

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

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 Tom Kolditz, who was the founding director of the Anne and John Doerr Institute for New Leaders at Rice University an internationally acclaimed and game changing university leader development program. Prior to Rice, Tom taught as a professor in the practice of leadership and management and served as Director of the Leadership Development Program at the Yale School of Management. A retired brigadier general, Tom led the department of behavioral sciences and leadership at West Point for 12 years. He served for two years as a leadership and human resources policy analyst in the Pentagon, a year as a concept developer in the Center for Army Leadership, and was the Founding Director of the West Point Leadership Center. Tom or General Kolditz, as some refer to him, is a recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal, the Army's highest award for service.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([01:01](#)):

He has been named as a leadership thought leader by the Leader to Leader Institute, and as a top leader development professional by Leadership Excellence. In 2017, he was honored with a prestigious Warren Bennis award for excellence in leadership, an honor also bestowed on Doris Kearns Goodwin, Howard Schultz, Tom Peters, and Benazir Bhutto - to name just a few. In 2019, he was among eight global finalists in coaching and mentoring by Thinkers, 50, a UK management ranking organization, and selected as the number one university coach in the world in London in November 2019. In 2020, he has continued to be ranked in the Global Top 25 Coaches. And in 2021, the number six Startup Expert worldwide. Tom has published more than 75 books, book, chapters, and articles across a diverse array of academic and leadership trade journals, including the proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and the proceedings of the World Economic Forum.

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

He has appeared on Bloomberg TV, 60 Minute Sports, ABC World News, ABC 20/20, Al Jazeera, MSNBC, CBS NPR, and now the Better Understanding podcast, and the list goes on and on to include more than a dozen national and international news agencies. I met Tom in 2017, because I served on the selection committee, of the Warren Bennis Award for Leadership Excellence. And Tom has been a friend and mentor to me ever since. I feel lucky to know Tom, and to bring his wisdom to all of you. He's here with us. Hi Tom. Thank you for taking the time to be a guest on our Better Understanding podcast.

Tom Kolditz ([02:39](#)):

Well, it's my pleasure, Susan, and thank you so much for that incredible introduction.

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Susan MacKenty Brady ([02:43](#)):

You're the one that's incredible, but I gotta tell you, there's probably stuff about you that our listening audience might not know if they looked on LinkedIn and listened to that introduction. So what do you want our listeners to know about you that I didn't cover?

Tom Kolditz ([02:57](#)):

I often introduce myself as a soldier, scholar, mutt. You know, I've spent time in the military, in leading organizations in a very practical sense, but I also have a PhD in social psychology and I understand leadership research and the academic side. And in the last 10 to 15 years, rescue dogs have become very popular and people understand the value of a mutt. I mean, you ideally get the best qualities of multiple breeds and hopefully not the worst qualities of multiple breeds. I'm gonna say I'm a soldier, scholar, mutt with the best qualities of both those breeds.

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

Oh, I love this. So I'm gonna dive right in soldier, scholar mutt, to the conversation of diversity, equity, inclusion, leadership, all that jazz. My question is what fuels you about this work? And maybe you can define what this work is for you.

Tom Kolditz ([04:00](#)):

I think for most good leaders and definitely for me, the idea of justice in the way that we interact in the world is very, very important. And I see challenges in diversity and inclusion as being unjust. It just is intolerable to me. Now, there are other pragmatic reasons that I'm very interested in diversity, equity and inclusion. I think it's really important for everyone to lead in that way. I think that often there are diversity, equity and inclusion solutions to problems that if leaders just frame them in that way, that they'd be able to get to the other side of a knotty issue for them.

Tom Kolditz ([04:49](#)):

What drives me? What gives me the passion is the sense of fairness and justice. And another thing about me that people may not know is that I have two daughters and they're both very independent. And both of them have advanced degrees and they're doing a great job. Both of them were raised to feel that same sense of commitment to the underdog, the same sense of commitment to fairness. And one of my daughters is a special education teacher, and the other one is an assistant district attorney. And so I see both of them being driven in the same way, by a sense of fairness and equity and inclusion. It wasn't my deliberate intention to help raise them that way. That is our family. That is the way all of us think in the family,

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Susan MacKenty Brady ([05:45](#)):

The whole premise of your work being focused around fairness and justice democratizes the answer to the question I'm about to ask you, which delights me because I think we need some new language around DEI and B. I think we need to talk in ways that people who have in some ways felt marginalized by the conversation can come in. Maybe in your own words, you can share why you think more inclusion at work is needed. And also what's driving all the focus.

Tom Kolditz ([06:17](#)):

What it really means is that you're taking the unique values of people that are in the organization and you're bringing them forward instead of somehow suppressing that. And that can't help, but make a better organization. I mean, it just can't for me, it's, again, the mutt, it's a pragmatic thing. It restores justice and fairness. It also creates a better organization because you get more out of everyone.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([06:47](#)):

You've probably read and written more on leadership than most people alive today. And I'm debating whether this is an oxymoron. How would you define leading inclusively? Is leadership, good leadership, inclusive leadership? And we're just at a moment in time where we're having to focus that truth. And how would you make sense outta that? So how would you define leading inclusively?

Tom Kolditz ([07:10](#)):

There is a fairness component to it. But to lead inclusively is to take inclusivity, and take the recognition of the value of others, and to turn that into a multiplier. To turn it into something that's gonna make the organization more effective. And I think that sometimes if people don't fully understand the fairness aspect. Anybody understands the pragmatic aspect, once they see it in action. And like most other forms of leadership, until you see it, until you recognize it, until you practice it a little bit yourself, you're not gonna be very good at it. Leadership is a matter of practice, not knowledge. So that's kind of how I would define it.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([08:01](#)):

So can you share a story to bring that home, about when you have felt you have fostered inclusion or greater understanding?

Tom Kolditz ([08:08](#)):

I was commanding an artillery unit near the DMZ in the Republic of Korea. And I had 550 soldiers. Most of whom were fairly isolated. 95 of them were Korean soldiers. And each American military unit, in the area had the same kind of ratio. These Korean soldiers were highly selected to be in our units. Many of them had college degrees. A lot of them were

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

computer scientists. They were all black belts in TaeKwonDo. They ran our complex systems, like parts ordering systems. And when I got to this unit, they were being almost abused by American soldiers. But the Koreans, you know, they were fit in different ways. American soldiers like to run distances, they would run four or five, six miles in the morning and the Korean soldiers weren't used to that. So they tended to drop out and, and tended to be not as physically dominant as the American soldiers.

Tom Kolditz ([09:13](#)):

And the problem was not just in my unit, but in neighboring units. There were a handful of suicides because of it. The Koreans were demoralized. And my initial thought was, this is really unfair. They're not recognizing the talent that these individuals have. And of course, the reason that we had these soldiers was that in the event of a war, there was a need for translation. And there was a need for a lot of coordination. So one day it occurred to me that if that was their value, that part of my responsibility as a leader was to train, leveraging that value. So I issued an order to all 550 soldiers that when we were in the field on field trials, practicing all of our wartime maneuvers, and in particular, the kind of maneuver where we would pass through another unit moving forward, which is fraught with danger, friendly, fire problems, and so forth.

Tom Kolditz ([10:14](#)):

I said that the entire exercise would be conducted in Hangul the Korean language. And all of a sudden these 95 Koreans became the most valuable people in the unit because everything had to be translated. All the written documents had to be translated. Every radio transmission was in the Korean language and very quickly, these American soldiers began to appreciate how valuable these people were. And I could argue that I did it because I wanted to integrate them. But the reality is - that's war in Korea. That's what we had to train for. And so for me, it was just a reminder that, when people are different, when they're in the minority, that they generally have really important things to add to the organization that can often be suppressed for no good reason. And it changed everything.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([11:12](#)):

I bet.

Tom Kolditz ([11:13](#)):

Koreans were always in the four-person rooms with each other. Within a year or so they were all intermingling in rooms and not avoiding one another. So it's just a reminder to me that there's a practical aspect to this, along with a fairness aspect, and that when you use one to get to the other, you improve the organization pretty significantly,

Susan MacKenty Brady ([11:38](#)):

Tom I'm so grateful for that example. This, brings the point home. You know, we talk about value and unique contribution all the time. It's what you can't see, or aren't used to, that maybe you need to look at a little closer. I'm wondering if you have an example when

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

something like this was done for you in your career where you didn't feel valued or went from sort of not fully being engaged to a time when you did, because there was an overt move to bring you closer in.

Tom Kolditz ([12:10](#)):

I've always been so suspicious to academics. They see me as a soldier, a general officer, somehow they forget that I've got 75 publications and that my Vita is 35 pages long. I was brought into Yale, to the Yale school of management, by a terrific leadership author and teacher named Jeffrey Sonnenfeld. And he was my advocate. He knew he wanted me to come there and build a leadership program, but I did not look or sound like your typical Yale professor. And so he basically took my Vita and went faculty member to and said, listen, we're not giving anything up. We're getting a great professor. And we're getting this person with all this leader development experience. It was really important because I decided in January that I'd go and work for them - January of 2012. And Jeff said, okay, well, what'll happen is that the entire faculty, the school of management will vote on you. And then once you pass that vote, you can begin working. And I said, oh great. What'll that take like two weeks? And he said, no, that'll be in May. Meanwhile, I'm turning down other job opportunities. And you we're getting closer and closer to the summer turnover. And I felt very vulnerable. And he said two things to me, one of which was, was a little disturbing. And the other was confidence building. So the confidence building thing he said was, listen, you're already pretty accomplished. And we have a lot of assistant professors that don't have a Vita as rich as yours. And so I'm advocating for you. And I don't think you need to worry. And I said, well, couldn't, they speed it up? And that's when he said, the second thing. He said, Tom, Yale university is a 312 year old institution. It's not gonna change for you.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([14:15](#)):

<laugh>.

Tom Kolditz ([14:16](#)):

And I sweated it out. And, they voted and I was in. So all's well that ends well. But I, I felt like he was managing the fact that I was different.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([14:26](#)):

It's so interesting. It reminds me, and both examples happen to be in academia. But it reminds me, we just had Sonya Jacobs. Who's the Chief Diversity Officer and Advisor to the President of the University of Michigan as a guest on the podcast. And she was talking about how, as a staff member, not an academic, she literally was shopped around by her manager who saw her impact and the change she could be making in the university. But really carried her card for her. And so what it brought up for us in that podcast, which I'd love to talk to you about is the role of sponsorship when it comes to having access to opportunity. How do you see sponsorship and maybe even allyship? Can you talk about that a little bit?

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Tom Kolditz ([15:10](#)):

Sure. Well, first of all, I really believe that a lot of the advances that we see in diversity, equity, inclusion in hiring and in the formulation of an organization doesn't happen by committee or by a faculty senate. It's because individual people make the right decisions. I really do believe that when you see health in an organization, there's probably a CEO or some other senior leader who is making that happen. If somebody does not say this is worth doing. And so we're going to avoid the typical biases and the typical pitfalls in hiring, and we're gonna make this happen, then it, then it just won't happen. I mean, I've been around academia. Academia's not covered itself in glory when it comes to diversity, equity, inclusion. And every individual professor, I think has a pretty good attitude, but when they get together as a committee and they start hiring people, they can't find the way to make an endorsement around. Well, you know, who on paper is the best person here. And consequently, you know, you go into physics departments and it's 95% white males.

Tom Kolditz ([16:29](#)):

And so I really believe that individuals play a major role in that in terms of the sponsorship and advocacy. I've actually done a lot of that. Mostly I would say with women. And I would also have to say that I've gone way outta my way to ensure that gay, lesbian and transgender people that were in and around my organization were able to have the same kind of advantages and were brought into the organization in ways that would recognize their value. And interestingly enough, the thing that I've run in the most with that kind of advocacy is that my own advocacy tends to outrun that of the person who I'm trying to help. I'll help develop a tremendous opportunity for them. And they're like, well, I couldn't possibly do that.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([17:23](#)):

It's a thing. It's not your imagination. That's been one of the refrains with me, with women, but I find myself doing it as well. It's why we need to develop sponsees.

Tom Kolditz ([17:34](#)):

That's a great idea.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([17:36](#)):

We also develop sponsors, right?

Tom Kolditz ([17:38](#)):

That's a great idea. Yeah, you're right. Because sometimes we create our own limitations. But I have always felt good when I could develop an opportunity for someone else who may not have had that opportunity otherwise. That makes me feel really good. Since I've done this for such a long time, I tend to recognize in someone, the ability to succeed at a certain job or

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

certain level. They don't always trust my judgment in that respect when it comes to them. But I have more confidence than they do.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([18:17](#)):

There's a saying, as you probably have heard, if you don't intentionally include, you run the risk of unintentionally excluding. And what I'm hearing you say is, gosh, one of my skills is I not only intentionally include, I intentionally sponsor and see the gifts of what people bring. So if that's one of the skills of an inclusive leader, how do you cultivate that? And what other skills do you need to cultivate to be an inclusive leader?

Tom Kolditz ([18:46](#)):

Well, I think the way that you cultivate the former, you know, what we've been talking about in terms of sponsorship is that you do it. You make yourself do it once or twice. And what happens is, it's addicting. Because all of us enjoy operating on the world. We enjoy wiggling one end of a board and seeing the other end wiggle. And so when you leverage your knowledge and your confidence in people, in ways that cause them to advance and thereby their organization advancing, it's extremely satisfying. I think there's a momentum to be built where after you've done it once or twice, you know, then it comes much easier to you. And the other thing about it that one of the pragmatic things that I think is also important because every leader wants to do the right thing. They don't want, they don't wanna pick the wrong person. You know, just because. Over time you gain enough confidence that if it is the wrong person, you're strong enough to say, Nope, I'm not setting this up. I'm not faking this. They're just not ready, or what have you. And it's hard to do that unless you've had experience on the other end where you know what right looks like. And that gives you the strength to not make those silly mistakes, where someone winds up getting pushed up or into a job that they're not ready for.

Tom Kolditz ([20:17](#)):

I think other qualities of diversity in terms of leadership, and this is a really challenging skill. It's hard to talk about what people bring to the organization without running the risk of stereotyping them. I was very excited about a multicultural leadership counsel put together other at Yale. It wound up being a disaster, because anytime we tried to characterize leadership in another culture, now we were stereotyping people. And so we were criticized for that. So I think the ability to gently and tactfully capture what unique qualities people in the organization can bring forward and get them moved forward without being clumsy and stereotyping people and embarrassing people. And that sort of thing. That is a skill. That is an influence skill that is polished because there are a million pitfalls, especially for a 65 year old white male leader.

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Susan MacKenty Brady ([21:26](#)):

This backing away from exactly what you're talking about, which is, all the good work we're doing to include those who haven't been included, to see those whose skills haven't been seen. There seems to be a collective sort of... I literally have this metaphor of this chair backing away from a table by the very people, mainly men, mainly men in power we need to lean, literally pull up and say, okay, tell me more about you. What do we do about that? About that fear about those pitfalls? What did you do about that when you messed up by accidentally stereotyped and got the gift of feedback? What did you do?

Tom Kolditz ([22:05](#)):

First of all, I was horrified at myself. And I have spent time myself worried about my career, worried about some thing that I say that is wrong, that all of a sudden is on social media. And within hours, I'm looking for another job. That is a real possibility. I think people are concerned about something that is more possible than probable. They catastrophize around it. And especially people who deep down are quite committed to diversity, because there would be nothing more horrible than to be committed to diversity and inclusion, and somehow getting fired because of something inadvertent that you said. If you were a bigot or, you know, you didn't care, then it would be more tolerable. But to those of us who really deeply care, it would be nothing worse.

Tom Kolditz ([23:05](#)):

So I think one of the things that can help leaders in that respect is that about the time they're feeling like they need to be self-protective and pull back, they need to double down on being more vulnerable. And they need to say, I'm trying to do this. You know, don't let me screw this up. I wanna be helpful. Don't let me screw this up. And if you surround yourself with people who are not like you, then it almost doesn't matter what DEI angle you're dealing with. Somebody else is gonna be there for you. And they're either gonna stop you from saying something dumb. Or when inevitably you do say something dumb, they're gonna help smooth things over. Withdrawing more makes you more vulnerable than just saying, help me to get this right, because it is complicated. This is not leadership 101. This is graduate level.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([24:07](#)):

Give me 10 women. And I'll show you 10 different responses to the exact same comment, right? So there's subjectivity in all of this, right? Which is why I tend to remind people, our friend, Jim Koozis laid this out. And many other scholars in leadership, that leadership is first and foremost a relationship. It's a social construct. And therefore we have to connect with people as individuals. And the fact that when we do it wrong, we lean in and we look to do it, right. So that's inspiring. So as we think about wrapping up Tom, what is the most important skill we can practice that will lead to more inclusivity? What do you wish to leave people with?

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Tom Kolditz ([24:50](#)):

You know, whether you do it by reading or by who you associate with, or by the hobbies that you have, you have to push yourself into an open mind. You have to push yourself into the realization that there are billions and billions of people who are not the least bit similar to you, billions. And that all cultures are worthy of respect and participation. And when you try to learn more of about complicated diversity perspectives, like the just awful, crazy things that transgender people and their parents are going through right now, if you understand transgender science, gender identity science, it's easy to identify into that culture and, and with transgender people. But so many people don't try to understand, or they substitute their own beliefs. That same principle applies, whether it's race or gender or anything else, you know, you have to be willing to age in the reality of the cultures.

Tom Kolditz ([26:13](#)):

I am fond of saying that if you can't see the world through the eyes of the people who you're trying to lead, how can you possibly say the right thing to influence them? How can you possibly lead them? If you don't see what they're seeing? And so experiencing other cultures is really important to me. There is no food I won't eat. There is no movie I won't watch. There is no art that I won't look at. And the more you do that, the more you, you become capable of that kind of outreach. We were talking a little bit ago about children who grow up in multiple foreign countries, and it's not just military children, but it's expatriate businessmen, it's foreign affairs people, embassy people. What you find is that they are among the most tolerant and diversity aware people in the world. And it's because they've looked at all these societies that are different and the rules that they had for themselves change around them. And they realize how arbitrary so much of what our culture is. And so if you can remap in a month's worth of experiences, what military children get in 18 years of moving around, it's the same process of cultural appreciation and recognition that puts a leader in the frame of mind to solve some of these challenges.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([27:47](#)):

What it boils down to, is what's possible If we didn't let ourselves feel better around differences or worse around differences. Right?

Tom Kolditz ([27:58](#)):

Right.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([27:59](#)):

What you're talking about is just broadening your aperture and true acceptance. Tom, it's been such a delight. I could talk to you all day. You are a breath of fresh air and thank you so much for taking the time to be with us.

## **The Better Understanding podcast with Susan MacKenty Brady**

### **Episode 11: A Conversation with Tom Kolditz**

Tom Kolditz ([28:12](#)):

Well, it's been an incredible experience for me, and this is a first rate podcast and it's really my honor to be a part of it.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([28:19](#)):

Well, thank you.

Susan MacKenty Brady ([28:20](#)):

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.