

Episode 353: Are You an Inclusive Leader? Here's What You're Missing with Kelli Lester

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Do you want each person on your team to do their best work and be their best self? I really hope you answered yes, which means your job is to be an inclusive leader so that everyone can show up every day and give their best. So while the days of DEI might be over for some, inclusive leadership is here to stay, and today's guest is going to help you become that inclusive leader who gets the best from their people.

Today's guest is Kelly Lester. Kelly is co-founder and partner of Onyx Rising, a change management consulting firm specializing in individual, team, and organizational behavior transformation. Her compassion lies in fostering environments where inclusive leadership thrives. Leveraging over two decades of experience to drive meaningful progress.

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Now here's my conversation with Kelly.

Are you a manager, boss, or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You are listening to the Modern Manager Podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Camper Stewart. Each week I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities. Optimize team performance and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at themodernmanager.com/more

Thank you so much for joining me today, Kelly. I'm really excited to talk about inclusive leadership, as I feel like we're at a moment in time where inclusion is really being lifted up as a core component to successful workplaces. And so I'm really happy to have you come on today and talk to me more about inclusive leadership and what those traits are and what managers do if they want to create that kind of inclusive culture.

Kelli Lester 01:57

Absolutely. It's so good to be here. It's really interesting that you talked about if it's being lifted up or not. I think it in some cases that it's forgotten, right? Or, and so understanding the value will be important in this season.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:13

Yes. Actually, that's a really good point that I think there's, I'll say like from the listeners and the folks that I mostly talk with, right? It's being lifted up as a primary part of good workplaces. And I think in other places it's gotten shoved under the rug or left behind or like the baby's being thrown out with the bathwater kind of situation. And so bringing inclusion and lifting it back up and recentering, I think, is such a great opportunity for managers regardless of where you work and regardless of what your organizational culture is. So maybe you can start us off by just explaining like what. Is inclusion, like how do you define it? What makes for an inclusive culture?

Kelli Lester 02:48

Absolutely. So inclusion is really at its core how we engage others based upon who they are, where they sit, their particular uniquenesses. Sometimes when. I've been in this space for about 25 years now, and people will try to have diversity without inclusion without diversity and they do work in tandem. And when we talk about inclusive cultures or inclusive leaders for that matter, that means that I understand who I am, I understand the culture around me, but it's the context of how do we create. Success in this space with you, you involved, and that takes some effort. It doesn't happen all the time naturally. So you may have remote workers, folks that are global, your team may be of different generations. And so it will cause me as a leader to have to adapt my style to ensure everyone can be their best. And so to me, inclusion at its core is how do I. Leverage all of the differences or the success of the organization or the team, or the project.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:59

I so appreciate that you described generational differences, locational differences, cultural differences, right? That this is really about every single person. Comes, as you said, as your unique self, right? And you have your style, your perspective, your needs, your way of thinking and working. And as managers, we have to work with everyone. We have to be able to create a space where everyone feels part of the team. So I think that's a really important nuance is that we're not just talking about race and ethnicity. We're not just talking about gender. We're like, we're talking about a whole swath of factors that make people who they are.

Kelli Lester 04:39

Yeah, absolutely. One of my favorite topics is to really bring forth something as simple as being an introvert or an extrovert. Throw out a question as a leader and think people can respond in the moment because that's my style. But if you really truly understand someone that is an introvert, it could create a lot of nervous energy. Speaking in front of people. Makes you sweat sometimes, right? So how might I prepare for a meeting that involves. Introverts and extroverts, right? How can I give them a heads up on the agenda? How can I give them pre-thinking questions so that they truly can be their best? Versus someone like me who, yeah, in the moment, Mamie, I'll take those questions and you can go here and there. Not everyone's comfortable with that. And so as a leader, we have to be very cognizant of. Each person's starting point, right? We talk about in this space, meeting people where they are, but do we know where we are and where they are and what's the impact when those two things come together?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 05:48

Yes, I love this. Such a simple example that we can all relate to, and as a leader in a meeting, right? It totally sucks when you throw out a question and no one answers. So this is like a win-win for everyone when you start to pay more attention and become more aware. Are there particular ways that you have found that have been very helpful to become more aware of your own? All the things. I don't even know what the right word is.

Kelli Lester 06:14

No, it's a huge question. I think doing this work for so many years, people thought, oh, I'm going to understand others. And yes, you absolutely, when you go on this journey, need to look outside of yourself, right? Enough of the naval gazing, right? But do we really understand others? But it starts first with the lens in which we see the world, and many of us have become adults. And didn't necessarily reflect back why we have the values we do. My mentor actually, and I'll never forget it, he talked about it's okay to see the world the way you do, but it's not okay if you think everyone sees it the same way. And so I think when it comes to self-awareness, we have to actually say what are my values?

For example, something as simple as getting up early. I believe that I started out my career thinking if I got up, up early and other people that were up early, they're productive versus really looking at people that are maybe, Hey, you don't get going until noon or the afternoon is your best time of day, or your best thinking. So we have to really understand. Now, if I judged everyone, oh, you came to work early, so I value you more, or your perspective because you are. My face and not across the globe. So some of those things we have to really understand. Am I making decisions? Based upon my values, which is okay, but understand what those values are that way, so I would say the best way to address self-awareness or really understand your lens is to reflect on your past, reflect on your values, and reflect on how you got to that place. And many of us don't often naturally do that. So it's almost wanting for me in this

conversation to add intentionality. Inclusion, right? Because if I leave it as just, oh, it's natural, then I'm going to go with my natural state and decision, which may not be as acceptable or comfortable for others as I navigate my workplaces.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 08:17

That is such a good point that it's really about being intentional, which sometimes means doing things that are uncomfortable for you. Working in ways that are different. Putting in more attention to planning your meeting, as you've said earlier, around, preparing stuff ahead of time. That's not, that might not be how you function, but it's how others are and how you need to work in new ways. Stretch yourself. So important. I'm wondering about kinda other examples of what an inclusive workplace looks like. What are some of the behaviors that you would see managers do?

Kelli Lester 08:50

Yeah, great question. I think we talked about surveying our team, right? To some degree, right? So you may think about preparing for a meeting. One of my favorite things to do when I have a new hire is that I ask them to finish these sentences. What does a great day look like for you? I am motivated most by, so you wanna understand what are those motivations, and then also share what yours are so that way you really begin to interact in a way that's strategic, that honors the other person's style. Maybe as a leader, I want to motivate my team and give them bonuses. But maybe they want time off so sometimes we have to really understand what are those things and make sure we almost have a profile, for lack of a better term. And I don't, I know some of us aren't very formal as leaders. Maybe you are a little bit more of a laid back leader. But you wanna understand this, and I liken this conversation more to if you have children particularly if you have more than one child, people will understand this. So I have a boy and a girl, right? And they're older and they're grown. But when they were young, I wanted them both to go to college.

But what motivated one didn't motivate the other. And so I had to really understand. You may encourage one child; you may have to give discipline to another child. So when you think about that, you want them to accomplish the same thing, which is success, whatever that is. But how you go about it, they look very different. And so that's what I really challenge leaders to think about as they're leading their workplaces. Another example would be. At the end of the day, we really want everyone to bring their best self. I have a perspective that I don't think we want everyone to bring their whole self. Your whole self may not be accepted in an organization's culture, but I do want you to bring your best self. So if I understand what your strengths are and what maybe are your opportunities, then I can really start to build that. So I can't assume that you wanna aspire to have my job. You may not even wanna be a manager at that level, but if I understand what your motivations are, then I can come at this in a unique way.

So I think we don't spend enough time really understanding the motivations of our teams and then wonder why we did not achieve the success that we intended. So I think that's a big part of

it, but I think workplace culture is what we come from at. Those that are Gen Xers, we had a command and control culture, corporate cultures, and now I get many leaders coming to me saying, oh, I don't understand. The younger generation help me to understand, but I think their time has to really be. Spent on what's expected today because that the impact may be that you won't even retain your staff, and that's a huge part. So many people are thinking of both about the value of understanding the uniqueness of our team, but what might be the downside if I don't do it? So I personally believe that the future of leadership is inclusive leadership because as you've mentioned, all of us are different. But how do we still achieve success in that space?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:12

Yes. Okay. So like the tagline for the show is. Creating a culture where people get to do their best work and be their best selves. At the end of the day, we all want to be our very best, and we want to do our best. And our manager's job is to help us unlock that potential, unlock that greatness within each of us. And it's not about. Come, bring all of your baggage, and be your whole self. Be your authentic self. This is still work; this is not like all of life. There are places in other parts of life where we can do that. But in the workplace, this is really about getting to make your greatest contribution and getting to unlock your greatest potential. So for me, like that's hands down what inclusive leadership is about.

The second thing you just said. Which is around understanding people and their motivation and likes and what people need to feel successful and how important it is to remember. I. What you said earlier is that sometimes what we want isn't what our team members want. And it is so easy to get stuck in. I don't like it when somebody gives me lots of directions. I want you to just give me the high level, and I'll figure it out. And other people are like, wait no. I need a lot more information here. I need a lot more detail. I need a lot more structure. And being able to work in those adaptive ways. Isn't always easy because it's so much easier for us to just go this is what I do. I give you this assignment. I give you this assignment. I give you this assignment. Old style, command and control, and now it's nope. I gave you this one way, and I gave someone else a different way, but it's what they needed. As you talked about with your children, it's what they needed to be successful, and that's such a hard thing for us to, to figure out and learn.

Kelli Lester 13:47

Yeah. One thing you just mentioned that it just triggered me to think about this when I first got into my career, a more senior woman came to me and gave me advice. And she said, never cry at work Kelly. It is a career killer. And she really was trying to help me and context at that stage. That was probably great advice, but if I were to apply that advice today, I really would not have been successful as a leader. Today's culture, we're almost asked to do the exact opposite, right? So ask your employees how they're doing. Ask them on a daily basis if something is happening externally. No, it may not be work-related, but you can't drop everything at the door when you walk in, right? So those kinds of things can either make or break a relationship, and the more we're able to build trust with our team, then they will take a bullet for us, right? One thing that's

not a part of my Inclusive Leaders leadership traits is vulnerability. But it's embedded, right? So I always like to say that when I finally let go of the command and control and understood that when I'm vulnerable, then that gave permission for my team members to do the same. If someone, for example, brings me some feedback and I. Rejected or I come across very harsh, would they ever bring it again? So if we are trying to unlock innovative ideas, we have to be able to listen to some ideas that maybe weren't the best. Your first idea may not be the best as a team, but my ability to create that comfort, not just one-on-one, but even among the team dynamics really starts to help us be more innovative. But rejecting that or your idea isn't good unless it's my style of an idea, or you only like my ideas, then I may not get new, innovative ideas. That not only hurts our productivity, but it can actually keep us as a company or organization from achieving our overall objectives. So we need people to have a comfort level in bringing ideas, being them. Their authentic selves or their best selves to work, but we have to create that environment, and that is not one way. And so leaders have to strategically understand how to intentionally create inclusion and the dynamics being different. And I think some of us are afraid, right? We're afraid because it's uncomfortable for us. So I don't like crying at work. I have never done that, but that's also part of my personal style. But I can't judge someone for doing that. And when people are that vulnerable at work in a culture or a leader that doesn't welcome it. It can actually hurt their entire career trajectory. And I think that's important, especially if you're, say you're in world headquarters, but you're the one remote worker that's not, so you do something or demonstrate in a way that's not part of the culture or not looked at as favorable. It can actually hurt you for years to come. Do you remember that time she did this? So I think it's really important to do that as well as advocate. For our team members, as we look at, I, I'll call it bias, right? It's ultimately biased. So you may see that, but if you say, oh, Mamie really brought that idea and it's great, and another manager doesn't support it, whether that team member is in the room or not, we have to advocate and support them, right? And that really makes a difference in, I think, changing the culture so that it creates more innovation versus stifle it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:42

I very much agree. And I think the nuance I want to pull out from what you just said is that an inclusive culture is both about the inclusion of the person and their style and the way that they show up and what they need to be successful and to be motivated but also the inclusion of their ideas and their thinking and their perspective and them and the kind of mental contributions they're making to the team. And those sometimes are two different things that we require us to do both. We have to both include and be inclusive of the person, and we have to be inclusive of their thinking. And yeah. I just, I love this.

Kelli Lester 18:18

Yeah. And it really connects back to what you said about being uncomfortable, right? So this act may be very uncomfortable for me as a leader. So both. Our team member and us need to get out of our comfort zone to create something new. And I think that I always latch onto the benefit, right? But again, some people latch onto the risk, right? So the carrot of the stick when it comes

to culture, because of course I work with leaders, but I also deal with organizational change management as well. And sometimes some of my clients. They're motivated by what the reward and others are motivated by, if we don't do this right, the, what will happen? Will we exist? Will we get fined? So that, that's an interesting dynamic 'cause we both need to understand the culture we're placing or leading this team within. And that's an important dynamic.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:13

Yes, very much alright, hold on. I'm gonna think about where I wanna take this. So you shared that obviously like we get the best thinking of people when we are vulnerable and we're willing to accept their ideas. And you talked about how that goes into creativity, innovation. What are some of the other real, tangible benefits that managers can experience when they are doing the right things or they're they're really invested thoughtfully in building that inclusive culture.

Kelli Lester 19:39

Yeah. One of my favorite experiences, and it's personal, is one of the key inclusive leadership traits is amplifying others, and I would say in particular, amplifying the uncommon idea or voices, if you will. And so one of the benefits, and this is a little bit of a flip because it was. For me individually, so I was considered a high potential coming up in my career. I was not in a room and my boss was, and there was at this particular organization. People could not move up in human resources until you had field experience. I happened to be a single mom and they were saying, oh, this is a great opportunity. A position became open. It was temporary until they found someone that was bilingual, but they were considering putting someone in human resources that was a hypo. In this role, my name came up. And someone in the room said, oh, she can't do that, she's a single mom. She won't be able to travel. And my boss apparently said let's ask her. And so what I'm getting at is the accommodations that we make, right? So that's an a huge component of not just changing the culture, but offering opportunities to different styles in different ways. And luckily for me, I was a, my family lived in a different town, but I was able to fly in a family member to take care of my son and take this opportunity for three months. So for me, at the end of the day I'm highlighting two things. One, you have to advocate for talent and you have to not only be, I think we know about mentors, but I think there's also a sponsorship that takes place. And so I personally, had she not done that, I would not be here today. There is no, no doubt I, my career would've went in a completely different direction.

And so I guess I shared this particular story because it's a great demonstration of what it looks like to amplify others, what it looks like to advocate for talent and what it looks like to push the envelope or check other. People. So what is the benefit? It's obvious the benefit for the talent, right? But what was the benefit for my leader in doing that? She actually, to me, was a role model of what inclusive leadership looks like and started to open doors, and she even got promoted as a result of her style. So I guess what I wanna leave with your listeners is when we operate as an intentional inclusive leader, we're building leadership. Skills for the future. That's the kind of leader that we need in our organizations. That's the kind of leader that will be capable of leading a global team, leading a group of introverts, extroverts, men, women,

whichever, right? So whatever that looks like, whatever the difference, my ability to understand both myself and my lens and then understand the motivations of my team will enable me to achieve great things.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:45

Yes. I wonder if you have any other stories, because that was such a good story from your own life, and do you have other stories you can share with us about people who have either just naturally or really those who transitioned from one style of leadership that maybe was a little less inclusive and put some of these practices in place and what that did for them?

Kelli Lester 23:04

Yeah. So I do a lot of coaching with leaders at executive level, and I'll be honest, a lot of them are male. And this particular dynamic, our situation was we were leading the executive team to communicate and own what I call the case for change. So many times we may know we need to change, but unless the organization is holding our feet to. Or there's a consequence, right? We may not change. So what I was experiencing was half of the leaders were in a place where they really own the topic of inclusion. They were demonstrating it, and part of that was because they had some experience where they were excluded. And I think that had a lot to do with it. And so for this particular male, I don't think he could connect to the topic in a meaningful way. And this is why it's so important to do our own self-reflection to take actions. And I had the executive team do homework in between the educational development workshops that we were doing. We did them quarterly as part of their executive team conversations.

And initially even the head of diversity, equity and inclusion was like, oh, he's not bought in. I just bypassed him. I said, no, you need to lean into where he's at because he's actually representing where a lot of people may be. And when you truly understand that, not run from it, you'll really be able to create more change management and inclusion. So over time, this leader, his daughter, went into the workplace. When we first started the journey, I don't think he could connect that women needed something different. He could not adapt his style in any way. This worked for me, so it should work for you. But as his daughter was entering the workforce, she was experiencing some challenges. And in my one-on-one conversations, he started to share those with me. He became our number one advocate for women in the workplace. He ended up becoming the executive sponsor for the Women's Resource Group and it really became when he immersed himself to get out of himself and understand what his daughter was experiencing. So I say this to say that sometimes we need to find our voice on why we're doing this. Why should I be inclusive? What is the benefit to me personally, or what is the opportunity? And so as he became an advocate for his daughter. He then became a greater advocate for women in general but even started to see other aspects where he may have been more close-minded. And that was his own personal journey, right? And so he became what, like I said, the best advocate at the end of the day for diversity, equity, and inclusion at that time. So I think it's really critical that we get out of our own mindsets and start to really. Put ourselves in someone else's

shoes, as we like to say. But what does that look like? And it took a personal experience for him to really do that.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:05

Yes. And that is often the case, right? Like we can learn about something, we can hear about something, but until it becomes. Close to home, it's sometimes hard to really understand. So what a gift for that man to be able to see it up close.

Kelli Lester 26:21

Yeah. I think leaders is our head, our heart, and our hands. So the head is, why should I do it? Is there a business reason for it? Will the company benefit? Will I benefit? And that might be the numbers, right? That story I just shared was his, the heart, because at the end of the day, his daughter was his heart, and so it became the right. Thing to do and he can make a connection with real experiences. And then the do or the hands is the act, the actions. And so then he started really demonstrating inclusion daily everywhere he went. Not just at home but at work. And so that's where I think a lot of times, leaders, we try to jump to the do and we haven't addressed the head and the heart. And so it's not as meaningful many times, or it's a check the box and we're going through the motion, but when we can connect our head and our heart to those actions, now we're really making.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:20

Yes. Okay. But we are running out of time here. So Kelly, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Kelli Lester 27:28

So I think it's funny, the advocacy story about my boss really is that one, but I will, there's one other boss I would say or mentor that was in my life, and what she did is she recognized. What was a real, I would say I was rough around the edges as a leader and I did not understand how to not think as an individual and really think as a team, that was really hard. I'm also an only child, so these things were, I think, embedded in. So what that leader did is the first year I knocked all my goals out of the park, but I was an individual contributor, but that needed to begin to partner with others and a brand new people manager. So what he did is he changed my goals and objectives to only be connected to the team, to the group. So I didn't get my bonus, I didn't, none of my goals were based upon me alone. I would say that almost drove me into inclusion. In a way to demonstrate or practice what I preach, really.

So at the time, I was a little pissed, I'm not gonna lie. I was a little mad. I was like, Hey, I'm a high performer. How could you do this to me? But it ended up being one of the greatest lessons

I had, and I had to really circle back and thank him because it actually made me better at this work as well. So I guess as a leader, he challenged me and he pushed me further. Then I thought I could even go right. But it happened to be the best thing that could have happened to me at that stage in my career and really opened up and I could demonstrate and speak to what it looks like to create inclusion, because every last one of my goals were connected to. If the team was successful. And so that was a very strategic thing, but it really worked out for me. But it also worked out for the team, so it was like, we win. And I think that's what I would say about inclusive leadership. It's not about you winning. That's great that you can make the connection that this is why I'm doing this is why I'm motivated. But it's now, as you transition to a people leader, it's about how do we win?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:41

Yes. I love that creative approach that he took to teach you those skills and put you into the right mindset. So creative. All right. And where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

Kelli Lester 29:51

So my company is called Onyx Rising. You can reach us at www.onyxthenumbertwo.com.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:01

Thank you again so much for joining me today, Kelly. Really such a fun conversation with you and we all need to be better at inclusive leadership and so this is such a great topic and I really enjoyed getting to chat. Thank you.

Kelly is providing members of podcast plus her Inclusive Leadership Traits Assessment. The PDF includes an overview of inclusive leadership traits and a self-assessment to help you identify areas for improvement. To get this guest bonus and many more, and the extended episode where Kel explains the inclusive leadership traits, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more.

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Thanks again for listening. Until next time.