

Susan Mackenty Brady ([00:03](#)):

I'm Susan Mackenty. Brady. Welcome to the better understanding podcast. Please join me in exploring what it means to lead inclusively. I'm very excited to welcome Stuart Kliman into the better understanding podcast. Stu is a partner at Building Industry Partners, a leading private equity investment firm, focused on the U S middle market building industry where he leads VIP Center of Excellence. The VIP Center of Excellence provides thought leadership, best practice tools, consulting and training to VIP portfolio companies and the industry at large, prior to joining VIP, Stuart was founder and partner for 25 years of Vantage Partners, a mid-sized consulting and training organization and spinoff of the Harvard Negotiation Project out of Boston, Massachusetts, in that capacity, Stu worked with a cross industry set of firms ranging from those in the fortune 500 to startups on issues relating to alliance, customer supplier management, organizational design, and transformation, to a myriad of human capital management issues.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([01:07](#)):

Stuart has authored white papers on topics ranging from alliance strategy and management to key capabilities for leaders, to the future of work. He's a sought after speaker and facilitator. He graduated Magna laude from Franklin and Marshall College, and Magna laude from Harvard Law School. He lives in the Boston area with his wife, Lisa, and I'll confess upfront that Stu and I go way back to a time in my early career when I worked at Vantage Partners and actually reported to Stu. Championing into the Corporate Marketplace, the seminal work on negotiation based on the best-selling books, Getting to Yes and then Difficult Conversation really ignited my passion about relationship work writ large. Stu was the charismatic master of curiosity and teaching understanding back then. And he still is today. Welcome Stu. I'm thrilled to have you as a guest and thank you so much for taking time to be with us.

Stuart Kliman ([02:04](#)):

It is amazing to be here, Susan. Great to be joining you on this. Really looking forward to the conversation.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([02:10](#)):

I always like to think, what can't our listeners find out about you on LinkedIn? What do you want our listeners to know about you that I haven't shared?

Stuart Kliman ([02:18](#)):

I guess it's worth knowing, I'm a hetero man who believes pretty deeply in Simmons' work. And I am super proud and honored that you asked me to be a member of the Simmons Institute, strategic advisory board. That is a complete joy for me. And certainly is quite humbling to work with you on it. I think maybe that leads to the second thing, which is that I like to believe and I hope to believe, and I work, frankly, at believing that I am painfully aware of unaware I am and how much there is to learn. Hopefully as I work with folks, they can see that painful lack of awareness. And at least that effort to try to learn as I go.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([03:00](#)):

It's such a classic thing for you to say, it's totally authentic. As brilliant as Stu is, he's always saying, what am I not seeing? Generally speaking, I know your work is sort of macro in organization-to-organization alliance management and also micro these days in really thinking about the individual and their work.

But how did you come to your understanding about inclusive leadership work and what fuels you about that?

Stuart Kliman ([03:28](#)):

I came to this slowly, and I think I came to it honestly, in that as you noted, I spent 25 years of my life leading an organization, a somewhat diverse, but certainly not diverse enough organization. Saw a lot, had lots of discussions had to work with many different kinds of people had to lead teams and lead organizations. And I had a few folks who felt under included or disengaged or slighted and felt confident enough to let me know that both sort of about the organization and about our interactions, as well. And that opened my eyes to a lot that I hadn't seen and learned and understood. You mentioned my real background at the Harvard Negotiation Project. And so as I lived through and experienced those other interactions, I was lucky enough that because of my HNP background, I think I had the tools and the vocabulary to think and feel my way through those moments. And that helped me find to learn some of what you guys are all about Simmons and trying to hold that over time. That sense that that has been worth the journey and of value to me personally, and to my clients. And my work is a big part of the fuel.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([05:04](#)):

The biggest thing I took away from my years at Vantage and from you is that we spend precious little time, especially at work, thinking about our thinking and feeling, and a whole lot of time talking and thinking about our doing and are saying, and being trained on the latter as well. It's an interesting phenomenon. I think inclusion doesn't happen unless you are conscious of your thinking and feeling. It starts there.

Stuart Kliman ([05:27](#)):

I think that becoming more inclusive, creating more inclusive environments and a more inclusive world is fundamentally about learning. And learning, particularly as an adult, is fundamentally about reflection. Doing things, reflecting on how those things went, what your results were, how you felt about those results, how other felt about those results. And you can either leave those things be, or you can reflect and try to learn and try to get better. Reflection is the basis for getting better at golf or tennis. You have a framework. You take a swing and you see where the ball goes. The learning doesn't happen when you swing or when the ball hits in or out of bounds. The learning happens when you reflect back on what worked and what didn't work, and what you should repeat, and what you should do differently next time. Reflection is part of the secret mix. I think leads to better results, however, defined.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([06:37](#)):

Your take is, becoming more inclusive is fundamentally about learning and reflection. Can we just think about the current world of work? I'd love to hear your view on why do we need more inclusion at work? What's driving all the focus. What are you seeing? Certainly share what you're seeing in your industry. But I think you have such a broad take on this. I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Stuart Kliman ([06:59](#)):

Hey, great question. When I think about inclusion as a notion or enhanced inclusion as a notion, I think of it as both an ends and a means. It as a notion, which is both an ends and a means is what's driving a lot of what's going on. As an end, I think more and more people just believe that it is a objectively good thing to be more inclusive. That it leads to more people having better lives and feeling better about their lives, be they in the workplace as we're talking about here, or elsewhere. And I think more and more

people just come to that belief. They think it is just objectively as a good thing. And I think that is a wonderful thing that people believe that it is a better end in and of itself. It is also more and more seen as a means.

Stuart Kliman ([07:59](#)):

And I think that is what notwithstanding many people giving voice to it, being a great end. I think that the thing that most drives businesses is an acceptance that it is also a wonderful means. And in fact, it is a very important and direct means to better business results. You know, we look at the world around us and we look at the labor force around us and or in our organizations. And we as business leaders have as an imperative to create a context where we can attract the best people who are out there, where we can retain the best people who are out there, where we can most effectively tap into the demonstrated and latent capabilities of the best people who are out there. And if we can not do that, if we are only tapping into 20%, 25% of the potential workforce is out there.

Stuart Kliman ([09:05](#)):

If we're only tapping into 20 or twenty-five percent of the capabilities of the workforce that we have in our businesses, we will lose. Industries will lose. You mentioned I'm now in the building industry, the building industry will lose if it can't attract a more diverse workforce. And individual firms will lose, if they cannot attract the right people. There's labor shortages and all sorts of places, and they cannot retain, develop and tap into a big, broad swath of the workforce. And I think the other just way to come at it, is we have a more diverse customer set and we have a more diverse supply set. If we hope to create value with, with all of those folks, again, we need to enhance inclusivity again, as a means to the business results. Happily, both of those things can come together, sort of doesn't matter at some level, if you're more on the ends or means goal. I think if you get your head that both are important, that only makes you more powerful.

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

I love that frame. I haven't heard it expressed that way. And you know, I've had a lot of conversations with executives about sort of the quote unquote business case for inclusion. When in fact they don't really even know what I'm talking about, sometimes when I'm saying leading inclusively or inclusive leadership. And I think there's lots of different definitions out there.

Stuart Kliman ([10:27](#)):

Yeah.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([10:27](#)):

How would you define leading inclusively? What are we talking about here?

Stuart Kliman ([10:31](#)):

Again. Great, great question, Susan . It is important to think about two parts of the answer to that question. There is a way in which that question leads to talking about me as a leader and my individual behavior. And related, but I think meaningfully distinct is my role as a leader in creating an inclusive operating environment for my people. Those are related because one of the ways I create a more inclusive operating environment is with my individual behavior and me as a model. But I also think that there are distinct. Leading inclusively as an individual has a few different components. It looks like a leader who is deeply curious about the world around them in all of its facets, including the various

individuals with whom I work. It looks like again, kind of underneath curiosity. It shows up as behaving in ways that indicate the true acceptance of how small my experience data set is and how little I can know and truly understand the impact others experience in an environment. And I think it then looks like the willingness to actively act on that curiosity and that that acceptance of how little I can actually know about others' experiences. So I think that's very individual.

Stuart Kliman ([12:16](#)):

And then I need to, as a leader, recognize that my behaviors as an individual will only go so far, certainly as a leader, they oftentimes carry more weight than others, but then it's sort of this organizational context. So how do I create an organizational context built on those beliefs? And that has to do with the systems I put in place. That has to do with the culture that I drive. That has to do with the stories that I tell. That has to deal with the behaviors and the results that we as a firm decide to value and promote and propagate.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([12:54](#)):

I love the way your brain works. It's so fun to hear you sort of deconstruct this. You're coming at this for our listening audience in such a different way. I actually want to go deeper into your psyche here. Can you share a story about when you felt you fostered inclusion?

Stuart Kliman ([13:12](#)):

That is a hard question. So I will say we all remember stories, uh, in, in all sorts of ways, but my mind went to the great recession of 2008, 2009. I was a owner or a partner or a key person, as you said, you know, a mid size organization. That was a crazy, crazy, scary time. I think that it is when things are most crazy and scary that it is harder to live up to your espoused values. It's easier to not. And we knew at that time that we were about to run into all sorts of challenges and run into all sorts of trouble. We knew that our revenue was going to drop precipitously or might, and that we needed to change our internal expense, our internal cost basis. Right. And you know, no hiding from that. The grim reality of the recession. What my partners and I tried to do is we tried to, first of all, be very, very explicit with people that this was the context in which we found ourselves. Be very, very transparent with people that we saw, all sorts of business dilemmas that we were going to need to deal with, that those dilemmas would inevitably have implications on all of us.

Stuart Kliman ([14:44](#)):

And, and this is what I think, you know, I'm sort of most proud about. It says we didn't simply act without sharing and asking for some very explicit kinds of help. One is we asked for ideas. What should we be taken into account? But the other thing we ask people for was to help us make as smart decisions as we possibly could. So we told people we're going to need to cut our expenses. It would be really helpful as we do that, to have more information from all of you. So we asked people, if you're thinking about in three or four months, going off to business school or going off to do something differently, it would really help us to know that. It would help us as we're sort of trying to calculate out different kinds of things. You should know, we're not going to punish you if you tell us that you're going to leave early, but it would help us to know that as of September, we're not going to have you on our cost basis.

Stuart Kliman ([15:43](#)):

That would help us make better decisions that would have less impact on other people. We asked people if they have kids at home and they would be just as happy working half time, rather than full-

time, that'd be really good to know. So we tried to get a lot more information, Susan, that I think oftentimes people would feel an incentive to keep close to the vest. And so we tried to get more information out on the table so that we can come up with a more optimal solution. To the point I made before, I think in a very, very difficult business circumstance, we had to deal with the fact that the world was falling apart around us. But I think we came up with a more jointly, valuable solution, right? We came with a better, more creative, more elegant solution for having more information. And I think that in terms of trying to show inclusivity and create a culture of inclusivity that I think actually paid off with all sorts of dividends for a long time, it wasn't a bad example. I admittedly didn't know if it would work or not, but I think I took a lot of lessons from it.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([16:56](#)):

I know how I would feel had I been still at Vantage and that was your process, which is invited to the table, valued for my opinion, wanted for being a part of the solution. And that I probably would be valued for my unique voice. Right? So I want to go back to one thing you said. It's a slight detour, but it's an important one, because on the topic of inclusive leadership, we often get pretty quickly to transparency. What I heard you say is we put information on the table. Are there some rules of the road for how leaders can assess how much is too much information to share? I mean, even at the relationship level, I kind of err on the side of, if you don't communicate at least have some communication, people will make up their own stories and those stories might be fueled with fear-based thoughts. And I'm going to, in this case, I'm gonna my job. Tell me a little bit about, as you're looking to be more inclusive in your offering up more information. What's the right boundary?

Stuart Kliman ([17:56](#)):

Super question. So first of all, leaders are used to trying to think and talk about cost-benefit analysis. And I think that around the topic of transparency, you can see this in context, after context, after context. That folks overestimate the cost of transparency and underestimate the benefits of transparency, both short and longterm. So I guess I say that Susan, because I don't think that it is useful or operational advice to say to people be more transparent. The advice of being more transparent runs into that, people will think that it is an unwise thing to be more transparent because they will overestimate the cost and underestimate the benefit. Going back to reflection, I think if people were a little bit more reflective about this, they would find that they are often wrong in their calculus. That they learn later, that they should have been more transparent. That they learn later that they overestimated the cost. That they learned later, that when they were transparent, there were this huge number of benefits.

Stuart Kliman ([19:14](#)):

They came up with more creative solutions. They develop stronger relationships. They built trust that paid off later when people gave them the benefit of the doubt, right? There's all that stuff on the benefits side that nobody really, really identifies and ponders and reflects on in a way that would cause them to change how they think about it in the future. For me, it really starts with that. Do yourself a favor, don't be more transparent because it's the moral thing to do. Don't because, you know, somebody told you to be more transparent, but you're not really comfortable with it, but you're going to do it anyway. Really see whether or not in your experience, greater degrees of transparency have had lots more benefit than you have necessarily attended to, and then make the calculation. There's a pretty systematic bias in favor of underestimating the benefit, because it can be scary and a pretty systematic bias at overestimating, the dangers.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([20:11](#)):

It's a good transition to talking about the role of understanding and how we cultivate it. We're competing with multiple viewpoints at any given time in any conversation.

Stuart Kliman ([20:20](#)):

Yeah.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([20:21](#)):

And I'm curious for the listener who genuinely wants to understand why understanding is important. What do you have to say?

Stuart Kliman ([20:30](#)):

It's the motivator question, right? What would motivate you to try to cultivate greater understanding? And I just go back to what I talked about before, which is that understanding is part of the secret sauce. It is the mix of which greater business results will come. We have a more diverse workforce, which means that there are all sorts of views and data and information and experiences that we can either tap into or not tap into. We have a customer set that is ever more diverse. And if we don't understand those customers, we're going to find it really, really hard to come up with products and services that will actually meet their needs. If I, as an individual, don't take advantage of all the opportunities around me to learn and understand, again, based on, you know, a deep level of curiosity, I am less likely to grow and advance myself. It really just starts with a real understanding of how much there is out there and how much I can miss that will lead to less value for me, my business, my organization, unless I'm sort of proactively trying to understand what's going on.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([21:53](#)):

What's the mindset that you have to have to stay seeking?

Stuart Kliman ([21:58](#)):

Deep, deep curiosity.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([22:00](#)):

Yeah.

Stuart Kliman ([22:01](#)):

And I love that you used the mindset word, cause people talk about like skills all the time. And I think you know, I'm just not a believer that skills mean anything without the mindset underneath it. Then you're just acting, right? You're not behaving in ways, consistent with a set of beliefs that you have and what, at least I've tried to cultivate. What I try to sort of help other folks is that you have to have this deep belief that you have just a limited set of experiences, a limited set of data that you're at the logic path that you're using to reach conclusions is based on limited data. Data that you've chosen to attend to because you like that information, right? And that information that you don't, you're making logic leaps up and down your own reasoning path. And others have access to different data. And so they've got different logic paths and that's leading them to different conclusions.

Stuart Kliman ([22:59](#)):

When you and I were working together, which was wonderful. You came from a whole different set of experiences and a whole different set of backgrounds. And you would say things to me. And I would say what? And it would confuse the heck out of me. And I think we all, we experienced frustration or we experienced discontent or anger or whatever, right? At that moment in time. And I can either decide at that moment, Susan's completely insane. She's crazy. She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand things and frustrating, or I can be really, really curious. Wow that really makes me curious.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([23:37](#)):

It is really the saving grace of relationships. Curiosity.

Stuart Kliman ([23:41](#)):

It, it is, It is everything. I mean, I was going to boil all the stuff that's out there. Inclusivity, relationship management, joint gain negotiation, you name it. In my view, it's about curiosity. Everything that drives it and the belief system that sits underneath it, it's the seed. It's innovation, it's business results. It's stronger and more robust relationships. It's learning. It's really amazing. If you can get it right and you can cultivate it.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([24:12](#)):

Why are people threatened or scared about creating equity and inclusion?

Stuart Kliman ([24:16](#)):

Right.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([24:18](#)):

When we've talked mostly about what sounds like really smart interpersonal, relationship leadership skills.

Stuart Kliman ([24:28](#)):

Yeah.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([24:28](#)):

I feel like there's this cloud over this now. No one wants to go too near, you know,? I feel like we need to rebrand, which is why in part doing that with just talking about better understanding. Right. Help me here.

Stuart Kliman ([24:40](#)):

Well, hopefully around all these questions, but certainly around this one, I come with a great amount of humility because it is a hard question. I would say a couple of things. One is the world feels increasingly zero sum. If when people come at this question, if by being more inclusive, it means giving more to you at the cost of taking from me, giving more to you and your people at the cost of taking from me and my people. It can be very, very hard to ask people to divide the pie in ways where someone else gets more and I get less from the way it has always been. It can be heard in the context of a very, very fixed pie. And being aware of the fact that when it comes down to individuals at times, it is a fixed pot. I have a talented, white hetero son who, as an individual may or may not have all the opportunities that he used

to have perhaps unfairly, but in any event used to have, because we're all trying to create a better world, right?

Stuart Kliman ([25:56](#)):

Where there's more opportunities for everyone. So it is true that in some individual circumstances, it is a fixed pie. But in any event, I think that as sort of big level, the world feels evermore increasingly kind of zero-sum. And that plays into it. There are all sorts of ways to acknowledge on the merits that the world really isn't fixed sum. In kind of the, the system or meta sense. And that there's all sorts of things that each one of us can do to kind of expand the pie and even get a bigger piece of that. I think that's one way of coming out, Susan, if, if what I've been talking about is true, that inclusivity and curiosity come together. And again, curiosity requires to acknowledge that there's all sorts of things in my day to day reality, where that's based on very, very limited data. And all of a sudden, I need to believe there's stuff that I don't know or that, you know, a long-held belief maybe has some limits. That's pretty scary. And so it gets unsurprising that with both of those things going on, it feels like a fixed pie and I'm going to get less of it. And you're asking me to kind of recognize that maybe the beliefs I had or the knowledge I had about the world, there's some limits to it. Or maybe based on some of the things. That's a kind of scary situation. That's one of the reasons why it can be so hard to persuade people that they should give this inclusivity stuff a go.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([27:33](#)):

What do you wish people to do? What's the one action to take, to continue their own journey of understanding about inclusion?

Stuart Kliman ([27:42](#)):

Given everything we've talked about, what has to be about curiosity. And I think I would say, act on that deep curiosity and see what you can learn and see around you. Read, watch, listen, experiment, behave, and then take all that and reflect. Because again, reflection is kind of the stuff from which learning comes. Becoming a more inclusive leader or creating more inclusive organizations, developing more inclusive ecosystems, I think really is a lot about learning and helping others learn.

Susan Mackenty Brady ([28:23](#)):

Awesome answer. And you are awesome as well. Stu thank you so much for joining us today. I so appreciate it.

Stuart Kliman ([28:30](#)):

Great to be here

Susan Mackenty Brady ([28:31](#)):

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.