

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host, Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro. And together, we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance, and real life HR situations we face every day. Joining me today on the podcast is Shereen Daniels, founder and managing director of HR for HR rewired, an anti-racism and racial equity advisory firm. Additionally, she is the chair of the African Diaspora Economic Inclusion Foundation, among many other things. Shereen, thank you so much for joining me.

- No, you're very welcome. Thank you for having me.

- So you have this amazing background, but I was curious, what was your motivation in establishing the anti-racism advisory firm, HR rewired?

- Yeah, it wasn't planned, Shari. It wasn't planned. So my background is human resources, for my sins, I'm almost 20 years, and I've done all the corporate gigs you can imagine, UK, Middle East, US, and then, you know, global bits and pieces. And after I had my second child, I decided to step away from the corporate life and start up my own HR consultancy. So that was in the summer of 2019. So then I did a stint in politics and decided that wasn't for me, and then started HR rewired in October 2019. Then fast forward kind of six, seven months later, and kind of simultaneously, we had the murder of George Floyd. We also had the video of Amy Cooper in Central Park. I don't know if you remember that. And actually, it was the video of Amy Cooper that was my breaking point, if you like. And then I recorded a video in my bedroom, on my mobile phone, for 20 minutes, completely not planned, just talking about my experiences of racism and what it meant to be a black woman here in the UK. Because in the UK, at the time, we were all looking over the sea and going, "Oh, it's so terrible that America has this issue with racism." Like, "We don't have," not only, like, "we don't have the issue," but like "racism didn't start here." Do you know what I mean? This was the hotbed. England was the hotbed of, you know, of that kind of ideology. And then one video became 10, became 20, and then 100. So I recorded, yeah, over 100 videos in 100 consecutive days, so every single day. Ended up having my story featured in Forbes, became one of LinkedIn's top voices in 2020, 2020, then 2022. And then so alongside that journey of me just sharing what I was relearning, you know, and unlearning, and starting to challenge some of these assumptions about culture fit within organizations, about the root cause of exclusion for people who are marginalized because of their ethnicity, because of their skin color, I just found I brought people closer to this issue. And so as I was kind of sharing and crying and then recording videos in various parts of my house, I had brands, CEOs reach out and say, you know, "We thought we understood this issue, but we're listening to you and we realize we don't. Can you help?" And so fast forward to present day, that's pretty much been my journey for almost two years, is sharing my

relearning and unlearning, right? And then, but also bringing all the people with me and then helping them and then companies to do the same with their teams. So that's a very round the houses, as we like to say, explanation of how I got here, but does that help?

- Oh, absolutely. And I love that you pitched it as learning, relearning, unlearning. I think so much in this space is you really are on a journey if you're navigating this. I'm continually amazed at the things that I'm learning, especially, you know, as I spend a lot of time behind the mic and the words I choose. I do a lot of looking things up and go, okay, is that idiom something I should be saying? What is the background behind it? But I still run into people who don't understand the difference between equality and equity. How have you helped to define that for people as you've been consulting?

- I think where my starting place is, part of the reason why I got here is because of my directness. So I don't kind of beat around the bushes. And so what I always start off with people is saying is the first things first is you've gotta understand that racism is a system. So it's not just about individual acts of behavior, you know? So in the UK we talk about, it's not just calling, using the N-word, for example, which I know, you know, you have in the US as well. It's not just the stereotypes. It's not just the prejudice. It's not just the discrimination. It's a system. And it's a system because it produces consistent, favorable outcomes for some and consistent, unfavorable outcomes for others. The keyword is consistent. So that's why when I talk about racism and my team as well, we always talk about systemic racism. So we're meaning how it is woven into the very fabric of our society, how we interact with people with decisions that are made across all facets of the world that we live in, not just, you know, in the world of work. And so when you understand this point about racism as a system, to then become anti-racist as an individual or an organization means that you take active steps to look at where racism shows up within your sphere of influence and you take action to dismantle it, whatever that action looks like. So that's the difference between somebody who says, you know, "Oh, I'm not racist," which is a passive statement because you can just say that and not do anything, versus anti-racist, which means you take action. Now, as you're dismantling racism in whatever guise that you're doing within your teams, within your culture, wherever, you're also looking at this idea of equity and equality. So for anybody who's kind of come up through the HR ranks, it's like, it's our thing, isn't it? We've always been taught about equality. Treat people the same, equality of outcomes, equality of opportunity, meaning everyone has the same opportunity to, fill in the blanks. What I say is equality is absolutely the destination, but equity is what's gonna get us there. And equity recognizes that there is a different set of circumstances, different barriers, different structural barriers, that stop people from even being able to compete for those opportunities, nevermind have access to. So the challenge that we have in the space that I work

in of anti-racism and racial equity is most people aren't anti-equality. So they, if you said it to somebody, "Do you believe in equality?" They will absolutely say yes. No matter who they are, what their upbringing, they will absolutely say yes. When it comes to equity, that's what they feel really uncomfortable about because equity for me might be different than equity for you, Shari, do you know what I mean? So we might have different barriers, or, so that means in an organizational sense, they might put things in place that benefits you because you're not starting off at the same place as me or vice versa. And that's what people really struggle with. And then when they tap, when you tap, when you roll that back to anti-racism, what they therefore struggle with is why are you putting things in place that are only gonna benefit the black community or black colleagues or black professionals? What about me?

- I have so run into that. That what-about-me mentality. And, really, it's a lot of energy to try to explain that and to talk through what equity really is. You know, you mentioned HR kind of having this equality word and I agree. Like we've been taught forever, you know, equality, equality, equality. But I think, for too long, the way we were taught was don't talk about race, don't highlight the difference. We know now that that was wrong, right? The way that we were thinking about diversity is wrong. How have you helped people to move beyond just okay, I understand equity now, but now I need to be the initiator of these tough conversations in my organization.

- So I think there's a couple of ways, one in which, one of the things that we found, like a universal truth, if you like, is so often, as individuals, so those people who feel so strongly about being part of the solution, right? Whether, no matter what they label themselves as. Advocates, allies, just somebody who cares, that's all I'm interested in. Just like, does anybody care, right? To do differently. When you're within an organization, it's really tempting for you to feel like, right, if I can just do this, it's better than nothing. So, you know, they'll jump in and they'll do some things with their employee resource groups or their employee network groups. They'll, you know, go and bang on the door of whoever to try and influence. And what I've seen in my work and my team have seen over the last two years is if there isn't board alignment on what is anti-racism and the need to become an anti-racist organization, it becomes very difficult to sustain the momentum that's needed to put equitable things in place to address systemic racism and to advance racial equity. So what happens is you find one or two people who have taken the responsibility, but they carry the responsibility. And they're doing that without the support, without the alignment of the board, which means when they're asking for X, the board is saying no. Not because they don't understand or because they don't see the relevance, because they themselves haven't gone on that same journey. So I, which is, I know, a very roundabout way of answering your question, but I think part of what I've said and what I do is yes, you know, we can bring people

closer to this issue, but actually, where we put most of our energy and effort is with the board. Because, you know, it's so difficult if you do not have what I call power rank and the privilege to be able to enact change. And even if you're somebody who desperately cares and I'm sure, you know, there'll be people listening in who can kind of nod their head because they recognize what it's like to be in an environment where there's a few of you who are doing the heavy lifting or it's your black colleagues that are doing, that are shelving a lot of the burden. They're educating, they're the ones pushing for change. They're the ones that are having to come up with the answers and everybody else has taken a passive role. Like you can't sustain that. So that's the bit, I think, where we spend most of the time. And if I'm honest, it's where a majority of organizations go wrong because they think they can do it around the board and not with them.

- It's interesting that you hit on people of color bearing the burden of education. I've seen that and it's so heartbreaking 'cause I think it misses the point of what we're trying to do in this space. You know, I'm very fortunate. I work for an organization where our leadership is behind us in the initiatives that we're doing to address this. I'm curious, if you're in that spot, right? And you've got your board or your leadership on board, you've got your passionate people in place who are driving the change, but at the employee level or the individual contributor level, you're hearing this chatter around, like, why are we always talking about race? What's your advice to kind of come back to those employees and explain, again, like it's not a political issue that we're talking about a human rights issue. Do you have some advice or some talk tracks for HR professionals navigating that right now?

- I think, so one of the reasons why I would always emphasize starting with the board is because as part of that, what you're wanting to do is you're wanting to weave in your future state into your vision, into your values, into your behavioral expectations. But you need to do that upfront. When you've done that or you're going through that process, what it means is, as you're then communicating out, "This is what we stand," "This is our vision as a company," "This is our mission," "This is what we stand for," "This is what we care about," "This is the difference that we make in the world," the tenants of what it is to become an anti-racist organization, of what it becomes to be a super inclusive organization, to be equitable, to be kind, all of these things, if that is wrapped up in your values and your behavioral expectations, that becomes your DNA. So when you find that people are, people will always push back anyway. And I always say this. So, you know, even if everyone followed to the letter, like our methodology and, you know, and how we say to do this, you will still find people who fundamentally don't want to do anything differently to get to equality and will actually be a saboteur, silent or active, to derail that in the hope that it all goes away. For lots of different reasons. So you'll always have that. But if you've spent the time and

continuously spend the time going, "This is part of our values. It's part of who we are. It's our DNAs, it's in our fabric." You are then, it takes people time to build habits. It takes people time to build new behaviors. If you always treat anti-racism or racial equity or inclusion, whatever the elements that you're trying to address exclusion. If you treat it as some separate thing over here and never a core part of who you are and how you operate, people will always assume that at some point that's got a shelf life. So they're always thinking, okay, well, we're doing this today. You know, we might be doing neurodiversity. We might be supporting the transgender community. We might be doing something around gender, et cetera. Like when are we moving on to something else? And if that's where people's heads are, what it means is you've just got more work to do to bring the elements of what you're trying to do back into the core of who you are. So that's point one. And then point two, I would say, is what's really interesting for me around anti-racism and one of the reasons why, despite all the trauma and the trolling that comes with, you know, trying to get people to see differently, is we're actually challenging, at its root, this concept of what's normal and who's normal. So when you think about how different communities are marginalized, it all stems back to it's because we've all been socialized into this idea of what a CEO looks like, what a nurse looks like, what a doctor looks like, what a physician looks like, what, you know, so we have all of these images. And then we attach our experiences. And then we have, we're laid on with stereotypes and prejudice and all of these things. At its root cause, what we're saying is like white supremacy hurts everybody. Elevating whiteness, and therefore white people as part of that, is not a society that's fair. It is not a society that's equitable. Just by also definition, excluding people who don't fit society's standards of sexual identification or sexual orientation or gender expression. Who's to say that they're not normal? Who's to say that I'm not normal, right, in the vote of commons because of my ethnicity? So when you start to do the real roots of this, that's when you start to realize how addressing racism for the people most impacted, because we are at the bottom, you know? Consistently, 400 years' worth, means you're raising the sea bed for everybody. Do you know what I mean? And so that's, it will take different iterations of these same conversations, but that's why it's so important to have it as like a core part of who you are, what you are doing, and why, you know? Everyone loves Simon Sinek's "Why?" I would say like put in the anti-racism, put in the inclusion underneath that, and be able to articulate that why and consistently keep iterating that, you know?

- You made the comment of just continuing the programs. And I love that because I think we saw, you know, after George Floyd's death and, you know, the Black Lives Matter movement kind of rise up again. We saw a lot of organizations who implemented all these DEI initiatives. And something we've been talking a lot about is don't just let them be like the flavor of the month. They shouldn't be. If you're genuinely

concerned and it's not just your pop culture reaction to something, then you're absolutely right. You're gonna have to continue to put these programs out, these ideas, and this education, so that your employees get used to it. And eventually they'll have to come to that realization. Do I wanna be a part of this organization or not? And that's just the reality of it. You know, you recently had an article published in HRZone. It was titled "Conditional versus transformative cultures: How to create radically just workplaces in 2022 and beyond." I wanna read a quote from that. "There is so much global injustice with increasing societal pressure to ensure that individuals, corporations, governments, and community leaders take a proactive role in being part of the solution. Yet, many leaders can't help but wish they could operate their companies in isolation with what is going on in the outside world." I'm not gonna spoil the whole article. I genuinely encourage our listeners to go read it. I was hoping, though, you could share a little bit about how we, as HR professionals, navigate these conversations with our leaders to understand where our organizations fall. Do we either have a conditional or transformational culture?

- The thing that was going through my mind at the time I wrote the article about conditional culture, which means is, like everyone says, "We want people to be themselves, we want people to feel like they're safe here." You know, particularly in the HR world, we will talk a lot about employee experience. We'll talk a lot about psychological safety. And my counter challenge is it depends on who you are because when you start to understand how people are excluded, for lots of different reasons, but you know, think about my area of racism and as it affects black colleagues and black professionals, is I was thinking about all the organizations that wanted to talk about everything other than how racism was impacted on their colleagues. They wanted to, so they spent so much time trying to work out the appropriateness of a response, the appropriateness of a reaction. And then if they deemed it too political, therefore too risky, they decided not to speak out. And every time, that's because they weren't centering the people most impacted because they saw them as secondary or tertiary or just, you know. To use the phrase from the movement, they didn't matter. And so a conditional culture is whereby you espouse your values, but it is conditional upon you deciding appropriateness, you making sure that it's not too risky, you picking and choosing where those values apply to or who they apply to and who they don't. And conversely, if you have these set values, but you consistently allow your colleagues, you know, heads of department, directors, to act in ways that are contrary to these values and you accept that, that is a conditional culture, you know? And that's the difference. So, you know, it is about a transformative culture which says, you know, how do we move away from carrot and stick? So how do we move away from creating all of these policies to catch people out when they do wrong as like our first line of defense? And instead, how do we help create cultures that make it easier for people to do the right thing first, right? It's like you

know when everyone says, like, "Start off with good intentions," how do we build a culture that it makes it easy for people to do the right thing? That's a transformative culture, you know? And how do we help people to see their harm and to see the consequences of their action without feeling the need to excuse it because it makes them or us feel uncomfortable. That's a transformative culture.

- Sitting in uncomfot can change your life in so many ways. You know? Being able to hear that feedback of, you know, going back to what I said earlier about my own speech, somebody calling me out and saying like, "Hey, you know that phrase that you said? That doesn't, that has some background. Maybe you shouldn't say that anymore." And the first few times it happened, I was horribly embarrassed, but it was such a learning moment to go, okay. That's okay. I didn't know and now I know and I'm educated now. And now I wanna know more. For me, it was a motivating factor. So I love that. I love that, you know, don't become complacent. Don't say one thing and do something else. You know, as we wrap up our discussion, I'd love to hear what you're excited about, what's next for you. What is something you can share with our listeners that's coming from you?

- Oh, well, two things I'm very excited about. One is rocking and rolling with my foundation. So I set up a foundation, as you mentioned in the beginning, called the African Diaspora Economic Inclusion Foundation. And we're focusing on supporting black female entrepreneurs who are still locked out of venture capitalist, venture capital or what we call debt finance. You know, if you go and get a loan from the bank. And finding different ways to support them without forever asking them, like, what are the barriers that you face? We want to be able to put things in place that just support them to scale and keep growing very successful businesses that help contribute to economic growth for everybody. So we think that we're just missed out. And I class myself as a female entre, a black female entrepreneur within that circle. So that's really exciting. And then the second thing is I will have a book. So my book, "The Anti-Racist Organization: Dismantling Systemic Racism in the Workplace" is just based on, you know, the thousands of conversations that I've had, the work we've done and my company has done with clients all over the world. But also, the work that clients have not engaged us to do because of their discomfort about race. So it's full of qualitative and quantitative data points and quotes and insights, but also practical advice on like how to, how to do this work without perpetuating harm, you know? How to do this work with centering the people that are most affected by racism and how to do this in a way that gives everybody a role, right? So you don't end up leaving people behind. So I'm really excited about that.

- So exciting. I'll make sure to include a link to your book in the show notes if you're listening and you wanna check out Shereen's book. But thanks for taking a few minutes to chat with me today.

- Now, you're very welcome. It's very easy to talk to you, so we could have carried on talking for ages couldn't we?

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