Better Understanding with Susan Mackenty Brady: A Conversation with Sonya Jacobs

Susan Mackenty Brady ([00:01](#)):

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 and honored to welcome Sonya Jacobs to the Better Understanding podcast. Sonya is the Chief Organizational Learning Officer for the University of Michigan and the Senior Director for Faculty and Leadership Development at Michigan Medicine. She is also Special Advisor to the President of the University on culture. This includes the development of programs to further the university's initiatives around creating an inclusive and equitable environment. In addition to serving on several leadership boards, Sonya is the co-founder of the Leadership Summit for Women in Academic Medicine and Healthcare, and the Rudi Ansbacher Women in Academic Medicine Leadership Scholars Program. She also founded the executive coaching certification program at Michigan Medicine. Sonya was awarded the 2020 Michigan Chronicle Women of Excellence award. She was also chosen by the Academic Women's Caucus as one of the recipients of the 2020, 2021, Sarah Goddard Powered Distinguished Service Award. I featured Sonya in my last book, Mastering Your Inner Critic as the woman leader who embodies the work of all of the hurdles, culminating in the hurdle of networking for women who have advanced.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([01:16](#)):

Welcome, Sonya. Just reading your bio and you're just so incredible. I'm thrilled to have you as a guest on the Better Understanding podcast, and thank you for taking time to be with us today.

Sonya Jacobs ([01:26](#)):

Thank you for having me, Susan and I am honored. This is one of the topics near and dear to my heart. So I look forward to our conversation.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([01:34](#)):

Well, let's dive in. What do you want our listeners to know about you that maybe they couldn't find on LinkedIn or that I didn't cover just now in your introduction,

Sonya Jacobs ([01:43](#)):

I love golfing and am fiercely competitive. So my husband says. I love to cook, which is also a stress reliever for me. And most recently I've taken up the sport of fishing. And professionally, I've had a wonderful meandering career affording me the opportunity to gain experience across multiple industries and develop breadth and depth of knowledge. Lastly, I'd like to share - I love investing in others and bringing my authentic self into everything I do.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([02:14](#)):

I love that. I want you to say more about that. Do you mean that you can't be inclusive and you can't lead inclusively if you're not being authentic?

Sonya Jacobs ([02:23](#)):

Absolutely. Because when I'm being authentic, I'm leading based upon my values and my beliefs, all aspects of me, my culture, my upbringing, my education and experience I bring to the table. And I think

it's being who I am. Showing who I am, and really articulating that, that allows others to bring their full selves.

Susan Mackenty Brady (02:49):

Do you ever see leaders confuse being authentic with having appropriate boundaries? What's the line in the sand here of like being real versus.

Sonya Jacobs (02:59):

So being real doesn't mean that you're not professional. Being real doesn't mean that you are not being respectful. It is just being true to who I am and letting that show. I think back to a conversation I had on code switching, and we can talk all day about code switching, but in some instances, people feel as though they've got to turn on another persona in the professional workplace. And I believe that I am who I am. I speak the way I speak. I engage people the way I am and that's just being me and I can't bring my full self and be successful if I have to be concerned with how one might perceive me based upon my identity.

Susan Mackenty Brady (03:50):

Maybe you can tell the listening audience a little bit more about code switching. It's harder for some identities and some underrepresented populations. And frankly, some people not to put on something that they think they should be in order to fit in. And I'm wondering if you've always been authentic. And also, how did you come to this work and have you seen this phenomenon?

Sonya Jacobs (04:14):

Yeah, I would say I've always been this authentic when I came to the work of inclusion. And at that time we weren't even using that word - inclusion. It was diversity work back in the late nineties and early two thousands. I had the great fortune of working with an organization who was contracted with the University of Michigan to design diversity training for leaders. And that's really when I got steeped in diversity, equity and inclusion. I'd lived it all my life. Therefore I brought, lived experiences to the work. And I believe that it was the lived experiences and telling the stories that I experienced around recruitment or retention, around being developed, around getting feedback as an African-American woman. I saw a definite need to really educate leaders on all aspects of diversity. And how do we leverage all aspects of diversity so one can bring their best selves and be most productive.

Susan Mackenty Brady (05:31):

You just nailed it. I'm wondering your own personal experience. If you're comfortable sharing. What it brings up for me is the level of unconsciousness. And now we say unconscious bias. So it's no blame, no shame, but the fact that there's purposeful either rejection or bias. When, you know, you make up a story about someone because of how they look or where they're from or how they speak. And then there's unconsciously doing that. In your experience, over the course of your career, have you seen both and is more one true than the other. And what's the most effective remedy to put it on the table so that everyone can bring their unique self to work?

Sonya Jacobs (06:13):

Yeah. Susan. We all have biases. And it's important for us to understand that we have those biases and those are the lenses through which we view every interaction. So one is just acknowledgement, right? And being self aware. Some get there sooner than others. But I've had those instances where I know

there were conscious efforts made to either exclude or hold back. I also know where there were unconscious instances where one has this biased lens, for which they viewed me. And it's really on the individual, I think, to understand that and know the impact that it has. What I mean by that is you have to be open, right? I have to be open because I know that there are things that I can do and I can improve on. And I had to check myself to - related to my own biases. And others have to want to do that and want to be open. Now that I'm aware of it, I'm much more conscious about my interactions with people. And why am I perceiving a person that way, you know, is it because of my bias? So for some, it's very easy to understand. Oh, check that bias. And then for others, it's not,

Susan Mackenty Brady (07:33):

Yeah. When you say it really begins with self-awareness, I just have to underscore this. I don't know how to go about creating more inclusion at work, without it starting with the individual. So what's driving all the focus then? Like right now, I mean, there's obvious events in the world, but there's something organizationally that's happening. And maybe you can speak even personally, I mean, to be an advisor to the president, at one of the biggest universities, not just in the country, but the world is a huge job on culture. Is that in part, because you bring this lens of awareness about inclusion?

Sonya Jacobs (08:09):

I think it adds value to the work. When we talk about culture change, it is about creating an environment where individuals can feel physically, socially and psychologically safe. And to create that kind of environment, I have to have an understanding of the individual. I have to have an understanding of myself and what can I do to help foster an environment where one can thrive, or one can be productive, or one can learn, and where one can lead. And I think at the foundation of that is our values. And so I talked a little bit about being values driven. And so it's understanding who in our organization, who are we, who do we want to be? And diversity, equity and inclusion and respect are foundational to that. So if I'm going to respect and create safe spaces, I have to understand that there are biases for which I might view individuals, or biases that I might use or could impact my ability to recruit or retain the best - to actually develop, to identify talent in the organization.

Sonya Jacobs (09:23):

And so, yes, diversity equity inclusion is at the root of culture change. And in order for us to make real change, we have to, as leaders create that space to make change inside ourselves. I think about the social unrest that we have had in our country and around the world, quite frankly. And the work that we have been doing in the organization to help raise awareness around our biases and raise awareness around anti-racism. And one of the things that we said first was it's up to the individual to learn. We engaged in book discussions on white fragility. You're probably familiar with that, and it really does require one to go on their own journey. And it's a journey because it never ends. I too continue to learn. And so if we want to lead inclusively, we've got to look inside ourselves to see who we are, what do we value and how does that impact my ability to lead and to serve others.

Susan Mackenty Brady (10:34):

What I get so excited about is the reach and impact. If some of what you're talking about can really be experienced, if we teach adults and students in a higher education setting, but also adults. If they understand what it means to create psychological safety, which by the way, folks, people can't bring their true selves to work. They can't bring their unique selves to work and they can't engage fully or give all of themselves to productively doing the job, if they don't feel safe, right. This is why Amy

Edmondson's work has taken off. And why it's, it's a brilliant pursuit. Amy Edmondson has had a tremendous impact on leadership and organizational learning. She's a Harvard business school professor and has done an incredible job bringing the idea and importance of psychological safety to the leadership lexicon. I just think of the impact. Can you share a story about when you have felt you fostered inclusion or greater understanding and maybe even when others did this for you?

Sonya Jacobs ([11:37](#)):

Yes. So I think about when I've created those environments and I think about the learning space. I had the unique fortune, and I think this is probably when I first met you, to build a leadership academy. And if you understand academia, we have our faculty, we have our staff, we have our students. And I fundamentally believe that in order for us to be successful and achieve our goals, we have to understand the space we're all working in. We can't lead without an understanding of the contributions that others bring. And so it was really important for me to create a program or a learning opportunity where we could learn from, and sometimes even walk in the shoes of others. So bringing together our faculty and our administrative leaders in a learning environment was really important. And I think that was one of the most important ways that I've fostered inclusion, because the result of that has been a greater understanding of the academic world and the challenges that our faculty face. And a greater understanding on the part of our faculty of what an administrator has to do and their responsibilities. But then at the same time, building the skills together to create inclusive environments, because it takes a team.

Sonya Jacobs ([13:12](#)):

And so that was one of the opportunities. Again, an example of that would be in the Rudi Ansbacher Women in Academic Medicine Leadership Scholars Program that you mentioned, because that too was an opportunity to bring our faculty and administrative leaders together in a multi-disciplinary and in a professional way. But then also to bring others from other organizations, creating these heterogeneous environments, different perspectives and ideas and talents together, and really being able to produce a very stimulating and innovative learning environment. Individuals being able to work on projects that are advancing their organizations together. And we could not have done that and been as impactful as we have been without being intentional about creating an inclusive culture. So those would be two examples I'd share that I've had the ability to do that. And I can talk about my own experiences where that has been afforded to me. Just taking the role at Michigan, I think was a great example.

Sonya Jacobs ([14:22](#)):

I had the opportunity to take on a full-time role at the University of Michigan after consulting with them for 14 months, delivering diversity equity and inclusion and training for the leaders at Michigan Medicine. And stepping into a space that was somewhat unfamiliar to me at that time in terms of academia. But I had an opportunity to be brought into an organization, bring a very different background and perspective, but add value to the work that human resources was doing, and really impact the organization. Another opportunity was when I took on the Director of Faculty Development oh some 10 years, 11 years ago, where I was asked to help with the career advancement of faculty. And I'm a staff member, but I was very fortunate to have a leader who saw the talent and my abilities, and provided a space for me to learn and to grow and be really productive and successful.

Sonya Jacobs ([15:32](#)):

Now, I can't say some of the things she probably had to do behind the scenes, but she truly sponsored me, let individuals know the value she saw and the contributions that she saw in me. And I do believe that that was the opportunity that allowed me to shine. So it was a psychologically and physically and socially safe environment for me to bring my best selves and grow a department that was really focused on advancing our faculty. So I have really benefited from that, too. And I don't even know if she knew that that's what she was doing at the time.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([16:11](#)):

What I heard you say about sponsors - have your back when you're not in the room. What did that afford you?

Sonya Jacobs ([16:16](#)):

Oh, absolutely. I think back to the sponsors I've had, and knowing what sponsorship is, and knowing that someone does have my back. And so if there are instances where I may misstep, my sponsor can speak on my behalf when I'm not even in the room. And they can speak to who I am and what they know. And that happens unbeknownst to many of us, but it occurs quite often. But it's based upon the relationship you've built with that sponsor.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([16:52](#)):

But when it doesn't happen, we don't see women of color. We don't see women. We don't see other underrepresented populations advance when doesn't happen.

Sonya Jacobs ([17:03](#)):

Absolutely.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([17:03](#)):

Because no, one's there to translate some of this.

Sonya Jacobs ([17:05](#)):

Exactly.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([17:05](#)):

Right? Or have their back. As we're talking about the story about fostering inclusion and bringing people from different environments together, you know. I've been in the leadership learning space, most of my career as well, and really value the kinds of experiences we can provide leaders to further their consciousness, to help them be more effective and productive. And it's funny, I've never thought about this before, but what I heard you say as a by-product, which I've never pinpointed is being with others who are different than us and understanding their world, be that staff member to a faculty member, or engineering to a finance person, requires compassion and empathy. It's empathy and action, empathy and compassion for, oh, that's your world. That's some of the gift of better understanding. What do you think the role of understanding is? How do we cultivate it? Or for the listener who generally wants to understand why understanding is important? What do you say?

Sonya Jacobs ([18:08](#)):

Seek to understand. Being curious, wanting to know about others, others' worlds, their path, I think is very foundational to understanding. And in my field of organizational development, we must always seek to understand. That's how we bring people in. That is how we're creating that empathy and that compassion. I don't know another person's journey. And so in order for me to create that opportunity for them to contribute, I have to be curious. I have to be understanding, and then have to be a little vulnerable as well. And I think that's where many people struggle. We are professionals. Sometimes we put up our armor. This is who I have to be. And that prevents me from being open to learn about or from someone else. So when I think about understanding, if I create that environment where I can be open to listen and to learn that increases my compassionate and empathy, because now I know that person. I have a better understanding of who they are and what makes them tick. And I think that too was foundational to my success, because my leaders took the opportunity to get to know who I was. And that created better understanding. Curiosity is at the root of it.

Susan Mackenty Brady (19:44):

There's a connection here to courage that I heard. So better understanding - if we must better understand in order to create inclusion, then we need to take risks interpersonally to get curious, which means I'm going to dare greatly and ask you a question that feels maybe a little uncomfortable for me, because it might make you feel uncomfortable. And I don't want to pry, or what have you. Which instantly makes me vulnerable. And people don't go to work to feel vulnerable, right? By the way, when you're courageous, you automatically are vulnerable. Is that why creating equity inclusion feels scary to some. Is it the vulnerability or what else do you see as the scary part? And then what can we do about it?

Sonya Jacobs (20:27):

Very loaded question. I do think vulnerability is one of the barriers to inclusion. It will require individuals to be self-aware. It is going to require individuals to really check their biases that are rooted in their backgrounds. Okay. So there's some things that I'm going to have to acknowledge that I've done, seen, or heard, in order for me to truly unpack what is behind this bias. So I believe vulnerability is really one of those barriers. But I will tell you that we all have a responsibility to try to create a safe space where it's okay to be vulnerable. If I can give you an example, I was working with the leader in the space of anti-racism. And I said, you're going to have to allow yourself to be vulnerable, but I'm here with you. You may think you're going to say the wrong thing, and you might say the wrong thing, and you apologize. And you learn from that. And we keep moving, but we won't learn and we won't grow to lead inclusively unless we do allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Ask questions. Ask for feedback along this journey. And just know that it does take time and you will be somewhat uncomfortable. But that discomfort will allow one to grow, to become a much more inclusive and curious about those they lead and work with.

Susan Mackenty Brady (22:11):

If you could wave your magic wand and the listener all - listens to this and is inspired and goes off and does an action that's aimed at their journey of understanding about inclusion. What is it?

Sonya Jacobs (22:23):

I think it's building relationships and that's pretty broad, but my ability to build relationships with a variety of people, I think has only enriched me and educated me on what it means to lead inclusively.

I've got to get to know the stories of those individuals that I don't know. I would say look to build relationships. Be open and be curious.

Sonya Jacobs (22:57):

Collaboration. We use that term so much when it comes to getting things done, but it's collaboration that also increases our understanding of others, their challenges. What are their interests and desires? And, or just through those interactions that we continue to build really strong relationships. So I think the building of relationships.

Sonya Jacobs (23:24):

Being collaborative and transparent is another word we use, but that to me, ties to authenticity because I'm going to be true to myself. I'm going to share what it is I know. And I will do what I can to ensure that it's filtered. But I do believe that the relationship building has been just key to my development and just reaching out to people who I don't know. You know, but I can learn from

Susan Mackenty Brady (23:56):

So Sonya, I think you would agree the stakes have never been higher in part because of technology. In part, because the minute you say anything, and you're in the public arena, you're a leader, you might be retweeted. Uh, you're going to be found out kind of, right? So it feels really risky to make a mistake at this. When we make a mistake, what's your advice on how to manage this?

Sonya Jacobs (24:18):

Susan? I think it goes back to the skills I talked about and building relationships, because if I've built relationships and people know who I am, they have a better understanding of my intent. And so therefore, I can apologize and be remorseful. I am deeply sorry, and you know who I am. And you know, that I did not intend to offend in any way. And part of that to - my ability to apologize is based on my behaviors, my previous behaviors. The way that I've carried myself and interacted with individuals all goes into who I am and the relationships that I have. And we're going to make mistakes. And we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and then open up the door for a courageous conversation. What I said offended you. That was not my intention. Please help me understand what I can do to avoid ever doing that again. And that not everyone, is at place where they have that level of comfort or vulnerability. And we have to then rely on that relationship that we've built with individuals, for them to know where I may have been coming from. Own it. Seek feedback to understand what you said or did that was received negatively. Reflect on the feedback in order to learn how not to do it again. I always say I'm a work in progress. Always striving to be a better person.

Susan Mackenty Brady (25:51):

It's really the connection back to the work on the inner critic rate. The fact that after I make a mistake, I need to return to a place of warm regard for myself and for the other and be able to be compassionate with myself and with them as I learn. If I don't have that muscle, it's really hard to do this work. It's really hard because once you realize you made a mistake, you're either going to go into defensive rationalization, which is annoyed with others for pointing it out or finding you wrong. Or you're going to go into shame where, oh my gosh, I can't believe I did that. And the faster a leader comes back to that center place - the way I've watched you do over there over many, many years, the faster the leader comes back and then allows for others to do the same, the more we can get back to connecting with great intent.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([26:42](#)):

And you're the first guest that has landed on relationships. And I want to remind our listeners that leadership is a social construct. It's a relationship. Leadership is a relationship. And what I'm hearing you say, the good news is to foster inclusion and to lead successfully, both require that we connect with humans. I mean, at the bottom bottom line that we connect and that we understand and make it safe for them to be who they are and be who we are. I think we have a lot of goodness here and Sonya, thank you so much.

Sonya Jacobs ([27:14](#)):

Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure and I look forward to reconnecting and learning more about Better Understanding.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([27:22](#)):

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.