

## Episode 33: A Story About Being Gay in Corporate America

**Daniel Robbins:** Here we are again. For another episode of Above it All, a podcast dedicated to the roofing industry by Johns Manville. Today is a very special day. We are celebrating Pride Month, and so we're gonna be talking about something very serious today, but also something that a lot of people can take something away from. And our special guest today is Zebonie Sukle. How are you doing?

**Zeb Sukle:** Doing well, thank you.

**Daniel Robbins:** So Zeb, before we get into the depths of this podcast, tell us a little bit about your background, and I know we've done one episode before, so for anyone who's listening, go back, check it out, her name's on the title, and it talks a little bit about what she's been doing at JM, but let's recap that a little bit now.

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, so I've been here at JM for about 11 years. I am the technical director for the roofing systems division, so I manage our product engineering resources, our codes, our quality and our R&D activity for our development.

**Daniel Robbins:** So we don't have great new outstanding products without you. That's basically what you're saying.

**Zeb Sukle:** Well...

**Daniel Robbins:** Oh, your team...

**Zeb Sukle:** Without my team...

**Daniel Robbins:** With an incredible team too...

**Zeb Sukle:** With an incredible team, yes.

**Daniel Robbins:** I don't wanna down sell any of them because you work with definitely some of the smartest people I've ever met in my life. That's for sure.

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, they are very talented.

**Daniel Robbins:** And your background is in was it Chemistry or Biology?

**Daniel Robbins:** It's my undergraduate is in Physics and I have a Master's.

**Daniel Robbins:** Physics. So I see you build hadron colliders potentially, right? At your house.

**Zeb Sukle:** Totally.

**Daniel Robbins:** Alright, so this month, it's Pride Month, I wanted to talk to you about your life because there are so many people who can be empowered by your story, so you are an openly gay woman in leadership, and I wanna ask you, what was that journey like coming to this space where you felt supported enough to just be yourself?

**Zeb Sukle:** You know, it's been a journey. I mean, I wouldn't say that it hasn't been a process. I would like to first say that JM has been exceptionally supportive of me in my career, which has been fantastic, but in previous companies and in other places it wasn't always like that. You know, I've been out since I've been 20 years old. And so going through that period of time was very tumultuous.

**Daniel Robbins:** I can imagine, but that's part of the reason why I think we needed this podcast, 'cause people need to understand that it's not just something that people do culturally or it's not a trend, it's literally something that people just live with and they struggle with because there is a cultural stigma. I feel like we're kind of... It's like people don't wanna talk about it, and it causes a form of discrimination, I feel like. So let's go back to the earlier days before you came out, what was that like, was there a lot of stress with figuring out who you are and how all that worked or what was that like back then?

**Zeb Sukle:** Oh, absolutely, because I grew up in a very Catholic family.

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**Daniel Robbins:** Oh my gosh.

**Zeb Sukle:** And so I pride myself on being a very spiritual person, and it was tough growing up in that kind of environment in a rural area of Colorado, discrimination and comments about gay people were all over the place. And growing up knowing that I was different, but not really knowing how to express myself and feeling comfortable to express myself and feeling like it was a safe environment to do that was a big deal. And I think that the hardest thing for me through it, and I always shared this story, is really... It was the coming out to my family was probably the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life. And I would say that there were times where I didn't talk to members of my family for years as a result of it. And one thing for me that I've maintained in my life is just being consistent, being consistently who I am. And if you know me, I hope that those that do know me know that I'm a fair person. I try to treat people with respect, treat people as I would wanna be treated, even in the face of challenging times. And as soon as I kinda crossed over and did come out to my parents and dealt with all of those things that kind of...

**Zeb Sukle:** Not just my parents, but my entire family dealt with all of those things that came up. Really, in my mind, I felt like there was nothing that could be any harder than that for me to get through. And I kind of have taken that course as being a gay woman in the workforce in corporate America to hopefully help push the envelope a little bit further for other people.

**Daniel Robbins:** Absolutely, I can't imagine how many people probably dealt with something similar. When you came out in those relationships were there some of them that were just damaged for life, do you feel like? Or is it this time where people, takes a while for them to kind of let it sit in with them, and then finally out of love, out of family and those things, these type of things, they get put in the past and all of a sudden people go to these higher spaces?

**Zeb Sukle:** I would, I completely agree with that. I think when I came out, it was months before, or months after Matthew Shepard had been killed. And I remember my mother just being very fearful that why would I ever choose a lifestyle that would put me in that position that something could harm me like that.

**Daniel Robbins:** And for our listeners who don't know, touch on the Matthew Shepard story just a little bit.

**Zeb Sukle:** Matthew Shepard was a gay man in Wyoming going to school, that was murdered because of his sexual orientation, and it was kind of, it hit really close to home, being in Colorado...

**Daniel Robbins:** Yeah, it's close.

**Zeb Sukle:** Very close. Wasn't something that we had seen a lot, but certainly it had made mainstream media here in Colorado, and it was a scary time for us.

**Daniel Robbins:** So that was indeed a hate crime... And so there's this other side too, like you had to deal with the stress of dealing with family members, but then also too, there was this facing of fear outside of your family because people do crazy stuff, and you had a precedent knowing that how bad things have happened to people who have come out and... So that's strength, right? That's you just going. Leaving it on the table. Right, and...

**Zeb Sukle:** Well, I think it highlights the fact that it's not a choice back in that period of time, people really felt as though being gay was a choice.

**Daniel Robbins:** Why would you wanna endanger your life for something?

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, why would I wanna do that? And it wasn't that, it was about being true to myself and authentic to who I am, and... So yeah, it was tough and it took years of people being consistent, being still, even though things were said and comments made, is still trying to take the higher road and being who I wanted to be, and I think this is a great, great platform right now, for us to help people, I wanna be a role model and hopefully help other people that are on that cusp know that they can be their authentic self even in a work environment.

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**Daniel Robbins:** Well, I love your story too, because whether you're gay, straight or whatever, you orient as, there's this mythos to the road less traveled the road. That comes with hardship. Right, and when we approach that cave that the dragon is guarding, right? There's treasure on the other side, but to face that dragon, to face the fear, to go that hard route and it's okay to suffer. I think a lot of us are getting this idea that life needs to be good, life needs to be good and things need to just work out. And I think they can and they should, but no they don't really happen like that without suffering first in some way. Right? And so that's a testament to your story, right? That's what you did. And now you're here. So I wanted to talk about now, in the later years of your corporate experience, 'cause I know you mentioned lightly that you've been in situations in business environments where you felt unsafe to let people know who you were there and so what was that dynamic like?

**Zeb Sukle:** When I first came out, when I finally came out to my family and then I started my first job right out of school, I was definitely in the closet, and it was hard navigating that area, right? Because I had a partner for a period of time before that, but work was work and my home life was completely separate. And so building friendships and relationships, it just took a little bit more time. And it was hard to really show people that during that period of time, who you really were. And I always say I could always hide to some extent, right? Because I can do my hair, I can put on make-up, I can dress the part. There are so many people out there that can't. For me, being a lesbian in Corporate America, at least when I started, I could hide. I could put on a dress, I could do my hair, put on make-up, and people... I looked the part. And other people don't have that benefit of being able to hide, hide in plain sight.

**Daniel Robbins:** But that to me, blows my mind too, 'cause like just... Like you said it, gotta hide in plain sight, just even being in those circumstances is so compromising to your sense of self. It's like, who should be hiding? Right? And why do we need to be hiding... So the culture, we're seeing it change a little bit, and I wanna ask you too, so we're here now and it's been this long journey having to feel like you had to put on certain masks, as you say. People don't have that benefit all the time. So do you feel like it exists today? Potentially if you weren't at JM or for other people maybe that you know, is there an element where people are still hiding, that you know that they have to present a certain side in order to appease the market or whatever, out there, it's like there's this subconscious element of reality that we're all kind of negotiating with somewhat.

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, I do. I think that people... I think the Black community by far is kind of in that area where they have to look a certain way, act a certain way, that we've put some of those boundaries on them for whatever reason. But I think that it is encouraging to see people having the conversations, talking to people about their differences. I would say that a lot of people that I've met throughout my career have been super supportive, but it was first getting to know me as who is Zeb in the workplace, like what do I stand for? Like my work ethic, those were all the things that I focused early on in my career with kind of demonstrating through who I was, through what I did, not about who I was outside of work, but what I delivered to the workplace...

**Daniel Robbins:** That story that you're talking about. It sounds like you were tying... Because of the potential stresses that you would face from society, it sounds like you really went out of your way to show that my work should speak for me. But I think more than ever, we all wanna know who you are as a person, because the incredible person makes the incredible work. It's not like the other way around, and I think we do work, and that defines us in some ways, but on that note, do you feel like culture has become a little bit less confrontational on just letting you be you over the years since you were young?

**Zeb Sukle:** Absolutely, I think it's much more accepting to a large extent, than it once was. I was just watching little tidbits from the Ellen... 'Cause the Ellen Show, right? For those that don't know, Ellen DeGeneres, her show aired 19 years ago, 20 years ago. And this year is her final season of it, she's moving on. And when she was re-capping and going through, it was interesting to hear that 20 years ago she wasn't allowed to say 'gay' on television. And she wasn't allowed to even say 'we' on television. And I remember there were times that nobody ever even knew that I had been with my partner at the time for five years, and nobody knew that I had a partner, because it just wasn't something that you openly shared with at work.

**Daniel Robbins:** Right. It was also something that it's like people potentially are gonna persecute you in some bizzare way and discriminate.

**Zeb Sukle:** I will say though that I've been really proud of the fact that because of getting over that hurdle of being out to my family, it did give me a little bit of confidence in the workplace. I do have friends that for a long time, and even now, are still not openly out at work, so that there is still that occurring in today's environment.

**Daniel Robbins:** What's their... I guess what is their mindset like a little bit, from your own opinion. Why do they feel that way about their workplace?

**Zeb Sukle:** Because they've heard comments.

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**Daniel Robbins:** Oh, people just, people passing by or people having conversations as they're walking by, things like that?

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, or they hear talk from other people saying, "Oh, he's so gay, or she's really gay." Just simple things that people don't realize affect somebody's ability to be really authentically who they are and worried about some of the consequences that might happen. So it is still out there, which is why I hope in doing this, we shed some light on the fact that we have to continue to be the voices for people, because Ellen is going away, like my only thought is, she's been a platform here on mainstream television for 20 years of somebody that we could identify with. An openly gay woman on television, right? There's not very many role models when you talk about role models for who you look to and who looks like you, who acts like you, who feels like you. You Somewhat feel like you're in a world of your own for a period of time. So for some of us that have kind of gone through that and we're at a different point in our lives, hopefully giving other people an opportunity to see that we have normal lives just like everybody else, we have families that we love and that love us, and we have communities that we work with and we're part of. And that it isn't...

**Zeb Sukle:** Our lifestyle and who we choose to love is not something that's a choice. We didn't carve this out and say, "Hey, yeah, I wanna take this road and do this." It was either that or the sadness that would happen as a result of not being who you are. I couldn't even imagine that. I couldn't even imagine if it didn't go that way for me. I feel fortunate enough that for the most part, I had I would say a great... Other than the first initial part, but my family came together. And I think that support has given me... Has given me strength in continuing that journey and being true to who I am.

**Daniel Robbins:** Well, it sounds like love too, right? This is kind of a motto for me. It's like love always wins. And we can get frustrated at people, we can get mad at situations, but if we choose to figure out how to come back to it with more of an open heart in love, it's like you end up having a better relationship than you had before, potentially. I wanna step back to that thing you said about just the simple things that we could say that would just completely help reinforce some type of maybe even traumatic reality that someone's living in some way or hiding from who they are because they don't... It affects... Those things affect them. And so many people don't think about what they say. I'm constantly... Sometimes I say too much, and I love that because we could all use the ability to think more about what we say and truly potentially how is it gonna impact the people around us.

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah, I mean, I think it's a practice. Right? I think I was always taught to think before you say something, and realize that you can't take those words back, and be really mindful of how your words can affect somebody else. And you don't know where they're at, you don't know what's happening in their life or what situation they're in that maybe those words said just are the tipping point for certain people. So for me, it's really just being mindful of how words affect other people and getting away from some of those... I would say the comments that we all grew up with of words and...

**Daniel Robbins:** Yeah, there's somewhat of slurs. We could say that. I don't know, maybe I'd be using the wrong word like a racial slur, but there's some form of a slur that have been integrated in our vocabulary that we could easily just remove with finer words. We're almost out of time, but I know that you have been working here at JM on accounts because JM values lacking division, JM values unification, JM values its people, it values integrity and it values people's emotional state and having a high quality of life. And so I know that you've been involved with the council, can you tell us and the listeners about this council that you've been working on.

**Zeb Sukle:** Yeah. So it's our Diversity and Inclusion Council, and part of that is a sub-team for the LGBTQIA+ community. We're just starting it out. We just formed it. We hope that we can get more people through our plans throughout JM part of our group to really just start the conversation and have support and avenues for people, and not just... I would say not just for those that identify, but those that are supporters of the LGBTQIA+ community, those people that have loved ones that they wanna support and better understand some of the struggles that they've had to deal with. How we can start to have just conversations about it and find the common ground, find where we can all see where we're more similar than we are different. I think that's the biggest... In my mind, I think that's the biggest thing, is we're all... I would say the vast majority of people are loving, caring, kind people. Right?

**Daniel Robbins:** I agree. I agree.

**Zeb Sukle:** And I think that we just get lost in some of this noise that occurs, but if we can find those avenues that are important. My family is important to me. I bet that every single one of the people on this, that are gonna listen to this, realize that their families are probably the most important thing to them. Right? My friends have been amazing. And we can all share and probably agree that our friends are awesome and the best friends ever. So finding those places where we all have more in common than we have differences, I think make those transitions between some of the gray area a little less hard to have conversations about.

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**Daniel Robbins:** I love that. And before we go too, I know you've been on this journey, there's been a lot of anxiety, stress potentially. I don't know anxiety may be the wrong word, but just like confrontation and the angst that might come with that. What are some tools that have helped you other than just getting in there and fighting the good fight, no matter how tough it gets? What are some tools that have helped you along the way to help manage those emotions?

**Zeb Sukle:** Well, I think it's in the workplace is having some allies. I've had some great allies through my career in the people that have seen me and have worked with me and have helped me to navigate those areas and have had my back at times. So I think having that support group and... Is super important to talk to about things and challenges. Me personally, I tend to meditate when things get... I need to have a little time to reflect. And I think not only about what has occurred, but would there be a different way for me to handle a certain situation if it was presented to me again? So I think those are some of the tools. I think too, for a lot of parents that might be wondering too if their child might be gay, there's a lot of support groups out there and before maybe... I would just say maybe before you have that conversation with them, you know, talk to somebody, go to counseling. I have a counselor, I have a therapist, right?

**Daniel Robbins:** Me too.

**Zeb Sukle:** And it's great... Therapy is great. I think it helps us to have somebody that we can talk to about things. And I think for us, especially in today's environment of the just everything that's coming at us in the last few years, I think people need to really take that moment and give it to themselves, that opportunity to let it go, let certain things go.

**Daniel Robbins:** That's powerful. Find your champions, find your peace, meditation, yoga, maybe even exercise. And find your counselor because it's important that we all learn the art of communication, that's what counselors do, it's like learning a dialogue with yourself, it's healthy, and then also how to work with people that same way. And it's amazing what we can let go of when we can communicate, well, maybe some stuff effectively, yeah. So powerful stuff. Thank you so much for sharing this on the podcast with us.

**Zeb Sukle:** Well, thank you, and I just wanna say Happy Pride Month to everybody out there. And I'm so grateful you asked me to participate in this month's series. It's been great.

**Daniel Robbins:** It's an honor. We're making history right now.

**Zeb Sukle:** We are, and it's good. And I hope that this spurs the conversation and gets people asking questions and more support around it. JM has been, like I said, extremely supportive to me. My sexual orientation has never been an issue at JM, and that's refreshing. That's not always the case at companies.

**Daniel Robbins:** People love you. Whoever I've talked to, I try to talk to everybody too, whenever anything about Zeb or product innovation comes up, they have... It's like they love you. People love you here. And that's a beautiful thing.

**Zeb Sukle:** That's because I love everybody here. Well, thank you so much, Daniel, for having me, and thank you everybody for tuning in and listening. And please join, please join our LGBTQIA community and group. And I hope this is helpful to those... I'd be happy to talk to anybody else if there's any other questions they have.

**Daniel Robbins:** She said it best. We'll catch you all next time. Stay safe out there.