

Willie Jackson FINAL_2

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SPEAKERS

Julia Winston



Julia Winston 00:00

Take a look around. You'll notice them everywhere. facilitators, people who guide other people, create connection and make tough things easier. This is facilitator forum, where we meet a magical mix of people who offer us insights and inspiration through the stories of their work in the world. I'm your host, Julia Winston. Welcome. Hey, friends, I know it's been a while since the last episode of facilitator forum. Thanks so much for tuning back in. This is actually the last episode of facilitator forum. Stay tuned to the end of this episode to find out why I'm wrapping this podcast for now. And to get a little teaser about the new podcast I'll be launching next year. As for today's episode, I knew I couldn't end this podcast without exploring the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion, a topic that's become pressing and prominent for facilitators around the world, and especially here in the United States, as race relations have escalated to new heights since the murder of George Floyd in 2020. Most of all, though, I couldn't sunset facilitator for him without interviewing Willie Jackson.



01:14

I'm tall I'm brown, and I don't take myself too seriously. My career has been one of unapologetic opportunism, finding things that light me up that bring me joy. And occasionally things I'm good at.



Julia Winston 01:30

Willie's good at a lot of things. He started his career as an IT consultant at Accenture then served as the technical lead for the marketing guru Seth Godin, his publishing company and alt MBA program. Then he founded a successful digital magazine for black men called Abernathy. And now he serves as the head of learning and development at ReadySet, which is a boutique consulting firm that specializes in making more human centric and inclusive work environments. Willie is a frequent writer and speaker on the topics of workplace equity, global diversity and inclusive leadership. And he has an interesting perspective about Dei.



02:07

I'm deeply ambivalent about the frame of the AI. And it's often really counterproductive because it comes with baggage. And there's a stigma and it doesn't scale internationally. And some people shut up parts of their brain. When they hear those terms and like sit in a quote unquote dei session, I don't find it to be the most useful frame, what I do find useful is drawing insights from history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines into the project of a well lived life. And a lot of times what I find in dei is that people are holding a lot of stress, a lot of anxiety, a lot of anger. I'm really animated by the project of bringing more ease and lightness and levity and joy and humor into those spaces. Because people are so tight, they can't be useful to themselves or



Julia Winston 02:58

others. And where did facilitation enter your journey?



03:01

It was a dark and stormy night 2016. It probably wasn't either of those things. Let's see. Facilitation was never something I really thought about, or, frankly, had a clear idea of, until I met the patron saint Jenny sour Klein, she was organizing a conference. And I was really impressed by her thoughtfulness. And she wanted to go about programming, and producing this conference in a way that reflected her values. And also her growing consciousness around the need to really model inclusion in a way that was far beyond lip service. And so I had an opportunity to be a basically a volunteer role, where I was responsible for a very small gaggle of humans. And I did facilitate some things and I'll never forget, I had pinkeye the first time, which was delightful, just delightful. And that was my first opportunity facilitating, I don't think it was necessarily wonderful, but that was my first taste of it. And I remember all of my anxieties, you know, am I doing the job, how I do this, etc. And the other touch point was a year later, when Ginny had me facilitate a couple things. One was a fireside chat with Molly Ford at Salesforce on I think ally ship and equality. And the other one at the same culture conference was a bit of Color in Tech panel. And I think to this day, those are two of my crowning achievements as a facilitator. So 2016, I believe, is around about the time when I started facilitating, and it became a career years later. A lot



Julia Winston 04:37

of the frame for this whole podcast is that we don't have a school or facility. Not like we say, Oh, I'm gonna go be a facilitator one day, right. It's another thing. So how did it become a thing for you like from this first inkling in 2016, leading to the time when you decided I am going to be a facilitator for a living? What were some of the touch points along the way that You either chose or that happened to you.



05:01

So the assumption in there is that I ever made a decision around that That's not quite how it

So the assumption in there is that I ever made a decision around that. That's not quite how it played out. Even after I had these experiences, facilitating sessions, I wasn't thinking of myself as a facilitator, I thought of myself as moderating. So just kind of interesting languaging there. So I thought of myself as moderating those conversations. And I remember distinctly, I was facilitating a man of color and tech panel in a large breakout room. And there were probably, let's just say, 50 people in attendance. And I knew a lot of people in attendance. So what ended up happening over the course of this moderated hour or so is I was able to bring in people from the audience and incorporate their voices and their stories. And because it was not a huge room, you could hear people without microphones, and people would like speak up. And so we had a rich conversation flowing people of different genders, identities, backgrounds, sexual orientations on the panel, and also in the audience as well. So there was just a moment when we were flowing as a room and having conversations like, basically, the whole room was like, alive with this conversation. And then we wrapped and people were saying nice words, that generally happens after human, you know, as a speaker, like people generally have nice thing to say, if you haven't completely bombed, so it was like, that's great. I thought that always feels nice. But I remember a couple people were a few Civ, they were just saying very flattering things about how I facilitated the conversation. And that was one of the first things I got my attention in terms of whatever it was that I was doing. And frankly, intuiting. At that point, that was really resonating with people, Jenny offered me some like Master facilitator reflections. And she basically made it clear that there was something there that I might consider exploring. So all that to say, there was never a point when I say, Oh, I'm a facilitator. Now, because I didn't, you know, I wasn't paid for those things, right, there was nothing that said, this might be a viable way of moving through the world of making a living, etc. I joined a small diversity strategy firm called Ready set in 2018. My role to begin with was consultant facilitator, basically, generalist, you do whatever you have to do, I was hired number three, and we were very, very small at the time. And I consulted and I facilitated like everybody else. And one thing I really appreciate my CEO for why Vaughn Hutchinson remarkable person who wrote a book called How to talk to your boss about race, is that she waited to see where I would thrive, before working with me to carve out my area of focus. And it just so happened that after facilitating and let's be clear, I was not a great facilitator all the time to be what I was fine. But it was really in my head, I was insecure about the practice of facilitation. But it just so happened that I developed the comfort around the material. And there was an analogue with the journey that I had been on, you know, healing, introspection, learning my history, etc. and facilitation got to be something that I was good at. And the feedback ended up being positive every time and as you know, when you're good at something, and you do it for large groups of people, you tend to get more opportunity to students to do the same thing. And so that really started my facilitation career in earnest. And, honestly, I have to credit why Vaughn with having the vision here. So I started off as lead facilitator at ReadySet, then I became head of what we call facilitation at the time now had a learning and development. And that's been my journey since 2018. So literally what I do for living now,



Julia Winston 08:24

when we were just chatting at the beginning of this conversation, we were talking a little bit about your frame on diversity, equity and inclusion. I would love to hear more about that. How do you perceive our country to be talking about DTI? And how do you see DTI?



08:39

Big Questions. I would say that DTI is discussed in pockets and you know meanings in the

big questions, I would say that DEI is discussed in pockets, and you know, meanings in the mind, it means different things to different people. When some people hear Dei, they hear the animating force behind their professional career. So I informally mentor, quite a number of people who are looking to transition into the EI or at least think they want to transition into the I'm not saying I dissuade them. But I'm not saying that either. So some people are really animated and values driven around this. And this often maps to like people with multiple marginalized identities like women of color, that is a huge category of people that are transitioning into Dei, because these folks over index on like a values driven way of showing up in the workplace. And frankly, they've suffered harm in the workplace. Right. So there's a way in which the experiences that we've had, I think you can relate to this with some of your work beyond this podcast, there are there ways in which the experiences we've had and how the lights have come on for us in terms of different areas of concern, or different people groups or social groups or just folks who have a rough go of it that make us want to either fix that or drive awareness around that or advocate on behalf of people who might benefit from that advocacy. So I would say on one end of the spectrum, there are people who are The animated by that. And there's another end of the spectrum of people who see dei and its concerns as evidence that things are going really wrong in this country. It's a big question to ask how I think about this country. And its prioritization of a dei conversation in general, because fortunately, or unfortunately, I know a little history. And things look very different for a lot of people. Just yesterday, in terms of the timescale of human history, my grandfather was a sharecropper. My grandparents were sharecroppers in the rural south, my grandfather had a sixth grade education, my dad's dad had a sixth grade education and literally dropped out of school to work the fields, because, you know, in, in the early 1900s, that's what you have to do in the South as a black person. My father was born in 1944, and picked cotton in the rural segregated south, grew up in abject poverty walked off the farm at 18, to join the military. And so I can see through my bloodline and two generations, a remarkable story of American progress. But that doesn't change the fact that things look so different, not very long ago. I mean, to put a fine point in it, black folks couldn't buy property in living memory in this country. And they're the descendants of those folks are still suffering tremendous economic and practical and professional consequences for policy decisions this country has made. So it's really difficult to disentangle the history of the United States from the conversation we're having now because that history is still with us. When I was 22, I bought a five bedroom McMansion in the Atlanta suburbs, I had my choice of jobs coming out of undergrad. And now for living, I facilitate conversations that are very natural to me conversation that I'm very well equipped to navigate. And my life is not hard, I live a very beautiful, privileged life. So the punchline of what I just shared is the fact that my life is beautiful, compared to generations that have come before me and even current generations. And I want to peel back the layers a little bit more, because I'm not sure that your audience will have heard something like this coming from me. I'm a tall, straight, black male. And one of the complicating factors of this work is that many audiences, and I'm talking about white dominant audiences want to see a brown face doing this work, and carrying the emotional labor of driving these sometimes very difficult conversations. And so because of my identity, because of the fact of my race, because I am black, I get a lot of credibility in the space. Because I am male, I also get privilege and credibility in the space. And so I live in this bizarro land where the fact of my race and gender is a superpower. And I'm in demand, because people believe the things I'm saying, and it comes packaged in a format that doesn't feel particularly threatening. And so like, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the way that people with different social identities have a much harder time navigating the waters that I fairly effortlessly navigate. And I'll give you a couple of brief examples. I have, over the years been responsible for programming the facilitators, I've managed large teams of facilitators at my company. And I have to be mindful of what's in front of which audiences so for example, a group of senior executive men are going to treat young looking woman identified

facilitator much differently than they treat me. I don't get challenged, I don't get talked over, I get the benefit of the doubt. People don't come at me in ways that they don't even realize that they're doing with people of other genders. For example, I'll never forget being in Santa Barbara with my CEO, my CEOs black, and we would literally be sitting right next to each other. She's a CEO, I'm just they're very junior couldn't be more junior than I was at the time. And people would talk to me and not talk, they would basically ignore her and direct all their conversation towards me. So that was a really pivotal experience that I had, and realizing how transparently gendered and biased a lot of interactions can be. I wasn't dealing with evil people. These are people who were spending real money to engage us on very important work. And they were helpless but to perpetuate biases that were not obvious to them. So I'm throwing a lot at you right now. But I want to paint a picture of the fact that this work is really complicated and nuanced, and I'd benefit from a tremendous amount of privilege in this space. That is not my fault at all.



Julia Winston 14:49

Yeah. I think it's really important that you brought up that dynamic and that truth about you and your experience in that. I sometimes wonder and I think other people out there probably wonder, like, quote unquote, should DEI facilitators be people of color? Should they be black? Should they be white? Should they be female? What are your thoughts about that?



15:11

I think there's work for everyone to do. Here. A lot of white men don't feel comfortable in this space for a few reasons. One, I think there's a way that white men are caricatures as what is wrong with America, which is to say, white men are over represented on executive boards, and executive teams, etc. And they can be seen as holding on to power gatekeeping, so on and so forth. There is a way in which white men have a crucial role to play in everything from succession planning, to mentorship to sponsorship to, in some cases, stepping aside and making space for the next generation of folks who don't necessarily look like them. This is complicated, because what the literature tells us is that, let's just take let's take Whiteman and I'm painting in broad strokes to make a point here, losing status is a huge concern for folks, for white men in particular, and this is like, deeply baked into our psychology and our desire to propagate as a species and preserve identity. This definitely is very, very personal. And so there are ways that white men have not been invited to certain parts of the conversation, and their presence is presented, or it feels uncomfortable, or they're dismissed out of hand, because we can't really have a nuanced conversation about what it means for people of all identities, backgrounds and genders to carry the important work of DEI. This isn't to say that I need Tim Cook, the CEO of Apple, who happens to be a gay man to like be talking about DEI, in the same way that I do. I don't need that. But at that level, it might be procurement, it might be policy and might be examining, you know, examining equity in the pipeline, succession planning, and so forth. So I would summarize it by saying, I think there's a role for all people to play, I do think there's a rich, nuanced conversation to be had about sharing space, about sharing opportunities. So for example, I'm straight cisgender. So I wouldn't feel comfortable necessarily carrying the conversation forward about queer concerns or transgender concerns, because that's not my, that's not my area of expertise. One, and two,

there are people who live that experience, who have something to say about it. So it would give me a lot of joy and pleasure to share that opportunity with somebody who could speak to it more directly. So I do think concerns and reflections like that are useful.



Julia Winston 17:37

There's this confusion point about not wanting to burden people, right. So like, there's this conversation about emotional labor that has really caught my attention when it comes to Dei, you know, I don't want to put the burden on you as a black man to educate me as a white woman about your experience. So that's one way of looking at it. And then on the other hand, it's like, who better to decode, make aware than the people who are experiencing this struggle themselves? So how do we carry that paradox?



18:09

Well, I mean, I love that you brought that up. So what you just said, is really important, in particular, in a one on one context, so I counseled a lot of managers and leaders about this. So you might be, you come to one of my sessions, or you read a book, or you know, your child has something that has you think about something, whatever it is, whatever it is, it gets you activated about this range of concerns. And you say, Oh, I get it, I have a woman on my team, my personal color and my team, I'm going to ask them about their background, and really pay attention to what it is that I don't know. And where a lot of people flame out or misstep is not realizing the way in which that feels challenging and surprising and unexpected, and frankly, unwelcome to people. Because a you know they're not prepared. And B, there's a power dynamic. If you're a white manager, and you're trying to connect with a person of color on your team, you've have to remember that setting aside your intention, setting aside your curiosity, setting aside where it is that you're looking to go with that conversation, that will very likely land in a way that's very different from your intentions. And I have just heard of countless conversations falling flat right out of the gate because somebody was animated in a way that didn't connect with the person who they were talking to. All that to say in a one on one context, I think we should be very sensitive people of all backgrounds and identities should be very sensitive to putting other people in a situation where they feel forced or pressured to explain their humanity, talk about things that are very personal to them talk about things that they frankly don't want to talk about, etc. I think we can miss each other there. By contrast, if you make a living as I do leading these conversations, then economically it could be very important to receive that referral or that recommendation. I think you can float opportunities to people without signing them up for opportunities in a way that gives them agency and choice.



Julia Winston 20:07

Thanks for breaking that down the one on one point is really important because we have conversations about Dei, in different contexts with different intentions, desired outcomes. And so what I hear you saying is, let's be thoughtful about what the context is. And then based on whatever that is, let's make a decision about how to approach it in an appropriate way, or a way that feels sensitive.



20:30

Yeah, what I would add, there is a summary of something that I see that really challenges a lot of people, which is the desire not to say or do the wrong thing, it can feel very, very scary to broach these topics for the first time. And let me let me empathize. If you grew up, in a context where you never had to consider the fact of your whiteness, or the fact of your privilege, or the way in which certain things have come easy to you in ways that don't necessarily come easy to others, it can be exceptionally difficult to metabolize these things live, let's be real, starting in 2020. Yeah, and then have an informed conversation, even though I mean, you may be fairly senior, you may have a family, you may be confronted with a range of concerns that feel destabilizing, and then you work up the courage to talk to somebody that you feel you have a lot of rapport with professional background, you know, shared experience, whatever the case may be. And then you get blasted because you use the term colored instead of person of color, for example, like, that is a way that people can feel so embarrassed and so ashamed. And they might be met with anger and rage that may or may not be their fault, or may or may not be their stuff to hold. I'm painting a picture of how complicated and how difficult and how personal the sport can be, because folks can be put off from the project of trying trying in this work, because they made some unfortunate missteps. Right.



Julia Winston 22:01

Absolutely. And I think many of us out there can probably relate to this in some way. I know I can't, and 2020 I think you named it, you know, like, unfortunately, we were not as mindful prior to 2020 as we should have been. And I think we were all forced to confront a lot of truths in 2020 that were easy to ignore.



22:19

And we have to be clear about who we mean by we, right? Because like, a lot of people said a lot of people and not all white people, right? And so I'm, I'm being cheeky right here. But what I'm saying is that many people in 2020 said, Oh, my God, I didn't realize something, how bad things were. A lot of people said, that's for you to join us. Right? And so like, there were ways and not to mention the fact of oh, I don't know, a global pandemic, like 2020 was a doozy. It was a doozy. There are ways in which like, I have, like friends and acquaintances who approached me for like guidance that like, I wasn't in a place to provide and like, frankly, didn't want to provide like, that's not the role that I play in my social circle. I don't spend a lot of time like educating my friends are things like I have a I'm an Aquarius, if that means anything to you, like, I have a very small circle of people who are my people, I have hundreds of acquaintances, but like I have a very small tight circle. And we speak in shorthand. And spoiler alert, we don't really talk about Dei, right. So that's what I do professionally, but I have a whole identity outside of what I do for a living. So again, you might see somebody who, quote unquote, does dei for a living, and you could very easily have your expectations missed that person, because they don't show up in that way. And I'm sure some people have had that experience with me, like, let me know, like, this is not how I talk when I'm hanging around Brooklyn. Like, I just want to talk professionally, but like, I am a three dimensional human being who likes talking about, you know, all sorts of things. And I'm an introvert. So sometimes I like talking about nothing. Anyway, back over to you.



Julia Winston 23:52

i Every time you talk, I have like 10 things. It's like a drop down menu 10 questions,



23:57

we're gonna need a bigger vote.



Julia Winston 23:58

I mean, one thing I just want to go back to for a moment, just to bring a little bit of myself into the equation to relate to people about some very real uncomfortable things about this topic, is that as a Jewish person, I really saw a lot of people in my generation who just assumed that because Jews back in the day used to experience a lot of oppression. And Jews still experience oppression all over the world. I'm not diminishing that in any way. But I am saying that in this country, Jewish people are white people, you know, are that's that's one perspective. I'm putting a stake in the ground right now. And I think there's a lot of people out there who might disagree with me. And we don't need to spend the rest of the episode talking about this. But I'll just say that really seeing myself as a white person over a Jewish person, especially because I grew up in Texas, where there were not a lot of Jews. So I identified as a minority. And I guess I thought that made me a more sympathetic figure. And then in light of all the events of 2020 and just looking inward, and doing a lot of reading a lot of listening and making a lot of mistakes, frankly, as a facilitator or to like publicly humiliating mistakes, trying to have grave conversations, it really cracked open a lot. 2020 was an inciting incident for a lot of white people in terms of our awareness and the dimensions and nuances of our awareness about the problems that we experience around race in our country.



25:17

The Jewish identity piece is really salient for a number of reasons, like one obvious, tremendous historical atrocities with the Holocaust, and just the attendant anti semitism globally, there also was a turning point in the civil rights movement, where when Jewish grandmothers would lock arm and arm with black folks and say, you know, enough is enough, like that was a turning point. So that that's the thing. And then there's, there's also this lingering question of like, who gets to be white, I don't need to tell you this. But like, there was a time when Jewish folks, Italian folks, Irish folks, etc, weren't considered white. And over time that has changed. Many folks who are less melanated, than myself have had the option to become white and to have been folded in under the banner of whiteness.



Julia Winston 26:06

I think there's a generational conversation here. And I want to touch on that just a little bit like Dei, through the generations, what are the different conversations that you're hearing and having amongst the boomers, the Gen Xers, the millennials, Gen Z, what are some of the things that you hear and the indicators of where we are around this topic across generations.



26:27

So I'm glad you brought this up. So there are five generations in the workplace today. And they're just very different expectations around all of this stuff. So when we think about people graduating from college now, or let's just say in the past four to five years, they speak the language of resistance, they're much more liberal and progressive in their values, they are much more comfortable with communication mediated by electronic devices, they skew much higher in terms of like reporting anxiety, depression, etc, etc, kind of like symptoms of living life online. And I'm trying to characterize you folks, but these are profound themes that I'm seeing, and I've consistently seen in this work, and they really miss some of the older generations, or I should say, the older generations, sometimes miss them. So setting aside products of the 60s, people who grew up in the counterculture revolution, and who can reserve some space and like, remember what it was like to like protest the Vietnam War and like to stick to, like draw a line in the sand that felt very risky. I think there's some play there and some opportunities to connect, like, my father just doesn't get it. My dad 78, like he wasn't joining an employee resource group, you know, he was just happy to have a job. Right. So like, they are, I would say, different values, and mean, just think about how much norms have changed from the madmen generation locker room banter. And like, what would be acceptable at work coming out of the mouth of leaders? I mean, we see this unlike Wolf of Wall Street type conversations and you know, succession, you know, we like see the way that corporate conversations tend to flow. And I mean, you can speak to this directly, if you've been, you have been in some spaces. So there's a way in which things that felt acceptable yesterday, are off the table today. And one of the deep concerns to put a fine point and one of the deep concerns that I see I mean, I'll give you an example. And executive in an all staff conversation will be asked a question, you know, extemporaneously, and a little bit too much conservative talk radio comes out, or they'll say something like, we really care about diversity, of course, but we're not going to lower the bar. And as you know, there are certain things that young folks in particular are very activated around. And we can hear that on charitably, and then ReadySet gets a call, right? So there are ways in which people are resentful. Older generations are resentful, they don't get it things are moving too fast. I don't get this pronoun thing. I'm a guy, what do you want? Like there was a guy, what do you want, like, they just don't get it. So when we're talking to like, trans inclusion issues, and gender neutral bathrooms, like this stuff is really difficult for a lot of folks to get their arms around, because they don't have context. They don't connect with it personally. And maybe even their kids didn't have the same experience, you know, moving through the world. So they haven't had an opportunity to get an education on it. And they feel very foolish, being experts in one way and having so much credibility and experience and, you know, muscle memory around making certain decisions. And then you know, somebody who's 23 telling them that they're bigoted, or sexist, or they're using language that's offensive. So it's so difficult across generational lines, setting aside race and gender like just the generational piece is bedeviling a lot of folks. The way that you speak.



Julia Winston 29:57

So empathetically about, folks Older generations is really, it warms my heart, it makes me feel really sad at the same time. And you know, a value I always grew up with as a Jewish person was to honor your mother and father, respect your parents Respect your elders. And it's so hard for us to respect and understand each other across generations with such wildly different

contextual understandings of where we are right now. And I think one of our jobs as facilitators is to help connect people to build bridges across I love the gaps and understanding and it makes me like, really, I get so fired up about that. And I also get really moved and emotional.



30:37

I wish people could see right now because you are you're bubbling Yeah.



Julia Winston 30:41

I've got my fist pump in



30:44

shadowboxing? Yes,



Julia Winston 30:47

I just think that's what we're here to do, you know, like, and we can have these specific lenses for you. It's diversity, equity inclusion, and as a black man, you can speak to that with credibility with experience with gravity and with lightness, because you carry all of that in you. And for me, you know, it's, it's as a woman, and as a white woman, a Jewish woman, a woman with queer family, we all come with our own lens and bringing ourselves into our work as facilitators, we can build bridges across all types of gaps. And I think that's what's so beautiful about this work. And what I hope that anyone who's listening to this, you know, feels loving and passionate about when it comes to facilitation is that we have a role that we can play in creating more connection across humanity,



31:31

I love that you use this bridge building metaphor, because that's one of the things that I really emphasize in my work. So in every workshop that I do, I cover community agreements. And one of the community agreements at ready said is basically we we focus on like, this tension between intent and impact. So we basically say, assume good intent, but own impact. And what that means is, if the subtext for me is, if you say or do something that causes harm, don't use your good intentions as a shield against accountability. My invitation to folks is to enthusiastically endeavor to build a bridge to understanding in the event that you cause harm, however, unintentionally. So I just love this frame of bridge building, because a natural human response to hearing that you've caused harm or that you've offended somebody is to defend yourself. That's a very natural human reaction, because you want to make that cognitive dissonance go away. But one of the expectations and invitations I make at the outset of my sessions is in the event that that happened, your number one job, even if you don't know the right, you don't have to know what it exactly is that you did. But you can honor the essential humanity that we share with somebody, and you can apologize enthusiastically and genuinely, even if you disagree with that person. So a classic example is a visibly nervous individual

contributor comes up to you after a meeting and says that you used a racist metaphor, think it's like the pot calling the kettle black, which is not racist, but it sounds a little racist. And you're, you're shocked by the suggestion that what you said had any racial implications whatsoever. So this person is triggered, activated, and they build up the courage to come to you and you have a choice in that moment, you can affirm them in that you can say, I'm so sorry, thank you for bringing that to my attention, which is what we recommend. Or you can say, Oh, you misunderstood me, or that's how they met. And they like you, you start to explain to the person why they're wrong. And then as the joke goes, you have two problems on your hands, right? Because you've caused harm. And you're like explaining to somebody, something intellectual, that should actually be an emotional conversation. And all you really need to say in that moment is I'm so sorry, right? Even if you disagree, so I just love that bridge building metaphor, because I think that's something that we can all practice and take away from conversations like these, you don't have to agree with somebody to acknowledge the courage that it takes to bring harm to your attention.



Julia Winston 34:08

Thank you for that. And I love this, first of all, the notion of community agreements. And that's a really tactical tip. And I want to get back to that in a second. And I also just want to say that this specific community agreement around owning the impact, I think, is critical. And I alluded earlier to some embarrassing moments that I had, you know, in 2020, as a facilitator, there's an anecdote that I can share just to, I think, illustrate some examples of how you might have really good intentions in trying to, you know, maybe being an ally or an advocate like myself, around DEI and then ended up having an impact that is counterproductive. And I had this this thing happened that was so embarrassing, but I'm going to share it here for some reason, I feel called to share it and I think it's probably because a lot of us are sitting out there with shame. You know, sitting with shame around ways that we've tried and failed. To be advocates or be allies, and again, the we I'm speaking about people who are white. So I was facilitating a meeting not long after George Floyd's murder, and people were really activated at that time really triggered, and really flustered. And, and really sad. And there was a lot of intensity. And I was working with a company that I'd worked with a lot. That's that was like, almost all white, there were no black people who worked at this place. And it was also growing. So I'm up there facilitating, and actually, unbeknownst to me, there was a new employee, and they're half black. And just by looking at the screen on Zoom, you can't necessarily see that. So hi, dear. I boldly said something like, let's all be real here. Like, there are no black people who work at this place. You know, I said something to try to make a point that like, we need to look around and recognize how white this space is. And I started getting bombarded in the chat in the Zoom chat with like, actually, there is now and I was like, Oh, my God, I saw this. And I was like, Oh, shit, like, I need to make a public apology right now and acknowledge, like, everything that's happening. And I did, and it was so embarrassing. And I was, so I felt so horrible. And my intentions were so pure, like, I really like I had the best of intentions, it was the most clumsy thing. And it ended up like inadvertently making someone invisible, who should not be invisible. And so I reached out to this person, and we had, you know, we had a wonderful moment, it was fine. But like, I felt like sharing that because there's a lot of embarrassing and seemingly shameful moments that are happening out there around DEI. And I think we have to recognize that these are learning moments,



36:48

for holding for sharing that, that that's powerful. And there's so many different ways to slice it. So obviously, I can see how you would be utterly mortified in that moment, right? Because you're making a strong point. And everybody, it was like the the Kermit the Frog emoji, you know, taking seriously like, actually, actually actually. And then there's the impact on the individual, which I could see being bigger in our head. And in practice, it sounds like you know, it's fine. Probably not the first person first time that somebody, some something about them, and the other. And then there's also the DEI best practice that I will remind folks have or just to underscore, because I can I see people getting this wrong. There are a lot of well intentioned folks who, for example, in a recruiting context, try and determine somebody's social identity on the basis of phenotype or how they look. And that's very, very tricky, because not everybody identifies the way that they look. I mean, there's a sexual orientation. takeaway here, there's a race and gender, there's an ethnic orientation here. And, you know, none of us are 100%, anything we have, we all have a little, we all have a little something in us. And it's impossible to predict how somebody identifies racially, ethnically, or otherwise. So I would just caution people, like, you know, Julio learned, so you don't have to this way, it's really, it's really risky to make assumptions about people on the basis of the way that they look. And their ways of like softening our approach, or inviting people to self ideas, we say in the corporate context, that that will save you a world of hurt in the future. And it's just a little weird to like, you know, I'm not pointing this at you. I mean, the practice more generally, really, it's like, weird to categorize and sort people on the basis of their identity and your assumptions about how they identify, you can really, you can really get it wrong.



Julia Winston 38:48

Yeah, you can really get it wrong,



38:50

despite the best of intentions, right? That's I mean, that's, that's the key here, like, you're trying to push a it's hilarious, kind of it wasn't hilarious at the moment. But the fact that you were you were trying to make a point and that point was so viciously undercut by the assumption that you made and like having to repair the harm not to, like it wasn't like an email that you had to attract or you had to do this live so alive,



Julia Winston 39:14

and I'm still facilitating it's okay, you know, we can make mistakes. We can make it through to the other side.



39:20

So alright, let's make this tactical.



Julia Winston 39:22

Yeah, let's, let's not tactical. So I wanted to ask if you have anything or evidence for people who

mean, let's, let's get tactical. So I wanted to ask if you have any tips or guidance for people who are not official DEI facilitators, but do this type of work in their organizations like me, like the misguided Julia? Who was doing that? Do you have any tips or guidance, for example, you just brought up always starting with community agreements. And I wonder if you have any other practices that you would advise folks who are holding this role, whether officially or unofficially, to take



39:51

sure one recommendation is, try very hard not to make it about you. There are ways in which So a lot of people have been personally impacted by this, just say the events of the last two and a half years, and really want to signal to the world that they're on the right side of history, that they're an ally, that they're an advocate, etc. And there are incentives that make that a very understandable thing to do, which is to say, we want to, you know, draw attention to the fact that we're a safe space, or we're an advocate or, you know, we've got your back, etc. There are ways that a that can fall flat with many people's underestimated identities, who have been harmed by the good intentions of people who are acting out of a sense of trying to see themselves as the people, rather than actually being willing and capable of doing the hard work of advocacy, which is to say, expending political capital, speaking truth to power, and doing both of those things when it's not comfortable or convenient. So one of the ways that I see this, I'm trying to make all this stuff specific. One of the ways I see this playing out in the workplace is harm will occur in a meeting, or somebody will say something terrible, and individuals in that meeting will know that there's somebody else in that meeting, who is likely mortified or suffering in that moment, or they'll disagree with what's being said. And instead of speaking up in the moment, they'll go to that person afterwards and say, oh, man, that was so terrible, I can't believe that happened. So instead of having courage in the moment, and speaking truth to power, they try and assuage their own lack of courage in that moment, by building some rapport with that person afterwards. And I'm not trying to shame people for doing this. But I am going to invite people to be more courageous in the moment, and think about what you can offer in a way that might cost you something. But that benefits from somebody who doesn't, doesn't have some of the privileges that you have. In other words, black women do not have the freedom to express anger, and rage and pushback in the workplace, in the same way that people from other social identity groups do, because of, you know, historical, racist tropes. And so, if there is injustice occurring, for people who don't hold these structural privileges, there's an opportunity for you to stand in the gap there and expend some political capital on their behalf. So the takeaway here is not to make this about you, which is to say, and I caricature to saying, Hey, everybody, look at what a good person I am. Or, as my friend will put it 100%, or my, as my friend put it, the Bay Area is a place with more Black Lives Matter signs than black lives. Right. So it's a bizarro world. So make it count. And don't make it about you. That's one thing. The other thing I would invite people to do, is to be compassionately, curious. And that's not to say, Hey, can I touch your hair, or what's it like being black, but like, listening deeply to people's stories and lived experiences, and not being in such a rush to cover all this ground, like, you know, it's wonderful that you're animated by these concerns, and you really want to get it right, et cetera, et cetera. But there are ways that we can bring like supremacist values into this work, which is to say speed for the sake of speed, perfectionism. There's a way in which you can go about the quote, unquote, right work in the quote, unquote, wrong way. So it's a long journey. Don't try to be like, anti racist by Friday, you know, commit yourself to learning. That's books, that's podcasts, asked for book recommendations, ask for organizations doing impactful work, ask for what people need. And maybe don't ask people to speak on behalf of their identity group, but just connect with people as individuals start doing some

pattern matching and give yourself the time and the grace and the patience to learn something that you weren't attuned to in the past. I guess the final thing I'll say, is, I think it's really important for white folks in particular, to do a lot of this work among white folks. A lot of people feel a lot, I'll be specific, a lot of white folks feel like in order to do the work of becoming a better person and becoming more informed around Dei, they need to just practice with people of color than with people who will hold marginalized or underestimated identities. And a lot of harm can occur. A lot of microaggressions take place, a lot of ugliness can happen unintentionally. When you haven't spent time working out your own stuff, your anxieties, your guilt, your shame, the way you're trying to be okay in the world. And you kind of foisting that upon a person of color and in an unspoken way, asking them to make you feel better about the fact of your identity. That's messy, and that can cause harm, and it perpetuates a lot of ugly power dynamics. I think it's important for white folks to talk to and with white folks about these things. Um, hang themselves before they take it outside of those communities because so much harm occurs when people aren't ready to have a conversation that they feel like they want to have.



Julia Winston 45:09

I really appreciate all of the tips guidance perspective that you've that you've just offered us here and throughout this entire conversation. It's an important conversation. And it's something that I think we need to talk about forever, whether it's under this this title of diversity, equity and inclusion or just plain old human connection, empathy, compassion, respect. What do you hope that listeners are taking away from this conversation?



45:36

I really hope people take away from this the fact that there's a role for us all to play in this work, to ask difficult questions of ourselves and those around us. And I wouldn't underestimate the power of the well timed question, compassionate questions, asking questions, non confrontational, asking questions, and in ways that invite people to reflect can be so incredibly powerful in this and adjacent work.



Julia Winston 46:04

Willie, thank you so much for joining us at facilitator forum. I have been wanting to talk to you for so long about this. And I just feel my cup is full right now. And I wish we could talk even more about this topic, because it's literally limitless, the amount of ground that we could cover. But I want to thank you so much for being here and for sharing your wisdom, your perspective and your experience.



46:26

Oh, Julia, it's been a privilege. Thank you for having me. And thank you for the work that you're doing.



Julia Winston 46:36

Wow, there's so much to unpack on this topic. But I think we covered quite a bit of ground. These conversations can feel heavy and scary. But Willie has a way of making it inviting and matter of fact, without stripping it of significance and meaning. As he said in the beginning, he loves to bring more ease and lightness and joy and humor into dei spaces. And he certainly did that. For me. It was scary to talk about whiteness in the context of my Jewish identity and to share my facilitation fumble, but he created an atmosphere that made me feel safe to do it. And if he can do that in a podcast interview, I can only imagine how he might open up a whole room in a dei training. One of the most important things he touched on is that there's a role for everyone to play here. As a former coach used to tell me, we're all part of the problem. And we're all part of the solution. And Willie's goal is to help us carry the problem with more lightness and ease. My question to you is, what role are you playing when it comes to Dei, either in the workplace or out in the world? What's one way you can be part of the solution? So shifting gears a little bit, Willie started with his story by sharing that it wasn't really a decision to become a facilitator so much is a trail of fortuitous breadcrumbs that led him to a job that fits him like a glove. That seems to be the case. For so many facilitators. We follow what feels alive, which leads us now to a transitional moment. When I started this podcast, I wanted to respond to a question I had been getting a lot which was, how did you become a facilitator? What does it mean to be a facilitator? And how do you do it? I wanted to explore an expansive definition of facilitation and empower everyone to see themselves as a facilitator. This is the topic that was most alive for me during the heat of the pandemic. Over the last year, I've loved every guest and savored every conversation featured on this podcast. And as I went along, I had a million ideas for additional people to interview and topics to explore. I wanted to grow the podcast. So I took a course over the summer to learn how to do that. Something unexpected happened when I took that course. As I dove into questions about what messages I really wanted to put out into the world. I realized there's one topic in particular that I like to focus on family, and more specifically, unconventional families. I come from a queer, blended family. And I've always been curious about other people who grew up in non traditional households. I'm someone who starts projects as a way to explore my own big questions. So I launched a project called the rainbow letters back in 2017, inviting other people with LGBTQ parents to share their stories too. And then earlier this year, when I donated my eggs to a gay male couple to help them start a family, I got inspired to pick up what suddenly appeared to be a much bigger thread. As I contemplated growing this podcast, I realized that what feels most alive for me now is to start a new podcast to share stories about creating families in non traditional ways, which as it turns out, is a big theme in my life. I'll be having real, raw, honest conversations with people who are single, queer child free communal, blended, or relying on science to build their families. I'll also speak with experts who are working to change laws, policies and social systems in support of families that don't fit the nuclear mold. To sum it all up, I'm going from facilitating conversations about facilitation, to facilitating conversations about family. This is what feels most alive and most pressing. At this moment. I'll bring updates about the new show into this feed. So if you follow facilitator forum, you'll be updated when the new podcast launches next year. So farewell for now, but stick around because I'll be back next year to facilitate more juicy conversations. This time about one of the most essential things in life family. It's been a total joy being on this journey with you and I appreciate you so much for joining me here. I also want to thank the folks who helped me bring this podcast to life. Adam Rosendahl for the artwork, Caleb Spalding and Massimo Lusardi for the music, and Josh Gilbert for the audio editing. I'm shifting into Thanksgiving mode with so much gratitude for all of you and for this incredible learning experience. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Take care, and we'll meet again soon

