

EEP 128- Berwick Mahdi Davenport: The Solution to Ending Racism and Building Stronger Teams

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, leaders, racism, listening, authentic, thought, empathy, connection, life, create, solidarity, facilitated, authenticity, person, representing, authentic self, human, vulnerability, moment, question

SPEAKERS

Maria Ross, Berwick Mahdi Davenport

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 00:01

What we find out is that we have so many similarities, right? And then we have differences. And those differences are strengths, they are not threats, because what racism has gotten us to think is that those differences are threats, when we don't realize that we are living in the same world, and if we really saw the truth about people's differences, and saw the strengths, and what we can really do with all the difference that we have in this country, right? We have, we have so many beautiful, unique expressions, that if we open the door to the possibility of, you know, doing something different than what we always do, right, having that convergent thinking, but we always gone to the same thing all the time. And try some divergent thinking, opened the door to some some diversity for real,

Maria Ross 00:49

Right.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 00:50

You know, not just use the word but really open the door to what that looks like. I mean, we could be totally effective, we could transform everything.

Maria Ross 01:46

Racism was designed to keep us apart. It was designed to create conflict and a scarcity mindset. When we're socialized to hide our authentic selves, and not bring who we really are every interaction. We just cannot connect. Leaders whether tackling diversity and inclusion, or just everyday engagement and performance can learn a lot of lessons about how authenticity and connection lead to better outcomes. My guest today, Berwick Mahdi Davenport and I tackled big questions for some amazingly useful insights. Mahdi as he is known is the CEO of soul focused group, and brings over 30 years of experience as a practicing life coach, and anti-racist organizer, facilitator and spiritual teacher. Mahdi's primary focus is facilitating human connection that helps people recover and heal from racism, and

other forms of mental and emotional trauma. This expertise and passion allows him to expertly hold space for leaders to explore and heal from the cultural programming that allows racism to sustain. His organization provides workshops, keynotes, and facilitated gatherings to crack open tough conversations and find human solidarity, which he believes is the solution for ending racism, and enabling us to be stronger, more successful leaders. We discussed what is the ultimate human need, what role authentic connection plays in satisfying that need? How listening is the hardest but most effective practice for leaders, and he'll tell you about his talking diet with his team daughter. We defined honesty, vulnerability and authenticity in meaningful ways that you can apply to your leadership right now. And how a lack of them gets in the way of effective performance. Finally, we talked about how racism and racial inequity play out in the workplace and society, preventing us from creating together and making smarter decisions. I loved this conversation and hope you will to take a listen.

Maria Ross 04:02

I'm excited to welcome Berwick, Mahdi Davenport, otherwise known as Mahdi, to his friends and best podcast listeners, the CEO of soul focused group, welcome to the podcast.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 04:14

Thank you for having me, Maria, I really appreciate this opportunity to talk to your listening audience and to really just get down to business in terms of business of empathy, right?

Maria Ross 04:24

The business of empathy. I love that that was actually I think in the mix for the title of my book, but and I just want to bring listeners back to the fact that I found you through DJ John, who was on an episode previously, which I will link to in the show notes, really educating us on the difference between racism and race and the history of where racism comes from. And talk to us about a lot of the great things that soul focus group does, but now that we've got you here, let's remind our listeners what is soul focused group What is your mission? And what's your story? How did you come to this work?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 05:04

All those are very good questions, I would say, you know, the sole focus group, our mission is to eradicate racism, right? Through the creation of human solidarity. Right? Try to put it in in basic nutshell. What brought about the sole focus group was the idea that me and my business partner Dustin Washington had been doing anti-racism, organizing and facilitating workshops, we've facilitated over maybe five to 6000 workshops, we've trained hundreds of 1000s of people literally. And what we found was that there was something missing from our work. And what was missing was our relationship with ourselves. So we were sacrificing our families who were sacrificing our health. There were people among us in the movement who were suffering from addictions, suffering from financial issues, health issues. And we all learned to just ignore ourselves because our job was to change the world, right. And essentially, what we said to ourselves is that we're going to put living our life on hold, until racism has gone. So so much about what we will focus on. So, it's about everybody else, not about ourselves. And things got so bad for us that we realized that we left the leader behind, right. So, we are leaders, right. But we had left ourselves by and so we say we left the leader behind was, so we had to go back and get the leader, right? Go back and reclaim our lives, because we had essentially gave our lives up to do this work. And so we created sole focus, because we wanted to bring about a completeness in this

work while we do this work, but we also are balanced with taking care of ourselves, and aspiring to live our lives to the fullest in the face of racism. So we're not waiting for racism to be over, to live out to live our life to the fullest and to be the best leaders that we can be. We're doing it now.

Maria Ross 07:05

Oh, my gosh, there's so much to unpack there. I mean

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 07:08

Yeah, there is.

Maria Ross 07:09

It's just a what an amazing story. And what an amazing revelation that you all came to early on. It sounds like,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 07:17

Well, it wasn't

Maria Ross 07:18

Wasn't earlier. It wasn't early on. Okay,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 07:20

No. This is like 20 years.

Maria Ross 07:21

Oh, wow. Okay, 20 years down the path. Okay. And what you find yourself repeating what other people have done. And people are not really questioning everything. I think one of the things that we struggle with the most is being able to confess what we see that's not working, but we're doing it anyway. Because the people that came before us did it. Right. Right. Right. So, we felt we, as leaders, we felt a certain degree of any effectiveness. And we had, the biggest challenge among us was to come clean with ourselves about the fact that we weren't being affected. And that we would have to change our strategies change our approach at doing this work. And when you bring yourself back into the picture that was once out of the picture, it changes everything. Because now you having to have more complete strategies that are not just about focusing on the other people, but it's about how do I bring myself How do I bring ourselves into a place of health, happiness and joy? While we're doing this work, right? When you start seeing people completely differently, when you are happy, healthy, you know, how you see people, how you engage with people, as a leader, completely transformed well. And you also fill your well, so to speak, of being able to sustain the work because I think, you know, this is so true of empathy, as well, very empathic individuals tend to burn can tend to burn themselves out if they don't set those boundaries or practice self-empathy. Definitely. So, with all those good intentions, I was just doing an interview recently, where we talked about the fact that especially in jobs where empathy is required, there, you need to have those those abilities to step back to focus on yourself in an unselfish way. Yes, and build up your reserves, just like we charge up our phones every night. Right? It's, it's having that ability, otherwise, you can't do the work anymore.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 09:19

And that's, that's so true. Maria, I remember, there was a speaking engagement that I was invited to, to speak to a group of fathers, right. And I have three beautiful daughters. And at the time, they were they were babies, and the oldest was in high school. So, I went to speak to this group of fathers and, you know, I thought I did a real good job, you know, and tooting my own horn. They thought it was a great presentation, brought them to their feet in the standing ovation. And so, after was over, I picked up my oldest daughter from high school. She was in high school at the time, she was only 16. And I would pick up on a regular basis and when she would get in the car, I would ask the standard question. Just as a father, how was your day? She would start telling me about a day and I would immediately get on the phone with someone. You know, as a life coach, I was always working with people. And so, this was what I did on a regular basis. I never thought twice about it was just my routine, our routine. So, I thought, but this particular day, I said to myself, I really want to know something. But what I wanted to know was I wanted her to really pat me on the back, like the guys at the speed, the speaking engagement that I did. So, I asked her a question and I said, sit Nasha. Daddy wants to ask you a question. And I said, I promise I won't get upset. I just want you to be honest with me. I don't care what you say. I just wanted you to be honest. So that short that I'll be honest with you. So, as I said, Nasha, am I a good father?

Maria Ross 10:46

Wow.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 10:46

That was the question, right? Now, here. Here I am. As a leader, I'm about to put my foot in it. I don't know it, though. But as a leader, I'm ticking. I'm taking that, that risks. While at the same time my ego is saying, I'm no she's gonna see you doing a great job. So, I was looking for that pat on the back from her.

Maria Ross 11:04

You are looking for the validation.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 11:05

Oh, yeah. I mean, I thought it was coming. It was like, if someone would have told me it wasn't coming, I would have been like, no, you You don't know my daughter know, right. So, she says to me, Sure, Dad, I'm glad you asked me that question. Because I've been thinking about it for a while. Well, I kind of said back and you know, in the driver's seat, and I'm like, what do you mean by that? And I was like, don't worry about it. Just forget it. Just just tell me. Am I a good father? She says, to be honest with you. You are a lousy father. Everything stopped in my world.

Maria Ross 11:37

Wow

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 11:38

I have my head. Everything stopped. And my voice raised. I got upset. And I said, how, how dare you say something like that? All that I do for you. I can't believe you would say that. I'm a lousy father. And then I caught myself. And I was like, wait a minute, I promised I wouldn't get upset.

Maria Ross 11:56

Actually, you promise you would get mad. Yeah.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 11:58

So at that moment, I apologize to and I begged you to tell me why Give me one reason. One thing that makes me such a lousy father. And she says, and I'll tell you the thing that she said makes me a lousy father is the same thing and makes us lousy leaders. She says, Daddy, you don't listen to other thing. And I said, That's not true. She says you're not listening right now. I said, yes, I am. And we went back and forth that for a minute. Then I said, Wait a minute timeout. Can you give me one way that you know that I don't listen. She says, Daddy, I come to you all the time and share things that are very important with me in my life. And she says I was sharing with you to come back and ask you about it later, you have no recollection of it. And she says you do that all the time. And she said, I've come to three conclusions about you. From you not listening to me. Number one, you really don't love me. You you are doing what you have to do. Because as a father, it's your responsibility. Number two, she says I tell you tell people all the time that we are so close, stop telling him that we are not close at all. And the third thing she says, I hear you telling people that you know, you know me, she says you don't know me. And that moment, I was like, Oh my god. So as a leader, I'm getting a self-evaluation done.

Maria Ross 13:18

You are and you're like, I'm sorry, I asked

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 13:20

The same time when she said that. At first, I was thinking about myself, right? And then for a minute, I showed someone empathy, and connecting to what this must mean to her. Right? And what impact has me not listening to my daughter hat on her perception of our own voice? In a patriarchal world, right, where I'm out in the world, supposed to be representing what? A male in recovery. Right recovering my femininity, recovering my meat, understanding what it what it means the feminine energy, even the means right now in the workplace. That when she said that, to me, I was I started thinking about how she stopped feeling. And I felt something distance between us. But the first time I was became aware of that distance, because before I wasn't, I tricked myself. I thought we I really thought we were really close. And when she brought that to my attention, I realized I start seeing the science in my head, how much distance there was between us. And the last thing I wanted was to lose my daughter to the world, you know, for her to start looking to, you know, the outside for advice, versus being able to trust her parents being able to trust her father. So, I made an agreement in that moment. And I said, I don't know how that's gonna work. But I said, I promise you, I'm going to do this. I'm going to go into talking diet. And I said in this talk and diet, I said, I'm going to only talk 20% I'm going to listen 80% And I said, I can't tell you exactly what is what's that going to mean in real time. But I know I'm gonna practice it. And I gave him my word. And I dedicated myself for three years to literally listening, listening the majority of the time, which is 80%. And I will talk very little. And what I discovered was my leadership transform. Because I was leading from a place before, I'm not listening to people. So now, the first year

was like torture, I felt like a two-year-old put in timeout. Because the way I approached the world was more like, I thought, I was the only voice that was that mattered in the room. So, it was about you listening to my voice, not me listening to your voice, right. And we know that you don't find connection with people, if you don't listen to their voice. If you always have an expectation of them listening to you, but you're not listening to them, you don't create connection. So when I started becoming aware of just how disconnected I was from people, you know, that diet transformed my entire life, it transformed my relationship with my daughter, which was priority. But more and more importantly, it transformed my ability to lead people because what I started becoming present to is that people when you listen to him, tell you how to lead them. So essentially, people are leading themselves, oftentimes not taking responsibility for the direction that they've given themselves. And so as someone they look up to, you are giving them permission to follow what they know, instinctively to follow, anyway.

Maria Ross 16:32

Well, so there's so much in that because we've talked so much to too many guests on this show about humble leadership. And this idea of humility being a necessary ingredient to being great leader.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 16:45

Yes.

Maria Ross 16:45

And someone recently spoke to me about the difference between an authoritarian leader and an authoritative leader. And I think we all are striving to be an authoritative leader where we, we are guiding we are showing the way we are mentoring; we are imparting knowledge and wisdom. But sometimes it comes out as authoritarian. Yeah, leadership my way or the highway, right? Yes, I'm the only one that can have the right answers here. Yeah, so you're getting to just the crux of the essential ingredient for being an empathetic leader, which is the ability to be curious and actively listen. Because people will tell you what their perspective is, they will tell you what their experience is, if they know you're listening, and if you've built up sufficient trust for them to feel it's okay to share that.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 17:39

What the thing is, there's no way to build that trust without listening. Alright, that's the gateway, the minute you really show people that you are listening to them, it transforms the way that they come to you. You know, because on a spiritual level, listening creates a vortex that sucks their voice into you, right? I would say to people all the time, there is nothing more important to a voice than being heard. So, if I come into the room with listening, I come into I come into the room with some serious attraction. Right? People are highly attracted to me, because I listened to people on a regular basis. And I've you know, I've got a lot of billable hours of listening to people. So So I have a I have strong muscle. Now, what did I didn't have any muscle at all.

Maria Ross 18:26

Right. And I love this idea of a talking diet. Like I think every leader who's having challenges with their team needs to look at that as maybe an intervention step. So, you know, with the work that you do around, you know, the very just, you know, simple mission of eradicating racism, right?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 18:44

That's simple.

Maria Ross 18:44

That's what I mean, being sarcastic. Like, that's all you're trying to do is just

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 18:50

Yeah sure, sure.

Maria Ross 18:52

You know, that you talk a lot about creating human solidarity. And also, you know, this idea of what is our ultimate human need that we all share, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, what is the ultimate human need that we all especially as leaders?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 19:14

Right

Maria Ross 19:15

Understand that we need to help people fulfill?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 19:18

Yes, the ultimate human need, from my experience from working with hundreds of 1000s of people is significance, right? And sometimes significant significance comes in the package of a job title, or position, connection, relationships, love, but it all it's all doing the same thing. They want to matter. Yeah, it's putting us in touch with the fact that we matter. We want to know that we matter. When you look at the level of energy and participation people put into their lives or into their work. It goes up the more that they know they matter. The less that they think they matter when they start doubting that they matter participation goes down. Authentic participation. People you know, we'll find themselves in the workplace going through the motions all the time, but they call quiet quitting. Right?

Maria Ross 20:04

Right.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 20:04

There's a lot of people quietly quitting because they don't know that they matter. And there are some employees, some employers that have not really made it their business to let their employees know that they matter for real, has been more of a like a show. You know, in authentic show, today, people are really reexamining how they've been living their lives. COVID put us in touch with how much we have neglected ourselves. So as people reengage the workplace, they are coming from a whole different place than they were before. So employers, leaders have to be more than bosses to people, they have to be more than bosses more than overseas, more than supervisors, they have to be people who are invested in the growth and development of people's lives in a balanced way. Right. So, the job can't be the only the top value in people's lives. That's the new that's the new landscape, right?

Maria Ross 20:59

Well, I love that. And it gets to you know, when when you hear leaders being fed up with their teams, or saying like, well, they just they don't get anything done, or they take so long to do all these things, or they just don't seem engaged. It it's not just thank you for doing your job. It's, it's more spiritual than that. It's I need to know that it matters that I'm here that I'm contributing, that I work side by side with you, even when I mess up.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 21:29

All right. You know, what you're saying is so, so, so true, Maria, what we have to come to realize as a leader is that you cannot pay people anything of equal value no matter how much it is to their life. Right. But we have quantify the worth of life by how much we pay people. And we have not really gotten present to the fact that what does it mean, if a person is at work 60 hours a week, 40 hours a week? How does that impact their family, their children, we have not thought about that. For years, this has been you know, the status quo. What so what we do, because work is our highest value, I'm not saying work is a bad thing. What I'm saying is now we have to put it into context, in the context of living a life, right? So how do you live a life if you always at work? We don't end up not living a life. Right? So I tell people now, in my work as a life coach, and as a, you know, a practitioner of human solidarity, please don't forget to live. Because this thing happens so quick. I remember when I was in my 20s and 30s. No one told me, look, by the time you hit 40, this thing will go so quick. Gonna be like what happened?

Maria Ross 22:41

It seems to accelerate after 40. Does it does? So you know, with all your work around anti-racism and D and I belonging create helping people create inclusive cultures, whether in their own community or in their workplace? What role does forming authentic human connection play in satisfying that ultimate need of significance? And if you are not someone who readily can make authentic connections, whether you feel it's because you're introverted, or because you, you know, had some past trauma? What role does that ability to create those authentic human connections play? And if that ability is not your strength? How do you advise leaders to still help satisfy their people's ultimate need?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 23:39

Oh that's lot of stuff

Maria Ross 23:39

I mean that's a big question.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 23:39

A lot, a lot of good stuff you asked? Where do I start with our stuff? Yeah. Well, I want to start with a clarification around authentic, right? Because I am, doing a lecture at Columbia University in New York. And I was working with a group of graduate students, and I was talking about authenticity. And they said to me, you know, all of them, like raise their hand at the same time. And they said, you know, to be honest with you, we really don't know what authenticity is. Right? So a lot of people say, We want you to be authentic self, and we really don't have a grasp on what does that mean.

Maria Ross 24:15

Right. Right. So also, we also think it's an end state that looks the same for everybody.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 24:21

Exactly.

Maria Ross 24:22

Actually, is I go on this rant all the time when I talk to clients about being an authentic brand.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 24:27

Right.

Maria Ross 24:28

Whatever is authentic to you.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 24:30

Yes.

Maria Ross 24:31

It's not a thing that everybody that's authentic looks alike.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 24:36

Thank you for saying that.

Maria Ross 24:37

I'm sorry. I just got so excited.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 24:39

Because that's so true, because authentic is different in every moment. Right? Right. And we make authentic linear. We make it where we think is something as a way to be all the time, right? It is and it isn't. Right? So, it's a way to be spontaneous, unpredictable. Right? And all in, like in every moment in every moment of your life, if you being all in that what is being all in, feel like and look like, it looks like you accurately representing your own internal reality. Right. So that is our responsibility. Every human being is responsible, whether you are introvert or extrovert, you are responsible for the same thing. No one knows what is unfolding inside of you. So, it is your job to accurately represent what is unfolding inside of you. So, let's say I have a desire, and that's what makes us leaders. That's the first thing and it makes us leaders, that we all leaders of our own life, because we are responsible for accurately representing ourselves, right? So now let's let's talk about what happens if I inaccurately represent myself? Right? Because we have this conversation often around racist.

Maria Ross 25:49

Well, or when I try to look like I have all the answers, or I try to look like I'm not scared or edge looks like I've got it all together.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 25:57

Yes, yes. When I show up as an imposter, right, right, because I think there's some kind of way I'm supposed to be. That's not who I am. In that moment, right. So, when I talk about the idea of, you know, you have to completely be willing to represent yourself, because if you're not representing yourself, then what you have was doing what was going on is you're not building authentic connections. Right? So here's what happens. I call it the volcano syndrome. Every time you hold back, suppress what you really want to say about your inner reality, because you want because that's the drive in us to represent it accurately. And every time we misrepresent it, what it does, it builds up resentment, we build up resentment inside ourselves. So it starts interfering with our connection with ourselves. And this, what happens is, it happens so often, then what I call mad day happens, where you can't take it no more, you've suppressed yourself as much as you can. And you let it all out all at one time. It acts like a volcano, you spew all this hot lava on people.

Maria Ross 27:04

It's a great analogy.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 27:05

You know and then what happens people back off from you. They really reserved about you. And in some cases, they want to get rid of you. And you try, you're trying to figure out well, what did I do wrong? So what we tend to do is blame it on our authenticity,

Maria Ross 27:19

Right. Because it all came out at once.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 27:21

Right.

Maria Ross 27:21

You think oh, that's what happens when I share who I am.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 27:24

Exactly. It's not the authenticity is the fact that you've been practicing suppressing your authenticity.

Maria Ross 27:29

And now you just shocked people, because where did that come from?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 27:33

Not only not only shocked, he's what they shocked about, they thought the person you were being was real. They thought what you were sharing with them was accurate. And now they're having to rethink what comes out of your mouth. So, every day that we practice, we show up in our imposter syndrome is a day that we wouldn't have to give account for because the minute you come clean, people gonna stop making the connections about what you said before. So that's the thing about inaccurately representing yourself, you have to keep up with those in misinformation, you got to keep up with it in your mind, it puts pressure on your mind, baggage. And you know, it's my grandparents used to say all the time, if you tell one lie, you, you got to tell two you got to tell one for yourself and one for the other person. And

what they meant was a lie cannot stand by itself. It needs other lies to support it. So, we keep embellishing versus just coming clean and makes it harder and harder. The more we embellish, the harder it is to come clean.

Maria Ross 28:36

You know, you are sparking this thing for me, I don't even know what to call it, you know, just relating this to me with my own eight year old son. And just the times when I try to, you know, with good intention, I try to pretend I'm I'm calm in the moment and not he's not getting to me. And I'm trying to get him to either, you know, tell me something or you know, like, especially when he lies frequently. You know what I'm trying to go ahead just tell me what bla bla and then when I lose it, and I go and the real the real emotion comes. You can tell on his face. He's like, okay, so I know that that wasn't genuine when she was trying to get me to tell her the truth or saying that I wouldn't get in trouble or whatever the thing is, and you're just like, you're creating this parenting moment for me of like, that's what it is he's not connecting with with me being inauthentic instead of me just admitting I'm getting really frustrated right now. And I you know; I really want you to tell me this but you're not and so I'm gonna walk away for a little bit and then when I come back like that's authentic because that's actually what I'm feeling in the moment.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 29:45

Like that connection.

Maria Ross 29:45

It's not a big deal. Just tell mommy it's okay. Like I won't get upset.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 29:51

That's not real. And there's, there's something about us. You know, we are spirit beings. First of all, you know, we are nothing but energy. And that energy connects naturally with other energy at a certain vibration, right? So, when we when we are not being authentic, that means the level of vibration that we are giving off, will not connect with someone who is who is real. So, the more real we are, you know, the more distance a person creates when they're not being real, you, you almost like can feel it, you know, and children feel it more than anybody. They pick up on it.

Maria Ross 30:35

They are truth detectors, they're [...] detectors.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 30:38

Exactly.

Maria Ross 30:39

So how does this relate to? This is kind of a rogue a question for you, I tend to do that with my guests in the anti-racist work that you do. And in the DEI work that you do, how do you pull apart for people, when they're really being authentic? Or they're putting on a show of being an ally, because they know that they know that how they're feeling isn't what they should be communicating? And so, they're,

they're putting on these inauthentic guys. Is that does that lead them to ultimately embrace that authentically? Or, you know, how do you help teams navigate that?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 31:14

Well, I would say it is that, first of all, it's a process. And part of the narrative that racism has given all of us, regardless of what our race is, is that we can't show up as our authentic selves. That's a that is our narrative across the board. So, what racism has cleverly done in our processing, it is made our authentic, our authentic self of the problem. Now, that's, that's deep. So, we are always working on changing ourselves, because racism has gotten us to believe that who we are, is not enough. So if you're white, that's not enough. If you're a person of color, that's not enough. We all are reexamining and critically examining who we are. And the we feel like the work is moving through the false examination that that racism has gotten us to do allow ourselves to really get in close to who we really are for real, right, and to be able to embrace our true self, and learn that it's good enough, right? Because most of the conflict that we experienced in ourselves a struggle is coming from us being in conflict with ourselves, and us being afraid to articulate that to other people. Right. And there's so much strength that comes from me being able to come clean to you about what I really what I really feel about myself first. Because I tell people this look honesty, it really is the best policy. But honesty is not about telling the truth, telling the truth about you. Honestly, it's about telling my own truth. It's about giving your accurate location about where you really are, what you really feel and think and owning it and taking responsibility for it yourself. A lot of people think in this work, anti-racism work, they always want to tell other people's truth. There is no power in me telling your truth. Why you did this, then, you know, got my hand in your face, that there's no power in it. But there is power that is restored in me if I step forward and say look, this is what I'm really feeling and thinking and I'm going to own that was essentially honestly puts the spotlight on you. I can't be honest for you, and you can't be honest for me. So honestly, has has a medicine as a spiritual medicine in it. That returns us to our power almost instantly. I've seen people in rooms, right big rooms of people, community people, and one person come clean. And it creates a I mean,

Maria Ross 33:41

Well, it opens it invites other people. They're like, hey, it's safe to do it, too. Yeah, I'm gonna do it too. Yeah. That is very cathartic. I think for me it is. You just need that one person to be brave and one person just open right?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 33:55

It's like Adam has been cracked open the atomic bomb right goes.

Maria Ross 33:59

That's why if a leader can set the tone Yes, for that. I mean, I I'll put a link in the show notes to a podcast I did early on with a leader Paul Mirabella, who was seen about leading during major crises. He was a CEO during 911. He was the CEO during the financial crash. He was a CEO during cocoa, right? All of these things and he said what he learned number one was what you started this interview talking about was how self-care helped sustain him that he couldn't be Superman and he had to take care of himself and his family before he could be a good leader for his teams. And number two, the fact that vulnerability, I always talked about it as confident vulnerability. You can be confident in your vulnerability

and not be just like a heaping mess of tears on the floor. I must genuinely feel but he was talking about the fact that when I started to share with my teams that I didn't know I was scared to. I wasn't sure how we were We're gonna get through this, and just can't lead from that place of like I'm admitting to you my vulnerability. He said it changed the dynamic of his team's relating to each other and to him because he has the model as the leader made it. Okay?

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 35:15

Right.

Maria Ross 35:15

You admit your honest truth [...]

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 35:18

Maria, how can I be with you, or you be with me if I don't give you my accurate location?

Maria Ross 35:20

Right.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 35:25

And to me, that's what vulnerable being vulnerable is. I'm telling you where I really am emotionally and mentally, which gives me the opportunity gives you the opportunity to be with me, it gives the people in your life an opportunity to be with you. I've worked with people in my coaching practice, who were married 20 something years, and they were so far apart from each other, because they didn't practice giving the accurate location. So something comes up, they hide it from each other. And then they literally hide in each other's face. You know, they think the person is right there next to him, but who they really are, is not next to their body is next to you, but who they are is not next to you.

Maria Ross 36:04

Such good stuff. You talk about human solidarity as the solution to ending racism, can you define for us what you mean by human solidarity? And why is that the solution,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 36:16

I would say a human solidarity is authentic human connection, that solid, right, and that we have a practice amongst each other. authentic human connection is solid, well, we all are working to stay to stay current. So when I show up, I show up as myself, I'm not showing up as an imposter. I'm being as current as I possibly can, so that you can know me and I can know you. And then what we find out is that we have so many similarities, right? And then we have differences. And those differences are strengths, they are not threats, because when racism has gotten us to think is that those differences are threats, when we don't realize that we are living in the same world. And if we really saw the truth about people's differences, and saw the strengths, and what we can really do with all the difference that we have in this country, right? We have, we have so many beautiful, unique expressions, that if we opened the door to the possibility of, you know, doing something different than what we always do, right, and having that, that convergent thinking, well, we always gone to the same thing all the time, and try some divergent thinking opened the door to some some diversity for real, right, you know, not just use the

word but really open the door to what that looks like. I mean, we could be totally effective. We could transform everything.

Maria Ross 37:41

Well, I mean, the research out there, we've we've spoken about this on several shows, too. It's the data is there that when you have a diverse executive team, a diverse leadership team, you make better, more profitable business decisions, because you're not all caught in making the same mistake you've got, you're looking at the picture from different angles, and you're considering all the options before you make a decision. And you might consider an option that no one else in the room thought of or avoid a risk. No one else in the room saw coming. Yes. And so you know, the more we the reason I wrote the empathy edge was to give the business case for empathy to skeptics to say it actually look at how it improves the bottom line. Now, my heart and my soul just want us to be in a more empathetic world, right. But if we can meet skeptics where they are, and convince them to give it a try. So it's the same thing. I'm like, I'm trying to you know, as much as I can get that data and that research out there that diverse thinking makes better decisions.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 38:44

Yes, definitely.

Maria Ross 38:46

I mean, fear it. We don't want to be surrounded by Yes, people, you know,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 38:51

We'd get past get pass or out of our ego, right. And I talk about that a lot in our work about having an assigned ego. So through socialization, indirectly, we are all assigned an ego. It's something that we heard in our childhood growing up, either from our parents all from school teacher from somewhere in society, that we latched on and start trying to thought that being that person, that personality, would get us what we need in this world, right? What get us up a leg up in the world. And so we take that personality on, and it's not until maybe 30 or 40 years down the road, we realize this is not who I am. This is what the world gave me to be. Right.

Maria Ross 39:38

Right.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 39:39

And so a lot of leaders operating from that place. Right? Supposed to ensure I'm supposed to do this.

Maria Ross 39:48

These were the rules. I was taught how I got to be successful. Yes, I say this all the time about us having empathy for leaders, especially in this new world of work, this future of work where we do We do want people to bring their whole selves, we do want them to bring emotion, we do want them to bring vulnerability. If we're being empathetic about the more seasoned leaders, that's a big paradigm shift for them. And they're like, but wait a minute, for 30 years, you were telling me I had to be this way at work. And now all of a sudden, you know, Gen Z comes along, and now I have to change, right? And I think

that empathy goes both ways of like, yes, they still need to change. But be empathetic at the fact that that's a big change. They can't change on a dime. And interestingly enough, I don't know if you've found this in your work. I had an interview with another DEI expert. My heart who goes by heart, he runs the heart learning group out of DC. And he he talked about the fact that sometimes it's the hardest for him and even him as a black man practicing as a DEI professional. He said sometimes my the biggest, most obstinate the most obstinate leaders are actually sometimes the leaders of color. Oh, that's because he said, because now I'm telling them to change all the rules that they like you said their assigned ego had ascribed to for years. Yes, yes. He said, versus being a little bit more agile and flexible, like the younger generations are. So, it was it was a fascinating conversation. He said, sometimes, that's where I have the biggest barrier.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 41:23

Well, I would, I would agree to that. And I would say that what I had to wake up to as a leader in this in this field, was that nobody grows in your face. And everybody deserves to have the risk, the respect and the space to grow. None of us who are doing this work got to where we are overnight, we all saw ourselves grow and go through challenges away from everybody else. So people didn't get a chance to see the messy stuff that we experienced in our lives. Right, right. Because then we'd show up in front of the audience. And we clean up really well, in front of audiences, everybody think we have it all together. But people don't know the story behind like, I tell people all the time you go see a movie, and you don't realize it took five years to to put this movie together. And if you saw the steps and stages it took to put it together, you would understand more about the reality of your own life. But well, we are always presenting a movie. So we're like, we're going to do this presentation, Lights, Camera Action. And the person you're seeing is not the person that it's not the whole person. Because we we got to learn to be able to express ourselves in a way where we're being vulnerable, as you talked about, right? So that's, that's a big thing. Because we right now, we all been asked by the universe to make some shifts. Yeah, I'm at the sole focus group, we say, number one, we honor mistakes. Mistakes are have high value in our company. Because we want people to feel it's okay to come to our workshops, and make mistakes. Right? We are not afraid of your mistakes, right? We have been trained, though, through our socialization, to not only be afraid of it, but to attack a person for the mistakes they make. Right. And so, we've transformed that totally, because we want people to feel like, we want to embrace your growth, we want to we want to be supportive of your growth, because we know that where you starting at, it's not going to be where you end up. But but the thing I was ready to tell you was some time ago, I had this big epiphany around this right in the epiphany was when I was in my early 20s. I read a psychology book that said a whole bunch of things. But there was one line that stuck out to me for all these years. And the Lion said, it is next to impossible to get someone to believe what they don't want to believe. And I was like, oh shit, right? That's huge. Because racism is a belief system. Yeah. So how do you change a belief, you can't force someone to believe something they don't want to believe it is the power left up to that person to choose to believe something different. So when I got that, for real, I stopped bringing to the idea that we are sharing our perspective. I'm not trying to change what you believe I want but I want you to see my perspective. And I'm willing to see yours too. Because what this conversation has been missing is us being able to share each other's perspective without attacking each other. We are so afraid that if we listen to the other person's perspective, it may change us

Maria Ross 44:37

Right or we're condoning it.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 44:39

Exactly.

Maria Ross 44:40

Yeah.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 44:41

They're just listening to it, you know. So, we could just listen to each other's perspective. And then we all still have the power as adult learners to choose to believe or not believe. Because racism is not afraid of evidence. Racism is not afraid of the truth. And it's not afraid of proof. You could bring all All those things because racism exists in the realm of belief in the realm of belief. It's not about,

Maria Ross 45:04

Right. It's like religion.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 45:06

Exactly. All the truth you want, you could say all of the, all of that you could provide all the evidence, and we've done it for years. And it's not going to move a person, if they are in a place of believing it. Because racism says, I don't care if you for me or against me as long as you believe in me. Because even those who are against racism, believe it helped to keep it alive. Our belief in it keeps it alive.

Maria Ross 45:31

That you know that that concept was brought up during the pandemic for people trying to figure out how to reach people who were her who were anti-vaccine. And the whole point what they, you know, they came around to was like, throwing more facts at them is not going to change their hearts and minds don't move, don't move. It's about listening. It's about sharing stories. It's about maybe getting them curious enough to to seek out a different alternative to the narrative they've been telling themselves.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 46:02

Yes. When are people most likely to make a change in the scope of a relationship with someone else?

Maria Ross 46:10

Someone they trust.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 46:12

Exactly right. When people, that's when we all you know, somebody comes into our lives, and they become this, this this, this force that demonstrates that they care about us beyond what we thought was possible. And we almost immediately start feeling a need to grow. You get I'm saying almost immediately, but happens in the scope of relationships. That's why we say human solidarity is about human connection, authentic human connection, that solid because in connection, we influence each other, and we grow in a more healthy way than outside that connection.

Maria Ross 46:48

So much good stuff, how, what is soul focused group doing to further this movement? You deliver workshops, do you go into companies,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 46:57

we deliver workshops, we go into companies, we do keynotes, we, we meet with anybody we can be with, because we realize that people have become so accustomed to fighting. Right? So, we say creating is the new fighting, right? Because we don't want to say that fighting is wrong, because it has its place. But when you fight all the time, at the end of the day, you have nothing to show for the fighting, right, because the fighting is a destructive energy, you tearing something down, but you're not creating something. So we say let's replace fighting with creating, we are working to create human solidarity. And we do it through these workshops, these lectures, podcasts, you know, coaching sessions, you know, we meet people where they are.

Maria Ross 47:43

Right. And basically any group can come to you if they want to have some sort of facilitated session, whether it's a workplace group or community group, or school group.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 47:53

It is all of it, we have, we have all of it. We have diverse leaders from different backgrounds, we've worked with, you know, in different disciplines that are capable of bringing this conversation in a way that's really heartfelt, connecting, and respectful, right? We don't we don't shame people, right? When we feel people feel guilty, we are not trying to change anyone, we actually trying to get you to be more of yourself. And we're saying racism has done a good job of moving us away from who we really are. And we need to move back to who we really are. So that we can really see ourselves and and see each other. You know.

Maria Ross 48:33

I love it. I love it. Mahdi, this has been such a great conversation. I know we get in a few different directions, but I love it. And I love the work that you're doing with so,

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 48:43

Thank you so much Maria.

Maria Ross 48:44

We need more of that I can I can think of like five different places you guys need to get in and facilitate. But for you know, we'll have all your links in the show notes so people can connect with you and find out more about your work. But for those on the go, where's a good place that they can check out your work.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 49:02

Where they go to our website, soulfocusedgroup.com And check us out we have we're getting ready to launch a new website. We you know, we've retooled our toolboxes and we were excited about it. So soul focused group.com

Maria Ross 49:18

Check that soul focused F O C U S E D group.com. Mahdi, thank you so much for this conversation and for sharing your insights and I just really, really support your work.

Berwick Mahdi Davenport 49:32

Thank you so much. I appreciate you.

Maria Ross 49:33

And thank you everyone for listening to another great guest on the empathy edge podcast. If you like what you heard, please share it with a friend or colleague. Don't forget to rate and review. And as ever, always remember our mantra, cashflow, creativity and compassion are not mutually exclusive. Take care and be kind.