

Susan MacKenty Brady (00:02):

I'm Susan MacKenty Brady, and 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 Darlene slaughter as our first guest, to the Better Understanding podcast. Darlene dares people to bring love, respect, compassion, and empathy into the workplace.

Susan MacKenty Brady (00:23):

I have known Darlene for over a decade. And let me tell you, she is grace defined. She makes complex things easy and she connects with anyone she meets. She's been one of the most influential teachers to me in my life -thus far. I also featured Darlene in my last book, Mastering Your Inner Critic, about recognizing and utilizing your confidence.

Susan MacKenty Brady (00:44):

What you would learn if you read her professional bio is that Darlene has served in government roles and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors. She was chief diversity officer at Fannie Mae before becoming chief diversity officer for the United Way worldwide. And is now Chief People Officer at the March of Dimes. She also serves as a strategic board member and fellow with the Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership.

Susan MacKenty Brady (01:07):

Welcome Darlene. I'm thrilled to have you as a guest on better understanding and thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today.

Darlene Slaughter (01:14):

I'm honored to be here and thank you for that introduction. That was wonderful.

Susan MacKenty Brady (01:20):

Thank you so much. So here's the thing, I'm wondering what you want our listeners to know about you that I didn't say.

Darlene Slaughter (01:28):

Ooh, that's a great question. I think I would say, I think of myself as a teacher - until someone crossed my path and actually said to me, I don't think you're a teacher at all. I think you are a nurturer of people and teaching is the platform that you use to do that. And I thought, well, that's pretty cool. And of course you have that moment of, I spent all my years thinking I was a teacher and now you're telling me I'm a nurturer of people, but it's, but I would, I would have to agree with that. That is what I love to do. And it was one of the things that I think I do best, which is the connection to people and making people comfortable in some of the most uncomfortable situations. Yes.

Susan MacKenty Brady (02:18):

So say a little bit more about that. You know, what, how do you come to this work and what fuels you as you think about helping people to have those difficult conversations?

Darlene Slaughter ([02:29](#)):

Yeah. You know, I go back to probably my beginning. I think a lot of times we are designed for things or put on this earth for things that we don't have meaning for when they're happening. It's just an experience that's happening to you and you get to a point in life when you start to reflect back on how, how did I become who I am? And I really do go back to the early, right. Um, I know when, when I was younger, I was extremely shy, just extremely shy. I did not want to look at people. I did not want to talk to people. I found myself many times hiding behind my mother when people would come up and say hello. So it was, I just didn't want to be seen. Um, because that was the safest place to be. And what I realized from family dynamics, right?

Darlene Slaughter ([03:29](#)):

And some, some people didn't want to see you and were perfectly fine to leave you in the background. And other people did want to see you and were perfectly fine pulling you out into the foreground. And learning how to be in any one of those situations brought me into a space in the work world, in the corporate world and the nonprofit world, where I had the ability to work with anybody on any side. And I knew how difficult it was. And so I, my, uh, sister-in-law at one time said to me, I don't know how you do this work because you don't like being around and talking to people. And I said, I do the work because I know how hard it is. And because I know how hard it is, I set out to make it easier for everybody else. And that's, that's how it works.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([04:26](#)):

I just have to ask you as you paint the picture of you as a shy little girl.

Darlene Slaughter ([04:30](#)):

Yeah.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([04:30](#)):

And knowing you for some time, you're a great listener. Have you faced any issues of perception where people make up other stories about your shyness?

Darlene Slaughter ([04:42](#)):

Yes. A lot of times I've been told... One person said you're just so aloof. Like you really don't care. And I was like, well, it's not that I don't care. It's just that I'm not comfortable. And I'm trying to figure out the way to maneuver this scenario, but I really do care. Or people will think that I'm not paying attention. And I'm like, well, no, this is what you said. I heard everything that you said, because I am paying attention. I may not be looking directly at you, but I am paying attention. And then I had an instructor when I was in grad school, who said, you need to be the big person that you are because you're the only one that can't see that. And I was like, okay. And she said, everybody sees that except for you. And you have to, you have to grow into it. So I had to grow into who I am today. I had to grow into that.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([05:41](#)):

There's so many different dimensions of ways that we unconsciously exclude or that we make up stories. And we think we understand when we really don't understand somebody. You know, I'm so curious... As you think about your very storied career, especially in inclusion work, what's going on at work, that we need more inclusion? What's driving all this focus?

Darlene Slaughter ([06:06](#)):

You know, another good question, Susan. I would say the world is changing rapidly and people don't know their places. I mean, where they stand and people. And actually, I would say at work, I go back to that statement I made earlier, like people don't understand the bigness of themselves. So we do play, we do play small, especially in the workplaces. We're afraid to speak up. We're afraid that, you know, I don't want to be the one that's different. I don't want to be the one that questions, those kinds of things. And so I think inclusion becomes very important because it brings sensibility to the workplace. Right. You know, me and you know that my angle is always about love.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([06:55](#)):

Oh yeah, we're going to talk about love. Yes.

Darlene Slaughter ([06:57](#)):

Right. And love in the workplace. And I think that is one of the things that is missing that because it is very uncomfortable when you're talking about love in the workplace, because people are like, you can't, I've had people tell me, you can't say that. You can't say love in the workplace.

Darlene Slaughter ([07:11](#)):

And I'm like, well, but why not? Okay. Okay. But when there is something that you love and, and we, we can say, I love my work. I love the place that I work in. I love the type of work that I do, but we can't say from a people standpoint that we need to have more love in the workplace. More compassion, more empathy, more understanding. And that's what inclusion does. So inclusion really takes all of those feelings and brings it into the workplace in a way that people can actually talk about it. But you know, when you said earlier, I make take the complex things and make them very simple. That's to me what it is, that's exactly what it is.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([07:59](#)):

If you think of a leader who you would define as an inclusive leader, can you paint a picture of what that person is or even tell a story about who comes to mind so that we can bring it to life? We can bring the act actions of inclusive leadership to life for our listeners.

Darlene Slaughter ([08:19](#)):

So I have one, one person in particular, early in my career, or very early on in my career. And there was a business meeting and it was a leadership meeting. And the person was responsible for organizational development in the, in the organization. So it was all of the, all of the senior leaders that had come to the big table, the big, you know, boardroom table. And at the end of the meeting, you know, people start popping up and leaving. There are some people who sat at the table and there's some people who sit on the wall just because it's a big meeting. And so at that point, it was, that was my cue. It's time to leave because the meeting is over, the person said, where are you going? And I said, well, the meeting is over and it's time for me to leave.

Darlene Slaughter ([09:07](#)):

And they said, no, you don't need to leave. Sit here. You belong here. Don't worry about it. They said, you belong here. And so sit down. I mean, it was just as simple as that, right? It was as simple as that. But what I will tell you that did, it was you belong here, you are included and you are just as important

as anybody else around this table. And it was probably that moment when my career totally changed in the organization, because all of those senior leaders saw me very differently from that point on. I mean, there were senior leaders who would not say anything to me because I guess they figure you're not at this level yet. And so, you know, we don't really need to have a conversation with you to all of a sudden wanting my advice on different things that were happening in the organization. So it's as simple as that, that someone sees something sometimes in you that you don't see in yourself or brings you along in a space that you would never be invited into.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([10:13](#)):

So you said so much goodness there. I heard that the simple gesture of saying you belong here, you felt valued. And because it was in front of other people, your brand changed in that moment and your probably self perception, your perception of self. And it was linking it back to love. It was a metaphorical hand that said, Darlene, you're worthy and we need you. Right. So what else would you say about inclusive leadership? What is it? And what's the role of understanding?

Darlene Slaughter ([10:48](#)):

How as a leader, do you think about what your role is, but then what is that role that you have to the people that work with you? Right. I think so many times in organizations, we are so concerned about the widgets that we create. You know, that we've got to, we've got to produce and we've got to bring in revenue and we've got to make a new product and we've got to get a product to market. And we are managing people to get all of that stuff done. But how often do we make the time to sit and listen to someone who's not sure about themselves without saying to that person you're not performing. Right. And so I think there is from an inclusive leader, what we're trying to get leaders to understand is, you know, step back from what you have been hired to do -

Susan MacKenty Brady ([11:49](#)):

From your agenda.

Darlene Slaughter ([11:51](#)):

From your agenda, right from your agenda. Stop thinking about the bonus that's going to come when you get that product to market and think about what is it that helped you to get to where you are and how are you helping others to get to where they need to be. That's what, to me, that's what inclusive leadership is. It's sort of putting yourself in someone else's shoes. One to learn about their story. But to also add to the journey that they're on, so that they see themselves in that bigger way than they may be in wherever they are. There's a lot to that.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([12:29](#)):

Here's what it brings up for me is for those who are listening, some are listening for themselves. Like they just want, they want to do a better job. I mean, either their organization or their team leader or someone in their life is like, gosh, you know, you need to pay more attention or they're just seeking to understand. What are the skills that we need to develop? What have you seen? What have you seen most, I guess it's a two-part question. What are the skills that you think need to be developed that'll help well-intended people do what you just described, which is, acknowledge others, understand others? And then what kind of experiences have you seen be most effective to awaken this?

Darlene Slaughter ([13:11](#)):

The first one I would say, we need to stop taking ourselves so seriously. Right? We need to stop falling for our own hype, right? So I'm a manager, I'm this I'm that, you know, and people are so afraid to say, I don't know, I don't, I don't know where this is going. I don't know what we're trying to do. Get comfortable with not having all the answers get comfortable with not being scripted. I will tell you, and Susan, you know, me, you know, I am so more, much more comfortable working off script than I am on script. But I think working off script helps with your authenticity, right? And now there are times when you can't be off script because depending on what it is and what you're doing and the message you have to get across. But I can't tell you the number of meetings that I've been in, where people are just talking to their own people and have to have talking points to talk to their own people.

Darlene Slaughter ([14:10](#)):

So the inclusive leadership skill is who are you in your own authenticity and get comfortable with that. Because when you get comfortable with that, the people in the room understand your energy and will come along with you. Like I've been in meetings where people will, and I can hear people say in the background, see this is just why I love her because she just says stuff like that stuff. And I can also laugh at myself because in a moment of saying stuff, sometimes I do say, Hmm, I probably could have said that differently. Or let me back up and say it again, but let me say it with the intention of where I'm trying to go. So understand your own authenticity and who you are and go in with intention, right? Go in with intention and be vulnerable. It's okay to be vulnerable.

Darlene Slaughter ([15:08](#)):

And then a lot of people think that being vulnerable means being weak. I was on a call the other day and the person was like, but tears mean weakness. And I'm like, well, no tears don't mean weakness. That's not what tears mean. Tears mean that you have very strong feelings around whatever it is you have strong feelings and that's okay. Right? Because if you don't have strong feelings about something, you can be very indifferent to those things. And that can take you down a road that you don't want to go down either. Right. So it really is. I really do think it's, it's understanding itself. And then once you understand self, that gives you some insight to understanding others, as well.

Darlene Slaughter ([15:51](#)):

You know, we talk about the core of being a human, right? And I don't, it doesn't matter what your religion is. It doesn't matter what your race is. It doesn't matter what language you speak. It doesn't matter what the color of your skin is. If I'm in a room full of people that I've never met. And that I don't know. And I smile. Everybody knows what that means. Everybody knows what that means. There are core things inside of us that are common to all of us because we're human, right? So when we try to act like that's not real, that doesn't exist. I'm above that. That's not me. I don't feel those kinds of things. That's when you start giving the side eye of, do I, can I really trust this person? Can I really believe what this person is saying? And that, you know, sometimes it's hard, but you know, sitting down and examining who you are for who you are, is not the easiest thing to do. But once you get clarity around your own authenticity, you show up very differently in workplaces.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([16:59](#)):

Okay. So I heard get over your own hype. Stop falling for your own hype. We gotta sort of be more comfortable speaking. And you know, this is my word, not yours, but I joke how I'm on a moment to moment journey of trying to remove the gap between my intention and my impact. But because I'm human, I'm going to err, right? Like I'm human and I am going to make mistakes.

Darlene Slaughter ([17:25](#)):

So Darlene, I'm listening to you and I'm like, Oh my gosh. It's like the ministry of Darlene Slaughter. And I love it. And you and I both know, because we've talked about this before, the opposite of love is fear. Can you talk a little bit about what is the fear about. Like what's keeping people from showing up in the way that you just described - at work, and with one another as humans?

Darlene Slaughter ([17:51](#)):

Yes. The fear is that because we believe we have to have all the answers. That we have to know. That we, especially around inclusion and equity and diversity. Right. I don't want to ask the question because I may offend you. So the fear of not asking the question keeps me in the dark, really. And it keeps me operating on assumptions that are not true. So you're not afraid of operating on assumptions that may not be true, but you're afraid of asking me a question so that you can learn. Right. And that's the fear.

Darlene Slaughter ([18:30](#)):

And so the conversation that I have is - before you ask the question, think about your intention, right? Because it's your intention in the question. And it's the energy that you bring that question to me. That's what I'm going to speak to. So if you're coming with a question, but your intention is to, it's not a real question, it's a statement or some something you want to get across. I feel that before I even answered that question, and I would choose to answer that question either in the way that you really want an answer, or I'm going to answer that question through the energy that I feel from you, which is if your intention is to do something to me, that's going to come back at you. Right?

Susan MacKenty Brady ([19:20](#)):

So almost authenticity begets authenticity. Inauthenticity gets a return of inauthenticity.

Darlene Slaughter ([19:28](#)):

And authentic. It may be very authentic, but it may not be the answer that you were actually looking for. You know what I'm saying? It's this kind of - the fear of not knowing or the fear of saying, how did I get to be at this place in my career or this, this stage in my life and not know that I'm okay with that. Right. I'm very okay. Because we all kind of grew up in the same system and we learned some of the same things. Right.

Darlene Slaughter ([19:58](#)):

But because of who we are, we each have different experiences and some of us don't have to experience everything. And some of us have to know that, right. Just because of who we are. But if you, if you really want to know, and then you really want to do something with it, I'll talk to you all day long. And what you do with it could be, wow. I never actually thought about that before, or I'm going to talk to my kids about that. Or I'm going to look at something that I'd never paid attention to before so that whatever it is doesn't mean, it needs to be some big, huge thing that, you know, I'm going to go out and change the world. It could be, I'm going to call Susan and ask her, has she ever thought about this question. And then Susan and I are going to have a conversation that Susan and I never had before. Yeah.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([20:49](#)):

You know, as you're talking, I realized one dynamic that's incumbent upon better understanding is of course, asking questions. And I really love what you say about, pay attention to your intention when you're asking and pay attention with your genuine question does not come with an answer. That's preformed. It comes from really, not knowing. So that's energy out. But so that's my learning.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([21:14](#)):

How about when? And this just happened to me recently when we stumble on our own unintended impact and we get the gift of feedback. I think one of the most painful things, and this is another element of fear is that, you know, we won't know when we say something that's somehow offensive and the person we speak with, especially if we're in a position of power and that other person doesn't feel like somehow, safe to say something to feedback. Is it incumbent upon all of us as we seek to understand, to check in, in every conversation? Like, did I say anything that offended you? Almost like, A, how do we deal with the feedback when it comes, when we do have unintended impact? And B, is there a way that we can get out ahead of it? Right?

Darlene Slaughter ([22:02](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, there are times when, um, the feedback comes and then you just need to pay attention to it. It happens in the moment that you say it, right. When the things get said that are like, okay, that was just so wrong. Or just so like, just so not cool. Right? The feedback comes in that moment and it's whether or not you're actually paying attention to it, because you can say, did I say something out of order? And somebody might say, yes, you did. Or somebody might laugh. Or somebody was like good grief. Or somebody might get up and walk out of the room and you know, there's feedback there.

Darlene Slaughter ([22:45](#)):

So we have to sort of pay attention to what's actually happening around us. And that is the intention and the impact. Right? I think it is hard for people to ask for feedback because we have in our mind, well, I'm going to go ask Susan for feedback because Susan is my friend that she's going to tell me in the way that I'm going to hear it best. She's going to put icing on the cake and it may be a little nugget of like, well, you could have done something a little bit better, but you know, you're in such, such a sweetheart and you're so good and people love you. And then I didn't really hear the feedback. I heard that accolades because I went to Susan for that. You know, I may not go to somebody else because they were like, you just keep saying crazy stuff all the time. What is wrong with you?

Darlene Slaughter ([23:32](#)):

What is wrong with you? Right. So I may not have asked that person for feedback very often. You know, I say to, to people like being on automatic pilot does not do a good thing for you - for you, right. So you have to kind of sometimes slow down and say, what is my impact? It's a, it's a question you can ask others, just ask the question. What impact do I have on people? That's a scary question. It is a scary.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([24:02](#)):

So yeah. So when it, when it comes to feedback, I mean, this is part of the work that we've collaborated on in the past, around having a place to return to at your center where you can kind of recalibrate and you can then kind of return to that center, that compassionate place, that self-respecting place, or the respect for other people place, and then be able to metabolize the feedback. B ut what I'm hearing you say is, is it's okay to ask for feedback? Would you, would you put that up there on the things that people need to do who want to lead inclusively, asking for more feedback about how they show up?

Darlene Slaughter ([24:39](#)):

I would say yes, but I would also say it's not the most common thing because people are afraid. People are afraid to ask for feedback because they're not sure what you're going to say. And they're also not sure how they're going to handle it. Right? So if you ask someone the question, what is the impact that I have on you or, or in not even on you personally, but what is the impact that I have in the organization? People are hoping that you say you have a great impact, but some people may say, you know, it may, it may be not what you want it to be. And then if you say, I'm really working on being a better leader and being a more inclusive leader, and I really want to understand the impact that I have. Most people will probably answer that question without the fear of like, if I tell you what the impact is really then something's going to happen to me. So that's the thing with feedback. We're all afraid of it, right? We're afraid to give it, we're afraid to get it. And so we have to really take the sting out of what feedback is and think about it as a gift. In order for us to, to move on many times, we've heard things before and it's it, but we get to choose when we actually believe it.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([25:58](#)):

Isn't that the truth. The teacher will come until the lesson is learned. I believe right? Just as a, as, as a, as a final thought, what, 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?

Darlene Slaughter ([26:17](#)):

Susan. I think that one thing that people can walk away with and do is really think about conversations, that you are a part of - conversations that you are a part of or conversations that you're seeing, and really get in touch with what's going on with you when you hear that conversation, right? Because we all have triggers in one way or another. What it that's causing you to go toward that or to go away from that? And right now, I think in this country, right, we have a lot of opposing beliefs on a lot of different things and on a lot of different levels. And we dig our heels in to what we believe our values are. And, um, our belief systems are, and we close ourselves off to hearing any thing else other than what we believe. And sometimes it's really like, how can you find common ground with those that are, that you may perceive as being very different from you?

Darlene Slaughter ([27:21](#)):

And how can you get to common ground to have that conversation that perhaps triggers you at times? Right? So we, so we stopped listening to each other. And if you are an inclusive leader, the one thing that you cannot do - is that you can't stop listening to people. You have to bring the voices to the table, whether you agree with them or not. But you have to make the space for people to have a voice. And you don't necessarily have to make a decision and you don't have to agree. But I think you have to make the space for people to be able to share their beliefs and their values and their understanding. And then you need to work towards common ground. I'm not going to agree with everybody, but there are probably some nuggets in there that I can agree with. And if we can agree on one or two things - that changes the dynamic of the relationship, I always say that, and we brought it up earlier.

Darlene Slaughter ([28:18](#)):

There are two places that people come from - a place of love or a place of fear, right? And when you come from a place of love, you really are open. You're curious. You're spontaneous. You're hardworking. You're still all the things that you need to be in an organization or as a person. But you, you have a, I want to learn more. I want to know why that is. When you come from a place of fear, the way it looks in

organizations is I don't want to have a meeting with a whole bunch of different people. I want to make a decision. I don't think that's a new opportunity that we should be paying attention to. For whatever reason. I don't have time as a leader to sit and have you come in my office and just talk about who you are and what you want to do in your life. Get your job done. Right? So we can see that. Am I coming from fear and I'm very closed off, or am I coming from love? And I'm very open. I don't have the answers, but I'm open to what's to come, right ?

Susan MacKenty Brady ([29:19](#)):

With that. You just confirmed that indeed. The name of the podcast is probably right. The Better Understanding is, uh, Requires an opening of the heart. Darlene, you are a walking definition of big heartedness, and I just have to thank you so much for taking time to be with me today and our listeners. And I'm so excited to journey on and continue to learn with and alongside you.

Darlene Slaughter ([29:47](#)):

Well, Susan, thank you for having me to be your first guest. It's wonderful to be here, but what I also want to tell you is I know you and we've known each other for a long time. This is going to be wildly successful, probably more successful than you actually realize, because it is so needed right now. And one of the things in the space that I'm in and as a, as a black woman, that we, you know, being that this is the podcast. We didn't say that, right? But many times when we look at who are the practitioners in the workspaces that are really driving diversity, equity and inclusion. Many times it is black women in the workplace, but what needs to happen is it needs to be across the board. So that one group of people, one race of people, one gender of people is not the messenger. It needs to come from people across the spectrum. And I think where we are as a country right now, and that's what we're seeing. That it's going to take all of us to do this while my title might have diversity in it, it's just to create a framework. But the work actually has to be done by all of us,

Darlene Slaughter ([30:57](#)):

Kudos to you.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([30:58](#)):

Thank you so much. Let 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.