



Introduction

The idea for this book grew out of two conversations, one with a client and one with a friend. Let me start with the conversation that I had with a client, a white managing partner of a large, prestigious law firm. I was sitting down to discuss his firm's diversity challenges and recent initiatives and I asked him why he thought, that despite all their efforts, the firm had not promoted a black attorney to partnership in twenty years. He explained to me that his firm had made great strides over the years with minority recruitment, but that the retention of black attorneys was a real problem. He thought one problem was that their black attorneys had been lured away: by other firms, the firm's clients, the government, and other attractive opportunities. Then he quickly added, "But we have also had some spectacular failures with black attorneys. They just don't seem to do as well here."

When I asked him if he thought black attorneys—those who left on their own volition, and those who were asked to leave—may have encountered any barriers to their success at the firm, he earnestly expressed his belief that the firm was an absolute meritocracy: there were no impediments to anyone's advancement. "This is a firm where people succeed or fail on their merits." In our conversation, he used phrases like "we have dipped down" and "bent over backwards" for black attorneys and finally concluded, "Maybe we aren't hiring the right people." Whatever the cause, he explained that the present situation was unacceptable; and yet, the firm was at its wit's end about what could be done to fix the problem. That is why he had hired me, a diversity consultant.

In the spirit of honesty, I have to admit that for a long time in my consulting career, I did not quite believe my clients when they told me that they didn't know what to do. I could not understand why they were perplexed by increasing numbers of people of color coming into their institutions hopeful but exiting quickly thereafter, disillusioned and disengaged. Sometimes, to illustrate what one problem might be, I would bring up a director's offensive comment or exclusive behavior, and the response from my client would be, "But I'm sure that is not what she meant." Or I would point to the failure of an influential partner to take a senior black associate in his practice group under his wing and the response would be, "Yes, but that partner doesn't mentor anyone." When I would suggest that maybe a certain system or practice lent itself to bias and could

disadvantage blacks and other people of color, I would get quizzical looks and the comment, “It’s difficult for anyone to succeed here; how is that a race issue?” In addition, many white people within my workshops would tell me that they didn’t know what to say or what to do in certain work situations involving a person of color, or they were afraid to broach an issue with a black person.

After hearing these sentiments over and over again, I formed my theories about why these people, who solve complex problems all day long, were at such a loss when it came to relating across race. I have to tell you that none of my suppositions were very flattering. To me, it seemed that the problems, the issues, and certainly the “dos” and “don’ts” were obvious. If I knew the thinking of my clients, their behavior, and the organizations resulting from their behavior were shaped by their own cultural values, life experience and racism, why didn’t they understand that? I know “racism” feels like a harsh charge; it is, especially for many of my clients who believe deeply in equality and fairness. When I use the term here, I am not talking about intentional racism, or people behaving out of racial animus. I am really referring to a more modern form of racism—unconscious biases and assumptions rooted in notions of racial superiority and inferiority that affect the way people behave and are embedded in the way organizations operate. This type of contemporary racism, sometimes called “aversive racism” or “implicit bias,” is perpetuated by good, kind, well-meaning white people.¹ It is subtle and mostly unintentional, and yet it is as concerning as old-fashioned forms of intentional and conscious racism.

Then one day, I had the second of two conversations that prompted me to write this book. My white friend, Gene, is quite progressive and is married to a black woman from South Africa with whom he has a son. We were speaking frankly about something that I wrote about white people and race relations, and he said, “All the things you say about how white people get it wrong are true, but when I hear these things, I get depressed. It would be great if you would go a step further and tell white people what they can do to improve how they relate to black people. White people need some hope that they can improve the diversity in their organizations and their relationships.”

Initially, I argued with Gene. I informed him of how his request felt for me as a black person: “Why is it always us?” I said. “Why is it that the ‘out group’ has to teach the ‘in group’ basic respectfulness and awareness? As black people, we’re exhausted by life generally, trying to make it in the majority world, making you all feel comfortable with us and now you are asking us to do your work for you.” It isn’t just the mental fatigue and psychological toll, of course. Trying to manage all this wears us out physically as well. You can look at the recent studies that show that the internal organs of black people are older than whites their same age, even when they have the same income and education level and the same level of health insurance coverage. The only way that scientists can explain this phenomenon is that black people are under more stress than their white peers.²

I pleaded with Gene over the telephone, “Can’t you all work as hard to understand us as we have in order to understand you?” We have studied hard to succeed in predominately white institutions, schools, and communities. We know the lingo, the jokes, the habits, the history and the nicknames, of the majority group. Then I remembered that some white people can’t see that there is a system out there that is hard for black people to navigate successfully and fit into. It is a system individual white people didn’t create, but that reflects and benefits them. However, many black people see this

system clearly, and we work hard to put our individual best forward, but we feel constantly snared: not only by individual racism, but also by structural racism.

I continued making my case, “Believe it or not, most black people believe in meritocracy, too; we just want to be a part of it. We want white people to help break down the barriers that keep so many black people existing along the walls of the dance floors of their organizations, rather than getting out in the middle of the floor and dancing.” I explained that black people, like anyone else, want to be part of the lifeblood of the organization and regarded as valuable and indispensable.

Gene continued with his plea for real concrete steps. I kept trying to hear what he was saying because of our relationship and my respect for him. Then it came to me. What if I believed him? What if I took my white friends and clients at face value, took their word for it? What would that mean? After all, as a diversity consultant, I am always telling people to “try on” others’ ideas and beliefs. I reasoned to myself: my friend is brilliant, educated at Columbia, one of the best schools in the world; he became a partner in a large prestigious law firm; and he is now living in a multi-cultural family. Yet, he is telling me that he knows good and kind white people who need help if they are going to build the bridges necessary to create real opportunities and deeper relationships with black folks. What if I believed that there are many white people who want to engage with, invest in, and support black people—to “dance with black folks”—in their personal and professional lives. Whether I like it or not, they need to be guided and encouraged.

Then Gene said, “Vernā, you do this in your workshops all the time. You not only raise people’s awareness about race and other diversity issues, but somehow you tell smart and powerful white men—who think they know everything—what they can do better. They listen because you do it in a way that gives them some confidence that they can get there. Just write about what you do in your workshops.”

So, I decided to respond to my friend’s request. My hope is that he is right about my ability to shed light. I am optimistic that white readers will take the examples of the big and small action steps I offer and feel a combination of informed hope and deep responsibility. This is not a book about inviting black people to the party; that has already been done. It is intended to be a resource for the white people who are willing to go outside their comfort zones, to ask black folks to join them on the dance floor of inclusion, where power and opportunity are shared and where black people are expected to be full participants on every level, in all facets, and in the deepest respects.