Shilpa Alimchandani (00:00):

Many individuals and organizations see learning as an important part of how we move forward—that if we're going to see changes in society around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and right now, very specifically around racial justice, there's not just learning to do, I would actually preface that by saying there's a lot of unlearning to do. And as we know, as learning professionals or people in the learning field, unlearning is a lot harder than learning.

Jeff Cobb (00:36):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:38):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:45):

Welcome to episode 253 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with Shilpa Alimchandani. This is the third episode and a seven-part series on the learning business in disruptive times. Shilpa Alimchandani is a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategist. She has more than 20 years of experience in DEI leadership development and intercultural learning. She has facilitated trainings in nearly 20 countries around the world and has received numerous awards, including twice the Peace Corps' distinguished service award. Celisa spoke with Shilpa in September 2020.

Shilpa Alimchandani (01:30):

I love my work, and it's very personal to me as well.

Celisa Steele (01:34):

So tell us a little bit more about that work that you do.

Shilpa Alimchandani (01:39):

Yeah, I've always throughout my career, whether it was in higher education or nonprofit or government service or in the private sector where I'm doing most of my consulting now, really focused on helping people to build bridges, to be their authentic selves in all of our complexity as humans. And I've been on my own as a consultant for the past year. And when I say the work is personal, what I mean to say is that each of us brings so much of ourselves to our professional world. It's not just the degrees that we have or the skills that we have. It's all of our background, our history, our identities, and that's a beautiful thing. It can also be a source of

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misunderstanding, of conflict. And so I think it's really important to facilitate conversations and learning so that people can really be their authentic selves.

Celisa Steele (02:47):

I love that, that idea of getting to bring your whole self and be there authentically because I think that whole notion of the work-life balance or anything that puts in these arbitrary dividers between our work life and our personal life, it feels very untrue. It doesn't really play out. So you and I are talking as part of a podcast series that we're doing on the learning business in disruptive times. And so when you think about what you're living through, what you're working through now, what comes to mind? What are the kinds of disruption that you're experiencing?

Shilpa Alimchandani (03:25):

The list is almost endless, isn't it during this time? What I can say the most obvious one, as someone who does a lot of facilitation and training around issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, is that a lot of that work had traditionally been done in person, and now it's all virtual. So that is a big shift and change. And, at the same time, I have been really heartened to see just how much and how deep the learning can be using virtual tools and platforms. And so I have not felt that, oh, we're somehow behind, or we're not able to do the kind of work we want to do in the learning space. I think we're just having to be more creative in that process.

Celisa Steele (04:21):

So I hear you speaking to one aspect of the pandemic, the need to shift from that live, in-person training to making use of these virtual tools and needing to learn around that. What other types of disruption are you dealing with? And I'm thinking again of the fact that you're emphasizing, DEI things, that there's just been a lot happening in the United States in particular recently. Is that part of what's going on in your work and your personal life?

Shilpa Alimchandani (04:56):

Most definitely. The growing movement in the U.S. and in fact around the world for racial justice has very much impacted what I do, the organizations with whom I partner and the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion in general. What I see is one of the shifts happening is that a lot of training that was happening in the DEI space tended to focus a lot on what individuals can do to change their own behavior and attitudes to be more inclusive, to be more fair. It had to do with what organizations could do to attract talent from different backgrounds.

Shilpa Alimchandani (05:41):

And now what I'm really happy to see is a shift from that individual focus to one that really is looking at systems. What are the systems in which we are operating? And there's a very much an educational and learning component to this because there are a lot of folks who really are not paying attention to broader systems like patriarchy, white supremacy, capitalism, ableism, you name it. There are all of these systems at play, and we are operating within those systems.

Shilpa Alimchandani (06:19):

So if we actually want anything to change in our lives, in our organizations, in our communities, in our country, then we've got to be able to see those things. And that disruption is so welcome. It's so necessary for things to actually change.

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Celisa Steele (06:50):

Given the types of disruption that we've been talking about with the pandemic, with the increased calls for racial justice, what are you seeing as the impact on learning and learning businesses, and how are you responding?

Shilpa Alimchandani (07:06):

Well, I certainly think that many individuals and organizations see learning as an important part of how we move forward—that if we're going to see changes in society around issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and right now, very specifically around racial justice, there's not just learning to do, I would actually preface that by saying there's a lot of unlearning to do. And as we know, as learning professionals or people in the learning field, unlearning is a lot harder than learning. There's so many things that we have been taught, and there's so many systems, as we were talking about before, which we have not really been aware or not paying much attention to, that actually need to be unlearned to make space for new ways of doing and new ways of being with one another that are more fair, that are more just, that do allow everyone to thrive as their authentic selves. But there's a lot that gets in the way of that.

Shilpa Alimchandani (08:17):

If we know that we have been taught things, even from school and our history, that have left out really important parts of how we've come to be the way that we are, and people have access to what they do or don't. Those omissions and then even, I would argue, some lies that we have grown to believe over time need to be unlearned in order for us to really see transformative change.

Celisa Steele (08:55):

So what are the threats of these current disruptive times? And I'm thinking in particular of organizations in the learning business. What are the things that worry you the most about what we're experiencing now as disruption?

Shilpa Alimchandani (09:12):

One of the worries I have, I've talked to some organizations who say, "Oh well." Because they believe that so much of this work does need to be done in person, there's a "Let's put it off, let's do it later when we can all be in the same room together and have face-to-face dialogue and discussion and those opportunities." That worries me because timing really is everything. And so we really need to pay attention to the current state of affairs, what learners need, how to meet their needs rather than putting it off. So I worry about delaying because of the virtual nature of the work and the pandemic.

Shilpa Alimchandani (09:59):

I also worry about the desire for quick fixes. So there's a great sense of urgency that many people are experiencing around, wow, maybe we haven't talked about this before or a diversity training that we have conducted in the past covered a whole host of issues but didn't really zero in on race. Or didn't really go deep on this issue, so we better start doing that now. But then the assumption that, and so then we can just do that, have that conversation. We'll do a community conversation, a town hall, a workshop. We'll do something on unconscious bias, and then that will solve the problem. And that worries me because that's not how this work is done or at least not done effectively. And it is a long-term investment to see the change that we want to see.

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Celisa Steele (11:03):

Yeah, the idea of a town hall or a conversation or a workshop—I know someone who talks about arbitrary alternatives. It's like you lose sight of the overarching goal, which is to really address this issue of systemic racism, and somehow it gets boiled down to, "Let's have a workshop." Which does not necessarily at all address the overarching goal and so making sure that that doesn't get lost. Yeah, that's definitely important. So the converse of what I just asked you—what's going on these days that most excites you? Where are you finding hope or energy or enthusiasm, despite the disruption?

Shilpa Alimchandani (11:49):

I am finding hope specifically around issues of racial justice, that more and more white people are seeing the importance of addressing these issues. So I'm a person of color, not a Black person. So I don't experience the kind of racism that really the Black Lives Matter movement has centered. And, at the same time, many people have asked, "None of this is new. What's different now? Why so much emphasis now?" There are a lot of things that are different, but one of the big things that is different is that white people are using their power to shine the light on injustices that have existed for hundreds of years. And there's a worry that that attention will dwindle away. My hope is that it won't. And so that gives me hope. Another thing that gives me hope in these really uncertain and disruptive times is the technology. The tools that are available to us as learning professionals to really creatively engage people.

Shilpa Alimchandani (13:15):

I know we're all on some video conferencing system or platform for much of our days. And there are so many other things that you can add to that. Like we used to do Post-its on the wall, and now there are apps that can help you to recreate that kind of an experience virtually. There are so many ways that even the facilitation of breakouts and all of that has just gotten easier. It's been around for a while, but now, even as a sole practitioner myself, like I can do this. And I can manage that. And it gives me hope because there's still opportunities to connect, learn, grow despite our physical distance from one another. So we need not, like I said before, put it off until another time. Let's use what's available to us now.

Celisa Steele (14:19):

What is DEI? And maybe talk a little bit about how it fits with implicit bias.

Shilpa Alimchandani (14:26):

Sure. So DEI stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Diversity is simply all of the various identities that make us who we are. And so you can have a long list of those things. The first that usually come to mind are around race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, disability, et cetera. So diversity just is. Equity has to do with fairness. And so it's very purposeful that in this work, we don't necessarily use the word *equality* because equality means sameness, treating everyone the same. Equity has to do with fairness, which may mean differences in people's experiences, what they need, what they have access to, and how we treat them. So that equity piece is quite critical because it is about fairness, and inclusion has to do with the environment that we create.

Shilpa Alimchandani (15:33):

So inclusion has to do with, okay, we've brought this diverse group of people together to work together, for example. Are all of the voices really being heard? Now does everyone have a seat

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at the table? And inclusion has to do with those kinds of issues. Creating an environment where people's contributions truly are not just welcomed but valued in the decision-making processes. So all three of those things are really important. There's sometimes an alphabet soup when it comes to talking about these issues and because it started with diversity, and then it was diversity and inclusion, and now you see equity in there, and sometimes you even see justice being paired with these other terms. But each of those additions to the lexicon around these issues is purposeful. And so DEI, you really need all of those components together to really see change inside of organizations and educational institutions.

Celisa Steele (16:40):

And so I know that implicit bias is an area of interest in work for you as well. And how does that fit in with the DEI?

Shilpa Alimchandani (16:49):

Sure. So what I would say is that bias gets in the way of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Bias is a function of the human brain. We do need to be able to discern, narrow down gobs of information to really focus, and be able to make choices. But those choices are influenced by the programming, the cultural programming that we've grown up with. And so that programming is riddled with bias, with stereotypes, with things that are just simply not true about entire groups of people. And so, like it or not, we act on those biases, and to understand that they are within us as human beings, no matter what background we come from, is just the first step in then being able to disrupt bias in our thinking and in our decision-making. That is then what makes way for things to be more equitable and inclusive.

Shilpa Alimchandani (17:59):

If we're not looking at bias, then despite our best intentions we'll default to what's comfortable and what we're used to, which is bias, and which is, again, grounded in our cultural programming. So we've got to bring that to light and actually address it. We can't erase it, so that's the other thing I would add. We can't erase the cultural programming, and we can't erase the bias. It will be there. We can notice it; we can interrupt it. We can make different choices. We can—in that pause between the thought and the action—choose a different way. And we can look for how bias lives in our systems.

Shilpa Alimchandani (18:41):

So bias is something that could influence how I interact with you, but it also is something that lives in how promotion decisions are made inside of an organization. And what are some ways, for example, that we could make those systems more fair, so that bias is not what drives the decision-making?

Celisa Steele (19:15):

What lasting changes do you think will come of these current disruptive times, and are those changes good, bad, or something else?

Shilpa Alimchandani (19:26):

I think there are a lot of opportunities for lasting change. It's hard to predict which ones will stick. Certainly the flexibility of working from anywhere will have a lasting impact. I just can't see how it wouldn't, given how long we have been away from what was a typical work

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experience inside of offices and things like that. So I think that will certainly have a lasting impact.

Shilpa Alimchandani (20:04):

I hope that having more human-centered policies and practices for organizations will also be a lasting impact. The recognition that people are balancing, juggling, many, many different responsibilities simultaneously. That's not new necessarily because of the pandemic. It's certainly amplified. And that at least I have experienced—there's so much grace that most people have and…. Oh, I was on a call with a client last week, with the CEO of a company, and my child came in and interrupted that call, and it was fine. Like it was like not an issue at all. So I hope that those kinds of things will also have a lasting impact on how we move forward even after the pandemic.

Celisa Steele (21:08):

I think *grace* is a great word for it, and I've definitely felt it and experienced it myself. These things that might have felt unprofessional before now, it's just how life is. And so, yeah, the dog barking, the child walking in, whatever, it's all par for the course now.

Celisa Steele (21:26):

What words would you have for those in the learning business about how to do right and thrive in this moment? They could be words of advice or caution or courage.

Shilpa Alimchandani (21:41):

I think that there's an opportunity now to really reflect on our own power, privilege, access to resources, et cetera, on a personal level but also on an organizational level and a community level. So if we are now paying attention to these issues and really are more aware of where the gaps are, where the injustices live in our society, there's an opportunity in the learning business to apply that learning to what we do. What do learners need? How do we meet those needs? How could we be more creative in the way that we address those needs? And what's some unlearning that we need to do in order to make space for new ways of being within the learning business?

Shilpa Alimchandani (22:54):

I think this is an opportunity if we're talking about systems, and we're talking about the way things have always been doesn't really need to be the way things are going to be moving forward. Then where are the places for that kind of change within our own businesses and within this field of learning?

Celisa Steele (23:16):

Yes, this definitely seems like a time ripe for reflection and then hopefully action based on that reflection. What is it like to be a DEI consultant at this moment in time?

Shilpa Alimchandani (23:43):

I would say it is overwhelming in that there's a lot of demand for this work. And there's also a lot of reason to be hopeful that things can change because of the attention being paid to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion and specifically to issues of racial justice. At the same time, it's

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challenging. I myself have turned away clients, turned away projects because to me the requests felt superficial, or it didn't really meet my standards around integrity to really make change.

Shilpa Alimchandani (24:35):

And so those are tough conversations and it's not even in...I know it may sound a bit judgmental now that I think about how I phrase that, but it's really more about how do I want to spend my time and my energy? Like we've talked about, these are disruptive times. I have two children; I have parents; I have a partner. There's so much more to our lives than our work. So I have this amount of time and energy that I want to spend. I want it to be meaningful. And if it's a one-off workshop that I don't think is really going to make any difference, I'm just saying no to that kind of stuff. If there's an opportunity to engage in long-term change and really build a partnership and deepen learning not just.... That's my caution around implicit bias learning is that that's just the beginning. It's important, it's necessary, and it shouldn't stop there. So if there's an opportunity to deepen the learning. then I'm all there, and it's a good time to be a DEI professional.

Celisa Steele (25:50):

So what steps and actions do you recommend for learning businesses who are looking to meaningfully support DEI? What should they do?

Shilpa Alimchandani (26:02):

I think, first of all, look inward. Who are the individuals that you partner with? Who are the people doing the training and the teaching, and what are their backgrounds? And who's missing? Whose voices are not an active part of the people you engage with as educators, as learning professionals? So that's number one. I think number two, looking inside of your own organization. So there may be issues of equity and inclusion within your own teams, within your own organizations. And there's an opportunity to really highlight those issues, make changes within your organizations. And I think that is directly tied to how well you serve the communities and the learners and the other businesses that you work with, the institutions that you work with because when you are actually helping people inside of your organization bring their best selves to work and not have to cover who they are and really have an opportunity to bring diverse perspectives together, that's going to benefit everyone that you work with and you partner with outside of your organization.

Shilpa Alimchandani (27:35):

It's an investment. It's not easy. The research tells us that diverse teams without a real focus on inclusive leadership and culture change actually don't do that well compared to homogenous teams. But diverse teams that actually have the supports in place to really make sure people's contributions are valued and that they can bring their authentic selves to work with the kind of leadership that they need, they're more innovative, they're more creative, they're more in touch with what's going on outside of the organization. And it actually becomes an advantage for organizations who do that. It's an investment, though. So, yeah, it's both, who are you partnering with? Who are the learning professionals you're engaged, but then also are you looking internally to see how you could be more equitable and inclusive in your own culture?

Jeff Cobb (28:34):

Shilpa Alimchandani is an instructional designer, a learning facilitator, and a coach. Drawing on her deep knowledge of learning modalities, intercultural leadership development, and human

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centered design, Shilpa works with her clients to address diversity, equity and inclusion in their organizations to make a lasting change. She is the author of the book *Communicating Development Across Cultures: Monologues and Dialogues in Development Project Implementation*. Find Shilpa and connect with her on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele (29:06):

You can find a link to Shilpa on LinkedIn in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/253 along with the transcript and a variety of resources related to my conversation with Shilpa.

Jeff Cobb (29:19):

At leadinglearning.com/episode253, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the remaining episodes in this series, we encourage you to subscribe and subscribing also helps us to get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (29:36):

We'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts, Jeff and I personally appreciate it and reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business in disruptive times. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Jeff Cobb (29:53):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes leadinglearning.com/253, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (30:05):

Thanks again and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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