

## Better Understanding with Susan Mackenty Brady

### A Conversations with Dani Monroe

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. I'm excited to welcome Dani Monroe to our podcast today. Dani currently serves as a trusted advisor and thought leader to chief diversity officers and other senior executives in partnership with Center Focus International, Inc., a consulting firm she founded in 1995. She consults to large multinational corporations like MetLife, Novartis, Pfizer, and even the CIA. Dani was the inaugural Senior Vice President, Chief Diversity Equity and Inclusion officer for Mass General Brigham, the largest private employer in Massachusetts with 82,000 employees. During her seven year tenure, she led MGB from an organization hesitant to speak the words, inclusion and diversity to one that is known around the region for its work in this space. She built and implemented an anti-racism strategy titled United Against Racism. And that was only one of her many accomplishments. Governors, Deval Patrick and Charlie Baker appointed Dani to the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education, The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, and the Massachusetts Economic Development Council. She also served on Vertex's diversity equity and inclusion advisory board.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([01:23](#)):

Dani is the author of the book, Untapped Talent: Unleashing the Power of the Hidden Workforce that focuses on identifying talent that is right before your eyes. We'll hear more about that today. Recently, she was featured in the Boston Business Journal article, The Urgency of Now Reflecting on the Progress Made in the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Space Since George Floyd's Murder.

Dani Monroe ([01:46](#)):

Dani serves as a frequent speaker on diversity equity and inclusion issues and trends at national and international conferences. In November, she'll be returning to her Alma mater Pepperdine University to deliver a plenary session on the systemic challenges of CVOs. I met Dani a number of years ago at a gender equity conference in Arizona. Our lives continued to intersect over the years because she is considered somewhat of a legend in the diversity space. I can tell you that she is a visionary and as courageous as she is compassionate. Dani, welcome so much to the Better Understanding podcast. I'm so happy to have you with us.

Dani Monroe ([02:25](#)):

Thank you, Susan. Thank you for that wonderful introduction. And I'm excited about having this conversation today, especially with you, given the work that you're doing at the Institute.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([02:36](#)):

I love opening our podcast with a little peek behind the scenes. What do you want our listeners to know about you? You know, that they might not be able to find on LinkedIn or that I didn't just share in my introduction.

Dani Monroe ([02:48](#)):

Yeah. So I think one of the things I'd like for them to know is that I'm a curious person. And one has to be curious in order to do diversity equity inclusion work. Because if you aren't, you get into some preconceived assumptions all the time. And that curiosity for me, that sense of wonder, has allowed me to work with hourly employees, to CEOs, to boards, to local, to global work, and just really stepping in the work and stepping in it from a place of - I wonder what the journey is that will take place now?

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Susan Mackenty Brady ([03:26](#)):

I could just talk with you today about curiosity and how to cultivate it. Is this how you came to the work? I mean, you have curiosity, but what, what fuels you, because you could apply that curiosity to any number of topics and specialty areas. Tell us how you came to be an expert in this work.

Dani Monroe ([03:45](#)):

Yes, because I'm curious, I don't always think of myself as an expert in the work. Because I think of myself as a student of the work. I've always lived in a multicultural context. I grew up on the Monterey peninsula in a small town called Seaside, California. Our block had African-Americans Asians, Mexicans, Portuguese. So they were the people that I went to school with, that I played with. We were in and out of each other's houses. And so subconsciously I was learning about differences, since I was born actually, because my family is also multicultural. But it wasn't until coming out of graduate school that I consciously began to think about race. And I did so because as a woman of color then in organization development, trying to find a job was extremely difficult. And in fact, I couldn't get a job.

Dani Monroe ([04:40](#)):

And one day I was reading an article in Black Enterprise about Dr. Price Cobbs, who was a psychiatrist. And I consider the godfather of diversity equity and inclusion work. And Price was working with Black and Brown leaders in organizations. And I called him up. Six months later, I was working for Price in his consulting firm Pacific Management System. Totally changed the trajectory of my work and brought me into this work in a conscious way. I truly apprenticed in the traditional sense of apprenticing with someone, with Price over the years. And then began to grow my own practice. What's exciting about it is, really, is what I wrote the book about in terms of untapped talent. Over 30 years, I was able to witness incredible brilliant human beings who should have gotten promoted, developed, lost opportunities. And I couldn't quite understand the "why." I could see their gifts and their brilliance, why other people couldn't. And so what I realized over time is that the unconscious bias that was operating would continue to operate and that this work needed to continue. And I just think everybody deserves the opportunity to have their talent fully expressed. And now, no matter who you are,

Susan Mackenty Brady ([06:07](#)):

What I'm hearing are a couple of different themes. One is this whole concept of the business case of maximizing the talent that you have in the organization, and also seeing disparity, and your inference to what had to have been exclusion and a lack of belonging. Can you share, just going back to Price's work, can you share with our listeners, is there a theory or a value that you learned from that phase of your life working for someone who was a giant in the field that you would want? Just, that's just a kind of historical context, Dani.

Dani Monroe ([06:45](#)):

Yeah. So I think the historical context for me really is that race matters. And we've come full circle and many people today think we're just talking about race for the first time in organizations when this work was started on that. So race matters. In that, is the value of a human being and what they can contribute - makes a difference. And that we often judge people based on external factors and don't provide the opportunity for them to develop and grow. And back then we used to do five day leadership labs. If you could believe it, we'd do five days with the Black and Brown employees. And then we would have two days with their managers who tended to be White. So we could work some of the issues that we heard over the five days with the leaders to get them aware about what their employees were experiencing.

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So that value of a human being and what they can contribute to an organization really popped out for me.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([07:53](#)):

What's the driving focus now. I mean, I'm looking at where we're sort of in some ways, still in a global pandemic. We sat tight last summer and witnessed some horrific goings on in our country. I know we have listeners from outside the United States. With George Floyd's murder - absolutely put race and the conversation of race in the workplace. Why do we need more inclusion at work? And for the listener who really wants to understand now what's driving all this focus. Because I hear you talk about the value of human beings and oh boy, that speaks to me big. Can you connect that to inclusion work, talk about the focus right now? What's the burning platform that you see?

Dani Monroe ([08:40](#)):

The burning platform at the moment is around equity. How do we ensure equity for not just people in our organization? When we think about the pandemic - and we have witnessed and observed the impact in diverse neighborhoods, because they don't have access to healthcare. They may have, and rightfully so, very strong held beliefs about not getting vaccinated because of what's happened to them as a race of people in the past. And so equity is the burning platform at the moment. And I think the need for it and the need for inclusion in our organizations. Because we're really talking about how do we optimize the performance of an organization. Should, I mean, it's twofold, there's a business case. And there's also a moral case. And the business case is about optimizing the performance of an organization. You know, when we have different ideas and voices and lived experience at the table, we know, research tells us that we get better outcomes, better results, better creative types of answers.

Dani Monroe ([09:52](#)):

Now, at the same time, from a moral perspective, people want to be heard. They want to have their intelligence used. They want to have that brilliance come to the surface so that they can feel like they belong to an organization. And it's not just people espousing that we support people who are different. But how do I get to demonstrate my strengths, my influence? You know, how do I get to really take a project and run it and drive it? And the resources are there for me to actually be successful. And not only that, that I know that my manager or leader has my back. So if I need some political coverage that he or she will also provide that. You know, when people feel that sense of belonging and connectedness and they're in an environment where they can thrive, that is where we retain people.

Dani Monroe ([10:51](#)):

That is when we get the best out of that person. And what a person receives - the reciprocal experience - is they get to have, what I think is one of the best experiences anybody can have. Is when your talent is fully being utilized and you are practicing self-expression from your talent. And all of us have had sort of those critical experiences in our lives where, you know, it's almost like we're working on all cylinders. It's the right place, the right job, the right, the right people around you. And you are just elevating. And.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([11:29](#)):

You're in the flow.

Dani Monroe ([11:31](#)):

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You're in the flow.

New Speaker ([11:31](#)):

We all need to have those experiences throughout our career. Because my sense is that when you're in the flow, you just impact everybody around you in what you're doing. And you being.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([11:48](#)):

Dani, The actuality of feeling all of that. If I'm an employee in an organization, is that your definition of inclusive leadership? Or could you distill the definition of an inclusive leadership for our listeners?

Dani Monroe ([12:01](#)):

That's part of it. So it really is about the diverse ideas of individuals, but it's also about what we were just talking about is. As an inclusive leader, your role is really to tap that energy and power in a human being so that they can bring forth their skills and talents and ability. And to be inclusive means you have to move into action. You can't be just good intended. One has to say, I'm putting Dani on that project. Oh, by the way, she needs to do three years at Harvard MBA school or executive school or whatever. And I'm gonna provide that opportunity for her. That's when people stay and that's when they really talk about their organization being a great place to work. And that's what being a great place to work should really be based on.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([12:56](#)):

I want to go back to a concept, you said about political coverage, because I think as you know, I'm a student and teacher in the world around sponsorship. And what I see to be true is without it, there isn't advancement. Oftentimes there's not retention of the very employees that C level executives are saying we value. And I haven't heard it called political coverage, but that might make some people think, oh, that sounds so contrived. I'd love your perspective on the necessity and the importance. And then also just talk about what you mean by that. I'd love for you to elaborate for our listeners about that.

Dani Monroe ([13:33](#)):

Yeah. And so political coverage, you know, I had a wonderful manager at Mass General, Brigham - Peter Markel, who was the CFO. So I reported him for a long time - to the CFO of the company. And people said, well, wow, that's odd for DEI, but he also ran three fourths of the organization from an administrative place. And just reporting into the CFO, gave me political coverage and leverage. Peter controlled all the budgets. Right? But at the same time, I could walk into his office and say, Peter, I'm having a difficulty with moving this through this particular department. Can you help with that? How can I negotiate with the leaders? I think I might need for you to have a conversation with so and so about X. And he would do that because, quite frankly, if we're being honest, I didn't have the stripes to do it. And sometimes we have to leverage the power brokers around us to have this work move forward. And other times I would find out he had intervened on my behalf and I didn't know about it. So that's some of the sponsorship. That he took it upon himself to do that, because something came up in a meeting. And because we had a great trusting relationship, he would do the intervention then. And then I'd find out about it later, which was fine. And so I always knew that he had my back.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([15:16](#)):

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I hear what you say. And the thought that came to mind was love. If you think about love as being seen and being wanted. The appropriate professional version of that in valuing human beings and the political sponsorship, is I see you and I value you. And I want you here to thrive.

Dani Monroe ([15:39](#)):

Yeah.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([15:41](#)):

Is there an opening to talk about the connection between this work and love?

Dani Monroe ([15:49](#)):

Yeah, because this work as you know, Susan, and probably some of the listeners is about head and heart and the headpiece or all the rational logical things that I can talk about in terms of the business case. But there is a heart piece. We hear with both. We hear with our head and our heart, and we want those in alignment when we're making decisions. When we move into this space of heart and listening to people, I mean really listening to people. And people communicate as we all know in multiple ways. So certainly verbally, emotionally, and then through their actions. And as an inclusive leader, part of your skill development is to begin to look at the whole person and how they're communicating, because oftentimes they're incongruent and what they're saying and the way they're behaving, what you perceive, they may be feeling and experiencing.

Dani Monroe ([16:49](#)):

And so the space is - when you are connected to people, your heart opens up to them to listen in that way. My former staff would say to me, I'd call one of them. And I'd say, I've been noticing, you know, you seem a little off this week about that out of that. Um, is there something we need to talk about? They would say, wow, you really, you really catch those things, Dani. Well, I'm an empath. So I pick up everything in an environment, I feel it, you know. It comes in, I process it, et cetera, but it is really about when I first started doing my work, my training, and from Pepperdine, the master's program in organization development, we spent a lot of time understanding who we were as an individual, so that we could be better consultants. And that means we had to understand all of what we believe to be true about ourselves and then learn about what wasn't and how we got to where we were at that point in time in the world. And so one could separate who they were from what was going on in their client's system. And the same is true in DEI work - is that you have to be a clean vessel to really step in to a space of guiding an organization forward. And you have to also understand that opening up to people in the heart space or the love space. As you were talking about Susan, is really about being present with them.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([18:32](#)):

It's an inside job before it's an outside job, right? That connection of head and heart. And I think Dani, listening to the way you're speaking, it occurs to me. People want to work for leaders who see them, who notice. For the listener who isn't an empath, how can the skills needed to cultivate inclusion? How can our listening audience improve themselves in this path, in this journey?

Dani Monroe ([19:04](#)):

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I think one of the ways is really to check your listening skills and check them with the people that are around you. And I really hearing you say, X, Y, and Z. This is how I am interpreting. I'm getting mixed messages from what I'm hearing you say, and some of your behaviors on other projects. Can we talk about that? And bringing people into the conversation? People, especially, I think passive aggressive people, they will sit in silence in meetings. And that can sometimes be as a way to get back at their manager. And what a manager finds that they're doing is constantly asking for that person's opinion. So what do you think about da da da, or how should we do "da da da?" What's your ideas on - it gets really difficult for the leader at times. But that scale of this reaching out and trying to pull people in and try to engage them as much as possible. And then at some point saying, this is what I'm doing, what's getting in the way of you not participating? Is it something I need to do differently that would get you more engaged? As opposed to making assumption about what the behavior is about.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([20:27](#)):

It's courage to, to check in and that consciousness not to make assumptions. That's what I heard. So why is, for some, creating equity and inclusion, threatening or scary, and what can we do about it?

Dani Monroe ([20:42](#)):

That's a great question. And I don't think people think about it from this perspective, but when we think about including people and people resist it, there's a couple of mindsets there that I have observed. And this is my perspective. One is from a place of scarcity mindset. That if we include others, what's going to happen to us? Are my ideas going to be accepted? Is that person going to be promoted? And I'm not going to get my promotion. Those are all scarcity ideas and fears. The reality is from my experience, when we include other people's ideas and concepts and perceptions, we actually create abundance as opposed to scarcity. Because then we start to thrive off of what's being said, and people start to bounce all kinds of ideas around. So it's from that perspective of scarcity. The other piece, I think that prevents it is most of us grew up in a world of sameness, same neighborhoods, same kids.

Dani Monroe ([21:49](#)):

We went to school with same "da da da da." Unless you happen to be, you know, military and you moved around the world or whatever. But even that became sameness for you, because you develop the coping skills about how to manage that. And sameness equals easy. It's easy when we are comfortable with people. And we like to be with people like us, because it's just easy. We can do shorthand in the conversation. We know the nuances. We don't have to adapt. There's nothing taxing about that. When we open up to others and bring others in, that means we also have to change in order to adapt to this new person, this new energy. This perhaps different ideas than what we have. How do you do that?

Dani Monroe ([22:44](#)):

You know, one is, I think it goes back to the space we talked about a little bit earlier, Susan, which is, this is where you work from your heart. And you provide the open space for people to show up. And you look for connections of that. What do I have in common versus what's different about Dani? What I've learned, the more I start to talk to people, and I've talked to people all over the world in some capacity. Maybe just sitting on a train, and I start chatting with someone. The more you start to understand, you have some things in common, and there's going to be some things we don't have in common, but there's going to be a lot of things we have in common. If we start taking the time to have those conversations and not make assumptions that, oh, you're from X town, you must be this way. Or you're

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from California. Therefore you're all spacey people. I can say that cause I'm from California. And I know that's one of the perceptions people have of us. So it is really about being open to what's different.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([23:58](#)):

I have a line here and I'll credit you for it. It's valuing human beings means looking for connections about commonality instead of difference. This is what we mean when we're talking about the head and the heart of the work, because it's got to be a conscious and intentional intellectual decision to move into thinking and then feeling and connecting in ways that might feel not natural. And it's okay that it's not natural. That's what I heard you say. Like we grew up in sameness

Dani Monroe ([24:32](#)):

And which therefore it's uncomfortable. You know, the old saying in DEI work - get comfortable with being uncomfortable. So it's uncomfortable. But I would say those have been some of my greatest learning experiences is when I've been uncomfortable. And in fact, one of my professors Dechard, who did a lot of work around organization change. He talks about the rubber band theory and that if you don't have enough tension in the rubber band, change will not happen, right? Because when you don't have any tension in a rubber band, it just falls. And there's no energy there, but when you pull it and take it past this natural state, that's when you start to see the change in the rubber band. And the tension that's there that's needed for some change to occur, even when it's good things. Think about the beginning of a relationship you're having. And I mean an intimate, personal relationship. Yeah. You're all excited about it. There's still tension about, "who is this person?" You like being around them, but they're different. And so even when it's out of the space of good things going on, there is still that tension around the difference.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([25:50](#)):

Already, our conversation is just so chock-full of goodness, but what do you want to leave people with? What actions do you suggest our listeners take to continue their own journey of understanding about inclusion?

Dani Monroe ([26:03](#)):

One is - take risks. You can do measured steps in terms of risk taking. Action moves us forward. You can always step back and reassess and change gears, but to do nothing provides you no new reality. I think learn how to listen to the whole person. And that means not just what they're saying, but also how they're behaving, what you perceive their emotions to be. And then also things about their personal life, because that comes into play and think of your inclusion journey as just that it's a journey and it can be a wonderful, exciting journey, but that doesn't mean it's not going to have its challenges along the way.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([27:00](#)):

Dani, I have to tell you, I am grateful for this conversation. I - like you - I'm on my own journey of learning and growing and maturing in this space, and having my own personal experience, while I hopefully play a role in helping professionals to step into theirs. And so thank you for your wisdom and your clarity. It's been a wonderful time to spend with you.

Dani Monroe ([27:25](#)):

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Thank you. I've enjoyed the conversation. As you know, I've been taking the summer off as I'm moving into a new chapter. And so it's great to start thinking again about these issues that I care so much about. So thank you for the opportunity

Susan Mackenty Brady ([27:40](#)):

At the core, leading inclusively starts with the desire to understand. So we hope the Better Understanding podcast sparks something for you that leaves you wanting more. Thank you everybody for joining.