Steven: Caroline Casey, good to have you here. Hello.

Caroline Casey: Hello Steven.

Steven: It is lovely to have you here. First of all, for our audience, who are you and why are you here today? What's your story?

Caroline Casey: Oh my gosh, that's a big existential question at 48 years old. My name is Caroline Casey. I'm Irish. I am the founder of The Valuable 500, which is a global campaign to get 500 of the world's most important leaders and brands to put disability on the leadership agenda and create a tipping point. I, myself, am registered blind, visually impaired. I have been in the space of disability business inclusion for about 20 years and I feel like I have the role of a revolutionary now. I think age is a great thing actually I have to say.

Steven: Wisdom makes the difference.

Caroline Casey: I'm not sure wisdom, but I definitely would say... So my story is such an unusual story. I often quote Maya Angelou that there is no greater agony than an untold story inside you. I discovered at 17 that I had a rare condition called ocular albinism, which means obviously you and I can't see each other, but I definitely can't see you from here though I look very visually able. When I've discovered that, I just could not connect with it. This is back in 1989.

I had seen how the world had treated disability and I couldn't identify. I didn't want it. I hid it and I hid it for 11 years until I came out of the closet, which was 20 years ago now when I was working for Accenture as a management consultant. I often laughingly say, what does that say about management consultants? They didn't know they had a visually impaired blind person in their business.

What's very unusual about the story is that it was no accident that I didn't know about my sight loss until I was 17, because my parents made a conscious decision when I was very, very young that they didn't want my life to be defined by a label or a medical condition and they knew the world wasn't designed for difference. They decided to do a human experiment and send me to a normal school and see how I did. I did okay. I mean I survived it. It just self-perpetuated and that's how I found out at 17.

Steven: It's interesting you used the phrase you came out of the closet.

Caroline Casey: Yeah.

Steven: I've used that myself a few times. You know? It's an interesting comparison to make, isn't it? Because you're admitting to people. Is it perhaps different for us in the sense that if you're coming out of the closet, say, as someone who's gay, you might not need to do that every day of your life with people. Whereas if you're visually impaired, you kind of do, don't you? You have to tell the world every day, because the next person you meet doesn't know and the next person you meet doesn't know.

Caroline Casey: Yeah. It's one of the hardest things. I don't want this to come across the wrong way, but because I don't look like I have a vision impairment at all and I don't behave like that at all unless you see me walking into glass doors or falling down steps or coming out of the gents' toilets and all the usual things that happen with someone who's visually impaired... And that happens all the time. I have just about two feet vision and everything beyond that's very blurry.

I walk around in really high heels. The first thing I'm often asked is, "You're visually impaired and you wear high heels." I'm like, "Yeah." I'm like, "Why would I not wear high heels?" This coming out process that you talk about, it nearly has to happen every day and sometimes five or six times a day. It's very hard because I'm Caroline, right? You're Steven. I [inaudible 00:03:52] I'm Caroline, the visually impaired girl. When I finally owned my cane, when I got my cane, it took away a lot of the questions. I know that sounds really strange, but sometimes when I was in the hiding phase, I used to nearly wish that my eyesight was worse.

Does that make sense? Because then people would know and I wouldn't have to explain and I wouldn't have to justify or be so frightened that I was looking like I was trying to get attention from you. For me, my biggest issue around my acceptance of my sight is lack of confidence and lack... I'm such an independent spirit. I am a rebel. I mean I am a rebel, a rebel woman. This independence piece was really hard, asking for help was really hard. This disclosing, "Hi, can you help me go to the bathroom?" Honestly [inaudible 00:04:53].

Steven: That's what perhaps is most interesting because there are a lot of people as you know, as I know, people who will never leave the house after diagnosis, after they lose their sight. For many people, it's later in life. There are many of us who have grown up with sight loss in one form or another or vision impairment because we didn't really lose anything, did we? With that in mind, I think it's interesting that we have that process. I think there's also, from what you're saying, a really interesting conversation to be had around blindness and partial sight. There's a key difference, isn't there?

Caroline Casey: There really is. I think even when we talk about disability and I talk about The Valuable 500 and we are really looking at the 1.3 billion people in the world who have lived experience of disability, there are so many different... That word means so many things, right? Doesn't it?

Steven: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Caroline Casey: Even within sight, your experience of sight loss and my experience of vision impairment are so entirely different. Then, somebody who has absolutely no vision, I have no idea what their experience in life is and if they acquired it and if they were born with it, you know? I really am against these definings and definitions and siloing that exists even within the disability community, let alone outside it when we talk about inclusion and we're pitting race and gender against disability. I mean I can't bear it. I think we are all equally unique and different and that's hard.

Steven: The problem we have is that our voices, despite our voices being perhaps heard more, we're still very low in the conversation, in the national conversation.

Caroline Casey: For sure, we are.

Steven: Certainly below gender, certainly below race, we're way below that.

Caroline Casey: We're totally below that. It was one of the main reasons that... I mean I've been in this work for 20 years, but I really wanted to launch The Valuable 500. It was actually after the death of my father very unexpectedly that I found that courage to do it. Dad was always, "Be yourself because everyone else is taken," which is hilarious because he lied to me. It's more about that part where I just did not see, in the 20 years that I had come out of the closet, I had not seen accelerated change. I was like, "This is insane." If you consider 1.3 billion people in the world who have a disability and maybe there's a mom and dad or two people that love them, that's 53% of our consumers. How can we be consistently left on the sidelines of the societal conversation?

I think it's because we've been on the sidelines of business. I think one of the reasons been on the sidelines of business is because there's a lack of understanding of our value. I'm not talking about charity. I'm talking about our value to business, to talent and to brand and to innovation and to growth in an eight trillion market. The other reason is we have no leaders. We haven't had leaders like... Before Paul Polman, who's the chair of The Valuable 500, we haven't had leaders who stood up and said, "You know what? We're going to do this, we're going to do this." That's why the sidelines... We've been there and no more. It's not okay in 2019 actually.

Steven: Do you think those leaders need to be disabled themselves?

Caroline Casey: No, no. This is going to be controversial. I honestly believe if you want to design solutions for people with disabilities and lived experience, they have to be part of designing that solution. That is 100%. Again, I have a lived experience of disability which is not the same as somebody who may have a mobility issue or who has a learning disability. We have to be very careful now. However, I have a husband, I have a sister, I have a brother, I have a mom and a dad, I have family and friends. They have a lived experience of living with me and my disability. When we talk about leaders... So I'm going to give you this horrendous statistic. 56% of our leadership boards have never discussed disability. 7% of our leaders have a lived experience of disability, yet four out of five of them are hiding it like I did. I would love-

Steven: Even when you get to the top.

Caroline Casey: Yeah, right.

Steven: To get to the top, you may need to hide.

Caroline Casey: Yeah, exactly. My point of it is like, "Okay, well do they need to have lived experience?" No they don't, because they're the leaders of a corporation or an organization which needs to reflect the society to which it operates in. That is all society, the full breadth of society. What I would love to see happen is them to feel comfortable enough to come out of their closet, but they don't have to. What they need to do is create cultures where we can all turn up as ourselves.

Steven: Caroline, I'm also intrigued to talk about your love of technology or lack of love of technology. This is a technology show. I want to talk about tech a little bit, so tell me your relationship with technology.

Caroline Casey: I'm terrified of technology. I'm a Luddite. I have a sister who-

Steven: How can you be terrified of technology?

Caroline Casey: I am, okay? We can't judge what other people are frightened of. My sister who's also visually impaired like I am, she's complete opposite. She's this brilliant engineering brain and she's magnificent. I don't know. I think number one is I have been able to get away with everything for so long with my stubbornness and this ridiculous behavior that I've had that I have not embraced technology like I should have. It would have made my life so much easier for me as it would have made the life of my family and my friends around me. There's just been this absolute... I don't know what it is. I'm just so scared. I'm going to give you an example. I'm running a campaign to make sure that we can all have a conversation, right? If I would do little video clips for social media... Which I'm also rubbish at. That is the other thing you need to know. I mean rubbish on social media.

Steven: How can you be rubbish at social media?

Caroline Casey: Because I have no interest. My energy goes into the connection between you and I.

Steven: Yeah, human interaction. Yeah.

Caroline Casey: Yeah, I want human interaction. I have really no... I just don't want to... It's not where I put my energy. Anyway, so I was doing these videos. Hector Minto, who is... And Neil Milliken, two gentlemen I really admire and who are great evangelists on accessibility and technology, they were like, "Caroline, you can't keep having this conversation and then having captioning." I was just like, "I can't. I'm too scared." Hector was like, "Get over yourself. Here's Clipomatic, right?" I remember one day just going, "This is awful," because I was at a conference that somebody wasn't speaking English. I went, "Oh my gosh, I am actively not including by not using Clipomatic or something like it." I did and I realized it was really easy. I loved it.

Then, I went and I told everybody, "If I can do it, you can all do it." Then, it started to make me think about technology and myself. I was like, "I'm traveling around the world on my own right now. If I didn't have the apps for taxis, if I didn't have Google Maps and things like that, I simply wouldn't be able to do it." The other part of it is we wouldn't be able to scale our message. So much of what we're doing is marketing and all these marketing communication tools have helped us amplify it. Actually through The Valuable 500 and my fear, I'm starting to realize, "Oh, it's okay." What I did realize is the fear that I've had over technology stopped me moving forward. It's the same fear that exists in CEOs and business. If I want to get them to come to my side, well, I better start facing my fear. It just shows you how much fear stops things.

Steven: That's interesting. I think it also shows that you need a way in to technology, don't you?

Caroline Casey: I need somebody to be patient with me.

Steven: You need a front door to it.

Caroline Casey: I do.

Steven: Because once you've learned how to do-

Caroline Casey: Will you help me?

Steven: I can try. That's my job here, I guess, is to tell people about all of the wonderful ways that technology can help, but you need that connection. You need that connection with something.

Caroline Casey: I don't want to feel like a fool either. I think speaking at this conference here today, and one of my biggest fears was going to look like the stupid person, you know? Yeah. I think there's that fear looking like an idiot or fear of getting it wrong. You're right, I need a front door and you know what? I know that my life could be infinitely easier if I get over myself.

Steven: Tell us about The Valuable 500.

Caroline Casey: The Valuable 500, it's trying to... I guess it's like a circuit breaker, if you know what I mean? It is trying to get 500 of the world's most influential brands and CEOs to put disability on their leadership agenda and extend the conversation of inclusion to equally include disability. It's to do it in a year. Okay? It's amazing. I mean when you think about this... But could you imagine 500 Paul Polmans or Sheryl Sandbergs putting this on the leadership agenda because when it's on a board, what gets measured gets done.

What it would do is support or give permission to operationalize inclusion and accessibility throughout our businesses because it exists. It already exists, but we need to get the resources released and stop it going into these silos. It shouldn't be in D&I. Valuable 500 is saying, "No. You as a leader are accountable. This is a culture issue. This is a leadership issue. This is a sustainability issue. This is a growth issue. This is not about D&I." You can hear that revolution. That's what it's about.

CIBC has joined us and we're at 170 companies as of today. I really want to go back to Davos with as close to the target of Valuable 500 we launched in the World Economic Forum this year. I go back in January, but you know what? We've already reached a tipping point. I called it The Valuable 500 like Fortune 500. Either way, we are going to get 500, whether it's before Davos or after Davos, and that is a critical mass, that's a tipping point, which we can never go back from.

Steven: What does success look like?

Caroline Casey: Oh my gosh, somebody asked me what success looked like to me ages ago and I was like, "Well, what does it look like to you?" Now, I cannot call who this person is because it's a very strange comment, we would all know them, and they said, "Well actually I think successfully that we would eradicate disability." I was like, "What?" What I think is success looks like to me that disability is part of normal. It's a normal part of humanity. It is a normal part of business, that we are not having Valuable 500s, we're not having Caroline Casey speaking. We're talking about inclusion and we're talking about accessibility for all. We're talking about design for all. We are not talking about disability and that it is part of everything that we do in the same way, I don't know, that we breathe air. Wouldn't that be amazing? And that I am not around. That is what success looks like for me anyway.

Steven: Caroline, it's been great having you on the show today. I think a lot of people will be inspired by hearing your story because I think the acknowledgement of the challenges, especially by someone who has risen to such success, I think will play very well with people, will really resonate with people who are sitting at home listening, thinking, or watching, thinking, I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if this is something I could ever achieve or could I ever achieve much? I think people will take from what you've said that they can.

Caroline Casey: I would like to say is, to end on my father, is be yourself and everyone else is taken. Every one of us has a unique and separate journey and my question is you only get one go at this. Actually if you go inside yourself and hear what it is that you uniquely want to do, oh, just try. Just try.