Defining Moments of Leadership with Marsha Acker and Kadidra Hurst on Allyship

Marsha Acker: Hi, everyone. I'm Marsha Acker, and this is Defining Moments of Leadership. My guest today is Kadidra McLeod Hurst, and we are exploring what does it mean to be an ally, and more importantly, in the vein of Defining Moments, what's the impact on others when we step forward into this role and what's it like when we don't. Let me tell you a little bit about Kadidra before we dive in. She is an agile delivery lead, an agile enthusiast on a mission to empower her teams to reach their next level of productivity and output. This role taps into her natural-born leadership and empathy skills, 10 years of project management experience, including a background in IT and over 25 years of experience. Kadidra's IT education started with Brooklyn Technical High School, followed by obtaining a BS degree in information management and technology, computer science from Syracuse University. She received an MS degree in Information Systems and Technology Management from George Washington University, and holds certifications from Project Management Institute, Information Technology, Infrastructure Library, and the Scrum Alliance.

Kadidra also has a strong passion for social and economic justice and is active in various local and national organizations which promote advocacy and voter education, empowerment, and engagement. She is most proud of serving on the core team of agile color, which is a professional development and mentoring organization targeted to serve persons of color in the global agile space. When not working, volunteering or learning something new. Kadidra is watching something on Netflix, Hulu, or Disney+ hopefully without commercials and spending time with her husband, daughters, stepchildren, extended family, and two dogs. I look forward to you meeting Kadidra, so let's dive in. Welcome, Kadidra. It is such a pleasure to have you on the show today. I'm so glad you could join.

Kadidra Hurst: Thank you. I am so glad to be here.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I've really been looking forward to our conversation. So I am curious, you're an agile delivery lead and an agile enthusiast, and I'm just curious about what is that? What does that look like for you each day?

Kadidra Hurst: The Agile delivery lead, it's a position that they have at my organization, and I'm a scrum master, so day to day I serve in the scrum master role, but it's a little bit elevated because I advise and consult with the product owners, and in terms of getting things to my teams, I help with development of the roadmaps and collaborating, cross team collaboration things. So it's a scrum master, but a scrum master plus, plus plus. And my company just named that role solutions manager, agile delivery lead.

Marsha Acker: Nice.

Kadidra Hurst: Agile enthusiast, is what I do with the rest of my time. My CIO says that I drank the Agile Kool-Aid and really I did because my company decided three to four years ago, okay, we're going agile. I was a project manager at that time and we all went to training, and for me something just stuck. I had not heard of Scrum or Lean Agile or anything related to Agile up to that point. So after taking the training and getting involved in the Agile community, it's really something that I'm excited about, something that I believe in, and that's my agile enthusiasm. My work outside of work is doing agile stuff.

Marsha Acker: I love it. What's at the core of your enthusiasm for Agile? What do you believe is there?

Kadidra Hurst: The human touch. Agile project management is about the whole person. Okay. Yeah. You have your teams that's coming in and doing the work, but they are all people and they are all unique and they have their own challenges and they have their own everything, and they bring that with them to the work. So it's about balancing all of that together to complete the job and bring value to customers.

Marsha Acker: One of the things that drew me into the agile space was very similar. I felt like it was, I finally made the conversation about working with other humans acceptable and actually something that people were striving for. So I find a lot of alignment for me with what you share about your enthusiasm for Agile. Kadidra, how did you get to where you are today? I'm curious about maybe your earliest concept of leadership growing up. Where did you first or come in contact with the idea of leadership?

Kadidra Hurst: I found out really early that if you just do what the teacher says, then you'll be in better shape than if you didn't. So I was that child who, and I still am, I always do my homework. I always listen to what's said and unsaid, and when unsaid is the reaction of the person to what somebody else did. And I say, okay, well I'm not going to do that. So I was the one who was always called on and I was at the top of the class all the time in terms of grades and things. So just being that hall monitor, door monitor, student of the month. I have a certificate from kindergarten where I got a citizenship certificate and I was so proud of myself.

Marsha Acker: That's awesome. What was the citizenship certificate for?

Kadidra Hurst: Good citizenship. Just being a good student and being nice to the other kid.

Marsha Acker: That's awesome. Well, what I hear is a real attention to the overall whole that you were contributing to as you navigate your leadership. I'm curious about, as you continued your career, did you ever think about or aspire to do some of the things that you do today? I know you're really active in some of the agile community under your agile enthusiast role, so I'm just curious, did you ever aspire to some of that?

Kadidra Hurst: Honestly, no. It's not really aspiring to anything but showing up, contributing, raising your hand when you can support things, and that kind of naturally puts you in leadership positions, if that makes sense. So I wouldn't say, so right now I'm working with the group Agile in Color, and we are an initiative of the Agile Alliance, and our goal is to try to get more speakers of color at the Agile conferences, submitting talks, keynote speaking, anything that they would like to do. And I am on the core team for that group, not because I aspired to it because I didn't even know it existed, but I did notice that we needed an organization like this. And if agile and color didn't exist, I could tell you I probably would have founded it because I too recognize the need for it.

Marsha Acker: That's fantastic. So Kadidra, I'm wondering if there's, as you think about your whole trajectory, one of the things that we talk about on this podcast is defining moments of leadership and if there is a defining moment that had an impact on how you think about leading.

Kadidra Hurst: Absolutely. So for me, my defining moment in leadership, especially with the agile community and with Agile in Color, I was attending an Agile virtual summit meeting conference, that's a yearly event that is put on by Adam Weisbart, and it was in 2020 and it was after the George Floyd murder. And Diane Larson, who is very famous author of the book, Agile Retrospectives, she was giving a talk and I wanted to join the talk, and I don't even remember what the talk was supposed to be about, but changed her entire talk and it became a Black Lives Matter talk. So that really made me sit up in my chair and want to listen as a black person who was upset by what was going on, the unrest that was going on all across the country. And through the chat I'm seeing, oh, why are we talking about this? Can we get back to the topic?

And a lot of people in the chat did not want to talk about it, did not want to hear it. And that, for me, is why I said earlier, okay, if this organization didn't exist, I would've founded it because that was very jarring to me. And it was the first time. I've noticed that when I go to my agile training classes and the meetups and all of that, I'm the only black person there and I'm the only black person in a lot of spaces. So I didn't really think much about it, but when we got to that session and the feedback that was going on in the chat, and it's really anonymous, we don't know who anyone is, it's faceless. So people were just being very unkind, and that's what projected me to say, we need some more.

These people are supposed to be empathetic, supposed to be understanding of other things going on, everybody bringing their whole selves. And they were in the chat just talking totally against what Diana was saying. And to me, that made me respect Diana

even more because I don't know if she could see the messages, but she just went on and she was a true model of an ally to me.

Marsha Acker: There's so many things in what you're saying that I want to click on. Number one, I'd really love to hear, it's a such a pivotal moment, and as you say, you're coming into a session, somebody's changed the topic, something that you care about. What people couldn't see when you were talking a moment ago is that you said you set up and you actually sat up in your seat now and leaned forward. So this concept of hearing something that I'm going to make up resonated with you and had you lean in a little bit. But, can you say a bit more about what happened for you in that moment when you started to recognize there was criticism or critique coming in, anonymous and faceless critique coming in? What happened for you?

Kadidra Hurst: It made me feel like I was not welcome, and I don't know if I should have taken it that personally because it really wasn't about me personally, but I will say that it made me feel excluded from the community.

Marsha Acker: I can totally see that. The other thing that I hear and that experience is that it sounds like it created dissonance for you.

Kadidra Hurst: It did, absolutely.

Marsha Acker: Yeah. What was the dissonance?

Kadidra Hurst: The dissonance was that on one hand I had this image of what the Agile community was, because in the traditional project management community, it's the same, but we know that most of the PMP are white men. So, that's something that I was used to. So when we got to the agile community, I thought there would be more open mindedness, if you will, and to have experienced that, again, I felt separated. So a few months later is when I learned about Agile IN Color at another agile virtual summit because one of the founders had came to talk about Agile IN Color and what the mission was. And I immediately reached out on LinkedIn like, hey, I'm here. And the rest is history.

And CP, who was the person I reached out to, I could tell he was feeling me out and saying, okay, well why are you interested and what are you trying to get out of this? And I said, I just want to find my tribe and help grow this idea. Because we do have black people in the Agile community. And I have yet to find someone black who has been a part of the community for 20 years. So when the whole idea started of Scrum, for example, were any black people in that room? I don't know.

But everybody that I see who's like, oh, I've been doing this since the beginning, none of them have been black. Yeah. So that was the dissonance that, you have this idea of what you think it is, and then you experience something that's totally different, and that changes your whole... And it did. It changed my entire trajectory and it didn't make me dislike any methodology, I guess, if you will. It didn't make me dislike it anymore. I'm still an agile enthusiast, but it made me see that, okay, this agile community is just like any other community that I might find myself in. And I took it off the pedestal that it was on.

Marsha Acker: I really love what you're pointing to right now. This notion of putting a movement or a community where there are values that are, you've talked about looking at the values of wholeness and humanness and that humans look very different, and that we should really be embracing all of that humanity. And then finding the dissonance in maybe the gap between believing that you've bought into a certain value and then experiencing in the moment getting to see some other different part of that that maybe creates a gap. And I wonder, I'm curious about your perspective, because I think that's true in many circumstances where we talk about, or we espouse, one set of values and then in action sometimes there's another set of values that come forward. What's your perspective about the agile community? What should we be doing in the Agile community?

Kadidra Hurst: I think the Agile community should inspect and adapt itself, right? That's what we're supposed to do. So in doing that, you take a look at what you're doing. So let's say the defining moments of leadership podcast. And you say, what has my guest roster looked like? And who am I inviting to be on my show? Who's saying yes? Who's saying no? Why are they saying yes? Why are they saying no? And if you do that, and if you look deeper into anything that you're doing, then I think it reveals itself. So as an example, for me as a scrum master, and I'm in a meeting, it's the same thing, okay, who's in the meet? Who did I invite to this meeting? Now that everybody's here, who's speaking up? Who's speaking in the meeting, who's not speaking? Why are they not speaking? And I think that's something that I do personally. And I think if we do that, then we can identify where the holes are and then we can try to fill those holes.

Marsha Acker: You said a few moments ago, you talked about wishing that there was more open-mindedness in the agile community. If there was more open-mindedness, like what do you imagine it would look like?

Kadidra Hurst: I think that we would hear from more voices, other voices, little known voices. A lot of it is about who you know or how popular you are and how many LinkedIn followers you have. And really we could be missing out on some voices using that type of framework to accept talks. And this year at the DC Agile Conference, they did a lottery for the speakers. So people submitted and then they were selected by lottery. But again, I didn't see a lot of speakers of color there. And maybe another thing to look at is to say, okay, well, who submitted talks for the lottery and how can we get more diverse speakers and less experienced speakers?

Marsha Acker: As you think back about this particular moment in your whole leadership trajectory, what's something that you've taken away from it? What did you learn?

Kadidra Hurst: One thing that I learned is that I think the agile community is just like any other community I might find myself in. I have been a black person in white spaces for my whole life. So I said, okay, well this is how I need to approach it. And it's not a bad thing, it's just America. It's how America is. And so, some people may say, well, why do we need a Agile in Color? And we are separating ourselves, and it's not a separation. It's to being able to have a community that's accepting of all and helping our members develop so that they can make it to that next level. We have a program called Colorful Voices where we invite new speakers to come and practice their talks and get feedback so that they can make stronger submissions for these conferences and things.

Marsha Acker: I love it.

Kadidra Hurst: And it's helped me too.

Marsha Acker: So I'm curious about over the next six months, where are you focused? What's your passion leading you towards here in the next six months?

Kadidra Hurst: Continuing to grow? I am speaking, I'm coming up, I'm doing a talk at the Agile Virtual Summit coaching edition where I'm going to talk about how anybody can be an agile coach no matter what your role is at your job, whatever your job title is, you can be an agile coach. And I'm also planning to submit for another conference.

Marsha Acker: Don't take her idea.

Kadidra Hurst: How to be an ally, rise to allyship in the agile community. And I'm very excited about that talk because it's really telling everyone how you can be an ally to help get more voices of color in this space and more welcoming.

Marsha Acker: That's awesome. I have to tell you, in hosting this podcast, I never know what topic people are going to bring in. We all have so many defining moments of leadership, I believe, but I am so grateful for you today and you bringing this topic in. Because I think it's something that we need to be talking about. I want us to be having more conversations about it. My whole orientation to life is what's the conversation that we need to bring in the room, and how do we bring it in the room rather than keep it offline? And how do we put faces behind it rather than having it be anonymous, and how do we work towards the good of individuals and the whole? And so I just really am grateful to you for bringing it in, and I think it's something that we need to be talking about more and more.

Kadidra Hurst: Yeah, and I thank you too, because when I sat down and started recording, I did not even know I was going to talk about this. But it's not a pretty discussion. A lot of times when I try to talk about, and I'll just say diversity issues, people really take it personally. And it's not something that you need to take personally, it's something that you just need to consider and explore and inspect and adapt. And I think if we all do that, then we can make such strides in that area.

Marsha Acker: Yeah, I couldn't agree with you more. I think there's so many topics that are front and center for all of us today, where I hold a perspective that there's value in learning to dialogue about it, to really inquire into someone else's experience or point of view, so that we can see and understand. And I think if we could just begin to practice the scene and understanding and inquiring part, then it informs the actions that we might take that might be a little bit different than the actions that we're bringing forward. So love the conversation. So glad that you're bringing it forward. Love the mission of Agile in Color, so glad that the organization exists and that you're out doing that work. Well, I end every podcast with a speed round of questions where I just say a sentence and you say whatever comes to mind and fill in a sentence. So are you ready to dive in?

Kadidra Hurst: I'm ready.

Marsha Acker: All right. So leadership is-

Kadidra Hurst: Is motivating people towards a goal.

Marsha Acker: A piece of advice I would give my younger self.

Kadidra Hurst: Just do it.

Marsha Acker: Period.

Kadidra Hurst: Just do it. It was a Nike slogan when I was growing up.

Marsha Acker: That's nice. One thing people sometimes get wrong about me is-

Kadidra Hurst: That I am outgoing. I always tell people that I'm shy. But I'm really shy and I'm not as outgoing as people think I am.

Marsha Acker: Something that brings me joy.

Kadidra Hurst: Roller skating.

Marsha Acker: When you look forward to the future, what kind of leader do you want to be?

Kadidra Hurst: I want to be the type of leader that brings other people up into leadership to come behind me.

Marsha Acker: Nice. It sounds like you're well on your way to doing that. If people want to get in touch with you or are curious about any of the things that you've been talking about, what's the best way for them to do that?

Kadidra Hurst: I am trying to be more active on LinkedIn, so I would say that's the best way. On the time I post, I do the messages, feature so anyone could contact me via LinkedIn.

Marsha Acker: Perfect. Kadidra, thank you so much for being on the show. It was such a pleasure to have you.

Kadidra Hurst: Thank you. It was a pleasure to be here.

Marsha Acker: Kadidra and I had a really important conversation about being an ally and the impact it can have on others when we show up as one and the impact it has when we don't. At Team Catapult, we hold a belief that change does not happen until people feel seen and heard. And that what you resist persist. So here's what I mean by that. It means if we can't talk about a topic and bring the conversation into the room, then it will continue to undermine the greater impact that we're wanting to have. And until we can also create a space where people can voice what is true for them, even if it's different than what

others have experienced, and not have that contribution dismissed or stepped over or devalued in some way, then change will not happen. And I'm going to tell you, I've spent the last six weeks in multiple rooms with different groups watching the energy thinking and outcomes change dramatically for the better.

Just by the very simple and yet sometimes really hard action of creating a space where people can voice their experience and have someone else, hopefully more than someone else, more than one person say, I totally see what you're saying and I'm sorry that this had that impact. We desperately need more spaces of dialogue and less monologue if we are going to navigate differences in all kinds of ways. And I love the vision that Kadidra holds for an agile community that is open-minded and receptive and curious and diverse and human centered. Yes, I could not be more aligned with that. And I also love this reminder she offers to all of us, to pause, inspect, and adapt. Like who's saying yes and who's saying no. And what might the reasons be for this, and what role might we be playing in those yeses and no's. I asked myself those very questions as I started season two. And I am actively working to make that better.

So check out Agile in Color, get involved, learn what they do. I really appreciate that organization. The inquiry that I'd leave with you today is what's one action you could take to create a space where someone feels more seen and heard than maybe they did yesterday? And then just do experiments, like notice, what makes the conversation different today from the ones that you had before. I really appreciate you being here. If you want to continue the conversation, come join me in the Facebook group in the defining moments of leadership community. Keep growing your leadership range and defining your own model for leadership. And I'll see you next time.