Episode 337: How to Build a Strong Team Culture Using Workshop Techniques with Alison Coward

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

Have you ever walked out of a workshop just feeling so energized by that collaborative process, by writing sticky notes and moving from table to table and just feeling fully engaged in conversation. Now, wouldn't it be nice if every day felt that way? Well, today's guest says that it can, and she is here to help us understand how today's guest is Alison Coward. Alison is the founder of bracket, a consultancy that partners with ambitious, forward thinking companies to help them build high performing team cultures. She is the team culture coach, workshop facilitator trainer, keynote speaker and author of workshop culture, a guide to building teams that thrive, and a pocket guide to effective workshops. Clients include Google, meta, welcome and the VNA. With 20 years of experience working in leading and facilitating creative teams, Allison is passionate about finding the balance between creativity, productivity and collaboration so that teams can thrive and do their best work together.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:54

A quick, warm welcome to Francesco L to Podcast+. Francesco now has access to the private members only podcast feed so they get the extended interview where Alison explains the five pillars of a workshop culture and how you can start building them. To get this private podcast feed wherever you listen to podcasts, become a member for $15 a month at themodernmanager.com/more. Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:18

Are you a manager, 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 rock star manager and help your team thrive at [themodern manager.com/more](themodernmanager.com/more). Now, here's the conversation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:43

Thank you so much for joining me today, Alison. As a fellow meeting enthusiast, I'm super excited to talk with you about your book and the ideas of taking workshops, which, again, as a meeting enthusiast, I love, but I feel like most people love, and turning that into a way of working all the time right to create that culture. So thank you so much for coming on today.

Alison Coward 02:05

Thank you for having me.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 01:40

So why don't you start by explaining what is a workshop culture like? What does that term actually mean, and why? Why is it important?

Alison Coward 01:48

The way that I define workshop culture is it's a team culture that uses the principles and practices of effective workshops to build high performing team cultures and collaboration. And what it really means is that we've all experienced a great workshop. Most of us have experienced a really great workshop where we're just getting together with our team. The ideas are flowing. Conversation is great. Everyone's getting involved. Everyone feels energized. And we get to the end of that workshop, whether you've run that yourself, or you've bought an external facilitator in and you're feeling really high, and yet, you know that the next day you go back to work and you sit at your desk and you get consumed by the everyday, that energy, that feeling, is going to go so workshop culture is saying, okay, that energy at the end of the day, we want to take that into the rest of our culture. And actually what happened in that workshop is how we want to be working every day. We do want to be collaborative. We do want to hear from everybody. We do want to share ideas. We do want to get better ideas. So why are we not doing that more frequently every day? I do appreciate that we can't run workshops every day. We can't work exactly like that all day, every day, because it's just exhausting. But there are little principles and tips and practices that we can take both from what a facilitator does in the workshops to get that environment and what we do as participants as well, to take that into our wider team cultures.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:13

Why don't you take us down that path of like, what makes the workshop culture different from the way that we currently work, like, Where would we see these differences showing up? Because I totally agree that being in a great workshop is energizing and collaborative and so fun. So where would those pieces like show up in our daily work if we were actually living a workshop culture? Or maybe you can explain through a story or a client that you worked with?

Alison Coward 03:37

I'll do both actually, um. So the way that it shows up in a very practical and obvious way. It will show up in our meetings. Our current meetings generally, are very dry. They drone on like everyone gets involved. Sometimes we have too many of them. People are there that don't need to be, people that kind of sitting back and just consuming information rather than getting involved. If we take principles from workshops and inject them into our meetings, then we can change the way that we experience our meetings. And as I say in the book, a lot of us spend most of our days in back-to-back meetings. And if all of those meetings, or most of them are terrible, that becomes our experience of work. So actually, if we shift, we turn it on its head, and we bring all of those amazing elements of a great workshop into our meetings, and that's 80 to 90% of our day. Then all of a sudden we have a different experience of how we see our working day. So that's a very practical example of where we see a workshop culture in a more, I guess, subtle behind the scenes, way it will show up in how we communicate, though, when we think about what a facilitator does to create the environment, and this is where our leaders and our managers can take inspiration, a facilitator is not a content matter expert. They're there to guide a process. They're there to ask questions. They're there to listen deeply. They're there to check the temperature of the room, make sure that everyone is. Are enjoying and experiencing the session. They're there to make sure that the team are making progress and getting to an outcome. To get those results and that impact, it takes a set of skills, which, you know, some of them I've mentioned, listening, asking great questions, being able to read a room or being able to drive a conversation. If we're doing that more in our daily work as well. We're actually starting to build better relationships, from our leaders to our teams, but also within our teams as well. We become better listeners. We become more empathetic. We know what it takes to build more psychological safety in the conversations that we're having. We become more curious, all of those kinds of things, though, in a very practical way in our meetings, in a more subtle way, how we interact with each other.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 05:46

That sounds awesome and amazing. Okay, you just said before that we have the facilitator role, and then we have the participant role, and both of those are important for our workshop culture. Say more about the facilitator role, and you just started to kind of explain what some of those things are. But like, what does that really mean for those of us who are not professional facilitators?

Alison Coward 06:04

So a facilitator is there to guide the process, right? So they're not there to contribute ideas. They're not there to say, I'm the expert. I'm going to tell you what to do. They are there to think about, what does a team need to achieve? Who's going to be in the room? Where do we want to be at the end of our time together? And they design that process. So they're thinking about all of the characteristics of the people in the room, with personalities, what's happened in the team before, what the team wants to do after the workshop, and they're pulling together a set of activities that is going to enable the team to get from A to B. So yes, you do have professional facilitators. I am a professional facilitator. People ask me to come in and design and facilitate their workshop. But also, facilitation can be a skill that anybody can pick up. We all need to, at some point, bring people together and help people move from one point to another, and we can use facilitation skills in that. So there is the kind of the role of a facilitator, and then there's the idea of facilitation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 07:08

I think I just heard you say too, that there's like work to be done beforehand by the facilitator, like it's not just something that happens in the actual meeting or workshop. Can you say more about what happens before, during and after, if you're playing a facilitator kind of role or bringing your facilitation skills to bear?

Alison Coward 07:25

Yeah, I'm really glad you asked that question, because I think that's one of the biggest misconceptions about facilitation and facilitators, and it's one of the reasons that a lot of people are put off from facilitation as well, because they might experience a really great workshop. They see what they consider an amazing facilitator, and they can't put their finger on what they did on the day. They think that person just turned up and worked their magic, and all of a sudden the team have all of these amazing ideas. But actually, as facilitators, we know that so much work goes in to designing that beforehand. So as I said, we'll look at who's in the team. What do we need to achieve what time we have together. Even think about the space that we're going to be in together, whether that's virtual, whether that's in a physical space, and they will pull together activities that enable the team to have the conversations they need to have. So facilitators are very tuned into Dynamics. They're very tuned into a sense. How do you create that space for psychological safety, the kind of sensitivities, of making sure that you create an inclusive space where people feel comfortable to speak out, and when I say designing activities that could be anything from I won't call it icebreakers, because I'm not a massive fan of icebreakers, but those kind of introduction activities to warm people up all the way through to ideas generation brainstorming activities, all the way through to critiquing exercises. And how do

you create a space where people are able to critique each other in a positive and productive way, rather than in a destructive way, all the way through to making decision and making commitments and making actions, or committing to actions together.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:04

I wonder if you tell a story about a team you work with, or one of your own experiences where you kind of went through that thinking process or and what it turned up into, kind of, what was the result, because all of those activities, like, we need all of those. I'm just wondering if you can, you can share some of like, what does it look like when you go from, okay, we're going to gather to here's what the design of that day looks like.

Alison Coward 09:25

Worked with a brilliant team earlier this year in a in a cultural institution, and the team are actually very high performing, very, very good at what they do. The organization experience, like many of our companies and organizations that we work in, experiencing a lot of change, a lot of change in the past, a lot of upcoming change. And the leader, who was very committed to creating a high performing and healthy team culture, came to me to help them run a series of activities where they could get together and talk a little bit more about how they could work and how they're going to face. Future together. And particularly the interesting thing about this team was that they were a wider team, but they were also sub teams within that wider team, and they were having challenges with collaborating across some of those sub teams. So the leader came to me and they wanted an away day. And I said, Yes, an away day is going to be great, and we can have a fantastic workshop on the day. And I'm also interested in what happens before and after that away day for your team. I don't want your team to think that the away Day is an interesting, amazing day for us all to come together and then that's it. They don't need to work on their culture anymore. So what we did was we did a diagnostic where we kind of looked at different elements of their team culture. What they needed to improve communication was one that came up massively. And so we did look at their meetings, and we looked at, again, injecting some of those workshop type activities into their meeting. So it wasn't about overhauling all of their meetings all at the same time. It was taking an existing meeting and taking 15 minutes out of that existing meeting and running a brainstorming session in the way that we would perhaps in the workshop, and starting to orientate the team to a different way of being together in those spaces that when we actually got to the away day, they're already prepared for those kind of creative exercises. So on the away day, we could really focus a lot more on generating those high level creative activities. And actually, particularly in this away day, we spent the first half of the day kind of strategizing and thinking, big picture, blue sky, being very, very creative. And in the second half of the day we spent most of that actually turning that into commitment. So it was almost like, okay, these are the ideas we've come up with. How we actually going to implement them, and what barriers do I personally have to move in forward on some of these actions? So

by the time they came out of the workshop, it wasn't just they had the ideas. They actually had a plan for how they were going to put those ideas into action. And I think the special thing about this team as well is that they continued those conversations. It wasn't just the end of the workshop we're done now, and she continued those conversations into the meetings in a way that we'd seeded those kind of collaborative conversations before the away day and after.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:11

Wow, that sounds amazing. And I really love that you paired the kind of big picture thinking and strategic thinking with the orientation to action and translating into like, real behavior and commitments. There's actually a model in your book about this. Can you share that with us?

Alison Coward 12:28

Yeah. So, I mean, there's a few models around that, actually. So there's, there's, there's one model, and where I talk about the challenges of leaders, right? We have to, as leaders and managers, we're trying to balance so many different aspects. We're trying to balance the business, and we're trying to balance people, and we're trying to balance strategic thinking with putting things into action. And so with a workshop culture, we're kind of really kind of zooming in and sensing at which point where we are now, what do we need to focus on? So in a workshop, for example, you might focus or the beginning of workshop, you might focus on the kind of, the strategy, the ideas. But there's always two sides to creative processes, the development of the ideas, and there's the implementation of them, the convergent thinking. And so we need to have the skills to be able to translate those big picture ideas into action. And that comes with a few things. It comes with designing the behavior and also understanding how, as individuals and humans, we implement behavior change. How do we develop new habits? How do we undo habits that we've kind of really that are ingrained and have developed over over time in the past, and how do we actually undo them and replace them with more productive and positive team habits, and that's also a process as well. It doesn't happen overnight. We really need to kind of think, Okay, where can we start small, and where can we encourage people to make commitments, but at the same time, how do we check in and keep people accountable to those commitments and coach them through any barriers they might have experienced? And that's all part of the change process. It's not that we say something we expect it to happen. In practice, actually, the whole process of change is kind of navigating some of those things that might pop up that might get in our way.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 14:11

Yeah, behavior change is another one of my favorite topics, because it's so fun to talk about. So let's link these together, because we talked about like, the facilitator role, right? If you're leading

your team and you're thinking, like wearing a facilitator role kind of hat, that's a lot of change, right? It's a change in the way that you think. It's a change in the way you spend your time, the way that you are interacting with folks, the way that you're leading a meeting, right? So often, as team leaders, we're leading a meeting, and we're like, participating in the meeting very aggressively in a way that doesn't allow us to maybe manage the process the way that we could. What does that mean for participants? Because that was the other role, you said, like as workshop culture, there's also the participant behaviors. What's different about that role?

Alison Coward 14:52

The facilitator is almost taking a step back with that role. And you mentioned, you know, the manager, it's a very difficult space. To be in when you're trying to participate and facilitate at the same time. I always advise against it, to be honest, when I'm kind of teaching facilitation skills as a participant, you're kind of not aware of that process that the facilitator designed. You're just completely involved. But yet, there are still some of those skills that a facilitator has that transfers into the participant. First of all, it is, you know, being engaged and being willing to contribute and speak up, so not kind of being that passive participant, but then also having those skills of being, like, super curious about your co participants, asking questions, taking a step back, making sure that you know you've heard from everybody in the room, and calling things out, making suggestions, even to the facilitator of a different way of running the process and being, you know, not being afraid to speak up and say, Look, you know what? This isn't quite working for us. I suggest that you kind of take it in this direction. So there's kind of, I guess there's an element of kind of bravery, kind of stepping forward. I think one of the things that I talk about a lot is that the way that team culture is developing now, and the way that we need to treat it is very different to how we treated it in the past. And one of the things that we need to move toward is everyone on a team being co creators of a team culture. So in a sense, we're all we're not just consumers. We're not just sitting back and kind of saying, Oh, this is the culture. I'm just going to take it, or we're not just contributing, even though that's kind of another step where we are kind of stepping forward a little bit and we're responding to questions, actually, we're actively involved in building and sometimes some of those participants might need to be facilitators themselves.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:35

I love this so much because I think it is so true, like a workshop is all about the people who are in it, right? Like, as you said, like, that's where the content comes from. And if people are not engaged and contributing and willing to ask questions and ask tough questions and push back and share ideas, I think then it the workshop doesn't. Like, it kind of falls flat, right? Like, there's only so much the facilitator can do, like, it's really actually on the participants, and I see how that translates, you know, in terms of different behaviors, right? Like, the need for psychological

safety, the need to like, be able to manage conflict, and be able to like deal with differences, and like, that's that's not always easy for folks.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 17:16

I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit more about the behavior change piece. And, you know, for folks who are listening, who are like, Yeah, this all sounds really great. Like, I'm not a facilitator. I don't know how to like, I have to lead my meetings and like, how do I get my team to, like, start behaving in these ways?

Alison Coward 17:29

First of all, the thing that pops into my head is the idea of a growth mindset. I talk about that in the book growth mindset came from and the psychologist Carol Dweck, and she talks about these two opposing types of mindsets which lead to success. Fixed Mindset is where you believe that talent is natural, talent is innate, and there's no point in trying to practice or get better, because you're never going to be as good as somebody who is naturally talented. A growth mindset, you still believe that, you know, people can be naturally talented at the same time, anybody can improve with practice, persistence and patience. We also need to apply that to our teams. We have this idea that your team either works or it doesn't. You get great people together, and the team should work without us putting any effort in. Actually, most of us, 90% of the time, 95% of the time, great collaboration takes work, and so a team needs to have a growth mindset approach to their team culture. We might not be in the best place now, but if we work at this, if we focus on it, if we spend time and attention on it, then we will get better. We will improve. The other thing is around having a design mindset. So again, I think one of the misconceptions of the way that we work together is the way that we work together, is just the way that we work together. There's nothing we can do about it. The meetings that we run are just the meetings that we run. The way that we communicate is just the way that we communicate. Actually, no paired with a growth mindset, if you can. And in fact, it's advised to be intentional about the way that you work together, so you can design your interactions, you can design your communication. You can design your meeting. You can say, this is the culture that we want. This is what we're going to design and set up and create to make it more likely that we're going to achieve that, whether that's in as say, your meeting design, whether that's in little rituals and routines that you do to become more connected as a team, so taking that intentional approach. And then the other, the behavior change piece, is around understanding as humans, how we make change happen. And mostly, again, the rhetoric, or the feeling is, is that in order for change to matter or to make a difference, it needs to be this big thing and it needs to happen all at once. Actually, that's not how sustainable change happens. Sustainable happen. Change happens from us doing things small in a small way, consistently over time. So it's not that we overhaul, as I mentioned before, overhaul all of our meetings and hope that it sticks you take a small part out of a existing meeting. And we change that, and we do that over

and over again until that sticks, and then we can move on to the next thing. I think it's, um, James clear in atomic habits, that talks about the 1% shift. You know, what is the thing that you can do? What's the 1% shift that you can make that will have the biggest impacts, that you can do consistently over time, that will have the biggest impact. So make your kind of actions and your commitments as small as possible so that there isn't you reduce the barriers to change and you make it easier and more likely that you're able to kind of sustain that behavior over time.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:32

I say the exact same thing to my clients when we're working on their meetings, which is like, start with one small change and commit to it for a month and then check in and then check in and see how it's working for your team. And if it's not working, then pick a new one. But if it's working, keep going and then add and layer on a new change. Those like little shifts are so much easier for people to make than swooping we're overhauling our culture. We're changing all of our our

Alison Coward 20:57

I think the challenge with that, though, is that when they are small shifts. People don't have the faith that it's going to make a difference. So it really is sticking with it, and it is changing, sort of overturning the idea that we have that it has to be this kind of big, monumental change straight away for it to matter.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 21:15

So if you were going to suggest for people to make one change, to start shifting towards a workshop culture, or start improving their meetings. What's the one change you would suggest people start with?

Alison Coward 21:26

This might come as a surprise, but I would almost say for for leaders and managers, because this is a new thing for them, don't start with your team. Start with yourself, and start with kind of understanding and testing your levels of comfort towards collaboration and opening up the conversation in this way, because that is, you mentioned it earlier, it is a fundamental shift and change in the way that we often do things. So I will start with some some reflection. I have, again, some some exercises in the book. But one is, you know, how ready are you for collaboration? And if this feels like an area of tension for you, what's one thing, small thing that

you can do to kind of open up the conversation. Is there something that you're working on as a leader that is kind of quite low stakes and low risk, that in a meeting you could take 10 minutes and say to your team, I'm working on this. What do you think about it? And then just see how that feels, and then do it again. And you will be surprised again that that shift from you asking your team that question to input in something that you're doing, the impact that it will have on them once you've got that buy in, once they've started to kind of think, Oh, this feels different, but it feels good. Then try the next thing. It might be, you know, asking a team member to contribute something or lead a part of the meeting. It might be, you know, opening up your your strategy for input and but yeah, start with yourself first. I think again, I say that in the book not to kind of labor the book, but there is a whole section on it. Starts with you as a leader, you have to be ready for this, this mindset shift and this mindset change before you start implementing these ideas in your team.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:06

And the reality is like, we only actually have control over ourselves. And so the best way to start, and the best way it also is like role modeling, right? Like when we when we do those behaviors, I love that I have to share, like my place where I always tell people to start, which is to write a desired outcome for your meetings to write, what are you trying to achieve in this meeting? What are you going to walk away having accomplished? Not what you're going to do, but what you have accomplished in that meeting. That is my number one go to I tell everyone you have to do in your meetings. It's easy shift to make, and it will have huge impact. I'm wondering about the kind of follow through piece, and we didn't talk a whole lot about this part, yet, the accountability to put all that into action right to like, go from strategy into actual behavior change into actual implementation.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:54

Any thoughts on how to hold it yourself or hold others accountable to those changes me?

Alison Coward 23:58

The thing that goes through my mind is, it's actually quite boring. It's really repetitive. It is, you know, this cycle of setting the micro actions we spoke about before, something small, setting the deadline. You know, maybe in two weeks time, we're going to try this over two weeks or a month, like you mentioned, in a month, we're going to get back together and we're going to talk about it. And that conversation the leader has with their team is really crucial, because it's not about blame. It's about how did you get on and did you stay on track with your commitment? If you did, what was the impact and what did you notice? How was it positive if you didn't? What got in the way? Okay, so let's work at reducing those barriers, and you're sort of learning as a

team. So it's, it's a real cycle. I mean, I had the conversation with a client yesterday. They're starting to feedback behavior of setting an intention, trying it out, having a conversation, reflecting on it, and then doing it. It's literal cycle. Set the action, check in and try it out, check in and review. You. Iterate. As I said, it feels boring. And because it's boring, it feels like it's not going to make an impact. But that's exactly what we need to do to make that sustainable change. We just need to keep going at it, repeating the actions. It's a cycle.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 24:08

So true. And sometimes what gets in the way is something very obvious and like sometimes it's all in our heads and we..

Alison Coward 25:18

And that's the learning, right? That is the learning. That barrier, whether you were aware of it or not, exists, and you need to make that transparent and visible so you can have a conversation about moving through it, whether you say like it is mindset, or whether it's a very real physical barrier, such as a process or another team member that you kind of need to work through, and that is the process of transformation and change, not avoiding those barriers, but having effective ways to work through them together. And this is, for me, what a workshop culture does. It's not saying that you know, as a team, you're never going to experience challenges, but what happens is you become better at a team, as at having those conversations, to work through them, and that's what leads to high performance, not trying to eradicate all of those challenges completely.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 26:04

Well, we are starting to run out of time. So Allison, can you tell us about a great manager that you worked for, and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Alison Coward 26:10

I mean, I have to be honest that I have spent most of my work and career working for myself, and I think that probably part of that was largely because I didn't have an amazing experience with managers, but I did have one brilliant manager, and it completely changed my experience this manager. It was my third job, and this manager was I was working in a gallery, the crafts Gallery, and this manager trusted me on a level that I'd never experienced before. Most of my previous managers were micro managers, or they were either micro managers, or they kind of

just left me to it, where this manager provided just the right level of guidance to kind of direct me and help me feel supported, but then allowed me to go off and kind of make my own mark in the areas that I had the, you know, the agency over so, yeah, it was that, that balance of kind of trust and support, which I think made the difference for me.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:12

That is such a hard balance to find, and it is magical when you get to experience it .

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:18

All right. And where can people learn more about you. Remind us the name of your book and where people can find it.

Alison Coward 27:22

Yeah. So my book is called [Workshop Culture: A Guide to Building Teams That Thrive.](#) You can find it at all good bookstores all day if you buy it directly from my publisher, practical inspiration. There's a 30% discount. And if you want to find out about me and the work that I do, my business website is [bracketcreative.co.uk](#).

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:40

Thank you again for coming on. I love talking about meetings and workshops and all that kind of stuff. So this was really fun. So great to have you.

Alison Coward 27:48

Thank you.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:48

Alison is providing members of Podcast+ 30% off her book *[Workshop Culture: A Guide to Building Teams That Thrive](#)*. This book will show you how to create a happy and engaged team through small actions which lead to big results. It features practical and accessible tool kits to

help improve your team's performance and productivity. To get this guest bonus and many more, become a member at themodernmanager.com/more. All the links are in the show notes, and they can be delivered to your inbox when you subscribe to my newsletter. Find that at themodernmanager.com. Thanks again for listening. Until next time.