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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave Hennessy: Welcome to The Hennessy Report. I'm Dave Hennessy. Today we have part two of our four-part NEHRA podcast series from the Conference. Today's episode is with Doreen Nichols, the Vice President of Talent, Culture and Organizational Development at Eversource Energy. Our conversation with Doreen starts off in a powerful way. She talks about the adversity she deals with as a young person in her life and how that made her a stronger and more competitive person and really impacted her career. Also, she talks about how Eversource has really shifted from a utility to an energy company and what that means for their business and their mission.

Up next on the podcast is Sachin Sahney, the Chief Human Resources Officer at Cerence, a spin-off of Nuance. And now, our conversation with Doreen Nichols.

So here we are live at the NEHRA 2019 Conference doing an on-location, live, recorded podcast of The Hennessy Report. And today's guest is Doreen Nichols, the VP of Talent, Culture and OD from Eversource. And also Doreen, another thing that I like about your résumé is, you're on the Board of NEHRA, just like me.

Doreen Nichols: That's right.

Dave: We joined at the same time.

Doreen: That's right.

Dave: And we tease Tracy Burns because membership has just gone up and up and up by double digits each year since we've joined. I know she says it's us, but I know there's other reasons, right?

Doreen: I know it's because of us.

Dave: Well, it's a great organization. What do you have to say about the NEHRA experience? Why is it important to you?

Doreen: So when I was asked to become a board member, I welcomed the opportunity. And for many reasons: the NEHRA community is very nurturing, they have just-in-time information, you can ask a question, you can feel safe in asking a question. And a little bit of what Tracy had said the other day is that people feel comfortable. They can be their authentic selves if they don't know an answer. And I really appreciate that there is a place that professionals can go to and network with others, ask the questions, connect with really talented people that are in the HR field.

Dave: Absolutely. It's a great organization. I'm so proud to be part of it. And Doreen, thinking about you now before we talk about Eversource, can you tell us a little about your background and maybe some



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early life experience as you look back on it now was an inflection point for you that set you on the career path or got you to where you are today and where you're heading?

Doreen: Yeah. So I'm a product of the '60s. And my parents moved out to the suburbs, it was actually a farm town in Ashland, Massachusetts. And it was a very interesting experience because my brothers and I were the first African American family to graduate from Ashland High. And I just remember growing up that I was...we moved out there in third grade...because I was black, an African American, the kids would make fun of me. I've been spit on. I was called a walking Tootsie Roll. And I wanted to fit in. And my brothers didn't have that issue because they were athletes, they were popular, and I did not belong to any particular group.

Dave: Wow. That must have been so hard, at that time.

Doreen: It was hard because I just thought, I need to fit in. And so how I fit in is, I actually took up sports. I became an athlete. And then I actually just did a deep dive into the study, so I was going to be the smartest person in the class so that people would recognize me from my smartness, not for the color of my skin. That carried on until I graduated and went off to college. And it was a defining point for me in saying, "I don't have to..."

Dave: Did you know you were doing that at the time, that I'm really... Was it planned? Or as you look back on it now, do you know you were doing that?

Doreen: I did not.

Dave: You did that as a...

Doreen: It was just survival.

Dave: To survive in that, you just did it.

Doreen: It was to survive. I just did it. And then it was when I became a little bit more of an adult and much more intelligent, I guess, that when I was in college, it's was like, okay, you don't have to fit in. You can be your own unique self and make a difference. And so my goal was to make a difference in life. And then I landed in the HR field, and I had that opportunity to...

Dave: What was your first job, I'm curious, when you graduated?

Doreen: Okay. So my first job actually was not in the HR field. I wanted to be a pathologist. And I was petrified of rats, and so I moved into the primate, and I got so attached to the primates, and it was just that from a moral obligation, I knew the research was good, but it was the research on animals...

Dave: You just couldn't...



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Doreen: ...and so I couldn't do it. So I left the job without a job, and signed up with a temp agency, and landed an opportunity in HR. And the rest is history.

Dave: Wow, that's amazing. All right, so let's talk about Eversource. A lot of us think about NSTAR and Boston Edison, but Eversource has changed a lot over the years. And I was wondering if you could give us just a little update of the status of the organization. What's your mission? How big is it? Who do you serve?

Doreen: So it's so funny because I was working at Tulane University in New Orleans, and I really always wanted to be back up in New England. And I get the call from Eversource, and I didn't know what an Eversource was. I am a National Grid customer, and that's all I knew. And when I...

Dave: The competition.

Doreen: ...yeah, it is the competition. But the only competition in electric and electricity, but they can't compete against us, as it comes to our culture and our people.

Dave: Ah.

Doreen: So when I met with a recruiter, and just the way she talked about Eversource, about the culture, about people passionate about servicing the customer, keeping the lights on, the gas flowing, and the water flowing, and we're making a difference in the environment, I was hooked, I was sold. And so I interviewed, and I was like, "Oh, I hope I get an offer."

And so I joined Eversource. We were at 8,000. I have to say, they're all family members to me. So, 8,000 employees that make up the Eversource company. And the mission is really to keep the lights on, the gas flowing, and the water flowing, but also making a mark. We are protecting...

Dave: It's life or death ...

Doreen: It is life or death.

Dave: ... I mean, when you come right down to it.

Doreen: It really is. It is life or death. And we're making a difference. We're making a difference, clean energy, where our footprint is to ensure that we are taking care of the environment. I told that to the Board of Directors. I said, "I want to be back here, but I love that we have a purpose, and that purpose is to save the environment by keeping the lights on, the water and gas flowing."

Dave: And that's something that only you can get behind by all of your employees.

Doreen: Yes.

Dave: So as you're recruiting talent, you want to see if that resonates with candidates.



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Doreen: Also for the younger generation about protecting the planet, you hear in the news today about global warming, and people want to survive and stay on this planet. And so they have an obligation to protect it. And that is one of the attractions that we're making a difference with the environment.

Dave: That's great. And what's important to you about the values and culture? I think we're starting to get there. You already started to talk about the mission, and of course that spills into the values and the culture. What's important to you about Eversource's values and culture?

Doreen: Well, we want to create a culture of engagement. We're a culture of customer centricity. We realize that if we have engaged employees, you will have happy customers. And so that's a value, engagement, culture of customer centricity, that we have a moral obligation, we consider all ideas of our employees, we reward and recognize, we have a social responsibility. Something that's just near and dear to me is that I work with all levels of the organization. And that common thread is really keeping our customers happy by keeping those lights on and the gas and the water flowing.

We do it with passion. We don't want the credit. We just want to do our jobs every day and just make a difference. And I see that. It's part of our DNA, if that makes sense. It's really about servicing their customer, but at the same time working together as one team. So even though we've had many acquisitions, when they think about a customer, we become one team, servicing that customer.

Dave: And how have you brought those organizations that you've acquired?

Doreen: Well, it hasn't been easy.

Dave: So it's not done, completely, right?

Doreen: Yeah, it's not done. It's not done.

Dave: I mean, it's done with the names, but...

Doreen: Yes, some of the names, but we continuously try and make sure that we are one company. And so we gather information through the engagement survey, we get out there, and we train, we communicate, we have town hall meetings. We talk about what it's like to work at Eversource so the potential candidate, and saying, "Here's how we've evolved over time." We are no longer utility company. We are an energy company. And we are always transforming and updating, and keeping current, so that we don't become obsolete. When you think about Blockbuster, who was...

Dave: Oh, yeah. They've talked about that at the conference here, the companies that were big brand names that are gone just in a few years.

Doreen: Right, Toys "R" Us, Babies "R" Us, they are gone. And Amazon's taken that whole market, Netflix and the Blockbuster or the movie industry. And so we are always transforming to make sure that we don't become obsolete, and going in the direction of energy because it touches so many areas. You have water, you have electricity, you have wind, and then who knows what else is out there. Recyclable



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clothes, you never know, you can use that for fuel. So, but we're always looking at ways to stay ahead of the curve.

Dave: You mentioned a culture of engagement. Can you describe what that means at Eversource and what it looks like in practice? How do you make sure that happens? What are the things that you and leaders are doing to create this culture of engagement?

Doreen: Yeah. Well, it goes beyond the dollars, the salary, and the benefits. It really is listening to our employees and say what's important to them. So if it's important...so that rewards and recognition is a piece, if it's giving them some really meaningful projects, having them to lead an opportunity, that is what engages employees. And we hear that, and we read it from our survey results. And so I look at my team, what's going to motivate them is, I bring them into the process. I am not the smartest person in the room, and nor do I ever want to be the smartest person in the room. I want people to say, "I have this idea." And then I'm open to listening to that idea. I have this model. Sometimes it's good to lead, sometimes it's follow, or sometimes it's just good to sit back and enjoy the ride. And my team does that for me.

Dave: Ah, that's great. How do you define leadership, both you personally, and how do you define it at Eversource?

Doreen: So leadership isn't a title, it isn't the name that you have after your name or below your name. It isn't tenure or seniority. When I think about leadership is how I influence people or employees to go to that common goal. And so when you have somebody that goes to the left, or somebody goes to the right, and they're not staying on track, as a leader, my goal is to bring them back in, not with the two-by-four, but really looking at how they make a difference to complete that goal or that objective.

And so I look at leadership as being open to ideas, listening for understanding, being an ethical leader, and relying on your team because you don't have all the answers. So people bring different perspectives, and having diversity of thought, diversity of just... of the physical diversity, experiences actually are meaningful to any organization.

Our leaders at Eversource, they measure themselves always. They measure themselves on executive visibility, they measure themselves on diversity and inclusion, they measure themselves on being brand ambassadors and...

Dave: How do they measure those things?

Doreen: So as far as the demographics of the organization, they measure themselves from the engagement score, so the question asks, my manager walks the talk, they do what they say they're going to do, my manager gives me the tools to...

Dave: And do those managers get specific feedback about themselves?

Doreen: Yes.



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Dave: Not just general?

Doreen: No, so it's in their organization, so it rolls up depending on the number of people. It will roll up, and they actually see that hard data. And then they have to come up with action plans to... If it's a best practice, how do you continue, if it's not a best practice, is it something that's...

Dave: So they're held accountable ...

Doreen: They are held accountable.

Dave: ...to their leadership.

Doreen: ...to their leadership.

Dave: Wow.

Doreen: Yes.

Dave: Interesting. You wear many hats as an HR leader. As a brand ambassador, you're negotiating, you're working in diversity inclusion, you're acquiring and developing talent. What are your thoughts about ethical leadership?

Doreen: So we lead by example, and I was in a meeting last week, and talking to key talent, and that question came up about being an ethical leader. As I say to my son, I want to be a role model for you. I want to set that example. The apple doesn't fall too far from the tree is that your children or people who admire you, they're going to try to emulate you. And so what I do, as I present myself, my actions, my behaviors, people are watching that. And so if you are behaving in a manner that just really goes against the grain of what people think is a person who is ethical, you've lost credibility. In the tough times, people then do things that they shouldn't do. I never want to be on the front page that my mother would be reading this and saying, "Doreen did XYZ." So it's just something that's really important that you emulate certain behaviors and that you're compliant, that you are ethical, and that even in the bad times that you don't steer from that moral obligation.

Dave: Right. You said there's so much the role model there about the leadership because people can't be what they can't see, right?

Doreen: Right, exactly.

Dave: When they're looking up, they're going to emulate that. We had a podcast guest, I think you know Helen Drinan. She's right now the President of Simmons University. And she said in the podcast something very similar to what you just said. She said, "You know, when times get tough in an organization, when there's that existential moment, that's when you need more values-based leadership. That is the time to say, 'Okay, we're going to be a little more flexible in this to get through



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this. This is when we need to make sure we're working the hardest at being ethical and being values-based."

Doreen: Yes. The other thing is that when you're working with employees, employees bring their whole selves to work, and so you need to understand the whole person. I look at it that I can't just understand that person from the 9:00 to 5:00, because if something's going on at home, they will bring that to work. So they could have had a fight with their child or their spouse, and that plays out in the workplace. So they're not themselves, and they're not their authentic selves. And so for me to motivate and engage my employees is to understand the whole employee and not just that one skill.

Dave: Right. And I'm curious how you do that because right here at the conference, my colleagues, Brenda Stanton and David Brendel from Keystone, presented on a topic that employees bring their poker faces to work because there are so many risks. If you really share what's on your mind, if you really try to be your whole self, there are some risks that are associated with it. Maybe I'll be rejected, maybe I'll outshine my boss, maybe there'll be retribution if I say something that's controversial or challenge the status quo. First of all, what do you think about that, that poker face thing? That happens a lot in companies, doesn't it?

Doreen: It does happen a lot because people want to put their best foot forward. They want a person or their leader to see that they can manage through all the minutia, the tough times, the good times, and...

Dave: And they want to please too.

Doreen: Yeah, please and just deliver.

Dave: Right.

Doreen: But there are days when that just doesn't happen, you know?

Dave: Right.

Doreen: So something could have been said, you hit your head against the cabinet, and it's like, "Okay, this is bothering me. I can't think." Or you've had a disagreement with a family member or even a coworker, and how that plays out in the workplace, we're all emotional, we're all human beings at the end of the day, and people who have feelings, and they have that emotional intelligence, it needs to play out in the workplace. How do you capitalize on the strengths if there is something going on? How do you remove those obstacles so that person can be their whole self when they come to work?

Dave: Right. And I think that was their whole point, is that we sometimes hide behind a facade to just get through the day. And are we not tapping into all those employees' talents because they're not really sharing their whole self?

Doreen: Yes, their authentic self. They have a lot to offer when they are being their authentic self.



Dave: So we have to create that trusting environment.

Doreen: Yes.

Dave: There was an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about cultural fit. And so many organizations are so focused on culture, and they want to hire people that fit. And when we do that, sometimes we hire people just like ourselves, same schools, same neighborhoods. And maybe that's not what they mean by hiring for cultural fit, it's more about the mission and values. But I know this happens in organizations. They're employee referral, they're your friends, they come from the same circles, they went to the same schools, all those things, but you can end up having more of a homogenous culture if you get caught in that trap. So what's your philosophy on this? How do you deal with this at Eversource?

Doreen: So, I interview every director and above that comes into Eversource, so I'm on the interviewing team. And I don't talk or interview for the skill set because they have the skills. I do...

Dave: If they made it to your desk, they're qualified.

Doreen: Yes. They're qualified. So I interview for leadership, personality, and as you call it, a fit. And what I'm looking for is a person who can be flexible. And I even ask the question, on a scale from one to five how flexible you are, because things are ever-changing. I'm looking for a person that, not just even the physical, like the physical, where you have some diversity from a physical standpoint, that's a good thing. But diversity of thought...

Dave: But how do you measure that? How do you get that?

Doreen: So I'm asking the question, so I do situational interviewing to see how a person thinks, how they're formulating their questions. And so I did ask one person about D&I, and he says, "Well, I'm going to always hire the right candidate."

And I said, "Well, tell me about what that means to you." And so it's really then understanding their perspective, so are they hiring that Harvard MBA, or are they hiring the person who did an online course, which there isn't any difference as far as I'm concerned, just the name. But you have the ability to learn. So, that's something that's really important to me.

Dave: So you see what their thought and their thinking is.

Doreen: Yeah, their thought process is.

Dave: Yeah. That's great. We have Keystone deliver the Hennessy Report in cooperation with NEHRA, and we have always had the NEHRA YP, the young professionals, question of the podcast, but we're rebranded, as Tracy talked about last night at our board meeting. And she says, "We don't have to explain to the HR community why we renamed it to the NEHRA, Emerging HR Professionals," which is a much better name. So we're happy to have the Hennessy Report, NEHRA, Emerging HR professionals, question of the podcast. Oh, there's a guest right here.



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Lexi Kantor: Hi, my name is Lexi Kantor. I'm the Senior People Operations Associate at Ovia Health in Boston. My question is, have you ever received a piece of feedback that really changed your style or approach for your career going forward, even if it was a piece of feedback that you didn't super appreciate at the time, and looking back, and have more appreciation for?

Doreen: So that's a great question, Lexi. You know, it's very interesting. When I joined Staples, I had a buddy. We had the buddy system so that they help us maneuver and assimilate into the company. And it's so funny that one of our NEHRA board members was my buddy. Her name is Nancy Persson. And she had given me some advice. And so I am a very direct person. I don't sugarcoat things, but I don't do it in a way that it is going to cut people off at the knees.

However, she observed people's body language when I was giving that feedback. And she gave me some feedback about, it's not what you say, it's how you say it, and how you may want to look at your audience or the person that you're talking to and seeing how they're going to receive the information. So take a moment to really get to understand that person. So if you're giving the feedback, you can do it in a way that they can understand it. So it was just invaluable for me.

The other thing is that she told me that sometimes you have to be the bigger dog. And it is so important.

Dave: What does that mean?

Doreen: You rise above it. So when a person goes low, you go high. You don't go and stoop to a level that is not who you are. And so it's been great feedback and great commentary and advice that I take with me every single day.

Dave: And advice from another NEHRA board member.

Doreen: That's right.

Dave: Nancy.

Doreen: Nancy Persson, yes.

Dave: She's right here. If you could write a letter of advice, professional career leadership advice to yourself when you were 25, 30-years-old, what would you write to Doreen?

Doreen: Be true to yourself. Do not compromise. You can give, and you can do it in a way that is accepting. Know yourself. And the other thing, be the open to the feedback. Listen for understanding. And if I had known how to manage to the political landscape, I think I wouldn't have stepped in it so often. That would be the one ... that to be one with the...

Dave: The political landscape?



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Doreen: ...the political landscape is like how you maneuver and get what you need out of a situation, but not necessarily have to kiss up, so it's maneuvering and understand who is who in the organization, who are the movers and the shakers. That's what I would write to myself. Understand who the movers and shakers are, maneuver through that political landscape, and have somebody that will be your mentor and role model so that you don't step in it. They can tell you that you're about to step into it. So by...

Dave: Know who the people are that you can go to in advance of the situation.

Doreen: ...exactly, in advance of the situations. And just being able to maneuver to that political landscape. I wish I had that knowledge earlier.

Dave: Well here's a question you asked Jane Moyer, our new board member, last night, putting her right on the spot as she...

Doreen: Oh, I know.

Dave: Her first board meeting.

Doreen: And she has so many unique things about her.

Dave: Right. And you asked, "What's something unique about you that you're willing to share, maybe something we wouldn't find in your LinkedIn profile?"

Doreen: Well, there are two things. I'm going to give you two things. So, I was three years old, and I had this pink piggy bank. And my brother had this blue piggy bank, and he threw my piggy bank out the window, and I went after the bank. I was following the money. And I fell from a third story building. And the only thing that saved me was I landed in the mud. There was a woman...

Dave: There must have been a lot of mud.

Doreen: ...it rained. And the woman across in the other apartment building saw this, and she came down. She called the fire department, and she brought me back to my mother. And she goes, "Is this your daughter?"

She goes, "Of course that's my daughter."

And then she had realized that I had fallen out of the window.

Dave: Oh my God, three stories.

Doreen: And so they did take me to a hospital to make sure that I wasn't hurt.

Dave: Three stories.



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Doreen: Three stories, three stories, and landing in the mud. That broke the fall.

Dave: That is, that is...that you had a softer landing.

Doreen: Yeah, and I didn't land on my head, so that's a good thing.

Dave: Right, right.

Doreen: Yes, yes, yes.

Dave: You said there's a second thing.

Doreen: Yes. So in high school, I ran track, because I wanted to fit in. And so I held the state record for a year running the 220. It's no longer the 220, it's 200...

Dave: 200 meters now, right?

Doreen: Yes.

Dave: Yeah, right.

Doreen: So I ran it in 26.6 seconds.

Dave: Wow. That is unbelievable. And my last question for you, favorite movie?

Doreen: *Imitation of Life*. It's an old movie. It was actually when they were just transforming into color. And it was very interesting because this woman wanted to fit in, and she spent all of her life trying to fit in, and just really disregarding and disowning her parents. And when her mom died, she ran to the...and she was crying at the casket, saying, "I didn't mean to do this. I didn't mean to do this." And so it's just important to... You don't have to necessarily fit in, it's how you maneuver and be true to yourself. You can go with the flow, but you don't have to be in the flow. You can be alongside the flow.

Dave: Hmm. Well, I think it's kind of fitting that we started with fitting in, and ended with fitting in, and knowing that that's not really the way.

Doreen: Yeah.

Dave: So great to have you as a guest on the podcast.

Doreen: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed it.

Dave: Me too.

Doreen: Thank you, David.



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Dave: Thank you.

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