

Audio Title: Shawna Gann True Colors Consulting, Organizational Fairness, and Leading with Intention

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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of *The Book Stoop*.

And if you are new here, let me help you get to where you're going.

So, you're gonna go past the corner of bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you will find our stoop.

Our host, Amanda Lytle, will be there to welcome you to the conversation. *The Book Stoop* is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers – our favorite people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing. Now, come on in and meet Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks, Bex. Hey, friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, *The Book Stoop*. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on *The Book Stoop*, I'm speaking with Shawna Gann. As a certified diversity professional and scholar practitioner, Shawna successfully marries business psychology, learning theory, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) principles to support organizations as they advance DEI practices in the workplace and in everyday social situations.

Though she works with employees at all levels of an organization supporting the many dimensions of diversity, she specializes in racial ambiguity, authenticity, and belonging.

Though her world travels, Shawna has immersed herself in global and social culture, granting a fresh perspective and the ability to think broadly which has augmented her work as an effective and impactful consultant, educator, and doctoral candidate.

In the conversation today, we dive into organizational fairness, the backstory to True Colors Consulting, and Shawna's journey from the classroom to the world of organizational leadership and then into business psychology, and her continuing studies.

Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share *The Book Stoop* with your community. If you are loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram @rowhousepub. Every share,

5-star rating, and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we are super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on *The Book Stoop* with a rather fitting question, so what are you reading these days?

Shawna Gann: These days, I am reading, I forgot to answer that question. Let me go grab my book real book. It's not like any beach reading, if that's all right.

Amanda Lytle: Of course.

Shawna Gann: But it's called – let's see if I could say it right, [0:02:46] [Indiscernible] or something like that. It's a book for DEI professionals or diversity, equity, inclusion professionals who are looking at the statistics involved with assessments around DEI. And it's especially interesting to me as non-beach reading as it is because it is written by IO psychologists or industrial organizational psychologists and my studies are in my business psychology. So it's marrying the two disciplines that I work with. So that's what I'm reading right now.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. No. It's incredible how you are able to consume content that you are genuinely passionate about, that you genuinely care and are interested in. I mean that's everything. So yeah, thank for sharing.

Shawna Gann: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: So you've actually kind of segued into a question. We are going to just change the order because I was going to ask you this later but because you've just said the word organization, I want to know what organizational fairness means to you.

Shawna Gann: Ooh! Yeah. Well, I think of it in terms of organizational justice because that is an actual study, area of study. And it's a great question because I've had this conversation with a couple of people because of the semantics involved with the word justice. Justice can be something that you're seeking in order to right a wrong or it can be this sense of fairness.

So in terms of fairness, it means that there is equity, equity in the things that you receive at work, equity in the way that you are treated, equity in terms of the way things are done, so procedural. Yeah, it comes down to equity.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you for that. So now, I'll ask you the question I was going to dive in with, which is I'd love to know the backstory to True Colors Consulting because that's not just work I think someone would fall into. I think that there's a lot of love and intention but also, just drive that has to go into that work, courage, it could be integrity. So yeah, let's hear the backstory.

Shawna Gann: Yeah. So once upon a time, I was an elementary school teacher.

Amanda Lytle: OK. OK.

Shawna Gann: I taught really all grades because I was a trailing spouse. My husband was active duty in the Air Force, which meant we have lived in lots of really cool places, including outside of the US. So right now, I'm in the DC Metro area but we lived for about 15 years in Europe and a few countries as well, as in Asia, we lived in South Korea.

And so as an educator in those places, that meant doing more than just what you would expect for a teacher in one space with children who are probably similar in terms of culture, etc. And so I was teaching in spaces where in one case, I actually had to teach in two languages, trying to bring kids together and parents together and colleagues together in very different cultural settings. And so organizations in themselves already have a culture but then you take that and layer on to that the different places that people are from and what they bring with them.

So this has always been present with me, diversity, equity, inclusion. As I progressed in my career, I decided I wanted to go back to learn some more because I'm a forever student. And I had already completed my masters in Curriculum Instruction and Assessment, so I wasn't sure that I wanted to go back for a second masters. A friend of mine suggested that I go to – I look into organizational leadership because by then, I had already been beginning to do some policy work and some workshops, trainings, and things for other teachers within my district and so on.

So I registered for courses, began a program at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology for organizational leadership and it was in that first course that I learned about IO psychology. I had never heard of it before. But then when I looked it up, and I was like, "Oh, my God! These are my people." This is what I've been looking for and I had no idea.

So I actually left the classroom. 2016 was my last year as a formal educator. And I moved into this world of organizational leadership upfront, but I ended up transferring into business psychology because that was more fitting. And from there, at least by that time, I was working for the Department of State in a role where I could really apply these skills and it was just so fulfilling to do the thing that I had been wanting to do. And with the Department of State, that meant again, bringing together various cultures, people who may be aren't used to working together, lots of language barriers, all of that stuff, which is a hundred percent related to diversity, equity, inclusion.

And so, I guess the final step toward True Colors was – well, let me pause because there is this interim step, let's say.

Amanda Lytle: OK.

Shawna Gann: While I was studying business psychology, a friend of mine recommended that I start a podcast, which was Our True Colors. So Our True Colors actually came first.

Amanda Lytle: OK.

Shawna Gann: And it had a lot to do with my study on my specific niche area, which is racial ambiguity and in particular, for multiracial women in the workplace. And so, I started Our True Colors where I wanted to be able to talk with folks who not only are – not only self-identify as multiracial but also have other aspects to their identity such as being a third culture person or third culture kid like my kids who grew up outside of the United States.

In addition to that, people who – I get asked the question like, what's your background? Where are you from? What are you? Those kinds of questions. And so, this is – I'm on the fourth season of Our True Colors. But somewhere in there, so that was the interim step, I also went – so I went from the classroom to consulting and I did management consulting, but I always specialized in diversity, equity, inclusion, DEI.

And after a couple of stints doing some work for other folks, it was time for me to go out on my own, so I did. And now, that's how we have True Colors Consulting, which is specific to DEI.

Amanda Lytle: OK. I have a couple of different questions. I'm not sure which way I'm going to shoot here. But I personally am really interested in the idea of psychology in your work and how psychology plays into it. I love how the mind works. The mind is fascinating, right?

Shawna Gann: Yeah.

Amanda Lytle: And the patterning that we just fall into and are just immersed in by design, right? So I'm curious about some of the biggest aha moments or biggest takeaways and it's a bit open-ended for a reason, some of your own biggest learnings in the process when it comes to psychology.

Shawna Gann: Yeah. Biggest takeaways, well, the thing that makes business psychology cool or OI psych is that a lot of times when people are looking at businesses in terms of the health of the business, they are looking at that bottom line, what's coming in versus what's going out. And oftentimes, people who are the decision-makers are focused on scaling up or growing. Business psychology focuses on how people behave in organizations. And that contributes to the health of an organization.

I think in terms of the biggest takeaways for me, it's just – for me, this is me personally, I was shocked and very pleasantly pleased at how transferrable my skills as an educator were to this work because as a teacher, I was doing strategic planning, long-term, short-term goals. I was looking at where students were, that would be the same as a current state assessment and looking at where they needed to go to build that plan to make that happen.

The number of programs and things that you have to juggle brings it out of being just project management into program management. And then if you are involved in any extra things, that are just those other ancillary aspects to work that can come to play.

So in all, I always had to be attentive to the behaviors of my clients, whether my clients were elementary school kids, their parents, or executives and large organizations. So I think that has been the most eye-opening for me.

Making that step was pretty scary, moving from being a teacher to corporate world. But then once I got into that and realized how much teachers do and how prepared I actually was to do that, it was amazing.

Amanda Lytle: So interesting about the project to program management, just to segue of that, now in that work like you said, even I can personally see the parallel in like, of course, this would be work for you to step into just because of all of the things that you're juggling at once in order to step into a role like that. I'm just wondering if in the work that you are doing, are people coming to you or are you going in or what's your preference?

Shawna Gann: Yeah. I mean I think it's both, right? In terms of marketing what I do, that's me reaching out, networking, knowing people. I genuinely, I mean this isn't just work that is my job. I enjoy this and it's my lived experience as well. Everybody has an identity or several that we are negotiating in various spaces. So this is super important to me as an individual, not just as a professional.

But most often, people are coming to me. The truth is, a lot of it I think, a lot of the interests in work in DEI and as it pertains to business psychology. That interest has increased since the murder of George Floyd in 2020. There were organizations who vowed that they were going to do better by their black employees and all the things, all the things. I'm sure you and your listeners probably remember the many statements that appeared on LinkedIn and everywhere really.

What is interesting though and something that I caution people about is it has now been more than two years and I think that interest has waned. And what I fear is that people who may have put together some initiatives in their workplaces such as like training programs and things like that, I'm afraid that they think that they've checked the box and it's done. Yeah, we had training. We know what unconscious bias training is. We are good.

And the real truth is that society changes every day. You just turn on the news for a few minutes and you will see something new. And that means that as humans, we are changing, and we are having to negotiate and navigate our spaces differently every day. So this is never-ending work. I don't think it's something that you can check a box and say we did it.

And I often tell my clients, "I'm not in the business of handing out band-aids actually. I'm here for the long term, for the long haul because I care about this, and I care about your people."

The other aspect of this that where DEI is married with business psychology in this work is oftentimes DEI is housed under HR, Human Resources. And I think that that's a mistake a lot of times because Human Resources, while there are lots of paths in that or lots of elements to HR,

oftentimes it is, in terms of employee relations, it's kind of reactive. Something has happened, somebody report something to HR.

In the work that I do, I want to set organizations up to be proactive so that if they're already aware of what a diverse workforce should be and look like through all levels in the organization, if they are operating with organizational fairness that you mentioned earlier, that equity, and if they are employing inclusive practices, their people will feel like they belong and there are really far fewer messages or reports going to HR from employee relations.

I feel like I talk a lot. I'm sorry. I hope that answered your question.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, it's great. No, the reactivity piece is so – I've seen that in reality. I've seen how that plays out in a variety of workplaces and I think that that's where I would see such value in starting from the ground up with a new business so that they are set up for success structurally and are just laced with values that are so important from day one. But I'm sure that that comes with hurdles. I'm sure that even starting from there comes with hurdles because as you've mentioned, even with identity and people navigating identity and showing up trying to be their most authentic self in different places then you add in personality and add in every other thing.

Shawna Gann: Absolutely.

Amanda Lytle: Do you find that sharing your own personal journey either with identity or DEI work or like how much personal sharing do you do? Because I find even as an educator, which I'm sure you can relate to, is a lot of the times, that's where the depth of empathy can come is brought by sharing. So, do you share often?

Shawna Gann: That is a fantastic question and I have discussed this with a lot of my colleagues and other folks that I network with in the DEI community. I try to keep a very careful balance. So the quick answer is yes, I do share. Part of that is because of positionality. I mentioned earlier that I focus on racial ambiguity and I'm a racially ambiguous person. A lot of times, people can't guess what my ancestry is. And so, that's a question I get asked a lot.

So I often will position myself and tell people, "I'm a black woman. I recognize that I have light skin and certain phenotypical features of the way that I look that could confuse some folks. And so then I talk about what racial ambiguity is and that leads me into the discussion of race as a social construct. So people can kind of begin to relax when you start to say all the heavy stuff upfront and if I'm relaying it – if it's tied to me and my identity, they don't have to do that for themselves. They can kind of relax.

Now, the flipside is, I do share other things about my journey as a person and what that means for me and all the other interactions I have folks with different identities than mine. But I try not to overshare because that could risk that I am centering myself rather than allowing the people who I'm there to serve their opportunities to sit in that space and explore identity. If I'm always sharing, sharing, when did they get to share?

And also, I'm really careful because DEI is very heavy. It's very sensitive. And there are folks who will really, really look to me and to other folks in this field as models. And so, I want to be able to provide some modeling but also, help people feel comfortable to explore their own identities.

The other aspect that's kind of slippery there is as I mentioned, it's very heavy, so a little bit, I have to protect myself because every time I share something that happened to me or something that I've experienced, that is opening up a box of racial trauma or other sort of identity-related trauma. That weighs on you over and over and over again. So I'm also careful for myself.

Amanda Lytle: Of course. And is there an offering of how people, almost like a self-care practice like a mental health, mental and emotional health care practice that either you offer or practice yourself in order to look after yourself so that you can continue doing this work?

Shawna Gann: Yeah. So one thing is I do coaching. So I love to work with people who have – who are part of communities that have been historically marginalized communities because they are often underserved in their communities whether that's their work or their actual place of residence or however that is.

So a lot of times in the coaching world, I'm talking about like the executive coaching or career coaching, most of the people that get coached are executives. And most of our executives in the US are not people who are from marginalized communities. So being able to bridge that gap is important to me. So that's one way.

Personally, I am a big believer in therapy. Mental health is something that should be a priority for folks. We go to the doctor. We don't have a problem saying like, "Oh, I have a doctor's appointment." But for so long and I'm so very glad that this is changing, for so long, there is a stigma attached to mental health care. And I look forward to the day that it is treated the same as other medical health care.

And the last thing that I do personally is I journal a lot. It helps me to express myself in any way that I want without any fear of judgment because it's my words for me. And also, I like to reflect on previous entries. So I look back a year or so and see where my growth is or what has changed in my life. So those are some ways that I think are helpful.

Amanda Lytle: I love the reflecting piece so much. I'm sitting here smiling because the reflecting piece for me, there's often like, should I go back? I don't know if I want to read that. But I love that too because I've participated in that in order to see growth in certain places. And that's where you get to witness your own journey because we are often just walking alongside other people in our lives, and we are witnessing their evolution and their healing. But to witness it in oneself I feel is so empowering to just keep going. And that's where journaling is such an easy way to see it. It's a tangible way to see and witness your own evolution.

Shawna Gann: Oh, yeah.

Amanda Lytle: Ugh! I love that you do that. OK. So speaking of evolution, grown and learning, you're a life-long learner, I'm a life-long learner. I see that in you. I value that so much. So when it comes to studies, are you continuing studies? What are you currently working on? I'd love to know.

Shawna Gann: Yeah. Thank you for asking. I am actually at the very tail end of my PhD program. So I mentioned earlier that I moved into business psychology and I'm currently a PhD candidate at the Chicago School for Business Psychology and I have just completed my study and I'm wrapping up my actual dissertation to report my findings and so on. So yeah.

Amanda Lytle: That's awesome.

Shawna Gann: Forever learner.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, no kidding. A PhD is – that's big. That's a lot of work. That's a lot of time. That's a lot of energy.

Shawna Gann: It's a lot of money.

Amanda Yeah, it is too. But you've enjoyed the process?

Shawna Gann: Oh yes I am complete nerd when it comes to stuff like this. And I mentioned earlier, I found my people and boy, I did. I mean there are – like I said, I have my undergraduate studies. I got my degree, my master's degree. But this particular discipline, it's so exciting for me whenever I can see my work applied, my studies applied in my everyday work experiences. So that has been really cool. Yes, I love it.

Amanda Lytle: Can you elaborate a little bit on what it was that you were researching?

Shawna Gann: Yeah. So my dissertation is about black multiracial women. So that's women who are – who self-identify as multiracial but at least one of their parents has African ancestry. So they're part of the African diaspora. So I looked at how black multiracial women describe organizational justice in their workplaces. And I also wanted to know what accounts for their perceptions of organization justice. So that's really what I focused on because I found this enormous gap.

It all started when Colin Kaepernick was very much in the news with the take a knee situation. And I was doing some other group project at school in my classes, and we had to come up with some issue. One of the things that's cool about the Chicago School is they very much push social action and being part of your community. So it was something to do with that.

And it was during this class I found out about the Rooney Rule, which is from the NFL, the football league, and it was almost like an affirmative action initiative where because there are so few people of color in coaching positions, specifically head coach, they were making it so that there had to be at least a candidate pool that was open to other folks who are from marginalized

communities because before then, it was pretty much good old boys club, I know somebody, that kind of thing.

Now, I'm not going to argue about what that's like today because I know there are still some things going out there. But what that led me to was I curious about Fortune 500 companies and how diversity was looking like in those kinds of leadership positions. Found out that Ursula Burns who was the CEO of Xerox left in 2016. And when she left in 2016, she was the last – well, the first and last black woman as a CEO in a Fortune 500 company.

And it wasn't until last year that we got two new CEOs who are black women in these Fortune 500 companies. One of them I think is Rosalind Brewer. She used to be with Starbucks. And so, it was kind of a big deal.

So I think at the time of this recording, there are two black women who are CEOs of Fortune 500 companies. Just think of that, two, like two. And there weren't any until last year because Ursula Burns left.

So I started researching black women in senior leadership and realized that there's a lot. There's a lot out there. But there was like nothing about multiracial women. And this was important to me because I grew up with the notion of hypodescent, which is the one-drop rule. So like if you have even a tiniest bit of black blood, at least in the US, you are considered black, and this goes back to Jim Crow days.

But a lot of people today if they are multiracial and they have black ancestry, they still self-identify as black, almost as if they are monoracial. But there is nothing about these people, about these women at work. So I decided to explore that. So that's what has led me to this study.

Amanda Lytle: How do you go about finding these people, these people that are willing to share, they are willing to talk, but also in such numbers that you'd be able to conduct the study?

Shawna Gann: Yeah. That was actually quite a challenge. My first attempt was very difficult, my recruiting. I hardly met anybody. So I had to kind of restructure my recruiting, my strategy for that. And I did end up with 14 women who volunteered for this. There's an entire process that I have to go through, or any student has to go through when doing a study like this where you have to present your plan to an institutional review board and they just make sure that nothing in your study will be harmful to people or if there is any potential harm that there's a plan in place and things like that.

So it's very strict, very specific. And then part of that includes an informed consent where the women say, "I trust you to do this." And then they showed up.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah.

Shawna Gann: So, that was amazing.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, well, congratulations. I know you're right at the end of it. That's really, really fantastic. And it must feel so good.

Shawna Gann: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yes. It will feel even better when it's done.

Amanda Lytle: It's getting there so soon.

Shawna Gann: Yes, so close.

Amanda Lytle: OK. Shawna, I've got one more question that we wrap up with the podcast. But just for fun, you love singing karaoke.

Shawna Gann: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: What is your favorite karaoke song to sing to?

Shawna Gann: Oh, my! I think my go-to is probably *Valerie*, a song by Amy Winehouse. And the second favorite which we could have an entire conversation about this so I'll just throw it out there for people who might be familiar with it. If you've ever or any of your listeners have ever seen *The Wiz*, which is basically the black production of the *Wizard of Oz*, I love to sing, it's going to sound so awful but it's so fun, the song is called *You Can't Win* actually. It's the scarecrow song and Michael Jackson is the scarecrow in this and it's the crows around him who are trying to convince him that he can't do it. And of course at the end, he does get down off of his pole.

But the reason I love that song is because my big brother and I sing it together and we just have way too much fun doing it.

Amanda Lytle: That's amazing. I've been singing karaoke for a while so when I read that, I was like, "Oh, that is amazing. That is so fun." What a fun way to just let loose.

Shawna Gann: It is my favorite.

Amanda Lytle: Oh, this is so good. OK. So my official last question then is about a shout-out. So if you had the opportunity to give a shout-out to anyone that you wanted, an account, or a person, an organization, a disruptor, an activist, or a change agent, who would it be?

Shawna Gann: I think I'd like to give a shout-out to my sis, Joquina Reed. She is of J Reed Consulting. She is not my sister by blood, but she is my sister. And just been an incredible voice for social justice. She is a JEDI consultant. I don't know if you are familiar with JEDI so it's justice, yeah. And so, she is amazing, has fantastic just words of knowledge. So she has a podcast too, a couple of them actually. One of them is *Divesting From Whiteness*. The other one is *Please Say Black*. And yeah, and her consulting firm, so she is just doing some really, really amazing things.

Amanda Lytle: I will second that shout-out so deeply because she is incredible. But also, how good is her laugh and how much fun is she to talk to?

Shawna Gann: Oh yeah, that's why we hang. Yeah, I love her dearly.

Amanda Lytle: Shawna, thank you so much for your time, for your energy, for your sharing, your stories, and congratulations again. But thank you so much for being a guest on The Book Stoop.

Shawna Gann: Oh, thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

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