

**EPISODE 1316**

[00:00:00]

**FT:** So Money is brought to you by CNET, the site that shows how to navigate change all around us. So Money episode 1316, Deepa Purushothaman, author of *The First, the Few, the Only: How Women of Color Can Redefine Power in Corporate America*.

**DP:** *This is hard, right? And it's not fair, and there is blowback, and there is retaliation, and there are things that happen when you do speak up. But I come from a place that we can't make change if we don't speak up, and I'm not saying every culture is the same. So maybe you're in a culture where you can't speak up at all candidly. I think then you should need to find ways to get out of there because I also don't think every culture is women of color friendly."*

[INTRO]

[00:01:05]

**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. We are discussing the workplace today, redefining the workplace and making it work for women of color in particular. Our guest, Deepa Purushothaman, is back on the show. She's been on a couple of times, always loves sharing her ideas. Deepa is the Co-founder of nFormation and a woman in Public Policy Program leader in practice at the Harvard Kennedy School. She's the author of a new book, *The First, the Few, the Only: How Women of Color Can Redefine Power in Corporate America*. It is a deeply personal call to action for women of color to find both power within themselves.

Deepa says it's a book that she needed when launching her own career. You'll hear her talk about how she spent more than 20 years at Deloitte, the first Indian American woman to make partner in the company's history. But it didn't end well, and she left. What were her lessons? Deepa speaks very candidly about how to speak to power in the workplace without facing repercussions. That's a real risk. What companies can do to really, I mean, really create a culture of inclusivity and acceptance, and why you don't have to see it to be it. You don't have to

see yourself represented in the C-suite to know you can get there. Here's Deepa Purushothaman.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:02:21]

**FT:** Deepa Purushothaman, thank you so much for coming back to So Money. Lots to share with our audience. Very important book you have out, *The First, the Few, the Only*. Congratulations.

[00:02:32]

**DP:** Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here. This has always been one of my favorite places to have a conversation. I can't believe we get to have it again.

[00:02:40]

**FT:** Oh, my gosh. There's so much to discuss. I just finished watching your TED Talk, which you did with your co-founder, Rha Goddess. The two of you were on So Money, I believe, in – I want to say 2020 or 2019, discussing your collaboration as co-founders of nFormation. Your TED talk, I'm going to put the link up, is so powerful. Everybody should watch it, talking about your very direct advice for everybody, particularly women of color, but also white allies, corporate America on how to just do better. It's an important time to be talking about this because coming out of the pandemic, we know what's happened to women, right? Your own research finds that one in three women are considering leaving the workplace this year. Work is not working, as you have said, especially for women of color. So perhaps we should just start with just get into it. Where do we go from here? What needs to change?

[00:03:34]

**DP:** I think the first thing that needs to change and, yes, I think we're in a moment. I should start there actually. I feel like we're in a moment where change is possible. So my message, although is very direct, is also very optimistic. With COVID, with the conversations we're having about

race at work for the first time in a lot of places ever, there's a moment to truly make change. I think this is culture building work. I think this is conversation work. I think this is the report. We keep saying it's about getting real. It's about being honest.

Part of why I wrote the book right now and what I'm really trying to communicate is that corporate America is not a meritocracy, right? A lot of the work that Rha and I do together is to show that systems and structures are broken. I'll be honest with you, Farnoosh. I don't think until probably a year and a half ago, two years ago, there was permission to have that conversation. We used to, as women of color and people operating in these spaces, get messages of just work harder, or you're making that up, or it's not really that bad.

My work right now is really trying to put stories and words around the fact that it is that bad. If we don't acknowledge that, if we don't understand it, we can't change it. So that's really what I think needs to happen right now is it's not just education. It's true understanding, and true understanding takes storytelling and takes a really different kind of listening.

[00:04:43]

**FT:** Maybe we can get into this even deeper by having you share your own personal journey because you were that woman of color who rose to the top of the top. Working I believe at Deloitte, you ran equity programs there. You were changing policy. You were an effective leader. But you were experiencing incredible burnout. Take us to that moment because –

[00:05:05]

**DP:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:05:06]

**FT:** That's not fair. That's not what should happen, right? By the way, it shouldn't just be one person, one woman of color who's getting to that level. But unfortunately, that's what happens everywhere, and there's only one seat reserved, right? It's like charity is you, and Rha talked

about it in your TED Talk. So tell us about what happened when you were at that crossroads and why you ultimately left.

[00:05:27]

**DP:** Yeah, absolutely. So I spent 21 years in the same company at Deloitte, and I had a wonderful career. I was the first Indian female partner that we made a partner. So there was a lot of opportunity and a lot of responsibility that came with it. Although the firm was wonderful, I think for me, there was a growing sense that I was responsible for a lot of people around me. It's true in the research that I found. I interviewed over 500 women of color to write the book, and there's this deep sense of like responsibility that I can't really explain it, where it comes from. It's just part of who we are that we have to make change for others. So I think there's a lot of extra that I took on. There was a lot of extra that was asked of me that we can get into and we can unpack, and that's part of the burden of being a woman of color in these spaces where you are first or an only. There's all this extra work.

But for me, what came to head is I moved from the East Coast to the West Coast. I got married. I ended up on the biggest project, so the biggest sale of my career, and found myself working a lot of hours because it was a huge divestiture, 20 hours a day probably for about eight months, and so the intensity of the work, all these other things I was taking on and being asked to do. At the same time, this really big questioning of like, what's my purpose and what am I doing here. I loved my work but I had 20 years in front of me and was really feeling called to do, have bigger impact, especially around gender topics and things like that.

As those things coming together and slowly in all candor, and I talked about this in the book, my body just started to react. So it started as like skin rashes and infections and small things. Then it started to mount and mount and mount. Then at one point, it was full blown shingles and neuropathy and pains in my head and my hands and my feet. I ended up taking eight months off and really trying to get honest with myself about the nature of the work. So the nature of the work that I did was intense. I sometimes was in three cities a week, and I think I was on – It's not necessarily the company. I think it's all of corporate America. I was on this trail, on this chase of success that I think makes many of us sacrifice our bodies and our choices and our families

to get ahead because that's what success looked like around me and what I've been taught growing up, the American dream. My parents sacrificed so much to get here.

It was all of those things coming to a head, and so I took the time off. I really started to question what was important to me and who I wanted to be, and could I keep living this way. It took 15 doctors and three years to get an official diagnosis to find out I had Lyme disease. So it was real, and the doctors believe it came during that stressful time. It was triggered. So I probably always had it dormant, but I just want to tie it to one other thing, and then I'll pause. What's fascinating and that became what was so interesting to me, I started to ask questions about do I want to stay here, do I not want to stay here, and I started meeting with women of color. I started one on one, then two and three-person.

Then eventually, Rha and I did dinners across the country. I was just trying to figure out stay or go. What we would find as we created community just to talk about where does a senior woman of color go after 20 years in one company because that's overwhelming, what we found is a lot of the women of color had some of the same questions and some of the same struggles. Finally, the biggest findings in my research is that the women of color were sick. So a lot of the symptoms that I was facing, although my Lyme disease is very unique to me, most women of color trauma are facing trauma, are facing physical manifestations of being in systems that don't see and hear them, where they're conforming in court, contorting themselves to fit in. It does take a toll on us. So that's really, I think, what my own path was and led me to this work. It's real. I have the data to support those conversations.

[00:08:55]

**FT:** You touched on this a little bit, but this stress and this pressure of working overtime, this equation that we buy into that if I just work harder, I will get there. I will get to the highest level. It's a message that's particularly passed down to women and women of color. I hear it a lot on the show, successful women, women of color, and it comes up. I felt like I had a responsibility. I couldn't slow down. I couldn't be "lazy." I couldn't say no. I should have just been happy to be there. Where does this messaging start, and how do you unravel from that because that takes work?

[00:09:33]

**DP:** It takes real work. I think unfortunately for a lot of women that I interviewed, it takes almost crisis like it did for me to really redo the work because I was rewarded for sacrificing, right? Sacrificing my health and doing more and overworking. It comes from childhood. So I have a whole chapter that talks about these messages that we get as women of color. By the way, it's different by segment. It's different by generation. It's different by if your family immigrated here or if you're a second or third generation. The stories and the messages we get are different.

But for the most part, the consistent messages that the women of color got, they got it from their parents. They got it from society, from school. Then it was reinforced as they went through all of the systems. Finally, the workplace was, one, you have to work harder. A lot of the black women I met were taught they had to work two and four times as hard as their white counterparts just to get to the table. The second is a lot of the other women were told, "Don't rock the boat. Don't bring attention to yourself." Think about that, like they're being told not to question things. Yet they're also in corporate America where speaking your voice also matters. So this very confusing message of like how you actually show up.

Then another one to your point was it's really important to get to the table, and you should be thankful, right? Like success and security, especially for immigrant women, is so important. So this idea of you sacrifice and you work hard and you don't complain and you'll get the rewards eventually is a lot of what seemed to come up. I think the biggest myth for the women I met over and over again was once I get to the seat, once I get to the power, then I can do it my way. Then I will be able to relax and I'll be able to like really be myself.

The bottom line is I did not find that. I actually found that once you got to the seat, most of the women felt they actually had to conform and contort more because there was more expectation around them. It's like a paradox or this conundrum that I think we don't understand. So my message to women is to understand it earlier and to be really conscious. It's almost like deprogramming. Rha calls it indoctrination. It's like reprogramming yourself on what's important in the world.

[00:11:31]

**FT:** I have friends at work who are earlier in their careers, and they recognize exactly the patterns you're pointing out. Yes, part of it is your own, perhaps the storytelling that you have, this false story that I have to do all these things in order to be accepted and to be successful. But there's also that pressure of going to work, and there are, let's just be honest, like the white men who are not doing as much work as you, who are giving you the work, who are offloading.

How do you speak to that power when you're maybe still junior, and you know this is wrong? Something is unsettling about this. Who do you talk to? How do you voice? Because I know in your TED talk, you did talk about calling out these players in the workplace that undermine and undervalue and overwork women and women of color. Maybe it's aggressive. Maybe sometimes it's just subconscious. But it's just so much part of the culture that it's happening. So how do you stick up for yourself in those situations without penalizing yourself?

[00:12:40]

**DP:** Totally. There's so much there to unpack, so I'll just try to pick out a couple of pieces. One, I think the first most important thing is for women of color to understand it's not them, right? So part of this and part of what I learned in the dinners early on that I held was that most of us think it's us. So like if something happens, like that's bad, or if a micro aggression or racist incident happens, sometimes, or a lot of the time I should say, we feel the shame and pain. We don't necessarily feel empowered to confront the person in the moment. So part of it is understanding it is going to happen to you. I tell all the women I mentor now like, "It's going to happen to you. So be prepared for it. Know it when it happens and have almost prepared commentary or prepared things you can say," because so often I was caught flat-footed because you're not taught to be prepared. We're taught that you should be okay, but it does happen. So being really prepared I think is important.

I think the other thing is understanding – Rha and I are asking women to do things differently, so I'm just going to say it. This is hard, right? It's not fair, and there is blowback, and there is retaliation, and there are things that happen when you do speak up. But I come from a place that we can't make change if we don't speak up. I'm not saying every culture is the same. So maybe you're in a culture where you can't speak up at all candidly. I think then you should need

to find ways to get out of there because I also don't think every culture is women of color friendly. But I also think we're in a moment where if we keep tolerating it or putting up with it, it's not going to change. So find your sisters.

I talk a lot about the power of me and the power of we so that you feel empowered that you can push back. That's really what it is. It's about practicing it, realizing you're not alone when you do it, and then finding community, so you can talk about what's happening. So you can kind of let go of that stress and that pain and that trauma, and process it, and realize that we're all having to do this work together if we're going to change systems. So that's just a snippet of what I would say.

[00:14:22]

**FT:** Yeah. No, thank you.

[00:14:23]

**DP:** It's complicated.

[00:14:24]

**FT:** It is helpful though. To your point that companies are recognizing this, and they're establishing divisions, diversity, equity inclusion, departments. But I was just talking to another guest who was like whether it's diversity or equity or mental health, the companies will do a workshop and call it a day. Or they'll hire one person to take on that entire workload, and that's not the right way to go about either. So what's your recommendation for companies that want to be proactive about this and create a better culture where they have employees feeling comfortable speaking up, if that's the kind of company they want to be?

[00:15:01]

**DP:** I would say to the companies or the executives that it's hard. You can't just say you want to do it. So one of my favorite conversations in the book is I talked to a white male executive, and

he wouldn't give – You need to want to go on the record. But off the record, he said, “I think a lot of the DNI we have in place right now is propaganda.” I think that was a really strong word, right? He was basically saying it's kind of dressing and it's not real change. I think a lot of the other challenges that companies that want to make change don't know how to do it, to your point. So they'll say, “We want to hear from our employees.” Then as soon as an employee says something, there's almost backlash to that or questioning them to the point that it's uncomfortable, and they don't want to share their truth.

I think we have to change cultures so that we can tell more truth. That's a lot of what this work is about. But at the same time, right now, a lot of HR processes in particular are not set up to handle racism, and I talk about that quite a bit. We need to redo systems and structures so that we're not protecting the company because that's legally what is happening, right? When an employee steps up or stands out, right now, the protocols in place actually are there to protect the company. Unfortunately, there's such fear around being called a racist organization or all these things happening. That is it's much more in the company's interest to shut those things down.

So a lot of what has to happen is parallel processing. We have to change HR and reporting processes. We have to create cultures where we can have more transparent, honest, hard conversations. We also need to know as colleagues that just saying I'm not racist is not the answer. Again, back to this idea that meritocracy, like companies and structures show up differently for different people. We need to understand that even if you are not a woman of color and making space to understand that and to hear that because most people want to say, “I'm not racist,” and then there's nothing else I need to contribute. But it's all of our activity. If you see something, it's not just my problem to fix it as a woman of color. I want our allies and our coconspirators to lean in and make change as well. That's part of what has to change. It has to be all of our work, not just mine to point it out and then to take action against the system.

[00:17:02]

**FT:** Yeah. Part of the challenge too, Deepa, is that we don't sometimes see ourselves represented at work, so we don't know what's even possible. It's scary to be the first or the few or the only, to use the title of your book. You worked within that challenge and then were

successful. But tell us what helped you work against this concept that you have to like sort of see it to be it. You don't have to.

[00:17:29]

**DP:** You don't have to. I know it's easier if we do, so I don't want to say that's not important or downplay that because I do think seeing role models that look like you, seeing yourself on television, seeing yourself in the media, makes a huge difference on what is possible. I talk quite a bit about how we really encourage little white boys. We tell them consciously and unconsciously they'll be leaders, they'll be CEOs, they'll be all these things. We don't give those messages to little brown girls, little black girls. As a result, consciously or unconsciously, they may think it's not possible for them. So we do need to rewrite that.

But I was really aware of it. I don't know why. I was just always really aware of that and I have – It's a silly story. But in my email because, again, I traveled all the time, so I didn't work in the same office, I had an email that I kept for myself really early in my career. It was you don't have to see it to be it. It was kind of like my mantra. So whenever I was having a bad day, I literally would go read that email or remind myself that that was part of my work of being there was to change. But I also, I mean – You said this at the beginning. It's hard work.

There's a black woman, Roxy, I interviewed, and she works in a large company in the Midwest. She started crying as we were having our interview because at one point, she said, "I'm literally the only black person, not just executive woman but black person that people in my company have ever met." She said, "As a result of that, I feel responsible for what I look like, how I talk, what I eat." The level to which she screamed herself or stunted herself or muted herself, is maybe the right word, was startling to me because I heard that over and over again. But the level to which she felt that and the how that was ingrained, that sense of – I call it code switching, right? That you edit yourself to fit into certain spaces, it's so high and so severe. That's what I think we need people to understand, how much that happens and the weight of what that does to us.

[00:19:13]

**FT:** So talk about the risks of that like code switching. I think that's a really great and very much a now way to explain what we do to ourselves in the face of things like imposter syndrome and not seeing ourselves represented. Because, listen, there are a lot of books for women that talk about how to lean in and do the thing that will make you successful, which means oftentimes prescribing to the establishment.

[00:19:40]

**DP:** Yes. So what I'm ultimately saying is I spoke to all these women. Again, 500 really senior women, although I spoke to them at all levels, and the bottom line is they got to the seats, and they were unhappy. So I'm saying like let's do it differently. It may be hard, but part of the agency is realizing in every single moment we get to decide if we're going to conform or not. We need to train ourselves as women of color to know that that's happening to us. I'm not saying you shouldn't conform. I do have a chapter that says how you play the game while you change the game, and I really didn't want to write that chapter because I didn't want to be encouraging women to do that. But I also realize we're working in systems. I think it's being much more conscious of what's happening to us and what role we're playing and how much we conform on a daily basis and being much more active about that.

One of the younger women I spoke with just had started in the workplace prior to COVID. Now, it's all different. But she said, "I struggle with wanting to wear really bright red lipstick in the workplace. I just don't know how that's going to be seen." That's such a small example, but that was really real to her on how she presented herself or how bold she felt like she could be and how much she should edit herself. So I just want to say like the spectrum is pretty large from do you wear red lipstick and do you wear ethnic jewelry too, all the way to like, "I just saw a racist incident. Am I going to intervene?" There is a really big spectrum, and part of what we have to do and taking our power back is realizing that our power is taken from us on a daily basis.

As women of color, the only way we're going to get it back is if we decide for ourselves what is important to us, how we define success, how we want to show up. We're more conscious. Again, I'm not saying we don't ever have to conform, but I want us to know when we're conforming, and that's the difference.

[00:21:18]

**FT:** I'm hearing that we want us to take a lot of risk. There are risk taking moves. Can we afford it in the short run, given that we've just come out of a really devastating couple of years with a lot of women being forced out of the corporate world, out of their careers? We need to make money. So in the meantime, okay, you talked about it, how to work within the system as you're trying to change the system. Maybe this is a good time to talk about that.

[00:21:43]

**DP:** Yeah. I think there's absolutely things you can do, and it's about being smart and about creative. Let's talk about money itself because I think that's – Just to get to the heart of matter, I

–

[00:21:52]

**FT:** What's that?

[00:21:53]

**DP:** Yes. I interviewed a number of recruiters and a number of headhunters as I did my work as well. One of them shared with me that women of color tend to not ask for their worth, right? Yes, some of this is about speaking up. But I'm also talking about taking up space and knowing your worth and feeling comfortable. Once you come from that place, it doesn't feel as risky because you're just asking for what you're worth. She shared with me that when most women of color are asked, like when they interview for a job, and they're asked how much do you make or how much do you want to make, aspire to make as the rules are changing on being even be able to ask that question, she said women of color stumble. They don't feel comfortable talking about their worth, whereas the white men she works with will ask literally for 2 or 3x sometimes what they were making currently. They're just comfortable making that ask, knowing that they won't get it.

She said this is the difference between women of color. We are so afraid we won't get it. Or when we don't get it, somehow it reflects on our worth. Whereas the white men she's working with will ask 3x of that, not get it, and not care, and move on with their day. So part of this is a little bit of, yes, it's risk taking. But I want us to puff our feathers and take up more space as well. At the same time, and I'm very clear about this in the book, you can't do this always. So one of the women, I loved her story. She said, "I'm going to ask for more or quit my job, once my son gets through college. I'm paying his college tuition. I can't afford to go somewhere else right now. So I'm putting up with more than I would put up with at a different stage in my life."

But for me, it's the awareness and then understanding what your circumstances are. If for whatever reason you can't leave right now, it's figuring out what is important so that when you do leave, the next place, your next employer is the right place. I'd finally end with we have so many women of color and women leaving the workforce right now to go start their own businesses. The rights of black women starting businesses are off the charts, and they're doing that to create cultures that work for them. So at the end of the day, if companies don't start to listen, we're going to go make our own businesses and create our own structures that do work for us, and that's part of the message. That's my work to put in the world. While the women are in the structures trying to fix it and make space for themselves, more of us, like the work you do is talking about the fact that we're leaving. That's a really big conversation that companies need to be having, so they need to work on it too.

[00:24:04]

**FT:** Yeah, and just a good reminder to tell everybody that your timeline is not your female colleague's timeline, right? But awareness is something that we can all work on wherever we are along the journey. A lot of us are contemplating leaving the workplace. We started that. That was the first thing I opened the conversation with. In some ways, that's a good thing because that opens up the market, right? I think now more than ever, there's choice. There's more choice perhaps. Let's leave on an optimistic note and talk about some of the opportunities out there for finding the right job and where you can grow and reach your potential. Sometimes, it's not about just starting your own business because that seemed to have been always like the alternative. Like if you can't deal with the company, go start your own company. But that's easier said than done, and not everybody is built for that.

[00:24:59]

**DP:** Absolutely. I mean, the great resignation has created a situation where there's a gap in people. So the women of color we work within nFormation, we were just having this conversation a few weeks ago. Some of them are getting called on a weekly basis for new opportunities. They're being headhunted or they're being reached out to. So my message, especially women of color, is we are more in demand than ever. I'm not saying we should all leave. Not only not leave corporate America and not leave our companies right now. But I'm saying we have a tough informed choice. Let's make sure we're choosing cultures that allow us to use our superpowers, allow us to be in our full strength and know that you can.

One of the early pieces of advice I got from a senior partner when I started was always, like every few years, go through the headhunting process, not because you're going to leave, but it helps you know your worth. That's a little bit of my message. It's not about leaving, but it's about knowing your worth and feeling comfortable where you are. So many women of color get messages that they should just stay, right? Security and just be happy and all the things we started the conversation with. I think we're in a place where we're in demand like never before, so let's ask for it. Let's look for places that actually make sense. Let's go to companies where there are other women of color, so you're not the first, if you're the only. Let's reward those companies that do it right.

Let's also use our voice to make changes where we are because I also think we're in a moment where more of us are willing to lean in. But we're also lean in a very different way, lean in together to make change. I think that's what's really exciting and interesting about this moment.

[00:26:29]

**FT:** Well, Deepa, as always, such an honor to have you on the show, learning so much from you. The book, everybody, please consider buying it for you and a loved one. The book is called *The First, the Few, the Only: How Women of Color Can Redefine Power in Corporate America*. Congrats.

[00:26:46]

**DP:** Thank you. Thank you for having me.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[00:26:50]

**FT:** Thanks so much to Deepa for joining us. Her book, again, is called *The First, the Few, the Only*, available everywhere. Be sure to send me your questions for our Friday episode of Ask Farnoosh. You can text me, 415-942-5002. Or send me a direct message on Instagram @farnooshtorabi. Thanks for tuning in, and I hope your day is So Money.

[END]