



**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 by Keystone Partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and today's guest is Genein Letford the CEO of CAFFE Strategies. She was also our keynote speaker at NEHRA's 2021 Conference in Newport, Rhode Island. And I was able to interview her after her keynote, where she talked about the seven gems of intercultural creativity, which she created. And she is an amazing speaker and a dynamic guest, you'll enjoy this podcast. Upcoming on The Hennessy Report, we also interviewed at the NEHRA Conference, the new chair of the board of NEHRA, Carlos Echalar. He's also the CHRO of CDM Smith, that's upcoming. And in our normal broadcasts, we have Amy Knapp of Catalant, the chief people officer, and now our conversation with Genein Letford.

Genein, welcome to the podcast.

**Genein Letford:** Thank you for having me.

**Dave:** It was so great to hear your keynote talk this morning, I really learned a lot. I'm going to ask you a lot about some of those things. I want you to go into depth. We always start The Hennessy Report by learning a little bit more about our guests and how they got to where they are. And my question is what's an early life experience that you see as inflection point, or really informs who you become as a professional?

**Genein:** One that might surprise you was I was actually a special education student with a serious speech impediment. I stuttered and I still do stutter today in my adulthood. And so a huge childhood experience was walking down that ramp to the speech therapy room, shaking my fist at God. Just wondering why I struggled in this way. I couldn't even say my own name fluently plenty of times. And that really does a number on your identity and also your creative ability. I was asked the question recently in an interview, if you could be born again without the stutter, would you, and of course your initial answer is yes, but I think going through the stuttering, joining Toastmasters, going through therapy, and just practicing, it really helped define the woman that I am today about resilience, about knowing my ideas are good, even if I may stammer some time to get them out.

**Dave:** That's really interesting. You talked about how there's so many diamonds in plain sight, that they just want to be noticed to help realize their potential. We had Kim Scott from Radical Candor. One of the things she said is that the 9-Box puts people in the low potential category. When I was listening to you, I thought that was very similar. It's like, there's no low potential people. We have to find out what their strengths are and help them get there. Right?

**Genein:** Very, very true. As an educator, I started my career in K-6 education and then worked with 6-12. And so I saw the entire pipeline. It highlights the work of Howard Gardner, the multiple intelligences, and sometimes the school system and other systems only highlight one or two intelligences. And there's so many ways that people can show that they are talented and capable and gifted. And so I believe because of this next era and this pivot that our whole world is going into, we're going to need to start



opening our eyes and our other senses, right? I've done training on that, of looking at how other people shine.

**Dave:** You focused in on intercultural creativity for a big part of your talk and the seven gems. But you also talked about some other things that you do, and Alumni 360 and DonorsChoose. How would you describe your work today?

**Genein:** I first differentiate work from a job. So my job was teaching the California state standards, but my work is empowering and inspiring human beings to really be at their creative best with other people. So no matter what type of job I have, I'm still doing my work.

**Dave:** That's the common thread through all of it.

**Genein:** That is the common thread...

**Dave:** The inspiring people...

**Genein:** Yes, whether I'm working with a four-year-old or working with adults, I get to highlight that spark and really be a catalyst for people to see themselves in a new creative way.

**Dave:** So for our listeners on the podcast who weren't here at the keynote, could you please describe for them intercultural creativity and why it's so important?

**Genein:** Well, now The World Economic Forum listed creativity as now the number one skill needed in the workforce, but really people are having a hard time with that word because we don't understand what it truly means. And now our workforce is so global. I'm pretty sure HR has really seen the demographical shifts and the new connection shifts, how people can work remotely, which means anyone can live anywhere and do any type of position. And so our ability to number one, be creative, which means to produce value and solve problems in unique, interesting new ways. But now we have to be creative with one another other, and we're coming together to the table with different experiences, different observational lenses, cultural lenses shape the way we see and perceive things and interact with data. And we need to kind of retool ourselves to be able to do that, to be able to think creatively, but how do I think creatively with other people so we can get a lot of these problems solved.

**Dave:** One of the things that you said today is that creativity, imagination, comes from curiosity. Can you explain that link?

**Genein:** I love reminding people that, a lot of the things that I teach on, I train on, and I speak on. You came to the earth with them. So it's not like here's a new skill you've never done before infants come to the earth very curious and very curious with all of their senses. Have you seen an infant put something in their mouth? They're just trying to gain data about their world around them. That is their job. That is their employment.

**Dave:** Or they're hungry. And they think it might be food.



**Genein:** Either...guilty as charged. And so we forget that in order to release the blinders that are blocking us from seeing things in a new way, or blocking us from seeing new ways to solve the problems, we have to be curious. And so curious is that energetic force that is moving us beyond status quo. And so the brain does this – to save energy, to be efficient, sometimes for survival skills – is to stay with what you know. To transcend the boundaries, to look and explore. So, if you look at the work of Dr. Michael Platt, who's out of the Wharton Business School, he talks about the importance of exploration and how the exploration curiosity levels of your CEO and C-suite is directly correlated with the survival and the thriving aspect of an organization. So I see C-suite and CEOs taking more awareness of how do I build my curiosity, how do I become aware of my biases and boundaries and step beyond them?

**Dave:** Because of our cultural backgrounds and our different cultural lenses, how can individuals expand, an organization expand, so they can be more creative?

**Genein:** The process of being aware of your cultural lenses and being aware that you see the world in a particular way is the first step. That awareness is there, and then you're able to take initiative. So the brain really learns from linking new information to old information. And so that's why if you travel to a new area around the world, your brain is saying, okay, well, this is how we normally do things, but this is how they're doing things, interesting. And so a highly culturally competent person is looking at the similarities and differences between cultural groups and traditions and things. So here's a quick example. I am not of Jewish descent. I am a different faith, but because I took interest in their process of thought and just how they think about things I attended my first Rosh Hashanah shul.

And I had no schema of how their process worked, but my brain was very awake. My observational senses were awake because it was brand new to me. It was an amazing experience. You feel uncomfortable because you're not used to it, especially if you're the only one who looks like you. And there's so many differences that are apparent. Because the brain learns and the brain will grow, if there's a little bit of discomfort going on, not major where you're in a dangerous situation, but there's a little bit of stress going on. And so now I have this schema for me to continue to grow.

**Dave:** That's really cool. Can you give some examples of people or organizations, companies maybe that you have recognized as interculturally creative?

**Genein:** IDEO is one, and they produced a concept called the T graph, fits the shape of the letter T and they have their employees list the skills that are directed to their job. If you're in design or accounting, what skills do you need to get your job done. But on the horizontal level, they have people list out skills that they feel good in and competent in, but they have nothing to do with their job description. So it could be as far as karaoke singing, do it yourself thing, handy work at home and some people have surfing and just random activities people do. What I like about that is number one, intercultural creativity is all about allowing people to really show their different facets. That's why my logo is the diamond to show that we're multifaceted. It's all about integration of concepts and re combining ideas, that's where the innovation comes from.

And I've heard some crazy solutions where a man had a problem and brought balls with air into the solution. And that's helped them figure out because he read a child's book about them raising a ship by



putting balls in the ship. And so all of these experiences you're having, your brain needs to log and eventually it may bring it back up so you could have some innovative creative solutions for business or for whatever you're doing. But if you're not having any experiences outside of what you normally do, your brain has a very limited pool to pull from.

**Dave:** You keep on using the word schema. I don't know it. Can you define it?

**Genein:** That's okay. A schema, it's a psychological term. And so, you have a schema, which is like a set of rules or procedures for something. So, you have a schema for entering the elevator. You don't enter an elevator and start tap dancing. That's not normal. You have a schema for going to a restaurant, stand there to wait to be seated. So you wouldn't trade your restaurant schema for the elevator schema. It's just your understanding of how to act in a certain setting.

**Dave:** There are a lot of unconscious and automatic, a lot of them are.

**Genein:** Yes, eventually. So I had no schema for the synagogue experience I had because I've never experienced it yet. And now, I've been three times. I went for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and now my brain has a better schema for it.

**Dave:** Some of the things you've just been talking about remind me of when you mentioned metaphorical thinking. Could you explain that and how that's related to all this? I think you're kind of touching on it in a way, right?

**Genein:** It acts as a bridge to what you know, to what you need to know or could know. An example, what is your high school mascot, or college mascot or your...

**Dave:** It's the Minutemen.

**Genein:** Think about attributes about the Minutemen that speak to you, who you are. It forces you to look at something from a new direction. So I'm an Eisenhower Eagle. So an Eagle is a powerful bird, has excellent vision. So I have vision in my life and it uses storms to elevate itself. And it rides behind the storm. That is in line with me being resilient and being regenerative and things along those lines. So that's metaphorical thinking, the great scientists use metaphors because it allows you to use what you know, and then look at it a different way to get into areas that you may not be familiar with.

**Dave:** You predicted that observational training is something that we're going to see a lot more of, that executives and leadership teams will need to be going through this. It's going to be huge. So what does this look like? What does observational training look like?

**Genein:** First of all, you can't create psychological safety and innovate if you're not aware of what's going on around you. So how do we increase people's ability to pay attention on multiple levels using all of their physical senses, but also their intuition sense, their emotional sense, right? Even their spiritual sense. Decades ago, maybe when you and I entered the workforce emotion wasn't really allowed in the boardroom or at work. It was like, analytical, dot, dot, dot, let's get it done. But now that we know so



much about neuroscience, if you look at how data enters the brain, it enters through emotion first, and then your brain makes analytical decisions about what to do. And so now that we understand how the brain brings in any emotion, the leaders who know how to tap into that tool and how to refine that tool and use it to their benefit is key. So something as simple as doing a painting class, our top Nobel peace prize, winners inventors like George Washington Carver had an excellent background in painting.

No one knows that he won global painting awards. They just know him as the peanut guy, right, who was born in slavery by the way, George Washington Carver. But the fact that he was able to sit with presidents and still work with formerly enslaved people, his attention to detail, his attention to observation was key, but he was an excellent musician. He was an excellent painter. And he was probably very much in tune with his emotional and spiritual and creative senses. And so we're going to need leaders to do the work, to know how to pay attention to those cues.

**Dave:** When I came and saw you at your book signing, *I Am Creative*, you were talking about getting children focused on creative things in the arts early. You said there was a linkage there to some success or some emotional intelligence. What was the linkage?

**Genein:** Now we think arts education is if we have time, if we have funding. I was a music teacher and I was a music teacher at 2008. You know what happened during 2008, the economy tanked. So what's the first thing to go on the docket, the arts and physical education. The research shows in my research in my books talk about how humans who have training in the arts are actually training other areas that we're not aware of. So their observational skills. Like I said, with George Washington Carver, he was a painter, he was a musician. And so when you go to a board meeting and you see that maybe someone is not in line with whatever's being presented on the board, you can feel it. Or if someone says something over and over again. So those are patterns. Those are rhythms.

Those are emotional cues. If you spent the first part of your life playing music, you're already sensitive to those things, you're sensitive to patterns.

**Dave:** In tune if you will.

**Genein:** Yes. In tune, right? When someone's off...speaking communication is just pitch and sounds and cadence. People who have a musical background, they're just more in tune of these slight variances. People have this left brain right brain thing.

**Dave:** One or the other.

**Genein:** Yes. So the neuroscience is showing that that's not really the way it is. The concept is true. Like the yin and yang, but the physicalness of a left brain analytical and a right brain creative. That's not really true. When you listen to music, the whole brain lights up. And when you play music, the brain is doing a dance party on both sides, both hemispheres, and in the middle of the brain, there's the corpus callosum. Your brain activity is going back and forth between both hemispheres, which is strengthening the corpus callosum, which is kind of like a highway. So imagine, I don't know what freeways you have around here, but in LA we got the 405 and the 101.



**Dave:** Yeah. We got the 95.

**Genein:** Okay. And it is congested. Imagine having one lane on those freeways. Now imagine having 10 lanes. Someone who has artistic training and musical training, they have grown that. So now they have 10 lanes between both hemispheres to get information back and forth.

**Dave:** That's a good metaphor. I like that.

**Genein:** Thank you. And so I think it's an injustice, it's an injustice that we don't teach our kids financial literacy. And it's an injustice that we don't treat the arts as important as math and reading because arts are a way to communicate.

**Dave:** That's really good. And the other thing you mentioned is that like for corporate settings, going back to HR and how they can apply some of this thinking to their work, you could get a group of employees together and go have them do a painting thing. Even if they have no interest or had shown any skill or interest in it in the past and they will get something out of it, from a creative standpoint.

**Genein:** Yes. Because once you put the brain in a new environment or a new action, it wakes up. And then I would take it a, a step further and ask your team members, how can you connect this to what you do? Or have your team members go into another department for a day and say, okay, well, where do you see the connections, or what song? I should ask you this question. How does your favorite karaoke song communicate the project that we're on now? Their entry point.

**Dave:** It's not even going to, let's go have fun painting. It's, let's go watch them and compare it to what we're doing in our department. Even though it's something totally different.

**Genein:** We lose a lot of our gems and a lot of our great ideas, just because of ignorance. We don't know what's going on, on the other side of the cubicle.

**Dave:** Right. What other things do you recommend Genein, for HR people, or just anybody in a leadership role inside of an organization that they can do to be more creative and be more effective?

**Genein:** I introduced the concept of the diversity diamond. When you think of the word diversity, you normally think of the five major ones that come up. But on this diamond, you have almost 20 different diversity areas to be aware of. Something like the abled body area or educational status, or family status. Different cultural lenses that are coloring the way that people are seeing the world that is different from the way that you're seeing the world. I was speaking with a person who could be classified as beneficial or privileged in some areas, but it made me kind of look at my own situation. And I was like, Genein, you are privileged. When you look at me, you think of some of the demographics that... I'm female, I'm a person of color. I have speech impediment, so special education. But my mother fought hard to get us in schools.

And my mother's college educated. She knew the school system. There's a lot of students who don't have parents that know the school system and how to get things done. Something as crazy as I'm 5' 7".



There's a height bias. If you look at all the CEOs, you know they're very tall, they got that height bias. I look a certain way. So there's all these other demographics I never considered that puts me in the privileged position, but it's not about feeling guilty that your privileged, it's about how do I use my privileges to help others come up? That's what people need to understand.

**Dave:** That's good. That's really good. We deliver this podcast by Keystone Partners in cooperation with NEHRA we're here at the NEHRA Conference. So, we always have the NEHRA question of the podcast. And this one comes from somebody you met at the book signing, Laura DiMaria. She's the director of HR of Horizons for Homeless Children. She said, "What's something that you borrow from children that help you in this work?"

**Genein:** This is a whole podcast by itself.

**Dave:** You have your own podcast. Let's do a plug for your podcast.

**Genein:** Yes. *Create and Grow Rich Podcast* of course it's a spinoff of *Think and Grow Rich*. The great book...

**Dave:** Napoleon Hill.

**Genein:** Yes. And so that's a great question. Of course, there's the obvious answers, like be more curious and things like that. There's a term called functional fixedness. And it's the fact that when I look at an object as an adult, I usually see it for its main function. So there's a microphone in front of me. This is a microphone, it records sound. That's its function. My three year old will look at this and turn it into a rolling pin for his playdough. That's what I'm calling functional agility. Children come to that, especially before the age of five, they're highly functionally agile. So they're able to take anything and turn it into 15 different things. The older we get, unless we're very mindful to break free from it. We get functional fixedness where we look at objects and we only see it for the original function. Now, what does this mean for business. There's research that shows that adults who are more functionally agile actually come up with more innovative solutions.

**Dave:** When groups are trying to be creative together, I've heard people say that sometimes it's harder for a big group to come up with a creative solution. But if you do dyads, the two people... What do you think about that? And does it relate to this work at all?

**Genein:** Well, that's intercultural creativity, right? The "interness," the interpersonal neurobiology as Dr. Daniel Siegel talks about. That creativity isn't just in my brain, but it's between our brains as well. I will say the diversity of the group is a huge thing. And not just diversity, meaning, ethnic and nationality but...

**Dave:** All those 20 something things that...

**Genein:** Right. But also diversity of thought. How do people come to their conclusions? What cognitive pathways do they take?



**Dave:** You mentioned that sometimes you think of creativity as just ad agency people, or design or arts. And you talked about creativity is not just that. What are the misconceptions about creativity?

**Genein:** Be aware of having things like the creative director or the creative team, because what your subconscious is telling everyone else is that they're not creative. Creativity is an accountant. Creativity is in the operations. Creativity is in the warehouse. You don't just have one creative team, right? You have a creative organization, and the word organization, you have the word organ there. Life. And life is creative.

**Dave:** Well said. If you could write a letter of professional career advice to your 25 year old self, what would you write? Dear Genein...

**Genein:** That once again, her ideas matter and they may be unique, but they matter. And even coming into the corporate world, doing a lot of corporate training, even though I started my career with elementary school kids, I had to remind myself as I'm working with you and other people like you to not change who I am. I teach through experiential learning. I teach through play and through Legos and playdough, I don't have any here with me today, but that's who I am. And that's how I know the brain learns the best, and how the brain holds on to the experience in order for you to retrieve it when you need to retrieve it. So telling my 25 year old self to continue to be uniquely you, do what your gifted... I'm a gifted teacher. That's why I was put on this earth, to teach and, have fun. And if you have fun, they'll have fun and learn too.

**Dave:** That's good. What's something that's not in your executive bio or your LinkedIn profile, or one of your books, that's interesting about you that you're willing to share?

**Genein:** I was on *Wipeout*. Do you remember a show called *Wipeout*?

**Dave:** I do.

**Genein:** Where you run through the obstacle course?

**Dave:** And you fall into water or something?

**Genein:** And you fall into freezing cold water, David.

**Dave:** You were on *Wipeout*!

**Genein:** And you get hit by balls and stuff.

**Dave:** Oh really?

**Genein:** And I didn't want to go on *Wipeout*. My husband went. But we went through the selection period and they ended up choosing me and I'm like...



**Dave:** They didn't want him.

**Genein:** But that's just an example of not letting fear stop me and just going and to have an experience.

**Dave:** That's great. Do you have a secret life hack?

**Genein:** Protect your quiet time. Because some of your best...

**Dave:** So, you're ruthless with your quiet time.

**Genein:** Yes. I'm up at 4:00, sometimes 3:30, but I don't recommend it. Get your sleep. If you look at how the brain works, you know there's different waves or different frequencies that the brain is going on and it's that frequency, you're not asleep, but you're not fully alert yet. Your blockages of crazy ideas isn't fully up yet. So you have some really fun ideas coming through and...

**Dave:** That's where they always... I always get middle of the night ideas.

**Genein:** Yes. Keep a notebook next to you. And it may be crazy when you wake up, but it might be the spark of something new.

**Dave:** And what's something you hope not to regret 10 years from now, or just something you want to make sure you're not going to let it be left undone?

**Genein:** When Maya Angelou died. I wasn't sad because she is the epitome of a life well lived. Talk about leaving everything on the earth. Right?

**Dave:** Right.

**Genein:** And when you think about what it means to live, is she really gone? I can go on YouTube and watch videos. I can see her productions. Her creativity is here still speaking for her, even though her physical body is no longer with us. And so that begs the question, what does it mean to be alive? And for me to leave this earth with still my creative ideas within me, that is one thing that I will regret. And so that's why I'm writing these books. I'm thinking my ideas, I'm here with you, Sara, and Tracy. And when I'm gone, David, this, podcast will still be here. And, and your great, and my great-grandchildren may still be listening to you and I today in 2021. Remember when that pandemic happened? Yeah. Well, here's my great, great grandmother talking to a man named David, talking about intercultural creativity. We laugh, David...

**Dave:** I love it!

**Genein:** But it can very well be true.

**Dave:** That's awesome. Well, thank you so much for being a guest on The Hennessy Report by Keystone, in cooperation with NEHRA. And, thanks for coming to visit us here at NEHRA!



**Genein:** It's my pleasure. You guys are doing great work here and I'm here to support your mission.

**Dave:** Thank you.

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