

Listen In

Crucial Conversations on
Race in the Workplace

"The issues related to race in the workplace that are presented by the characters are too often experienced today. Listen In empowers its readers to be change agents with simple, yet concrete, steps for self-improvement, and for developing systemic change in the workplace. This book is a phenomenal resource and exceptional value for an individual and organization to invest in. It is a must-read, and applicable not only to corporate settings but also to institutions of higher education and beyond."

- Dr. Anika Bissahoyo, Bowie State University

"Listen In is the source for addressing race in the workplace today. The conversations are real and relevant and provide thought-provoking insights to anyone who is curious and courageous enough to read them. Allison has bridged the gap between 'corporate speak' and actually dealing with the everyday issues that exist for minorities in the workplace."

- Cynthia Goins, Principal of Motivations

"Listen In is the groundbreaking new resource for understanding workplace diversity. This book brings a fresh lens to addressing topics of race and diversity. Readers will be entertained and feel empowered and inspired to have tough conversations that will greatly impact workplace relations."

- Dr. Courtney R. Cornick, Psychologist

"What a read! I love what Allison has done to present a conversation that most companies are reluctant to engage in. Listen In should be required reading for the all C-suite leaders and HR professionals. Corporations that are not leveraging all of their talent should not be mistaken as a viable business in the 21st century. Thank you for sharing a tough conversation."

**- Jane C. Smith, President & Chief Results Officer
of Next Level Consulting**

"Listen In will be catalytic in changing corporate environments to value diversity. This book combines the real-life conversations that people of color are having and the prevailing white privilege that stagnates their career growth with real life solutions. Allison Manswell brilliantly weaves the stories and solutions with the expertise of a master coach, experience of a senior HR professional and the compassion of someone who cares deeply about moving our country forward."

**- Rev. William T. Chaney, Jr., New Church Strategist,
United Methodist Church**

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Allison Manswell

JRM
Publishing

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Published by JRM Publishing, a division of NaLa Ventures Group
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ISBN: 978-0-9770452-2-8

Printed in the United States

Book Design by Teri Saunier, Material Graphics

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*To my sons, family members and friends,
thank you for the love that gives me the courage to speak my peace.*

*To Eli, Shane, LaToya, Roshunda and Maya,
thank you for choosing me.*

*To my mother, my father and all of the ancestors
whose sacrifice made this experience possible – thank you.*

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Introduction



This book wrote itself. About six months after *Lean In* came out, I was talking with a friend and I asked her, "When is someone going to write a book about being Black at work?"

She said, "When you do it."

Even though I immediately brushed off the idea, the suggestion wouldn't leave me alone. The concept, format and dialogue for this book played randomly in my head. It often distracted me so much that I had to write it down.

Meanwhile, it was the summer of my discontent; 2015 brought an unsettling barrage of police brutality incidents, the South Carolina church massacre and hashtag overload. The notes for this book became the place where I could process my emotions, debate the issues and design business solutions that could make a difference.

Toni Morrison says, "If there is a book that you would like to read, you should write it." She didn't mention the inherent risks of making that book available to the public. I had to get comfortable with the potential criticism from all the groups who could have a strong opinion about this work of fiction, self-help and business consulting.

*When we deny our stories, they define us.
When we own our stories, we get to write the ending.*

- Brene Brown

So why take such a narrow focus?

- 1) The foundation of the business case for diversity and inclusion hinges on the premise that everyone's point of view and contribution is essential to the bottom line. Race is a factor in every aspect of American life and culture. However, I find that the African-American point of view is absent from boardrooms and water coolers. This absence is costing us the collaboration and innovation that flourishes when people understand and trust each other.
- 2) The foundation of the challenges we see in African-American communities are economic challenges caused by generations of disparities in access to quality education and jobs. For most families, their economy is funded by the employment income that they have access to. So by addressing the issues around race in the workplace, over time we can close the gap on these disparities and move closer to solving broader community challenges.
- 3) The foundation of our humanity is said to hinge on our care and concern for each other as human beings. To me, the jury is out on if Black lives really matter on Main Street. So maybe (just maybe) if we help Wall Street take the lead and realize that #blackmoneymatters and #blacktalentmatters—the case for Black lives becomes unnecessary.

I realize that conversations about race at work are awkward and difficult. It seems to me that the awkwardness and difficulty come from the absence of a safe context to host the interaction and lack of awareness to guide productive dialogue. My intention is for this book to provide that context of mutual understanding, non-judgment and genuine desire to build stronger relationships. My goal is to help individuals to develop the skills to have these conversations, plan their careers effectively and transform organizations to solve problems that live behind the metrics.

A few important disclaimers:

- 1) I don't pretend to represent all African-Americans (U.S. born people of African descent) or Black people (foreigners of African descent who live in the U.S.) with the views expressed in this book.
- 2) Not every company has the organizational culture or metrics expressed in this book.
- 3) This is a novel with fictional characters and situations. The characters and situations are a figment of my imagination. Any similarities to individuals (living or dead) is purely coincidental and simply provide proof that these experiences are valid. In Part II the resources are based on the subject matter expertise that I have gained from my education and 20 plus years of experience working in talent management, learning and leadership development and organizational effectiveness. They are not based on any particular company, organization or agency.
- 4) Not everyone should engage in conversations about race at work. There are people who lack the personal and social awareness, communication and relationship skills, emotional maturity and range of experience to be a productive part of this sensitive conversation. This book isn't for them. If you engage in conversation with someone who fits this description, I urge you to remember this paragraph and politely excuse yourself.

Listen In:

- A) allows us to eavesdrop on a series of candid conversations that gives us insight into various perspectives on societal challenges, our workplace and their impact on individuals and teams; and
- B) gives personal and organizational development resources to transform our lives and our companies.

I could have spent inordinate amounts of time and energy to include research and statistics. However, I don't think that we lack data. We already have all of the information we need. Every time someone reads this and nods, relates the characters to their experience or that of a friend or a family member—that is powerful validation. I chose the format of a story with lots of dialogue as a deliberate strategy to:

- A) promote active listening: observing a fishbowl conversation forces you to tune in to what the characters are experiencing while (hopefully) putting your internal chatter on pause.
- B) offer raw emotion: operating in a sterile corporate world where we focus on products and process often causes us to forget that human resources are actually real people. They have hopes and dreams like everyone else, and at the end of the day they are trying to make a better life for their families.
- C) change the conversation: engaging in meaningful dialogue is the only path to solving some of the workplace challenges that slow productivity, contribute to employee disengagement and ultimately retard innovation.
- D) emphasize that research is not the answer: We need people in positions of power and/or with related influence to make decisions that change the outcomes. That's it. That's all. We can stop hiding behind studies and metrics—just do things differently.

Now that I have outlined my intentions, let me admit the discomfort that this book brings.

“Walking into our stories of hurt can feel dangerous. But the process of regaining our footing in the midst of struggle is where our courage is tested and our values are forged. Our stories of struggle can be big ones, like the loss of a job or the end of a relationship, or smaller ones, like a conflict with a friend or colleague. Regardless of magnitude or circumstance, the rising strong process is the same: We reckon with our emotions and get curious about what we’re feeling; we rumble with our stories until we get to a place of truth; and we live this process, every day, until it becomes a practice and creates nothing short of a revolution in our lives. Rising strong after a fall is how we cultivate wholeheartedness.”

- Brene Brown from

Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution.

This book includes all three elements: the pain of reckoning, the conflict of rumble and the risk of revolution. The discomfort is not my deliberate intention but I’m okay with it as an outcome. I am inspired by people like Stuart Scott who led ESPN through their initial discomfort with him to the impact he is credited for today. This book will immerse you in the characters’ journey to personal and professional fulfillment. More than any other outcome, my hope is that it inspires you to embark on a journey of your own.

1

Refined by Fire



The door swung open and Shane's swag rushed inside before his 6' 3" frame and 'win you over smile' made it into the crowded restaurant. It was hard not to notice everything about him as he took off his sunglasses and began appreciating the comfort of the AC on a hot DC day. He looked around briefly until he saw his friend Elijah waving him over to a large round table already filled with familiar faces with glasses in their hands. He walked over and pulled up a seat.

"Late again," Elijah laughed.

"Hey man, don't give me a hard time. You know I am trying to make VP. Doesn't matter what time you start. It only matters what time you leave." Shane, a former Marine, had been the director of supply chain for 8 years. He was known for having the unique and complimentary qualities of being a strategic and engaging leader. His peers raved about his ability to balance efficient operations with exceptional people skills. He was known to be tough, but every interaction left those around him feeling heard and clear on next steps. He was very successful at balancing strong leadership and personability. Those who know him were well aware of the storm that lay just beneath that warm fluffy cloud.

"You will get there soon, Shane," Maya's quiet voice was hard to hear over the buzz of the restaurant. Her warm and nurturing demeanor always made everyone feel better. At 57, she was the old-

est of the group but, unlike some of the others, she hadn't gone as far in the business world. She was soft-spoken, reserved and not always willing to talk for the sake of being heard. She listened intently and often only shared her opinions after much introspection and a degree of certainty about her information. Coworkers and leaders often assumed that she didn't have a point of view or maybe that she didn't process information as quickly as the extroverts in her midst. She had no problem being in the background and often let others take credit for her ideas. Maya wanted to pursue higher rungs on the corporate ladder but made a conscious decision not to change core elements of herself to fit in. So she put her emotional energy into nurturing her family and building a thriving small business. It was comforting to know that she could retire at any moment menopause told her she should.

"Oh honey, please! Be careful what you wish for! As soon as I made Director it was like people expected me to be on call 24 hours a day. There is no such thing as time off anymore," LaToya chimed in to the conversation. When LaToya talked people listened. It was clear to anyone who met her why she was so well-respected in her company. Her confidence came across in everything she did and was sometimes mistaken for arrogance. But those who took the time to engage in real conversation quickly learned that she was one of the most emotionally intelligent leaders in her company. She simply processed information, interpreted meaning and articulated her perspective at the speed of light. She was very open to other ideas, quick to extract lessons learned and very effective at foreseeing outcomes quickly. But one area that she clearly needed to work on was leaving room for others to participate in the process. Her career trajectory reflected her reputation as a 'get it done, grace under fire and take no prisoners leader.' However, she often wondered how much of herself she had sacrificed at the altar of her career.

Roshunda sat to Maya's left and was the last member of the group to speak up. She had a sweet voice and sassy energy. At 25 years old, she was the youngest of the group and was proud of her millennial status. She had an impressive combination of Ivy-League education and Fortune 10 experience. She also had a powerfully seductive energy. Every male in the bar glanced her way at one

point or another. And because she was so accustomed to the attention, she was able to be polite and dismissive in the same gesture.

"That's an old school mentality to 'live to work.' Business acumen begins at home for me. I didn't sell my employer 24-hour access to me. When there is a key deliverable - I'm all over it. I will work long and hard around the clock until it's done. But during normal operations, I don't answer WOA emails after 8 p.m. I use my down time for activities that rest my brain and empower me. Shame on you if you don't learn to put boundaries on your time."

Elijah chimed in, "I must be getting old but what is a WOA email? Did your generation make up a new acronym that's about to get into the dictionary?"

"No, that one is all mine. It means whirlwind of activity: a question or action where responding off-hours won't add value or contribute to the bottom line. Therefore it can wait until the next business day. You also need to read Ariana Huffington's book *Thrive*. Our nation needs a new definition of success that includes our well-being. I don't need a broken nose to figure that out."

Meeting for comfort food and conversation was their mental health ritual. LaToya, Roshunda, Maya, Shane and Elijah had been a wonderful combination of friends and family for over 12 years. Despite having families, busy corporate America and community service schedules, they made time to connect on a regular basis to share their successes and struggles.

Elijah raised his glass and announced, "It always feels so good to get together with my peeps and decompress. Let my hair down, if you will."

"Get outta here with your bald head. What do you know about 'let your hair down'?" joked LaToya.

"I know its unbeweaveable how long your hair got since the last time I saw you," Elijah replied with a big smile.

"You know a Sista gotta do, what a Sista gotta do. Until corporate America learns to accept me in all my nappy glory, it's gonna be me and this weave all the way." She was unapologetically blunt.

Shane winked at LaToya as Roshunda rolled her eyes in disapproval. LaToya continued, "I'm taking the Hillary Clinton approach. I ain't lettin' some relaxer steal my dreams of being CEO. I will play the game until it doesn't need to be played anymore."

"I hear you, but what the hell does that have to do with Hillary Clinton?" said Elijah.

"Ah, see, y'all missed it. You remember the whole Monica Lewinsky scandal? I kept trying to figure out why Hillary wasn't moved by that. I kept watching every day to see when she was going to snap and go ballistic on Bill. But she never did, did she? It took me until the first round of Democratic candidate debates in 2008 to figure out what she was thinking. 'What in the world does a blowjob have to do with me being president?' Sista Girl didn't let that distraction deter her from her goal and, look, she made sure she pursued that goal—as planned. And that's where we can all take a page outta her book. Don't let this hair issue in corporate America take you off path to your goals. One by one we won't change anything about how people see natural hair or braids. But collectively when we all get to the C-suite, we can take our weave out in the boardroom if we feel like it. We need to use the fire in our lives to refine us like gold and then step out and shine."

"But wait a minute," Maya chimed in, "If we all take that approach, change never happens. My soul didn't come to this earth to conform. I have no desire to fit in. I left a six-figure position because the stress of being a good fit was just too much for me. If my natural hair was too much of a distraction for them, then they didn't deserve my discretionary effort. I found another company where I was truly valued for what is under my hair."

"You know what?" Roshunda shifted in her seat and leaned in, "I think you guys are overreacting. I just don't think that hair is that big of an issue. I have been successful in all hairstyles: braids, weave, I even did a non-blow dried natural Afro-looking style for a minute. All that matters is the results you produce."

Maya's demeanor changed completely. Her normally quiet and subdued energy swelled into a tsunami wave. "Well ain't that some shit? Do you have any idea, much less the willingness to acknowledge, the sacrifice your ancestors made so that your narrow behind could sit here years later and say out of your mouth that it doesn't matter? Your generation infuriates me with your 'racism is over' mentality. You probably have never seen the Black name/White name resume experiment or the pay disparity data between blacks and whites. Check up on those results and get back to me about 'it doesn't matter'."

The room went silent. And it felt like the oxygen had been sucked out of the atmosphere. Everyone who knew Maya had experienced her transition from mild-mannered and soft-spoken to a militant soldier who channeled Harriet Tubman energy.

Eli broke the awkward silence. "All three of you are right," he said. "Roshunda, there are some environments where hair doesn't matter. And those enlightened corporate cultures will corner the market and outperform other companies in the long run. Eventually corporate America will figure out that people have enough to deal with in their normal lives than to be worried about fitting in at work. That emotional energy can be redirected into innovative ideas that will become the next iPad and change their industry."

"Maya, for some people, picking up and rolling out is not an option, in which case LaToya's point is a good one. First, clarify what kind of culture you're in. Not what's on the posters and in the Diversity & Inclusion Report, but what is really valued in your organization. Become situationally aware of the style, flow and vibe of senior execs. Then, do whatever your checkbook allows you to do. If you can afford to be a change agent—go for it. If you need that job at that moment, get a relaxer, get a keratin treatment, just get something that will get you by Monday to Friday. Then do you for real on the weekend. But either way be purposeful about your decision. Stop being emotional about your hair and start being strategic. Have you seen Hannah on Tyler Perry's *The Have and the Have Nots*? That sister will switch it up as necessary."

"My bald-headed opinion is that Black women need to take control of this narrative. Get clear about the culture you're working in and get comfortable with the hair you wear. When you do that, corporate America will follow your lead."

Eli had a way of schooling folks and adding emotional punctuation to a conversation. Somehow it felt like the bell just rang.

2

Jim Listens In



Jim was the CEO of a company with over 18,000 employees. He had the standard pedigree of education and experience and had been groomed for his current role by the previous chairman of the board before he retired. He was proud of his success and prided himself on his diverse background and open-minded parenting.

He wasn't sure how he ended up at a table within earshot of this conversation. He wasn't intending to eavesdrop but couldn't help but be intrigued by the Hillary Clinton /blow job comment. After that he was hooked into the conversation.

He found himself incredibly curious about how his company was experienced by African-American employees. What would they say if they got together in a restaurant? Did hair really matter that much? Did their company culture engage all employees equally? All of a sudden he had a flurry of questions worth asking his leadership team.