

Episode 318: How Body and Brain Awareness Can Make You a Better Manager with Amanda Blake

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Would you believe me if I said your body is intelligent? Well, science says that our bodies know a lot more than we realize. And if we can learn to listen to them, we can tap into that deeper internal wisdom. And thankfully, today's guest is an expert in the mind body connection. And she's here to help us develop the sensory awareness to be our best. Today's guest is Dr. Amanda Blake. Amanda is an internationally celebrated educator and executive coach, with a pedigree spanning more than 25 years, and 35,000 students in companies, nonprofits, colleges and universities, professional associations and more. She has shown people in over 50 countries how they can enjoy life more while making a bigger contribution. And as reached many 1000s bar as a top rated podcast guest with her award winning book, your body is your brain. She's also a master somatic coach and her primary research areas are the neurobiology of embodied learning, applied ethics and leadership effectiveness. Now don't forget to hit that subscribe button. I share new episodes and other tips for managers every week. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:38

Are you a manager or a boss or team leader who aspires to level up and unleash your team's full potential? You're listening to The Modern Manager Podcast and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer 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.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:31

Thank you so much for joining me today, Amanda, I'm so excited to talk about a topic that I don't think I've ever covered on the show before. And also that makes me a little uncomfortable, which does not usually happen usually like Uber getting my feedback and conflict and like this is

gonna be great. And I'm like, Oh, we're gonna talk about like how we feel in our bodies. Oh, avoid that one

Amanda Blake 01:56

You know what, we can talk about feedback and conflicts, because how we feel in our bodies totally affects how we show up when we're delegating and negotiating. Yeah, right on.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:06

Yes, yes, yes. Okay. Why don't you start by laying some groundwork for us about the topic, I don't know actually know officially what are called, like somatic and body embodiment, like, what are we actually talking about today.

Amanda Blake 02:20

So I like to talk about embodied intelligence, my book, *Your bodies, your brain* refers to somatic intelligence, really, it's all the same thing, which is that we actually have intelligence out. And I literally mean intelligence, out to our fingers and toes. We know things through our embodied sensations, even through the way we physically sit, stand move in the workplace, in our homes, we know things and we take action that way, through our bodies, and there's no switching that off. That is on 24/7. But what's interesting is nobody has ever taught us a that that's true, be how to use it well, and see how to use it well, in a workplace context. So some of us might be athletes or go to yoga, or do other kinds of physical things like playing music, or theater might be a hobby, right? So any of these things very physical, we might be very physical in other parts of our lives, just playing with our kids or whatever, that's very different from using your body as the antenna that it is to pick up on signals. And your body's always sending you signals about what's going on in this situation. How might I respond effectively, to this situation? We actually have intelligence that can help us that we're leaving on the table.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:51

Yes. And I love the section in your book where you were connecting, like the different types of that internal sources of knowledge with the common sayings that we have, and how that those those phrases those things, things like sick to my stomach, right or heartbroken? Like they actually come from somewhere, they're not random. Can you just talk us through that and help us understand what are some of these different senses and sources of intelligence in our bodies?

Amanda Blake 04:21

What you're referring to, they're these phrases that come up, like we'll say someone was spineless, or will say, Oh, I got really hot when what we mean is I got angry, right, that we actually can't understand the world. This comes from linguistics and cognitive science. We can't understand anything about the world without understanding it in embodied terms. So if I ask you to point to the future, where is the future in relation to you right now? I mean, I'm literally asked.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 04:52

Forward, like in front of me.

Amanda Blake 04:54

So there's not a right answer to that our culture the that we share a North American culture, most people will point in front of them. And we have a sense of like the future means moving forward. Right? So, and it is a sense, and I use that term deliberately, right, we have a sense, and it is something that we kind of, yeah, we might have an idea about it. But it's something that we also physically feel. There are cultures that will point behind them, the future is unknown. I can't see it. But I can see laid out before me everything that has happened in the past. Interesting, right? I'm watching your expression like, yeah, right. So my point here is, there's actually no way for us to understand the world except in embodied terms. And what that means is that almost everything that we do, can be understood via the landscape of embodied cognition, or what what cognition means is essentially, knowing about the world and being able to decide what to do in it. Right cognition is about managing our behavior in response to incoming information. So humans are not the only cognitive creatures on the planet, right? Lots of other creatures, even without our linguistic capabilities, have cognitive capabilities. It's why we can study animal models and understand things about the brain, right or understand things about behavior. So this capacity for embodied cognition, trust me, it's working all the time while you're at work, and is nowhere more. So I want to say nowhere more so than in management, nowhere more so than we when we are responsible for helping people work effectively together. Because a lot of our embodied cognition has been shaped both serve historically, evolutionarily, the brain as it develops, if you look at evolutionary biology, but also if you look at developmental biology, so just our every day, everybody grows up from being a child to an adult, right. So over long spans of time, as well as over the span of a lifetime, we see that the brain is really highly oriented, towards making sense of our social relationships. There's a ton of brain real estate devoted to that. And all of it is tied to our sensory capacities as well. So these things are tied together in ways that we can't see and aren't always aware of, but they're always affecting our actions.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:43

So given that we are learning over time our brain is developing over time, and it's being influenced by all of our different experiences, could you maybe share a little bit or give us some stories about what happens to us over the course of our lifetime, gets embedded into our body and then shapes our perception of the world kind of shapes how we then experience the world?

Amanda Blake 08:07

Yeah, that's great. So this is something that is, again, it's switched on all the time. So we can't not do this. And what happens is, so the brain is considered the least a differentiated organ at birth, meaning compared to all our other body parts, the brain is going to change more than any other part of our body from birth to adulthood. And it not only changes, its wiring and its connections, it actually develops kind of new structures and thick in certain areas. And so it's really physically taking shape. Like if you look at your hand, you're going to wind up with the same bone structure in adulthood that you had as a child. But the brain is quite different, it will change quite a bit. And now parts of our brain that don't mature come online until much later in life. And meanwhile, we are being shaped will say by the environments that we live in. So our school environment, our home environment, our wider cultural environment, whether we what country we grew up in, what sort of subculture we grew up in, whether it's religious, so subculture or an ethnic subculture, right. So all of these things were immersed in these as as children, and the parts of our brain that are most mature as children are the sensory parts, the parts for sensation and movement. Those when we come into the world are already almost fully formed parts for language obviously not it takes us a while to acquire that parts for kind of logical reasoning. Obviously not it takes us a while to acquire those capacities, but the parser sensation and movement are always switched on. And so we're always almost like drinking in from our environment. Here's how it feels to be in relationship with these people around me, here's how I move in relationship to these people around me. So we adopt and acquire both in childhood and throughout our lives, ways of being biani virile habits, what I sometimes called Bio behavioral blind spots, they could be strengths, sometimes their limitations, right, that we put on autopilot, the brain is a pattern detection instrument, and it wants to put as much as possible on autopilot. So early in life, we're putting a lot of behavioral responses on autopilot. So if you grew up, for example, in a circumstance where people laughed at you a lot, and you were laughed at and not left with, much later, you're in a meeting, and a bunch of people burst into laughter, maybe your heart starts to beat fast. Because you're you learned way earlier in life, oh, this fast beating heart, this is like a people laughing That's maybe a risky situation for me. Now, it may or may not be in this particular workplace situation. But we may pick up on something that could be an accurate or an inaccurate read of a situation based on our embodied responses. And then we'll make all kinds of decisions about how to, you know, very swiftly, very unconsciously, we'll make all kinds of decisions about how to respond to that laughter. So we might last along with or feel a little niq and kind of look down at the table or tell everybody to

shut up or right, the lots of ways that we might respond. And sometimes what we're responding to, is physical discomfort inside ourselves that we just want to make go away. And so will tell everybody to shut up or what. And if we have other learn other skills, other strategies to go, well, there's discomfort here that may or may not be telling me the truth. I'm going to learn you know, this, this, it takes some time to learn how to discern in our own bodies, when we're getting an accurate read of the world versus a read that's maybe then we can say Miss educated, right? We learned a lesson that isn't so helpful for us now.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:22

So what you're saying there's so many signals that are happening in our bodies. And if we're not paying attention to them, it's really hard to be aware enough to assess and then make deliberate choices, because we're basically running on autopilot. And this might be silly, but like, it reminds me when I am doing peloton classes, and there's different instructors will say things like relax your shoulder and I'm like, I didn't even know that my shoulders were doing this while I was writing, right or like relax your brow and I'm like, Oh, I didn't even know I was like tensing my eyebrows. Like wiggle your toes. I'm like, Oh, my gosh, I was cramping my chest like, I wasn't even realizing what was happening in my body because I was so intent on the activity that was, you know, that I was doing at the moment riding this bike. And I feel like that is it is so hard for us sometimes to realize those sensations in our bodies. Or I will say for myself, it is very hard. So are there things that we can do to start to build greater awareness of those emotional and physical sensations, I'm guessing that's the place that we need to start with is getting more body awareness.

Amanda Blake 13:31

What you're describing is so super, super, super normal, it is more normal, to not be aware that your brow is furrowed than to be aware of it, whether you're on a peloton bike or concentrating at your desk, right? It's much more normal not be aware. And part of that is by biological design. So where we can put our own internal sensations on autopilot, we do. And then we also have all these cultural messages that say ignore, ignore, ignore, right? So we there are lots of things that have our interior sensory life be just very dampened and very quiet. And that's normal. And I just want to say, Fine, like, it's totally fine. But the other thing, if you don't mind, before I answer your question of how I, I'd like to kind of point to why because like, why why bother, you know, getting better at sensory awareness? What is it actually offer you? And this actually isn't in the book. This is in a more recent research that I've done concluded a couple of years ago, that shows that as you develop embodied self awareness, you also develop the emotional and social intelligence that leaders need to do an outstanding job. Right. Like I know one of the things that you you point out is that people tend not to lead jobs, they leave managers, right they have we need people that are there. they'd CLR not treating them well. And so the kinds of emotional and social intelligence capacities that we need things like resilience and adaptability, in today's

crazy environment, things like the ability to manage conflict well or to empathize, these kinds of things, research has shown come along with growing embodied self awareness. So it's a worthwhile effort. It's a worthwhile undertaking, for those of us who work inside of organizations, and whose job it is, is to work well with other people and help other people work well together. Right. Okay. So that's why, and then the question is how, let me give you a couple of very practical things you can do. One thing you can do is take like some really flat lentils, take a little sprinkle, put them in your shoes, and walk around with lentils in your shoes all day, not like really huge, bumpy lentils that are going to I have super sensitive feet. So I just use the really tiny ones, they'll slide around in your shoes, and it's enough to get you paying attention. But my feet are making contact with the ground all the time, right? Most of the day, I mean, maybe sometimes I sit on the couch with my feet tucked up under me, most of the time my feet are on the ground, those lentils will slide around, they'll help you get more connected to the sensations of your feet, the sensations of your legs. And in that way, you know, we talk about being in sort of popular terms, we'll talk about, oh, I need to go get more grounded. Now. Well, this is a really practical way to do it, right? To actually wake up to the sensations in your feet and in your legs. And it'll keep you paying attention all day. I have another one too. But let me stop there and see what you have to say response.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:52

No, I love that. I never would have thought to put lentils on my shoes. So I'm, I'm excited to try that. Why don't you just tell us what the second one is? And then I'll take us in a new direction.

Amanda Blake 17:02

Okay, okay, that sounds good. So another thing that you can do is, too, you could probably find lists online and I would steer you away from doing that. Instead, think of as many words to describe sensation as possible. Usually, when I do this, when I suggest this people will say things like anxiety, excitement, fear, those are not sensations, right? Those are words that describe an interpretation of a sensation, a sensation is physical. It's something like heat, sweating, chilly. So we're really looking for things like how rapid heartbeat or a pulsing, or a weightiness or a lightness or a sense of expansiveness, or sense of tension. Right? If you're just gonna describe the furrowed brow, you might say concentrating, but that's not furrowed brow, right? So really, one of the reasons that we don't I said like, we tune cessation out both biologically and culturally, we're, we tend to do that. But also, we tend not to have very good language for it. So make a list for yourself of the as many physical sensations as you possibly can keep it near you on your desk or on your phone, and just pull it out a few times a day, circle a few things that you're feeling that'll start to direct your attention more and more, it'll start to build your embodied self awareness, your capacity for present moment, non judgmental attention to sensation and motion, which is the academic definition of that term.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 18:47

Oh, I love this. And one of the things that I was thinking about doing when you were describing this, I was like, Oh, I feel like I want to set a timer like randomly on my watch. And then when it goes off, be like, Okay, what is my body doing right now? Like, where am I feeling tense? Where am I feeling relaxed? How was my head tilted? Like, what's happening? And like, what's my emotional experience? Am I deep in concentration? Am I feeling annoyed? But like about something that I'm reading? Like, what is happening? And what's the, what's the emotion experience? And what's the physical experience of that? So maybe that's like another another thing? I'll try doing?

Amanda Blake 19:24

Perfect. Perfect. Yes, yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:27

Okay, great. I wonder if you can share some stories or a story about yourself or about a client. And what was this process like for them to go from kind of unawareness, to awareness to kind of changed body changed emotions change mental state? Because I want to, I want to get us to the place of like, how do we make the changes once we are aware, but I want to maybe hear a story first.

Amanda Blake 19:51

Yeah, that sounds good. I mean, one of the things that I often say is, you know, awareness creates choice, but it's practice that creates capacity. So uh, awareness is just the first step, but then getting into a regular practice of doing something different. That's where the real power of this approach can really make a difference. Why don't I use an example of someone who was super driven by her to do list and very much in overwhelm, she happened to be a consultant. So she didn't work inside of a company. She wasn't a manager, and she had two clients where this was a really huge issue. And not all of us can relate to having too much to do. Right? This is maybe going to sound corny or hokey. But what we ultimately came to after exploring, where does she feel relaxed instead of compelled? Right, so she had this sense of like, I'm compelled by my to do list. And in both her case, and the other client that that I worked with on this specific issue, both of them are really compromising family relationships as a result of this compulsion, right? My actions, my behaviors are like, I have to do more work, I have to keep up with this. And of course, we all have tons of demands on our times. And there are times when we actually

have to really do something. But as a consultant, she actually had a lot of leeway to choose. And when I asked her, you know, where do you feel the opposite of that compulsion? Where do you feel the most at ease. She talks about walking with her dogs. And what we explored is like when she was walking with her dogs, and I had her go out and walk with her dogs and pay attention, right, she had really like, open across her chest and collarbones, her shoulders were dropped, you were talking about that earlier rain on the peloton, and she just felt really relaxed across the front of her chest. And almost like she was even though she was walking, almost like she was like leaning back, or she could look up, she just had felt all this space in front of her. And so one of the things that we started to do is when with an Explorer was when she sat down in front of her computer to make that space. So to open across the chest and color balance, and to look up right and to see like the horizon, the wider world, not just her computer. And she ultimately added to that a gesture of putting her leaning back in her chair, putting her hand on her chest and, and just saying to herself, I am enough. Right. And this was there was a whole history around this right. But I am enough really different from another fellow that I worked with, who was one of the smartest people I've ever met, who worked with equally smart people and more so and who felt intimidated by the people that he worked with. And really knew he had been hired to kind of elbow into this roomful of smart people and make a contribution. But he found himself hanging back a lot being the quiet one in the room, worrying that maybe what she had to contribute wasn't quite as sharp wasn't quite as shiny. So similarly, a we explored Where do you feel more of a sense of confidence? Where do you feel more of a sense of the kind of contribution that you want to make. And he talked about walking with his son on a trail and putting his son was quite small at the time on his shoulders, and sort of feeling like, the additional weight into the ground, like, I'm gonna pick up this person, I'm gonna carry this weight. But similarly for him and openness happens to be an openness across the chest, right. And so, he, what, what we wound up designing a practice for him that was around sealing weightiness opening across the chest. And he came up with a phrase, my purpose is service. And without phrase, and that physicality, he was able to step into these meetings where he was intimidated in a much more powerful way. And then I'll give you one more, very simple, she worked inside of an organization, she needed to set more boundaries at work, and at home. She was doing so caregiving for a family member who was very demanding, and there were caregiving responsibilities that needed to be met. And then there were demands on top of that, right, so one of the things that we worked with, for her was coming up with both a phrase and a movement that was about setting boundaries, should a rolling chair at work, as many of us do. And I had her stand up in front of the chair and push the chair away and simply say, No, we did this at home first, where she was not like around all of her colleagues, right? But just have the chair in front of her push the chair away so that she could feel herself physically making space in front of her. And in a sense making a boundary push the chair away and say no or No, thank you. For I'm unable to do that now. So this pairing of our linguistic self, right, like, we might be able to say something like, we might be able to learn a bunch of words like, I can't help you right now. Or no, if you want me to make that a priority have to drop this other priority. Like we can learn a lot of really great phrases. We shouldn't stop doing that. It's really, really helpful. But if in the moment, when your boss comes to you and says, I need you to x, y, z, you're like, wow, there's no feasible way I can add that to my plate. And also still, you know, feed feed my children this evening, you know, whatever it is, to be able to have a physical sensation that goes

along with, we need to discuss priorities. And to say that with gravi toss with lentils in your shoes, with a sense of, you know, we talked about spinelessness before, with a sense of strong back soft chart, right? Like that firm here. I'm connectable. I want to connect with you. All of that gets communicated in a very nonverbal ways.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:11

Oh, my gosh, yes. All right. All right. Thanks. Couple of quick things before we have to wrap up. So first, is I love the strategy that you just share three stories of identify when you're feeling small or tight on your end, it's in your body, right? When you're not at your best. And then imagine the opposite? Where are the places where you feel the opposite? And what is your body feel like there. And now let's bring intentionally, that body posture, that body movement, that body sensation into those spaces, and times where you, you're feeling the opposite, right? Like, that's such a great strategy that everyone can start using. The second is this connection between words and body sensation, like words and physical. And that, especially for those of us, who tend to live in our heads, that feels like a nice way to kind of bring these two parts of ourselves together. So just want to lift that up. And then thirdly, with this last story, you were just sharing, right? It goes back to us being on autopilot, right? Like, we might know the words, but getting yourself to say the words, when your entire body and your life experience has led you to do the opposite is not so easy. And so just knowing the words isn't enough, right? Where we're actually, what you're describing is trying to rewire our bodies, in a way that allow us to say the words that we know, we want to say and we know we should say and are the right thing to do. But all these other parts of us are saying that's not what we should be doing. So just Yes, yes, yes, yes.

Amanda Blake 27:50

And I just want to say like so very often when we know what to say, and we don't say it is because we're uncomfortable saying it. And that is a physical experience. If you can find a way to intervene in that physical experience, to expand your capacity to tolerate the discomfort for a moment. And to practice shifting out of that into something that is more comfortable, you will be more able to say the words. It's true in my life is true in client's lives. It's so powerful. It's why I do the work that I do, because my life was totally up ended in the most positive of all possible ways, by doing this kind of work.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:32

And when it comes to the workplace, there are so many places, right? We talked about giving feedback, dealing with conflict, right, speaking up in a meeting, where you're not sure how your ideas are going to land, right? All those places where we feel those physical sensations of

holding us back, right? What a difference it would be, if we learn how to accept those sensations, and move forward anyways, and say what we want to say just so powerful.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:01

All right. We have to wrap though. So Mandy, can you share with us a great manager that you worked for? And what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Amanda Blake 29:08

Oh, you bet. Hands down. Eric Wood. I worked for him at two different companies. And I will say two things. One is he was totally upfront about his strengths and weaknesses to the point of introducing himself with a PowerPoint complete with strengths and weaknesses. Here's what you could expect from me, including the ways I'm going to fail. You just helped me work around those. So he was he was absolutely wonderful. And the other thing that he did was he she offered a lot of trust, and was always there to back us up. So go do your thing. He was great about clearly setting direction and then offering a tremendous amount of trust combined with support. He wasn't going to let us fail and was absolutely going to let us do our jobs.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 29:55

So so amazing, and I love that PowerPoint idea I might steal that.

Amanda Blake 30:00

Yeah, it was, it was very memorable.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:04

Awesome. And where can people learn more about you remind us the title of your book and where people can find it and all that good stuff.

Amanda Blake 30:10

Yeah, so [Your Body is Your Brain](#) is available at bookstores worldwide have at it, you can find a lot more information, including tons of free practices on the Embright website. So go to embright.org. I imagine you'll put the link in the show notes. That's E M B R I G H T embright.org is where you can find all kinds of free stuff, and other goodies too.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:36

Fabulous. Well, thank you again, for this fascinating conversation. And I, I already said I'm gonna put lentils in my shoes, I can't wait to try it out.

Amanda Blake 30:45

Fantastic. Thank you for having me. It's been really fun.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 30:48

Amanda is giving away two free copies of her book, [Your Body is Your Brain: Leverage Your Somatic Intelligence to Find Purpose, Build Resilience, Deepen Relationships, and Lead More Powerfully](#). In this book, you'll learn to strengthen your social and emotional intelligence by cultivating your innate somatic intelligence. This is powerful mind body science that applies in the workplace and beyond. To enter the drawing. You must be a member of Podcast+ and submit your entry by August 23rd. Plus, in the extended episode available to members of Podcast+, Amanda reveals a major insight about the importance of body awareness as well as how to put that awareness into action when the right moment arises.

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