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DIVERSE IT WITH SELENA TEMPLETON

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Bill Proudman Talks White Privilege, the Use of Curiosity, and Whose Job It Is to Be Educators of Equality

Podcast Transcript

Selena: [00:00:00] So why don't you start by just telling us a little bit about who you are and what your background is.

Bill: [00:00:05] Yeah well for me I've been doing leadership development work for 40 years, basically all of my adult working life. And 30 years ago I had an experience where I was in a two-hour workshop with a man from the Bay Area who opened my window – a door to the parallel universe related to issues of diversity and inclusion of race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and, you know, largely as a straight white man I had been oblivious. I sort of knew that conceptually, but I had been oblivious to any intersection of how those issues affected my own personal life, let alone personally or professionally.

So that started my 30 year journey which then ended up in the creation of our consulting firm 20 years ago and for the last 20 years we've been working with executives, mid- to senior-level managers, not just white men but men and women of color, white women, white men, primarily specializing in the engagement of white men because of trends that we had seen and continue to see happening where that group largely is oftentimes on the outside looking in when it comes to any issue of inclusion in a business culture.

Selena: [00:01:19] Before we get on to actually talking more about this, I'm always so curious – and I do hate to generalize and stereotype and all the rest of this – but briefly what was your upbringing like? Because you mentioned that, as a straight white male you are oblivious to a lot of the issues that were going on for minorities and women. And yet you were able to change. You were able to see things and change. So I'm curious about your your upbringing, you know, what kind of parents you had –

Bill: [00:01:50] Well, I'm 62 years old. I'm a child of the '60s, grew up in the '60s, and I grew up in a small working-class bedroom community outside Philly in Pennsylvania called King of Prussia. And at that time this little bedroom community was a largely white working slash middle class, more sort of working class folks. And when I look back in history at that time I am amazed at what was happening all around me. And the little bubble that I was in was largely oblivious to that, other than what would show up on the evening news. So it was pretty insulated.

I think of my high school class of 500 kids, I think there were five or six kids of color. I just reconnected with one of them who's a lawyer, has been a lawyer all of her adult career, and we chatted about what her experience was like in that same high school that I went to. And we literally were walking in different worlds. She had to obviously walk in mine all the time, but I was oblivious to hers. And I think for me one of the most formative experiences happened at age 16 when I had the fortune and the privilege to be an exchange student and I spent a year outside of the U.S. in New Zealand, which is English speaking so there wasn't that language issue, but was the first time that I was brought to the realization that I

actually had a culture and that culture shaped my values, beliefs and ultimately influenced my behavior. And that experience has led to a lifelong curiosity and desire to be in cultures of difference, mostly because I have learned the most about myself when I am out of my own comfort zone. And so there were many formative experiences obviously along the way. You don't just sort of flip a switch and all of a sudden get clued in to this stuff.

Selena: [00:03:39] That makes a lot of sense, that really underscores the idea of being able to walk in somebody else's shoes at some point. Because you don't know what you don't know. There's ignorance and then there's stupidity. And if you don't know something, how do you know that?

Bill: [00:04:09] Yeah. Well, Selena, I think what you just said is really significant: there's ignorance and then there's stupidity. My experience of working with my group, and for much of the last 30 years of my working life was with straight white men, is that lots of times the ignorance gets interpreted by others as stupidity. And I think it's a barrier for many white men because of their unconscious incompetence. Based on the groups that they were born into that they don't even know are there. In other words, straight white men in the U.S. are a little bit like fish in water. If I were to make sort of comparison, generalization, then if a fish had a brain and it could speak, and it was asked "what do you think about the water?" it would likely say "what are you talking about?" because a fish out of the water is dead. So it doesn't realize what it's swimming in and I think for a lot of us that are growing up as white men, straight white men, in this country where we've largely been oblivious to culture – we think that's something everybody else has – and add to that the added piece around the rugged individualism of the culture that many of us were inculcated in. There's a tendency then to hear people, when they talk about their experiences that are not white men and they talk about some of the struggles that they've experienced when they bump into other white men, for a lot of white guys it feels very personal. It feels like "why are you angry? you're attacking me." That can also lead to a further erosion of any potential partnership that we have. And so it's very complex.

It's also really driven me to say that engaging my group, engaging myself, is really important because issues of equality, in equity and work in particular, have a business imperative if we really believe that we want to recruit and retain the best talent. Not the best talent that is most like us, but we're truly saying the best talent. That takes rigor and persistence and a lot of continued self-awareness, not just on the part of white men but on all leaders' part.

Selena: [00:06:03] Absolutely. And I'm so excited to dive into that more. My mind is just racing here. But before we do I want to ask you about the name White Men as Full Diversity Partners. I'm curious to know how you got the name and what kind of misinterpretations

have there been about it.

Bill: [00:06:23] Yeah, it's always a great story and I always lead with this when I'm working with groups. I'm going to be speaking next week at a conference in South Carolina and we're going to talk about this given what's happened in Charlottesville for example. So when I am on an airplane and it comes up, as it sometimes does, "What do you do for a living?" I have a really interesting choice point. If I say something sort of esoteric like "I do organizational development leadership for executives around the intersection culture," that's pretty benign, it's left alone, it's interesting, we talk about other things. But I find if I lead with "I'm the founding partner and the name of the firm is White Men as Full Diversity Partners, about 80 percent of the time that ends the conversation. You just start to see the wheels turning with this person and two things are usually happening – at least my data collection tells me two things. One is they might assume that we're a white supremacist group that is going around the country trying to sort of reclaim the homeland or something like that. Or the other end of that continuum is that we're the PC police and our job is to go around and beat the whatever out of white guys or give them frontal lobotomies or whatever because they're the ones causing all this lack of movement around inclusion. But actually, the name of the firm came from a pattern that in the late '80s early '90s I noticed over and over and over. So when I was working with a senior leadership team and the issue of inclusion came up, almost always this is a very predictable pattern: the white men on that team, from a place of really positive intent, would always outsource the issue to anybody else on the team who didn't look like them.

So if there were a couple of white women on the team they were automatically tasked with "great, you're going to teach us about not just gender but about diversity." If there was a man or woman of color, "great, speak for everybody not just of your group but everybody of color across the entire globe." If there was actually someone who was out as gay or lesbian, same thing. And so putting that person, the "other," whoever the other was, in the position of educating, mentoring, coaching.... I saw this happen routinely and pervasively. It wasn't intended, it wasn't malicious, but the pattern was consistently there. And the other thing that went with that pattern is that these white men were really well intended: I want to learn, I want to lead more effectively. They would look past it themselves and each other. So they were put on point and on notice from a positive intent that people on their team that didn't look like them – and I said this is not a sustainable proposition. If we believe as I do that one of the imperatives of all leaders is to create an environment where everybody feels valued, heard and respected, that's not just the responsibility of some based on their representation of their gender, their race, their orientation or whatever. That's a leader's job. So hence the firm was born. We don't just work with white men but we're about bringing that group at the leadership level back into this, not only conversation but the very heavy lifting work with "how do you create and sustain cultures of full inclusion?"

Selena: [00:09:33] That sounds great and you actually answered a question that I was going to ask which was I wanted to know whether these men who are pushing that off onto the other people, women or people of color, a lot of them probably thought that they were doing the right thing: "Well what do I know about diversity? You probably know better, and you go for it."

Bill: [00:09:53] Absolutely. As my colleague, the guy that helped start the firm with me, one of the people, Michael Welp, he did a Ph.D. on this topic and one of the things he found in his research with his dissertation is that many women and people of color, particularly in the business environment, are incredibly exhausted and fatigued because of the continued heavy lifting that they have to do to be constantly on point as the educators, the mentors, the coaches, the referees. I mean they're just disproportionately passed with "you're in charge of this topic" and actually when they speak their truth they also then receive the other very end of that spectrum which is now they're accused of pandering to self-interest. No one has ever accused me when I'm passionate about this topic of pandering to my self-interest. Sometimes they really don't know what to do with me because they've never seen a passionate straight white guy talking about this topic, because it's largely been associated with, you know, everybody who's not straight, male and white.

Selena: [00:10:59] Part of the reason I was so excited to talk to you on this podcast is because I don't get a chance to talk to a lot of straight white males about this. A lot of my guests, and they're all fantastic, primarily are women and a lot of them are of color. And it's always fantastic getting that sort of viewpoint from somebody who's in it. But I'm so curious to be talking to somebody who is quote unquote sort of outside that bubble, as you were mentioning, your high school experience was a completely different one from the black woman that you spoke with. And do you find that you are still one of few – obviously your cofounder Michael is there too, he's also a white male – but you do find that you are just one of a few straight white males who is really passionate about this?

Bill: [00:11:51] Well I still find ourselves an anomaly in this space with people who are doing pretty amazing courageous work around the globe related to leadership and cultures and inclusion. What's shifted in the 20-30 years that I've been involved with is actually more straight white men – and what's shifted even better, and that's actually hopeful for me, is I get to work with incredibly courageous leaders, men and women, of color, straight, gay, white, etc. around the globe who have taken this issue on and understand its relevance and its applicability to not just making their business profitable but actually creating a culture where people feel valued, heard and then they bring their best to work every day. Some of the shifts that have had happened and are happening that seem, for a lot of white men – and this piece of research is Catalyst (which is a really well-known 50 year old organization that has done research on the role of women in particular in global business for the last 50 years). Catalyst did a study in 2009 and they found the three major obstacles for

men, not just white men but for men in general, to be visible champions related to gender equality, was apathy, fear and ignorance. And the apathy is a really important one for me because a lot of white men view inclusion and diversity as about all those other groups that have been historically marginalized or sort of cut out of representation particularly at senior leadership levels.

If we only think of the issues about those groups and we don't understand our own self-interest in a non-inclusive culture, how that's impacting me personally as a person and also a white man as well as other white men, I can't stay in it long term, is what the research says, which has certainly been my personal experience. So if I'm on board to help you and other women just to create a more equitable environment related to your gender, I can deal with that short term. Long term, when it gets hard and I don't understand what's in it for me, there's a correlation that I've seen where men sort of fall by the wayside. They get fatigued, they get overwhelmed.

It's sort of like a guy said to me once, he said "Bill, I'm so confused. It's as simple as in the morning I open the door for my female colleague, I get chewed out for doing that. I don't open the door for my female colleague, I get chewed out for doing that as well. I don't know what to do. I avoid all situations where I open the door." I'm like really? So people are dragging around this feedback loop because they're looking – I think part of what's happening is they're looking for a "one size fits all," they want a rule that applies to all people and last time I checked no two of us were the same. So there's some complexity in how we create an environment where someone I'm working with feels heard and respected as well as I do. It's not simply a rule book that I stick in my wallet and say "Every situation I need to do this." Part of that is I've got to understand my self-interest in that. How do I benefit and what's the cost for me to continue to be in systems that marginalize some people, not because of their talent and ability, but simply because of some demographic group that they were born into.

Selena: [00:15:08] I can understand that idea of being exhausted. That example you had of the man "do I open the door for a woman and get chewed up, do I not open the door for a woman and get chewed up?" – I hear a lot of men in my own life too, on business levels or just personal levels, say "I don't know what to do anymore, I'm kind of afraid to get chewed out for doing one thing or another." And just out of curiosity, what would your reaction be to a man who said that to you? How would you advise him?

Bill: [00:15:36] Well I'd say first of all I'm sorry that that's happening for you. And then secondly, are you interested in trying to find another way of operating? So in other words, you've got to appeal immediately to self-interest because if it's simply I'm just venting because I feel I'm hurt or marginalized or I'm just getting hammered because I'm a white guy – just take the most recent example that's been out in the public, the manifesto from

the software engineer at Google. You know, there's an increasing backlash that we're noticing and particularly in the tech industry but it's obviously in lots of other industries and generally as well. For in this case, a lot of men are really seeing women's equality or what they've equated as gender equality being women's equality, as antithetical to the opportunities that they have and they're looking at it through a Zero-sum lens: you win, now I lose. Or as some guys say "why are they taking my job from me?" And my question to them always is "where did you get the notion that it was your job to begin with? I thought we were competing and actually hiring the best talent, not the best talent that happened to look like me."

So part of that is not to hit them with a hammer. I mean, my experience, particularly with white men in this country, is that they have been so beaten up over this topic for the last 30 or 40 years that they've come to look at any sort of inclusion or diversity with a sense of "am I going to get blamed again for all the ills on the planet?" Or "it's all my fault." And our work is to say "no, this isn't your fault AND you're responsible for understanding how this inequity continues to plague us." And then really impact business results and also morale and engagement, not just of women and people of color, but also of white men. Are you interested in being a part of that solution or not? So it's really appealing to self-interest. And first of all, it's about validating what their reality is. And I also say "your view of the world is not wrong, but it's likely incomplete."

So for example, yesterday I was at a large tech company that we're doing a lot of work with, had a group of executives for a day, was a relatively short little session, and I had two white guys who were, for me, really typical of white men. We were talking about the concept of white male privilege. You know, these are the unacknowledged invisible benefits that don't even look like benefits that come to, in this case, a person because of their skin color and their gender, and it's not so much what I have is a benefit, it's what I don't have to negotiate or think about often. And these gentlemen, the word privilege has been so politicized in this country recently that it's sort of like a four letter word. What a lot of white men hear when they're told they have privilege, they think they're being told "you have gotten everything given to you and you haven't had to work hard." And I would say to white men "you have had to work really hard, that's not the issue here. AND, because of how you came onto the planet, the family that you're in, the country that you were born into, the language you speak, the color of your skin, you have things that you do not have to navigate and negotiate."

When you're the contrarian on the team, no one ever assumes you're speaking for all white men, versus a woman when she is saying something like "this is happening because of gender," she is accused of pandering to self-interest, she's seen as playing the gender card. When there's a major event in this country like what just happened, that incredible tragedy in Las Vegas, communities of color are really quick to say "I hope the suspect is not

someone of my group." Suppose this guy who did what he did in Las Vegas turned out to be another white guy – I'm not worried that that gets projected onto me by other people. When I'm in the convenience store, nobody's following me or store security is not following me around generally. After Tim McVeigh did what he did years ago in Oklahoma City blowing up the federal building with fertilizer in a rental truck, the next day when I went to rent a rental truck to take my kid's stuff to college, no one ever saw me as a potential terrorist. That's all privilege. I get to simply be Bill. It's not my fault but I don't have to understand what that's like. So helping them understand that and not to say this does not mean that you haven't worked hard is an important set of concepts to help help them sort of work their way through.

Selena: [00:20:15] Very well said. Thank you for all of that. And it really does come down to a lot of this polarizing – politicizing of the word privilege – but also polarizing, this constant polarizing of "us and them" whether it's gender or skin color or anything else. I've known a lot of people in whatever aspect it is that they are uninformed or are ignorant. It's asking the other person to help them see it from their point of view. And that's why, going back to the door opening thing, a few years ago I had a male friend who was complaining about that. And after he finished sort of complaining about that, which I understand you want to do the right thing and you don't don't know what it is. And I said "well how about, why don't you ask me? Here I am a woman. How about you ask me what I prefer or what I think of the whole door opening situation?" And it hadn't really occurred to him to to ask the question. He asked me and I gave him my point of view, which of course is not necessarily every woman's point of view, but he had a little bit more of an understanding just by being able to walk not even a mile, maybe a couple of feet, in my shoes and just understand what it's like on the other side of the equation.

Bill: [00:21:32] Well yeah, Selena, what I think that you've hit upon is, again, an erosion that I've seen certainly in the last decade or 15 years where, because of the increase in the use of social media and also the incredible expansion of how Americans get their news, the sources that we get it from, there's hundreds now of news sources. And the data shows that most of us choose to get our news source from the station or the source that is most like our own political or philosophical bent. And because of the advent of technology in our pocket, the world is simply a couple clicks away. There is this mindset that we have that we're really well informed. My experience is it feels like we're less informed. I hang out with and listen to people who only agree with me for sport. I and others demonize the other side of the aisle or whatever that happens to be. We always say "I fear the most but I know the least" so that whole fear and anxiety of "other" gets like pouring gas on a small fire and it erupts into a large blaze. And we're seeing that in corporate life, we're also seeing that just in society in general, not just in this country but around the globe. And a lot of our work in our little firm is with corporations but it's really about creating communities that are willing

to stay in dialogue with each other particularly when they don't agree with each other.

Bringing this into a business context, in my little firm when, as an owner, everybody is agreeing with me around the table, I'm suspicious of them telling me the truth. I don't pay them just to agree with me. I want to see a difference of perspective. And so that is an art form for leaders to create conditions where people tell us their truth and the collective truth actually helps us make better decisions because we get all different possibilities rather than sort of a groupthink mentality where we just want to move at the speed of light and you just sort of go along to get along and after a while you just sort of give up because it's like just tell the boss what he or she wants to hear. And that takes rigor, that takes time, but also the data suggests that we're making better decisions. And the skills that leaders, moving into the next couple of decades with increasingly global and more diverse teams, are not the old skills that were imparted by my parents of their generation and what I'm attempting to teach to my kids and their next generation. I mean this is evolving. And so, with that, we too as leaders have to evolve in how we lead more inclusively.

Selena: [00:24:23] And after doing this work for I guess about 20 years or so, do you feel that it's gotten harder or easier and do you have maybe some examples of 20 years ago versus today?

Bill: [00:24:32] Well I think it's a yes and yes – it's harder and it's easier. So think about it, Selena. With a name of a company White Men as Full Diversity Partners, that name in itself acts as its own screen. I mean the people who we end up working and the companies that we're involved with have figured out they want to do the work. They've already got a connection. And we're also usually dealing with leaders who have lots of anxiety and concerns about it but they're willing to be courageous. So I'm seeing an uptick in the last 20 years in the use of courage by leaders of both genders and all nationalities and ethnicities. And that gives me great hope. I am incredibly optimistic about the future of the world. Now, having said that, on some days and maybe on the same day I'm incredibly anxious and greatly concerned about the state of the world and where we're headed and the amount of differences and what we go to war over as countries of different ideologies, etc. So I think it's existing simultaneously.

Examples – I'll just tell a very personal example of a gentleman that I've known for ten years, a white guy from the Midwest. You might call him a classic conservative white man with an engineering background. Well-intended great guy from the work that he's done for the last 10 years. His name is Lee and one of the philosophies that's important to him is that he expects – and he runs the North American sales organization of three or 4,000 people. One of the things he expects of his employees is he wants people to manage across and down but also manage up. So they influence people below their peers and above them. And he'd been doing a lot of work on race and there was one guy in his organization he had

known for about 20 years who happened to be an African-American gentleman. And one day out of the blue Lee, who's white, said to this black man, he said "I'm wondering if you'd be willing to talk with me about what it's like for you to work at our company as a black man." That was a courageous question. This gentleman had never been asked that, certainly by Lee. At first glance he was sort of taken aback, like "what's behind this? is this a trick question?" Because it's, you know, from my experience for a lot of people of color their radar is up about "is this a really authentic curiosity question or is this a question that's disguised as a statement?"

So the gentleman thought for a little bit and then he said, "You know Lee, I've been hearing you say you really think it's important for employees to manage down, across and manage up." And he said "I feel like my career's gotten stalled and I've never thought about this until just now when you asked me the question, but one of the things that I've just noticed in you asking the question is I've really struggled in my career managing up, speaking truth to powerful white men in the organization, including you." And he said when he grew up, in rural Georgia, his father coached and taught him to be very careful about what he says to white men, particularly older white men. And part of that was because he was afraid of being physically accosted, hurt or in some cases killed. And it wasn't just his father but a lot of black men did the same thing for him, and he said – this is when he was a child and he had never connected these dots before – and he said "I think that may have spilled over into making my struggle engaging with you and other white men in our company more difficult than it needs to be." So Lee, hearing this, was dumbfounded, his mouth was open.

And now he asked a really important question, I think probably the most significant thing that Lee said. Instead of saying "Ok what are we going to do to fix this problem?" he said "What, if anything, would you like me to do about that?" So he asked the question rather than assuming that what needed to happen was X, Y or Z. And the black gentleman said "I don't know." But he said "it's incredibly comforting for me that we are actually having this conversation. So number one, you inviting the conversation, continues to do that." So they agreed that they would pick up the phone whenever to talk about whatever. And for this gentleman, this was the first time anyone ever realized that he might be, simply because of his skin color, he might be having a different experience in this company than some of his white colleagues. And it wasn't that anything got fixed, but for me that story is really indicative of how the use of curiosity, of when I am noticing difference and I'm looking at patterns and I'm interrupting patterns and I'm asking questions and the questions are coming from a place of curiosity, how important that set of discussions is rather than "I need to know what I'm going to do so this can go away and I never feel this ever again".

Selena: [00:29:39] Gosh, thank you for that story. That was actually really moving and I just love the openness on both sides of it. And that's how things evolve and grow and change and get better. It's just by being open and just listening to the other person and, as

you say, not leaping out and trying to fix it in a way that you think it ought to be fixed.

Bill: [00:30:00] Well think about this, Selena. I mean for this gentleman, that story is just the tip of the iceberg. So here's a company that is all about spreadsheets, results, everything is a 1 or a 0 or a yes or no, which is most every client we work with. Their value is based on delivering results, as it should be. This conversation about how you create inclusivity is not simply a laundry list of "here's what I've got to do to fix this." It is about being able to stand in the fire without being burnt and not shrink back, to be able to ask questions, to be curious, to notice patterns, to intervene with others with grace and dignity rather than, you know, it's like don't kill a mosquito with a hatchet. This is the notion that for me and most executives that I work with, men and women, to come to work saying "how can I do good?" We don't come to work and say "how bad can I make my colleague feel or invalidated or diminished?". We've done a good job of getting those egregious forms of mistreatment out of the workplace, or if not out, we have a system to take care of this. I'm talking about the stuff that happens on a daily basis that I do from a place of positive intent and I have not a clue how it lands on a colleague, maybe even another white male colleague. That's the work. And it's ongoing work. It's a little bit like safety in manufacturing, right? You don't think of safety as a project that you're going to fix after four staff meetings or one quarter and then never think about it. It's a mindset that lays over everything that happens for me and an inclusion mindset is the same thing and it should lay over all leadership actions, actually all partnership actions.

Selena: [00:31:35] That was brilliantly said and as I look at the clock here I know that we're going to be winding up now and I think that's a lovely ending point which is: it's not going to be fixed over four staff meetings or in one quarter, as you say. It's an ongoing...I was going to say struggle, I guess it is a struggle, but an ongoing project, perhaps, that we all have to continually be reevaluating and figuring out that for one generation certain things work and the next generation has to tackle it from a new angle and a new mindset. So just to wrap up here, I wonder if you would like to leave us with any last thoughts or best practices or first steps that people can take within the workplace.

Bill: [00:32:45] Yeah there's a couple of things. First of all, everybody has work to do, this is not a "I've reached my destination" or "my job is to go help poor souls that don't understand this." So this is journey work. The more I know, the less I know, and I'm actually more confused about many of these topics now than I was 30 years ago when I was having a great professional life but was mostly asleep at the wheel. So part of that is having patience. What do you need to do to stay in it for the long haul? I think along with that also is: are you able to make mistakes? Malcolm Gladwell's notion that it takes 10,000 hours for us to actually perfect a skill – last time I checked I think that's three and a half years of 8-5 worktime on a 50-week a year timeline. And so we don't just flip a switch with this stuff. And also when we learn new things, we make mistakes so can we create an environment

where we can metaphorically fall down with each other and it's not cataclysmic to either the business or to our partnerships with our colleagues. So what does it take to hang in there? And then lastly, I love the Gandhi quote about "be the change you wish to see." That's the only thing I absolutely have 100 percent control over – how I show up in the next interaction in the next moment. So I can influence lots of other things and people but I don't need permission is how I show up. So it starts with me and it starts with you. I'd leave it there.

Selena: [00:34:04] Wonderful. Bill, this has been great. And why don't you give the website of White Men as Full Diversity Partners so people can check it out.

Bill: [00:34:12] Sure. You can find more about us at WMFDP.com So William Mary Frank David Paul dot com. Selena, thanks so much for the opportunity for us chat about these topics – as you can tell they're near and dear to my heart.