

The Better Understanding Podcast with Susan Mackenty Brady

Episode 2 with guest Asha George

Susan Mackenty Brady ([00:02](#)):

I'm Susan Mackenty Brady. Welcome to the better understanding podcast. Please join me in exploring what it means to lead inclusively.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([00:11](#)):

I'm excited and honored to welcome Asha George to the Better Understanding Podcast. I met Asha two years ago when she served as a panelist at the Simmons International Leadership Conference, which we produced that year in Dublin, Ireland. Asha's insights and deeply authentic and thoughtful manner on that panel really stayed with me. And I am delighted to continue to learn from her and share her insights with all of you. What you'd learn if you read Asha's professional bio is that she currently serves as vice president of diversity and inclusion at Dell Technologies where she partners with leaders and team members across the organization to deepen and advanced Dell's culture of inclusion. Asha is a strategic human resources executive with over 20 years of experience acquiring and integrating new businesses, leading business transformations and shaping longterm relationships with top global clients. She is a passionate advocate for women in technology and deeply believes that diversity and inclusion is a business driver and therefore a business imperative. Asha holds her MBA from the University of Houston and a BA in biology from Baylor University. She resides in Austin, Texas with her husband and two teenage children. Welcome Asha. I am thrilled to have you as a guest on the Better Understanding podcast, and thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Asha George ([01:33](#)):

Thank you, Susan. You know, I'm a fan of yours. I'm a fan of the Institute and I'm fan of this topic. So I'm excited to be here with you.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([01:40](#)):

Okay. I, you know, I told the world a little bit about you. What do you want our listeners to know - what else about you?

Asha George ([01:50](#)):

Yeah. You know, the funny thing about this podcast is you can't necessarily see you. So I think a little bit about myself is probably good. You know, I am a first generation American daughter of immigrant parents from India. I was the first in my family to go to college. Actually when I went to college, like most Asian kids, you have three choices you get to pick between, you know, being an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer. I broke out of that. I came into HR. So I've spent over the last 20 some years in HR, and in the last few years in the diversity and inclusion space. I'm a working mom. I'm married for over 21 years. I have two children. Both my husband and I have really demanding careers and it literally takes a village, and we're hoping we're doing it right in kind of creating kind of the next generation of society. A little bit about me that you will probably know really quickly is I'm a numbers girl at heart. I like facts and data and that's kind of always been how I make my calls and decisions in life. And I always say, my superpower is always kind of being able to tell a story through data.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([02:55](#)):

That's really helpful. And how do you come to this work? So I'm thinking, what stat did you read? That was like, oh my God, I have to solve for this.

Asha George ([03:05](#)):

I crack up. I had actually no plans to come into this space. I stepped into this DEI space unexpectedly, but it's been an absolute and pleasant surprise and a fun, fun journey to be a part of. You know, most people have these kind of "have-to" kinds of jobs. I have a "get-to" kind of job. I've always been passionate about transformational change. And in this role, I get to do it every day. And so I consider my self quite fortunate because I get to live and breathe it every day. And so in my role, as a diversity inclusion leader, I get to change hearts and minds at scale.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([03:41](#)):

Changing hearts and minds at scale. That just is so cool.

Asha George ([03:47](#)):

It is. It starts off - you start off with just individual awareness. Then it becomes personal learning. And then that transforms to allyship over time. But when you work at a company like the size of Dell, it's like 160,000. It's like a small city. I mean, it's a big population. So transforming at scale. I always say, if you can make change at Dell happen, you're changing the world. And so that's what excites me and fuels me about this job.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([04:12](#)):

Why do we need more inclusion at work Asha? I know one of the things that I'm surprised about is there's been an ever present drum beat and there's a lot of focus. How would you articulate - why all this focus on inclusion?

Asha George ([04:28](#)):

One thing is, you know, as, as we think about social responsibility, driving more inclusion is simply just the right thing to do. And it's hard. It's not hard to imagine that DEI is just practical, but there is a demand and there's a supply. And so I think about it in that perspective. When you're in a business, you're always thinking about what the customer needs. And in my role, if the customers really want to know that they're doing business with a company that literally has a soul, diversity inclusion raises that customer that raises our customer satisfaction scores almost immediately. And part of it is also the face of the customer is kind of changing and they're becoming more diverse and they want to see people that look like them, that speak their language, that they can relate to, that have the same values as them. So you've got that piece kind of in play. And so that's why from a demand perspective that exists.

Asha George ([05:22](#)):

And then of course the workforce is changing. We actually have more women graduating than men. And then the buying power of our women as a result in minorities is growing exponentially. So as a company, we know that companies with higher gender and ethnicity, we just make more money. And so we often say, Hey, it's a business imperative. The other side of it is the supply. The number of women are growing faster than men in the workforce. And in the tech industry, I don't know Susan, if you've noticed, but you can sit on your couch and you could probably order your groceries, your dress for the weekend, and your takeout all within a 15 timeframe.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([06:02](#)):

My kids and I, my husband, we do this. We order - we solve 15 needs from the couch in 20 minutes. I guess, for the fun of it or because we could. We used to go out and do stuff. But now of course, we can't.

Asha George ([06:12](#)):

Every company has like a tech piece of it. And as a result, for our industry, we're in a war for talent. And the reality is when we talk about the skills shortage, we expect to have like 4.3 million jobs open by 2030. So as you think about that, it's hard to ignore.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([06:31](#)):

Did you say 4.3 million jobs?

Asha George ([06:33](#)):

Open in the tech industry by 2030. With the current graduation rates, we can't even hit half. We actually believe that if we can cast a wider net, we can not only meet the demand and fill the demand with the diverse talent. We also bring in diversity of thought, which if you think about that diverse talent brings diversity of thought, with diversity of thought, you get innovation. And with innovation you get competitive edge. And in a tech industry like ours, where we move at the speed of light, we've just got to get it right. We often say, Hey, if you don't embrace diversity and inclusion, you're just going to be left behind.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([07:09](#)):

First of all, you just said so much that I want to go back to. But one of the things as I sit here, looking at my Dell computer. Your brand is imprinted on me every single day when I wake up and go to work. I think technology used to be removed for a lot of people. Even the concept of STEM. One of the byproducts of the pandemic, the global pandemic, is everyone is searching for doing things remotely. And our dependence on technology has just catapulted into a different stratosphere, right? How do you see your Dell culture changing? Because as I understood it, you guys always worked from home. And how has the pandemic for your organization impacted how you can include and not. Have you seen a change?

Asha George ([07:59](#)):

Yeah. We had a big work from home culture before, for sure. It was probably about 30%, but over the weekend we went to about 90%. So it went really fast, really quickly. And I would have said we had more flex work schedules where people could come in and go as they needed. But a lot of people were still coming to the office when it made sense for their roles. But what really changed for me personally, as I've watched it, is watching Michael Dell and the ELT kind of open up their homes to us in their calls. You see our ELT kind of in sweatshirts and jeans and you see their dogs, their children, their grandchildren in the picture. When you talk about leading with inclusivity, I think you see that. It makes us feel a lot more safe to share our homes and our thoughts, right? Because it's, your home is a personal place. It's where you go to just unwind. And all of a sudden your home is now your workplace. There is no safe spaces. Inclusivity kind of is coming through whether we like it or not in this world, in a lot of ways.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([09:04](#)):

Yeah. So there's an adjustment. So that, I guess that leads me to the question is when you think about what leading inclusively means and how when you see it, how would you define leading inclusively?

Asha George ([09:17](#)):

I always say that if you lead inclusive, you lead inquisitively, the intent is to learn, not judge. The reality is that everyone has a logic that makes sense to them. And just because it's their truth, but it's not yours. It doesn't make it right or wrong. I always tell the story about my parents. You know, my parents believed in arranged marriages and I didn't. They celebrated 46 happy years of marriage. And I can't argue with that. That is their truth. I just celebrated 21 years of mine. And that is my truth. So when you have that open mindset and the ability to accept multiple truths, you're leading inclusively. And I'm not going to say that's easy. It's hard at times, but you've got to kind of learn to kind of open up your brain a little bit to that. And your heart.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([10:09](#)):

You basically just answered the question of why for an Institute for Inclusive Leadership, why we would name a podcast, the Better Understanding Podcast. If you could click on that one, one more time, what's the role of understanding? How do we cultivate it or for the listener, Asha, who genuinely wants to understand why, why understanding is important? What would you say?

Asha George ([10:35](#)):

I would say understanding is a journey that we all need to be continually focused on. You need to be deliberate. You need to be intentional. It takes listening more than even stating your own perspective. If you think about even systemic racism, it's existed for over 400 years, right? Susan. But in 2020, you know, you see the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Brianna Taylor, those racial injustices came to the surface really quickly. And when you talk about understanding, I'm a DEI professional. And even I had to pause and ensure I had a full understanding of what the Black community was going through - in order to really hear directly. And so I took the chance to really go listen to our Black team members. Our teams across Dell coordinated listening sessions to create spaces where people could really safely share their emotions, their needs. And a lot of times the rawness of what they were going through. This was not just impacting them at work. It was impacting their families. It was impacting their children. They needed somewhere to kind of open up as an outlet. This was an opportunity also for our leaders to learn and gain understanding as well. The simplest thing of just checking in, can be so powerful, and when you think about it, and just listen. As a result, progress is just made real through that understanding.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([12:01](#)):

I'm a big advocate of listening, being sort of probably the number one leadership skill. There is a fear though, right? To be white this summer on the topic of Black lives was, I think, scary because we didn't know what we didn't know.

Asha George ([12:17](#)):

Right.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([12:17](#)):

As you and I seek, with many others, to invite conversation, where do you see the biggest stumbling blocks or fears for people on these tough conversations?

Asha George ([12:30](#)):

Yeah. I had to really give this some thought. Some people believe that there are a finite number of opportunities and have this interpretation that equity and inclusion means that something is being taken from one person to give to another. I would argue that, that's simply not the case. I would probably venture to say, there's probably an infinite number of opportunities for all. It's not that a bigger slice of one pie means a smaller slice for another. It's that the pie just gets bigger. And there's just more opportunities for everyone. And the change has to begin with this understanding that the collective belief, that power, opportunities, success, joy. These are not just pies. There is an infinite number of opportunities that could be accessible by all. So when we talk about this fear, we have to let go of the fear that something's being taken away from us. And instead take action on behalf of all of us. Because I think, you know, revolutions really happen when you bring collective voices together. You need to amplify those voices, celebrate successes, be an ally and help each other. And that's how you got to tackle those fears.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([13:42](#)):

Just because we're elevating other underrepresented populations like women into positions doesn't mean that you male or white male, have less opportunity because you have to think about the pie, the greater pie that it's expanding.

Asha George ([13:57](#)):

Right. Right.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([13:58](#)):

Although there is the fear of what's gonna, what's gonna be left for me.

Asha George ([14:03](#)):

It is interesting. We had an executive a couple of weeks ago. He pulled up his chart from two years ago and showed his org chart. It's a fairly homogenous looking group of folks. And then he pulled up his org chart two years later. The size of the org chart had doubled. So the number of people on the org chart had doubled, he then went on and talked about the revenue growth. And then what you saw was the diversity across the org chart. And he said, "This is when I say the pie got bigger." We got, we made more money. And as a result, we had more jobs. And so we created opportunity. And that's really what, when we talk about it, really what it means.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([14:40](#)):

I love that example of how to activate a commitment of diversity in organizational life. So when you think about your own journey and I'll just confess this might've been my favorite part of the entire Dublin Simmons International Leadership Conference. We along with two other awesome panelists, sat down and talked in front of several hundred people about arguably the most vulnerable thing in life. And that is when we felt like we weren't included. Can you share a story about when you felt different and then conversely, a story of when you felt purposely included to bring to life the difference of what it makes for just one human?

Asha George ([15:25](#)):

Yeah. You know, I'll tell you, you know, kind of my childhood, because I think that really is telling a lot about me. I would venture to say, we all feel the need to kind of mask and cover parts of ourselves. You know? I mean, how many times do you think about it, Susan? Have you adjusted the way you talk or dress or even who you're seeing just because it just would make life easier. You know, it just happens. Or how many times have you said a white lie just to kind of get it out of the way. And so when I think about even my childhood, I was a first generation American kid born to Indian parents in the seventies. It's just a recipe for therapy on all different levels. Because there just weren't a lot of immigrant kids at the time. As a kid, I had very humble beginnings and often kind of played that role as family translator, business negotiator, taught many of my immigrant relatives how to dress and speak.

Asha George ([16:16](#)):

And I was the first in my family to go to college. So I often felt this pressure of being the one to take everyone forward. Like most first-generation kids, I live between two worlds, a life with a very, very traditional family and a completely separate life with my school kids. And the two never really mixed. And you see for my parents, India was home. But for me, Texas was the only home I'd ever known. And so if I think about how I handled it. I never felt like I fit in anywhere. So I did what most kids do. I covered, I covered everything. I don't want to take anything away. I mean, I love my heritage. I love the songs, the food, the clothes. And I love the American heritage. I love the sports, the jeans, the barbecue. I loved it all. But when it came down to it, I just didn't want to do a lot of explaining. I was frankly, just a little lazy. I didn't want to explain, you know,

why does your house smell like spices? Why do your parents speak in a different dialect? Why do you can't do things like we can? It just was a lot of work.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([17:15](#)):

For our listeners who might not know what covering means. Can you say what that is? And give us an example of covering?

Asha George ([17:22](#)):

Covering is masking parts of yourself to just be able to kind of fit in. And a lot of times it's ways to hide parts of yourself because you think you're not going to be accepted. And so that's really what I was really focused on is just trying to cover all those. I'd keep everything very separate because I didn't want to have to explain it all because I knew that my logic wasn't their logic and it just wouldn't be easy for others to understand.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([17:49](#)):

How did that shape you growing up in this duality?

Asha George ([17:52](#)):

I remember this moment. I have to tell you this one. You'll laugh, because it's hilarious. We had a Go Texans day in first grade. I begged and begged and begged my dad and said, can I get a Go Texans outfit, the cowboy hat, the whole thing? And I cried and said, I want to be an American. And my dad, we were really not well-off folks at the time. So, you know, money was kind of hard to get, but he waited until he got his paycheck on Thursday night, the event was on Friday. He went and bought me an outfit. I remember it being one of the proudest, even to this day, one of the proudest moments of my life. You see, like for a moment, I wasn't living like a double life. I lived a life where I was Indian and American all at the same time. And it was very proud. Right. And so when you think about diversity and inclusion, it's just more than what we do. It's kind of who we are. We have all these intersectionalities. Some of these things, you can see. Some of these things you don't.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([18:45](#)):

Ohh.

Asha George ([18:45](#)):

But we shouldn't have to choose one for another. Right?

Susan Mackenty Brady ([18:50](#)):

I will tell you that does not make me laugh. It makes me want to cry, because I can totally picture you in your little outfit.

Asha George ([18:57](#)):

I was very proud. I was very proud and my dad got the outfit from the grocery store. So you can tell how high end it was. But I was very proud.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([19:09](#)):

Okay, Asha. So do you have a picture?

Asha George ([19:11](#)):

I do. And I will send it to you. I'm happy to. You will have a ball of laughs.

Asha George ([19:16](#)):

But I think one of the cool things about this is I covered a lot as a kid, but here was my wake-up call. I was never alone. Everyone covers in some form or fashion. But you are your most, best engaged, happiest self when you let those covers go. And that's really why, I shared that example. We have to let people see you, see all of you. Let them see you, the warts and all, and kind of let that, that idea of perfection go because in the imperfections is where you kind of see that compassion. And I think that just tells a little bit about me. What it means to not cover is really kind of freedom in the end.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([19:56](#)):

So I promised myself when I launched this podcast, I wouldn't use buzzwords that might frankly turn people off from listening. And I think if there's one sort of shadow side that I can share that I believe we've done in the DEI profession is we've used language that sadly doesn't invite in people to learn as much as potentially unintentionally makes people feel wrong or scared that they're going to do it wrong. And one of those buzz words for me, and just talking to a lot of men, is privilege. What just occurred to me as I was listening to your story is when we talk about privilege, we talk about the less you have to cover. The more privileged you are, the less you have to think about being authentic. Being yourself means you're probably what is familiar and in the majority, right? What do we see as ubiquitous for power? Those people who are in charge, what's it like for you now? Like let's come to 2021 and here you have this really important strategic role at one of the world's biggest companies in the fastest growing industry on the planet. What's it like to navigate as you?

Asha George ([21:13](#)):

Well, as you grew up in this kind of age where you're trying to always figure out how to fit in. And I love your conversation about privilege, because I think every one of us has privilege. Some more than others, but we all have it. People at work, they say, well, I had humble beginnings. I said, yeah, but you know how to write a resume because you work at Dell. You know how to read a P and L statement because you work at Dell. You know how to read and write - that's privileged. And for a lot of people that we don't always recognize. And so I think that there's power in leveraging that privilege for others. When I look at Dell, my role and career at Dell, one of the things that I get to play as a role with our employee resource groups, I have 54,000 people that really take that passion and energy and really drive it into our customers, our community, and our business, so that I get to work at a place where I get to be myself.

Asha George ([22:07](#)):

And when I think about why that is so powerful - you know, when we look at each other, we kind of make a bunch of assumptions. But there are parts of me you see. And there's parts of me that you don't see. I have a disabled niece. I have a veteran brother. Those are things that people don't naturally assume. So when I think about my role at Dell, the power that I have is creating those spaces for people to bring their best selves to work and then to look back on their careers at Dell and say that was a great place to work because I got to be myself and I contributed the best version of myself when I was there. So I kind of think about my role at Dell.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([22:47](#)):

So maybe building on that, what is the most important skill we can practice that will lead to more inclusivity?

Asha George ([22:54](#)):

I really believe it's self-awareness. Particularly awareness of our own unconscious biases is the most important skill that we could use to lead inclusively. We all have biases. We just need to be aware of them. Listening, empathy, understanding are all part of that process. But until we kind of learn what our biases are,

you can't move to those next steps. The reality is this journey's really uncomfortable. And Susan it's sometimes very scary. We don't know all the answers. Otherwise, we already would've solved all of this. You have to choose to sit in those uncomfortable conversations and learn how to get comfortable. Our unconscious biases are what most would make this conversations hard. But if those conversations are the spaces we need to learn and grow, that'll make us more inclusive people overall.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([23:42](#)):

When I'm noticing my own bias and picturing, grabbing it and saying, whoa, any tips for leaders and our listeners about being more conscious? Then there's the next thing about doing something once you are conscious?

Asha George ([23:56](#)):

Yeah. Well, I have biases. I don't even know them half the time, but you know, what I do with my team at work is I give them permission to call me out on it. And I don't care if they do it publicly, just call me out on it. Because for me, I want to be caught in the moment and I want to catch myself before. Because you don't, you're so unaware. Right? And so giving permission to people. And you've got to define how you want to be told. Do you want to be pulled to the side? Do you want to be called out in the moment? Do you want to be told 10 minutes later? The next day, when you reflect at the end of the day? You've got to define what that looks like. But you've got to create your board of directors, of people around you that will be those truth tellers for you, and you be the board of directors for others. And that's, I think how that changes.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([24:43](#)):

You just put a piece of puzzle in the old big puzzle that was missing for me. And, and it goes like this. The reason why seeking to better understand, and frankly leading inclusively is so hard is because it requires that we get comfortable not knowing. They getting comfortable, being uncomfortable is actually - Oh my gosh, I didn't mean it to come out that way. Or I wasn't aware that that was offensive or it's actually being potentially wrong. And then being righted, which is really painful, especially for people who have pride, ego, don't love vulnerability. You know, it's like one big journey of vulnerability, right? What I'm hearing you say, the more that we can model this, especially leaders, tell me the truth about how I show up and what I might not be seeing. And then I, as a leader, need to check in about that. That's what I heard you say.

Asha George ([25:36](#)):

Yeah. Take a moment and kind of reflect and change.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([25:38](#)):

Yeah. Awesome. I want everybody in every organization to feel the way you feel, which is - I can be me and I belong. Right? What do you wish to leave people with? What actions do you suggest our listeners take to continue their own journey of understanding about inclusion?

Asha George ([25:58](#)):

Each of us is incredibly unique and special. So when we talk about inclusion, the only way to truly, truly be successful is celebrating those differences and working together. So what I would tell people is that you can't have a conversation without Asha, without her telling you what you want to go do. Just the way I am.

Asha George ([26:19](#)):

Get involved with people who don't look like you. Learn about their cultures. Learn about their language. Learn about their traditions. Ask about their barriers and challenges. Step out and get really, really uncomfortable. And once you figure out how to get comfortable being uncomfortable, then you'll learn how to become a change agent in our society. And then you leave a legacy that you can be proud of. And that's what I would leave you with Susan.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([26:46](#)):

Oh, get comfortable being uncomfortable. You heard it here. Asha. Thank you so much. I can't wait to listen to this myself and take it in really appreciate you being with us and really appreciate you being part of our work here at the Institute as well. Thank you for being with us.

Asha George ([27:04](#)):

Thank you, Susan.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([27:05](#)):

Thank you so much. Let's work together and make a huge difference in the world at the core. Leading inclusively starts with the desire to understand. So we hope that the Better Understanding podcast sparks something for you. That leaves you wanting more. Thank you everybody for joining.