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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave: Welcome to The Hennessy Report by Keystone Partners. I'm Dave Hennessy and our guest today is Robin DiAngelo, the author of *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People To Talk About Racism*. Robin's provocative book has been on *The New York Times* bestseller list for the better part of three years and reached the number one ranked spot last summer. Michael Eric Dyson, who wrote the foreword, says it's a "vital, necessary and beautiful book." Robin started her career as a diversity trainer and did that for many years. She became a tenured professor at Westfield State University, received her PhD in multicultural education from the University of Washington in Seattle, where she is an associate professor today. In our discussion on the podcast, Robin recommends questions HR leaders can ask of themselves and of their management teams about structural racism. She has certainly inspired much discussion and challenged perspectives on racism, and she describes how some of the reactions to her work have really surprised her.

A little bit about our next episode, where we will have our guest, Yolanda Butler Stephens, the chief of people and culture at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. And now our conversation with Robin DiAngelo.

Robin, welcome to the podcast. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to discuss with us.

Robin DiAngelo: I'm happy to be here. Thank you.

Dave: We always like to start The Hennessy Report by Keystone with that early life story for my guests, an inflection point, or informs who you became, this professional, and what you do today.

Robin: One is the death of my mother. She died when I was 11 years old, she was 37. She had three little girls. She was a single mother. It was a very long, drawn out death. She died of leukemia, and this was the late '60s. Cancer was a shameful thing. I don't know why, but it was, and we were literally told, don't tell anyone your mother has cancer. And then after she died, we were just not to talk about it. That was traumatic and made more so by silence.

And I think at a really early age, I wouldn't have articulated it this way, but the relationship between silence and suffering is clear. That there's this elephant in the room. There's this painful thing we're suffering from, but we can't talk about it. And it just made me determined. We will talk about it. And for me, racism clearly is a huge elephant in the room. And we're going to talk about it.

The other piece is the fact that my mother was raising us as a single mother and she was sick and she had a hard time keeping a job. And so we were poor and there was a very deep sense of shame surrounding that poverty. And I was in my thirties before I really understood the concept of white privilege. But when I realized that I could be colluding in a system that caused, not the same shame, but



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anything near that kind of experience, that was just unbearable to me. I think those two things pushed me to commit my life to this work.

Dave: It just really made the connection for you... I heard about *White Fragility*, and I hadn't read it until I saw the American Airlines story where Doug Parker, CEO of American Airlines went on a Southwest Airlines flight, quite a story, quite a touching story. Was that something you were like, that was one of the things I'd hoped would come from my book, these kinds of conversations?

Robin: Yeah. My understanding is that the CEO was reading the book.

Dave: Yes.

Robin: And that's an incredibly heartening story for me because I'd like to believe that it did go as well as it did because he had some insight that he gained. And that's my goal, just to make us more open and more receptive. And so that point of that story was they had this beautiful dialogue, this white man and this black woman that was initiated from, I think, she seeing him reading that book. So affirming.

Dave: Right. Well, that's what got me more interested in making sure I read your book. And I also, around the same time watched a YouTube video that has 2 million hits, and I'm sure you know about it because it's the Seattle Public Library presentation you made just around the same time. I thought it was really powerful to go hand in hand with your book. But I found your writing kind of jarring for me. I was almost stunned by it because I realized that I had so many blind spots, and it resonated with me and it kind of made me a little feeling guilty. I know guilt is not your goal.

Robin: Well, first I appreciate your honesty in saying that it was jarring to you. There are lots of approaches to this work. Mine tends to be direct, and that directness actually really is effective for some, it puts others off and that's fine. There're those who have a softer approach. There's room for many ways. But it sounds like you hung in there. And so you've asked about guilt. Defensiveness kind of goes with that. Some defensiveness when faced with this reality is a natural response, that in itself isn't white fragility. It becomes white fragility when you don't move past that defensiveness or past that guilt. Guilt is also a normal reaction when you realize, I've been complicit in something that I would never have wanted to be complicit in, but we can't use those feelings as excuses to shut down. Then we'd lock ourselves into a very limited world view.

When you understand that this is a system you were born into, it was set up long before you arrived, you were conditioned into it before you were aware by people who themselves were likely not aware, that really helps. And so we can move past this, am I or am I not a part of this system to, it's inevitable. So how have I been shaped by it? And how is it coming out in my life and my work and what do I need to do about it? That's actually liberating. We can get to work, actually aligning what we profess to value with the way that we live our life. So guilt is just not useful to anybody. I would ask listeners who have struggled with guilt or worried about it, to choose an area where you wish people who had power over your life understood that. Do you want them to say, "I feel so bad. I feel so bad. I feel so bad." Or do you want them to just, get going? Use your position, not excuse it to excuse inaction.



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Dave: Can you talk a little about how you came up with the term white fragility? Like what were you doing at the time? How the concept came about.

Robin: I was in a hallway outside of a workshop and it just came out of my mouth like, ah, this white fragility, it's just maddening. The fragility part is meant to capture or speak to how little it takes. There are likely people listening right now, who, the moment we said white people, took exception. Right? That's as far as we got and they were already set off into defensiveness, they were already responding with every counter that they've always ever responded to. I call that rehearsing, reinforcing the worldview we already hold, rather than having the humility to consider that you may not know everything you need to know on such a deep, complex issue.

The impact of that fragility, if you will, isn't fragile at all. Because, of course it marshals behind it the weight of legal authority, institutional control, power. And so it functions as a kind of everyday policing people into not challenging this system and our place in it. I'm going to imagine your listeners who are white have been in situations where they heard another white person say or do something racially problematic. They cringed, but they didn't say anything. Why not? Because the consequences are so penalizing and they just didn't want to go there. And so it's actually really effective to keep us from going there. And inadvertently is protecting the very system we claim to want to change.

Dave: One of the things you mentioned just a moment ago, when you use the term white people, I know you have felt the pushback that's generalizing white people, but you have a good response to that and why you do it. I'd like you just to explain that.

Robin: Sure. My new book is coming out in June and chapter two is titled "Why It's Okay To Generalize About White People." Let's just get it out there. Of course, we are all individuals and we are all different and special and unique. And I could not know anything about you if I don't know you on some level. We are also members of social groups that profoundly shape the trajectory of our lives. I identify as a woman, I'm a cisgender woman. Pronouns, she, her. And may I ask you your pronouns and your identity?

Dave: He, him.

Robin: All right, who would argue that the way that our lives have gone have been shaped by that fact. The moment you and I were born and they marked male or female on that birth certificate, a whole process of socialization was enacted. And if you're not sure about that, go into Target and walk down the aisles of the toy section and tell me there's not a profound difference in the messages we get, right?

Dave: Yes.

Robin: We understand that you and I are individuals, but that being in those social categories profoundly shapes our life. Same with race. In fact, we literally could predict whether you and I and our mothers were going to survive our births. Literally, whether we were going to live based on our race. That's how profound it is. And so we have to be willing to also grapple with the shared experience. We're in the same culture. We're getting the same messages. We're watching the same movies. We're



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reading the same textbooks in school. We've been given the same heroes and heroines. We've been given the same images of God and man and Jesus. And I can just go on and on and on. We're all receiving that. These are clearly observable patterns. And so if you don't fit the pattern, relax. However, you probably do. In my experience, the moment I give any white person a way out, they'll take it.

So how about we focus on the rule? Not the exception. What is so threatening about that? And so anything that you could come up with that you think makes you an exception? I had a black roommate in college. I speak several languages. I'm a minority myself. Whatever it is, ask yourself, well, and how does being white shape how you experienced that exception?

Dave: I'm curious what other surprising reactions you have experienced since writing the book?

Robin: Well, these are harder to talk about. Social media is intense. I'm not somebody who ever expected to be famous, if you will. I'm an educator, an academic, I pulled together 25 plus years of experience. The critique from the right I expect. And it's severe. I do get death threats. In this moment, I expect that and it doesn't hurt. But the critique from the left, the suggestion that I've taken everything I know from black writers. Of course, I have been profoundly shaped by black writers and mentors. And as an insider to whiteness, I also have a piece of the puzzle that they can't have. And I've put all of that together to produce something that's been effective.

Dave: It's been hard. Any surprising positives? You never expected to be number one on the bestseller list when you came up with this idea or wrote this book, obviously. It went right to the top of the charts.

Robin: And it has been for two years. That's unbelievable. Again, I'm heartened that it has had an impact. There are many of us who have been working for decades, probably longer to get the mainstream to understand systemic racism. Most of us are taught to see racism as individual acts of intentional meanness, which guarantees most of us aren't going to identify with it and guarantees we're going to be defensive about it. And we've been working so hard to get people to understand systemic racism through trainings. And you're in HR, you've been to these. And I'd like to think this has all come together with a lot of other dynamics. And we're at that tipping point. When both the president elect and vice president elect, and now president, say from the stage, systemic racism is a serious issue that must be addressed, that's incredible. And I think it just comes from decades of people beating this drum.

Dave: You mentioned the other books and other authors and thinkers on this topic. Who do you look to, or who do you recommend HR leaders, and all people read about this subject?

Robin: Layla Saad's book called *Me and White Supremacy Workbook*. And let's just pause, because I just said white supremacy. I don't want anybody to run from the room. Yes, I understand it's a charged term, and I was raised to think about that as people in white hoods, but along with systemic racism, hey, the president also said white supremacy because it is now understood more as, including people who would wear white hoods, but actually a very highly descriptive sociological term for a culture in which white people are set up as the norm for humanity and then black people and other people are always a certain kind of humanity. It is a workbook for every day, you do an exercise or a reflection, and that keeps you



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going. It's a lot like water dripping on a rock, right? Even now listening, you might like, "okay, okay, I'm tracking." But then go out there and bring it up with your uncle, and good luck defending it, right?

And Charles Wright Mills, *The Racial Contract*. That's a book, I just drank it right on down. He just basically says we study democracy, fascism, we study all of these political systems, and the one political system that underwrites all others that we never talk about or study is white supremacy. And he just beautifully articulates it. The other one is Dr. Eddie Moore's *21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge*. You can do that with a work team, every single day. You watch a film clip or you journal or you read this short piece or you engage in this act. My daughter did it with her work team at her workplace. Those are the kinds of engagements I like to recommend because they're...

Dave: Because a lot of activity, it sounds like, because that's where you can change behavior. Where you actually do something.

Robin: Yes.

Dave: Got it.

Robin: Reni Eddo-Lodge's book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Racism*. It's kind of the other side of my book, right? It's a black woman's thing. And this is what it's like to always be on the receiving end of white fragility. She's British, but that's also useful for people who think this is just in the U.S. Anything written by Carol Anderson. She's written *White Rage*, which is a meticulously researched, more academic explanation, I think, of white fragility. She won the National Book Award for that book. Michael Eric Dyson writes beautifully as you know, and just really accessibly. Ijeoma Oluo is wonderful. She wrote, *So You Want to Talk About Race*.

Dave: Yes.

Robin: Another workbook style would be Resmaa Menakem's *My Grandmother's Hands*. He is a black man, a therapist, and he specializes in racial trauma. And he argues that it isn't just black people that experienced racial trauma, that white people have a form of it. His book is also similar to a workbook.

Dave: Our listeners are HR and DEI professionals. What questions do you recommend those professionals ask of themselves and of their leadership teams?

Robin: Particularly white HR professionals and those who are in DEI who are white, that you continually ask of yourself, "How has my life been shaped by my race? Who am I accountable to or for?" I cannot myself anoint myself as an ally. And just because I'm in this work and believe in this work, I'm good to go, and only out here to get other people on board. In other words, you have to keep doing your own work. We will never be finished. I'm just going to be direct. I think the HR departments often are the least healthy in organizations. This is just what I have noticed. They're responsible in large part for the DEI work. Maybe there's a committee or a subgroup that comes out of that. But those who are there did not have to demonstrate that they could engage with these issues before they were hired.



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That entry point, that HR controls is fundamental. Every single person who's hired at any organization should be able to demonstrate some capacity and some characteristics around this work. In my experience, well, the only time we'd get what we call the diversity question was if I was on the interview committee and made a big point of it. It'd only be one and it didn't tend to carry any weight. Let's be honest. And the people at the table are not necessarily equipped to assess what is a strong answer. When that person leaves that interview, they should be maybe sweating a little bit. Like, "Wow, if I go to work for this organization, I'm going to be held accountable. And, is this a good fit? Is this not a good fit?"

Dave: Right.

Robin: And I think it's important to say that you're not looking for ethnic studies professors. All right? That's not fair. But you're looking for some openness, some humility, some awareness that this is lifelong work. You're not looking for a colorblind response. Imagine this question. Integrating a racial equity lens in recognition of systemic racism is important to this organization. How do you go about integrating a racial equity lens into your work? You wouldn't be able to fake that answer. Now you notice there's an embedded assumption that I'm talking about white people answering these questions, but you also don't want to do is just assume automatically that all people of color already know all of this and already have the skills to lead this work and want to lead this work. So that's the other thing that HR departments do. They just assign people of color this work, and it may not be their interest or their skillset. There's a range of awareness on all sides of this.

Dave: When organizations are being effective, breaking down systematic racism in their organization, what does it look like? What are they doing? You gave an example of an interview question.

Robin: They understand that it needs to be integrated across the organization and that it's ongoing. That the people at the top can't just assign everybody else to it. There's a recognition that if we don't keep this on the radar, it will slip off the radar. There are ongoing opportunities all the time. For example, monthly film showings, book study groups, cross-racial dialogues that people can go to, they're encouraged to go to. It's not whether your manager is cool or not, because we all know that one. There are also racial affinity groups. So ERGs, I think are fairly popular now.

Dave: Yes, definitely.

Robin: But they tend to be for more what we think of as marginalized groups, but white people also need to be doing work specific to our role in this. This, I think at this point needs to be voluntary. I'm actually working on a book now on facilitator's handbook for leading white affinity groups.

Dave: That's something you don't hear as much about. White affinity groups.

Robin: And these things are risky. People are going to have strong reactions to something called white affinity group, if they don't understand it. So it takes courage to do this work. I think something in your mission or vision statement that acknowledges that you recognize the existence of systemic racism is symbolically powerful. It doesn't solve the issue, but there it is. And it guides the direction you go in.



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Another option that I've seen organizations do is everyone on the executive leadership team gets an hour of coaching every week. The one organization I worked with doing that, the people of color on the executive leadership team got an hour of coaching with my colleague who's a black woman because there are very specific challenges to being a person of color in leadership. And I met weekly one-on-one with the white leaders.

So let's say you're the CEO of the company and we meet in your office for an hour, and I opened by saying, "All right. So how has your racism manifested since we met last week?" Which would be a really radical question, except that you'd had the foundational training. You understood that, of course, we're all part of this and you knew what I meant. And then you can say, "Well, I'm struggling with this decision. I'm struggling around this. Gosh, I'll be honest. I haven't even thought about it." And we would just work together.

Dave: Yeah.

Robin: One misstep a lot of organizations make is they stop at inclusion, right? So let's just add more people of color. But we're not asking ourselves what is the water we're adding them into. If we haven't done anything ...

Dave: That's the culture, right?

Robin: ...yeah, to also address the consciousness and the skill set of those who are already there, we're actually adding people into what ends up being hostile water in ways that are very hard to explain, a lot of gaslighting, a lot of denial. This is why I think well-meaning white progressives can actually be harder to get your hands on in terms of the stuff we're doing. And yet their retention is a problem.

Dave: The blind spot issue. Are there other ways that organizations can get at helping people see their blind spots, or techniques or approaches that you'd recommend?

Robin: It's a series of ahas, right? I do remember where I was sitting when I read Peggy McIntosh's famous white privilege list article, and it was a bit of an out-of-body experience for me. It was the first time in my life where I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm white." And I didn't want to go outside because I felt so bright white. It was powerful, and it doesn't last. Right? It's not like... And from then on, I had all these skills. I've continued and I continue now to get insights and ahas, but they don't happen if we're not continually put in situations that will ensure that they happen.

Dave: Keystone produces this podcast in cooperation with the Northeast Human Resources Association in Massachusetts, your old home state.

Robin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dave: And a keynote speaker at our D & I gala was Michael Eric Dyson, who wrote the foreword to your book. That was just three and a half years ago. We always have the NEHRA question of the podcast. And Meghan Mandino, our podcast producer is coming in to ask you that question right now.



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Meghan Mandino: Hi Robin.

Robin: Hi.

Meghan: How would you advise emerging leaders to respectfully approach colleagues on the subject of race, whether they're coming from a perspective as a white person approaching a person of color or a person of color approaching a white person?

Robin: I would advise us to always be aware of power dynamics. Imagine that we're in a male dominated workplace and we've just had this workshop on patriarchy and sexism in the workplace, and 10 different men kind of corner us in the hallway and start, "You don't feel that way, do you? What have been your experiences here? Have you ever had that happen to you?" That would be a little overwhelming, a little intimidating, and it would put us on the spot. If I don't have trust built with this person, I'm not going to start telling them about really difficult things. One of the things that leaders will often do is they'll go to their few black employees and say, "I just want you to know that if you ever experience anything around, right, you can come to me, you can give me feedback."

And then that supervisor or manager just carries on. I told them that they could tell me and so I'll wait for them to tell me. And if they haven't told me, then I guess there's no issue. That's an incredible load that you just put on a person who's in a vulnerable position in relationship to you. As far as people of color going and giving white people feedback. If you're up for it, go for it. Not for me to say, but you might think of some strategies around that. Like don't do it by yourself or tap another white person who you think does understand who was in that meeting who did see the behavior and say, "You saw it too. Can you talk to them? They're likely to hear it more openly from you." Again, this is not to take care of people of color, but it is an option.

Meghan: It sounds like it's the importance of building trust between each other and between the organization, which is really where HR leaders come in and where they have to guide leadership to set the standards.

Robin: Sometimes when you begin to do this work in an organization, all of a sudden, all this racism surfaces in the sense that people start coming to you as HR and start telling you about their experiences. And it can be confusing. You could think, well, we didn't have any of these problems before we started this work. And now this work is causing these problems. And what I would say, no, this work is finally indicated that there's room and space to bring these issues forward. So don't get confused about that. It's actually a healthy...

Dave: That's a really good point.

Robin: It's a healthy sign. It's not the work that caused the racism.

Dave: Right. It was always there. Now we're just hearing.



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Robin: The first time it does happen, you respond really well. And if you don't and then it stops happening, don't assume it's because there's no more issues. Go ahead and assume that somehow you conveyed that you weren't really as open as you thought you were. So I just received a book in the mail called *Confessions from Your Token Black Colleague: True Stories and Candid Conversations About Equity and Inclusion in the Workplace*. And it's by Talisa Lavarry. This would be really relevant for HR because it's very specific.

It's important to think about those as representative of common dynamics. Sometimes we can get focused on a particular story or a particular person, but these are patterns. And okay, thank you, you just demonstrated that pattern and that's useful so that we can talk about it, but it doesn't mean that you, Dave, are this terrible person. These are patterns. We need to change them and address them, but it doesn't mean we're not good people. That's something I talk about in the book, this good/bad binary, this idea that good, nice people could never be complicit with racism. And that's also the root of a lot of defensiveness.

Dave: In some ways I think of that as the heart of your book, that concept. If you could write a letter of advice, professional career advice to your 25 or 30 year old self, dear Robin, what would you write?

Robin: You'll never believe how your life is going to turn out. Hang in there, it's going to be a very long time, but you will make a difference in the world. So some of that is just encouragement and patience and trust in yourself and the people around you. And, never stop paying attention. There isn't anything that isn't rich with potential insight if you're willing to pay attention to it and think critically about it. A lot of us are not taught to think critically. We just react. If you've ever been in even a training in HR, there's so much to learn from that. How would I do it differently? Right? What was problematic about that? What's underneath that response or problematic approach? What are the operating assumptions that led to that? Those are fascinating questions.

And if *White Fragility* was useful to you, you probably noticed, it's like, okay, let's take the evidence most white people give for why they're not racist and use it to understand what they think racism is. And then we can let go of the evidence and let's go down under that at the deeper level and address the basic framework most of us hold and how that is functioning to prevent change.

Dave: And if you think out 10 years from now, what's something you want to make sure you don't regret?

Robin: Losing clarity, that it is simply not possible to get it right by everyone when you're talking about the most, I believe, emotionally, politically, socially charged issue of the last several hundred years. You will not get it right. So be clear, be steady, be accountable, but be brave. Last year on my birthday, I got a tattoo on my arm. It says, be brave.

Dave: Be brave. That's great.

Robin: This is my final note to HR professionals. Niceness is not anti-racism. Niceness doesn't indicate the absence of racism. Niceness is great, but it's not courageous.



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Dave: What's the kindest thing anybody's ever done for you?

Robin: I get emails that move me to tears, where someone just took a moment to say, "This made a difference for me." That is so heartening and it keeps me going. And anyone who's ever read evaluations, again, we're back to HR, which is perfect, right?

Dave: That's where you started your career, right? You were a diversity trainer?

Robin: Yes. Yeah.

Dave: That's what they called back in the '90s, right?

Robin: Right. It's hard to get evaluations that are hurtful, but there's also being an educator and you could get 20 glowing, glowing, and then two like, this was terrible. And that's all you can think about, right? Keeping a perspective is also really helpful.

Dave: You could go to dinner with any person that you don't know. Who would it be and why?

Robin: Jane Flax. She wrote a book called [*The American Dream*] in *Black and White*. It's been very, very powerful for me. I think she's a political scientist, professor and she's, oh, brilliant. Talk about thinking critically about frameworks. I would just pick her brain.

Dave: A book that changed your life?

Robin: It was a book by Ruth Frankenberg, and it's called *White Women, Race Matters*. It's a sociological study of five different white women, different social classes, and that's where I began to see the way that white people construct ourselves in relationship to black people. It took me way at a deeper level around race and blew my mind and was a key piece that set me on this path.

Dave: I noticed, and you talked about this in that video at the Seattle Public Library, and you use humor in it. And you talk about, this is a life and death subject, but I used humor as a strategy. And I saw that today in our discussion. Can you just talk a little bit about that? Why?

Robin: It's my style, if you hung out with me. You could go and you see I'm a little looser than you might think based on my private... on my talks. But also, it's a strategy that releases tension. Like this is hard. There were probably people listening who didn't realize it, but the arms started to cross or their breathing started to get tighter and their body started to get more tense, and that laughter loosens that up and releases it and allows us to take in more. But I also think if we can just not take ourselves so seriously. And this is the tension. Yes. We need to take racism and our role in it very seriously, but not take ourselves so seriously that that gets in the way. It's not just hard and painful and potentially guilt producing. It's also fantastically stimulating. Intellectually, emotionally, psychologically. And yeah, it's also hard at times like lots of things that are valuable and inspiring.

Dave: Right. Well, your passion comes through and we're so glad we had the chance to talk with you.



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Robin: Thank you for the opportunity.

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