

AWS: Season 01 Episode 05 - Transcript

Speakers: Geetha Annamalai, Anita Sood, & Constance Souchet

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Anita: The way you engage with your community, your teams around you, and then linking that to listening and actively listening to what's going on around you, you can pick up really diverse and unique ideas and thoughts.

It just helps you be able to push the boundaries, experiments and fail and take risks and just being free.

Geetha: Hi, I'm Geetha. Every day at AWS, I'm astounded by how empathetic my colleagues are. Being part of AWS means being part of a thriving community where we all lift each other up to do incredible things.

Human connectedness really drives this company. Today, I want to chat to someone that really gets this. I want to get more of a sense of how a philosophy built on empathy can improve our work environment and support our IDE goals for the future. Welcome to *Here at AWS*.

Anita: When you have trust and you have it in the community, you could do anything.

Geetha: This is Anita.

Anita: I've been in tech all my career and been very lucky because I've been inspired from a really young age with AWS. I was actually on my maternity leave with my second child, my daughter and I was having coffee with my mentor and she's an incredible female leader.

So, for the last 10 years, our paths have crossed multiple ways and she was explaining about big complex go-to-market problem she was solving in Asia, and it really lit me up. It kept me up at night thinking about all the different ways and ideas that I had. And next thing I knew, I was in an AWS loop with three incredible women leaders.

Geetha: Anita is a partner sales lead focusing on startups in Asia. I wanted to speak to her on the podcast for a while. If you've listened to the podcast before, you'll know all about the leadership principles at AWS, core philosophies that we all share.

For example, Invent and Simplify or Learn and Be Curious. Thinking and acting based on core beliefs is what makes teams at AWS so effective. Alongside these principles, Anita has her own life philosophy that really lifts her work.

We spoke the other day and you mentioned this idea to me; love, listen, learn. What does that mean to you?

Anita: Love, listen, learn is a philosophy that grounds myself in my personal life, my family, but also the people around me at work and with our customers. Love what you do in terms of work, love what you do in terms of the way you engage with your community, your teams around you.

And then linking that to listening and actively listening to what's going on around you. You can pick up really diverse and unique ideas and thoughts, and then if you connect that back to learn.

So, having that growth mindset and always learning, it just helps you be able to push the boundaries, experiment and fail and take risks, and just being free if you think of it as a learning opportunity.

So, love, listen, learn is something not only in my personal life but at work I apply. I probably reword it a little bit differently when I'm with my team and my customers. So, I talk about elevate, empower, and inspire. That's something that really resonates.

Whether it's a one-to-one mentoring session or whether I'm talking to another woman founder who's looking to kickstart their startup. It just helps you rethink about the world and the challenges in front of you.

So, it's kind of a motto that across my team, we use not only in our customer engagements but actually with my team for their career development.

Geetha: I really love this philosophy. It's grounded in trying to be understanding of others' needs and wants. We are human and so are our customers. I wonder: where does Anita's philosophy come from?

Anita: I'm really fortunate to have the blend of a Polish Indian heritage and I'm first generation Australian, and that's been an incredible source of what's made me up today in terms of my DNA, the way I think, the way I look at the world.

And I would say the combination of my father being English Indian, quantum physicist, a data scientist - really that "think big" mentality is lit up inside me.

Every dinner table conversation we have is always about what new technologies are out there, whether it be about the latest things that quantum computing can do right through the exciting things that gen AI and large language models are transforming the way we're doing things in the world.

And what my mom brought to me, I think is that hardworking ethic and both my grandmother and mom always put people and family first, and that's something that's probably brought through.

And so, I'd say the combination of my diverse background has given me a window into lots of different perspectives, and that's really something that's unique and I can stand in other people's shoes. Every day, there's something new to learn from my parents.

And I'd say my mom's ethic and life lesson around resilience is so powerful. Being a refugee, coming to Australia, she couldn't speak English, and took on the challenge of learning computer programming back in the seventies. And what that enabled her to do is open up a whole new world to her.

And so, although not speaking English, she was able to code and create new worlds for customers and for herself that enabled her to have a world of adventure. And she says it comes down to that resilience and just really getting uncomfortable with the uncomfortable.

Geetha: I think this is the core of Anita's philosophy. She's really open to diverse perspectives. She's a global panellist working with an international network, and she finds real purpose in those working relationships.

Anita: Yeah, I love working across boundaries because it's like you're tapping into this treasure chest of all these ideas and perspectives and thoughts. It's probably one of my most favourite things. Only last week my team and I had this huge customer problem we couldn't solve. We actually thought it was unsolvable.

And if anyone knows me and my team, we will do anything we can to get the outcome we need for our customers in a very sustainable, focused, positive way. And we were stuck.

And I actually had a mentoring session with someone in the global team and I was telling them, "Look, I can't seem to solve this." I was virtually whiteboarding with them. And they said to me, "What about this simple idea?"

And I was like, "Damn," everything just chimed and fell into place just by being open and having a conversation with someone across the world. And so, yeah, I just think it's something so powerful and it only takes a moment to pick up the phone or to send that message. It just takes a moment.

And so, you can turn the ordinary into extraordinary by just pushing the boundaries of your comfort zone and just picking up the phone and connecting with someone.

Geetha: Talking to Anita, the benefits of a network are really clear.

Anita: In terms of my global connections and how that had something meaningful recently come up, I'll probably relate back to recently when I visited the beautiful Seoul, Korea, an internal community group that I'm one of the exec sponsors for is focused on giving back ideas to the community around how talent of all diverse natures, not just gender can grow in the market, not only in the tech industry, but across all industries.

And so, with this internal community, I brought them together for the first time, it was a group of incredible women. And firstly, they had never had a conversation outside of work, activities, and tasks.

So, what I did was I asked them all to introduce themselves and instead of saying their role, title, and tenure at AWS, I asked to share an idea around, “how do they bring harmony into work-life integration”.

And there's actually a Korean word [jungwon 00:08:34], I'm a Taekwondo devotee. So, I kind of weave that into the conversation. I tell you that was the most profound 60 minutes I had with these group of amazing Korean women who each had their unique ideas of how you can build work life integration.

And I walked away going, “Gosh, as a leader, as a mentor, you do have to put your own oxygen mask on if you take the analogy if you are on an airplane. And you have to really focus on being balanced both internally in yourself and the way that you're interacting with teams. So, if you don't think about your own wellbeing and work life interaction, how can you help lift up others?”

So, that blew me away that a conversation in another country with a group of women that I hadn't met, brought together by a single community thread about gender diversity and supporting each other just opened up my eyes.

Geetha: That's amazing that you do taekwondo, by the way.

Anita: I have no fear. I've never felt so vulnerable as being, they call it on the mat or in the dojang in front of three judges in an arena, judging a 26-step pattern of punches and kicks.

And so, what taekwondo did for me was picking up a new skill, being pushed into the uncomfortable. You do actually have to trust yourself and if you don't back yourself and support yourself, how are you going to get through anything?

So, it was like a small hobby that turned into, “Yes, I got a taekwondo international medal,” but that wasn't the lesson. The lesson was “trust in yourself and back yourself”. The best part is that my eight-year-old son is the one coaching training me. So, he'll be watching YouTube and then training me because we're dancing on the belts together.

Geetha: She may be dangerous in the dojang, but Anita is always focused on supporting those around her. She's keen on finding ways to directly impact the future at AWS.

Anita: Focusing on inclusion, diversity, and equity, you'll not only be able to attract a pipeline of talent, you'll build incredible products that can answer truly what your customers need, right through to building a world of where tech needs to be, which is more diverse.

And that's a mission I'm on, many leaders are on, but it's a ground up swell that's happening from all the communities I'm involved in internally and externally. This is something that we all have a role to play in.

So, whether you are a solution architect or an engineer right through to a senior leader, we all have a part to play. If I just look at AWS internally, what we're doing, we are building the right ways to ensure we can attract talent.

Right from that loop experience that I had, I was able to ask questions and be open and talk to and be curious about what type of diverse workplace AWS is to developing the talent with leadership programs, mentoring programs, communities to really helping that full cycle of engagement with all the events that we do locally in Asia, connecting with worldwide to just keep lifting up.

Geetha: Anita also works on mentoring schemes to really provide support and advice for those at the start of their careers.

Anita: Probably about a month ago, I had a question that really stopped me in my tracks, "How do you dedicate time to your career growth?"

So, often as a leader, we're very focused around lifting up teams, inspiring teams, empowering them, working with our customers and partners and coaching our teams to support them that you do forget around your own growth and development.

And I actually had to spend some time to think about it, and I came back to that mentee and said that one of the things that I'd learned, and it's probably linked to some of the conversations we just had earlier, is about looking at yourself as a whole person and finding a balance of internally what are the things you need to be working on, whether it's your presence, whether it's around being mindful, really working out what fuels you and your purpose, but also linking it to the external things.

So, what are the processes you're putting in place to make sure you're taking the time to focus on the skills you need to develop as a leader. What are you doing to support your people in lifting them?

And what extra skills and talent are you providing them right through to thinking about, how are you going to ensure that your mission that you're on with your team is being elevated and supported by the rest of the organisation.

So, it did make me stop and say, "Hey, I need to be mindful about thinking about career growth myself." And actually, as you grow into your leadership capabilities, it's more about grounding yourself and being true to yourself and making sure your values are shining through because that's the way that you can help lift up and inspire others.

Geetha: In the end, it all comes back to love, listen, learn, thinking of the human being in every equation. It's been so interesting to chat with Anita about this part of her working philosophy. Growing communities and supporting people is her mission at AWS.

Anita: If we look at connections, so human connection is based on trust. And one of my mentors said early on to me that trust is made up of three things, empathy, authenticity, and logic like data. She said that's how trust is built.

And so, when you have trust and you have it in the community, you could do anything. Whether it's work on transforming an industry, the fintech industry, and all the new technology coming out there right through to looking at sustainability and smart energy ideas ...

If you have a community, and that community could be based of internal group of people from different parts of the organisation through to a community of customers in an industry trying to solve a problem around health and life science through to a community ... like at AWS we have a bunch of AWS partners in a network that work together to solve big problems and build new solutions. So, community is so important.

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Geetha: So, maybe we should all take a little more time to think of the human beings we work with, the faces behind the computer screens and on the other end of the phone.

Thanks so much to Anita 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 sounds like fun, why not check out our website in the bio. You may just be the person we're looking for.

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