



Leadership, Happiness, and Positive Psychology with L. Michelle Smith

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 366

L. Michelle Smith: [00:00:00] Happy people are successful people, which has been scientifically proven by applied positive psychology to be true.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:12] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:14] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:22] Empathy is essential to both learner-centered design and effective leadership, and empathy with doubly disadvantaged individuals, like Black women, can be that much more important—and rare. L. Michelle Smith is a certified executive and personal coach whose work is informed by positive psychology and neuroscience. She's the author of three books, including most recently *Yes Please! 7 Ways to Say I'm Entitled to the C-Suite*. L. Michelle's specialty is moving women and women of color to the C suite and E suite. She focuses on both professional and personal success, working with women so they can lead organizations they love while also living the lives they want. In this episode, number 366, Celisa and L. Michelle Smith talk about the difficulty women of color and women in general face in the workplace because of microaggressive behaviors and biases based on their gender. They also touch on intrinsic motivation, positive emotions like gratitude and amusement, demographic changes to the workforce, the importance of sponsorship and mentorship, and the role of empathy both when leading and when designing learning. Celisa and L. Michelle spoke in May 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:50] You are a coach, and you also offer online courses, and I would say that most of our listeners offer courses, whether those are online or offline. And I would say that some listeners, but probably fewer, offer coaching as part of what they put out there as their products and services. So I'd just be curious to know how you think about, how you define coaching, and what you see as the role of coaching in learning more broadly?

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L. Michelle Smith: [00:02:20] Okay. Coaching isn't necessarily teaching, especially when you're talking about credentialed coaching, coaching where folks were trained as professionals, and they report in, if you will, loosely, to an authority like the International Coaching Federation, which has ethics and standards in place and core capabilities. We, as coaches that are professionals, are there to explore, accelerate, and clarify the goals that you may have for yourself, and then there's also a level of accountability that's there. We do not spend a lot of time telling you what to do. In fact, we don't spend any time doing that. The other part of my business, as a consultant, facilitator, and speaker, takes on that part of the learning, but we do a lot of questioning. And sometimes people are surprised to get into a session with the coach, and she's not giving advice. I think that's one of the misnomers between coach and mentor that's different. And even [as] a consultant, you'll see people out there calling themselves strategists, and that's a lot of the time because, actually, they're giving advice.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:03:34] Now, what we know to be true as coaches, especially those of us trained in a degree of positive psychology, is that if the answers come from you, you are more than likely intrinsically motivated to get these things done. And what we know to be true about intrinsic motivation is that it comes from inside of you, and, because it comes from you, it will be more sustainable when it comes to action and actually getting it done. A nice mix of extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation is not bad, and that's why you typically have a mentor, and you might have a coach too. We're very different from therapists as well, although we work very well side by side, because therapists will look back into your life and try and fix what's broken. We spend more time, as coaches, looking forward, and, if we look back, it's with the idea of propelling you forward, not to fix you.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:36] And so you describe your coaching as being informed by positive psychology and neuroscience. You spoke a little bit there about intrinsic motivation. But just tell us a little bit more about what does it mean for your work to be informed by neuroscience and positive psychology?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:04:53] Okay. So you could be a coach in any aspect. There are all sorts of coaches out there. But, because I work with executives and people who are in business, and we look into their lives, we find it's very important to be evidence-based, and much of that is grounded in some type of science. You will find coaches that are informed by other kinds of science. Mine happens to be positive psychology first and then neuroscience second. It really speaks to motivation and where that motivation comes from, and then the neuroscience is actually how the brain actually works and functions to make these things happen. So my practice is grounded in the idea that happy people are successful people, which has been

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scientifically proven by applied positive psychology to be true. You don't work toward happiness. You have to find it yourself, and then you become successful. It's not the other way around. You don't find success and then find happiness.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:05:57] And so, when you look at it in that perspective, you're able to look at the entire person, both personal and professional, and find those areas where there may be gaps in happiness. And we'll use and leverage positive emotion to get you where you're trying to go. There are actually ten positive emotions, some of them you're very familiar with because they're on trend right now. You hear a lot of people talking about gratitude, making sure that you start the day with gratitude, expressing gratitude, or keeping a gratitude journal. But some of the ones that you may not be as familiar with are amusement. That just means downright fun. Last week, when I logged on with my clients (many of them are online because they're everywhere around the globe), I had on my Mickey ears. 50th anniversary Disney Mickey ears and, I think, a rose gold hat that matched or something like that. And I did it so that when my clients came online, the first thing I would see them do was light up, like, "Why in the world does she have that on?" And they're smiling all of a sudden, and it's fun. What we know to be true is that it takes three positive emotions at one time to undo a bad mood.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:16] Fascinating.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:07:16] And so, if we can get you out of a bad mood or even just a negative one that's just a little concerned, or what have you, we can push you further faster. So that's just a little insight into why the positive psychology.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:32] I know that your most recent book, released in June 2023, is titled *Yes Please! Seven Ways to Say I'm Entitled to the C-Suite*. Would you talk a little bit about who you wrote that book for?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:07:45] Yes. It's a continuation, I would say, a follow-up to the first book that I wrote, *No Thanks: 7 Ways to Say I'll Just Include Myself*. And that was a love letter to my sisters, primarily Black women, secondarily women of color, and then, thirdly, all women. And the reason for that is because there's research that came out in 2017 by Catalyst and also *Women in the Workplace*. They both said about the same thing—that women have a very difficult time in corporate America because of microaggressive behaviors and biases based on their gender. But then, when you add in the intersectionality of being a woman of color, you become the double-disadvantaged. And so, when they've recognized that these organizations center white maleness, that automatically others people who are not white and who are not male. So, if you

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are a Black woman, you get this disadvantage doubly and even more so than some of your counterparts that may be brown.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:08:59] The other thing is that those same studies showed that women of color, especially Black women, are leaving corporate America faster than anyone else. And the reason they cited is because they're tired of being othered and what comes with being othered. Many of those women are starting their own businesses, according to the U.S. Census. Black women are starting more businesses at a faster clip than any other segment of women or any other segment at all. But they're also followed by other women of color and then women in general. We're starting lots of businesses, and the reason why we're citing is because we're sick of the B.S. We don't like being treated poorly. We want to be treated as humans like everyone else and, if we're excellent, rewarded for our business and our greatness, just like anyone else would be. So *Yes Please!* is my insight, my storytelling, and the research that I've done to help women of color, especially Black women, make their way to the C suite because the numbers are really, really dismal.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:10:07] About seven companies are led by women of color, in general, in the Fortune 500. Only two of those women are Black: Thasunda Brown Duckett at TIAA-CREF and Roz Brewer, who is at Walgreens Boots. So the numbers are dismal, and you have to ask yourself, "Why is that?" Because it would seem that, if you go into a business, and you work hard, you'll just get rewarded like anyone else, and you'll move up the ladder. But it's just not necessarily true. What I have done is take the positive psychology basis and the neuroscience basis and presented some leadership concepts that may not be new to the majority of people out there, but access to this information has been little to none for women who make it to mid level, and then, suddenly, they're spewed out of the leadership pipeline for one reason or the other. Either they're pushed out, they're leaping on their own (as the data has shown), or they're being pulled out. That has more to do with partnership on the home front.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:22] As someone who listens to the Leading Learning Podcast, you should know about the Leading Learning newsletter, which you can subscribe to at leadinglearning.com/inbox. The newsletter is inbox intelligence for learning businesses and helps you understand the latest technology, marketing, and learning trends and grow your learning business. Best of all, it's a free resource. As a subscriber, you'll get Leading Links, our monthly curated collection of resources to help you grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business; the podcast digest, a monthly summary of podcast episodes released during the previous month; plus, periodic announcements highlighting Leading Learning Webinars and other educational opportunities designed to benefit learning business

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Celisa Steele: [00:12:22] I know that affirmations also play a role in your work, and maybe you're putting some of those leadership concepts under these affirmations, but maybe you can either share some of the leadership concepts and/or some affirmations that you like to use and help especially women of color better understand their role in the workplace and what they can do to make sure that they aren't othered.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:12:47] Right. Okay. Let me back up for a second. The reason for the affirmations, again, positive psychology. If we understand from the survey that I've done of 100 high-performing, professional Black women in corporate America that 90 percent of them say they are not happy in corporate America, there's a problem.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:10] Yes.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:13:10] Because what we know to be true, what I just said about positive psychology—happy people are successful people. We've got to get our Black women, other women of color, and women in general happy, and we have to understand why they're unhappy. The book really peels apart some of those issues, and it's based on the research that we've seen before. Again, a continuation. One of the things that is cited in the *Women in the Workplace* and Catalyst research from 2017, and again in 2019, and again in 2020, is that sponsorship is hard to come by. It's hard for women to find these sponsors, Black or otherwise. But, if you're Black, it's really hard.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:13:49] One of the affirmations that's in the book is, "I am entitled to a good sponsor that works on my behalf." And it may seem very simple, but the fact is that it's hard to find one. Once you find one, you need them to actually do what sponsors do. What we're finding is that's not always the case. There are a myriad of reasons why that could be, but one reason is because it's a game of numbers. We've been taught, especially women of color, "If you can't see it, you can't be it." So we look for people that look like us. Well, there's a numbers problem. If you're not finding Black women at the top of these organizations, how, then, can you find a Black woman sponsor?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:14:41] The few that are there—the one or two that are there, depending on what company, where you are—they're in high demand when it comes to sponsorship. And people also forget that once you get to the C suite, the problems don't go away. In fact, they're

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amplified because you are the only one in the room in a white, male-dominated situation. And, whether anyone is saying something negative or not, you can feel it in your pores when you walk in. So we navigate some culturally nuanced leadership advice, not just to get a sponsor, not just to diversify your board so that you have all sorts of people that don't look like you, don't think like you, don't have the same role as you, maybe in a different industry, maybe even in a different company, but we also go as far as to say, based on the research, the survey that I did, where we even asked in that survey, who has been the most helpful and who has been the most hindrance to you on your leadership journey? Based on what those women have said and also based on what I'm hearing (as a coach) from women that are just like them, 43 percent of them said that white men have had a big impact and have been the most helpful outside of other Black women. So there we go, flying in the face of "You can't be it unless you see it." This guy doesn't look like you, but we're finding that these successful women that make it to the C suite will identify sponsors and mentors that are white and male.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:16:24] But here's the trick. Remember, there are two questions, and there are two lists: Who's been the most helpful? Who's been the most harmful? Everybody is on both lists. So the question becomes who do you trust? Who do you trust? Because, from my experience, white men have been very helpful and instrumental in my career. It's not to say that Black women have not been—the few that were there have been—but these guys have been. But I've been in organizations where I walked in, and Chad was working to the end of his days to make sure I was shut down. How do you go into an organization in a new role and know who's who? It actually takes time. It takes time, and it takes a degree of savviness. At the same time, it could be a source of disillusion. So, while you're going through all of these steps to try and figure out who you can trust, who can be a great sponsor, or who can be a great mentor, we have to reinforce the positive emotion. And, through the storytelling of the other women of power that are in this book, you see them seeking out other women, peers, mentors, and people who can pour back into them their value and happiness.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:17:43] One of the women that speaks is the chief experience officer at the Utah Jazz. She said that one way that she maintains her happiness is to look outwardly and to celebrate other women. So, when she sees someone doing well, she makes sure that she goes out of her way to celebrate them. And guess what the by-product is? She feels good too. I had another chief nursing officer in the medical and healthcare industry who had moved to ten different cities in order to move up to where she is today—senior vice president, chief nursing officer, one of the biggest hospital systems in the United States of America. That can get lonely. Not just because she's the only one in the room, but she's moving every so many years, and she doesn't have that community. When I asked her, where did she get her happiness in times

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where it's really tough, and she's the only—because the villain in the book is isolation. She says she turns to her family because they know who she is, and her husband pours it right back into her. The happiness and joy she feels at the accomplishments of her sons, one of which had just finished college, and moving him into his first apartment—she gets joy from that. So they find different ways to reinforce their positive emotion so that they can go back into the war zone and do the battle.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:10] That's one affirmation—this idea that I deserve sponsorship. I deserve not just any sponsorship either, but a sponsor who's truly going to go to bat for me and fulfill what it means to be a sponsor. But I'm also thinking about our podcast listeners who aren't Black women or women of color. What is it that you would want them to understand and then potentially do with this understanding of what it's like for Black women in the workplace and for that culture that can leave them doubly disadvantaged?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:19:54] Yes. Well, as people who are designing some of the learning and the programs that many leaders are learning from, I would hope that in this conversation, you've listened very intently, listened actively, and listened mindfully, so that you understand where the people who are on the other end of your design are coming from. And, hopefully, you'll be able to design programs that have these nuances in mind. Because let's look at the numbers. Our workforces are becoming multicultural. They're browning. Even if we're just looking at color and not just about all the other boxes that you could check. They're browning. The most multicultural adult generation is the millennial generation, and we've got Gen Z, who's coming out of college now. They're getting their first jobs. One out of every two babies born in 2012 is a baby of color—that's 50 percent. We even need to change our language when it comes to talking about minorities. They're not minorities anymore. They're not. Get rid of the language. Start to understand what these different generations [are], how they tick, what they need, what they look for, and how they learn.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:21:22] One of the things that I do—although my leaders are typically in midlife and midcareer, I have more and more millennials coming my way. Because education's in my background too. I'm also an adjunct faculty member at Texas Christian University. I know about hybrid design and even just typical design for learning and development curriculums and such. It's important that you give everyone all sorts of opportunities and ways to learn what you put in front of them. Even in my coaching, when they are prepared to answer one of my questions, I will give them a mindful moment. I'll tell them not to answer right away, to think about it, then write it, and then share it. It's a red team exercise. You might recognize it, but it gives you a few different ways to digest and be mindful of the material of the question.

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One, you're going to think about it. Two, you're going to write it—this is kinesthetic. Then you end up saying it. You might even repeat it. I'll usually reflect back to you. That's the other thing a coach is. I'm a mirror; I'm going to reflect back to you what I just heard, so you're going to hear it.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:22:50] One of my biggest pieces of advice is to give people, ultimately, several ways to take in the information because everybody's different, and you don't know which two of those learning methods are going to hit home for someone. But it also gives everybody the chance to learn it all. But just know that there are cultural nuances between the races and also even genders. We have different experiences. So bouncing your design off of someone who does not look like you or act like you. Treat it the same way an executive would with their personal board of directors. Get yourself a tribe that you can use, like a focus group, informally, and bounce it off of them and see what they come back with and see how you can tweak your design and get where you're trying to go.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:42] This is the Leading Learning Podcast. So one of the things we always like to ask guests is just a little bit about their own lifelong learning. And so I would love to hear from you, L. Michelle, what are some practices, habits, or sources you turn to as you're looking to grow yourself personally and professionally?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:24:01] I'm glad you asked that question because this is one of the advantages of having a credentialed coach. We are held to the standard of continued learning, and we can't recertify—they expire; these things expire—you have to go back in there and test again to get your credentials back or even go higher up the chain. You have to have continuing coaching education units. When I first got my coaching credential, it was in applied positive psychology. That neuroscience certification, I'm still working on it, but that's part of my continued coaching education. The red team exercise that I just talked about, I just earned some continuing coaching hours in red team coaching. I love it because it invigorates my practice and serves my people even though it's serving me—I'm learning, I'm growing, and I'm upskilling—but to see how they are accelerated even more by the learning that I bring to them makes it even more important. Again, it's intrinsic for me because I want to see, I have a desire and a passion to see my clients climb higher. And, when they succeed, I'm overjoyed. I just can't help it.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:25:25] So there's the continuing coaching education that I do, but I'm always reading. I'm a self-proclaimed geek chic individual. I love technology. It's a part of who I am. It's a part of my brand. And when this AI thing hit as hard as it did and as fast as it did, yes, it was scary. It's still scary—I'm not going to lie. But the things and the opportunities that it

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opened up for me as a business owner, also as a coach, and as an individual, I love playing with that thing, whether it's ChatGPT or some other application that has it embedded inside of it. I want to know all the different ways that AI can benefit humanity. I have this innate curiosity, which actually feeds my ability to be a great coach. You have to question everything. I have questions. I'm going to be looking for answers. So I'm going to be reading about it. I'm going to be scanning YouTube and going to YouTube University to learn about it. I'm going to be on TikTok, seeing what people are going to say. I think that continued learning and upskilling is just...I'm hardwired for it. And I think that, if you're not learning, you're definitely not growing, and whatever's not growing is dead. So as long as I'm on this earth and alive and able to do that, I'm going to do it.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:58] Have you engaged in experiences where you either really saw, wow, they're really working hard to make sure that everyone's engaged, including women of color, or, perhaps, on the other end, where you've come up against educational offerings where you felt like, wow, they really did not design this for me? Do you have any examples or ideas for how people can consume responsibly in a way and make sure that what they're taking in as they pursue their own learning is going to benefit them?

L. Michelle Smith: [00:27:31] Yes, and I think I hear a couple things there. One of the things that I saw after the George Floyd situation, which, if you recall, was a massive rebuke on anti-Blackness. It was something we'd never seen before, in fact, since the civil rights movement and definitely not at that scale. People were hitting the streets in Italy, of all places, and everywhere to say something about this. And then we saw corporations pipe up, and they took a stance, whether it was a black square on Instagram, funds that they were donating to a community group, or some effort to encourage and lift up the Black community. We also saw companies that were trying to pour into leaders more and fill the pipeline. That was one of the things that we saw. We wanted to see more Black leaders, not just in the pipeline, but we wanted to see them on the boards. We wanted to see them in the C suites. We wanted to see them at every level.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:28:33] So they funded these programs, and some of them were knee-jerk and not very well thought out. What I heard from the leaders, and I told you just the other day when we were chatting about the show, I positioned myself like Nike. Nike is for the athlete, not necessarily for the sports industry. They're for the athlete. I'm here for the leader. So I don't spend a lot of time telling organizations how to be more diverse, equitable, or inclusive. I spend time with the leaders, hoping that they will be able to navigate the obstacles that are in front of them. After all of this happened, one of the knee-jerk solutions was, "Let's talk about it. Let's

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have courageous conversations.” And they’d call on the Black leaders who had just seen the video, who were mortified, horrified, and triggered based on things that had happened in their own families that they’d seen for themselves. They were asked to sit on panels and present to everybody in the wake of that, just right in the midst of it.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:29:44] There’s something to be said about empathy and engaging empathy in your learning design. Because, if there was some thought put to it, if someone had just simply said, “If I were in their shoes, would I really want to be saying all of this to all of these people with all of this raw emotion, and this really hitting home the way it had?” We saw that with the violence against Asians. Some of the companies, first thing they want to do is have a town hall. “Let’s bring all the Asians together, and let them talk about it, and we’ll listen.” Is that the most empathetic or even effective way to have a courageous conversation? I would venture to say no. Because what ends up happening, when I have my emergency coaching circles and have the parents, let’s say, who just saw the news of Uvalde come across their newsfeeds, or they saw it on television because they were still at home working with no place to emote, nobody at work said anything about, “You know what? If you need to go home, go home.” No one said that. They’re just there to grin and bear it, but I gather them so that they can emote. I start to hear from them.

L. Michelle Smith: [00:31:11] We have these diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, but something’s missing because there’s no thought to what we’re actually going through every day and what the news cycle is bringing down the pike. And when you talk about parents, you’re talking about every corner of society. They looked like everybody, but they were all hurting the same way. So I would say that, as you’re building your programs, keep in mind what’s going on in the outer world. What’s the cultural context? What’s going on inside of people as a result of what’s going on in the cultural context, and how can you show up for them in those situations? And what would benefit those folks first?

Jeff Cobb: [00:32:05] L. Michelle Smith is a life and business coach, an author, and a speaker. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode366, you’ll find a link to L. Michelle’s Web site, where you can learn more about her work and books.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:20] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:32:33] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode366, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:50] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]

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