

It's the Vibe.

Talent

Episode 6

DE&I: Be the Lone Dancer

with Vanessa Sorenson from Microsoft

Ian Tyler:

Hello, and welcome to It's The Vibe. A podcast produced by Talent International and centered around no BS conversations with business leaders and even innovators digging into all facets of company culture. I'm your host, Ian Tyler. I'm Talent's group chief strategy officer. So why are we doing this? At Talent our vision is empowering people to build a better world of work for all. We want to support and educate businesses big and small on how they can do their part. We want to share insight, stories, real life examples and experiences from business leaders and experts on employee engagement, communication, DE&I, and a whole lot more.

For today's episode, we're going to be talking about diversity, equity and inclusion. And I'm delighted to be joined by the managing director of Microsoft New Zealand, Vanessa Sorenson. But before I welcome her, allow me to tell you a little bit about Vanessa. Vanessa's got more than two decades experience in the New Zealand tech sector. Having worked through the ranks of Spark over an 18 year period, and then moving to Microsoft New Zealand in 2017 in a role as enterprise director, and then over the past year and a half was really moved into the role of managing director for New Zealand. Vanessa leads diversity and inclusion initiatives to really look at improving gender and cultural diversity in technology and leadership, particularly through education. So, Vanessa, welcome.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Kia ora. Thank you, Ian.

Ian Tyler:

Thank you. I have to say I've really been looking forward to this conversation and the thing I about our discussion I'd really like to start off with, I've learned a lot about you just through some research and I'd love the opportunity to get our listeners to really understand your story. So why don't you tell us a little bit about Vanessa Sorenson.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Wow. Where do you want me to start, Ian? What a loaded question. Look, I was born in New Zealand, in fact, West Auckland, so a real westy, and had the typical, two kids, mom and dad, wonderful home, boat, two cars. And when they split up, when I was about the age of six, life really changed. And that's pretty normal in the 70s, lots of marriages did break up, but it was really the start of a very transient lifestyle for my brother and I. And that was when we first moved into our first caravan park, Tui Glen Caravan Park in West Auckland.



And I remember social services being involved because my mother and stepfather decided it would be a great idea to have an adventure in Australia. And I suppose that's where my two worlds really shaped who I am today because seeing things that most children wouldn't at a really, really young age. And I mean moving around a lot, a lot of poverty, no money and going to countless schools. So, we just drifted. We literally drifted from place to place. In fact, for one component we were homeless and I think it shaped me. I really, as a young person, decided that I wouldn't become a statistic, I was actually going to change my life.

Ian Tyler:

Wow. And so how does one go from that particular background to being the managing director of Microsoft New Zealand? Because that's a ride.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Look, I remember being about 12 and living in [inaudible 00:04:10] caravan park in [inaudible 00:04:12] of all places and I just had an epiphany that I wanted more for my life. You see, leaving New Zealand and my father had a beautiful villa in Mount Eden, I always thought he was a multimillionaire. When you're the kid that's really, really poor, I had this rich father that I just completely idolized in a strange way. I hadn't seen him for so long and that's what I wanted for myself. And I remember visualizing it, I was going to own the Villa. I was going to have the picket fence, I was going to have the incredible husband and I was going to make something of myself and I started writing it down. People call it journaling, but I really started creating goals for myself. And that's when I got my first job, a bakery. And every second weekend to the drive-thru bakery at 13, I worked and I saved and I saved and I knew that one day I would get out and I would come back to New Zealand and I did that as a 17 year old.

Ian Tyler:

Incredible. It's very inspiring, as I said to you briefly before we started our recording, just learning more about the people that you interact with, but then truly learning more about your real authentic story, which is exceptionally vulnerable and you've put yourself out there like that. I totally commend you because that's one of these masks that people wear, you always get a little bit of something from somebody, but to truly be totally open and embracing that, but also now more importantly, using your platform for the betterment of other people, I think, is incredibly inspirational. So thank you.

I think it's a wonderful thing. I really do. So given our conversation is about diversity, equity and inclusion and the story in the journey that you've had, I think there's no one really better to talk to. There's an obvious thing for me to ask you around in terms of women in technology, which is a very important thing to discuss, but it's a very obvious thing for us to discuss. We recently conducted a webinar, which was a global webinar where we were asking the question of women in tech, are we there yet? The outcome of that in a very, very high summary was no, not really, we're not there yet. What's your view on that?

Vanessa Sorenson:

We are so not there yet. And I look at females still today, I have gotten gorgeous daughter, who's 15, and I say, "Why not tech?" And it just doesn't inspire her. And I think it comes back to our education system. I think it's still very... A lot of our females are leaning into still nurses and teachers, which is incredible, it just isn't the passion in younger kids. And so I am trying to do a lot of that via the





platform within Microsoft, because we are still fundamentally very underrepresented. I was fortunate, landing in a role with sales, I could use all the things that I love, which is interacting with people. But when you even look at the scale of technical females, the stats are shocking. So I think all of us, especially females, I just wish we link downs more and supported one another and showcase that actually this is an amazing career.

And that is something that I try and do all the time. And I don't look like you're standard techy by any means. And I am seriously not technical, but tech is just so phenomenal. It's about business transformation. It's about seeing things, creating things that you could never have imagined. And that's the world that I want our next generation to consider stepping into and the pay is phenomenal. So lean into something, you've still got to work that 40, 50 hours a week, go where the pays good. So I constantly try and break down those barriers because it sales, it's marketing, it's technical, yes, but it's teaching, it's learning, it's so many things that I think sadly our system just isn't providing that guiding light for so many.

Ian Tyler:

I agree with you. I too have a daughter who's 17 and I also have said about luckily she's interest in creative arts and film and television and production and directing that type of thing. The irony of the situation for teenagers these days is they're all glued to a device. They're all using apps. They've all got an opinion of what looks good and what works well and what's easy to use, but yet user experience designers or coders, software engineers, developers, it just doesn't register on the radar. There's the irony of it. Really interesting. So tell me, I'm really intrigued, given that you were talking around and education is something that I know that you're passionate about, but within Microsoft, what are Microsoft doing to really move the dial internally, but also through different services, products and ventures externally as well? What are Microsoft doing to really move the dial on diversity, inclusion and equity as a business?

Vanessa Sorenson:

I just see us walking the talk. I've never seen and felt such a movement in an organization before. I think in my past career it was something I did outside of work where it's absolutely part of my full day, but in everybody's full day. And I say that it starts with inclusive design. It starts with our teams and Redmond who, for testers, they bring people in with accessibility needs. If we can design and develop products for everybody, then that to me is what inclusivity is. But it's more the culture locally and globally where we really support some core pillars. And one that I led when I first joined Microsoft was our Māori and Pasifika pillar.

But I must admit when I joined into Microsoft, I said, "So where are they all?" And there weren't any. And so we have really, really lent in to well, we have to change the way we interview. Our Parnell want us to meet with them. A sign of respect is looking down. We had to unlearn all of the unconscious biasness around how we were taught to interview people. And females as well, Ian, I've got to admit, I've been one of those females that was offered a role and I said to my leader at the time, "Are you sure you don't want to go out to market and see if there's someone better?"

Ian Tyler:

Okay.

Vanessa Sorenson:





Who does that? [crosstalk 00:11:37]

Ian Tyler:

Exactly. You're so right.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Well, you have to change the way you look, the way you even put roles out there. We no longer are looking for that education of universities. In fact, I want every person that goes for a role with us. I don't want a photo of them. I don't want their name. And I want them to talk about what really fills their soul. That's the type of people that we want to employ. You can teach people the tech, you can teach people the how, but come with the right attitude and let's face it. Our Maorian Pacifica or our kapa haka, our waka makers, our incredible leaders, but they just don't visualize themselves in these types of roles. And we want to change that at Microsoft and we are, we certainly are.

Ian Tyler:

Wow. It's absolutely amazing for our listeners that maybe tuning in from different parts of the world, because our podcast series is talking to people in the UK, the US, Germany, Australia as well, can you provide some context for us around some of the indigenous language that you've used there around them? Just to provide some context, because it's such a rich, deep heritage that I know every New Zealander is proud of. And it isn't just indigenous tribes that use this language, it really is part of the DNA of the corporate as well as the community style of engagement with in New Zealand. So would you mind sharing some of that content?

Vanessa Sorenson:

Yeah, our indigenous Maori in particular is something I'm just so proud of. When I was young and living in West Auckland, my best friends were Maori and taught me the incredible fulfillment of the language and the song and the traditions. And even in my lifetime, Ian, I've seen Maori have land taken off them, really a lot of badness that isn't what should be. So the role that I believe all corporates and [foreign language 00:13:48] are doing now is diversity, inclusive is not about the check tech box, it is about diversity of thought of everybody and our indigenous people are phenomenal. And I have had to learn a lot. I have spent a lot of time on Maori's, in particular with [inaudible 00:14:06] and Ōrākei, to see how they see the world, which is through the elders. It is through the language.

And in fact, one of the proudest moments, Ian, we've just released Windows 11 and we had installed into that globally is the Maori macrons, which is the way that you write in tohūtō, little old New Zealand did that. We also, we launched a few years ago, the tohūtō version, the Maori Minecraft called Ngā Motu. And we also launched, in New Zealand, te reo as the 67th official language in Microsoft's translator hub. We're walking the talk. We're a tiny mission, but we are saying that this needs to be, we want to be [crosstalk 00:14:52]. Yeah, it matters. And so my advice is learn more about your indigenous, bring more into your workforce because boy, oh boy, the creativity, the diversity of thought is where we are going to really change the dial.

Ian Tyler:

You've told us some amazing thing that's going on there with Microsoft. Do you think there is more of a real effort, a deliberate attempt to change and break what has essentially been old mindsets





around this? Because you're absolutely right, many businesses think we need a DNI policy or a program, tick, we've changed what the visually the landscape of our own organization looks like. So therefore we are, in inverted commas, doing DE&I. And to be really frank, I call horse shit on that.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Same.

Ian Tyler:

But do you think that the conversation more broadly is now starting to change?

Vanessa Sorenson:

Yes, I do. And I really would say, Ian, it's only been in the last four years. I felt that. I was wielded out as the diversity hire because I was a female. God, it felt like more than horse shit, to be honest. And I think it's got to be about the data. I don't necessarily think quotas and things, but you've got to have the data. You've got to look at the way you're walking the talk. And I think the tick box theory, people feel it, Ian. You can walk into an environment and you know if it's not genuine and the amount of things that we are doing, most of it people just wouldn't know. And seeing the pillars and the council leaders within Microsoft taking this to the next level, not through any PR story, but what is most important because they're seeing the impact that it has.

And I do believe that more and more corporates are getting behind that. We've partnered with an incredible organization called Tupa Toa, and they are assisting us with a helping of Maorian Pacific that have come into our corporate worlds because they aren't that nice, they aren't that welcoming and they are quite off putting, to be honest. And so we have to support our youngsters who are coming in. So they are mentored, they are supported, they know that they can be their full, authentic self. And I think that's been a shift and a change in the last few years. It certainly hasn't been throughout my career.

Ian Tyler:

Which, is interesting. I think about companies who are crafting programs that are more performative as opposed to authentic, I think you're absolutely right, they'll get spotted from a million miles. You'll be able to see that because, to your point, change comes from within and change needs to be from everybody. So it's cultural, it becomes habitual and therefore it just is a thing. It's just how you do it, how you walk the talk to use your language. Do you think it matters to all companies? I feel that there are businesses that we engage with across multiple different sectors that you could be working in a heavy asset industry, such as mining, or you could be a law firm, and they might want to have diversity and equity and inclusion, but there are certain roles based on certain conversations I've had that just wouldn't be right for this particular type of person.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Even that comment, this typical type of person, I'm an example of absolutely not a typical type of person, uneducated, high school dropout at 16 and running Microsoft. I think we have to change our lens around this stuff, but we also have to open doors. So one of the things that we've done is the partnership with Tupa Toa is made a decision that the interns we were hiring that year would all be Maorian Pacifica. And we were going to lean in and we were going to help and we were going to learn. And I was so fortunate, I got the most incredible intern. Her name's Venus. She's from Gizzy.



She's a proud Maori girl. And she found it tough, Ian, it wasn't easy joining a company like Microsoft, high achievers, really technical people. It was a rollercoaster ride. But that would've been the same for any young starter straight out of university.

And I'm proud to say she now has a full time role with us at Microsoft New Zealand that she earned herself. And in fact, I'll never forget when she was offered the contract and rang me and said, "Wow, is this what I'm going to be paid?" And I said, "You deserve every cent of that. Now you go back to your community in Gizzy and you be the person that they do a ticker tape parade for, because you should be proud, you've worked hard for this." That's how we change communities, one person at a time, but we have to give it a shot. We've got to go and look in those areas and say to those people, "You know what? You can and you will, and we're going to help you."

Ian Tyler:

It's amazing. Absolutely amazing. What is it that businesses that may be listening to this right now, leaders who are either starting out companies... We work with some really interesting, exciting scale up businesses that have got their first 50 hires, got their seed funding and they're going to that next stage and are deliberately thinking about setting up their company with the right foundational pillars around the way that they have flexibility, the way that they support mothers returning to work or flexible work programs specifically for maternity leave. But thinking about having a DE&I at the cornerstone of their strategy, they're really deliberately thinking about wanting to ensure that they do these types of things and do them fundamentally, as they build and scale their business that sets them up for the future. That becomes very deliberate, but also very authentic. So what could some of these companies do, do you think, to support indigenous people specifically within technology? What is it that you think are things that they could do or learn, or even explore that would enable them to attract more indigenous people specifically in the roles of tech?

Vanessa Sorenson:

Great question. I think it comes down to that word being deliberate. Honestly, you got to go fishing where the people are and encourage and delight and inspire, and you've got to be willing to take risks if it's seen as risk. In New Zealand, and if ever there's a year during COVID, our borders are closed, we're going to have a tech shortage. So even that, now is the time and we are doing a lot with our partner community. Hats off to the likes of Datacom, who are just saying, "We are in. We are all in. We will take a punt." In fact, we are partnering with other educational institutes where adults can go back to school, get certified for three months and therefore decide you know, what? I could go for that tech role. And back to what would my advice be, look around. Have you got a diverse team?

And if you haven't, what are you going to do about it? And I think it's not just a plan on a page, it's about being deliberate. And that's what we had to do. As you said right at the start, women are still fundamentally underrepresented, our indigenous, but all walks of life, accessibility as well, we are also missing out on a massive catchment of folk that can do different roles. They may not want to come into the office. Well, we've proven you can work from home. It is gone are the nine to five days sitting at your desk and that looking like performance, we now have to balance this out as what works for the individual. That person that actually going for a run at 10 in the morning works for them. And so we have to trust people. We can't put everybody in a certain box and hope for a different outcome.

So for me is take risks, scrap your old business plan around on what great looks like, because it ain't going to work anymore. And I think you've just got to give a shot and you've got to put support



structures around people, because I know for my own career, Ian, imposter syndrome, feeling not good enough, when you spiral it's tough to get back out again. So you have to put the guardrails around anybody. So in my other piece of advice is talk about it, more storytelling, more about what I'm doing. I only started sharing my story four or five years ago because I was worried that if people found out what would happen, would I be fired? Would I be missing out on that next role? Well, actually it's so much incredible sharing stories for others and then they go, "Wow, if that person could do it, so could I." So, that's what I would say to leaders today.

Ian Tyler:

Absolutely. It's so inspirational to be that way. Let's think then if there are leaders out there, and I've had this conversation with somebody else in the context of wanting to deliberately hire people from a non-traditional background, let's call it, which is the wrong language to use anyway and then they have been told by the organization, "Strategically take the risk. Lean in, take the risk," but then that person is measured based on the performance of the individuals that they bring into the organization. And through an interview process, there are things in place which want to see, demonstrate your track record of performing in this role previously.

So therefore, they can replicate that success or experience and add immediate value because what that is is strategically and aspirationally the business wants to do one thing, but the actual and deliberate notion of the hiring manager taking the punt on it takes the village to raise the child. Do you see enough of that happening? Because I think there is definitely the right strategic boardroom conversation going on about doing this, but then does the business feel like they've got the authority and they are supported enough to actually bring someone in from a completely different walk of life and you back the attitude and the aptitude rather than the experience?

Vanessa Sorenson:

And that is such a big question, Ian. Look, all I would say is everyone has to walk the talk and it's got to be led from the top down. In anything, if you feel unsupported and taking that risk is going to hurt you, of course, you're not going to do it. But I would suggest that any middle manager or anyone, be the person that's willing to go and say, "Why not?" There's always got to be one person that starts the dance. Be the lone dancer. And guess what? Then people follow. So be that person. I would rather people do that, take the punt and actually say, "What lesson did I learn if it didn't work?" And nine times out of 10, Ian, it will be the support you didn't wrap around that person. Any person that fails or isn't fit for purpose, that's the organization's problem.

To me, yes, there's people that, okay, might be lazy, but nine times out of 10 people come to work and want to do a good job. So what support are you putting around them? What are you doing to give them a hand up, not a handout? And that is missing and it's got to come from the top down.

Ian Tyler:

Yeah. 100%. As you would be aware, we have our charitable organization, which is called Talent RISE and that's all about exactly that, certainly not the handout, it certainly is the hand up. And we really support young people from indigenous backgrounds and people from drug or alcohol effective backgrounds or social justice or injustice, should I say, who've just walked a different life and trot different steps and needed either a first or second opportunity in life. And certainly with the work that's been done in New Zealand and the job readiness to get these young people ready for, you know what, you've got to create some structure, you've got to create some rhythm, you've got to

create some discipline just to be able to get up, get yourself to work and then form part of a working environment. That requires investment. It takes courage on the organizational side and also on the individual side. We completely are walking to talking that regard. So, Vanessa, what are some of the initiatives that are on the agenda or on the horizon for Microsoft specifically around additional diversity and an inclusion support around indigenous people within New Zealand?

Vanessa Sorenson:

I'm so proud that we are launching a new program called 10,000 DigiWahine, Wahine is Maori for female, where we are going to inspire females to consider roles in tech. We're going to open up all of our Microsoft certifications for free, and we are partnering with different educational institutes. And I just can't wait to see what this is going to do. And that is to inspire the next coder, developer, salesperson marketer. And we have set ourselves a very bold goal of doing it within 12 months.

Ian Tyler:

Wow.

Vanessa Sorenson:

So watch this space. It doesn't mean that 10,000 will get roles in tech, but imagine even 1000 new Maori females decide that tech's for them. That, to me, is a game changer. So very, very, very excited about that.

Ian Tyler:

That's amazing. And that's an initiative that's homegrown. What was sat behind that? The aspiration of it is incredible. What is it that made you guys say, "You know what? We can do this."?

Vanessa Sorenson:

Ian, our phenomenal people within our sub. We have got a woman in tech pillar and a Maorian Pacifica pillar, and they got together and said, "Man, we've got to cook something up. It's unique to [foreign language 00:30:22], unique for females and unique for Maori." They came and pitched it to myself and the SLT and said, "Are you guys up for this?" We got incredible Bob, who's our comms guy, behind it. We have now gone out to different institutions and said, "Are you guys up for this?" And it started simply by having a conversation and now we're going, "We're all in." And we're going to monitor and measure the success of this. And I can't wait to talk to you in a year's time to see maybe we bring a couple of these wahine onto the podcast and see how it's changed their lives.

Ian Tyler:

Fantastic. I'll hold you to that as well. Fantastic. That's a fantastic, phenomenal objective, but of such an inspirational legacy to be able to do something like that because you're changing lives, you're changing communities.

Vanessa Sorenson:

Absolutely. And that's, again, going all the way back to my own personal upbringing, I know what it's like to not have a role model or somebody that you go, "Wow. That's where I want to go." And so I truly feel that it's our platform to provide that, as well as sharing my own story that you can get there. And a lot of it I remember going through my career and all you need is a bit more confidence.



What does that even mean? We actually need to feel the tools of learning something new and we're going to learn until we die, so embrace it. And the fact that Microsoft said, "Yep, we'll open up our certifications to everybody," was incredible and such a simple idea, and we're like, "We're all in."

Ian Tyler:

Wow. Inspirational. It really is. It really is wonderful. It's something that is very close to all of our hearts. I'd like to just close out with Vanessa's magic three, if you will. For listeners that are in an organization that's big or small or managing or leading a team, what would be the three takeaways to say, "You know what? Diversity, equity and inclusion is important. These are some things that you can do right here right now that will move the dial." What would some of those takeaways be for our listeners?

Vanessa Sorenson:

The three things for me, know the data. Absolutely set some goals, set some plans and know the data. And if you don't, then how are you going to shift any type of dial, to be honest. Take a punt, it's worth it. We are proving it's worth it. Honestly, I wished I had done it sooner. And back to that fear base, once I got onto the top job, I'm like, "Okay, well, what's the worst thing that could happen?" Take the punt, be that leader. And share stories. Become the ally. If you see something that you disagree with, be that person that speaks out. That's what changes culture. Honestly don't put up with it. And we've all been there. I've had it in my own career, the snippets of when I was promoted and she only got the role because they needed more diversity, stats and things, the people that hear that stuff, be the ally and go, "That is bullshit." And so I think, for me, it's just walk the talk, make a difference and be the change.

Ian Tyler:

Wonderful. Vanessa, I want to say a huge, huge thank you for your investment of time in talking to us today, I would love the opportunity to talk to you about a whole range of other things in another time. I really, really appreciate your generosity of time. And hopefully some of our listeners have got some takeaways and insights that they've been able to glean through this conversation, just certain things that they can start to think about in their everyday business and also company conversations. What I'd also like to say now is for anybody listening out there, if you've got any other questions, please get in touch with us via the talent website at www.talentinternational.com. Or you can reach out to us on LinkedIn. Vanessa Sorenson from Microsoft New Zealand, thank you so much. I've thoroughly enjoyed our conversation.

Vanessa Sorenson:

[foreign language 00:34:42], Ian. Wonderful meeting you. Thank you for the opportunity. And I hope our podcast is just helping one or two other people to make the change.

Ian Tyler:

Thank you.

