



EPISODE 24

Transforming Your Business Through Change

- Intro:** Welcome to Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. On each episode, we bring you interviews with leading management and employment experts from across the country. Your host for Strategic Insights is Brad Smith. And now, here's Brad.
- Brad Smith:** Hello, and thank you so much for tuning into this episode of Strategic Insights, brought to you by PrideStaff. I'm your host, Brad, and today we have an amazing episode lined up. We're going to talk about transforming your business through embracing change and being open-minded. I am so excited to have our first member of royalty on the podcast here, Princess Sarah Culberson. Princess Sarah is a top diversity and inclusion expert and a Sierra Leone princess. Princess Sarah, thank you so much for joining us today.
- Princess Sarah:** Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be with you.
- Brad Smith:** So, you have an absolutely amazing story. I've had the pleasure of meeting you in person and hearing this story, but for our guests who haven't been so lucky, can you tell us a little bit more about your background? I know that you weren't always a Sierra Leone princess. You didn't know that, in fact. You were adopted and raised in the United States from a very young age. Share a little bit more of that story with us if you don't mind.
- Princess Sarah:** Sure. So, yes, I was adopted. Grew up in a loving, amazing, all-white family in Morgantown, West Virginia. My birth mother was a white American. My birth father from Sierra Leone, West Africa. They had me young, realized they weren't ready and said, "We think we should give her to a family who could really take care of her and give her everything she needs." So I was adopted and grew up in Morgantown, as we talked about. And then, as I got older, I wanted to know more about biological roots, medical history. I had all these questions I wanted to get answered, and I was wondering where to begin. And I never wanted to upset my parents. I told my parents, "No one will ever replace you. I love you. You are my heart. And there are just some things I want to know about myself." And they said, "We love you. We're we're here to support you on your journey."

Princess Sarah: I did this amazing class called Landmark Worldwide, and my friend who worked for Microsoft did this course. And I was sitting in the course, and they said, "Tell the person sitting next to you where you're holding back in life." And I was sitting next to my friend Art, and I said, "Art, I'm really terrified to find my birth father." And he said, "Why?" I said, "I've heard it cost thousands of dollars for a private investigator. I don't know where to begin. And honestly, Art, I'm really, really afraid of being rejected." And he said, listen, "I know a private investigator, who's not going to charge you more than a hundred bucks, not thousands. And your birth father's going to love you." And all my fear came up, everything came up and I said, "Okay, I'm taking on being open, loving, and courageous. So, whatever I find out, I find out. But I don't want to be 60, 70 or 80 some day, and it's too late."

Princess Sarah: So, walking into the unknown, walking into the fear, walking into an uncomfortable space, not knowing how it was going to go. But the private investigator found my father within three hours, all the information I needed, for \$25. I wrote a letter to Maryland, when we used to write letters, before Facebook, social media and everything. This is 2003. I wrote a letter, hand-wrote it, mailed it off. And he said, "Let him be with it. Don't just pick up the phone and call, because people freak out and hang up. Just write a letter." So, four days later, I got a phone call after mailing the letter, and there was this woman on the other line and she said, "Hello, Sarah. This is Evelyn. How are you?" And I thought, "Is this that Jamaican woman I met the other day?" Because I couldn't get the dialect. I wasn't expecting to hear from anyone so soon.

Princess Sarah: She said, "Sarah, I'm your auntie. We received your letter." And I started to cry. I said, "Thank you so much for calling. I didn't know if I would ever hear from you. I didn't know if I would ever see you." She said, "Sarah, I was there when you were born. I used to take care of you when your birth mother would go to the grocery store." She said, "Hold on, hold on. Let me get your uncle on the phone." Then my uncle gets on the phone, and he's amazing. He goes, "Oh, Sarah. We are so happy you've been found. Do you know who you are?" And I said, "I'm Sarah." He says, "You are part of a royal family. Your great-grandfather was a paramount chief in Sierra Leone. Your grandfather was a paramount chief. Your grandfather was knighted Justice of the Peace by the Queen of England. Our family runs a chiefdom of 70,000. You can be chief. You are a princess in this country."

Princess Sarah: Okay. So, just to be honest with all of you, all the fear started to come back up again. What does this mean? A princess? Do I have to be perfect? Do I always have to wear dresses? Now I can never say a bad word. What does this mean? And this whole new world opened up, and they said, "We're going to contact your father in Sierra Leone, and he's going to be so happy to meet you." And they contact my father. And what I didn't know is, in 2003 in Sierra Leone, it was actually a privilege to have a cell phone. So, they had to get a message

from village to village to village to get this message to my birth father. And during that time period, all of these different African family members started calling me, who lived in the United States. "Hello, Sarah. I'm your uncle Ali, your father's favorite uncle." "Hello, Sarah. I'm your auntie, Jenny. They used to call your father and me twins when we were little." "Hello, Sarah." "Hello, Sarah." "Hello, Sarah." "Hello, Sarah."

Princess Sarah: All of these different African family members are calling me, welcoming me to the family, when I had told myself, "They're not going to want to meet me, they're not going to want to talk to me." It was a whole story that I had made up. All my assumptions, and none of it was true. And then, after the two weeks went by, my birth father calls. And I heard his voice for the first time. And the first thing he said to me is he said, "Please forgive me. I didn't know how to find you after you'd been placed in adoption. Your name had changed. Everything had changed." I said, "No, no, no, no, no. I need to ask you to please forgive me, because I've been making you wrong my entire life, just to protect myself. And I'm not going to do that anymore." And he said, "Okay." And we decided we wanted to meet. How do we do this? "It's challenging for me," he said, "to get a visa to come to the United States. Could you come here?" I said, "I'd love to."

Princess Sarah: I flew to Maryland to meet all those African family members, the ones who were like, "Hello, Sarah," "Hello, Sarah," "Hello, Sarah." We planned a trip for six months later to go to Sierra Leone. I get off the airplane, get to meet my birth father. And he was so nervous and so scared. His eyes were saying, "Please like me. Please accept me. Please like me." And I just went over and I gave him a big hug and I said, "It's so good to finally meet you." And he said, "It's so good to finally meet you too." And my aunt Amy, the chief's wife was standing there, and she said, "Turn around, girl. Let me look at you. Let me look at you." So, I turned around and she gave me this big hug. And we took a ferry that night from Lungi to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. And it's actually named Freetown because it's where the Africans who were taken and enslaved around the world were returned.

Princess Sarah: So, here I am in Freetown with my birth father, meeting everyone, and traveling the next day to Bumpe, my family's village, on what I call the Indiana Jones roads. The bumpy roads to Bumpe. My father gave him this beautiful green African dress. He had a matching green shirt. When we arrived in the village, we were welcomed by hundreds of people, singing and dancing. And everyone parted, and all the women of the village came forward wearing the same green dress that I had been given that morning.

Brad Smith: Wow.

Princess Sarah: And they were singing. They were singing in Mende, my family's language. (singing) They're singing, "We're preparing for Sarah." I had never met anyone

there. I was literally pinching myself. I was this overachieving kid trying to constantly fit in. Basketball star, homecoming queen, full scholarship to college. And then I get here and I realize that I don't need to do all that stuff. Just showing up was enough. That's another thing I've been learning on this journey. Sometimes, just showing up is enough. So, that's the Cliff Note version of the story of meeting my birth family.

Brad Smith: Oh my gosh, Princess Sarah. Just such an amazing story. And I want to dig into a few elements there a little bit more, if you don't mind. So, you've embraced change. At so many points in that story, you could have just thrown your hands up in the air and said, "You know what? I can't go through with this. I don't want to talk to this investigator. I don't want to talk to my aunt. I don't want to talk to my birth father. You know what? There's so much uncertainty. I don't want to fly to Sierra Leone and meet people that I've never met before." I mean, there were so many opportunities for you to say, "You know what? No. I don't want to move forward with this." But you embraced change. If you don't mind, talk to us a little bit about the importance of embracing change, both for yourself and in business, and how much good can come out of embracing that change?

Princess Sarah: This is a great question. I think embracing change is just completely the number one thing that is so important when we're leaders, when we're working together inside of community, because if we stay the same, we can't grow, we can't expand. We can't really impact a greater level of ourselves and others around us. And there are many times when I was very challenged. I still am. There are new things that come up all the time. And what I've realized is when I take the time to embrace it, these incredible new possibilities start opening up. And we have been able to, for example, listening to a lot of different people in Sierra Leone having different voices, hearing the girls, hearing the boys, hearing the amputees from the community, and hearing what change they had gone through. They had been through an 11-year civil war. You can't keep acting the same and doing the same things after war. Things have to change.

Princess Sarah: We've all been going through this COVID time, right? And we've had to adapt and change. We're doing Zooms now. We're doing podcasts, webinars. And actually, with adapting to that change, we're connecting in a lot of ways we didn't before. We could have always been on Zooms, but we didn't do that. We didn't realize how much we can connect in powerful ways. And when we actually embrace the change around us, rather than resisting it, there are new levels of enlightenment, power, revenue, if you will, that actually start showing up when we allow ourselves to sometimes get uncomfortable inside of the change. What I've learned is part of the change is being uncomfortable. There was a CEO that I spoke with AT&T and he said, "I know I'm in the right place when I'm uncomfortable." And I think that's a powerful statement, because change is uncomfortable and scary. But if we look at it inside of the

context of, "Okay, I'm going to be uncomfortable, but there are wonderful things that can come out on the other side. Challenges too, maybe." But very often, the things that we worry about and fear don't even need to be worries or fears. There's actually wonderful things on the other side of it if we allow ourselves to step to the other side and step into that change.

Brad Smith: So, building on that a little bit. In your story, you shared a powerful word. Assumptions.

Princess Sarah: Yes.

Brad Smith: And whenever we come into a new situation, we embrace change, we look at that. We bring with us some personal bias. Based on our experiences, we assume certain things. And you mentioned that, that you assumed that maybe your father didn't want to talk to you. Talk to us about how initial assumptions can affect our communication, affect our actions, and how do we get beyond that as people and as leaders?

Princess Sarah: I think that's a great question. Assumptions are incredible. And I don't think they're necessarily bad things. They're, I think, learning tools, if we take them on to question and learn about our assumptions and ask questions. And I think when we bring our assumptions to the table, we can actually start to ask questions and learn from each other. But we don't always realize how our assumptions can sometimes, not that they're bad things, but how they can actually skew our views of a lot of things. So, for example, in the hiring process. Maybe you've hired someone from this certain agency, and the person that came was wonderful. Now you're getting ready to hire somebody else, and they're from the same agency, and there's just this bias that happens. "Oh, they're probably going to be wonderful too, because that person was wonderful." It's human.

Princess Sarah: We have different kind of biases that show up. Even charismatic biases, like, "Oh my gosh, that person is so charismatic. I think they'd be great working here." Well, what are their qualifications, and how do they work with us, blah, blah, blah, blah? Or, sometimes we might make assumptions about people based on their culture, their religious backgrounds, so on, that are biases that we don't even realize we do, and that can actually get in the way. So, I think assumptions are incredible tools for us to learn from and check ourselves to see. Because if I had stuck with the assumption that I grew up with for most of my life, I would never have met my birth father. We would not be digging wells for clean drinking water for the entire country, we've already started, that are serving 12,000 plus people in the country.

Brad Smith: Wow.

Princess Sarah: We wouldn't be working on a Disney movie. I wouldn't be able to have this whole new family that's in my life, and these opportunities that are just extraordinary. But if I had let my assumption stay in the way about my father, about my adoption, about my birth family as a whole, I would've missed out on such a purpose-driven life and a powerful new world that I didn't even know was possible. And that's in my personal family, but it's also affected my business, and I've been able to grow. I have my own business. I have a whole team that we work with. And it all came out of getting out of my own way so a whole new world could start emerging, through family, through community and through business.

Brad Smith: I love that. So, we're all going to have assumptions, but we need to realize that, we need to realize it going in. We need to realize that sometimes we might look at things with bias or different experiences. Get over that. Embrace change. Learn about other people, learn about other cultures. Learn about new things. Expose yourself to different experiences and you'll grow tremendously.

Princess Sarah: It's incredible. And you actually learn more about yourself along the way as well. There's a really powerful learning that happens with yourself and others that is indescribable. And I think, when I think about life, we're all born and then we're going to pass away at some point. So, what are we going to do in between this time? Are we going to just stay comfortable with our assumptions, and just do the status quo? Or are we going to step out on the skinny branches and challenge ourselves and challenge our assumptions? I don't know.

Princess Sarah: I want to live to the fullest in this lifetime. And let me tell you, I get scared. I get confronted. I'm taking on some new projects right now, and I'm scared. I'm going to be hands down honest. But I'm going to do it. And I'm excited about what can happen as a result. And I think it's also important for us to take these risks and step out on the skinny branches as well, because it allows and gives others permission for them to do the same. They see that. "Wait a second, so and so did that. I could actually do that." And I think that also comes into acknowledging ourself, acknowledging our challenges and stepping into them anyway, gives others permission to be themselves and their greatest selves.

Brad Smith: Now, that's a great segue, I think, to the next topic that I wanted to ask you about. I've heard you speak about the concept of filling your own tank, of taking care of yourself. Can you tell us a little bit more about what you mean by filling your own tank, and why it's so important to really live your fullest life?

Princess Sarah: I love this question. So, filling your own tank. When I think about that, and I actually did a course years ago. I'm always learning. That's the other thing, I think it's so valuable to constantly be a lifelong learner, which my dad, who's

a, neuroanatomist always said to me. Always learn. And I did this course and they talked about, how do you fill your tank? And I really took this on when we were in lockdown for such a long period of time and thinking, "Wow, there's a lot of downtime. What are some things that I can do, rather than getting discouraged about the situation that we're all in? How can I find opportunities during this time? What are the silver linings and how do I fill my tank along the way?" And I started getting out and jogging and being in nature, because I grew up in West Virginia in the mountains. And in Los Angeles, sometimes there are a lot of buildings and busy streets. And so, I just literally went down the street up into the mountains and started hiking, and it literally filled my soul.

Princess Sarah: I was able to think clearer, have more fun, and we actually started creating a lot of different projects as a result of me taking time to fill my tank. And when I think about this as business people, as entrepreneurs, as leaders, managers, wherever people are in their lives. As parents, as family members, as daughters, as sons, however people identify. If we don't take time to put the mask on ourselves and take care of ourselves, we're no good to anybody else. And I know we know that, but we don't always, and I speak in the I perspective, I don't always remember to take the time to fill my tank, and in the last couple years I have taken that on. And I think it's so valuable and it makes you a better person to be around, and a much better colleague that people want to be with, when you take care of yourself, and much more effective.

Brad Smith: It is. And it makes me think of, every time you take a plane ride and they talk about the oxygen masks coming down, they always tell you to put your mask on first, before you help somebody else. Because if you're not taking care of yourself, you can't take care of others. And it's so vitally important. Which leads us, I think, into the next question that I had for you. I want to talk about the importance of celebrating accomplishments. Now, as business leaders, as we embrace change, you mentioned it can be scary. It can be scary for a leader themselves, but it can also be scary for your entire team. Talk to us a little bit about how maybe celebrating accomplishments can help us embrace change, get people on board, and move the organization and move ourselves forward.

Princess Sarah: I think that embracing change is literally one of the best ways to move everything forward, and embracing, really, our accomplishments. And so, let me think about this. I remember doing this course, and this young woman got up and talked about how she was starting a whole program for people with physical differences. And she was doing a whole theater production, and they got to be in the cast. And I watched her start from beginning to end, and what she was creating. She didn't know quite how to do it. She was challenged. She was overwhelmed. But she got up and shared what she was taking on. And then we all got to go see this amazing production with young people who had all different backgrounds. There was a young person in a wheelchair. There

was somebody else who had Down syndrome. There were all these diverse folks, all in a room, presenting to us.

Princess Sarah: And we got to acknowledge all of them and her for the work that was created, that we all got to experience. And when we did that, and acknowledged her and them, they got to feel proud of themselves, and it also caused me to go, "Wait a second. What can I do that can actually do this?" And the project that I was working on that wasn't really moving at the time, when I saw what she did, I got so inspired that I then took on creating a play week for foster children, because I had been a foster child before I was adopted. And it was something that wasn't part of my everyday work life, but it's something that I wanted to do for others. And when I saw her and her accomplishments, and seeing her being celebrated for something she didn't know if she could do, that's when I thought to myself, "We have to celebrate each other all the time," because it causes people to go, "I can do this too. I didn't think I could, but I can do this as well." I think that's so valuable.

Brad Smith: That's amazing. And it's such a rallying cry. It brings everyone together. It gets everyone excited, gets them moved forward. I love hearing that. Now, myself included, and I'm sure some of our listeners are sitting here thinking, "Wow, Princess Sarah, you're brave. You've embraced so much change. I don't know if I could be that brave." What would you say to those people that are maybe holding back, that understand that they need to embrace change, but just can't get over that hump?

Princess Sarah: One of the first things that I always do is I write, I journal. I don't know if people do that. Maybe people could put it in notes in a text to themselves, or type it, but I write out my fears because I get exactly the same way. And I start writing out what I'm afraid of, dumping it, almost like I'm going to empty... We say fill the tank, and then I dump out my fear tank sometimes, and say, "Okay, these are all the things I'm afraid of." And almost just let it all go, in a sense. And then I start writing what I would like to do and how I would like to see it go, and what could be possible, and start getting into a new mindset. And I also share with people that I really trust, that are lifters, because there are those people in our community, and we have to be aware of this, who are like, "Oh, really? Do you think you can do that?" Those are not the people you should be talking to.

Princess Sarah: Who are those allies that lift you, that go, "Of course you can do that"? And talk to them, and have them hold you accountable with what you're afraid of. Because we don't operate inside of silos. We need people. None of this that I've been able to accomplish, I can say yes, I've been brave, but this has been a team effort. My family, my community, my friends, everyone, my boyfriend. Everybody has been part of making this happen and it's been a complete team effort. And to not think you have to do it on your own, and to not think you have to know how to do it all. I had no idea how to run a nonprofit. I did not

study that. But I did not study business at the beginning, right?. But what I've learned is working with some of the best people in the business, in the nonprofit world, in the business world, that's how I've been able to learn and grow, through experiences and through actively taking things on.

Princess Sarah: So, you're not alone. Write it out, your fears. Write out how you want it to go. And number three, share with the people around you, who you love and hold you in a dear space, and will hold you accountable.

Brad Smith: Wow, great. Absolutely amazing tips. One thing that really stood out to me is your question, what could be possible? I think, all too often, we go into situations thinking, "What could go wrong?" But that's a complete mind shift. It's what could be possible.

Princess Sarah: What could be possible. When I went to find my birth father, at first, everything was dun-dun-dun-dun. All I could think of was the worst things that could happen. I never imagined, and that's what so powerful, I think, inside of this, is we can even write out what we want to see as possible. And let me tell you what, I guarantee things that are even more grand and more powerful will show up, that we can't even fathom. And that's what I've noticed when we take on stepping into the unknown and being scared and walking into it anyway. That things we never could have imagined start showing up, not even just for ourselves, but for those around us. And it's so incredible.

Princess Sarah: So, sometimes if you get fearful, think about it in a way of, "Oh, this isn't just for me. This is for the people that I love and care for. When I step out on the skinny branches, when I take this risk, when I put my assumptions aside and take this on, I'm not just going to support myself. I'm going to support everyone around me." So sometimes, when we don't make it about ourselves, that helps me a lot too, when I'm like, "Oh, this is [inaudible 00:26:24]," put myself aside. And that's what propels me forward. The work that we're doing in Sierra Leone, getting clean drinking water, I have to get out of my own way when I get afraid to ask for money, or afraid to do this or that, because I'm like, this isn't about me. This is about what we're doing, and who I get to be. So, just throwing that out there as well, if that could be helpful at all.

Brad Smith: It sure is, so powerful. Princess Sarah, I want to thank you so much for sharing your amazing story with us, sharing your insight, walking us through how to embrace change and not run from it. It was so powerful. I really appreciate it. My final question for you is this. What is next for you? What change are you embracing next? I know you alluded to some amazing things that are happening. I want to hear a little bit more about those.

Princess Sarah: So, one of the main things. So, I went to college and graduate school for classical theater. I studied Shakespeare and Chekhov and all these wonderful writers, and Sam Shephard and everything, and got to study with some of the

best. Some of my teachers have won Academy Awards. I mean, it's incredible. My roommates have won Academy Awards actually, or Tonys on Broadway. So, it's something that, when I found my family in Sierra Leone, my focus just went there, and the work in Sierra Leone. And now, I actually just spoke to some casting directors. I can't believe I'm sharing this. Very few people... Does my family even know this yet? So, I actually am, and we have a whole team working up with us with Sierra Leone, so that's still moving. So, it's out of building these different teams that we now have, I actually have space. That's what I mean about not trying to do things on our own, because when we actually build teams around anything we're doing, we actually have more space to take on more wonderful opportunities. And I'm actually stepping back into acting again.

Princess Sarah: And so I have some, they're upstairs right now, but some sides and scripts that I'm reading and different things that I'm looking into. And let me tell you what, I'm scared, because I haven't done this in years. Two of my friends who are just incredible actors are like, "What are you talking about? You're a great actress. It's like riding a bike. You went to the top schools. You know how to do this. You just haven't done it in a while. So, get back on there and start doing it." It may sound so silly, but to me, it's scary. But it is a dream. And what I also know is when I get the opportunity to tell stories that I'm inspired by or excited by, and now there are more scripts and there's more diversity in scripts that's happening. So, I feel like this is a great time for me to get out there on the skinny branches and try something that I haven't done in a long time, and maybe do well, maybe fail at times, but that's part of the journey, right? It's part of the journey.

Brad Smith: It is. I love it.

Princess Sarah: Thank you for asking me, because I'm like, oh my gosh, I have to say this.

Brad Smith: Thank you for sharing. And don't forget to celebrate your accomplishments.

Princess Sarah: Oh, thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for that.

Brad Smith: Yep. Well, on behalf of PrideStaff and everyone listening, we really want to thank you for sharing that amazing story, sharing these great tips. Can't thank you enough.

Princess Sarah: Thank you so much for having me. Thank you for your spirit.

Brad Smith: And for those that are listening, if you're ready to embrace change, if you need help in building a team like Princess Sarah just mentioned, be sure to reach out to a local PrideStaff office. We are here to help and support you. Again, Princess Sarah, thank you so much.

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Princess Sarah: Thank you.

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