NEW AMERICA

# Crisis Conversations: Woke at Work?

## August 21, 2020

**BRIGID SCHULTE, HOST:** Well, welcome everyone to another Crisis Conversation live from the Better Life Lab. I'm Brigid Schulte the director of the Better Life Lab, and I'm so thrilled to to welcome everyone here, to the participants, and to our panelists. Today, we're going to be talking about you've hung up your Black Lives Matter sign, you've put out your statement, how do you actually build an anti-racist organization? How do you create that culture? How do you let that permeate in the work that you do?

Today, we usually have a chat function, we don't have a chat function today so I would encourage participants to use the Q&A, if you've got some questions please send them our way. We've got a fantastic panel so let me introduce them and then we will jump right in. We've got Melonie Parker. She's the chief diversity officer at Google, whose team just produced the 2020 Diversity Annual Report.

We've got Anselm Beach. He's the deputy assistant secretary of the Army for equity and inclusion, and he's spearheading something called Project Inclusion that we'll hear more about today. We've got Sarah Todd. She's a senior reporter for Quartz and Quartz at Work. She's the author of *What an Anti-Racist Workplace Looks Like*. Finally, we've got Tim Cynova and Lauren Ruffin, COO and chief external relations officer for Fractured Atlas, a New York City-based nonprofit that helps artists access funding.

Sarah, let's start with you. You've written quite a bit about diversity equity and inclusion. You've looked at this question of how to build an anti-racist organization, and what struck me in reading your reporting is you started out by saying there really aren't any. Can you talk about the landscape that's out there and what did you find in your reporting?

**SARAH TODD, PANELIST:** Yes, absolutely. That was something that a diversity consultant named Evelyn Carter told me that I was really struck by, there's no such thing as an anti-racist company. By that, what she means is that every company has more work to do. There's no one company that is the ultimate model. What we've seen I think in the past couple of months is a really interesting reckoning. Most companies

already had some form of diversity and inclusion policy or program, but when the Black Lives Matter protests happened, a lot of them released statements in support of the movement and were met by accusations of woke-washing. People saying "You say one thing but your actions reveal another."

For example, Amazon got hit by critics over the fact that it was selling facial recognition technology, which it has since agreed to suspend for a year at least. There was a lot of critique happening, in a productive way, I think. Because it's pushing companies to know that the status quo isn't enough and they have to be doing more. In terms of what the big challenges are right now, I think there are so many but if I really had to boil it down, I would say hiring and promotions are probably two really basic crucial issues.

Only 3% of senior executives and leadership at Fortune 500 companies are Black so there's clearly a huge gap when it comes to leadership. That's something that a lot of companies are aware of and working on. Then when it comes to hiring and recruitment, I think that the issue isn't a lack of talented people, but that a lot of companies haven't set up the pipelines to be able to recruit effectively, and then also that there are a lot of ingrained biases in the hiring process itself that companies need to revisit.

In terms of what companies are doing. I think a lot of big companies are still in sort of the listening tour phase which makes sense. It's a time when they have to be careful in reevaluating their practices but there have been some interesting pledges that have already come out. Just a quick overview of a couple of those. A lot of companies recognized Juneteenth this year for the first time, which was really interesting moment, very important one.

**BRIGID:** Take a moment to talk about what Juneteenth is for listeners who might not know and need to know.

**SARAH:** Oh, sure. Well, I'm not sure if I'm the best person to explain it in depth, but essentially it's a holiday celebrating the end of slavery. A lot of companies wound up actually swapping out Juneteenth for Columbus Day, so taking one very problematic holiday and replacing it with a very important one. Then when it comes to specific companies, Adidas said that it would fill at least 30% of all its currently open positions with Black or Latinx candidates. Estee Lauder made a pledge that it will make sure that the percentage of Black employees at all levels of the company will mirror the percentage of Black people in the US within the next five years.

We have seen several companies making strong public commitments to redoing their current practices.

**BRIGID:** Thanks so much, Sarah. Melonie, that's a perfect segue to talk to you about Google, and some of the work that you've been doing. In 2014, Google was one of the very first companies, particularly in the tech sector, to release demographic data, being very transparent, and what it showed, sort of not surprisingly, is that there was a lot of white men, a lot of Asian men in a lot of positions and particularly positions of power in the tech sector. Talk a little bit about what you're finding in your annual report, kind of how that's shaping the work that you're doing and how you're thinking about it?

**MELONIE PARKER, PANELIST:** Thanks I really appreciate the opportunity and agree a lot with the points that Sarah made, which is a lot of what we've incorporated at Google where diversity really is a verb. It's that ongoing commitment, and we intentionally published our data six years ago because we're both leaders and learners. We do publish, like the largest publicly available DEI data set in our industry.

We know every day is a day to get it right. What we found is that focus on representation, which is hiring minus attrition, and that gap in between that, as what Sarah so eloquently talked about, which is how we're progressing our talent, not just how we're promoting, but what are the development assignments? How are we focusing on attrition? Making sure that the folks that we're hiring are staying at the same time. Then very important is that leadership commitment and that leadership buy-in.

I'm so proud at Google, like Sundar gets it. He's all in, and really helping us to lead the way, but we have to be transparent about on our journey. We still have a opportunity that lies in front of us. It's an opportunity-rich environment. I want other companies to learn from Google as well, and to be willing to share that vulnerability because truly it's a collective action that we have to take, and not just as a company, but definitely as a society. What does education look like? Who has access to computing? Who has access to healthcare? Who's well enough?

All of these structures really underpin the systemic racism that we're facing right now, and so how do we come together as a collective to move that forward? We should do that very transparently.

**BRIGID:** You raise such interesting points, such important points with all of the structural racism. If you don't have the education system. If you don't have access to broadband, which is something that we are seeing so painfully in this pandemic. You talk about diversity being a verb, can you talk a little bit about what are some of the specific things that you're doing at Google that you think other people-- that you're learning from, and what are some of the results that you're finding?

**MELONIE:** Absolutely. We set aspirational goals around how we want to make sure that we're hiring the available talents. As we look at Black and Brown talent, we're actually putting a stake in the ground as to how we want to grow. One of the public commitments that we've made is a 30% increase in our executive leadership roles for our underrepresented minority talent, which is Black, Latinx, and Native American.

We're also making sure that we have a very focused approach to sponsorship, and advocacy, and mentoring, so we have a Pathways to Sponsorship Program. We piloted about two years ago, a retention program for underrepresented minority Googlers, so Black and Brown Googlers. What we found there is that by giving that targeted support to people who were thinking about leaving, we were actually making big Google small Google, and helping people navigate.

A lot of what we found is we need to set better expectations in Googlers when they're coming in. What's expected? How are you successful? Are you getting the feedback? It's not just about what's the fit for Google, what's the add? What is it that we need to add to our workforce as well and how are we valuing that? There's no one program. It's looking at that data, being informed by that, and really customizing or targeting our strategy based on what the data is showing us, and the collection of strategies is really what's going to help us continue to meet the goals that we set for ourselves.

**BRIGID:** I want to ask you one last question, and then I want to move on to Anselm in a minute, but why is this important? I think that we look at millions have been spent at diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, and we've got a question in the chat saying, "Can we probe a little bit more in C-suite representation as a key driver for equity and inclusion?" Sarah opened with Fortune 500, very, very miniscule representation, not only of Black and Latinx, but women, that we still have structures that favor and promote white men.

Can you talk a little bit about the C-suite and how important it is that these are efforts that come from the top down, and when you're building the pipeline, that's a long time to wait, right?

**MELONIE:** Completely agree, and I would sum that up by saying representation matters, and so we do need that representation at the top, at the middle, at all of those places because we need the voices at the table, we need the insights, the cultural competence, but that's where we have to make sure that we are fully representative across America, across the world, and that we're representing the places that we operate in, we're representing our user base. Because we need to make sure we have all the right voices at the table, and that we're fully availing all of the wonderful talent that's available. It's critically important.

**BRIGID:** All right, so Anselm, let me go to you. You're looking at all of this diversity, equity, and inclusion in the military context, in the Army, and it was not all that long ago there was a, I think I shared this with you, the military reporter Mark Thompson, he wrote about racism, and issues with diversity and equity inclusion in the armed forces. He showed a picture of President Trump with all of the top uniformed leaders, and every single one of them was a white man.

Talk a little bit about what you're trying to do in the Army, in particular, you've got Project Inclusion, because just as in the civilian world you've got so many racial and ethnic minorities in the ranks, and yet your officer corps is still very, very white and very male. You've got the very first, the Air Force General, who is the very first officer of color now, leading a service. Talk about what the Army, what you're doing, and why, and why now?

**ANSELM BEACH, PANELIST:** Thank you very much for letting me provide a perspective from the United States Army. First of all, I think the picture that you talked about really helps us to start this conversation, and I think that as long as we look at that picture, and we keep it in that dimension, we really create a one-dimensional construct of diversity. I think my colleague at Google, I think got to this a little bit because I think we need to think a little broader when we talk about diversity.

At the United States Army, what we want to do is to be able to expand the conversation on diversity, equity, and inclusion, beyond the visual and really talk about the value of diversity. Last year, October, in the United States Army, we published the Army People Strategy, and the Army People Strategy is really the roadmap for how we manage

talent. I think that when we talk about diversity we can't talk about diversity just in the shades of people. We've got to talk about the value that the different backgrounds bring, and it is General McConville, who is the Chief of Staff of the Army says, the Army should reflect America.

We appreciate that, and that is why the Army People Strategy is driving. In the Army People Strategy, which really looks how the Army attracts talent, how we recruit, how we retain, and how we sustain those efforts. We, the equity and inclusion agency published the diversity inclusion annex to the Army People Strategy, and in that annex what we're really doing is really providing a pathway to operationalize the Army People Strategy specific to the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion. That is really the driver for Project Inclusion, which really looks at our strategic plan which has 5 objectives about 25 tasks, and we focus on those one at a time. You talked about the officer corps.

**BRIGID:** Yes, I was really struck by one of the things that you're doing is removing photographs from candidates as they go for promotion. Can you talk a little bit about why you're doing that?

**ANSELM:** Absolutely. Because when we think about diversity as a value construct, what we must be able to do is to examine the systems that prevent us from getting the very best talent. In the United States Army, we are charged with really one thing, and that is the defense of the nation, and in the defense of the nation, we need every talent that we could get. Diversity, equity, and inclusion is a complex issue, and it simply can't be looked at just simply based on a few quick fixes here and there.

In the United States Army, before somebody could make it to general, we grow officers. You don't just have somebody one day and appoint them to a general the next day. That is not in line with the defense of our nation. What we need to do is to be able to look across, what systems do we have that prevent people, that removes barriers? Because we know in our country there's always a history of race, and preference, and stereotypes that go with certain demographic groups.

We looked at this issue, what are some of the barriers that would prevent people from that pathway? After studying this issue, that was one of the pathways that we look at, so when we go into blind promotion systems, with no pronouns, with no photographs, then the Promotion Board that looks at these promotion packets could then make a decision, and they're not looking at a photo and having these biases.

One last point I would like to make is that with Project inclusion, what we are actually doing is culture changing, and we are culture changing because what we want to do is prevent people from doing automatic thinking. For example, if I told you count from 1 to 10, because it's rote, you could tell me 1 to 10. If I were to ask you to be deliberate in your thinking and count from 1 to 10, but in alphabetical order, you have to pause, and you have to think, and it's a whole different paradigm.

**BRIGID:** Well, don't make me do that. [laughs]

**ANSELM:** Precisely, and as we examine these systems, what we are doing is taking a very deliberate approach and saying, how we examine these systems, how do we ensure that the population of our officers of our enlisted, of our warrant officer, of our civilian population, because there's a huge component of civilians in the United States Army as well. We must make sure that all those different groups are adequately represented because when our nation calls us to defense, it doesn't tell us we should just show up and somehow things would be okay.

This is a very tactical, operational event, and the nation relies upon us to win, so we must have the very best talent that we could have, and utilize all the skills and talents that diverse groups bring so that we could continue to fight and win.

**BRIGID:** At this point, let me go to Tim and Lauren. You're both at Fractured Atlas, Sarah featured you in the piece that she wrote that really caught my attention and really sparked the idea for putting this podcast together. Thank you for that, Sarah. Tim and Lauren talk about Fractured Atlas, talk about what it is that you do that makes your organization so intentional in this diversity being a verb, in this journey toward being an anti-racist organization.

**TIM CYNOVA, PANELIST:** Yes, thanks, Fractured Atlas the organization where Laura and I are both co-CEOs is about 20 years old. When I joined 11 years ago, we were almost entirely a white organization, maybe one person identified as a person of color, but we didn't ask. We recognize the value that comes from having a diverse organization and team. Probably back then, we would have said we wanted a organization that reflected the membership that we hoped to serve, and each year, we set a goal for us to diversify our staff and board.

Each year, we did a poor to wholly inadequate job of achieving that goal, and it wasn't until 2013 when two of our staff members used a portion of their professional

development allowance that they get every year, to attend the Undoing Racism workshop by the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond. That moment led us to rethink how we were approaching the work. We created a task force, then we eventually disbanded the task force, we created leadership team book clubs, so we could read books as a leadership team and really start our journey through that. We brought in facilitators for mandatory all-staff convenings. We spent one year looking at oppression.

The next year, we spent just looking at racism and systems of oppression as they relate to race, and then what this meant in our organization and what we were going to do about it. Then that group worked with our board of directors. We've paired these mandatory trainings with trainings in crucial conversations, because we felt like staff needed tools to help them engage in challenging conversations. If it was going to be mandatory, part of their work, we wanted them to have the tools. This led us to have monthly race-based caucusing. We have a white caucus and a people of color caucus that meets monthly. We've been doing that for about four and a half years or so.

**BRIGID:** Can we stop you right there? That's one of the things that struck me in Sarah's piece, to have a white caucus and a person of color caucus, that seems that on the surface could potentially be very problematic. How is that not problematic and how is that part of the solution?

**TIM:** Lauren, do you want to trade off here?

**LAUREN RUFFIN, PANELIST:** Yes, I'll go.

**BRIGID:** To the unaccustomed, you know that could sound an awful lot like segregation and isn't that what we're trying to move beyond?

**LAUREN:** Let's talk about the purpose of the caucuses, and they have very different purposes. The purpose of white caucus is to write a space for white people to learn about systemic racism. The purpose for people of color, as a caucus, is for us to exist in an organization outside of the white gaze. How can we talk about our experiences within an organization? Sometimes it's discussing microaggressions that happen.

For instance, we have a fixed-year compensation level. When you have a white associate who talks about spending two weeks in Europe, and we know that person makes $55,000 a year, as opposed to when they're talking about that vacation with some of their same level who makes the same amount, it's clear that we have differences

within the organization. However, we have to prepare white colleagues to be able to have that conversation in a way that acknowledges that privilege, and perhaps acknowledge a system with generational wealth, and all the benefit they have in being able to do that within our organization.

That's just one microcosm of how the caucuses function in a different way, but we get a fair amount of questions about caucusing, both in terms of segregation question, and why don't you do other types of caucuses? Why don't you have a women caucus? Why don't you have an LGBTQ caucus? For us, we've really been very specific about using the word anti-racism and anti-oppression, and not creeping into diversity, equity, inclusion, because racism, in the United States, the anti-Black racism is the root of the tree from which all the other isms learned how to behave. That's our thinking around caucuses.

**BRIGID:** What are you finding is the result from the caucuses, from some of your other efforts? What are you seeing happening in terms of your culture, in terms of the work that you're doing?

**LAUREN:** I think the big thing for us, and it's been interesting watching how the work we've been doing over four and a half years has positioned our staff to have conversations during the pandemic, and during the uprising, really about grief. My first week at Fractured Atlas was the week that Alton Sterling and Philando Castile were murdered. I came from organizations that were predominantly Black.

We worked in community, in service, and it wasn't uncommon for a woman in the organization who might have been someone who was preparing food in the kitchen, who was doing direct support the staff, to bring us together to grieve about things that happen in our community. That was the most interesting thing to me about Fractured Atlas is when I got there and had that experience, everybody was really grieving in the office, but no one talked about it. One of the first thing I said was like, "Hey, let's just gather in the conference room via remote, hop on Zoom and let's just sit there quietly, Quaker meeting style and reflect together."

From there, that work we've done allows a space for really authentic conversations to pop up in the organization around grief, around what's happening in your lives. I didn't know then that we'd be in the middle of a pandemic now, but a lot of that language, that muscle that we build over time, has really changed our culture and prepared us for

the work we're doing right now just to survive this pandemic in a way that's healthy and whole.

**BRIGID:** We're coming down on time. What I'd like to do is ask each of you, Sarah, starting with you, from your reporting and the rest of you from your experience, for the people who are listening, to people who are participating, what is one thing they can at least begin to think about or what's one thing to start focusing on? This is a big issue. We've got to, just as Lauren said, deal with the root of anti-Blackness, and as Melonie talked about, there are structural issues that lead to this. Where do we start? Sarah, from your reporting, what are some of the most innovative or hopeful things that you have seen? Melonie, I'll go to you next.

**SARAH:** Sure. I'll give one answer that's more directed at company leadership, and then one that anybody can do, like any employee. At a high level, a lot of research shows that one of the most effective ways to incentivize people to hire, mentor, or promote diverse staff is to really make that something that they track and measure. That's something that is really important.

For a manager, that might mean that's saying like, "Okay, I'm building into your performance review every year, whether or not you've hired and promoted people of color. If you do, there's a bonus, so there's also a monetary incentive." I think that that's one really effective way that research shows can definitely help. For employees who want to get involved, in this case, I'm speaking specifically to white people who want to be more involved and help.

One thing that I was really struck by, I looked at a recent survey. It was a survey of white men and it found that of the group of white men that said that they cared a lot about diversity inclusion, so they thought it was very important. Still, only about half were actively involved with any diversity and inclusion efforts at their organization. The most common reason that they gave was, "I am too busy."

I think it's really easy to fall into that way of thinking. We all have jobs, we're all pressed for time. It belies a thinking that participating in those efforts is something extracurricular, and it's not core to your job. I'd say, realize that it is core to your job, realize that it is an essential part of what you're being asked to do to create, not just a more moral organization but also a better one. We know that diversity makes companies stronger. Reframe your thinking about the time and effort that it takes to give it.

**BRIGID:** I love that, thinking about it as core rather than additional or extracurricular, which I do think is very common. Melonie, talk about one takeaway, and I know we haven't really had a chance to address this in the pandemic, and you've written about how to have some of these diversity as a verb, even in this pandemic. What's your one big takeaway that you would really encourage that people to be thinking about.

**MELONIE:** I would say, Brigid, that to be an anti-racist is to be an active ally. Not a neutral ally, but an active ally. What all of us can do, we can all leave from our seat to co-curate the culture we want to see in organizations that we sit in. That fosters that belonging, that we all want to see happen. It really just starts with us. I would start with active allyship is that antidote to being an anti-racist.

**BRIGID:** Okay. Anselm, we have a question from the chat or a comment really looking at some of the research that even in disciplinary situations in the military, there's research that shows that white officers tend to be much more understanding of other whites that come before them, and less so of others of color, seeing whites as individuals, and people of color as a group. What's your one big takeaway? How can we begin to build systems where people see people and not groups?

**ANSELM:** I think the first step in doing that is that, I think we all have stereotypes based on automatic thinking. For each and every one of us, it's time that we check our stereotypes. It's time for us to create better awareness. It's one thing to have recruitment efforts for unrepresented populations, but it's another effort to really keep them retained and feel that sense of belonging. We could only get there once everybody makes this an individual responsibility to become a lot more self-aware, and a lot more understanding of the complexity of this issue.

**BRIGID:** Tim and Lauren, we'll give you the last word.

**LAUREN:** You want to go first, Tim? Go for it.

**TIM:** I'll give you the last word.

**LAUREN:** Great. Okay, I'll go. I was just reflecting on this conversation and really appreciate everyone's thoughts. I've got nothing else to add. I think this is really great.

**TIM:** Yes. Sarah, your core leadership team or core leadership competency, understanding race, racism, oppression, as a core leadership competency is necessary. Leaders are shirking a core responsibility of their job and not doing this. We're living in

a moment in our lives in this pandemic and social revolution where the impossible is now possible, where things six months ago didn't seem possible. The big ideas, the far-fetched ideas, the ideas where we can create a world where everyone can thrive, that's now possible.

It doesn't take a grand strategy or strategic plan, it starts with simple informed action. The best way to begin, I'm speaking directly to white male leaders, is pick up a book, listen to a podcast, struggle with it, sit with the unease and discomfort that you might have, and then talk with other white male leaders about it or other white people, and struggle together. That is our responsibility, our duty, and that's part of what will help make it possible for us to co-create a future. The future we all want, and a future where we can thrive.

**BRIGID:** I love that. It reminds me so much of what the Army secretary, Ryan McCarthy said, "We know we have to do more work and we know we're going to have some uncomfortable conversations." I think that that's wise words for all of us. I want to thank all of you for being part of this conversation today. I want to thank our participants for sending in their questions. Really grateful for the space for this conversation, and some of these wonderful innovative ideas, and a sense of commitment that this is something we all need to be committed to individually, as well as in our organizations.

Next week, we'll be talking about women and leadership. What a perfect time to be doing that looking at diversity, as we have just seen Kamala Harris, the very first woman of color nominated to a major party ticket. That'll be next week. In the meantime, I'd like to again, thank our panelists today, thank the participants, thank the New America events team, my Better Life Lab team, David Schulman, our producer. In the meantime, wash your hands, wear a mask, stay safe, and we'll see you next week.