

Bold(her)

When Belonging intersects with Bold

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Lisa Bragg:

We are so much more than our titles and the labels we put on ourselves and each other. In this episode, we're talking to Dr. Rumeet Billan, and we'll get into the plus that matters to improving our lives and our workplaces.

I'm Lisa Bragg, and this is *Bold(h)er*, helping women make their next bold move, brought to you by BMO for Women.

Rumeet, congratulations because you became the owner of something brand new. It's so funny because I talked to you right before you were about to make the announcement, and I said, "Rumeet, what's your current title? What are you up to, because you're always up to something?" You said, "I have something just about to launch, but I can't tell you yet." I was like, "Oh, so exciting," but your Women of Influence, and you added a plus. What does that mean to you?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I did, Lisa, and I really, really wanted to tell you at that time when we were exchanging e-mails and then the second the news came out, I e-mailed you, and I was like, this is what's happening. Yes, so I took over Women of Influence on December 1st, and we did a huge rebrand. Women of Influence has been around now for 29 years and when I took it over, it was important for me to add a plus to the name. For years, the organization has been talking about intersectionality, but it was about time that we represented that, especially in our name.

It's to underscore the importance of intersectionality. Yes, I identify as a woman, but I also identify as a woman of color. I am first generation Canadian. I live in an urban city. There's all these pluses that contribute to the experience that I have. When we think about intersectionality, even for you, Lisa, all the intersecting factors contribute to your experiences too.

Lisa Bragg:

Because we're all different, right, so people don't necessarily see the socioeconomic conditions that you grew up in or are currently in, especially if they're just having a conversation with you for a few minutes. There's visible and invisible things that make up intersectionality, so we can obviously think of gender and race, physical ability. Why did you think it was really important for you as part of Women of Influence to really talk about this now and to move that forward?

Rumeet: I think oftentimes we want to label people and we want to put them in a box so that we can understand them but what we don't understand is that there are so many layers to an individual and the experiences that they have. Whether that's through the recruitment process in a workplace or whether that's through the systems that they interact with. It's all these factors that contribute to our experiences and we can't just put someone in a specific bucket.

Lisa Bragg:

We hear so much about diversity and inclusion, which sounds really good, but then people say, "Nobody sees me." We have a podcast coming up about ageism. You might be a white woman and people don't see that about you, and so it is all the different labels that go with someone. How does it work with diversity and inclusion and intersectionality? How do we think about them both?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Oftentimes, or for a long time, I should say, people were talking about diversity, equity, and inclusion, and that conversation has changed to incorporate the idea of belonging. I think it's important because you can invite everyone because you're trying to be inclusive. Whether that's an event, a conference, a party, you invite everyone. "I'm going to invite everyone. I want to be inclusive," but the question is, what happens when they get there? Do they feel included? Do they feel accepted?

Do they feel safe sharing what it is that they're thinking and feeling without fear of negative consequence? It's all about the experience. It's not just about inviting everyone, even though you are trying to be inclusive. Yes, that's important. Oftentimes, we miss the boat because we don't focus on the experience. What happens when we get there? That's where the belonging piece really matters.

Lisa Bragg:

Do you find it's harder or easier for people to have conversations about intersectionality?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I think people are still trying to understand it, to be honest. I think it's something that has been in our conversation recently. This is something that has been spoken about before, but there's more of a focus on it now. I think really people want to understand and I do think that there's an eagerness to understand the concept.

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, I think there is but you're right when you said people want to label people. We just want to know and know the labels of people. It misses out when we do this labeling on so many things that are about the person. It's our hobbies, our values. It goes beyond the superficial labels that we immediately put on each other. It's a challenge for all of us to-- It's actually a challenge, but it's actually almost human to move beyond all of those things but we've been in this time of such deep labeling. Do you think it's going to take time to move forward with it?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

100%. I want to add a different dimension to this conversation about labeling and putting people in boxes. It's something that I have really emphasized over the last three years, because we've gone through a lot in the last three years. Is that it's not just about the labels, but we also have no idea what someone else might be experiencing. We have no idea what's happening in people's personal lives. We have no idea the challenges they might be going through. Yes, we want to label people and put them in a box, because we are trying to understand them.

We want to make understanding but add that layer of, now you've put them in a box, but you also have no idea what they might be experiencing, that actually impacts how they show up each and every day at work. We bring our whole selves to work. I think it is going to take us time but what I am optimistic about and hopeful about is the fact that there is awareness around this. There is awareness that I don't just identify in this one way, that there are layers to me. There are different factors that contribute to my experiences.

Lisa Bragg:

It's interesting, because a young man, a few years ago, he said to me, "I'm having a hard time navigating at my law firm." He was a young white male, and he was having a hard time navigating and it's because he grew up in extreme poverty. He couldn't understand the culture and the social norms that were in this law firm. We wouldn't think that intersectionality would necessarily play in for him, but it does play in for all of us and understanding, okay, so he grew up in extreme poverty with one parent, and then the parent was pretty much absent.

He grew up by himself and that was a different challenge for him, where it doesn't nicely fit into the boxes of what people would have had for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the past. Is that an example of it?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I think that's a great example, and sometimes when we make assumptions about someone else, we can actually marginalize them, and so we don't want to be putting people in boxes. It's really about getting to know each other, and all the different factors and layers and talking to each other and that idea of communication, beyond someone's job title and their position or their role. I think that's really important.

Lisa Bragg:

I like that because it allows for more curiosity about each other. How do we have the conversations, though? I've had one friend who said, never ask people where they're from. We live in Toronto, which is very much multicultural, and it's actually quite a topic all the time to ask people. I was in a room the other day where I was the only Canadian, I'm using air quotes, Canadian born, like born in Toronto, and everyone else was from away, away in Canada, or away in the world. It was beautiful, but we're also being told not to have these kind of conversations.

How do we be curious, but also respectful as we move forward with each other?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I think that's a great question. Can I add a question to that? If we're not asking someone where they're from, we're asking them, what do you do? We're putting them in a box again, and again, I do emphasize because we are trying to understand. We are wanting to put people in boxes so that we can understand but to your point, we got to be careful about the questions that we're asking, "Where are you from?" Some people can take offense to that question. It's like, "What do you mean where I'm from? I'm from Canada."

Or it's, "What do you do?" and then we make assumptions based on what they tell us. Are we judging people if they tell us they're the VP of X company, or if they are a teacher, or if they are a plumber, or a mechanic, or an engineer, or a lawyer? It's also how we ask those questions and what questions we're asking. Maybe we start with, "What interests you?" Or. "How's your day going?" versus, "Where are you from? What do you do?"

Lisa Bragg:

Yes, those are good jumping-off points too. It adds to then the direction can go where they need it to go more so than, okay, I know here's what you are and what I can get out of you because you are the VP, or you are doing this somewhere and I can get these things out of you. Versus, actually, I genuinely want to get to know you as a human so that we can have a long-term relationship. Then I'll

probably get something. We have that exchange because humans want to help humans in the end eventually. It allows for more belonging in that conversation. Do you have a few other tips that when we're starting, because Canadians also love to say about the weather, which is very boring, but we do? What other kind of conversation starters, do you suggest that we can have when we're just getting to know people?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I love that question. Can I share a story with you before I answer that one? You just prompted something that happened years ago, but I'm remembering it now. It's this, I'm not very good at networking, which I think I should be better at networking, and it could be because I'm an introvert. I remember walking into a networking event, and you're given this name tag and on the name tag, it says your name and the position title. What people are doing is they were walking around and just looking at your position title, and they would decide whether or not they were going to talk to you based on that.

I will tell you, Lisa, I was there for two minutes, and I walked right out and it was just not my thing. Because if you are going to start a conversation with me specifically based on my position title, I don't want to have a conversation with you. That rubs me the wrong way. When we think about conversation starters, I mean, you can ask people about their day and it's not even like-- and I'll go, there's some research around this. It's not even around like, "How are you?" It's like, "Tell me something interesting that happened today. What do you like to do on weekends?" Or, "What is your interest professionally?"

That question is interesting because their interest professionally may actually not be what their position title is. If we're trying to get to know somebody, it's going beyond the titles and the labels.

Lisa Bragg:

I like those so much. Another one we could add is, "What brings you here?"

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Beautiful.

Lisa Bragg:

"Why are you here?" [laughs] "What brings you here? What is it?" "Oh, I'm a friend of so-and-so." I think too, we have to watch because people might have that title today and titles are so fleeting and they don't really matter as much as you realize because you are onto the next thing so fast nowadays. There's hidden gems beyond those titles. And so really caution to say, oh, I'm going to seek out the VP of something or other just because that might not be their title anymore.

Understanding that's professional influence and positional influence instead of professional influence. We have to watch those two together. I think a lot of it is that we want to belong, and belonging is, we've been remote, we've been out of sorts for the last few years and it continues on. I think you have some studies about it, but we want to belong to things and say, okay, there's my people, there's my group, there's my community. Tell us a little bit about your thinking with belonging right now.

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I've done quite a bit of research in this area on belonging. We did a study as well last year that we commissioned with Ipsos with employed Americans. My biggest aha moment when I was doing the research side of it was that belonging actually doesn't have to do with being a part of a group.

Belonging is actually a unique and subjective experience. When we look at what the actual definition of belonging, it has to do with the experience. I can be a part of a team, but that does not mean that I belong.

We have to take it a step further of there's that belonging piece. What was interesting is, especially in, I would say, 2022, is this idea of belonging was quite a popular topic among organizations and everyone was talking about the importance of it. We're still talking about the importance of it, whereas I think two to three years ago we weren't. No one was talking about what does it actually mean and how does it translate into the workplace? What does this mean? How does this show up in actions and behaviors? I asked. I wanted to know the answer to that and I asked.

The number one thing that came out in the research study, and I've done this study twice now, is being treated with fairness and respect by our colleagues, by our supervisors. Fairness and respect. Lisa, you don't need me to tell you that that's important. We all know that's important. What I encourage us to think about is what are the actions and behaviors within our team, within our department, that support that? That's fairness and respect in the workplace. That helps to create a sense of belonging.

Lisa Bragg:

It's that self-reflection to pause and to think about that but what's a prompt that maybe somebody could have to say, "I'm going to stop and really think about fairness and belonging and fairness and respect in my workplace?" Is there a prompt? Or even the person who comes in front of me. If we're talking to some people who work at BMO, what is a prompt that they can think of in their head as they have something in their desk about to have a new meeting with someone? Is there a prompt that you can suggest that they can take the time to reflect on?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I'll give you an example. I was consulting for a group. I was working with frontline staff, and they were doing a values activity. Of course, one of the values that kept coming up was respect. Respect should be one of our values. I challenged them and I said, "Okay, tell me, what does that look like? Give me a specific example of what that looks like in your role." A gentleman put his hand up, and he said, "When I say hello to management, they say hello back." What we learned was that wasn't happening.

It's going to be different for different teams, for different departments and so a prompt for ourselves is, what does this look like in my department? When have I felt respected or disrespected? When have I felt that something was unfair? Why did I feel that? What value did it work up against? If I want to promote and support fairness and respect within my team, within my department, within my organization, I can't just put it in a value statement. I actually need to outline what are the actions and behaviors that are associated with this, and it is context-specific.

Lisa Bragg:

I like that. It's context-specific but that's a challenge, though, too, especially in a place like Toronto or Canada widely because we have so many people coming from all over the world and have grown up in different-- Thinking back to intersectionality again, what is good for me isn't good for someone else and if you're coming in also from somewhere where it has much different social norms, cultural norms, how do we marry that together in a workplace? I think that's probably a whole other podcast.

How do we marry all of this together where it's not homogeneous, and it's so diverse, and there's so many intersectionalities? How do we bring it all together and make sure somebody knows that we respect them in the culture and context that we actually live in?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

The answer is simple and complex all at the same time because what we need to do is get to understanding. How do we get to understanding? It has to be through dialogue. It's also understanding that sometimes we might get it wrong. Sometimes we might say something that may offend someone else but how do we get to the other side of that? We might be engaging in microaggressions and that might not even be aware of it. It's about getting to dialogue versus fight or flight or freeze.

We want to get into conversation and get to understanding and sometimes we may need to apologize because we are going to get it wrong. We're human. We're not going to get it right all the time but if we can frame it as, "I'm here to learn. Can you help me?" I think that opens it up to dialogue.

Lisa Bragg:

I like that a lot, being able to apologize. I also wonder about on the receiving end when you do feel that there has been a microaggression against you, how do you open yourself up to realize that people are learning and to accept the apology to move forward? Is there any thinking that you can share with us about that?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Yes, I'm going to share two things actually. First, when we are apologizing, it's also about the language that we use. It's not saying, "I'm sorry if you felt this way. I'm sorry if it came across in this way." No, no, it did. It came across in that way. They did feel that way. We need to be aware of the language that we use when we are apologizing. The second piece, if we're experiencing microaggressions, and this comes from Dr. Christa Regis's work, who's a behavioral psychologist at Harvard Business School.

He has this framework of conversations and engaging in difficult conversations where we do want to address it and he has a three-step formula where you start with the facts. "Lisa, you said this." You share your intention. It actually came across in this way, and you open it up to dialogue. "Is that what you meant to say?" I think if we are on the receiving end of a microaggression or we do want to address something that's been said in a meeting, we can use that framework. We start with the facts, we share our intention, and we open it up to dialogue.

Because Lisa, you may not have meant to have said it that way. You just might not be aware, so that communication has to be two-way.

Lisa Bragg:

I think it's mostly, "Oh my goodness, I didn't mean that. Here's what I meant and let's continue a conversation where it grows." I always would hate that somebody would walk away and it would fester inside of them and ruminate, and then it becomes much bigger. I think it's nice to have that dialogue. It's crucial to have that dialogue and consider the conversation. I appreciate that.

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I think it starts young. I have my son who's almost seven years old, and he comes home and says all these words and I'm like, "No, we don't say that," and he'll ask, he'll say, "Why don't we say that?"

and it makes me think about, how do I explain this? He's coming home, and if we think about language that's being used or historically that we use, and it's like, "No, no, that's not appropriate." "Why isn't that appropriate?" He doesn't know, so explaining it, and I do think it starts young.

Lisa Bragg:

We need to keep moving and learning and growing and the reality is we don't know what we don't know, but how do we help other people move forward and also protect ourselves in all of this too? It's that belonging piece. I know you also talk about loneliness and thinking about loneliness in the workplace too. If we're not belonging, then we're feeling lonely. Talk to me a little bit about that, feeling lonely. I know in entrepreneurs, a lot of us feel lonely, especially as your business grows. No, even from the very first day, because [laughs] nobody understands you and why you would do this and it's a lonely toil. In many workplaces too, as people climb the ladder, they feel lonely. Talk to us a little bit about loneliness.

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Thank you for that, Lisa. This is why you and I get along so well, is we get it. We completely get it. I think loneliness is such an important topic. When someone doesn't feel as though they belong in their organization, that leads to alienation, that leads to burnout. Of course, it does, it leads to underperformance because they're busy being someone else. If I can't be myself and show up as myself at work, I feel as though I might not be accepted, I'm going to show up as someone I'm not. If I'm showing up as someone I'm not, that takes energy.

Of course, I'm going to be burnt out, underperform, and feel alienated, and people do feel lonely. So when we did the study in January 2022 with employed Americans, what we found in our data is that one in four women felt lonely in the workplace. Think about that, our workplace is where we spend majority of our waking hours. To feel lonely, I think we do need to address that, because that impacts also our performance. It impacts how we show up, how we connect, it impacts the culture of the organization.

Lisa Bragg:

To combat that loneliness, it doesn't mean, hey, invite us out to have more drinks at 5.30 or 6 o'clock. It doesn't mean that. You can still do those things but what I liked, one of your events recently that you held it at lunchtime and you said, 'Come for lunch,' and that made it easier for people to say, "Yes, I can." Talk to us about thinking about how do we help people to join our things and be included. You might be hosting an event, thinking about, people have child care and other or elder care, just different responsibilities, and so changing the different times, adding times in makes a difference, doesn't it?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

It absolutely does. I can rarely attend events after 3.30 PM and if they're held in the downtown core, I have to leave by 2:30 because of the traffic, because I do pick up, I do drop off as well. It's interesting because when we hold events at 5:30 or 6 PM, people can attend, but there are people that can't attend. I think it's interesting in terms of timing. I was working with a client, and this was a couple of years ago, where she wanted to create a family environment for our organization. She said, "I try to host these things where we go do games after and people don't come."

I said, "Yes, because they've spent their day at work, they're going home, or they have other plans, whatever it might be." What we ended up working together with the team on is once a month on Fridays, she would cater food in at lunchtime, and everyone would break bread together. You can

create that family atmosphere in different ways, but it doesn't have to be outside of work hours. We just need to get creative. What's worked in the past doesn't work now, especially if we talk about hybrid work and people coming in on specific days or other days.

They may not be in the office or they may not be in the downtown core, and we need to take that into consideration. Things need to change. The other piece to that, Lisa, too, is we're not going to create a circumstance where it's going to satisfy everyone's needs because things come up, but if we choose to ignore it, we're likely leaving up more people than we could be including and creating those experiences of belonging.

Lisa Bragg:

Rumeet, in my book, *Bragging Rights: How to Talk about Your Work Using Purposeful Self-Promotion*, I did some research and I found that actually 85% of us are cheering for you. In your thinking, in your research, in all the things that you've seen, how can we actually in a concrete way support each other on our journeys? Any suggestions?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I think that that is incredibly fascinating for a number of reasons. When I did the Tallest Poppy study, which looked at successful women and whether or not they were attacked or ostracized, or resented because of their success and or achievements, we found that over 86% of women who responded to our survey in 2018, we did it specifically in Canada. This year, it was an international study. Both times over 86% had experienced feeling ostracized, resented, attacked, or disliked because of their achievements.

I think what ends up happening is we don't celebrate each other's success. Instead, we might feel as though if someone got a piece of the pie, that's less pie for me. I think this notion of supporting each other, regardless of how you identify, is incredibly important and something that we don't engage in.

Lisa Bragg:

Just so we're all clear, could you tell us a little bit more about what Tallest Poppy?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

means? Absolutely. The term was coined in Australia and it comes from the metaphor of poppies, where the flower, the poppies are expected to grow together. If one poppy grows too tall, it gets cut down so that it is the same size as the rest of the poppies. We translate that into the workplace and my studies both focused on women in the workplace. If one woman succeeds or gets a promotion or an award, and "grows too tall", does she get cut down so that she is the same size as everyone else?

I knew anecdotally that this was happening, but I'm a researcher, I needed the data and what we found was that this is happening. We wanted to learn who is this happening to, who is doing the cutting, where is it happening? Is it in a specific industry or a field or position? What we found was it was happening to everyone, by everyone, across everywhere. It's sad. It's a sad reality. We had hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages of data and stories of women experiencing tall poppy syndrome.

Lisa Bragg:

Any difference between 2018 and your current research from 2023?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Not much has changed, sadly, even though it was interesting because this year we did ask a question of whether people were working hybrid and or remote or in person. Of course, there were a majority of people that were either fully remote or hybrid. It didn't actually matter whether they were in the office physically, or if it was hybrid, they were still experiencing tall poppy syndrome. Another interesting fact, which I find fascinating, is that it's not only happening in the workplace, it's happening outside of the workplace.

Half of respondents said, "Yes, I've experienced it outside of the workplace," and of those respondents, half of them, 50%, said that, "It's my friends that are doing the cutting." It begs the question, who are our friends, right? Not only is it happening inside the workplace, and then what ends up happening is we downplay our achievements, we don't share them with others, because we're afraid that we're going to get attacked or resented for it, we might not raise our hand up for that next promotion.

People are scared if they're perceived as ambitious, that they're going to be penalized for that. What ends up happening, people leave the organization, or they're looking for new roles. There's a lot that's going on in organizations, and I call it the silent systemic syndrome because it's happening, we just don't talk about it.

Lisa Bragg:

We don't talk about those things, we keep our head down, do good work and hope somebody will notice us. Or when we go and talk to somebody, like at a bank, that we aren't talking about our successes the way we should be, because it's so inherent and trained in us to make sure we play small and don't talk about it. Then we think that you're going to-- Some people in my survey too thought people would be mind readers, like, "You should read my mind, you should know that I want this and that I can do these things, and I have all this great business or this great knowledge behind me.

Aren't you a psychic? Aren't you able to do that?" We hope people are, but the reality is we're so focused on ourselves in this world that we don't take the time to really look at someone else and say, "Here, I can help you," or that I'm doing this to you. We don't even realize that we're always doing it to the other person. What's some advice that you've gleaned from your survey and your studies that we can actually really celebrate each other's successes more? Anything on your end?

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

Yes. We asked a lot of respondents, who better to ask than those that experienced it themselves? There were a number of things that came up with the first one being to build awareness. So many respondents said that, "I didn't even know it had a name. I didn't know that my experience had a name. Thank you for putting a name to my reality." Many people felt alone in their experience, and that connects to the belonging piece. If feeling alienated, feeling lonely, feeling isolated, all of those things are connected and we feel more alone.

When we talk about that as well, it's, I'm experiencing this because of me, and we internalize it. When we know that tall poppy syndrome occurs because the other individual is either jealous or envious or has low self-confidence, or there's sexism at play or racism at play, there's so many other external factors that are at play, but yet we internalize it. The additional strategies that the respondents talked about, in addition to building awareness, is about holding people accountable, regardless of their position. It could be the CEO that's engaging in this behavior.

You have to hold that person accountable, just as you would hold anybody else accountable. It's about being transparent around salaries, around promotion processes. Are you just promoting your friend? Or is there a process in place where I actually have a shot at this? I think the big piece here, though, is talking about it, recognizing it, naming it. When we do that, people feel like they can belong, and that they do.

Lisa Bragg:

We were talking about titles earlier, and that your professional titles, while they're fleeting nowadays, that our careers and our lives go far, far beyond titles, which really goes to the book you wrote, *Who Do I Want to Become?* I bought several copies, one for my daughter, her school, and a friend. Tell us about the book.

Dr. Rumeet Billan:

I love how you frame that because when I actually created the book, I designed it for both children and adults because I don't know about you, Lisa, I'm still trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up. The book was inspired by children that I met around the world, where I was asking them the question of what they want to be. They weren't sharing with me the position titles, they were actually sharing with me who they wanted to be, how they wanted to show up. That was really inspiring, because here, we focus on position titles, what do you do?

We want to put people in boxes, and we put ourselves in boxes when we just focus on the what. When we do that, we limit ourselves. When we shift the conversation to who do I want to be, how do I want to show up, I think that actually opens the door to so many possibilities. Actually, if we think about that, we can take it a step further and say what experiences do I want to create? Do I want to be that person that's cutting someone else down because they got a promotion? I don't know about you, but I don't want to be that person.

It really allows us to focus on how we show up in the world and who it is that we want to be.

Lisa Bragg:

Who Do I Want to Become? is available at all major bookstores. Thanks for joining us, Rumeet. To find out more about Women of Influence+, go to womenofinfluence.ca.

As I mentioned earlier, our next episode is with Helen Hirsch Spence, an age provocateur. She'll have us changing our minds about how we think and talk about age.

I'm Lisa Bragg, and you've been listening to Bold(h)er, helping women make their next bold move, brought to you by BMO for Women. Subscribe to Bold(h)er so you get the episodes sent to you right when it releases. Thanks for listening.