

Aisha Suleiman podcast interview transcript

SPEAKERS

Aisha Suleiman, Susan Heaton-Wright

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Susan Heaton-Wright 00:00

Welcome to the SuperStar Communicator podcast. My name is Susan Heaton-Wright, a leading impact speaking and communications expert. My aim is to show you how to make an impact. So you will be heard or listened to and respected for career success. Listen weekly to the podcast and go to our website, www.superstarcommunicator.com . Here at SuperStar Communicator, we are celebrating and highlighting Black History Month, which in October, every year is part of the culture in the United Kingdom. And I'm absolutely delighted to have Aisha Suleiman, who is an award winning diversity and inclusion advocate, consultant and founder. She is an ideal person for us to talk about Black History Month. And for me as a white ally, to really learn about how we can support black and brown colleagues, friends, people in our community. Her company is The Inclusive Culture which helps organisations to achieve their diversity, inclusion, and business goals through effective employee networks as part of their journey towards a more inclusive workplace. She's also a board member of the Rugby Football League's inclusion board, which supports the delivery of rugby League's inclusion, equality and anti discrimination plan and provides guidance on all inclusion matters in rugby league. And she also has a podcast, the world in her words, which inspires black women and women of colour, to take control of their careers through sharing strategies, advice, and inspirational stories. Now, this was recorded earlier this year. And she has got loads of content and tips. And I'm absolutely delighted that she is starting our Black History Month feature. So welcome, Aisha.

Aisha Suleiman 02:26

Thank you. Thanks for inviting me, Susan, I think it's gonna be great.

Susan Heaton-Wright 02:30

So tell me about your journey. You are in a corporate background. And you are a vocal leader. That's the right thing to say vocal leader, making sure that people like me, are aware of black issues and the challenges you have

Aisha Suleiman 02:52

Yeah, absolutely. So founder as well. So I started my company, the inclusive culture. And my goal is to help organisations reach diversity, inclusion, and also their business goals, through employee networks or employee resource groups, because I think that a lot of organisations are not really tapping into the potential of employee networks. And, you know, having started the black employee network at Amazon in the UK, I've sort of seen firsthand the value that employee networks can bring in terms of, you know,

raising issues, as you said, of different people from different groups, really, really trying to hold the business accountable in terms of diversity and inclusion, you know, educating allies, also even working on initiatives to help the business build more inclusive products, which can then help them increase their revenue, because then they get to reach a different audience. So I feel like a lot of companies are still relying on employee networks in terms of just events, and they're not really seeing, hey, you can actually work with employee networks. If you want to hire diverse talent, you want to retain your talent, you want to build more inclusive products, you want them to help you, you know, reach some of your business goals, they can help you do all of that. So yeah, I'm kind of on a mission to help organisations realise that so yeah.

Susan Heaton-Wright 04:09

It's so interesting that you say that at the moment. The way that it works is events. And yet I've been doing some work for International Women's Day, which was choose to challenge and in the next week, I've got three virtual workshops, where we're discussing how we can choose to challenge over various issues within organisations. How would you tap into that?

Aisha Suleiman 04:40

tap into it, in what sense

Susan Heaton-Wright 04:42

in in doing it in a way that will be impactful, but people feel safe sharing their experiences,

Aisha Suleiman 04:52

I would say with workshops, keep them small. So try and keep them as intimate as possible. So for example, I facilitate I am Remarkable. So that was developed by Google. And the whole point of that is to help women and people from underrepresented groups to develop their confidence in terms of self promotion. Because sometimes due to, you know, cultural factors or different things, we don't self promote as much. And this is actually detrimental to your career. Now, what I really like about those sessions is it's normally about 12 to 15 people. And I find that when it's smaller sessions, people tend to open up a lot more. And also, when you start the session, just setting the scene and saying, Hey, you know, this is a safe space. If someone shares something in this room, don't go and you know, tell someone else about it, unless maybe you check with the person and they're okay with it. Yeah. So I think there's that. And I think, also being vulnerable yourself. So when you also share your story, I think it also helps people feel like they can open up, because I can't tell you how many times you know, I've shed something that's happened to me, and then someone's like, wait, that also happened to me, too. I thought I was the only one I thought, you know, I caused it somehow that there was something wrong with me. And then it's like, actually, that happens to a lot of us. So yeah, I think, you know, being brave and being vulnerable and open that can really help. And then I think, with workshops, as well call to action that someone can implement immediately, right? So when they leave the session is like, Okay, what do you want them to do right now? Because I think giving people that one small step that they can do immediately can help to keep the momentum going,

Susan Heaton-Wright 06:24

Oh, some very good tips there. Now, I'm going to play devil's advocate, because sometimes I hear people say, Well, you know, everything's okay in my company, we're making a profit. Why should we worry about having these groups where people can express their feelings? because everything's happy, we're all happy here? Well,

Aisha Suleiman 06:52

I didn't know about that. What I would say is, if you want to know what's wrong with your organisation, I always say this, go talk to your employee networks, right? Because they will tell you the true story. So if you think everything is all happy, because the thing is, with surveys, you know, they're anonymous, they're supposed to be, but a lot of employees still don't trust them. Because it's that whole thing of the big bad, you know, corporate man, they think that maybe you will somehow trace the results back to them. So they might not be as forthcoming. Now, I think with people who run employee networks, I think the reason why they've set it up just because usually they want to make a change, they've seen something and they're like, okay, don't quite like this, let me see what I can do, rather than just complaining about it. When you speak to them, they will tell you the real story, right? So even if you think everything is great, set them up, then let's see. That's, that's the first thing I would say. And I would say in terms of organisations always take the proactive approach don't react, you know, especially with like, last year with you know, the Black Lives Matter protests, a lot of companies were then reacting, because they were holding all these listening sessions with their employees. Now, if they'd had an employee networks already, they would have already known what was wrong, and probably taking the steps to try and fix it. So a lot of them were reacting and thinking and saying, Oh, I didn't know that was an issue. Or you should always be proactive and think, okay, even if I think things are great, how can I still make sure and just find out.

Susan Heaton-Wright 08:14

And there's huge value in that isn't there? You said at the beginning about retaining talent, about making people feel valued, and implementing change if you need to? It's a no brainer. Now I noticed that you are involved in the rugby league. Me?

Aisha Suleiman 08:37

Yes, yeah. So I, that all came about beginning of the year was appointed. And it's very interesting, because I don't know so much about rugby league. I mean, obviously, now I've started to do my research and looked into it. And it's quite interesting, the history of it, and how it all came about. But I think one thing I learned from that experience is, you know, when I saw the position, I was like, Oh, you know, imposter syndrome started coming up. So what do you know, about rugby league? And then the other voice was like, Yeah, but you know, about inclusion. And then the other voice was like, Yeah, but not in rugby league. And then I started thinking, actually, when I think about all the people that I speak to across different companies, when it comes to inclusion, Susan, it's the same issue. It's like different finance, tech, whatever industry it is, you talk to them. And it's the same thing. And this is why we say a lot of these issues are systemic, right? Because, you know, it's not one offs, and that's why there's so many similarities. And so the other voice one, and, you know, she said, Well, you know, about inclusion, and actually, maybe the fact that you don't know so much about rugby league is actually going to bring a different perspective

Susan Heaton-Wright 09:44

than actually isn't imposter syndrome. An interesting issue.

Aisha Suleiman 09:49

Yeah. Yeah,

Susan Heaton-Wright 09:51

there are some people like yourself that I really look up to with the work that you're doing, and there's that little voice just squeaking away in certain situations, and certainly I've come to the conclusion that when that's going, I'm pushing myself outside my comfort zone. And my little voice is trying to protect me from danger. But at least we know it's not dangerous. We need to sort of say go away. We can grow as people.

Aisha Suleiman 10:23

Yeah, you know what, actually, I used to tell the boys to go away. But my therapist told me to talk to it. So like, listen to her. She's like, What is she telling you? Because exactly what you just said, she's trying to protect you. But then you have to dig deeper and say, What is she trying to protect me from? And then when you unpack it, you're like, Oh, this is something that's actually going to expand me. This is something that's going to, you know, make me grow and develop. And that is where that fear comes from. As an author, I really like her name is Tara Mohr, she wrote this book called saying big, you know, talked about the difference between Yirah and Pachad.

Susan Heaton-Wright 11:06

Just share it with with the listeners, just in case anybody hasn't read the book.

11:12

Yeah, so I think pachad is fear that comes from the unknown. And you're sort of the fear that comes from actually when you're growing and developing, or it could be the other way around. So don't quote me on this. But basically, there is a fear that you experience when you're growing and you're expanding. And that is not something you run away from you, you sort of walk towards it, and you listen to it. You know, you sort of say thank you, I understand what you're trying to do here. And I appreciate you for that. But you know what, I'm going to go ahead with this. So yeah, it's interesting, fear is not always a bad thing. Not only is getting comfortable with fear, and being able to move past it and say, Okay, I'm still going to go ahead and do this.

Susan Heaton-Wright 11:55

I absolutely agree. I talk about having my fear in my back pocket. Because sometimes you need to be reminded, yeah, of danger, particularly if it's physical danger that that you could be in, just so that you are always aware and you are in, you know, you're playing your best game.

Aisha Suleiman 12:16

Absolutely, absolutely.

Susan Heaton-Wright 12:19

I can't believe we're going down this route. Interesting, isn't it? And the great thing about this book by Tara Mohr is that she explains that there are various words in Hebrew for different types of fear. We don't have in the English language. Yeah, yeah. So that was a gift to hear. Yeah. Yeah. So carry on.

Aisha Suleiman 12:44

No, I was just gonna say it's interesting. You mentioned that because sometimes in my language, because my language is Hausa. So it's a it's spoken in West Africa. So it's a West African tribe. And sometimes when I'm trying to, you know, translate something into English. I'm like, wait, I don't think there's a word for that.

Susan Heaton-Wright 13:03

I'm sure you could do. So what are your three top tips? And I wish I always ask this of my guests. What would your three top tips be for? for people like me to hear about diversity and inclusion so that we can learn?

Aisha Suleiman 13:32

Yeah, absolutely. So I think I would say first speak on topics you're familiar with, right? So diversity, inclusion is such a big, big space, but speak on specific parts of it that you feel comfortable with. Because when you know your subject, well, it flows a lot easier. And then you find it easy to be authentic, because then you're not trying to be someone else or speak like someone else. And you can actually really bring in your own style. And I think when you can bring your own style, you actually end up enjoying it more, and then it's not so scary. Like, whenever I'm building presentations, I'm thinking okay, what sort of question am I going to ask, you know, what polling question am I going to ask, you know, what am I going to tell the audience to tell me? And I think when you're talking about something, you're familiar with your focus less on Oh, my God, I don't know what I'm talking about. Because you do so that's half the battle. Right. So I think that's, that's the first thing I would say. And then the other thing I'd say is practice, practice, practice. So I think communication is just one of those things that you need to keep doing to get better at, right. You can't only read about being a good communicator, you have to actually do it, right. So the first time I ever had to just read a story that I'd written in high school, I went up to the front of the class, I took a look at everyone. And then I read out crying.

Susan Heaton-Wright 14:50

I know where you are now.

Aisha Suleiman 14:52

Yeah, I know. I'm used to it. I still get nervous sometimes. But going back to what you said about the fear, I don't realise that Okay, that's normal And this is something that I can cope with because I've done it before. Now when you've done something before, it's almost like you're like, wait, why am I scared? I've done it before. And that didn't go so well, because then you have the proof. But when you haven't done it, you don't have the proof. So it's like, Oh, goodness. So that's another tip. And I think the last one, I would say is, think about your end goal. So what do you want to be the outcome, then when we think about, let's say, a meeting or a discussion, what do you want to be the outcome? I don't only think about yourself, so think about the other person or the other people in the room, and what did they get out of it? So let's say when I go into a meeting with a customer, I'm not just thinking, Hey, I'm going to sell them

like my online course. So I have an online course on how to set up an employee network, right? So when I'm speaking to customers, I'm not just going in there thinking great, I'm going to go tell them about the course. And that's my main goal. No, my goal is to hear what they actually need, and see if I can help them, whether that's through my product, or through another way. But the end goal is how can I help them achieve their goals? I think that's really important, because people can sense when you just want to get something out of them. Right. But when you sort of approach it, and I think that also applies to networking, as well, even though we're not talking about networking, but when you network, I think a lot of people struggle with it, because they're like, Oh, I'm just asking people for stuff. And it's like no reframe it, think about what you can offer them as well.

Susan Heaton-Wright 16:18

It's interesting, I've just been listening to a book on audio, about keeping your business small, and the fact that if you are serving your customers, you are going to build relationships up. So you have shown that with with what you said just now?

Aisha Suleiman 16:38

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Now,

Susan Heaton-Wright 16:41

obviously, you are in the inclusion and diversity area. What happens when somebody really doesn't like what your opinion is? Could you share that with the listeners? What, how would you approach it if somebody got very frustrated or angry with what your opinion was?

Aisha Suleiman 17:06

I think what I've learned to do is realise that sometimes people's reactions, especially when they're very extreme, it has nothing to do with me. By my comment, I've woken up something inside them. Yeah, I'm sometimes it has absolutely nothing to do with me, right. So we before the show, we were talking about how, you know, when you call out maybe racist behaviour, people automatically say, oh, you're calling me a racist, because they, you know, don't want to think of themselves as a bad person. And then what you said is making them question their identity. Now, you've not called them racist, necessarily, you've said this particular thing you've done is racist, but they're having that extreme reaction, because they're probably maybe feel a bit insecure around that. Maybe they are thinking that already about themselves. And then it's almost like you come out and you said that, and then it's like, oh, no, you know, I've been outed. So I think sometimes when people have extreme reactions, I think it's best to learn when a reaction actually has to do with you, and when it actually has nothing to do with you. And I guess that's another way of saying don't take it personal. Which can be hard in the moment, but I think this is where self awareness comes in. And, you know, knowing yourself, and I think when you know yourself, and you also really pay attention to the other person, and listen and observe, you can pick up on that.

Susan Heaton-Wright 18:25

Yes. What a mature attitude. Because you're absolutely right. And we were saying before we started recording that we all have our own personal map of the world of our experiences. And we also have to be aware that other people have got their own perspective.

Aisha Suleiman 18:47

Absolutely. Absolutely. And the thing is, every everyone exactly as you said, has their own perspective, right and it's different from yours. So you know, you can give the information how they choose to receive it is completely up to them and sometimes when you give it to them in that moment, they may not receive it well but see that person who's you know, had such a strong reaction they might go and actually reflect and then come back to you and say, You know what, actually you were completely right. I felt like that's happened to me before you know, I've I've mentioned somewhat Okay, this what you said to me was racist, and this is why I was racist, you know, here's an article go read it. I they didn't react well, at that time. They were like, Oh, you know, what are you trying to say about me and, and, and all of this stuff. And then, actually, I think two days later, they reflected on and they came to me and said, You know what, I'm really sorry, I actually had stuff going on in my personal life, something that had absolutely nothing to even do with inclusion, diversity, nothing. And they just brought that in. And the problems they were having had to do with a woman and maybe because I was a woman, they decide to take it out. So that just taught me like wow, okay, sometimes people react and you know, it's not about me, it's about them. So yeah.

Susan Heaton-Wright 19:58

So tell me a little bit about about your company and the online course that you have created.

Aisha Suleiman 20:05

Sure. So yeah, the inclusive culture started it because I think over the past couple of years, the top question I've probably gotten on LinkedIn is how did you start, you know, the black employee network? I want to start an employee network, whether it's, you know, a Women's Network, LGBT, Asian, you know, I, how do I get started? How do I get volunteers? And then I thought, you know what, I keep getting this. And I was like, I think I should just do something about it. So I decided last year, I'm just going to create an online course on it. So I created it. And it's an online course for anyone who wants to start an employee network. So from scratch, and it covers things like how do you get a sponsor? How do you get volunteers? How do you even structure it? Because my whole philosophy with employee networks is you need to run it like an organisation. Yes, right? you structure it properly, you get the budget, you know, you get the buy in, you get the sponsorship. And the way I've designed it is it's about five modules. And all of my videos, there's probably about four to five videos in each module. And they're all five minutes or less. Yeah, so there's there's exercises because I don't like talking at people. And I think I'm the same with presentations. Because when my presentations I try and keep my talking to 15 minutes. Yeah. And apparently, when TED Talks, they're 18 minutes. And that's deliberate, because that's how much people actually pay attention. Yeah. So yeah, it's five minutes or less as exercises, worksheets and stuff people can work through. And then what in one of my packages, people can join monthly coaching calls with me where I can just take their questions. So it's not like a presentation. It's just, Hey, how's it going? What challenges are you having? How can I help? So yeah, that's that's about the the course and also focusing on working with organisations. So even if they have employee network setup, then the conversation is alright, so how are you leveraging them? So are you using them? for recruitment? Are you working with them for talent retention? Are you working with them to develop your products and your services? So yeah,

Susan Heaton-Wright 22:03

that's amazing. And is it exclusively for minority groups? Or is it for any, any type of group,

Aisha Suleiman 22:13

any type of group so the thing is, the way it's set up is any type of employee network, you want to set up women's LGBT. And again, going back to my point about the similarities, when you're studying employee network, you need the exact same things. The only difference is around your mission, obviously, and your goals, and you know, who your goals are focused on. And actually, I think with employee resource groups, I think they should be separate in the sense that, you know, you shouldn't, I mean, you can, but I think when people can identify with the group, then you're more likely to get that buy in. So have the different employee resource groups, but see if you can get them to work together, that is really important, because intersectionality is so key, right? Because there are black people who are also LGBT, who also women, you know, there's, you know, white people who are trans and then they might have a disability. So if you just sort of keep it separate, it's like, okay, but, you know, people are more than one thing. And that's, that's a good thing.

Susan Heaton-Wright 23:09

That's a really, really good point. So anybody listening, it might be that you're our organisation desperately needs some employee groups. So get in touch.

Aisha Suleiman 23:22

Yeah, go to www.theinclusiveculture.com . So that's my website. And yeah, you can contact me if you would like to have them set up.

Susan Heaton-Wright 23:29

Brilliant. And are you happy for people to contact you via LinkedIn as well?

Aisha Suleiman 23:35

Yeah, you can connect with me on LinkedIn, Okay,

Susan Heaton-Wright 23:39

I'll make sure that I've got a link in the notes for both your website and also the your LinkedIn profile, if that's okay. Yeah, that's absolutely fine. And is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish? Oh,

Aisha Suleiman 23:55

any last words? Um, yeah, I think last words would be organisations, please be proactive, don't be reactive. Don't wait until the next protests to effect change because otherwise you're going to be in the same position because this is a long term effort. And it's it's we're working against years and years of, you know, systematic oppression here. So it's gonna take a lot of work, but you need to definitely be practical on that. And I think for individuals in terms of your communication as well be proactive. So go out there, get those speaking engagements, you know, start small, and keep practising and yeah, telling your truth and sharing your story, because we all need to hear more stories.

Susan Heaton-Wright 24:40

What a brilliant way to end. Thank you so much for coming on today. It's been an absolute pleasure. As I said at the beginning, I was really looking forward to meeting you.

Aisha Suleiman 24:51

Thank you, Susan. Thank you for having me on the show.

Susan Heaton-Wright 24:54

I'm sure you will agree that this was an amazing interview. In the notes For this particular podcast, I will make sure that all of Aisha's contact details are available to you, and please feel free to contact her. And so until next time, this is Susan from superstar communicator. Thanks for listening. You have been listening to the SuperStar Communicator podcast. Don't forget to subscribe and review the podcast on iTunes and on apps. Please contact us if you want to discuss any topic would suggest a topic for us to include or a guest who could come on to the podcast go to www.superstarcommunicator.com

Aisha's LinkedIn profile: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/aishasuleiman/>

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