

2024 National Black Business Month Interview Series

Interviewee: Laura Donald, Founder & CEO, Axis Talent Partners

This interview has been shortened for length and clarity. Watch the recorded interview [here](#).

DJ: In what ways did your identity inspire you to start a business?

LD: I think it was fundamental. It's something about the experience of being othered, or disenfranchised, and this thread is so strong in our work with candidates. We're an executive search firm that exists because we want to center People of Color in executive search differently than they've ever been centered. And we believe that an important lever in disrupting racism is supporting black and brown leadership.

That's why we exist. I'm attracted to the work of centering those who have been under-represented, historically marginalized, or excluded, because of my own experience. The truly disruptive work we do is creating a work paradigm for, largely, women of color, that centers, holds, develops, supports, acknowledges, and empowers all of us in ways that, historically, our workplaces have never done.

DJ: How does your own identity influence how you differentiate yourself in the market?

LD: Recent political and historical American context directly connects to this too. So, I was always attracted to working outside the conventional, white-dominant culture paradigm. That's how I got in this journey of creating my own work reality where I could thrive, and then create a reality for other women of Color where we could thrive together.

Our work is for us, by us. We already, in 2013, were unequivocal about recruiting leaders of Color. But we weren't even calling it "equity principles" then, but that's what we were doing, over ten years ago. We've been centering leaders of Color and centering equity in search for over ten years.

Part of what makes us different is that our approach to equity work is very much humanity and relationship-centered, because of the way we want to hold women of Color leaders. The relationships are deeper than the transactional relationships executive search firms typically have.

DJ: How do you encourage the leaders you work with to be thinking about their own identity as an asset?

LD: We're actually going to be doing a thought series on the state of social impact leadership as it relates to the tax and demand on leaders of Color. With the candidates we work with, we're

their advocates. We work as partners to help them center what they truly need and advocate for themselves. We've taken less for so long. Whether its compensation, time off, respite you need in terms of remote/hybrid flexibility or sabbaticals. We hear again and again how much women leaders of Color put their health at risk for their work. And there's such depth here with our history, with the load that women of Color carry. So, we're trying to be part of the unwinding of all of that.

DJ: How do you think about intersectionality and how it factors into how you want to take your business forward?

LD: Like many founders, I have over-identified and over-internalized my connection with access. I began this consulting practice when I was pregnant with my first child, so 13 years ago I began a journey of rethinking how I could work. So, as I was becoming a Mom, I was becoming a founder.

So, for me, my identity as a woman of Color was already fully intertwined with why I wanted to do this work and what I was going to center in this work. But my overwhelming identity was as a caretaker and mother and traditionally feminine-leaning leader, relying heavily on collaboration, communication, intuition, relationships, nurturing...all of which are traditionally female-leaning, but which are also essential, foundational pieces of leadership.

So, I am deep in a space of probably over-identifying with my gender identity and my ethnic identity in my work. But that said, there is so much to do in this space of supporting women of Color leaders in work, so the intersectionality of identities and our mission are very intertwined. And I know it is for the women we work with, too. What we're doing in support of women of Color is "life purpose" stuff for us.

DJ: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

LD: I so appreciate this conversation and celebrating our assets, because we are so often talking about the obstacles. The obstacles are always going to be there. We're always going to battle the "credibility" question. And ten-plus years in, that's still there. But it gets less loud. And a lot of that comes with leaning into the parts of your identity that are so deeply, loudly you. When we can activate those assets, it's powerful. That's where our real power is. And it's just a matter of connecting into it.