Lived experiences and being your true self: A conversation with Collette Philip

Lauren: So hello everyone. Welcome to the second CharityComms podcast hosted by yours truly. Today we have a very special guest. She is both the founder and MD of the brand consultant Brand By Me and is the powerhouse known as Collette Philip. So welcome, Collette.

Collette: Hi everybody.

Lauren: We are very, very, very excited to have you. I just want to say I was dying to speak to you after our first online conference. The way you chaired the group of eight people so seamlessly, it was so engaging. I mean everybody was like, “Oh my gosh, this is amazing. I didn’t know Zoom could be so interesting.” And I thought if she can do that then I need to speak to her! So if you haven’t checked out our online conference do check it out on the website. But yes, so let’s get this ball rolling. So, Collette please tell us a little bit about yourself. How did you get into comms and what was that journey like for you, and what inspired you to become a charity communicator?

Collette: Okay. So I started life in advertising actually. I worked in big ad agencies for the first eight years of my career. So my actual entry into the charity sector wasn’t the nicest because I actually burnt myself out of advertising. So I had to take a bit of a break and then rethink sort of my career. But when I was in that break I suddenly remembered – I had forgotten about it or maybe pushed it down, the fact that I had always wanted to work on a charity brand, and I was suddenly reminded of this when I saw an ad for a job at Barnardo’s in The Guardian. I was like this job! It was called Senior Marketing Manager and I was like I don’t have any marketing experience, never mind, I’ve been in advertising. But when I looked at the job description I was like oh no, this is looking like me – I mean this just looks like me. This is like all my experience. This is me. This is my job. And so applied and got that and that was how I got into comms and how I got into the sector, and yeah, that’s as simple as that. I knew I wanted to work on a charity brand. Realistically I thought that would be within an ad agency so I thought I would get to work on a charity account. So when I saw the Barnardo’s job I suddenly was just reminded of this and thought yes, I have to do it. So that’s how I got into it.

Lauren: That’s so cool. So, as we mentioned previously, you do owner-manager the Brand By Me agency. I think for a lot of people, especially in this climate, they are looking to diversify and see how they can start their own business or become a freelancer because –

Collette: Woo, Corona!

Lauren: Corona has messed everything up!

[Laughter]

Collette: Wow, Corona! Really? I mean I’ve had to revisit my decision about setting up a business but I still love it, to be clear. But I have – it’s not easy right now.

Lauren: Could you give us some advice about starting an agency. What did that look like for you? What surprised you along the way and what things did you take on from your experience in the corporate world?

Collette: So where it came from for me, erm, I had gone back and forwards, so I had done agency and worked on big FMCG type big brands, like Starburst, Clearasil, Veet, McDonalds, like big, big – always big brands. I went to Barnardo’s and built a brand for Barnardo’s behind the name. And then I wanted to get, I guess, more brand strategy experience because I was Assistant Director of Comms, and our brand was a bit part of what I did but I learnt it on the job. So I went to an animal charity – a global animal charity. I had done a global rebrand and then I had also worked alongside one other colleague and Director on the organisational strategy. And I got to the end of that and I just thought what next? And I actually wanted to, you know, go for kind of the next level of senior role. Not just Director of Comms but I wanted to go for like board level role in strategy or sort of a bigger marketing role. But I will be open about the fact that I hit a bit of a ceiling honestly and I wasn’t sure. So I took a career break again. I love my career breaks!

[Laughter]:

Collette: And I took three months. I saved up money and I was going to have three months and I was travelling for a bit of it. About three weeks in I literally woke up one night and was like oh no, I need to set up my own agency! Oh, and it’s going to be about brands utilising social change and, do you know what, it’s going to be for like medium-sized charities and it will be called Brand By Me. And that’s it. And that’s what I did.

Lauren: Wow.

Collette: So in terms of my advice, I think (1) work out whether you want to run a business or freelance, because they are different and it’s really important to understand the difference. If you are freelancing you will be going into organisations, kind of as a temporary employee quite often. Whereas if you’re running a business you are working with organisations as clients in an objective sense. And, although there is overlap, particularly if you’re a sole trader, they are different, and how you need to communicate who you are and what you are about is different as a business or as a freelancer. They look different. So I think that’s the first thing – be really clear on which one it is. And it’s not either/or. They both can be brilliant. One suits one, one suits others. There is both an element of insecurity because, you know, it’s not like your full-time, permanent day job. So that’s my first bit of advice. The second one is, no matter what, be super clear who you are, what you stand for, from the beginning, and how you are going to do and run your business in your way. It’s about being clear on your purpose, understanding how your personality and the personality of the company you want to create, and really understanding your values and the values of the company, and using them to make every decision you make. The other thing is being really clear and specific on your audience. I read a stat where like something like 70% of small businesses fail because there is no audience for what they do. So it’s really important to think about your audience and be quite specific. Not within charities – that is too broad. I was like medium-sized, complex charities who work on causes that are slightly misunderstood. That was my audience for Brand By Me at the beginning and that’s full core audience, and being super-specific on that. The other thing is – someone said this to me really early on, is like enjoy the perks of being your own boss and running your own business. So all those kind of, “Oh well, I should do this and they’re telling me to do that”, you need to stop that employee mind-set, because actually running a business is tough. It’s not easy. Particularly now it’s not easy. You have to wear a number of hats. You have to focus on what you’re good at and there is going to be other areas where you are going to need to learn quickly. So the big thing you can do is make sure you are doing the stuff that you love and not compromising on that. And not going oh well I should do this and all that. No, no, no – can’t do any of that. You really need to be clear on this is what I love and this is what I’m doing. And, if possible, if I can’t do that – if there is other stuff I don’t so much love, either I need to learn to love it or I need to outsource it to someone else in the long term. And that’s it about setting up a business.

Lauren: Business 101 by Collette Philip.

Collette: There you go.

Lauren: Thank you very much. You actually touched upon my next question which was to do with Corona. How have you been able to adapt in this season and also what are your long-term plans post lockdown? How do you feel like Brand By Me will be able to ride this course?

Collette: Okay. So whenever it was, March 20 whatever, overnight like the business just sort of disappeared. Our clients just stopped. Everyone was like – everything just stopped. We had some really exciting projects stopped and it was just quite terrifying. So that was the first thing and then you, sort of, you can’t just reel from that and sit there panicking. Also there was this thing around oh well you need to pivot your business, but in reality it’s not easy just overnight to change fundamentally what you do and what you’re about and nor should you. What it is about though, and what it was about for us, was finding out where people might need the skills and strengths and Brand By Me. You know, realistically who has the money to pay for that? And then making sure in the meantime that we’re managing and cutting costs wherever we can, our own internal costs, so that we can just survive the short term sort of loss of income that we were experiencing. And that’s what we did. And what it meant was in reality – so I had a couple of clients come back and go, “We committed to this big work, we don’t have anywhere near that budget but we’ve got this amount of budget, what can we do?” And then we did something with that. And a lot of stuff was around personal brand actually which we’re still working on. So personal brand meaning like you as an individual and what your brand is, and how personal brand comes out at work, and specifically how having a personal brand helps you if you are from an under-represented community. Now this was an area of work actually that I really wanted to do and I sort of started being proactive in developing the business and going out to some companies to talk about that stuff. And obviously those budgets were cut but people still wanted to do something, so we developed some like much tinier projects that we could do with those companies. We also started doing one-to-one personal brand work. So with, you know, leaders and people, kind of senior people within organisations. Either they were self-funding it because people were furloughed and they were self-funding it because they had time or, you know, their organisation were kind of like, “We’ve got hardly any personal development budget but we can just do these small things.” So that was kind of just ticking over. I put myself on furlough for a while and, Brand By Me, our team are actually primarily freelance, and so that meant that kind of timing sort of worked out from a cost point of view. And I guess the other thing was, and I guess this is my big learning, is it’s easy, when stuff is like a bit uncertain, is to just totally become invisible. But as a kind of small business we couldn’t afford to so I was a little bit let’s say proactive in wanting to be part of that conference, and I actually spoke to the team at CharityComms around, you know, just opportunities. There is a lot going on for brands right now and, you know, what are we doing and what can we talk about? And that conference was one – facilitating that panel. When we talked about it I don’t think any of us knew how huge that was going to be. We did not know how huge that event was going to be and how awesome it was. Like I mean I knew the event is always awesome but that was on another level. So that was really cool and it sort of kick-started – it just did – it made me on a personal level just feel like it’s me, and doing Brand By Me, and even amongst the turbulence, I can still be me. And then from there I kept being visible. So we did a You Tube – our You Tube channel is like youtube.com/brandbyme and on there we did a series, an eight-week series called How to Steer Your Brand Through Turbulent Times, which was just, you know, 15/20 minutes with just quick tips every week, reflecting on what brands are doing, what brands need to be doing differently and some key themes like how to stay visible which is something we were experiencing, how to speak out. Because, even before Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 is affecting some communities quite badly and from a brand point of view there was a need for people to speak out, and maybe counter some of the more dangerous messages that were happening around the impact of the virus. So, you know, how can you do that? How can you, you know, lead with purpose? So all that stuff. So we did that as well. And then, you know, honestly, the other bit of it was just spending time really building our network. We were looking at our network as it is, looking at who is in our network, what do they need right now and just connecting with people. Which actually made it a really lovely time because I just ended up connecting with like minds across different networks and that gave me a number of opportunities that are now being realised, just by connecting and going, “What’s happening for you?” You know, in some ways – quite a lot of it was with black women honestly and it’s like, “Oh my, this COVID is awful if you’re running a business.” But then, “Ah, here is what we’re doing. Oh this might be an opportunity, not now but –“, and it just led to some conversations. But sort of I guess just kept us just going. You know, it might have been what one of my friends called the fingernail climb, which is a bit like clinging on by your fingernails to the side of a cliff where you’re about to drop off. It did feel a little bit like that but we were still in there and just keeping going. Also, I mean very practically, on a personal level, managing our expenditure as a household – so it’s me, my husband and my dog. So that’s quite easy, it’s me, my husband and my dog but we had to, because the business income wasn’t there so we had to look at that as well. But we were able to do that too so, you know, that was kind of survival mode. Then, over time, it wasn’t like, you know, and I’ve said to a lot of people, it’s not like switching on the lights, off and then on when it will suddenly be okay again. It’s just been this gradual sort of evolution / movement through this. And we’re not through it but just through it and using these things, staying visible, connecting. We’re keeping connected to people, making sure we’re super clear on the skills and strengths of Brand By Me. Not – you know, beyond brand strategy as in brand strategy will lead but how brand strategy can really help organisations at this time. And some of the stuff that sits within brand strategy that can really help organisations and how we can do that, and being quite nimble about how we do that. And then just holding your nerve and hoping that your business survives!

[Laughter]

Collette: That’s what that looks like. And so far it has so well done us.

Lauren: Yes.

Collette: Well done.

Lauren: Definitely deserves a clap – there you go.

[Laughter]

Lauren: So you’ve spoken about harnessing insights and the power of brands to make a difference in the world. So what sparked your passion to keep pushing forwards?

Collette: I think, oh God, I’ve always liked – I liked helping people. So when I was about six my brother asked me, and he was four, he said, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” and I said, “Prime Minister.”

[Laughter]

Collette: So I always wanted to be – I was going to help. Not because I like power. I thought about it and I was – and I remember it because I remember the conversation and it’s always one that is told at family things. I remember going, “I want to help people and I’m, you know, big sister so I’m a bit, you know, I like to like –“, what effectively is leading. Obviously, I was age six, I didn’t say, “I like to lead” but I knew there was something in my head around that. Leadership and helping people. And then also, frankly I was like, at the time, because I am quite old, our Prime Minister was Margaret Thatcher, who was a white woman, and I thought, “Yeah okay, good, you know, a woman, but a black woman would be better so that can be me, thanks!”

[Laughter]

Collette: “That will be me. And I’m going to do that and helps loads of people.” And I think that’s where it came from. You know, I sort of went away from it in advertising but not really, it always somewhere there. And then when I joined Barnardo’s it set my head on fire, my heart on fire, because suddenly I was a little bit like all this stuff I know about brand, and this stuff around brands being able to – like people – I so love brands, the impact that brands have on society, the impact that brands have in terms of helping people get stuff, making people think differently, changing people’s habits, and this is just commercial brands. Fundamentally, when they launched iPad, right, everyone was like, “What do you need that for? It’s not a laptop, it’s not a phone – what is this?” Now, imagine life without an iPad. Like it created a new way of people – it created a niche for itself. How awesome is it that a brand can do that? But it needs to be used in the right way. So actually when you combine that with the need for positive and social change in a society you just have these fireworks and this magic. When you combine that with a really powerful cause it’s just this amazing magic. So that, for me, it started with bringing together all the stuff that I’m great at with all the stuff I’m passionate about and then some. And just the power of that, that’s where that came from.

Lauren: That’s good advice for anything.

Collette: Yeah.

Lauren: I feel very inspired, thank you!

[Laughter]

Collette: Also – so a quick plug – we do personal brand work. It’s all about that. What you love, what you’re great at and why the world needs it. That’s it. That’s what personal brand is all about.

Lauren: Love it. Now I’m taking that away, definitely, from our chat. I really appreciate that. So my next question to you is how can charity communicators ensure their work is true to their brand values? Or how can they develop their own brand value?

Collette: Yeah. I think also bigger than value – there are kind of four elements of brand. Your purpose, vision, personality and values. And your brand is about how those things work together. And that is the same for organisations and individuals. So when it comes to us as charity communicators it’s fundamentally about being maybe three things. One is understanding how our own purpose is linked to the purpose of our organisation and the work that we do. So, for me, you can see where, in terms of Barnardo’s, I was like I really, really love genuinely the power of brands and the impact they have, and this organisation – there is something about this organisation wanting to stand up, speak out and reach the hardest to reach and vulnerable children in the UK. And I was like where does that connect? And that, for me, connected in my role. Understanding that helped me motivate. It helped me be my best at work. It helped me – I got opportunities for myself and for the organisation, both mutually beneficial things. So that’s kind of the first one, is understand where your own purpose and the purpose of the organisation connect. And the second is – I talk about it – use the strength of your personality. So, you know, it’s not about trying to fit in with what people think you should be but really understanding your own personality and the strengths and what you’re great at, and making sure that you’re clear then about how that shows up in your role and in your discipline. So how does that make me an excellent communicator, be a strength to my personality? And then the final one is values which, for me, are like kind of a superpower. Your organisation should have values. There are a few organisations, I’ve worked at them, where they don’t manage or haven’t managed to articulate them in a way that was down on paper but they are there implicitly. Understanding kind of the values that your organisation holds dear but, more importantly, your own values is super, super key. So you understand your own values. And seeing your values – it’s not everything you value, that’s where you start, but then working out from within those which ones are your non-negotiables. The ones that, okay, if someone paid me a million quid still I wouldn’t move away from these values. The ones where if I had to, you know, if I’m doing something for free this is where I am, these values have to be at play. It’s that, the non-negotiables. And once you understand those non-negotiables just use them in every decision you make within your career. That’s it. Because actually, you know when people go, “Oh in my gut it didn’t feel right”?, that’s your values talking to you. It’s useful to have good gut feel. It’s even better if you hone it and you go, “It’s my gut telling me that actually my value is honesty and this organisation, what I’m doing, is maybe making me bend the truth quite a lot.” That was the case for me in advertising. So that disconnect in your values, it’s really important that you hone it and you understand where it’s coming from. And that’s why understanding your values becomes key.

Lauren: You are preaching to me, I’m telling you. I was like yeah, tick, tick, tick, tick. It was so funny, I did this exercise on a course that was facilitated by CharityComms and I had to list my eight values, and once you see it on paper it’s like pretty much what you stand for and you’re like okay I can go forward and I can pick this job, I can take this opportunity, I can do this, because it all makes sense. So when you were speaking I was like yeah, that’s actually true – that’s what I did afterwards.

Collette: I’m going to build on that exercise and tell you eight is too many. Cut it down and pick four. Narrow it down to four because there will only be about three or four that are non-negotiable. Some of them are then secondary and are useful and good to have, but actually there will be three or four that are your really core motivators.

Lauren: Okay. So I actually wanted to move on and ask you how do social movements inform your work in the third sector? And I think this question will lead on to a lot of other questions I have for you because we’re in a time of – I can’t even articulate it but it’s a time where lots of things are shifting and changing and for the better, so how has that impacted your work?

Collette: Erm, yeah, this question is a really interesting one. I mean it was hard for me to answer, not because I don’t know, it’s because they influence everything. Because your brand is not just about – because it’s kind of who you are and what you stand for, but only as experienced through other people and how it shows up in the world. So I guess for us, in our work, it’s about if you can tap into, in a meaningful and compelling way, the strength of a movement and the strength of a feeling, and join in with that sort of collective movement. As brands sometimes we lead the movement – charity brands – sometimes we’re just part of the movement. And we’ll flip and sometimes we’re just, you know, we’re a core sort of collaborator within the movement. And understanding kind of all those roles and where we’re playing is absolutely key. Understanding, you know, if we’re part of the movement, how are we showing up, in a way that is true to our brand, but fundamentally is still supporting the movement. If we’re leading a movement, what are we bringing? How are we bringing these people together to galvanise and spearheading it? Because some of it needs us to lead a movement to drive change. And, you know – and making sure that actually, if we’re leading that movement, that’s not a forever state; that’s just to galvanise and get people going, and we want that movement to break out so what is the role of the brand within that? How are we using – and, like, making this movement infectious and what are we doing to step our brand out of it so we make sure the movement becomes bigger than us? I mean there is big questions but fundamentally the growth of social movements is a massive opportunity when it comes to thinking about your brand. It’s not something – it’s not a tool to be used or things to be manipulated. It is a meaningful way of you just being part of this wider change that you want to see. And fundamentally it’s also probably part of you really delivering on and achieving the vision your organisation wants. Because your organisational vision is going to be too big for you to do on your own. If you end up having, you know, a social movement comes up and it’s in line with the purpose and vision of the organisation, you consider yourself the luckiest organisation in the world, because it will create a momentum and a pace of change that you couldn’t have dreamed of. But then it’s about how you operate within that movement and you need to be really clear, humble, transparent about that. And so I guess that’s, for me, that’s kind of how I see that in terms of brand and movement. It’s inextricable. And it’s something, you know what, this is an area for me that, you know, when I was back in the charity sector, this is something I had to learn, was the power of brand and movements. Because old-fashioned brand strategy tells you you need to lead and it’s about, you know, your brand is what people say about you when you’re in the room, and that doesn’t apply because actually your brand is much bigger than you. An old-fashioned brand would tell you you need to control your brand and make sure people use it properly. New brand goes actually you need to bring people into it and encourage them to play with it, use it, take it, take it forth and it becomes bigger than you. You know, this is the stuff, and that’s where the shift in terms of understanding the power of movements and how you as a brand operate within it becomes really key.

Collette: Definitely. You always leave me speechless after your answers.

[Laughter]

Lauren: So, talking of social movements, we can’t not talk about Black Lives Matter. And you recently spoke at Standing Shoulder to Shoulder for an incredible series of talks on everything from … [inaudible 22:00] to using the word ‘BAME’ as am umbrella is an issue. Regarding that specific topic, I actually saw an article written by Karen Blackett for BBC, talking about firms can diversify their workplace. Amongst that interview, which was really interesting, she touched upon the term ‘BAME’ being too broad a category to discuss a wide group of people, and basically it covered everybody that that was non-white, and I wanted to ask you do you think it’s something that can be broken up? Or do you think it’s something that should be broken up? We should no longer talk about racism and police brutality of terms of every ethnic minority? Should it just be anti-blackness? What does that really mean and how can we kind of dissect this especially in the sector? Because I think diversity, equality and that catchphrase, blacks will be used and BAME likes to be used amongst everything.

Collette: Yeah. So I have – I am going to borrow actually from the way, because I heard this most well-explained by our friend at Charity So White, who I love. I love them. Some of them I would consider to be almost friends. I think one day we will be friends, some of the organisers. But in the meantime I love their work and everything they do. And here is how, when we talk about it, here is how they said: There are shared experiences that exist across black, Asian and people from other minoritised ethnic backgrounds. I want to talk about minoritised versus minority as well but I’ll come on to that. And there are shared experiences and actually one of the things about breaking down racism is that you need to harness collective power. I guess where people are being marginalised it’s to make them feel like they’re separate and small. And as individual groups we might be quite small but as a collective we are big. So, you know, coming together as a group of BAME communities, full stop, is a useful thing for us. To collect together, to understand shared experiences, but also to understand our individual experiences so we can represent and show up for fellow people of colour. That’s all very useful for us. Right? That’s very useful, harnessing the collective power of movement, harnessing this. It is not useful when lazy people/organisations use BAME as the singular, “Ah, we have a BAME person.” What does that mean? One tick-box BAME person? No, not this. So no, we’re not doing that. Also, if you can’t break it down – when you’re thinking that BAME is all the same, no, not that either. So, to be clear, and, you know, whether or not you like the terminology that’s a personal choice. I use ‘people of colour’ when I’m talking about us collectively and when I’m with my friends, and women of colour, when I’m with my friends. I don’t want to say, “I’m a black woman.” Believe me, blackety, blackety, black. But if I’m talking about anti-black people talk about black, and we have to, within the BAME, we need to talk about the individual experiences and issues and difference, but we also need, for us as communities, we need to understand and represent. That’s where anti-blackness comes in within certain communities because we have – people have seen it – I saw it as like the races of Olympics, where it’s much worse for this group or this. It’s not Olympics. One group doesn’t win at the expense of another. If it hits one group, believe me that is going to hit us all somehow at some point. It might take a few years longer but it will hit everybody. So actually it’s really important we see that collective. But it’s not okay for organisations to use that as a one size fits all, as a singular, as a homogenous group and see it in that way. No, organisations need to do the work and break it down, and that’s really important. We collectively, as people of colour, can come together and it’s useful for us to understand shared and individual experiences. But organisations should be breaking this down. So if they’re saying, “We’ve got this stat in our –“, 4% BAME leadership. First of all, let’s talk numbers. Secondly, let’s talk about number of black people. Because I can name those individuals, the leaders within that industry. When you’ve got 4% that is a handful of people, right? That is individuals. That is not loads of people and I probably know most of them. We’ve got to be real and not hide behind a percentage and a homogenous group and start breaking it down properly, because it will tell us where the issues are. And depending on what industry and where you are, there are different issues. And it will help you highlight actually where this is so we can properly start to become sort of antiracist and we will tackle institutionalised systemic racism. If we’re still using BAME, percentage, no, it isn’t going to work. No one is – you can’t, you don’t even have a sense of the scale of the issue you’re dealing with.

Lauren: Definitely. It’s interesting. So you joined our panel for the brand breakfast titled The Power of Many, where we discussed how brands can truly embrace diversity, inclusion and equality. This is another title that people like brandish on different publications and events etc. So you had a lot of amazing points that you touched on but I’ll only touch on about three. So I wanted to talk to you about what it means to work meaningfully and to be an antiracist brand, and I wanted to basically ask what did you mean by this? What does the work around this look like?

Collette: It’s a very good question and I think I’m still working out what I mean by that. So obviously I guess there has been a shift between people’s awakening – not us, obvs – when I say ‘us’ I mean you and me as black women, it’s not an awakening for us. But there has been an awakening in terms of people going, “Oh I’m not racist” and it’s like not racist is not good enough. That means you’re just not flinging round racist terms and things. You have to be actually antiracism which is about seeking out and standing up against racism in all its forms: visible, invisible, insidious. And I thought as individuals yes, equally brands need to do that too, and I guess that’s what it refers to. If you’re being antiracist as a brand it’s about looking for incidences where you are benefiting from systemic and institutionalised racism. It’s about making sure that you *do* speak up where you’re spotting it in your sectors, in your categories, and you are quite vocal about speaking up too. If you are spotting it in the behaviour of your followers or your supporters you are calling it out and saying, “No, no, not you. Please don’t support us anymore, thank you very much, because of this.” You know, you are being really clear. And also you are kind of looking in your own structures internally about how you – how, I guess, systems and processes might inadvertently be disadvantaging black people or broader people of colour. And it’s about, at a brand level, doing that work. So yes we do it as individuals but brands have a role to play too. So I’ll give you an example of brands. There are any number. Sports brands really benefit from black culture. They have, you know, black people that, you know, lead in their charge as spokes people, yet in their organisations representation at leadership level non-existent. Yet, in terms of, you know, where there are issues that are affecting the black community where are you in supporting and helping this? And worse actually – this is another thing in terms of antiracism, it’s not just about black people. So you’re going, “On one hand we’re very happy to showcase black people as being the standard for excellence in terms of athleticism but I’m not going to ever have a Hijabi woman come near my brand in terms of being visible.” I’m talking specifically about, like, “We’ll change that now.” So actually going, “Actually no, what are we doing?” So that’s an example of then actually where you need to move from kind of, “Well we’re not racist, we have black people as our spokespeople”, to going actually, “No, we’re antiracist in our approach because we’re looking at all of these different kind of holistic way from the communities we engage with to the people that buy our products, to the people that represent our products, to the way that we are supporting the communities that we benefit from and that we build our brands off the back of, and we’re addressing all of these things and issues.” Consistently investing in it. Not just getting one token donation and we’re done, which is where Nike first started. It took them a while to do the hard work and they got caught on the fire. Because what’s the first thing you do? Do an ad. No, sorry, don’t spend that money on ad. Instead, go out there, let’s look at your leadership, let’s look at the work you’re doing in communities. That is an example, right, of what it takes. That’s what antiracism looks like at a brand level.

Lauren: I agree. I would think so. I agree.

Collette: And probably more than that actually. I was going to say that’s not an exhaustive list. That is now, off the top of my head that is what I’ve dug. When you delve into it you’ll fine definition of antiracism is standing up against racism and rooting it out wherever we find it, and we look across every touchpoint, every audience of our brand, every opportunity for our brand. That is probably the bigger way of being an antiracist brand. The examples on sort of areas I’ve given are just starting points. There is probably way more and as you do the deep work you will find more and continue to find more because that’s how it works. So it’s then about being committed through that long term and investing in the long term to really tackling this stuff.

Lauren: Very true. So I also want to touch upon equality and equity. You said you’re also an advocate for that. And I wanted to look at the work that maybe Brand By Me is doing with organisations around equity and equality and helping them to engage these concepts in their workplace.

Collette: So that’s a really good and big question. So we are a small brand consultancy with four people. If I were your advocate for equity, inclusion and diversity in the workplace, because of my experience, but not only that because I just think it’s the right thing to do, and I’ve always tried within my work and roles, you know, I had sort of director level roles I guess, and looking at where I can make sure that I’m doing my best, so when I set up my business it was like okay, it was like okay, so where can we make sure – where can we have impact? Not trying to take on new areas of work as EDI consultants. No, that’s not what we are. It’s kind of looking at the brand and what’s the opportunity within the brand? And it typically looks like this. It looks like going, “Okay, this is our purpose. Is it inclusive and is it tackling or furthering equity in some way, or is it working against it?” We’re an organisation, we’ll work with purpose. So if you’ve worked with us and they come to us and we’re looking at purpose and it seems exclusionary or elitist we’re going to question and challenge that. And normally that’s not a purpose. The purpose is about why the world needs you so that part of it, it’s really understanding that. And then going, “Okay, from there you need to live this”, and identifying maybe the areas where, you know, like you’ve said your purpose is, you know, end whatever, or everyone join together to do this. In reality you’re only serving these few people here so actually there is a disconnect here. Calling that out but not in a challenge way, bringing it to the surface so that, together, working with our clients, we can look at how they might fix that. So when I look at the brand we don’t just do – people don’t come to us and we just work on the values – we will look at the entire brand purpose, personality, vision and values. But often values is where you can put in and embed a commitment into a conclusion. A commitment to equity in your values. If it’s not in there it needs to be. And it can be in there explicitly as ‘one of our values is equality’ or it can be in there in terms of, you know, in the way that we do that we do our work, expressing it in some way. So, you know, ‘our value is community’. That will equally mean that actually equality and inclusion is a part of that; it will need to be. So you can use that. So it doesn’t necessarily mean everybody must have equity as their value but actually in some of your other values you will see that it needs – it’s a core part of delivery of it. And then the other way – and there are loads of other ways but I guess it’s about looking at – I guess it’s about connecting to brand names because that brand is what we do. Looking at that framework and going, “Okay, purpose, personality, vision and values” and going, “Okay, how does that help us?” A question – I said this to Zora [? 33:00] who hosted our panel. I said the question we asked the CharityComms panel was a brilliant one because we said what is the role of brands in helping us achieve an equal, just and fair society? So it’s not what can brands do to drive DNI? [? 33:17] Because that is, you know, that could be, “Oh, we’re going to do some events around different cultural events.” Okay, that’s cool but is it driving forward equal, just, fair society? No. If we ask that question it just – it elevates it. I guess it’s the same thing when you’re looking at your brand. What can your brand do? We all, as, you know, charities, we believe in, you know, equal, just and fair society. We have different ways into it. We might be focusing on animal welfare or on the rights of children, or on, you know, whatever it looks like, the environment, whatever. We have ways in but fundamentally that’s our belief so we can’t just take that little issue. You have to look at our brand and look at how we can use it for societal benefit too. I mean that’s a big question. It’s not like we go, “And that’s the work of Brand By Me.” Of course it isn’t; we’re a small consultancy. But what we do with our clients is make sure they understand their brand and how their brand feeds into that and how they can use their brand to help them on that journey. And the other thing, on the flipside, is, and I said we talk about positive business impact, so when we’re working outside a sector, when we’re working with corporates, quite often it’s about going, “How can we as a corporate business have a positive impact on the world?” That’s in our own workplace. So we do some work with under-represented groups on personal brand and we also, you know, we are starting to, and this is where COVID played a number with this, but we are starting to also talk to, connect up some of our corporate sort of clients with social change, make clients do stuff together that is really going to drive change. Now this is an incredibly exciting and new area for us but, again, it’s through the power of brand. We’re not like a partnerships agency. It’s us spotting it. “You seem to have shared purpose.” Or even, “You’re a –“, you know, in one of our client’s case, “You’ve got this corporate owner but they share a purpose so you could be doing way more with that relationship and let’s look at the brand and see what that looks like, and let’s look at the shared overlap in our purpose and work out what we could do and delivery of that together.” It’s that sort of stuff.

Lauren: Yeah, collaboration is key. I think that’s the main thing that has come out of COVID-19 and the sector, that we have to collaborate and have a collective voice in order to make real impact.

Collette: That’s exactly why, yeah.

Lauren: Yeah, definitely. And lastly, you touched upon having lived experiences of racism both in the sector and the corporate world, so I wanted to talk about experiences of censorship and maybe not feeling like you can bring your whole self to work due to your race, and the experiences that you had during your time, during your journey in general. So could you discuss that with us and how does that look like?

Collette: On a personal level? So I would say that it’s something – yeah, I’ve got some stories actually. I’ve got across the board but – and interestingly I was talking yesterday to one of my old bosses and, you know, she had no idea that this happened when I was working in that organisation. You know, because there was a sense you can’t talk about it because it will be held against you. But I guess in terms of being yourself, so I bumped up against this quite early on in my career. I started my career in a really positive sense. My first job in advertising was an agency called Grey and my first boss was a black woman. Now in advertising that is highly unusual. I was on a panel on Tuesday and someone said, “I’ve never had like a boss that is a person of colour, I’ve never had anyone more senior than me.” And I was like, “My first boss, when I started in the industry in 2000, was a black woman”, and a formidable, amazing woman called Sarah Jenkins, who is now the Managing Director of Saatchi & Saatchi, and she was my first boss. So I saw a black woman being herself, with integrity and, you know, just this amazing personality, and I was like cool, so I can do that then. Because, like, you know, I’ve got a nice personality, I’m a great person, so I should be able to do that at work. That was my first two and a half years and really understanding, by observing SJ, how you can absolutely keep yourself but you use your strengths at work, and also how you do the work to make sure that maybe some stuff where, you know, you’ve got your superpowers and your kryptonite, making sure you don’t get the kryptonite affecting your superpowers. You know, it’s that sort of thing. And then I changed agency and that’s where I suddenly was like oh it’s not that simple is it? Because as a black woman people have stereotypes in their head and even if you don’t open your mouth that’s who they think you are. And so things like “Angry black woman”, or, “You don’t look like an Account Director” I was told once. That’s awesome, ooh, thanks for that. Or, you know, walking into a meeting with another agency and the agency guy walks right past me, shakes hands with my intern who is in a suit. I was also dressed smartly but because obviously I’m a black woman I can’t possibly be the person leading the meeting. This sort of thing. So you sort of start to encounter that stuff, obviously while still having to do and highly perform within your job. But I guess the thing for me around being authentic self is – so I’ve talked about it and you can hear it, I’m a very open, straightforward person and integrity is the heart of what I do. That’s the point where I don’t like to lie and I’m not very good at it, so I don’t like to lie. So when, you know, you might go, “Sorry, a meeting run over.” If I tell you, “Sorry, a meeting has run over” the meeting has run over. Otherwise I would be like, “Sorry, I’m running late” which is the truth. I’m running late. I don’t explain why – that’s just an example of it. Right? I don’t like to lie. I’m not going to pretend. I don’t like it. So when I worked in advertising I remember getting – I had moved account and I was working on Always at the time and Always at P&G, and I loved Always. It’s all about women and women’s bodies and helping them understand their bodies. It was just an amazing brand to work on as a woman. And my clients were also awesome because like the clients were men but they really got it. It was just brilliant. And so we had this amazing relationship and I loved them and I was doing really well on the brand and they were really, really pleased; like the clients were really pleased. So I had an appraisal, we have to ask both agency and client to feedback in our appraisals so I had this appraisal and my clients all BCC’d me in with their feedback and it was all great. One of the more senior clients, who I hadn’t even asked to feedback, she actually proactively wrote in. She was like the General Manager or something. She actually wrote in an email with feedback too, so feedback just proactively. It was awesome. Now I should have gone into my appraisal and got amazing feedback, probably a promotion, right? No. I went into my appraisal and I was told, “Yeah, you’re doing a good job. There is just one thing though. Sometimes your clients have said that you’re too honest for your own good. Now I had my clients’ feedback. No one once had mentioned that, and in fact quite the opposite. They said, “We actually love the fact you’re honest with us because it helps us manage our expectation. It means we’ve got a really good relationship, we can always trust you.” This is the stuff they were saying. So obviously that just wasn’t feedback. What it became obvious and when I saw – I, in my straightforward way, I went, “Oh that’s cool except that I was BCC’d on that feedback so which client have you spoken to? Maybe you’ve got confused. It’s probably not one of my clients.” Because I wasn’t very happy about it and at that time I hadn’t worked out how to sensor, like, my temper. So I wasn’t happy which is probably why I don’t have a career in advertising anymore. Anyway, so I challenged it. And then it was like, “Oh actually it’s the agency because in terms of account handling it’s not always good to be – you know, you just need to think about the agency’s reputation when you’re saying some of the things.” And of course, when I was being honest it will be things like, “Okay, so we need more time because we want to get you the best creative.” It will be stuff like that. It’s not like, “Oh this is all rubbish.” It would just be the truth as opposed to, “Well, you know, we’ve got one that we could show you now.” Or, you know, it’s not that, I just didn’t play the game. I was really open with my clients and they really appreciated it but the agency didn’t like it. Well that’s an example. Sorry, a very long-winded example of where there is a disconnect between who I am in my best self and what the agency wanted me to show. At the time, you know, I ended up, after a few years, leaving that agency and I sort of … [inaudible 40:49]. But now I would do it differently because the same things happen. “Oh, you know, you seem really angry.” I’m sorry, I didn’t even open my mouth and I’m not saying anything. How have I? Just because black woman. So I have learned now though that I need to be really clear on my values and I need to clear on the strengths of my personality so that I signal it for people. So one of the things I do, when I was working in-house with charities I would say, “I am super passionate about brand which means I’m really excited. So you’re going to see that energy come across”. And I would introduce my personality so people got the strengths of it. So rather than tarring me with the stereotype they saw me. I will say things like, “Okay, would you mind if I gave you a very, very honest perspective? I don’t have to. I can, you know – but I’m going to give you a very, very honest perspective here.” And then people, you know, they’re not going to say no. But then I’ve countered it so when they then get, you know, their breath taken by the honesty that follows at times, when I was working in-house, because sometimes you just need to say it how it is, when they heard that they weren’t shocked because they heard it. So I was able to do that and it wasn’t taking away from who I am. It was just signalling. So I learnt to do things like this that really help. And now in our work as Brand By Me that’s the kind of thing, when we work with personal branding, this is what we do. But it starts with the strengths of personality. I guess when it comes to broadly speaking people of colour, we’ve done something which is called code switching. The example I make – I’m not the only one that has had this. You get a feedback that to be a certain way you need to do this and it will be at odds with who you are. You know, I spoke to somebody in my network and she said that for ages she wouldn’t wear her hijab at work and it was only when she had daughters that she said, “Actually this is sending the wrong message to my daughters” so she started doing it again. But she was in environments where she felt that wasn’t going to be okay and that is a big deal, right? That’s a big part of yourself to hide. And it’s that. So it’s not even be yourself. Okay, great, but actually the workplace has taught us the opposite. So we have to unlearn that stuff. We need to rediscover who we are and then we need to work out how we can be ourselves. It’s a lot more complicated but the good news is there are people like Brand By Me to help you do that. So in all honestly that’s what – and, you know, you just listen to this podcast, I just told you how to do it. So that’s it. It is as simple as that. Unlearn that code switching and don’t do it anymore. Figure out your strengths and signal them. Demonstrate them consistently because actually then you’ll start getting the people coming to you because of who you are; not expecting you to be a different way.

Lauren: Wow, that’s some heavy stuff. Honestly, gosh! [Laughs]. That’s a lot to take in. But it’s good advice. I mean I hope that really speaks to people and a learning experience for a lot of people. But I also wanted to ask you how are you practising self-care? You mentioned when you were in the corporate world that you just got burnt out a lot of the time. Is it the same in this sector and, if so, how are you, you know, shutting the laptop, going for a walk, doing things that you love, so that you can do what you love well?

Collette: It’s something that I had to really work on, honestly. I am not good – if there is something I’m not good at it was self-care. From my time in advertising, but even when I hit the sector, and that was on me, not on organisations, because I will say that, you know, charities are under-resourced and overstretched, there is always going to be too much work, so it is down to us to understand that. So I think there is a couple of things I learnt how to do. The first one was – like I’ve got a huge capacity so I can do quite a lot but I can’t, you know, you shouldn’t be doing that all the time. So if I’m constantly having to stay at the office until 8 or 9 I learnt how to flag that with, you know, my line managers, my bosses, and then look at my work and go actually there is just too much work here for me to do in the working day. Now I work in brands so if we’re in the middle of a brand campaign I know that there is going to be a lot of hours. Also when I worked at global organisations I know that, in order to speak to the US, it might need to be an 8 o’clock call, but that’s okay. It’s not okay if I’ve started at 8am that morning. And if I’m doing that every week for several months that’s not okay. So it’s first of all being really clear and setting boundaries. So, you know, if I was having to do a late call I would start late and, you know, I worked in – you know I worked in charities and quite a lot of charities have flexitime so you are allowed to do that. And if they don’t have flexitime it’s still highlighting that to your employer and saying, “Actually, my job is requiring to do this. Everybody knows you cannot burn the candle at both ends for a long time.” There might be times where it’s a super intense bit of work but that should be time limited. So the first thing was about setting the boundary. The second thing is these are mobile phones, right? Our mobile phones are like the worst. They are the worst. So we – because we do everything on them. So if you have a work phone that goes away out of work time, that’s it. Non-negotiable. I used to do stuff like, you know, I’d leave my work phone in my bag downstairs and then I would go upstairs; or it’s in my bag. Because some people, you know, unfortunately we can’t control others behaviour, and if you work in a global organisation you are going to be getting calls and emails 24/7. So if you’ve got your notifications going off the whole time you are just not going to have any peace. I don’t have on my phone – and I run my own business – I am, you know, this is it, I am Managing Director, I am the business developer for this, still I don’t have notifications turned on on my phone. Because I know that when I need to do my email I go in and do my email and I know this. So that’s the kind of thing. It’s not just about managing the work and managing capacity and flagging when it gets too much. There are emergency measures. Fundamentally you also need to work out what gives you joy and brings you joy and make sure you make the time for it. You know, those things where we say, “Go out for a walk, make sure that you’re taking time out, step away, have your lunch.” They’re all vital but they’re the basics of what we should be doing. It’s much more than that. And if you don’t know what the stuff is that gives you joy, cultivate hobbies. So I realised this, coming from advertising, which is super intense, into quite a bit charity role, into then other big roles, I realised I hadn’t really got very much work/life balance and also, you know, I was single at the time so I didn’t really have anything except, you know, work. So I just started doing a hobby. I remembered how much I like dancing, you know, when I go out, when I did go out, but when we went out I liked dancing so I thought oh, maybe I’ll look at dancing. And I did, I found dance classes. But I found dance classes that were one minute walk from where I worked so I knew that I could get there. I blocked it in my diary, ‘dance class’. So I would leave at half five to get to my dance class. I didn’t pick the 8 o’clock dance class. I picked the 6 o’clock one to make sure I had to leave work. And actually, in doing that, I found a reason to leave work but I also created a hobby that I absolutely loved. I did Bollywood dancing for five years and I loved it. I just recently on Monday did my first dance class in about three years and I absolutely loved it. And I did it for ages and I got good, and it was something for me, and outside of work, that I could love and invest in. And it’s important. And not just one thing. Not just one dance class. It’s important to have a number of things we do and understand what are those things that really nourishes and make sure that we’re full up with that and that we are making time for that appropriately. And how, even when I run my own business, and, you know, it’s hard, because everything I do now – I mean within an organisation I’m also going to say, you know what, they are paying you for a certain amount of time of the day. You don’t get any benefit if you work over and above, within reason – like within reason. So if you’re constantly overworking and stuff you’ve got to question it. It’s different for me now because I run my own business. Every hour I work comes back to me, to the business, so then it’s quite hard to switch off isn’t it because I could always work. But I still had to do it so I said, you know, I did a dance class on Monday, I walk my dog in the daytime, I will switch off to book in Zoom calls with my friends at 5.30. We started doing this, booking in Zoom calls at 5.30 because it means we all finish work on time and then have our Zoom time together. You know, it’s that sort of thing. And, you know, you can see how I have talked about habits and rituals, because you can’t just say, “I’m going to –“. You have to build it in. Book in the class, pay for it, this sort of thing, and that’s really important.

Lauren: Before we end I have one last question. As this is the Inspiring Communicators series, I would like to end this by asking you to share some advice with our listeners. I want you to motivate, inspire and encourage them to be the best version of themselves. So I am going to start off a sentence and I need you to finish it. So working for an agency in the charity sector feels like…

Collette: Getting to do what you are great at with really cool people for causes that make a difference.

Lauren: Being seen as an inspiring communicator feels like…

Collette: A responsibility because the role of inspiring people is to bring people up so that we, you know, brings others up that are maybe struggling and want to be where we are.

Lauren: And being part of the sector in general is…

Collette: Awesome and awful in equal measure at the same time.

[Laughter]

Collette: Because there is such a big need and there is so many people that need help. It’s awesome that we get to work in a sector that can help but it’s quite awful that sometimes the sector works against itself in doing that.

Lauren: Love it. I’ve learnt soooo much in this podcast. I feel like I should have paid for it really! [Laughs]. It’s been very, very engaging and, yeah, I feel grateful so thank you for your final words. So thank you very much. That’s it from us and we’ll see you in the next episode.

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The CharityComms podcast is produced by Lauren Haizel and Christine Fleming.