

Here at AWS _ S1E08

Speakers: Geetha Annamalai & Meena Morrish

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Geetha: Hi, I'm Geetha. To join any workforce, you're bound to feel some anxiety, we've all felt it. You sit down at the desk on the first day at your new job and you think, "What am I doing here?" It's that little voice in your head that wrongly tells you this isn't your place, that can be damaging and stressful.

At AWS, the well-being of employees is really important. In this episode, I want to understand how one can navigate these feelings. Welcome to Here at AWS.

Chennai to London, that's a long, long way to travel, isn't it? What was it like moving from Chennai to London?

Meena: My first thought was, God, everyone's so much taller than me.

Geetha: That's Meena, she's a solution architect originally from Chennai, now in London. While she has settled now, the change between living in Chennai and living in London was a big one.

Meena: I always had to look up to talk to people more often than not that like I need to get some heels for myself first. And then the next thing was there was this really loud noise inside my head saying, "Look at how different you are."

And I remember the very first conversation I had to have with the gentleman working in the supermarket aisle asking for some tomatoes. And I think at that time, I said it as "tomatoes" or something like that and he had to make me repeat it four or five times before he understood what I was asking for, and that knocks your confidence.

Geetha: It sounds like Meena felt anxiety about being in a new country. I felt this too when I originally moved. It's incredibly strange getting used to a new country and its culture.

Meena: I think the biggest barrier was myself really. Because like you say, I had this amplified voice in my head saying, "Look at how different you are or you can't do this," or it's that constant comparison, isn't it? And that's okay, and looking back on it, I think it's quite natural to have that comparison constantly.

But because of that, I excluded myself from everything. I remember it took me about three months to actually have the courage to go to a local gym. And then I was watching like they had this open plan for group exercises, and I watched them have a dance exercise sort of group class, and it was amazing.

They had the 1980s music as well, I think they were playing Arbor or something. And it was brilliant, I was like, "Wow, that looks so cool." But it took me another year to actually gather the courage to join at that class.

When I did, it was the highlight of my week and I really enjoyed it. And that was quite liberating because you stop worrying about being judged. Not that anyone is judging you or not judging you, but it sort of takes away the relevance of that. And I started doing things for myself, so that was very, very liberating for me.

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Geetha: For Meena, taking charge and making positive decisions in her personal life made her feel less like an outsider.

Now, in many ways, entering a new workplace is like starting over in a new country. There's an incredible amount you need to adjust to. So, let's move on to Meena's time at AWS. What was joining AWS like for her? Did she feel intimidated or was the experience more welcoming?

Meena: When I decided to move roles and I was really comfortable with my previous employers as well. Very, very happy with them, great work-life balance, great growth, wonderful people. And moving to AWS was me staking all of that, and that was the scariest thing I've ever done. But I'm glad I did it, but at that time, oh my God, was it scary.

Geetha: That's interesting because a lot of people would say like before joining, they feel they're a bit overwhelmed. So, I hope that scariness has gone away right now.

Meena: Whenever you start a new job, you're quite excited. You have applied that because you want to be there and you look at the positive things.

So, I was a bit like, "Well let's just give it three months, see how it goes and then we can form an opinion." And the onboarding itself was amazing, the fact that we say every day is day one, that's so true.

Because the past is the past and you bring your best self every day. So, that really resonated with me and the leadership principles like think big and customer obsession, and the fact that we talk about growth mindset and imposter syndrome. We had a training, so I'm in the architecture team and we have a week of training for new SAs.

And one of that focuses specifically on imposter syndrome. How everybody has that, how you should adopt a growth mindset to overcoming how everyone starts from somewhere.

And that's quite reassuring to know that you're not alone, it's not just you who's thinking like that. You're surrounded by high performance and it's hard not to feel like, "Oh God, should I really even be here?"

But it's very nice to see that's an emotionally astute organisation to look at people and what they might be thinking psychologically, and helping overcome that, helping

them grow as individuals. So, it's very different to anywhere I have been and it's very, very refreshing.

Geetha: At AWS, it's really important everyone feels like they're where they need to be. And as much as we want creative and empowered individuals, we also want people to feel part of something. Seeing such a diverse group of employees meant Meena really felt seen and heard.

Meena: Because it's so diverse, it's not even like a skewed diversity, it's truly diverse. And that makes me feel quite included if that makes sense.

It's like it makes me look at people as individuals, not attach any generalisation, not attach any identities to them. And that has helped me grow as an individual because it helps me break those initial barriers and get to the person or the essence of that person, and that's great.

Like I said, the training they give around, what did we say? We have this forte feedback going on currently where they call out the potential subconscious biases that might come to your head and how you can overcome it.

So, they're really mindful of not just diversity but also, how we as humans respond to it psychologically. And I think it has a profound impact on individuals.

Like my manager, he actively challenges subconscious bias on my behalf when he sees it. And that's like, "Oh wow, okay, even I didn't notice that." And those sort of changes percolates. And there's no, "Oh, you've only been here two years, what are you doing?" Sort of thing.

It's always about think big, think about how is this adding value to the customer, whether it is external customer or internal customer. As long as you are able to do that, they actively help me with the training which is great, but they also tacitly help. Just by the sheer of diversity, every single person I've come across have only made me feel wanted like I belong here.

We always say to each other, "You've been through the loop, you belong here." The loop is the interview one, you've been through the loop, you belong here. And what you do once you get here is completely up to your own initiative. So, yes, it's taken me a while, but yeah, I definitely feel like I belong here.

Geetha: Diversity of gender in the tech industry is something I'm quite passionate about as women still make up a much lower percentage of the workforce. What does it mean to Meena seeing other women in tech?

Meena: I went to this event called Women in Cloud event this Friday, and I was absolutely blown away. The sheer talent of the panellists and the speakers, the diversity you saw in it, but also, the similarities that you could see in them and the tips they gave was just amazing.

And those are people I didn't know that were in AWS, and just everyday people around me just looking at them valiant. I'm in the greenfield team, one of the managers there, she's a woman. And it's nice to have people around like that

because you are always thinking, “Am I doing too much? Am I biting off more than I can chew? Is this all too bad? Am I overlooking my family or am I overlooking work?”

And you always have that guilt constantly inside you. And just having those women around me and listening to those women in the event was really, really relaxing and calming, and I feel like, “Okay, that's okay, I can do this. I can take it one day at a time, it'd be fine.”

Geetha: Good, because obviously they kind of reassure you that everyone is going through it.

Meena: Yeah.

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Geetha: While she still feels like a sense of imposter syndrome from time to time, Meena's obviously more certain in herself than she was at the beginning of her time at AWS. And part of that is probably about recognizing when those feelings arise, it's about being aware of herself and others at AWS.

Meena: Professionally, I'm a lot more confident than where I was before, but I think I still have quite a way to go. I've sort of consciously dropped any identities that I might carry. Like when I think of myself now, I don't think of myself as an Asian woman in IT, I am Meena in IT.

Whereas when I was ... this was going back a decade ago, my identities were very strong and I always identified with certain traits and I'm like, oh I need to be there, that sort of thing. But now I'm like, “Oh Geetha, what does Geetha do? Not like, oh Geetha is so and so and we have that in common,” none of that.

I'll be like, “That's Geetha, what can I talk to Geetha about?” That sort of thing. So, that I think has really revolutionised my life for me because I've got friends who I wouldn't have thought of being friends with before.

I've got a great network of colleagues, I'm in AWS, I'm able to adopt that growth mindset. I didn't know growth mindset before AWS, I was like, “For real, are there really people that think like this as well?”

So, that is something I'll carry with me, not just in AWS, but for the rest of my career because being in IT, the technology is so fluid, the cadence is so high, you can't stay on top of everything.

And as much as I want to go into a meeting saying I'm the absolute expert in this technology, it's just not possible. So, now, I try to go into meetings thinking I know enough about this technology, but I also know where to go and learn more if I need to.

Geetha: I asked Meena what advice she had to share with people at the start of the journey, whether that be in AWS or the wider tech industry.

Meena: First thing I would say is if you are in, you belong, no one can cheat the system. I mean, it's eight hours of interviews, so nobody can get through that faking it, so don't worry.

The other thing is everyone's on their own time zones. You can't wake up in a British time zone and look at Japan and say, "Oh God, I wish it was evening already," we're all on different time zones.

So, it is quite easy to look up to people and think, "Oh, I'm not that good at any of those things at all." But don't worry about anything like that. It's more around, "I'm here, what are my goals? How can I progress on achieving them?" Learning from all those people of course but not comparing.

I try and set aside at least an hour every day just for learning. It doesn't have to be about technology, it could be a trend within our industry or it could be about emotional intelligence.

Again, at work, we currently have this certification drive going on which is seeing how much certifications can you get in the year. And the idea behind that is that you add more value when you speak to customers the first time. So, it's nice to be in an environment that is very conducive for that learning.

So, I try and set aside an hour or two every day for learning. I'm always looking around me for people who are doing some really cool things to say, "Hey, how did you do that?" And getting mentors, I think is very, very important.

It brings a human side of it and you're looking at people and their achievements, I think. But when you have a mentoring relationship, you're looking at the journey of that person behind those achievements, and that is the most learning for me.

How did they go about learning technology? What sort of technology? Why that sort of thing? So, yeah, that's how I try and stay on top of things. For me, if people are bold enough to listen to me, I will talk to them for days on end.

Now, I think it's very important to share what journey you have been on, it's not anything to say you're less wiser than me or I know more than you, it's not like that at all. It's just that, hey, I took the trail that you are trying to start and I can share what I know.

And it's a two-way learning, we've got a bunch of new starters in our team and we're always learning something from them during the meeting. So, for me, it's very important because you can nurture somebody, watch them grow and you can learn from them as well.

Geetha: This is something I found really useful. Nurturing talent or even just sitting down for a chat with a new colleague is something that is beneficial to everyone. Like Meena says, we can all learn from each other, and Meena obviously feels a sense of fulfilment when she's supporting others.

Meena: Eventually, I would like to do something that brings mental health together with technology. I know there's lots of digital therapies and mindfulness, and that sort of

thing, but I would like to explore what I could do in that space, which hopefully, will be of value.

Mental health, it defines the colour of the lens with which you view the world. I am in therapy for my own improvement and the difference that it has made for me, I'm so grateful to my therapist just within few months. The difference she's made to me as a person is fantastic.

I feel like we miss the opportunities to look at people, it's very easy to go into that inward facing mindset and unless we actively work on maintaining a good mental health, you missed the opportunity to be in a better place, I think. And the reason why tech and mental health is the one thing we all carry with us all the time is our phones.

Geetha: At AWS, we're all about supporting employees to feel comfortable and effective at work. Meena has really grown in the AWS environment, the diversity here also made her feel valued with a sense of ambition for the future, and she has some other big plans.

Meena: Well, my retirement plans are to have a bakery somewhere in Spain but I won't call that an ambition.

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Geetha: Amazing, thanks so much to Meena, for a fascinating discussion and thanks to you for listening. It's always so fun to chat with new people from this AWS family.

Constance: Exactly, no one here is just an email address, everyone is building something and they all have a story to tell.

Geetha: That's it for now, so don't forget to subscribe.

Constance: And hey, if working up here in the cloud seems like fun, why not check out our websites in the bio? You may just be the person we're looking for.

Geetha: We'll see you next time on Here at AWS.