**SPECIAL EPISODE: What White Consultants Need to Do to Dismantle Racism—with Deb Zahn**

Hi, this is Deb with Craft of Consulting. I want to do this special episode because I want to talk about what's happening in the U.S. right now, and sadly, what we've also seen happen in other parts of the world. And I want to specifically talk to my fellow white consultants and talk about what our part is and the things that we need to do.

Hopefully, if you're like me, you were absolutely horrified by the killing of George Floyd by the police, and hopefully as equally as horrified by Breonna Taylor being killed in her home or Tony McDade, who is a trans man who was killed in Tallahassee, Florida also around the same time, and the long list of Black people before them who have lost their lives because of injustice and police brutality.

I want to talk about what our part is as white people and as white consultants in dismantling racism. And I truly mean consultants. Regardless of what type of consultants we are, we have a role to play.

Now, I know that I have listeners in other parts of the world. These names may be more relevant to the U.S. than where you live, although I was so encouraged to see that there's protests going on around the world. But every country has its own version of this, so hopefully this is something that you can find useful for you as well.

I want to also point out, before I start talking about this, that there is nothing that I'm saying today that hasn't been said countless times for a very long time by Black people and by other people of color. So these are not concepts that are original to me. But because our current reality is in no way acceptable to me, either as a human being or as a consultant, I feel that it is my responsibility to influence and help where I can. One of the things that I can do—and I think it's my job to do—is to talk with my fellow white people who, like me, want to be part of the solution and, like me, need to keep doing the hard work of tearing the roots of racism out of ourselves and out of our society. I'm going to talk more about that in a moment in terms of what I mean.

But why am I talking to consultants? I'm talking to consultants because we are really in this unbelievably unique position to be able to do our part to dismantle racism because, if you think about it, as consultants, we're everywhere and we're in almost everything.

I was actually reminded, for some reason, I was thinking—I'm going to date myself a little bit—I was thinking about the movie *The Devil's Advocate* with Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves. And Keanu Reeves finds out that Al Pacino is the devil. He has a law firm that's worldwide. And he says to him, "Why the law?," and Pacino's answer as the devil is, "Because it gets you in everything." I thought, "That's absolutely true for consultants as well," which is why I think we can have a special role to play in making things better. We have a role to play in dismantling racism, and that's what I want to talk about.

Because we work with governments, institutions, companies, nonprofits, investors. I mean, you name it. We have access to leaders often that few other professions have. We have these amazing gifts as consultants: our ability to influence and to do strategy and analysis. We design things, we implement things, we evaluate things, and more and more. And those are the types of gifts we need. And we need those gifts across the spectrum of racism and racial injustice to make a difference. So we have those gifts that we can actually apply and we need to do our part.

More than anything else, we need to never resign ourselves to just doing our jobs, just whatever we were hired to do, because that's what allows oppression to flourish. It always has and it always will. And so that's why I think we play such a unique role. Now, sadly, and of course because of some exposés in newspapers, we now know this, if you look at many evils around the world, they're actually aided by consultants. So there are consultants who have PowerPoint decks who are just doing their job, and doing their job meant they were supporting actual atrocities, or they were supporting racial and ethnic injustices, or they were helping companies or governments deliberately duck accountability for the harm that they're causing.

Those are the most egregious ways that consultants can support and sustain harm, but there's lots of little ways that we could, which means there's lots of ways that we can actually do things to make things better.

The truth is, and this is absolutely true with me, is we see racism and other forms of injustices all the time. We may even be asked to support them, or we may be asked or assumed that we're going to ignore them. And we can't. Not if we actually want to be part of creating a just and equitable world. We can't do it.

But there's so much that we can do. And that's what I want to talk about today: all of the good things that we can do.

At the very least, like the least amount that we could possibly do, is that if we're asked to work on anything that constructs or reinforces racism, say no. There is no money on the planet that is worth feeding racism because if we do that, we are feeding the death and harm that we see in stark reality.

We also need to gain for ourselves a deeper understanding of what racism is and how it manifests and how it manifests in ourselves and in the environments in which we work.

The in ourselves part, I know, can be particularly tough because, like most people, we want to think of ourselves as good people, and we surely must have been unsullied by racism. But the truth is, we aren't. We're soaking in it. It's built into every aspect of our society, and it's unavoidable, even if we can't see it, even if we can't see it because it doesn't affect us. White folks not seeing it or experiencing it is actually evidence of its existence and its insidiousness!

Given that it's unavoidable, it's impossible that it's not in us. And that's true for all of us. It's definitely true for me. And I want to share something with you that highlights that and that's particularly painful for me. But I hope it's helpful in my sharing it in your journey.

I thought that I was a wonderful person. Couldn't possibly be racist. I was living in Berkeley, California. I worked in a residential facility where we served girls who were labeled as severely emotionally disturbed. What that meant is that they had had major trauma in their lives, unimaginable trauma and usually repeated over the course of most of their lifetime. Sadly, most of these girls were Black or Latinx. And I loved them, and I loved being a counselor for them. But one day, a Black counselor called me out on my racism. She said that I was harming them by things that I said or things that I expressed that just sort of assumed to the primacy of white folks. And I luckily stopped and asked her for examples. Sadly, she gave me several examples.

And I was floored. In my head, I was screaming, "Don't you see, I'm a good person. I'm not racist. Don't you see that? Don't you understand that?" For some power that is separate from myself, I don't know why, I luckily did not say what I was thinking. I took the time to process what I was hearing, and the next day, I came back, and after a lot of soul searching, even if I didn't really understand the full depth and gravity of what she was saying, I said, "I think you're right, and I want to do better." She, in her generosity, actually assigned me some books that I could read to get a better understanding of it.

But I was pained and pained for a long time to admit, and even now pained, that I was harming them with my racism. But my pain was *not* more important than theirs. I was uncomfortable because I had to see myself in a different light, but my discomfort was nothing compared to their constant discomfort and the constant pain that they experienced, not just because of all the abuse and neglect that they experienced, but because of the constancy of racism that they had to face each and every day, and sadly, they had to face from me.

It is hard for me to share that story, but I want to because I want you to understand how easy it is for white folks to ignore how we are contributing in our behaviors, in our thinking, and the things that we support and don't support, how we are actually supporting racism.

And that we have work to do. So I started at that time. I started to do the work. I read whatever I could get my hands on. I looked at videos, I went to lectures, anything I could do to gain a deeper understanding of what racism is; how it functions, both in myself and society; and what my role is in dismantling it, including becoming an ally that was actually worthy of trust, which I had not been. I had to learn how to do that.

Here's the thing, so I just want to make sure, for folks who haven't done this, the work never actually ends because racism is deep, and it's complex, and it's tricky as hell, and it's everywhere. We need to keep deepening and broadening our understanding and our skills.

If you think about it, that's no different than how we approach being great consultants. The more we learn and know, the more we're able to actually be effective and help others. And we can apply those same lessons to how we tackle racism.

At minimum, white folks, we have to hold ourselves accountable for our racism. It benefits us. It's in us. We have to do something about it. And we have to work on ourselves, and we have to continually do the work to become better people. And we have to help each other. We have to hold each other accountable, and we have to help ourselves, among ourselves become better at this.

That's the minimum, but there's other things that we need to do, and I just want to go through what some of those are, and I'm hoping that these are going to be really helpful.

One of the other things we can do is we can be supportive, particularly right now, supportive of our Black friends and colleagues who are having a difficult time. Check in and see how they're doing. And listen. If nothing else, don't make it about you. Their pain and your pain are not equal. What they're experiencing and the trauma that they have described to me and that they're talking about in the media, and that they're talking about on social media and everywhere if you take a look, it's deep and it's hurtful. And we need to be supportive in any way we can. And not just right now. If other things happen and you see something happen that's particularly traumatic, or even if it's not terribly traumatic, show up, check in, ask how you can best be supportive, and then listen when they give you those answers.

Now, the other thing, there's a lot of other things that we can do, we can put our money where our heart and soul is. If we really want to see a better world, then give money to social justice organizations, and specifically organizations that are led by Black people. Because white folks helping to dismantle racism does not mean that we need to put ourselves in charge. That's kind of a default setting unfortunately sometimes, and, sadly, that's just another form of racism. Our role is to work on ourselves and within our spheres of influence to make things better. It's not to suddenly be the boss of this. Again, there is a lot written about this, and I'm going to put some information in show notes if you want to go a little more deeply into it.

I would also say, more than even giving money is that if you're supporting organizations and they ask for your support and they give you guidance and direction on what they want that support to look like, show up and take that direction. Honor what they're asking for and be part of the solution as *they've* defined it.

The other thing we can do is we can always, always, always, always intervene when we see other white people commit acts of racism of any kind. And that includes people that we like. That includes our family members, that includes our friends, our colleagues. And there are really great resources. Again, they're available. I'll put some in the show notes, that talk about helpful ways to do that because you don't want to do that in such a way that you're actually putting Black folks in harm's way. You want to do that in a way that it's actually truly helpful and honors the place that they're in.

But if we really want to be part of uprooting racism, then there's a lot more that we can do and we should do. One is, we have to help organizations and companies and the systems, whoever it is that we're working with, develop and enact anti-racist strategies. For example, there are a lot of entities that we work with that are led by white people that don't address diversity and inclusion, let alone racism, at all or in any kind of a meaningful way. That's where we can use our access and our influence to encourage them not just to do it, but to do it for real.

And so one question is, "Well, how do you know if they're doing it for real or not?" I would say if they haven't changed the DNA of how they actually operate and function, then they haven't done it. Like that's the spoiler alert, is it's deeper than having trainings or a brown bag lunch where they bring in diversity speakers. Or maybe they did a statement that they put into their strategic plan, but they haven't changed their policies or the way they hire, or the way that they assess performance or communicate, or they haven't really done anything to try and shift their culture, and many other things along those lines. Then you should encourage them to dig deeper beyond that surface stuff they might've done and to do it for real for the good of their organization and the people that work within it, and for the good of the world, regardless of what they do.

Now, that doesn't mean that I'm going to say, "OK. Well, you suddenly have to become an expert in how to do diversity and inclusion and some of the anti-racism work." I encourage you to try and get your clients to actually bring in the real-deal experts because winging this or doing a “good enough” job is not a great option because this is way too important.

Now, that doesn't let us off the hook though. We should learn enough that when we are designing systems, or programs, or organizations, or we're doing our implementation, evaluation, whatever it is that we do as consultants, we need to have anti-racism as a lens by which we are going to make better choices and to encourage our clients to make better choices.

We also need to intervene whenever we see or whenever we hear Black people or other people of color being marginalized or oppressed, whether it's in the firms that we work in or among our colleagues, or with our clients. This is, all hands on deck, if you see something, say something! This is a chance to use your access and influence, especially those of us who work with white leaders, because it's the white leaders who are setting the tone and the climate for those who work with them. It even could be that they are the ones doing the marginalizing or oppressing or ignoring it among those folks that report to them. And we have to be willing to have those uncomfortable conversations with them and push them for what is right. And I mean do it, including if you may get fired.

I've had some of those really uncomfortable conversations. I've not been fired yet, but I'm willing to be if I see something and I know that I can help make it right. And I know that I can influence them and say nothing is complicity, and I don't want to do that.

Basically, anywhere we can, in all of the ways that we can, as white consultants, we need to do the work to undo the systems and undo the behaviors that perpetuate racism and support white supremacy.

Because, let's face it, at the heart of it, consultants are agents of change, right? That's what we're really, really good at. Change is really long overdue. And if we didn't see the consequences of not changing before—and we should have—but if we didn't, we sure as hell see it now. So let's use this moment and let's use the reality of where we are to make things better. Use the reality of that we are everywhere, and we're in darn near everything, and we are so good at influence and change. We can do our part to create that just, equitable world that we all, I hope, truly want to have. That's what I wanted to talk with you about today.

I know it can be a hard conversation, but if we don't have hard conversations, nothing is going to change.

I'm going to put some resources in the show notes. Hopefully, you're interested in digging into those. If you know of other really good resources that can help us do better, then please put those in comments. Share them with others so that we can continue to help each other become not just better consultants, but better human beings and create a better world.

Thank you so much for listening to this today, and I will be back talking with other wonderful consultants very soon.