

This webinar was given on Thursday, January 28, 2021 by Dr. Laura Morgan Roberts, author of *Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience*. It was given as part of M-RCBG's weekly Business & Government Seminar Series.

John Haigh:

Go ahead and get started. My name is John Haigh and I co-direct the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government. And I am very, very fortunate to have the opportunity today to introduce Dr. Laura Morgan-Roberts. And just a little bit of quick background about Laura. Her work focuses on the science of maximizing human potential in diverse organization and communities. We'll talk about what that means with a little more specificity, here in a minute.

John Haigh:

She's a Professor of Practice at the University of Virginia at the Darden School of Business there. She has served on the faculties of HBS, of Georgetown's Business School Antioch Graduate School of Leadership and Change. She earned her BA in Psychology, Phi Beta Kappa from the University of Virginia, and has an MA and a PhD in Organizational Psychology from the University of Michigan. She's taught these topics of organizational behavior, psychology, negotiations, group dynamics, diversity, leadership at a number of universities such as Michigan, the University of Michigan, the Wharton School of Finance, Dartmouth Tuck School.

John Haigh:

She's published multiple articles, teaching cases, and very practitioner-oriented tools. In particular, she's written and co-edited three books. I happen to... I'm going to proselytize on her behalf. I would recommend that you go buy this book. It's *Race, Work, and Leadership*. And that's really what we're going to talk about today. That's what she's going to talk about. She's also written and edited books on *Positive Organizing in a Global Society* and *Exploring Positive Identities in Organizations*, and is a frequent contributor to *Harvard Business Review*, the *Academy of Management Review*.

John Haigh:

So, with that, I'm going to turn it over to Laura, and thank you so much for being with us to talk about this critical issue of race, work, and leadership. The one thing I would say is, at the Center for Business and Government, sometimes we tend to fall into the path of being the economy in government, but we really are about business and government. And in particular, one of the things I find interest in thinking about is kind of how do we deal with issues of diversity and inclusion in the business sector and how can we improve our performance in those areas? So with that, I will turn it over to Dr. Roberts, and the floor is all yours.

Dr. Roberts:

Thank you so much, John. Thank you to all of you who dialed in today, who are logged in today and are eager to participate in this conversation. Always happy to be here. I was only half joking when we were having our setup in the queue about how I'm based here in Washington D.C. right now, but sometime between January and February, every year, probably of my professional career, I have, in some way,

shape, or form been snowed in in Harvard Square. So, I'm missing out on that, but vicariously from what I understand, it's snowing right now, today, so that's apropos. I'm based here in Washington, D.C. I'm on faculty at the University of Virginia Darden School of Business.

Dr. Roberts:

I'm going to invite an exchange today around a broader question and it's through this lens that we'll take up the discussion of race, work, and leadership. That broader question is, how do we bring out the best in ourselves and others and make our best selves even better? This is a question that has been sort of my burning platform ever since I was an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia and aspired to be a professor.

Dr. Roberts:

I went to Graduate School at the University of Michigan and at that time, we at the University of Michigan, particularly at the Ross School of Business, began to join with other scholars around the world in trying to understand the kinds of practices, beliefs, and structures that would enable positive organizing. It seems that we had spent so much time and energy understanding, problematizing things that were not working in our organizations and in our societies, but we still didn't have the models or the best practices for what might work well or what had already been demonstrated to work well.

Dr. Roberts:

Now, ironically, that movement of positive organizing really took off at the beginning of the 21st Century and continue to gain momentum and intrigue as people were passionate about questions of strength and thriving and flourishing and best selves and so forth. But the work on diversity, equity, and inclusion did not often fall within that same rubric. So, diversity, equity inclusion research and practice were still often located through in the deficit perspective or portrayal of organizations and societies.

Dr. Roberts:

So, one of the questions that I wanted to take up in trying to bridge these sets of understandings is how can we value difference, because when we value difference, then we're on a path as individuals and as a collective society to bring out the best in ourselves and others and make our best selves even better. And there are three components of valuing difference and you'll hear me reference those today.

Dr. Roberts:

The first is acknowledging. Acknowledging the relevance of our different identities and the experiences and structures that are associated with those identities. Not disappearing the difference because we're afraid that it's too problematic, too threatening, too challenging, too disruptive, too upsetting, but acknowledging the differences that exist. Affirming those differences and the potential that they can bring particularly affirming the potential of people who are often positioned on the margins of our organizations and our societies from a power status and resource standpoint. And then third, enacting. How do we co-create the conditions under which people of all backgrounds can thrive?

Dr. Roberts:

The second piece, race, work and leadership that followed from these questions of valuing difference came through a combination of my own passion around centering the black experience, so that we could learn from the challenges that are associated with race, racial inequity, racial differences, and so forth, particularly when it comes to acknowledging systemic racism and structural inequality. Affirming

the potential that black and brown people bring into our organizations, our communities, our societies, and then acting to create more racially just workplaces and societies. So, that was one piece.

Dr. Roberts:

But the other was I had the fortune of beginning my faculty career at Harvard Business School and even after leaving HBS and moving on to different faculty positions, I still remain connected to several faculty at HBS. And leading up to 2018, HBS endeavored to commemorate the founding of the African-American Student Union at the Harvard Business School. Now, AASU, African-American Student Union, was founded in 1968 and those five black students at that time, became key mobilizers and leading the way for stronger representation of black students as well as more inclusion in the curriculum itself around issues of diversity, equity, justice, and inclusion. And so, at the behest of HBS African-American Alumni, the school decided to commemorate the founding of AASU 50 as a pivotal moment in the history of the school itself. And I was able to re-affiliate, as a visiting scholar with HBS as part of that work, leading the research trajectory and out of that work came this edited volume race, work, and leadership.

Dr. Roberts:

So, I say all of that to let you know that what I'm going to present now are level of high, high level insights, frameworks, key takeaways that have been generated by over 70 scholars in the combined chapters of these two edited volumes. I encourage you to read their studies and to follow even more in depth in the specific findings of their research. I'm going to share with you what inspires me based on the research that we present in race, work, and leadership.

Dr. Roberts:

Okay, so in moving forward, yes, we're going to focus on the experiences of race, work and leadership within the organizational context and by and large, I'm talking about the experiences of black professionals. We put forth an open call for this edited volume and that's what we received was primarily a set of studies and essays that related to the experiences of black professionals, but we know that there are much broader implications because of the ways in which racial disparities and economic opportunity affect all aspects of our society.

Dr. Roberts:

Four key themes emerge from race, work, and leadership and these themes align with conversations that you've likely heard or at least in part, and possibly even participated in or when I look at the list of participants on, I see some familiar names and it's great to see you all. And so, I know that there are people on here who've also been leading this work.

Dr. Roberts:

Diversity, inclusion, equity, and justice have been persistent challenges for black professionals as they have been in creating greater equity and inclusion for a wide range of groups. They show up in our research around underrepresentation at the more senior levels of organizations, over representation in the lower levels of organizations. We've seen that in 2020 and now, in 2021, with respect to COVID, for instance, and who has been placed in occupations that have been disproportionately affected by COVID. We look at the essential workers in our healthcare organizations where the majority of whom are women of color, even though that demographic does not reflect the majority of the US population. So, over represented in those frontline roles and even in times of insecurity, we find them in vulnerable positions occupationally.

Dr. Roberts:

So, access is certainly a pressing question. But the research in our book also invites us to think about challenges that people face after they get the degree or after they get the job. So, you're hired in the organization, do you feel like you're truly included? Do you feel that you can express yourself authentically? Does the organizational culture reflect a degree of belongingness for members of all backgrounds? I'll talk about this a little bit more.

Dr. Roberts:

There are also some challenges with respect to equity or inequity in terms of performance evaluation and leadership development, so we find consistently that black workers are subject to shifting standards when it comes to evaluating their performance. That means that they are penalized more heavily for their failures and rewarded less generously for their successes. They also have less access to sponsors and mentors, which are critical for people to advance within their careers and to build their networks as they go.

Dr. Roberts:

They also don't get the same quality developmental feedback, so race and racial differences, in particular, create a level of anxiety for people who were in dominant groups and people, who are on marginalized groups, but the anxiety manifests itself in slightly different ways. So, for members of dominant groups, their predominant concern is that they will be viewed as biased or in this case as racist. And so, even if that's not a conscious concern, it does affect their motives for image and impression management. This is research from J. Nicole Shelton at Princeton, Jennifer Richeson at Yale, and [inaudible 00:14:16] and I think, Sophie Trawalter as well, who's now at UVA.

Dr. Roberts:

So, these anxieties among the dominant group are misaligned with the goal of trying to have a high quality connection or interaction and to provide people with candid and honest feedback. But on the flip side, you also had members of marginalized groups like the black professionals in our studies who are concerned that they will be viewed through the lens of negative stereotypes that people will not believe that they are competent, that their expressions of passion and enthusiasm or curiosity will be misread or miscoded as disruptive, as subversive, as angry. And so, that also creates some barriers in forming the kinds of relationships that are essential for people to feel more authentic and for people to advance within organizations. So, the structural issues are playing out, but there are also some interpersonal dynamics that are creating other challenges for black professionals to advance within their careers and to experience that full sense of thriving and belongingness within their organizations.

Dr. Roberts:

The last segment of our insights have to do with what black leaders experience once they reach the top, or at least near the top, right? So, you've got this position of leadership. Now, we know that at currently because of the announcement that came out two days ago for which many of us are celebrating, Rosalind Brewer is leaving her post at COO of Starbucks and now is taking on the role of CEO of Walgreens, which is fabulous, because that now makes her the only black woman, that makes her a black woman, who is a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, not fabulous that she's the only. Sorry that was a misstatement, but then there prior to her, there were none. Once Ursula Burns, who was the first and only for several years at Xerox retired from her post, there haven't been any others.

Dr. Roberts:

So, it is exciting to see and experience these firsts. It's exciting to see the first black President, it's exciting to see the first black and South-Asian descended Vice-President, who is also a woman. All of these trailblazing moments are significant. Representation is important and our research shows that when people draw upon the diversity of their experiences, it helps them to build stronger connections with others, and to make impactful contributions to organizations and societies.

Dr. Roberts:

But here's the catch. They often are placed in these positions of leadership under very precarious terms. The fragility manifests in two ways. In one way, we have the glass cliff dynamic, and President Lynn Wooten, who is President of Simmons University, right there in Boston with you and her co-author, Dean Erika Hayes-James, who is now the Dean of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, are two trailblazing black women leaders themselves. Their chapter published before they took on those trailblazing roles and had others that they were filling, talks about the glass cliff, and the glass cliff shows that all of the black leaders who have been CEOs of Fortune 500 companies have done so when those companies are in precarious position, so they have to come in and manage some kind of crisis.

Dr. Roberts:

Glass cliff means it's a high risk, high-visibility position. If you succeed, it's monumental. If you fail, it could be tragic and you may not get a second chance to try again. So that's one aspect of the precarious position. The second is that even as a leader, your legitimacy is continually questioned because of the stereotypes that people hold about race, gender, and other identities that you may bring. And so, you're constrained in your ability to exercise authority, or to hold other people accountable.

Dr. Roberts:

So, part of what I do in the research is to examine the data from a wide range of studies and methodologies and then infuse that with the qualitative understandings as well to bring out a set of reflections or descriptions of what people are experiencing in their daily lives. So, for black professionals, what they are experiencing in their daily lives are a mixed bag of concerns around whether or not they'll be negatively stereotyped, about how if and when they can advance in their careers. The career concerns can be general to everyone, right? Everybody has career concerns, likewise, with some concerns about being stereotyped, but the nature of the stereotypes, the pervasiveness of those stereotypes, and the longstanding obstacles around race and racial inequality makes it particularly challenging for these individuals.

Dr. Roberts:

In addition, it's not just what's happening in a thought bubbles above their head, but it's also what's coming out of the interpersonal interactions that they are experiencing. So, when their authority is being contested, when they're being mistaken for someone who doesn't belong, having to show multiple forms of identification just to get into their office buildings while other people are seemingly able to walk in and out more freely. Those kinds of micro-aggressions. Being questioned about your hair or being critiqued in your performance evaluations because people experience your cultural style, your expression, or even your physical appearance as less professional. Those can all be forms of racial micro-aggressions.

Dr. Roberts:

We also heard that these professionals often receive, like I said, limited career advice, because people are sort of hesitant about interracial interactions in the workplace and some may also get some misguided career advice. So, for instance, I conducted a study of healthcare leaders of color in the Boston area and they talked about being advised at points in their career to "Tone it down some, don't be so ambitious, you're fine where you are, don't worry about trying to get the leadership role, it will just come to you." Okay, so these dynamics create a cognitive and emotional tax and the consequences of those taxes are that there are resources that they could be bringing if we truly value difference, but those resources are suppressed in some circumstances.

Dr. Roberts:

In other circumstances, they feel that what they're bringing is the organization is taking up and utilizing it, so it's been exploited or appropriated, but they're not getting fully rewarded for doing the work. For instance, with the healthcare professionals of color, there seem to be a lot of hype, a lot of enthusiasm around cultural competence. There's a lot of enthusiasm about representation and the symbolism of representation, but they felt that they were not placed in positions where they could truly help to lead or drive the strategy of the organization. More broadly, they felt pigeon-holed into those roles as representations.

Dr. Roberts:

So, as we think about 2020 and moving into 2021, it was really at the root of a lot of the dynamics and the challenges that people are facing and what are our set of ideals that we might put forth that would truly invite and equip people to bring their best selves to work, to make their best selves even better, and to bring out the best in others. And so, I've been utilizing a framework around freedom to make sense of the data, but also to provide some guideposts for how we might move forward in the ways that we lead and organize our institutions.

Dr. Roberts:

So, the question on the table is, "What would it take to provide equal access to these four freedoms at work?" Because these are four freedoms that would go back and review those data, highlighted data points around lack of access, authenticity, advancement, accountability and authority. They're reflecting a sense that people are constrained. They don't have the freedom to be their authentic self at work without disparate concern about being penalized. They don't feel that they have the freedom to grow or develop, become their best self or have the resources that they need at their disposal to do that. People are not giving them developmental feedback or if they are being discouraged from wanting to aspire to have a greater impact, to develop themselves and to grow and advance that would create a set of constraints around becoming one's best self.

Dr. Roberts:

The freedom to be average is one that I think makes a lot of people pause, especially in a lot of the environments in which we work, because we're like, "Well, no, that's never okay. Who's striving for average? Why would we encourage anybody to do that?" I think if we complicate our understanding of average to think about multiple dimensions, we would see that there's a disproportionate privilege that members of the dominant group have by representing the norm, what is expected is setting the standard, what is typical. And it translates into also being able to deviate from the norm with less penalty because you're already an insider. People experience you as such. Those deviations can be

around your style, they can be around your opinions, those deviations can also be around performance. So, perhaps you have some great days, perhaps you have some less great days.

Dr. Roberts:

There's research from MBER that shows that black workers are penalized more heavily when they fail, so their performance flaws are factored in more heavily to their subsequent evaluations. Whereas those same flaws are excused, forgiven or taken into context with more grace and more contextual understanding when it's by a member of the dominant group. So, that also speaks to the freedom to fail.

Dr. Roberts:

I want to offer a couple of suggestions in terms of how we move forward in leading change within our organizations based on the understanding of these challenges and the issues that we face. The first is to contextualize how we have taken up these questions or set aside rather, these questions with respect to racial injustice as we become more and more enthusiastic about diversity and inclusion in our organizations. It's an ironic effect. It sort of creates a drift. There was a considerable amount of focus and intensity around equal opportunity, for instance that came in the 1960s, in the same time that HBS AASU founded, right? When there was a broader reckoning through the civil rights movement around longstanding violence and oppression toward black people that manifested in multiple sectors, having its roots in enslavement, which was the opposite of having freedom at work, medical experimentation, lack of access to affordable housing, quality education, financial capital, and so forth.

Dr. Roberts:

And then also thinking about other groups that may be marginalized and experiencing injustice, other racial ethnic groups, the injustices that were perpetuated against women, about against LGBTQ, against people who have diverse abilities, against people who have less economic resources, and the implications of that structurally and for their access or social mobility that is, and even people who are in stigmatized occupations or roles within organization. So, we want to become more inclusive in our work in ways that also address the needs and challenges of these groups. The tension or the challenge comes in with our willingness to take up this work in a way that advances the cause of these issues with full understanding a recognition that it's probably going to disrupt the dominant group's comfort level, comfort zone, or translation status quo.

Dr. Roberts:

And so, at many moments in time, we prioritize the dominant group's comfort by, for instance, having a widespread movement over training for unconscious bias, but shying away from training that talks about structural racism and inequality in organizations. And talking about the fragility and the virtues and sort of affirming and rewarding a lot of the virtue signaling that people might put forth when leaders put up that Black Lives Matter Square in June 2020 or hashtag on Instagram and other forms of social media, but not peeling back the layers to truly attack and address the structural changes that are required to shift the culture and the patterns in the beliefs.

Dr. Roberts:

So, I invite leaders at all levels of organizations and communities to engage in three zones of action and I highlighted these at the beginning of the talk. They align with our head, our heart and our hands. So, with our head acknowledging the relevance of race and bias in our careers, organization, societies and lives, it means that we have to counteract that impulse to deny the relevance of such. We deny the

relevance of such and we may focus more on defending our own self-worth and our own good intentions, but our energy really has to be directed toward affirming the value of diversity and underrepresented minority's potential for growth and advancement. And then with our hands instead of disengaging, we can act to directly and indirectly create a climate for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion to thrive.

Dr. Roberts:

And so, if we need a jumpstart in that work, here's something that we can each reflect upon, because I know it can be challenging to take in the gravity of the situation and the way in which it may implicate those of us who are benefiting from the status quo and causing us to have to acknowledge and reflect upon the privilege that we hold. So, for me, in doing this work, it's important that we hold the tension and the paradox as leaders, acknowledging the presence of bias and affirming the value of difference will not diminish the worth of my contributions or the validity of my hardships. Both are true.

Dr. Roberts:

For instance, I have been a recipient, I, Laura had been a recipient of positive bias through my longstanding affiliations with Harvard Business School, with Harvard in general. That creates a positive bias and a set of positive expectations that I have been able to leverage and benefit from at different points in my career. When at the other years of my career when I haven't been directly affiliated with Harvard, I have experienced a difference even though I am the same individual. Another socioeconomic privilege and class, my father is an orthopedic surgeon, but I grew up in Gary, Indiana, which is a working class community, and almost exclusively black in the 1980s when I grew up there.

Dr. Roberts:

So, we all have multiple identities, we have associated with those identities, some advantages and some disadvantages, but the work at hand involves us really unpacking how we value difference on all of these different levels. As individuals, how do we activate our best selves? Across our relationships, how do we learn from and across difference? How do we create more equitable systems? What do we need to do to lead change, and all of those things in alignment can help us to transform society, but we have to know our why and we have to be willing to hold ourselves accountable.

Dr. Roberts:

So, a couple of takeaways here. I'm going to skip a few slides and get to here. So, a couple of takeaways for sustaining cultural and strategic change. It has been quite useful and beneficial for us to take up a business case for diversity, but with respect to many of the issues that I've raised today, the business case for diversity may limit our ability to take the bold and courageous action that we need. A social justice orientation will help us to have the motivation and the fuel to move this work forward. I wrote an Op Ed in Bloomberg over the summer around the topic. There's also a fantastic piece by Robin E. Lee, who's a professor at Harvard Business School and David Thomas, former HBS professor. He's Emeritus now and also President of Morehouse College. He published an HBR Article around the same topic in the fall, so I highly recommend that you read that.

Dr. Roberts:

The one-size fits all approaches to diversity are usually say feel good moments that help everybody to feel like they're in the same boat, but they can pass over or gloss over, sorry, the more nuanced understandings of how structural inequality manifests and the unique stereotypes, stigmas and

challenges that people may face. So, we want to understand the various intersections and to develop our programs and initiatives around that. Creating the culture of inquiry around race and using data to assess the climate for diversity and inclusion can be particularly helpful here.

Dr. Roberts:

So I'm just going to highlight those. There are others here on the list that I hope you've been able to scan, just in thinking about how we create psychologically safe environments, which Amy Edmondson over at the Business School has talked about a considerable amount. What it means to mentor and sponsor black professionals and be an advocate and a champion. And then remembering here, I've talked a lot internally, but much of the action that we saw coming out of the protests after George Floyd's death had to do with business leaders taking up their role as agents of change in society and being more open to and intentional about partnering with external stakeholders, so these internal conversations are significant, but partnering with external stakeholders is also particularly important for us.

Dr. Roberts:

So, I'm going to pause here, so we can have some time for Q&A.

John Haigh:

Hi, Laura. So, we have a number of questions in the queue and I'm going to pull up a few of them. I'll try to get to most of them.

Dr. Roberts:

Okay.

John Haigh:

The one thing I would remind all of our participants is that a question generally ends with a question mark. And so, I'll try to look for the ones that are specifically questions where Laura can provide some perspective. And the first question I'm going to raise is, "In what meaningful ways, if any, do you see organizations moving to make themselves transparent and accountable for their statements of support for race, equity and justice. Many of which we have seen this past year. Can you give specific examples of organizations that are leading in this type of accountability?"

Dr. Roberts:

So, I highlight for organizations that are leading in accountability and also providing roadmaps, I would refer you to the Business Roundtables website, which is a group of corporations that have made a set of commitments to promote racial justice and equity. Several dozen organizational leaders have signed that. In Canada, there's a Black North initiative, which is also a similar counterpart. The Business Roundtable homepage has a link to their commitments around racial justice and then they have a set of several dozen examples of different actions that range from impact investing to partnering with HBCUs, Historically Black Colleges and Universities for providing more internship opportunities or even just being more intentional about recruiting from those universities and institutions.

Dr. Roberts:

I'm just on the access piece now, many organizations on the access piece had to acknowledge that they recruit from a very small set of non-diverse institutions and communities, and so they can't argue that there is no pipeline if they're only looking in a limited amount of places. So, those are just making those commitments and making them public, setting numeric targets in terms of the amount that they're going to invest their targets for advancing leaders of certain backgrounds to certain levels in three to five year period of time are all very compelling. Because the bottom line is they're setting a specific target, they're being transparent and public about that target, so they can hold themselves accountable and others can hold them accountable as well.

Dr. Roberts:

There are also a few actions by CEOs, who will hold their senior executives accountable for their commitment to and practice of inclusive leadership within their firms. I shy away from calling, from name dropping of corporations and so forth, because I do advise a lot of these corporations, so I refer you to that. I also was a contributor to the World Economic Forum's recent commitment, set of commitments through a task force, very stakeholders around racial justice and fighting anti-black racism. And so, they provide a set of metrics and steps by which these 50 plus stakeholders are all committing to holding themselves accountable.

Dr. Roberts:

So, those are two resources that I would recommend, but I hope it's okay with you. I won't call out any names of specific corporations right now on that. Ben and Jerry's gets it. If I would pick somebody who. There was a case study in HBR around Ben and Jerry's, I will call them out because they stand out in terms of the kind of language they use to take a stand against racism as well as the fact that they had a head start in doing this. They didn't just start in June 2020. They were already making these kinds of statements and commitments in a more public way. So, it's interesting to look at them, and then try to see what happens with many of the organizations, who are much newer to this work.

John Haigh:

I would point out that in your book, *Race, Work and Leadership*, there are various chapters that show details about various leaders at various points in time, and the corporations they work for. And I'm not saying that's necessarily the right group of corporations to look at, but you can learn a lot looking at those chapters in the book along some of these dimensions.

John Haigh:

There are kind of series of questions that have come up in the Q&A and I would encourage you, if you have a question, stick it into the Q&A and we'll try to get to as many of them as we can in the time we have. But there's a general kind of trend of some questions about what can people do as individuals, whether you want to say forced corporations or encouraged corporations or incent corporations to hire people from different backgrounds? And then I think I have to extend that a little bit to say and support them, as you outlined, as they go through their careers and corporations.

Dr. Roberts:

Yeah, that's a great question, John. So, let's start with the premise that we all have a sphere of influence. So, I think a starting point here is for any individual to assess their own sphere of influence and the ways in which they may be able to affect change based upon that sphere of influence. So, for instance, you

may be a middle manager, so you're involved more directly in hiring decisions or you may be on a hiring committee, so you're involved more directly in hiring decisions.

Dr. Roberts:

In those moments, when you look at a slate of candidates, you can be the voice who's asking questions around equity. "Wait, we said candidate. We were ruling out candidate A because they didn't seem to have this particular skill set. But now we're excited about candidate B, and they don't show or demonstrate they had that skill set either. What's, tell me again, the difference between candidate A and candidate B? Can you help me understand how we are thinking about these two candidates?" I mean, you don't have to come out of the box saying, "Hey, you're being sexist, you're being racist, you're being..." You're simply using the data and observations based on the data and asking questions to help the group to really think through these kinds of issues as they go.

Dr. Roberts:

This is what you can do whatever your sphere of influence may be. Now, when you have more senior leadership, then you also have control over the resources, right? But when I hear that question, I hear somebody feels like they don't have that same control, "How can I make corporations do this?" And that I translate that into, "How can I have influence over the leaders or the critical decision makers in the organizations?"

Dr. Roberts:

Let's be clear. What happened in 2020 was an effect. It was the result. It was not a cause. It's not like a bunch of CEOs all woke up one day, like in a Disney movie or something and said, "Well, you know what? It's time. It's time for us to take on." This is not at all what happened. It was very much in response to what a mass group of voices mobilized and activated on a grassroots basis using the tools that they had available to them during a pandemic, which was by and large, what social media. We weren't even going into office seeing each other, right?

Dr. Roberts:

So, raising their voices lifting consciousness signal to these leaders that they had to be responsive to the expectations of their current and future consumers and that's exactly what they did. So, I think when you're inside, there are ways to raise it that, like I said, are data driven, they're inquiry based, they're nuanced, you're inviting people to have a discovery conversation. But there are also ways in which people mobilize through grassroots activism and that has very much been a cornerstone of change throughout history.

John Haigh:

Interesting. So, there are a couple of questions here. I'm going to... one is "What role do personal and professional networks play facilitating a sense of belonging or inclusion at organizations? And how, if at all, is this different for black versus white employees?"

Dr. Roberts:

They play a critical role. There's data from what was formerly the Center for Talent Innovation. It was Sylvia Hewlett, and they renamed Coqual. Coqual is now their new name, but they have collected data on people's experiences of having access to sponsors and mentors, and how that correlates with their feelings of belongingness and inclusion in the organization.

Dr. Roberts:

Gallup has collected data for several years around employee engagement and they find that a key driver of employee engagement is the quality of relationship that you have with your managers and the extent to which you feel that you have friends at work, or even a friend, a good friend at work. Boiling down to feeling like you have somebody who has your back, that there's somebody who's in your corner, so that's pivotal for everybody. What's unique for black, brown professionals and other representatives, marginalized professionals, we often form these connections, these networks and relationships based on homophily, or similarities. We're attracted to people with whom we believe that we have some things in common and then we invest in building a relationship with those people.

Dr. Roberts:

We often avoid or overlook opportunities to build relationships across difference. So, 75% of white Americans don't have a single non-white friend. So, you come into the workforce, the odds are three out of four that you may be the person's closest form of exposure, personal exposure, beyond the media, TV, sports, whatever to a person of color. So, you're not just building an individual relationship, like "Oh, you're a stranger." You are also crossing some divides that haven't been crossed before. And that burden is often placed upon black and brown people, because in these integrated context, they tend to have more familiarity.

Dr. Roberts:

Now, I want to highlight an organization in Boston with whom I've worked very closely, The Partnership. So, The Partnership is a leadership development and talent management nonprofit that advises individuals and organizations around diversity and inclusion and the magic of the partnership is in their concern and attention to facilitating that process of networking and building social capital and they celebrated their 30th anniversary a few years ago, maybe, it was 2017. And so, I wrote a 30th anniversary report for them using multiple forms of data to understand why they had been so impactful over such a long period of time and a lot of it boiled down to these black and brown professionals saying, especially in the context of Boston, "I didn't feel like I belonged." Boston has a history of not being as welcoming and not being as inclusive. The Partnership was so intentional in helping me get connected and form professional or personal relationships that I was able to build a career here and become a leader. So, you can look up The Partnership for more around that question.

Dr. Roberts:

I also published an HBR article with Tony Mayo, who's my colleague. I should have mentioned that. Sorry. The Race, Work and Leadership book, I co-edited with Tony Mayo. He's an HBS professor now, and David Thomas, who I mentioned earlier and as part of the AASU50 work, Tony and I also conducted some research on this and we published a piece called Remote Networking for professionals of color that came out in HBR in the fall.

John Haigh:

So-

Dr. Roberts:

I'm very passionate about that topic [crosstalk 00:49:28].

John Haigh:

Here's an interesting question, which puts a slightly additional twist on it and it relates to black women. And in particular, how to black women influence the environment they work in when your experience and skills are delegitimized, not recognized. Multiple black professional women experience the need to present their reason for being at the table, which doesn't happen that I'm aware of to white female leaders.

Dr. Roberts:

So, let's talk about this. There's data, by the... my gosh, I'm losing... Nielsen. Nielsen that documents the ways in which black women are cultural carriers and trendsetters for the broader population. So, then even because statistically they don't represent more than 6% of the US population, but they do drive consumer behavior, fashion trends and other aspects of culture. Politically, black women have been very powerful as leaders. I can't think of a year in recent history in which that has been more evident regardless of your political ideology or affiliation.

Dr. Roberts:

One must acknowledge that Stacey Abrams was tremendously influential to shaping the governance of the United States for the next four years, both through the Georgia Presidential Electoral College Votes as well as the two senators that came out of Georgia, Warnock and Ossoff through political organizing, but that's not new. Stacey Abrams is not a unicorn, so she's not an anomaly. And neither is Kamala Harris or Rosalind Brewer, Ursula Burns, and many of the others that we named. There are a host of leaders, who are black women, who have been highly influential in our trends in politics.

Dr. Roberts:

What about in corporate America? What happens within that zone and domain? The person who's asking the question is posing a very legitimate one. There is a tension around authenticity and I alluded to this earlier. Latinos also expressed having this kind of resistance or pushback toward their interpersonal style, that their directness or their candor is interpreted as being overly critical, as being not approachable and often, if they don't have the sponsorship and the mentorship that they need, which as I mentioned before, a lot of underrepresented professionals lack, they will get passed over for leadership opportunities or even get demoted on the basis of how people interpret that interpersonal style. So, it is an issue.

Dr. Roberts:

Tony and I wrote a piece along with David and Robin. This was the first piece that came out of our AASU50 research and we wanted to know, "What of the black women who beat the odds?" Right? If that's what typically happens, how do black women beat the odds? And so, we looked at the women who graduated from Harvard Business School, who were statistically unlikely to reach the C-Suite, but they actually did and we interviewed half of them. They're less than 50 or 60. We interviewed half of them in two weeks. So, that just lets you know how small that sample set is.

Dr. Roberts:

But they talked about authenticity, finding ways to be true to themselves. They talked about the importance of sponsorship, which we've highlighted today, they've talked about agility, about keeping an open mind and taking advantage of new opportunities, understanding that they may have to move and live outside of the box, so to speak, from a career standpoint to get the best opportunities, and some of those happened to be glass cliff opportunities, but they had sponsors that had their back, so

they can learn and grow through the process. And they had emotional intelligence, so they talked about having to be sometimes hyper aware or hypersensitive of how they might be coming across, and learning how to navigate those kinds of dynamics and tensions.

John Haigh:

So, we're getting close, but I think we've got two questions to-

Dr. Roberts:

I'll answer fast. I'll answer fast.

John Haigh:

And I do want to point out to all of our participants that in the chat, there is now the link for The Partnership, Inc., in case you want to look at that. So this question, one of the things you had raised in one of your slides to make the environment more amenable to addressing some of these issues was embracing conversations about race and identity in a psychologically safe environment. And what do you think the characteristics are that constitute a psychologically safe environment that we should be striving for and creating in different organizations, whether that's corporations or at the Kennedy School or in Harvard?

Dr. Roberts:

Yeah, so and my rapid fire response to that question, because we could take an hour on that one alone. The rapid fire response to that question, I would just say, get ready to make some mistakes, get ready to break some eggs, and just be open to learning from that, expect that you're going to get some feedback. I think what happens is people anticipate that they will have these conversations, these difficult conversations and then after that, everything will be better and that's not the case. It can stir some things, it can prick some nerves, it can raise some tensions that have been lingering beneath the surface that people now feel that they can give voice to, especially people who have felt suppressed or marginalized and haven't been sharing aspects of their experience.

Dr. Roberts:

But members of the dominant group can be so unsettled by that that they can have an aversive reaction to it or there can be backlash around it or they can enter in these conversations and just not talk at all, because they're so scared, they're going to say the wrong thing. So, the fundamental principle of psychological safety is the ability to learn from mistakes. And that is so key here in having conversations about race, identity and other dimensions of difference is that we have to be able to acknowledge and learn from their mistakes and move forward, not get paralyzed.

John Haigh:

I mean, that's interesting when you put it back to your four freedoms at work, one of them is, and I know I'm abbreviating it a bit, but the freedom to fail.

Dr. Roberts:

Yeah, yeah.

John Haigh:

Right? So, last question, you've been doing this work for many years, where are you on the scale from despair to hope to optimism? What do you assess to be the mood of the country and the business community to engage in this work?

Dr. Roberts:

I would say convicted and you can read that in multiple ways, I think. Some people year have been convicted, like their hand got caught in the candy jar or on the barrel of a pistol and that was in full view. And so, now we're going to have to call that to account. There's also the conviction to say the work can't stop. I'll just use this as a closing comment.

Dr. Roberts:

One of them, it was a roller coaster, okay? 2020 was a roller coaster, but I would say one of my deepest moments of despair was when an Executive Order came through from the White House that said that no federal agencies or affiliates were allowed to teach or offer training or any kind of education around concepts related to basically what I just shared for you today and I just felt like that was a low and it was precarious. It was precarious, and we could have easily, as you all know, over the past two months, still been going down that path. And I haven't recovered from that emotionally, so I take it as conviction that the work has to go on. We have work to do and the work has to go on and it takes bravery from all of us to keep doing it.

John Haigh:

So on behalf of certainly myself, as well as all of the participants, I just want to say thanks for taking the time to talk with us today. I am going to give one last plug. I mean, this book, Race, Work and Leadership, I mean, there are so many terrific authors in here. Multiple chapters by Laura and her colleagues and I think it was enlightening for me to look through and read and I would encourage all of you to look at it. There's so much you can learn from that book.

John Haigh:

And with that, thank you all for joining and hopefully, we get a chance to see you at more Center for Business and Government seminars in the future coming weeks. And Laura, just thank you so much for taking the time.

Dr. Roberts:

Thank you. You take care.