Melissa Majors: [00:00:00] So often we think, "Oh, everything's wrong. There's so much that's broken. We're not making progress." But the reality is we're not broken. We're just unfinished. There are still things we need to learn how to do to work, play, and thrive with people that are different from us. We're still learning. This is a learning journey. So we're not broken. We're just unfinished.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:28] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:29] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:38] Welcome to episode 351, which features a conversation with Melissa Majors. Melissa is a keynote speaker, author of *The Seven Simple Habits of Inclusive Leaders*, and founder of Melissa Majors Consulting, where she helps leaders lead better and cultivate high-performing and engaged teams. Prior to starting her consulting practice, Melissa spent 20 years leading education services teams and divisions across a variety of industries, both large and small. Celisa and Melissa talk about what inclusive leadership is, its benefits, psychological safety, tactical empathy, and focusing on desired behaviors rather than leading with labels to get around DEI fatigue. They also talk about how to be inclusive in product design and development. Throughout the conversation, which took place in March 2023, Melissa's optimism and joy come sparkling through.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:41] Inclusive leadership is a focus for you. So maybe we should just go ahead and, here near the beginning of our conversation, have you explain what inclusive leadership is.

Melissa Majors: [00:01:51] Yes, I'm happy to do that. I mentioned my secret sauce over the many years that I've had managing high-performing teams. Before I had a label, I was inclusive. Everybody felt they belonged. They all felt like they could lean in and take risks without

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retaliation. We were really great at transforming conflict, not shying away from it. And so I wanted to know, beyond my own experience, what were other leaders doing to involve others equally? That's my definition for inclusion—involving others equally. And so I launched a series of research to find out what were other leaders doing and discovered they have shared behaviors that fall into seven different categories, which I cover in my book *The Seven Simple Habits of Inclusive Leaders*. But what I discovered is that oftentimes we unintentionally exclude people.

Melissa Majors: [00:02:44] Our brains get in the way—our natural wiring, our outdated wiring of our brains get in the way, and we unintentionally exclude people. Like snap judgments that we make about people. In a nanosecond, your brain will assess whether somebody is a friend or a foe. And an example of how that gets in the way is that we prefer familiarity. Our brain doesn't have to work as hard to assess whether you're a potential threat if you seem familiar and similar to me. And so, oftentimes, our brain can mislead us into misjudging people's character, and that certainly is a hindrance then to leading people equally. Those are some of the things that I use to describe and overcome to mitigate those risks related to inclusive leadership.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:30] So that's the what—what inclusive leadership is. And now I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about why we should focus on inclusive leadership. What are the benefits of leading inclusively?

Melissa Majors: [00:03:42] That's such a good question, Celisa. Why should we do it? Well, based on my research, I discovered that the most inclusive leaders recognize that being inclusive is so much more than a moral obligation. It truly is a business imperative. And there's research by McKinsey and Company that came out a couple of years ago, and it just continues to be validated by other big research firms (Gartner and others), that the most inclusive companies are outperforming the least inclusive ones with 49 percent higher profitability. Who can afford to leave that kind of competitive advantage on the table? And more about the why is those teams are not just higher performing in terms of financial performance. They have higher engagement; they have better retention; they're much better at mitigating and uncovering risks to ideas, decisions, and solutions; they're more innovative as a result of being more inclusive. And so there is a clear bottom-line benefit when we do this well.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:42] And so, given those benefits, that all would make a strong case for inclusive leadership, what are the barriers? What are the challenges? Why isn't inclusive leadership practiced more broadly?

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Melissa Majors: [00:04:55] That's another great question. Again, going back to the research that I did, 80 percent of C-suite leaders that I interviewed recognize and acknowledge that they're missing the mark related to being inclusive and don't know what to do about it. Especially during 2020, there was a huge racial reckoning here in the United States and around the world. There were leaders running to their closest Web designer to post statements and pacts that they commit to being more inclusive, but they didn't know how to operationalize inclusion beyond that goal and that commitment. And so, oftentimes, though, that commitment fizzled out without habits, which is why I think having habits is so important. Number one, establishing sustainable change through habits is one of the biggest barriers to operationalizing inclusion. Our brains are the even bigger challenge. As I mentioned earlier, our brains get in the way, and so often we unintentionally exclude people. It's easier to empathize with people who are more similar to us than different. And so understanding how you can overcome some of that natural wiring to empathize with all people and listen to perspectives that are different from your own, that's really, really important.

Melissa Majors: [00:06:10] I think one of the other challenges is convincing leaders why it's necessary. There are a lot of practitioners in the DE&I space and companies that position the why based on social justice and morality. And this is not popular what I'm about to say, but it's true that, whenever companies commit to something based on a moral need, they set themselves up for inaction and eventually deprioritization because, ultimately, the company has to thrive from a financial perspective, and they deprioritize things that don't drive financial health. When you can create a case for diversity, equity, and inclusion that's based on what matters most to the company in terms of financial health and cultural health, those solutions or those initiatives are sustainable whereas the others start to fizzle out. And that's what we're seeing now in our time as we're starting to see downward pressure on the case for DE&I. Long story short, it's really important that we align the business case and the why to what matters most to the company.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:20] That makes a lot of sense—there may be the moral and ethical reasons to do it, but also make sure that you're making that business case about DEI initiatives and inclusive leadership.

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Celisa Steele: [00:08:48] One of the things that I've seen you write about that I would love to hear you talk about a little bit is this idea of blameless inclusion. Can you speak to that a little bit? About the psychological or emotional things that inclusion can bring up in people?

Melissa Majors: [00:09:07] Yes, absolutely. I'll tell you a story to answer the question. A couple months back, I was about to deliver my signature speech on the book *The Seven Simple Habits of Inclusive Leaders*. And, after the session, a woman walks up to me, and she says, "You proved me wrong. I expected to feel attacked when I walked in this room. I expected for you to make me feel ashamed of who I am as a person and my beliefs. And you did not. And, as a result of that approach, I'm much more open-minded, and I'm going to apply these concepts and tactics." What I do and what other DE&I practitioners do is we're negotiating behavior change. I wouldn't just say DE&I. Anybody on this call that's interested in education—if you're educating people, you're in the business of negotiating behavior change. And, in any negotiation, if you cause people to feel defensive, you've lost; you've shut them down; they're not going to be open to the concepts. By design, I approach inclusion from a blameless, guilt-free perspective. I blame the brain, not people. And it opens people's minds, like the woman in the story that I just shared, to lean into these concepts and apply the tactics.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:26] And so you've mentioned the brain and blaming the brain to the extent that there is any blame to go around. I think that probably ties to bias. But will you talk a little bit about bias, what it is, and how it relates to inclusion? I know you talked a little bit about familiarity and some of those things, but dig in a little bit more on bias.

Melissa Majors: [00:10:47] Bias is such a bad, but poorly branded. Biases are just a natural threat detection mechanism in all of our brains. We all have biases. We think we're so much more sophisticated than we are, Celisa, but our brains have not evolved that much since we were hanging out in caves. We're still very much wired for survival and reproduction. And

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biases become shortcuts, based on inputs you've had throughout your entire life, that tell your brain, based on patterns, "I already know this is not a threat. I don't have to spend the time assessing a threat," and it works really well for inanimate objects. So when you walk in a room and see an object that has a flat top and four legs, your brain says, "I don't need to take the energy and time to assess that. It's a table. It's not a threat." But when you walk in a room and see other people, your brain has to work even harder because, as I mentioned earlier, it will assess whether somebody is a friend or a foe.

Melissa Majors: [00:11:47] And those biases, again, those threat-detection mechanisms in our brain, can lead us to make uninformed or misjudgments about other people. But what I discovered about the most inclusive leaders is they embrace their bias, which is hard to do, because saying "Hi, I'm biased" is like saying "Hi, I'm a bigot" or "I'm a homophobe or a racist" or something like that. But they embrace their biases, label them, and then they can work even harder to compensate for those biases so they don't seep out in interactions with other people, especially in leading teams. What I encourage your listeners to do is try to uncover their biases—and I have resources that I can share on that—but try to uncover your biases, and then you can compensate for them. But you have to embrace and acknowledge that they exist first.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:38] You just mentioned our listeners. I am thinking about our listeners and about their role in designing and developing educational offerings. There's, of course, an opportunity to directly teach about diversity, equity, and inclusion, have that be the subject matter and the focus of a particular learning experience. But I also see the opportunity for indirect opportunities, to bake some DEI concepts into some, if not all, of the learning experiences. I would love to hear your advice for how that might happen. How can we bake more diversity, equity, and inclusion into everything that we're offering as a learning business?

Melissa Majors: [00:13:17] Well, first, I would suggest you lead with the behavior you want and not the label of DE&I. Unfortunately, there's DE&I fatigue with that term, and so many people shut down when they hear that term. But, if you get rid of the label and just focus on the behaviors, like empathizing with people who are different from you. Think about any education designer, what's the number one thing that you do? When you're building an education product, you empathize with the people you serve, whether you do design thinking, needs assessment, whatever. You have to empathize with the people that you serve, and part of that is intentionally identifying the people you serve, deeply listening to their needs, and build that insight into building relevant products and services. That's inclusion. So often those of us in education services who are building products and services may not involve enough diverse voices at the table, and then we build products that miss the mark or may be irrelevant for part

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of the demographic that we serve. Be inclusive. Think about what are our blind spots as designers and product developers? And what voices do we need to invite to the table so that we have that full perspective? That's just a little bit about what that is, the case for, in terms of education design and development, but focus on the behaviors instead of leading with the labels.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:40] I like that advice a lot. And it seems, of course, to apply across the board to all situations. And it's that learner-centric view of design, which, as you said, really is at the heart of what we know about best practices for how to create effective learning experiences.

Melissa Majors: [00:14:56] Can I follow up and give you a story I just heard? Her name is Karen Townsend, she's an incredible practitioner and leadership expert. She gave me this example just yesterday, and it's just really simple and profound, around inclusion and design. And she said, ten years ago or so, she would go into a card shop to buy a birthday card for her mom, and she would scan the cards, and she wouldn't see any pictures of moms that looked like her mom. She's an African American woman. Until Hallmark came out with a line of cards called Mahogany. And now she can walk into a store and buy a birthday card with a picture of a mom that actually looks like her mom. And what Hallmark discovered originally is they probably had product designers around the table that had a singular perspective.

Melissa Majors: [00:15:45] They were thinking about their mom in the design of these birthday cards, and that came out in the design of products. And they were excluding big demographics and revenue-generating opportunities with an audience they hadn't tapped into before. Now when you go on a Hallmark store, you can buy cards for Yom Kippur, Diwali, and all sorts of cards that represent your life. And, yes, the Hallmark Company may have done this originally from a moral and social justice perspective in the product design. They also discovered there are revenue-generating opportunities by being more inclusive in the design process. I think that's just a really simple and profound story that anyone, whether you're designing education products or technology, can really wrap their minds around the case and the how to be inclusive in product design.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:44] I have a question, thinking about the different segments of audiences that a learning business might serve. Some of them are going to represent different demographics and different points of view. To what extent does messaging need to be different for different groups? If you have some of the historically under-included groups and you have some of the groups who have been part of those doing the excluding of those under-included

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groups, can the same messaging work for both those groups or groups all along those spectrums? Or at times do we need more nuanced and targeted messages for different groups?

Melissa Majors: [00:17:24] It's a really great question, Celisa. Where I have seen a lot of U.S.-based education services companies fumble in this area is in delivering global education. Because we have a U.S.-centric mindset, the product designers are probably based in the U.S., and so often it's easy for us to overlook the needs and the localization requirements for global companies. Even just as simple as the time when we deliver virtual education. Is it time zone friendly for everyone? Or are we unintentionally prioritizing our comfort and convenience to host them during U.S.-based hours and causing our other learners around the world to dial in in the middle of the night or at the crack of dawn in the morning? Simple little decisions like that. But, if you don't have those voices at the table informing those decisions, it's really easy to overlook those opportunities and then underserve the people you should be serving equally.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:33] Another follow-up question that I have around how we can best make our educational offerings inclusive has to do with the role of instructors and facilitators. I'm thinking of instructor-led things, whether that's online or physical classroom-type situations. They're often either experts in a particular subject, or they're experts in facilitation itself. But it seems to me that they also have a huge role to play in how inclusive that situation is. Any thoughts around how to best prepare our facilitators and instructors to help them be as aware of and inclusive as possible?

Melissa Majors: [00:19:11] Absolutely. It's important for us all to recognize our blind spots. And I'll tell you a story. Last year I was contracted to deliver education for a large audience in Italy. Now, these were all English speakers. It was their second language, of course. But I recognized my blind spots related to some of the challenges that are relevant in their workplaces. They have very different dynamics they're facing as opposed to most of the U.S. audiences that I deliver training to. I recognized the blind spot and also said, "I need to partner with someone in this situation. I need to partner with an Italian facilitator and instructor who can add relevant context and color to this content." And, once we started working together, I realized I didn't need to be the one at the mic to deliver this education. And so I brought this Italian instructor on to add even more relevant stories and customize the workshop and the content so that we achieved the outcomes we needed to in that audience. So recognize your blind spots and your limits. One of my favorite sayings is "Do what you do best; outsource the rest." Don't be afraid to ask for help from people who have that context and insight.

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Celisa Steele: [00:20:33] That's a lovely example. I want to talk a little bit about your book, which you've mentioned, *The Seven Simple Habits of Inclusive Leaders*. And I know that one of those habits you highlight is empathy. You've already focused on the need to have habits and to get really practical about what inclusion looks like. What does empathy look like in action?

Melissa Majors: [00:20:57] I mentioned, based on my research and advances in neuroscience, we know it's harder to empathize with people we see as them versus us. Our brain naturally prefers familiarity, so leaders have to work even harder to empathize across difference. And so I love Chris Voss, his definition of empathy. Chris Voss is the author of a book called *Never Split the Difference*. Highly recommend this read if you haven't. But he was the lead hostage negotiator for the FBI for 25 years. So you go on vacation, Celisa, and you get kidnapped; the bad guys take you away. Chris is the one they would send in to negotiate your way to safety. And Chris said his weapons-grade negotiation tactic is empathy—tactical empathy. And the definition is this: "Describing and demonstrating an understanding of the needs, interests, and perspectives of others without necessarily agreeing." "Without necessarily agreeing" is the key. So often, when we are attempting to empathize with others, we discount their perspective, we disagree, or we get defensive. And what he says, "With no defensiveness, no arguments, just listen to understand, not to disagree." And so that is also how I recommend, teach, and equip leaders to be even more empathetic, with that definition and reminding them you're not sympathizing, you're empathizing. You don't have to agree; you just have to understand.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:36] What I love about the focus on empathy is that it does seem like empathy contributes to psychological safety. And we know how important psychological safety is to learning—if a learner feels like they can really engage and participate fully, that's going to lead to more learning coming out of that experience. I think that emphasis on empathy works from the leadership perspective but also from the learning perspective as well.

Melissa Majors: [00:23:03] Absolutely, it does. Step one is empathizing with people that need to consume the content and build relevant products and experiences, and then give them a choice in how they want to consume it. Empathy is really the gateway to helping us understand not just what our learners need to learn but how they need to consume it in a way where they can remember the information and apply it. Because, if they can't remember and apply the content and the information we share, it was a big old fat waste of time. And you solve for that through tactical empathy.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:49] This is the Leading Learning Podcast, so we always love to ask guests about their own lifelong learning habits. I think it's especially interesting with you, given your

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educational services background. Would you share with us what habits, practices, or resources you tend to make use of to continue learning, professionally and personally too?

Melissa Majors: [00:24:11] Absolutely. I am a terrible formal learning student. You know those that do, we're just terrible students. But I'm an incredible informal learning student. And one question—I'm happy to share this with the audience—that has really helped me become an even better leader and educator is that no matter the situation, whether I perceive it as good or bad, I ask, "What is the lesson I should be learning in this moment?" And, even though it may feel disappointing to me, it pivots that experience into something that turns into wisdom for myself. And so whether it's an article I'm reading online or a newscast or whatever the story is, I can glean wisdom from other people's experiences informally by asking, "What is the lesson I should be learning in this moment?" And so that has really helped me. I love to read, though. I'm a big, big reader, and so I've got a couple books on my nightstand. That's usually what I do before I go to bed. And I like to stay on top of cutting-edge and next practices because I'm naturally wired as a strategist and innovator. I love hearing about best practices and ways that we can continue and evolve and become even better through innovative leadership and education experiences.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:38] Are there any cutting-edge topics that you're currently looking at that you would like to share? Anything that pops to mind?

Melissa Majors: [00:25:46] Yes. There's toxicity in the workplace and how to solve for that, power dynamics in the workplace, and unintentional consequences of being in positions of power. I'm digging into that research. I'm working on my second book. This is the first time I'm even mentioning this. I won't say anything else about it, but those are some topics that I'm researching right now to inform how leaders can continue to thrive in this very complex environment and detox our teams and companies.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:17] Is there anything else that comes to mind, or anything that you haven't had a chance to share that you would love to have a chance to before we wrap up?

Melissa Majors: [00:26:25] I would like to share more around inclusive leadership and how it can solve so many of the issues that we're facing on our teams and workplaces today, but it's getting a bad rep. There are a lot of organizations and companies that are deprioritizing this work because they just have not seen the returns they were expecting. There isn't a crisis in the headlines today that's causing a lot of organizations to deprioritize this work. But, when we do it well, it not only leads to full team engagement, it can help retain the top performers you have

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on your teams by very simple human needs we have—belonging, social connection at work, being involved in key decisions, and being treated fairly. Those are all experiences that, when we get it right, we retain great talent and achieve incredible results on our teams. But so many of us are getting that wrong right now. And so, before you are deprioritized—the inclusion work—really think about those behaviors and the benefits of it related to detoxing your teams. And, if there's anything I can do to help, call. I'm an open book. I'd love to share some of those concepts. But be careful not to deprioritize inclusion work too soon and then miss out on the incredible competitive and performance advantage that it offers.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:58] It seems to me too that inclusive leadership can also, in a way, be a form of self-care for the leader. I've seen you write about this idea of, as a leader, you don't necessarily have to have all the answers, and it can be really important and freeing to admit that.

Melissa Majors: [00:28:14] Yes, I'm so glad you brought that up! As leaders, we unintentionally derive our value from feeling like we need to have all the answers and be the smartest person in the room. And that actually shuts people down. And then, as employees who ladder up to leaders, we expect those leaders to have all the answers. Well, that's a bunch of baloney. Nobody has all the answers. But, if you work really well together and mitigate that misconception, the power dynamics in that relationship, you get everybody leaning in to share their ideas. And it's at the intersection of all those diverse ideas coming together where the incredible decisions are made. But we unplug when it gets uncomfortable. Those are some concepts that I try to help teams with and through. Labeling what appears to be uncomfortable conversations, it's actually part of the process, and that takes the sting and stress out of it when you're able to do that and does lead to more self-care.

Melissa Majors: [00:29:10] And you feel better when you've got teams of people that are happy and thriving. You feel better as a leader. There are ways that we can do this even better, and I'm a big believer that inclusive leadership concepts and topics are an incredible method to get there. There's one, also last piece of advice I'd like to give your audience, and that is to reframe their thinking around inclusion. So often we think, "Oh, everything's wrong. There's so much that's broken. We're not making progress." But the reality is we're not broken. We're just unfinished. There are still things we need to learn how to do to work, play, and thrive with people that are different from us. We're still learning. This is a learning journey. So we're not broken. We're just unfinished.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:30:07] Melissa Majors is the author of *The Seven Simple Habits of Inclusive Leaders*, a keynote speaker, and the founder of Melissa Majors Consulting. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode351, you'll find a link to Melissa's profile on LinkedIn and to her Web site, which features a variety of free resources around inclusive leadership topics.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:31] If you enjoy the podcast, we'd be grateful if you'd rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Jeff and I would personally appreciate it, and it doesn't take much time. Plus those ratings help others find the show. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:48] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode351, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:05] 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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