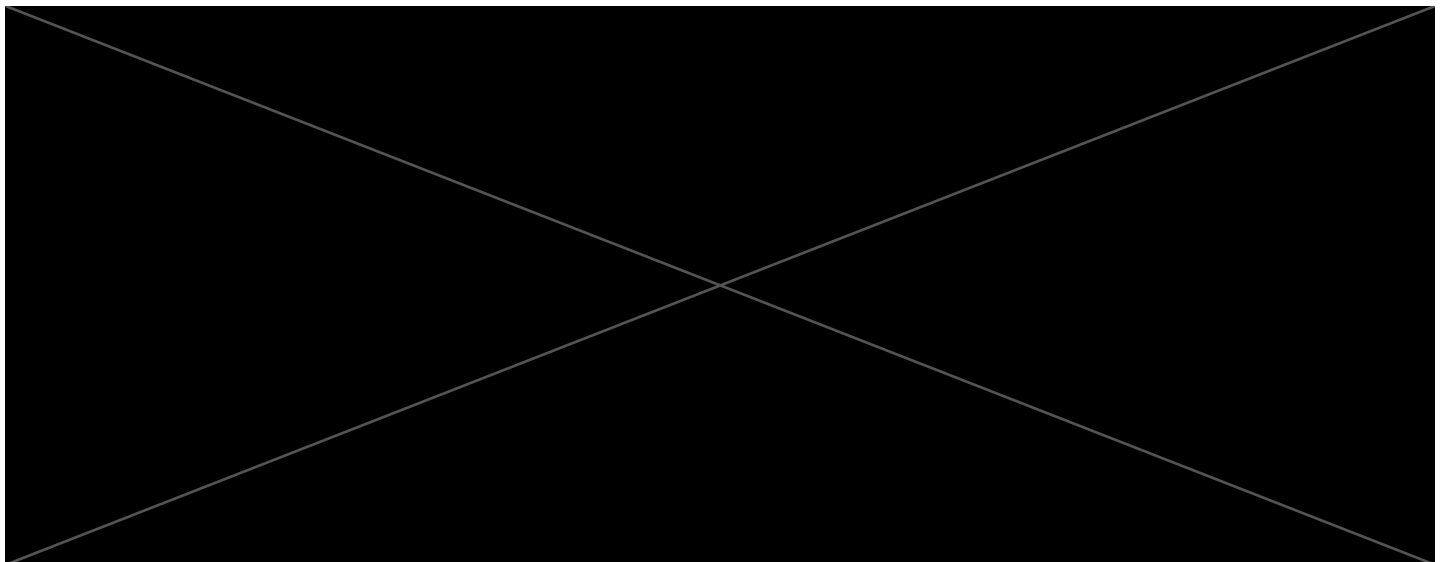


calling out racism, supporting a Black manager, and other questions with Michelle Silverthorn

by ALISON GREEN on JANUARY 18, 2022

Today Michelle Silverthorn, founder and CEO of [Inclusion Nation](#), returns to Ask A Manager! Michelle is the author of the best-selling book *Authentic Diversity: How to Change the Workplace for Good* (read an [excerpt here](#)) and talked with us last year about [the work she does to help build more equitable companies](#). Now she's back to take readers' questions!

Michelle: Thanks for having me back Alison and letting me share my thoughts on race during MLK week. Let's get into it.



1. Are we overstepping boundaries in our DEI work?

I work in a “helping profession.” Recently, my employer adopted a plan of increasing racial equity and justice in our organization. As part of the plan we are working in teams at a building level to engage in equity training and spearhead dialogue and changes in our individual locations. These teams include those with supervisory roles and those without. I am one of those without.

This is necessary work: studies and numerous personal accounts show there are racial disparities in the quality of services and experiences people experience in our field, some of which are rooted in systems and some in individual practice. There are uncomfortable but undeniable facts we all need to face. However, I am also struggling with the idea that we’re essentially asking everyone to get in step with the party line and at least pay lip service to a specific set of beliefs. My field already struggles so much with boundaries, and I’m not sure where the line is.

Which brings me to my question. How can we advance a goal that is so rooted in personal and political philosophy without overstepping our place?

Michelle: Listen, I can tell you about equality and justice and how if we call those political beliefs, then we have some serious issues as a human population. I can also talk about how your organization and their leaders can set forth whatever values they would like as long as they are legally allowed and board- or owner-approved. But I’m guessing you know all of that. So, here’s what I will say instead.

You work in a “helping profession.” My sister does too. She’s a doctor, an excellent one. Let’s say a patient comes to her and shares all that is ailing them. My sister, with her years of expertise and experience, asks the patient a series of questions. She learns about their history, their lifestyle, and their goals. She then puts together a treatment plan to help cure them. But instead of thanking her and getting to work, that patient responds, “Your treatment is a party line rooted in your political philosophy!” They then reject the treatment. Let me tell you what will happen to that patient. They will not get better. In fact, they will get much, much, much worse.

Your organization is ill. It has “racial disparities in the quality of services and experiences” that are “rooted in systems and some in individual practice.” Your employer has “adopted a plan of increasing racial equity and justice.” Do you, with your knowledge of your organization, your expertise in DEI work, and your lived experiences and data gathering, have alternative cures that you believe will work and will be adopted by your colleagues? Please make your suggestions. But if you don’t have alternative suggestions, and you think it’s better the patient remain sick, then go ahead and advocate that they throw the “personal and political philosophy” treatment plan in the trash and continue with the unhealthy

environment that they are currently in. If your organization even manages to survive, you and they will be right back here in five years asking why there hasn't been any progress.

If you have specific concerns, like you don't think the small-group dialogues are effective, or you believe the hiring plans are counter-productive, then share why, how, and any alternatives based on your role and work that you'd like to suggest. But if your baseline is, we are advocating a political philosophy and people shouldn't be forced to do it, then you're taking steps completely opposite to the direction that leads to healing.

2. How can I talk to my boss about making diversity a priority in our hiring?

Reader #2: *I work on a small team (less than five people) within a larger company. We work on several projects that have to do with Black communities.*

There are no Black employees on my team. My manager is white and I am Asian, but it makes me a bit uncomfortable that so much of our work is meant to benefit the Black community while that community is not represented on our staff. I feel sometimes that as a person of color, it's expected that I can represent all other PoC – but I can't!

We're in the process of hiring someone new and I have the opportunity to speak with final candidates, but my manager selects them first and the pool of final candidates is not particularly diverse. I'm kicking myself for not bringing up diversity before we started getting applications and am now at a loss for how to bring it up in the future. I have a good relationship with my boss and feel that she is well-intentioned, but historically my conversations about race with white people have not gone well. What are some ways to diversify the pool of candidates we get? And how can I bring this up with my boss without things getting too weird?

Michelle: Hello Season 1 of Insecure! This is very similar to the “We Got You” experience that Issa Rae wrote about in that season. First, it's troubling that you serve Black communities but you have no Black employees. If you've read my book or attended one of my foundational trainings, I'll always start with the business case for diversity. I also go into how that business case is never enough – we've been making the business case to CEOs for years, and yet, here we are. The business case though is a good way to start with someone who doesn't yet see the need for diversity.

Here's your business case. You are on a team that serves the Black community. You have no Black employees on your team. The Black community is vast and intersectional and no one Black person's experience is going to represent all of them but it's a start. At some point, those communities you are serving might push back and ask to meet the Black team members who are working on their project. Or new clients will want to know what personal experience those

who are working on their projects have. Or they'll reject you out of hand at a pitch because you don't demographically represent who they are. Those are all good conversations to have with your boss. A great way to start the conversation is simply with this, "I've reviewed our candidates and I see that we don't have any Black candidates under consideration. Given the work that we do, can we spend more time in the recruiting process so we can increase the pool of qualified candidates?"

Now onto this talent pool. First, please don't proactively do anything on your own for diversity hiring without you or your team working with HR. Work with them to figure out the most effective – and legal – approach to solving your challenge. Some strategies I will suggest. If you have personally seen the pool and you see the need to diversify, figure out how this pool of candidates found out about this job. Where did you post the application? What applicants did you receive? Who made it through the first round? Why? What questions did you ask on your application? What experience did you specify? Did you use a recruiter who has proven experience recruiting Black candidates?

There's still more you can do. You serve Black communities. Do you partner with Black-led non-profits or Black community leaders? They are excellent resources as well. Can you offer paid internships? The small team you work with, are they doing any work to locate potential Black hires as well? You mention that you work in a larger company. What work are they doing to increase Black representation in the company? What Black employees do you have outside of your team who might be considering a move within the company? It might take time (it will take time) but it is worth the effort to get the right result.

3. Handling work requests that involve my ethnicity

During Native American Heritage Month, my nonprofit's diversity officer (who is non-native) asked me and the other native employees to film a video of ourselves for company-wide distribution about our tribal affiliation, what makes our tribe "unique," and why we are proud of our tribe. I told the diversity officer that I'd be happy to participate in another project to commemorate Native American Heritage Month about how we can serve/reach indigenous peoples in our nonprofit mission. This is my first time working at a large organization – do you have any advice about how to navigate requests that do not pertain to my work duties but do pertain to my ethnic experience?

Michelle: If I'm understanding your question correctly, your diversity officer reached out to you to ask you to film a video, to which your response was, "I'd prefer to participate in this other activity instead." Excellent! I have zero suggestions for you. If you want to participate, you are doing exactly what I would suggest.

For anyone planning these events, there needs to be a healthy balance between giving members of marginalized communities the agency to share what they are comfortable with sharing, and also letting a diversity officer who should have expertise in events such as these the ability to design events they believe would be of greatest benefit and interest to the organization. Those are not mutually exclusive asks and your suggestion, “Yes, I would like to participate and here is how I would like to participate” is a great balance for that.

However, it also sounds like you don’t want to participate as it does not pertain to your work duties. And not just about this celebration, but other requests that would come up in the future. Your company should never request anything of you that does not pertain to your work duties. You are more than welcome to offer, but they should not ask. You work there because they pay you to work.

That said, “work duties” is quite broad and could encompass any number of things. You want to increase your sense of belonging. You want to hold your organization accountable to DEI promises. You think a training would be interesting to attend. You want to add some DEI experience to your resume. You feel a moral obligation to do the work. You want to ensure that others who enter the organization don’t have the same experience you did. You want increased visibility in your organization. You’re interested in learning more about the topic for your own personal or professional growth. You want to collaborate with a mentor. You want extra bonus pay, and on, and on. Those reasons all pertain to work duties, as narrowly or as broadly as you want to define it.

If your Diversity Officer is only asking you and the other marginalized employees to volunteer their unpaid time to do DEI work, and you don’t see any benefit to doing that work, then it is easy enough to reply and say something like, “Thank you for letting me know. I’m not able to participate in this, and I look forward to seeing what you and your team come up with.” If after this upcoming event, you decide that you would like to get more involved in the additional lift of DEI work, then have a talk with the Diversity Officer and see what you can potentially work with together.

4. How can I support my Black manager?

I see a lot of (very good, much needed) advice for managers on how to support their Black employees, particularly during grueling and exhausting current events, by giving them space to process and time to step away. I’m wondering what that advice would look like for non-Black employees with Black managers. On particularly difficult days (for example, the day of George Floyd’s murder or the day the jury was deliberating the verdict in the Derek Chauvin trial) I’ll sometimes check in to see if there’s any work I can take over, or things I can help with. Is this appropriate? If it’s appropriate, is it sufficient? My manager and I

have a great relationship and I want to support her as best as I can, but I know my options are limited given our positions.

Michelle: Excellent start. You can also make sure that you're not second-guessing her, not undermining her, and including her in the work community. Black managers often struggle with support in the workplace. Doing what you can to make sure she is heard, you listen to her, you support her, and you allow her to be an excellent leader, are all ways to provide additional aid.

But let's make it bigger! Your manager is looking to succeed as well, and you as a "non-Black" employee can use your platform and privilege to lift up her name. You don't need to go around banging a drum, shouting, "My Black manager is AMAZING!" Dial that down. But racism and bias are real and your Black manager faces both. Talk her up to your colleagues so they can talk her up to their managers. If a project goes very well, and someone compliments you, give her a compliment as well. And call out bias when you see it. Don't go to your manager every time with how, "Elena in Accounting said this about you." but do talk to Elena in Accounting and understand why she feels the way she does. Your manager might be terrible at sending in her reimbursement receipts on time, but Elena complains a lot more about your manager than she does about Dylan, the White male manager who does the same thing. Or Dylan, who is also junior to your manager, got the promotion that your more senior and more qualified Black woman manager was up for. So you mention in a conversation with another leader, good for Dylan, but also mention how excellent your manager is at her job and here's why and, hey, you're curious as to what Dylan accomplished that made him promotable over your manager so the path to promotion is laid out clearly to everyone, including you.

5. Calling out racism from a person of color when I'm white

I have a question about racism in the workplace. My coworker always had some uncomfortable anti-Asian sentiments, but it got worse when Covid-19 hit the news. She wasn't dropping slurs or anything but she made nasty little comments.

I tried to gently correct her on the informational front but had a lot of trouble telling her generally to knock it off because her comments were awful and bigoted. Because here is the complicating factor: I am a white woman from an upper middle-class family and my coworker is an aboriginal woman who has herself been the victim of racism on more than one occasion. I think I'd be okay with calling my white coworkers out, but it feels wildly rude and uncomfortable and inappropriate to lecture someone on racism when they've experienced it in their own life and I haven't. How on earth do I handle a situation like that if it comes up in the future?

I empathize with you; it's a tough situation. My suggestion is this. Be specific. "What you just said is hurtful, cruel, and untrue [because....]" Be personal. "You know, I've said some sh*t things in my life and I am not perfect but I work every day to do better." Set a path forward. "I don't agree with what you said; please don't say that around me anymore." Finally, be firm. When she says it again, "It's not funny and it's not true. I asked you to stop saying that already, I need you to stop again." If she does it again, stop talking or walk away. You don't need to lecture her on racism. If you want to get into a real conversation on racism, it starts with you listening to her experiences with it. But if you want someone to stop the bigoted remarks they are making, be specific, be personal, set a path forward, and do not back down. Once they stop, then you can get into the much harder work of shifting their perspective for good.

Thanks for having me Alison. Take care and stay safe everyone!

Alison: As always, thanks to Michelle! You can also check out her answers to an earlier round of questions from readers [here](#). Visit [Inclusion Nation](#) to learn more about her work.

