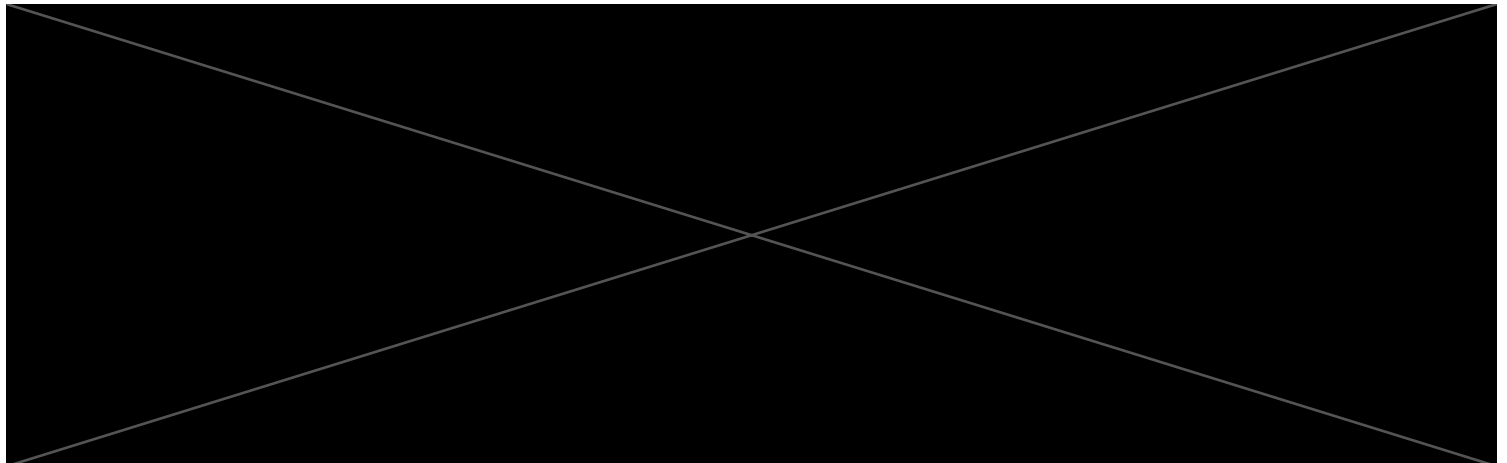


our white manager centers herself in conversations about racism — and other questions with Michelle Silverthorn

by ALISON GREEN on SEPTEMBER 29, 2021

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 earlier this year about [the work she does to help build more equitable companies](#). Now she's back to take your questions!

She's also starting a weekly video series on LinkedIn Live answering questions just like the ones below so if you like what you read here, [connect with her at her website](#).



Michelle: Hello friends. It's so nice to be back here again. Let's dive in, shall we?

My non-white coworkers are being paid less than me

Reader #1: *What should/can you do if you realize your BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) colleagues are being paid less than you? My company doesn't post salaries or salary ranges with job descriptions. But we're a small and close team, and we've all recently discussed our salaries. I'm making five grand more a year than one of my BIPOC colleagues. I was on the hiring team for her position, though not part of the negotiation process, and assumed the position would have the same starting salary as my own. We've got similar levels of experience, and definitely the same level of responsibility in our roles. The same is true with my other BIPOC colleague. We're all part of the same department. To make matters worse, our organization runs diversity and equality initiatives within our field!*

There are a number of other issues with this organization, and this one is the last straw. I'm definitely looking for work elsewhere. One of the colleagues in question is leaving shortly as well, partially because of this. But between now and when I hopefully leave this company, is there something I can do to push for change/equal pay for my colleagues?

Michelle: Here we have two BIPOC colleagues, both of whom are making less than the writer, one of whom is leaving the organization, the other of whom is apparently staying.

My first question to the writer is whether you shared your salary with both BIPOC colleagues? Or was the sharing a one-way street? I want to start there because the work of allyship is rotten from the start if it's centered on what the ally thinks is best, rather than what the marginalized person thinks is best. So step 1. Share what you are making and after they have had time to process that news, invite them to have a conversation on responding to this inequitable situation.

Step 2. During that conversation, find out how your colleagues would like to respond. Like you set out above, one of your colleagues is done with the organization. They could have completely checked out and are ready to leave. They might be tired, exhausted from the work, or not wanting to damage relationships before they exit. Or ... they might want to start a revolution as they grab their goldfish on their way out. Whatever their response might be, center them, their emotions, and their actions, and give them the grace to respond in a way that you may or may not agree with, but that is their choice to make.

~~At the same time, you have a BIPOC colleague who is still there making less than you. You~~

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making more money than you for the same work, I think the pay is grossly unfair. I have some ideas of what I could do, but I want to know where you would like to start.” Center them, not you. Give them the respect they deserve by providing the space for them to share if they want to act, how, and whether they would like you to be a part of that.

Because now we have arrived at Step 3 – action. Your BIPOC colleagues may want to be involved or they may not. There are several ways to approach the solution. All of them depend on how much power, allyship, and runway you have at this company. Crucially, do not put your BIPOC colleagues out there if they don’t want to be. Try this tack. You mentioned that there are DEI initiatives at your company. If there are, then your manager is likely involved in them. Here’s how I would script this conversation. Let’s say your manager’s name is Kim.

“Kim, do you have a few minutes to chat?” [pause for response]

“I know I’m not involved in salary negotiations, and I don’t know how much power you have over them, but I’ve learned that my salary is higher than several of our BIPOC colleagues and I’m worried that might be a department/company-wide issue.”

Here’s why this works. First, you’ve placed yourself as an asker, not a teller. Second, you’ve not assumed that Kim had the power to decide on the salary. Third, you’ve not shared how you found out that information – it could be third or fourth-hand for all Kim knows, and if Kim presses you, simply respond, “I’d really prefer not to say.” Fourth, you’re not putting the blame on Kim’s leadership but rather you’re expressing your concern for the company that this might be a larger issue than here. That fourth point is particularly helpful because if after a few weeks, you haven’t received a response, you can offer to escalate it. “I know the company’s really doubling down on DEI initiatives. I’m considering taking this to the DEI taskforce for their thoughts.” You’re applying more pressure to Kim without throwing her under the bus. As you continue, you can decide how much more pressure, and accountability, need to be applied.

I hope that helps with what you will choose to do. Here’s one last tip for your next job. As you interview at new places, look up their public commitments to racial equity. Then ask the person interviewing you what progress their team or department has made over the last 18 months. If they say, “Well, I’ll need to find out,” that’s a sign that while they may say it matters, the day-to-day reality in the department might be quite different. I hope you find a place worthy of your talent, and your allyship.

professional manner. I am outspoken, presenting questions and thoughts during meetings as they are requested, and setting the stage for further questions (and lively discussion) from others on almost every occasion. As I have advanced, and I've been promoted several times, I have achieved the role that I have been working toward my entire career. I plan to continue advancing within government.

My management tells me that my communication style is very blunt and that I tend to dominate conversations. I've been told on a few occasions that I need to temper how I speak. It has become a performance metric of mine. I have gotten much better at not being the first to speak, and better at not dominating conversations. My manager has remarked that there is a notable positive difference in how I behave during meetings, trainings, etc.

My colleagues, the majority of whom who are white, say so very little and (in my opinion) tend to depend on my risk-taking to bring forth complaints and concerns (and solutions). I know for a fact that this occurs because after I lodge a complaint or express a concern to higher ranking persons in management, people literally tiptoe toward me when management is out of sight to thank me profusely for bringing a problem or question to the forefront.

I feel that it's very disingenuous to be told that I need to diminish my presence; however, it does make sense given that my management has explained to me that (now that I am reaching higher levels) I'm going to be speaking to people who don't have to do what I want and so I need to present myself in a way that makes them want to help me. How do I balance the dissonance of being told to hold back, knowing that this tends to be the standard type of advice for marginalized people like me, while acknowledging that perhaps my manager has a point?

Michelle: I will preface this by saying I am not an executive presence coach. I think you've received some solid coaching advice on how to be better heard and understood. That is good. Here are my two cents. I believe that if you have been promoted with the personality, insight, and change leadership that you're bringing to the table, then your tone is putting you in the right position for success. The question I have is whether you have allies in the corner to back you up.

I don't love hearing that people are "tiptoeing" to you to thank you for what is being done. If they're only thanking you in private then they're also not speaking up for you in private. I want to make sure that the people who are benefitting from your courage are also supporting

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Instead of focusing on your tone, I would encourage you to focus on your leadership as well. Who are you cultivating to also do the work of challenging actions and speaking up for change? Given the power and platform you have in the company, who can you coach who may have a different communication style than those in the majority so you are not always the only in every one of these meetings speaking up and out? They could be your peers, they could be your direct reports, and frankly they could be people who you report to. They have already coached you to speak the way they speak so your communication with them can improve. Then they also need to step into your shoes and start communicating the way you do so you can also be a success at work, especially when that communication style – and I cannot stress this enough – *benefits* them.

Start with one person, or two. Show them how they can also make the same comments or interjections in meetings that you do. Make it part of the feedback you deliver to them. Make it part of the comments you share with your manager. Real equity and inclusion is a two-way street. Essentially you're saying, if you'd like me to diminish my personality to meet you at your level, then I also need you to raise your personality to meet me at mine. We learn to play each other's game and we both succeed.

Read an update to this letter [here](#).

Responding to offensive remarks as a white person

Reader #3: *My question is about how to handle witnessing instances of “casual” racism at work as a white person. I work at a fairly large national company in the U.S. We have a pretty diverse, partially remote team with a mix of races, ages, genders, and locations. Despite being spread out, we are a pretty close-knit team and talk frequently. The other day during a Zoom team call (on which our boss was NOT present), a very young, white coworker was talking about the town she recently moved to and referenced “the hood” of her town with some discussion of how it compared to “the hood” of her previous town. She also described one of the restaurants in the town as “ghetto.” It came across as extremely ignorant. There were several people of color on the call, but no one said anything about it. While it was secondhand embarrassing to me, it may have been actually hurtful to others.*

This is the first incident I've seen like this from anyone on our team, but the company as a whole certainly has room for improvement.

As a white person, I don't want to be a gatekeeper for what should or shouldn't be offensive x

to talk to the coworker even if I don't know that anyone was offended? Should I raise a red flag to our boss about it? Thanks for any help you can provide!

Michelle: There aren't many hard and fast rules in racial equity, but here is one! A White person calling something ghetto is always offensive. Period. This isn't a "call-in" kind of moment. I don't need you to consult with your Black colleagues first. This is a call-out. I would speak directly to the young, White woman and say this: "I know you just started, but what you said on the call about the neighborhood and the restaurant is not the language we use here." You can measure your level of comfort at re-using the words again when you're speaking with her, but this is absolutely a line in the sand. This is one of those microaggressions that a lot of Black employees will experience and still see this young White woman get promoted despite her use of those words. Absolutely not. This has to stop.

Now, she might pretend she never said it. She might genuinely believe she didn't say it. She might laugh it off and think it's not a big deal. Those are all part of her privilege as a young, White woman. And let's be clear, privilege doesn't make anyone a bad person. Unchecked privilege, however, can be destructive. You have the power to check it. Do it. She has a long career and you have a potentially long mentoring relationship that might result.

Addressing racism toward a Black employee who didn't want me to escalate it

Reader #4: *I work in a field that has a massive public service element and is not known for its diversity. This was true in our organization; we had two people of color in my department, which was one of the largest. I was co-supervisor, and my boss, Phil, managed both supervisors, professionals, and paraprofessionals—it was all a little nebulous but we worked well as a team, though he was the official boss.*

Our organization was in a self-proclaimed liberal town, but in my daily life I witnessed tons of racially based microaggressions, usually in the form of tone-policing Black women. Which leads to the thing I cannot let go: Our one Black employee, Diana, received the most complaints from customers and was often accused by other staff of being "lazy" and having an "attitude." I understand that employees act differently around their bosses, but I never witnessed her being anything but great with the public, and other staff would tell me when she did something particularly good. We also had security cameras without sound, and there was one incident where she went to help a male customer with his computer, and though we couldn't hear what was said, he grabbed the keyboard from her and slammed it down and stomped out of the room, and another customer complained to the supervisor on

I suppose it's possible Diana said something incendiary without revealing body language, but that is not what it looks like—it looks like a white customer freaking out at a Black employee for no reason. She and I had a relatively close relationship so we were chatting one day and she told me that Phil had disciplined her (not formally) because she “must have said something to set this guy off.”

*I was f**king livid. The fact that he wouldn't even entertain the possibility that racism was a factor in how customers respond to her...grr. She and I spoke frankly about it, but she also said she did not want me to go to Phil to reconsider his assessment of the situation. So I didn't. The biggest part of me thinks I did the right thing by respecting the request of my employee, and I can totally empathize that she did not want to be a “teaching tool” for someone who makes at least twice what she does (and who, in her view, did not respect her). But I wonder if I should have somehow brought it to his attention without naming her—even though I'm not sure how I would have done that because she was literally one of two Black employees in the entire building.*

Should I have handled it differently? How could I have brought it up to Phil while maintaining Diana's anonymity—or should I have brought it up anyway, even if he knew I was talking about her?

Michelle: How awful. That customer disrespect is reason enough to be angry. But I want to offer another perspective. Diana has agency. She has exercised her agency to say that she doesn't want an intervention. You performing an intervention that she has expressly stated her opposition to is infantilizing her and treating her like her agency does not matter.

There is a reason “white savior” is so loathed by the Black community, and such a beloved trope in books, TV shows, and Oscar-winning performances. It feels great to stand up on someone's behalf who is being clearly wronged when you know you are in the right. But here's what's wrong with being a White savior. You are centering you. You are centering yourself, your anger, and your outrage, rather than centering the person hurt. There could be many reasons why someone has asked you not to do anything: their fear of reprisal, their fear of embarrassment, and, frankly, their fear that maybe they were in the wrong too. And, this may be hard to hear, but what has been truly exhausting for many people of color these last few years is the fervent emotions of White allies – anger, outrage, tears, sorrow, more outrage. It can feel like we're on a runaway train of emotions where we end up being the ones in charge of slowing it down, “It's OK. It's fine. Don't worry about it.” How does that change anything?

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have witnessed. The way she is spoken about by customers and colleagues. What does she think? What is her opinion? What are her thoughts? Where is her agency? As an ally, what I would like you to do is build a trusting enough relationship where she can share those challenges with you, you can offer your own perspective as to why you think this also might be the case, and unpack some of the racist internalization that so many Black people have suffered over the years – “Maybe it is me” – when it is not. That’s what I would like to see from you as a colleague and friend.

But that is not what I would like from you as a leader. Why are there only two people of color at this company? A company that has a (checks notes) “massive public service element” and is in a (checks notes again) “self-proclaimed liberal town.” Are there trainings for antiracism? Are there opportunities to report microaggressions? Are there reframing role plays for racist interactions? Are there equity hiring plans? As a leader, what is your responsibility for ensuring that your current and future colleagues of color feel safe in the space in which they work? At the very least, there should be more than two of them.

Our white manager centers herself in conversations about racism

Reader #5: *My manager identifies as a white, gay, cisgender woman. She talks a lot about how much she is an ally and how committed she is to social justice. She supervises a team comprised of all people of color. Our organization is in the beginning (and very delayed) process of addressing racism both in our work and in greater society. As part of this process, we are all encouraged to be able to openly talk about race and our experiences.*

Here is the problem. Whenever any of us staff of color talk about race with her, she immediately steers the conversation to how oppressed she feels as woman and/or as a gay woman. While we recognize that her identities and experiences are important, it doesn't diminish the racism that we have experienced. For example, we had a conversation with her about how white staff kept mispronouncing the names of staff of color. She immediately began to tell us how she doesn't like when people assume she is heteronormative or refer to her with gendered language. Attempts to refocus the conversation on racism at work were quickly dismissed as she continued to talk about her own experiences – not related to racism. Our conversation got nowhere and we reached no solutions.

How can we tell her that her tendency to center her identities during conversations about racism doesn't help and is rather harmful? In fact, it's actually offensive given she self-identifies as an ally and social justice advocate. We're not trying to deny her own

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Michelle: I am a Black cisgender straight woman and if I sat in a conversation about homophobia and kept steering it back to my Blackness, they should escort me right out and they would be correct.

Part of the reason I'd be doing that might be why she is doing it – because she feels comfortable talking about her sexual orientation and less comfortable talking about her racial lens. Her network might be predominantly White and acknowledging that truth is painful for many. Bringing up her own marginalization because of her sexual orientation is a way to dissociate from that reality and find solidarity with a marginalized community instead. Now she becomes part of the marginalized, rather than part of the privileged, and that is comforting. That, however, is not the way forward to change.

She is your manager, so that adds a whole other spin on the situation. You don't want to burn bridges, but there is a whole lot of bridge between walking away and setting it aflame. Is there anyone who is of a similar seniority level to her, or who has a stronger relationship with her, who can share that feedback? Here's how I would frame it: "I'm going to be honest. I really love talking to you but it's hard for me because I've noticed in these conversations, you tend to steer it away from race and toward sexual orientation. I know there are struggles that are similar but they're not all the same. I would love to have a conversation with you about your experience as a gay woman, and mine as a straight woman, but in this conversation, can we focus on your experience as a White person?" You're steering the conversation back to where it needs to be and giving her a space to share her own experiences of marginalization without making this space that one. Try it and let us know how it works.

That's all from me! Keep sending your letters into Alison and we'll do this all again.

Alison: Don't forget Michelle will be answering questions weekly at [Inclusion Live](#) starting in November. If you liked what you read here, make sure to follow here there!

