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ORGANIZATION



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Real Solutions,
Impactful Change,
and Meaningful
Diversity

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I dedicate this book to my mother, Nellie Gaye; my two children, Taton and Talon Jenkins; my dear husband, Eric Jenkins; my bonus son, Eric Jenkins Jr; my supportive siblings, Tyrone Gaye, Decontee Gaye, and Jonathan Gaye; and my dad, Samuel Gaye. My mom looked me in the eyes as a young child and told me that I had the power to change the world. I remember looking at her confused, wondering if that was truly possible. But with those words my mom gifted me the power of confidence. She empowered me to take up space and prepare to not only take a seat at the table but to bring along some extra seats as well. I'm ever blessed to have a mother who instilled in me the belief that I would affect and change the world. My children, currently two and three years old, motivate me with an unparalleled drive. They have taught me to be patient and taught me about unconditional love. I am still trying to figure out what true balance means and looks like for me, but through my children I have learned how to create opportunities for multiple dreams to be realized. None of which would be possible without my mighty village which has always stepped in to support both my family and professional endeavors, whether or not I asked for help. I am so grateful to each one of you for helping me to bring my dreams to life. This one is for all of us.

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Introduction

I REMEMBER being a young girl, riding my bike down the peaceful tree-lined street I grew up on in quiet Rhode Island. We were one of the only Black families in our neighborhood, but I never really noticed or thought about it as a child. I remember playing with my best friend who lived just upstairs from my family. The two of us were inseparable; we spent our days biking around our neighborhood, looking for dinosaur fossils, and laughing until our bellies hurt. My childhood was full of moments like these—innocent, free, and light. But when I was seven years old, my bubble of innocence burst, as I was exposed to an uglier side of our society that would stick with me for the rest of my life. My family had just moved into a single-family home, still in the same town I'd lived in since I was a baby. My mother and I were standing in our new yard when a white woman walked right up to my mother and spat directly on her face.

“Blacks don’t belong in my neighborhood,” she violently hissed at my mother. I stood frozen, watching the woman’s

yellow phlegm drip down my mother's face. My mother calculated her options; to this day I can still see her doing the mental math on how to get us both safely out of the situation. In tandem, without saying a word, we turned around and walked into our home. We both went to sleep that night crying.

I share this story with you to explain why my life and career have followed the path that they have. This incident ended up stoking a deep desire to understand how the brain works and why people behave as they do. This curiosity led me to major in communications and minor in leadership with a keen focus on behavioral psychology. After going on to get my MBA, I joined the corporate workforce and started working as a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) specialist for all sorts of organizations, from Fortune 500 companies to smaller startups to passionate entrepreneurs looking to start a business. Through my education and professional experience, I've been able to merge the work I've done my entire life with what I've learned through my own lived experiences. This foundation has helped inform the DEI framework I have developed to help organizations of all sizes and stages build truly inclusive and equitable practices.

This book is an interactive guide to building an inclusive organization. It will help you operate and coach others on how to specifically operate from a DEI lens. You may be a CEO or founder, a board member, an individual contributor, or someone wanting to practice allyship with impact. No matter who you are, there will always be more to learn and ways to enhance your practice. As the workforce becomes more flexible to accommodate our fast and dynamic lives,

employees care more and more about organizational practices and culture. They, understandably, want to know that they will be supported in navigating their personal responsibilities while pursuing their professional aspirations.

I have always firmly believed that people are at the core of any business. Despite our immense technological advancements, people remain and will continue to remain at the core of any business. Organizations should always invest in their people and remember that the best ways to do so are by keeping their people interested, informed, and inspired. If organizations can commit to doing this with accountability and explicit metrics, then together we can start a DEI movement.

As a kid I started a DEI movement by challenging my teachers to include different narratives in their coursework. Even from a young age, I never believed in a single, unequivocal, and uncompromising view. I always felt that there were multiple perspectives that all deserved to be heard. As an adult, I want to help bring those voices into the limelight. I want to provide guidance to those who want to listen and a megaphone for those who wish to be heard. And that's exactly what I plan to do with this book.

This book does not seek to point fingers or assign blame. This book is for the reader who says, "I want to take action, but I don't quite know how." It's for the reader who says, "I have been taking action, but I know I can take it a step further." It's even for the reader who says, "I don't know what DEI is, but I want to learn more." No matter which reader you most resonate with, I urge you to seize this opportunity and use this book to create a DEI movement. Each chapter

will walk you through a different segment of my DEI framework and include worksheets that provide an opportunity for self-reflection and self-action. Really spend time with these worksheets, explore each topic in depth, and think about how you can apply what you've learned to your current situation. And remember, movements are successful when they have the power of the people. You do not have to start this movement alone. Grab your friends and colleagues, your leaders and mentors, and read through this book together. Share what you learn, ignite each other's inspiration, and come together to work on these areas together. So, if you are ready to officially start a movement with me, then take a photo of you and this book, share it on LinkedIn with the hashtag *#DEIMOVEMENT*, and tag me, Netta Jenkins. Together, we can power this DEI movement. Let's jump in; the water has never been warmer.

1

Decoding Human Behavior

WHEN WAS THE last time you found yourself in a blood-boiling disagreement with a partner or friend that evokes a high level of anxiety every time you think about it? You picked your battle that day and decided not to say anything. Why? Maybe you were worried about retribution, maybe you didn't want to be labeled as "difficult" or "confrontational," or maybe you simply did not have the emotional capacity that day to allow an argument to get instigated. Or perhaps you did say something, and in turn were completely disregarded. This culminated in your anger and disappointment growing and festering until one day you reached your limit and finally left that relationship. This is how a portion of the population feels on a daily basis: forced to withstand wave after wave of aggression, even aggression masquerading as friendliness.

When such actions continue to go unchecked, people will reach a point at which they will leave relationships and situations that do not give them the grace to be heard or

supported. When people try to speak up and are disregarded, a growing tension starts and festers. So how can we equip ourselves with the tools to both actively listen and advocate for ourselves to be heard? Please lean on me as we begin our journey of exploring the intricacies of building a truly inclusive organization, but before we can start to construct solutions, we must take a moment and understand how these problems arose in the first place. I ask that you remain open-minded and open-hearted as you read some of the historical pieces I'm going to explore in this chapter. I assure you that I am committed to growing a relationship with you on your journey to unfolding all the pieces within this book.

I believe that this journey requires a renewed cultivation of our limbic system—the part of the brain that enables each of us to understand our behavioral and emotional responses. This limbic cultivation may not always feel pleasant, and there will be parts of this book that will touch on painful topics and may evoke feelings of vulnerability. I want you to know that even as I write these words, I am aware of the effort it may take at times to relive or uncover some of the uglier parts of our history, but that I am here with you every step of the way. Let us hold each other's hand through this process and come out on the other side, stronger and together.

History of Race

In 1449, Spain passed an official proclamation that would later be known as the first set of discriminatory laws based on race. This edict would lay the foundation for the Spanish Inquisition, in which racism was fully legalized and culminated in the murder and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Spanish Jews, Muslims, and Protestants. While I

understand the Spanish Inquisition to be the first recorded instance of sustained and strategic violence on the basis of race and “othering,” the tactics of racial oppression and discrimination that were conceived in the 15th century gave birth to what I call *the Great Divergence*. All of the atrocities we have seen follow the Inquisition—from genocide to slavery to internment camps to the Holocaust—demonstrate that these “historical” actions may not be as behind us as many would like to believe. People generally would like to think that we have made some massive improvements, that our society now is eons beyond the hate and violence of previous centuries, as illustrated in the black-and-white photographs documenting the 1960s Civil Rights movement. But the first in-color photos were developed in France in 1907, and yet all of the powerful photographs depicting the resilience of the Civil Rights era were purposefully printed in black and white and are still distributed as such, pushing a false narrative that the days of bus bombing, police violence, and white people spitting in the faces of Black folks are far gone. But had Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. not been assassinated, or Anne Frank not been sent by Nazis to perish in a concentration camp, they could both be alive today, and would have still been younger than the late, vivacious Betty White. See, although it is far easier and far more comfortable to let history stay in the past, we must confront the painful and uncomfortable truth—that this suffering, this discrimination, this violence, are still very much embedded into daily life, even in the 21st century, and we can see it everywhere, if we are willing to open our eyes and look. From playgrounds to understocked grocery stores to overflowing prisons to our own workplaces, we are still living every day with the legacy of some of our most painful historic miscarriages.

But this book is not meant to be a history lesson. This book is meant to act as a guide, to provide you, the reader, with a specific toolkit to equip you to really create the change you want to see in your workplace. Maybe you are currently a leader of a huge corporation looking to help lead a cultural shift within your organization. Maybe you are a leader of a startup wanting to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is proactively embedded in the infant stages of your organizations. Maybe you are currently navigating the workplace and struggling with the weight of feeling othered or unseen by your fellow colleagues, or maybe you are someone who is simply curious to learn more about DEI and understand why it's been such a point of conversation in the last few years. Wherever you are in your journey, whatever perspective you are bringing or guidance you are seeking, this book will—I hope—provide you with the context to truly understand and verbalize what you are seeing and experiencing, and impart on you the practical and actionable steps to empower yourself and your colleagues to bring forth and sustain impactful solutions within your workplace.

The Great Divergence

And that brings me back to the Great Divergence. The last few years have sent the world into an upheaval in a way that we've never seen before. Never before has technology tied communities across the globe so closely together with social media platforms updating us on every occurrence across country and continental lines. Along with constant access to information, we are also given constant insight into everyone's opinion on the information we are receiving.

What we are seeing across the board is that there seems to be a strong sense of division. People are feeling polarized, and we've felt that gap reverberate from the family dining table to the company conference table.

It used to be commonplace to differentiate the outside world from the workplace. Professionalism seemingly encompassed a strong need to leave politics at the door. It wasn't professional to discuss certain topics; the workplace was for work, as simple as that. However, coming off of multiple years in which we were isolated out of necessity for safety, those lines have become heavily blurred. It is no longer possible to draw those strong boundaries of global events, personal experiences, and the professional workplace. From folks who lost their entire source of income due to the pandemic and were unable to work, to other industries that switched to operating fully remote, our homes became the physical space in which every part of life happened. From an influx of news about hundreds of thousands of lives lost to the insidious coronavirus, to people flooding the streets in outrage refusing to be silenced as we watched documented murder after murder, to a political insurrection that blatantly challenged our country's pillar of democracy, it has been an incredibly scary and challenging world to navigate. However, even in the midst of this global calamity, when it felt like we just needed to stand still and fully process what we were seeing, time kept ticking and the Earth kept turning. Businesses were doing their best to stay afloat, governments did their best to keep morale high and assure the public that our economies would survive. Unemployment skyrocketed, and those fortunate enough to work in industries that were able to weather the shift to remote work took on the new

and unique burden of attempting to maintain a sense of normalcy in a world that felt like it was anything but.

As a DEI executive, I have seen a recurring theme across companies both large and small: there is a divided experience that is informing a divided understanding. We can no longer afford to pretend that this divide doesn't exist. In fact, I have seen the overwhelmingly positive potential that comes when a company chooses to address this divide head on and create a space for their employees to connect in a deeper and more meaningful way than ever before. It's certainly not to say that it was the pandemic that exacerbated the Great Divergence, but more so it removed the niceties that shrouded a divide that has existed for a very long time and has made plain the urgency with which we must address the situation.

So what exactly is this Great Divergence? I define it as the divide that separates individuals into two groups—the first group feels like the discrimination of today is a much improved version of the discrimination of the past, that we are living in much safer and fairer times and therefore there really isn't a need for a strong shift in how we understand and address inequities. And the other group? Well, they disagree.

It is within this tension that the Great Divergence remains. Although the world does indeed look different than it did half a century ago, take just a single step closer, examine societal structures with a slightly keener eye, and we can clearly see the complex discriminative structure of accessible opportunity, power, and protection that is interwoven into

the fabric of daily life, and one that our workplaces are by no means exempt from. This structure leads to very stark and distinct experiences for folks who come from systemically overlooked populations. *Systemically overlooked populations* refers to populations who are affected by methods or systems that intentionally disrupt their access to opportunity. I define *systemically overlooked* to include individuals who identify as Black+, Latinx+, Asian+, Indigenous+, as well as intersectional layers that include women, LGBTQIA+, veterans, caregivers, and those who are differently abled. Each of these groups is faced with navigating their own unique set of challenges that have their own historical and social context. I will delve into this further in Chapter 2. Individuals who do not identify as part of a systemically overlooked population will be referred to as “advantaged populations” from this point on.

Sadly, this discriminative structure can manifest in many ways in the workplace. It can look like exclusion from opportunities, getting passed over for promotions, having to navigate the necessity of code-switching, dealing with stereotyped expectations, not being given the same benefit of the doubt that other colleagues receive, massive discrepancies in pay parity across gender and ethnicity, or companies becoming increasingly homogenous as you move up the company structure. This list is by no means exhaustive, as the nuances of how discriminative structures play out in the workplace can be very layered.

The last thing I want to do is paint this as an issue of good versus bad. There are so many complex interactions at play that can shape a person’s understanding that

it is far too simple, and, honestly, irresponsible, to simply label a segment of the population as malicious or ill-intentioned. Although there is a small group of individuals who unfortunately may be, the vast majority of people are well-intentioned and would never want to actively harm another person—they just might not fully understand how or why their well-intentioned actions could end up having a harmful impact. To really reach a place of genuine and forthright self-reflection and self-accountability will more than likely be an uncomfortable process. It is uncomfortable to sit with the understanding that despite your honest and true effort, there could be some painful consequences of a good intent. It is imperative, however, that in conducting these conversations, we operate from a place of compassion and patience because, more often than not, people really do care. In my work, I have seen the strongest impact and the most progress come from people who are welcomed into the conversation, with all the nuances and complexities they carry. As we start to really listen to people and learn who they are—what motivates them, what scares them, what makes them feel connected to those around them—that is where we will find the solution to bridging the Great Divergence.

So why would someone find themselves of the opinion that discrimination is not alive and thriving? There could be a multitude of reasons, starting with it's simply a more comfortable interpretation. But we have to come to terms with the fact that the ability to feel comfortable is itself a privilege, because there are so many others who, despite their best efforts, cannot even pretend to be comfortable in so many of their interactions. Going a little bit deeper,

maybe people are afraid to feel burdened with guilt about the experiences so many overlooked populations have. Maybe they reject that they carry responsibility for their ancestors' actions, that they shouldn't have to be accountable for actions that predated them by hundreds of years. However, how can one blatantly reject the negative consequences of their ancestors' actions while they simultaneously enjoy the positive consequences of those very same actions? We can no longer allow a partial recognition of history or regale only these stories that are written from the perspective of the victor. If the "winners" write the history books, how much of the full story is getting omitted? It is an uncomfortable truth, but a truth nonetheless, that we are in a complex discriminatory war that is fought by systemically overlooked populations. The single constant is that white people, even well-intentioned white people, remain at the helm of this power structure.

This can be a disagreeable statement for people to sit with. In fact, maybe you even feel a slight churn in your stomach or a rebuttal bubbling up to your lips as you read these words. I don't say this to be divisive. I say this to be direct and frank, because only through explicitly naming the issue can we begin to build an inclusive and successful solution. To continue in that vein, it is imperative that all leaders, especially those who do not identify as part of a systemically overlooked population, take a moment of genuine and uninhibited self-reflection, because we have come to know that the dynamics in the real world very much bleed into dynamics in the workplace. Leaders in any organization can wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate these power structures, and the impact of this can be immense. By unknowingly upholding

this power structure, the Great Divergence continues to oppress overlooked populations and inequity persists.

Bridging the Great Divergence

So how exactly can leaders address and begin to bridge this divergence? Just as with the problem, the solution can take form in many different ways. We will break this down further in Chapter 6, but it can look like creating policies to hold your organization and the organizations you work with accountable in maintaining diverse retention at all levels; providing leadership and decision-making opportunities to individuals from overlooked populations; or even coming to the understanding that sometimes the most impactful thing you can do is empty your seat and offer access to the resources, network, and skill set that helped you get to where you are today to another individual from an overlooked population who can bring in the perspective to truly help your organization evolve to the next level.

I want to take a second and examine an example of an advantaged leader who took active steps to create an inclusive solution to addressing the racial gap that he noticed within the board of his company. Alexis Ohanian, cofounder of Reddit and husband of Serena Williams, resigned from his role as Reddit board member 15 years after cofounding the company. He specifically urged the board to fill his seat with a Black candidate to help increase representation across the board. This representation, in turn, could shape Reddit's strategy in moving in a more inclusive and equitable direction. Ohanian made this decision in the midst of ongoing protests against police brutality after police officer Derek Chauvin murdered