



ARLETTE: Hi, I'm Arlette, your host, and welcome to "Give Me an H."

Together we'll explore the culture of The Home Depot through the eyes and experiences of our associates who live it every day.

Let's get started.

Associate-focused Culture and Diversity & Inclusion - Derek Bottoms



ARLETTE: Derek Bottoms is Chief Diversity Officer and Vice President of Associate Relations at The Home Depot.

He's responsible for leading the Associate Relations organization and the company's diversity and inclusion efforts.

Now, we're doing things just a little bit differently right now, so we're talking to him remotely today.

Listen in as we talk about his experience at The Home Depot and his vision for the future.

All right, Derek, let's jump in. Tell me about what it was like growing up as Derek Bottoms. What's your background? What's your story?

DEREK: I'm born and raised in Atlanta. Nothing particularly amazing about my childhood. Just real happy. Just a great little kid enjoying life.

I didn't go far from home. I went to the University of Georgia, which is about one hour from Atlanta.

I went to Law School. At one point I thought I'd be the President, and then, when I got to college as a freshman, I discovered fraternities and parties, and I realized the presidency was not in my future, because I really enjoyed the parties, and that kind of -- I don't regret it.

There were some really good parties.

ARLETTE: So from that, you chose the path as an attorney.

DEREK: Yeah... College. I went to Law School. I was working at a law firm, and Home Depot was a client. And that's how I kind of got to Home Depot, but you know.

ARLETTE: So tell us why that was your path?

DEREK: Well, I hate to say it, but I used to like to argue. So I thought if somebody would pay me to argue, that would be the best of all possible worlds. So...

ARLETTE: And I feel like I've experienced that argumentative side, so...

DEREK: No, no, no, no. That's giving you spirited advice.

And I came from a family of people who were doctors, and I took a few Science classes and realized very quickly that that was not going to be the path for me.

And I thought that going to Law School would give you a very important trait in terms of teaching you how to think.

So it wasn't necessarily that I had to do one thing or the other, but if it gave you a method or a way of thinking about facts critically, and you could take that and do anything with it, and it's --

So far for me has served me pretty well. I don't think it's going to change in the future.

ARLETTE: Now, you mentioned, though, that that's how you got to The Home Depot.

So tell us a little bit more about that. What specifically happened so that you could get to The Home Depot?

DEREK: You want the true story or the political story?

ARLETTE: Definitely want the true story.

DEREK: All right.

The true story is there was a partner that I worked for that did not think that I was a particularly good lawyer on some instances, and his thought...

ARLETTE: So wait. You were working for a law firm and not getting a great performance review? Is that what you're telling me?

DEREK: Hey, hey, hey. I didn't say I wasn't getting a great performance review. I said there was a lawyer who didn't think I was the best lawyer.

So don't try to put words in my mouth.

ARLETTE: Okay, go ahead. I'm sorry.

DEREK: So what's interesting, he did not think that I would make partner. And it was a couple of combination of things.

It was more about the ability to bring in business, and suggested that I go to work at one of his clients. And one of his clients was Home Depot.

And there was a guy named Don Singletary that was a client that I worked with at Home Depot when I was doing litigation. And he arranged with Don for me to interview for a job and apply. And I got the job, and I went from a law firm...

All you can think about at a law firm were lawyers; one that is a kind of money-making entity and everybody is in it to support the lawyers in whatever he or she is doing, to Home Depot, which is really a working warehouse.

And if you think about our office was attached to the store across the street, to 121 across the street.

ARLETTE: Now, that's important. When you say that our office was attached to the store it makes me think about our legacy as a company, which is to provide direct support to our stores.

So thinking about store supportcenters and our offices being tagged...

DEREK:

I will tell you, Arlette, it was -- At the time going there, I did not understand it because of what my background was, but I would say having an office attached to a store was probably the most important aspect of my years at Home Depot because I completely understood why we were there.

You were in a store and you appreciated every single day - what at the time there were probably 240-odd associates - who worked in that store 121.

ARLETTE: Uh-huh.

DEREK: And you walked across that store and see them working. You'd see the customers, you'd see how busy it was.

It always kept you very focused as to what your job was and what truly the store support center was. And nobody opens a business to litigate cases. We open a business to do two things, particularly at Home Depot.

We resolve a problem or fulfill a dream. We heard that a day before from Arthur. So you understood very quickly what your role was in the company, and your role was one of two things: you were either supporting the front line associate, right? Or you were about to support a front line associate.

ARLETTE: Tell me how that experience. Your first job at The Home Depot, attached to the store in the aisles, seeing the action, supporting the front line associates.

How has that impacted your outlook, now having been with The Home Depot formore than 20 years?

DEREK: The role that I have now has taught me to be patient, it has taught me perspective, it's taught me --

I got to know associates in that store for the people that they were versus the titles, or positions, or roles that they had.

And I learned in that role that there was never a leader that woke up that morning and decided, "I am going to make a bad decision to impact negatively one of our associates or one of our customers."

ARLETTE: Okay.

DEREK: And from that, I learned to have a level of patience and ability to ask that next question, to try to get to the root of an issue. Because at the end of the day, we don't have any associate that comes to work and says, "Today is the day I'm going to mess up and I'm going to do it on purpose."

Everybody, we start out thinking they can be the best that they can be, and if something goes wrong in that relationship it is because the relations went off the rails.

And that all really flowed from being in that store next door to a group of people and seeing exactly what they go through day in and day out.

ARLETTE: It's interesting, because you talk about seeking to understand or this idea of assuming good intent. And so I appreciate that, that associate-focused culture that we have.

And so when you think about being in the store, being in the aisles, having that thought process around, "clearly there was good intent," how do we solve this issue for this associate? Or how do we turn this around. It makes me think about our orange family.

Oftentimes you hear that phrase. What does the orange family mean to you?

DEREK: The orange family is not unlike your family or my family.

We've all got cousins that we love, we all got the crazy uncle who comes over for the holidays, and you want to put him up in the attic.

We've all got that. But it's our family.

ARLETTE: Right.

DEREK: You know, I think about my whole family. We all have these little things that are strange about our family, and we don't ever think it's us that's strange, but somebody looks at us and thinks we're strange.

And if you think about our family, it's the same way. We can all think about people we think are a little odd or a little this, but we're all there and we all work together. We're all laser-focused on trying to give the most dynamic customer experience that we possibly can, irrespective of how you define your customer.

Your customer can be the person that walks in and out of the car to get the thingamajig to fix the sink. Or your customer can be the front line associate who's calling you with a customer in front of them and they need help. Or when I was in the legal department, that customer could've been you.

You were calling to try to get some advice on an issue. But at the end of the day, we're all focused -- we're laser focused -- on how to deliver -- on trying to deliver the most dynamic customer experience we possibly can.

ARLETTE: You just said something that's important. You said, as a family, we all have our own idiosyncrasies or quirks that we bring to the table, and that makes me think about diversity, that each of us is uniquely positioned, that each of us is different.

You are the chief diversity officer for The Home Depot. You've been in that role now for just a few months.

What's your outlook? Where are we headed?

DEREK: Well, it's interesting. What I would tell you is that -- and this will sound unusual, I think -- there's not a great deal of thinking that you have to do, because we are a values-based organization.

So to the extent you ever have a doubt about anything, you look at the value, we all see the eight values. You look at the inverted pyramid and that steers you in the right direction.

Diversity has always been important. It's not all of the sudden something happened somewhere and now we gotta focus on diversity. We've always been that group of people, because we've always led and we've always lived in a valued-based environment.

I think what's happened is that we had the events of the summer, and I refer to them as events, and I don't mean to minimize them. We all know what happened. So we had the events of the summer and it created a more -- a fierce urgency of now.

But because of the foundation that we always had, I think that the ground that we have to cover is not as much as some of the other companies. So for us, what's important to me is that we're working on three things with diversity stand point, we're working on our associates.

What are we doing in our platforms and inside our buildings? We're working on our communities. How do we make opportunity sustainable for the communities that we serve?

And the third piece of that really is the supply and diversity aspect. How do we make sure that we're bringing other groups and other companies along?

If you think back when this pandemic started, remember one of the things Craig said, one of his focus in terms of not just your associates, but he wanted to try to keep our suppliers whole.

ARLETTE: Yes, he did.

DEREK: So, when you have leadership that leads from that perspective, it's not real difficult to make the pivot from a diversity perspective to do the right thing.

ARLETTE: That's a great point. You mentioned "do the right thing" as one of our core values.

I also believe that those actions highlight the value that we have of taking care of our people, and that's whether we're talking about our customers, our associates, or our suppliers.

So I appreciate that perspective. Now, we talked about your role as Chief Diversity Officer, but you also are our Vice President of Associate Relations.

What is that?

DEREK: Well, the difference for us is our associates. And my job is to make sure that our associates are in an environment, day in and day out, where they are allowed to bring their complete selves to work...

ARLETTE: Absolutely.

DEREK: ...and that they feel supported, they feel resourced, and they are able to do the jobs to the best of their ability and provide that excellent customer service.

That they give that discretionary effort to make sure that our customers walk out either having their problem solved that I mentioned earlier, or that dream fulfilled that they were working.

And that's -- if you say Associate Relations -- that's really my job.

ARLETTE: It reminds me of what our founders told us, which is, if we take care of the associates, the associates take care of the customers, and the rest takes care of itself.

And that seems to continue to be true today.

DEREK: Absolutely.

ARLETTE: So now, what do you do if someone asks you should they join The Home Depot?

How do you bring it to life for them in terms of understanding what your experience has been?

DEREK: Honestly, it's difficult to try to put the experience into words. And what I tell people is that I've been there 21 years, and I jokingly say, "If I hit the lottery, I love you but I'll miss you," because I hit the lottery, right?

But having not hit the lottery, I cannot think of another place that I would want to go and spend eight or ten hours a day. There are people here that are genuine people. There are people here that you have developed life-long friendships with.

There are people here that you will argue with at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, and then look forward at 11:30 to go to lunch with.

There are people that you will just gravitate toward. It's whoever you are, whatever you do, there is somebody here that relates to you, that will embrace you and we're all - and like I said earlier -- we're all aligned on a single purpose, and that's to deliver that fantastic customer service.

And it's difficult to really put it into words. But I would say, 21 years here and looking forward to the battles of the years would not change jobs in the least bit.

ARLETTE: I love that. We talked about the orange family, and you're right, there is a space for everyone here at The Home Depot. Certainly, we've all had those experiences.

So final question, what's your favorite day like at The Home Depot? The kind of day when you say, "That's why this place is so special."

DEREK: My favorite day, quite honestly, is when an associate calls me with a problem, and I am able to correct that problem or help them with that issue.

That they can come to work the next day and have a much better experience because of something near my team did. And what's interesting, just a very brief story, you know how many we have, you know, 400,000 associates.

ARLETTE: Yes.

DEREK: And obviously, you and I in Atlanta, and there was an associate in New York...

ARLETTE: Uh-huh.

DEREK: ..who was terminated. And she sent me an e-mail that said, "Hey, Derek, I'm sure by now you've heard about my termination, and I just wanted to talk to you about it."

And my point of that is that, in her mind, she knew, with the certainty of a prophet, that I was fully aware of the fact that something happened with her employment. And it turned out to be that everybody who is involved in that decision was operating off a different piece of information.

And we were able to get all the information together, we were able to resolve the problem. And everybody in that space was more than receptive to resolving that problem.

And the fact -- And I bring it up and I know it's a strange thing to talk about a termination, but I bring it up because she was able to reach out to us for help.

We were able to help her, we were able to call back her district and say, "Hey, what's going on?" We figured it all out, brought her back to work. She sends me a thank-you note, as does her store manager.

In terms of a good day, to have an associate that has an issue, that needs help with an issue, and you were able to sit down, talk to them, and walk them through the issue, and they go home and come back to work the next day in a better environment because of something that you did.

ARLETTE: That just brings to life our value of taking care of our people.

Certainly, our associates are one of our competitive advantages, and your role with the organization is just a testament to that.

So I appreciate the time with you.

DEREK: Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

ARLETTE: Derek said it best. He noticed it early in his career, The Home Depot has always been like a family, our orange family.

We take care of each other, give back, and we're committed to doing the right thing. And if you think about it, that's a huge part of diversity and inclusion.

And it's obvious that Derek is the right person to lead our efforts. He believes in The Home Depot's values, is passionate about our associates, and he's truly making a difference at The Home Depot.

Thank you for listening.

This is Arlette signing off.

I hope you'll join us next time for another episode of "Give me an 'H.'"