

## **Showing Up to Discuss Race, Racism, and Human Resources**

**By: Katie Calabrese**

At its annual Symposium on September 25, the Philly SHRM community had the good fortune to participate in a breakout session with Melissa DePino and Michelle Saahene of [From Privilege to Progress](#) (“FPTP”) a national movement to desegregate the public conversation about race. The conversation was moderated by Philly SHRM Board Member Jameel Rush, who formerly served as Philly SHRM’s President and is currently the VP of Diversity and Inclusion at Aramark. What follows is an overview of the September 25 discussion.

FPTP can be found on their website [here](#), as well as on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#), and [Facebook](#).

### **How It Began**

Jameel kicked off the session by asking Michelle and Melissa to share their stories. Michelle explained how FPTP got its start, when she and Melissa witnessed two innocent Black men get arrested for not buying coffee in a Rittenhouse Square Starbucks. Michelle spoke up, and Melissa took a video of the incident, which went viral. Michelle and Melissa had been strangers before the incident but connected afterward and eventually founded the FPTP movement.

Melissa said that before that day in the Starbucks, she “had never spoken up” about racial inequality, noting that white people are brought up not to talk about race. Since then, she said, she has heard “every embarrassing question about race [a white person can ask],” and it is time to move past the fear surrounding these types of discussions. She added that “what Human Resources [professionals do] affects everyone in [their] organizations,” so it is especially important for HR to understand these issues and be committed to inspiring change.

### **Lightbulb Moments**

When asked whether she and Michelle have had any “aha” moments in the course of their work, Melissa shared that one of the biggest came right after the Starbucks incident, when one of her friends said that “there must have been more to the story” behind why the two men had been arrested. This struck Melissa, because if she had not been there to witness the incident, she might have wondered the same thing. She added that giving white people the benefit of the doubt in racist situations represents the biases that all white people have and is an indication that those biases should be overcome.

Michelle said that she has been shocked by how many of the people she encounters have only an elementary understanding of race relations in this country. She has also been shocked—and encouraged—by how many people have wanted to have conversations around race but did not know where to start. She and Melissa see a lot of “angst and nervousness” around these conversations but are glad that many of the people they encounter want to understand how to get better.

### **The Heart of the Matter**

The conversation then turned to diversity, and Jameel noted that within HR, there is a lot of talk about diversity and inclusion, but less talk about race and racism. He asked why it is critical to have conversations about racism, not just diversity.

Michelle noted that the conversation must begin with race because “race impacts so much of our everyday lives” and that people, white people in particular, do not realize how much their racial identity impacts how they move through the world, including at work. If an organization’s leaders are not aware of their biases and the impact of racial identity, they cannot adequately address those issues through diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Melissa added that diversity and inclusion are “big ideas,” but the work we do to achieve anti-racism is individual. She referred to the notion that “racism isn’t the shark, it’s the water,” meaning that once someone starts looking for it, they see that it’s everywhere. She encouraged attendees to focus on looking inward and educating themselves on an individual basis, in service of the broader goals of diversity and inclusion.

### **Showing Up**

Jameel asked Melissa and Michelle to define what allyship means to them. Melissa said that she does not like to use the word ally because it sounds like a “destination,” not a process. Dismantling racism is not an endeavor where someone can read a book or attend a seminar and not need to do anything else. FFTP uses “#showup” as its rallying cry because it illustrates that anti-racism requires continuous action. FFTP believes that there are three main ways people can show up:

1. Learn on their own.
2. Speak up in their everyday lives (interrupt racism when they see/hear it).
3. Amplify Black voices.

Michelle also encouraged attendees to “lean in” to conversations about race and biases with the people in their lives they care about, and to not only diversify their spaces, but be aware of the spaces they’re inviting others into. Are those spaces safe, representative, and welcoming? If not, consider whether the invitation is appropriate. When someone starts to “show up,” their world will become more diverse naturally.

Jameel followed up by asking how HR professionals can honor these conversations despite being a naturally risk avoidant group—what if they believe staying silent is better than saying the wrong thing? Melissa acknowledged that the conversations will probably be uncomfortable when you first start having them, but that’s okay. Michelle’s response was that staying silent “affects lives [and] hurts people,” so the risk of staying silent will always be far greater. To remain silent in the face of racist behavior is to reinforce it, which is why disrupting racism is so critical. She concluded with a reminder that “None of us are born racist. It’s learned. We’re conditioned to racial biases.” When we stop the culture of silence is when we become active participants in furthering positive race relations.

### **Doing the Work**

In the final portion of the discussion before the audience question and answer period, Jameel asked Michelle and Melissa where organizations should start when they’re ready to jump into this process. Michelle said it can be as simple as “starting where you are,” which is to say, educating yourself in whatever way you’re most comfortable doing so. Social media is a great starting point, and Michelle encouraged attendees to “diversify [their] feeds.” Melissa acknowledged that there is an overwhelming amount of information on these topics, and suggested that starting small—for example, by reading a

book on anti-racism or following a few new social media accounts—and building from there is a good strategy.

Jameel noted that organizations undergoing their journey may want feedback from their employees who belong to underrepresented groups and asked how organizations can get that feedback without unduly burdening those employees. Michelle responded that “there’s a big difference between asking someone for feedback and asking them to teach you.” HR and organizational leadership should do their own research first, and then ask permission to have the relevant conversation. Not everyone will want to participate, and that is acceptable, particularly if it is not part of someone’s actual role at the company. Melissa added that just because this topic is new to white people “doesn’t mean it’s new” to people of color. White people should consider the “privilege of not having to pay attention,” and accept that “it’s on us” to do this work.

### **Audience Q & A**

The discussion concluded with a lively audience question and answer session, highlighted here.

**Q: In addition to speaking up, how can people use their privilege to support this movement?**

A: [Melissa] Again, start where you are. In your community, in local politics, at your children’s school, in your local economy. Vote for progressive candidates, support better public-school curriculum, and buy from Black-owned businesses.

**Q: What can we do to encourage our senior leaders to step into their conversation to drive meaningful change?**

A: [Michelle] If nothing else motivates them, they should understand that diverse settings are more profitable than homogeneous settings. Not only that, but consumers are now demanding diversity when making purchasing decisions. There is a lot of research supporting these conclusions.

**Q: How do you renew your strength?**

A: [Michelle] Remember to rest. Rest is a necessary component of this movement. You have to rest so that you can keep going.

[Melissa] White people shouldn’t be tired yet, even if they’re doing this work 24/7. The momentum should be energizing to them.

**Q: On your Instagram video series, “Unscripted,” you’ve said is how “corrections are a gift,” meaning that if someone corrects your thinking or speech as potentially racist, it’s really a gift to you, because it teaches you and helps you grow. Do you have advice for how can white people accept correction?**

A: [Melissa] Receiving feedback is always hard, and defensiveness is always a possibility. The best thing to do when you get that feedback is to stop, take a breath, receive what the person is trying to tell you, and then you don’t have to jump right back into the conversation. It is okay to

stop and reflect on the feedback, and then change your behavior accordingly. If you feel the defensiveness creeping in, be aware that it's normal and that you're going to feel it.

**Q: What is your last piece of advice?**

A: [Michelle] Make it a part of your company's culture to have conversations about race. Prioritize these conversations.

[Melissa] Every single person has the power to make change from where they're standing. Be willing to admit there are things you don't know and examine them. Don't feel guilty or ashamed but look at it as an opportunity.

### **Conclusion**

If the session's chat feed is any indication, session attendees were hugely energized and inspired by FPTP's presentation. We were grateful for Michelle's and Melissa's time and look forward to bringing their wisdom back to our respective organizations. Thanks to all who joined.

### **About the Author**

Katie Calabrese is the head of talent management at Security Risk Advisors, a boutique cybersecurity consulting firm. She started her career as an attorney before transitioning into Human Resources. Katie has extensive experience in the professional services industry, having worked for two different AmLaw 100 law firms. Katie is also a member of Philly SHRM's Thought Leadership Team.

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