

## AT THE EDGE PODCAST



### SEASON 2, BONUS EPISODE C

**SUSANNAH CHILDERS – Actually, Humans Want to Collaborate**

**Interviewed by Michael Lee**

Susannah Childers is the Founder and Creator of Possibility at Ah Ha! Which she has run for the past twenty-five years. She is an experienced facilitator of Organizational Learning, Innovation, Design Thinking, Strategic Planning, Knowledge Transfer, Market Research, and all-around fun and productive visual meetings. Susannah has a BA in Economics and Spanish from Washington University in St. Louis and an MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Prior to Ah Ha!, Susannah worked at Helene Curtis (now Unilever) and The Procter and Gamble Company connecting teams and driving learning and innovation. Susannah is an international speaker on the topics of insight, leadership, and innovation. She recently presented at the Creative Problem Solving Institute (Buffalo, NY), Mindcamp Canada in Toronto and the African Creativity Conference in South Africa. She lives in the beautiful North Carolina mountains with her husband Wayne. Susannah's work helps clients connect knowledge and experiences to drive innovation and discovery.

In this episode, Susannah discusses conundrums such as:

- How the system is more important than the individual in innovation, yet the human is also far more important than the system;
- How we don't really understand the problems we're facing, and yet the most powerful step forward will come from understanding the problems;
- How although we are generally not very good at collaborating or communicating, it's what we care about most;
- And much more.

**Michael Lee**

*Susanna, welcome to At the Edge. And thank you so much for being here.*

**Susannah Childers**

Thank you for having me.

**Michael Lee**

*You've been working with Innovation Minds for quite some time.*

**Susannah Childers**

My work is around facilitating innovation for corporate clients primarily. Frequently, we are asked to come in and do innovation work around a specific topic. But more and more companies are looking for an end-to-end solution. Innovation doesn't happen in isolation in single pieces. What Innovation Minds brings is an entire system that allows people to involve the entire company and move them forward from ideas through implementation.

**Michael Lee**

*Innovation doesn't happen in individual pieces. Say more about that.*

**Susannah Childers**

Frequently as an external facilitator for organizations we are brought in and we do one piece. We just had an example where we were helping do some ideation work around some new concepts and new products for an organization. But that was four or five months ago, and the company is still struggling with getting that out. So more and more, there's opportunity to look at entire systems and how things happen within an organization. And I mean systems in terms of how people work together, not just the technical systems. Technology can support and enhance how people work together.

But ultimately we need people to collaborate on everything from ideas all the way through execution. So innovation starts with understanding the current situation, not just coming up with ideas. And then developing refining, prototyping, and moving forward into implementation.

**Michael Lee**

*What would you say is the biggest challenge to innovation in today's environment, in companies?*

**Susannah Childers**

Sometimes in organizations today, people are trying to move so fast that they don't slow down and take time to understand the current situation, figure out what really the job to be

done is or the problem that needs to be solved. So problem-framing is a key starting point. And taking time to understand what's the landscape, what are the competitors doing out there, and really understanding what people need.

So regardless of industry, I work a lot with consumer products. What do people out there need? What is it that they're struggling with? What are they looking for? So, understanding and keeping those consumer or customer insights at the forefront, the customer experience, if you will, and understanding what it is that they are striving for.

I think organizations long have gotten themselves in a box of thinking that they're in the business of X, when in fact what people need is Y. Now, X might deliver on part of that. But there are many other ways that an organization or a product can deliver the experience that people are looking for.

***Michael Lee***

*How do you see innovation fitting into employee experience?*

**Susannah Childers**

Ultimately it's about human experience. There's a whole body of work around Human Centered Design, and it's not just for a product or a service. It's how we as humans want to live our lives.

Work is a part of our life. The same principles that apply for designing a product or a service can apply towards designing a work experience. Understanding what it is that your employees really want is the same thing. It just targets focusing in a different direction to a product or a service.

Organizations are looking internally and saying, What is it that we're about? How can we have our employees be a key part of delivering value to the shareholder or whatever the case may be? That their broader mission is the employee experience needs to be considered as well.

I was just on a call with some Hacking HR colleagues last week talking about the Great Resignation and employee experience. What do people want in their working life? People are reconsidering particularly now with the great shift that the pandemic has caused, worldwide. People are re-examining, What is it that I'm working for? What do I need? I think our period of increasing consumption may be past a little bit. And we're back to, What do I want to experience? How do I want to be in the world, not just acquire more stuff?

And so employee experience is a huge part of that. We spend a large portion of our lives working. How do we want that to fit in with our lives?

***Michael Lee***

*So how DO we want that to fit in with our lives?*

### **Susannah Childers**

I would not cite myself as a researcher. I have done a lot of reading on it. The things that I'm hearing are things like flexibility, like appreciation and recognition. It's not just work from home. We want everything from our basic safety and security needs to flexibility to engagement to appreciation. I can't remember the article I was reading last week on really looking at rewards and recognition as being a key portion. And that doesn't necessarily only mean more money, but it means knowing that the work you're doing has meaning at the heart of it. We want to live lives that have meaning. And knowing that you've helped someone can be meaningful in small ways. It doesn't have to be that we're all gonna win the Nobel Peace Prize. Just that we're doing work that is helping someone else and that others appreciate it, that it has a purpose.

### **Michael Lee**

*That's the biggest thing that we've noticed in all of the podcasts. The number one thing is people want to be seen as individuals, not as a piece of the big machine. Somehow we need to figure out how to make a bunch of individuals get the work done.*

### **Susannah Childers**

The research goes back a long way. I want to say it was Deming years and years ago, dating myself a little bit. If you take a look at the system that's in place, you can take one individual out and put another one in and the performance is going to be the same. So to that end, people tend to be seen as a cog in a great wheel. I think what you're looking at is culture. And you know, the old adage of culture trumps strategy every time. Creating a culture that drives innovation, that people feel valued in and innovate, that that can drive innovation within an organization, they have to feel that they're free to bring their whole selves to work. That's when you're going to get the best out of people.

People want to be heard. It's true whether you're doing consumer insight work or employee work. People want to be heard and acknowledged and valued. Ultimately, we want to know that someone else cares. Humans are by nature a species that wants to come together. And we are not necessarily taught in the Western world around collaboration. Going back to education systems and things like that: do your own work, don't look at anyone else's. And yet, to really get to solve the tough challenges, we need to work with other people. We need to work together to solve tough challenges. If anyone could do it themselves, we'd have solved an awful lot of the ills that are out there in the world.

### **Michael Lee**

*Speaking of ills, COVID came along and stopped everything and got people thinking very differently very quickly. How do you see the role of COVID-19 in the situation we're in. But also, where is it heading as COVID calms down a bit?*

**Susannah Childers**

It's been a big reset for people in terms of re-evaluating what's important. We certainly will slip back in some ways as a society at large into old habits, but I think that there's been a fundamental change in terms of accelerating the pace of acceptance of virtual work, of work from home, remote work. And the technology ramped up quickly. Technology has enabled us to be more connected.

You and I are an ocean apart, thousands and thousands of miles. But we can have a chat like this where we can see each other, that four or five years ago we wouldn't have been having. We wouldn't have thought of having it. You're working for Innovation Minds, being not based there where the rest are, where the technology hub is. And I'm also - we're all thousands of miles away from other people. Yet we can be connected really closely.

**Michael Lee**

*When we look at the hybrid situation we're in what do you see is the way to make that successful?*

**Susannah Childers**

I wish I had the magic answer to that. I think it's really about going back to understanding the desired experience. How do you stay connected? It's going to take working in different ways. We don't have the drop-in-around-the-water-cooler kind of conversations that happen in organizations. On the other hand, you can be more deeply connected with people who are much further apart. So there are pros and cons. I think the hybrid models will be here to stay. There was an awful lot early in COVID about people feeling isolated working from home. I don't know that's all been solved, either. Awareness is a good place to start. How do we maintain connections with people, regardless of where we are physically located?

**Michael Lee**

*Let's talk a bit about the difference between the virtual world and the real world. In terms of your experience, how does the virtual world actually make us better at work?*

**Susannah Childers**

The virtual world allows us to work on things differently. So a client that I'm working with, facilitating some innovation process work for them right now, we're able to work over time. We don't have to set aside a week and get together and hammer it out. So it allows more iteration or thinking time. It allows me to use technology, with breakouts and things like that to allow conversations, small conversations and large conversations. In a facilitated process, we have a lot of increased capability. I'm a big fan digital whiteboards. And so we use that to run a graphic facilitation approach. People can all see and share and work asynchronously as well as when they're online together.

So there's a lot of advantages in terms of time and space where people can be where they need to be, and still be working together. I participated in a lot of global projects over the past

couple of years, even in advance of COVID. And the technologies allowing us to bring people together and build relationships with people who are in Europe or in Africa or in Asia. We're spanning ways to connect in many different ways.

The flip side, of course, is the need for human connection and face-to-face. I've long been a proponent of face-to-face engagement, because there's some exchange of energy that that happens when people are together. And that's missing a little bit in terms of really knowing where are people? Are they engaged online? Or are they doing something else and just kind of looking blankly into the camera? So you know, we've still got some of that to sort out in terms of setting expectations. In a room, you just feel the energy in different ways.

### **Michael Lee**

*It's interesting when you say face-to-face, in fact, we are face-to-face, when we were on Zoom, or when we're doing this podcast. In fact, we're more face-to-face in Zoom than we are in real life. Because you can only look at one person at a time in a room. But you can look at thirty people on Zoom, and easily see all of them. So it's an interesting old relic in a way. How would the energy of working in an office contrast with the energy of working in a hybrid situation?*

### **Susannah Childers**

When you're in person, physically present with other people and they're nearby, you have a sense of what's going on. You can hear different cues than when you're working by yourself. So you're not on Zoom, you're in isolation, there's something different that happens when there's other people working simultaneously with you. I haven't done it per se, because I work with my husband, and he's in the office with me, so I'm not really alone in that way.

But I have heard different groups of co-workers who jump online on Microsoft Teams, or on Zoom, or one of these things, and they just hang out together and do their work. They're doing their independent work, but there's someone else around. And so we're bridging that energy feeling in different ways. And people are exploring ways to be connected, knowing someone else is out there and like, Hey, I have a question now that you might toss over the office wall. Now you have to schedule a meeting or make a phone call. So finding ways to have those casual interactions as opposed to the planned and scripted meetings. And people spend all day going from one Zoom meeting to the next. How do we find ways to bridge some of those gaps? I'm a huge fan of being able to work in this way.

We've done some really interesting projects over the past years. We've interviewed patients and doctors and things like that on Zoom and been able to build connection and rapport very quickly. So we're not done with – I won't say face to face - with being physically present with people. And the work is still getting done. I think that employers in terms of the employee-employer relationship are realizing that people can be trusted to do the work. If you give people expectations and clear goals, outcomes, things like that. People can be trusted to do the work. You don't have to be micro-managing them all the time.

***Michael Lee***

*Do you think in the not too distant future, we'll look back and think it was weird that people, thought that they should go every day to one place to work together? Do you think we'll look back on that and think that that was some kind of ancient relic?*

**Susannah Childers**

We're definitely in a time of transition. We've had several conversations with friends and colleagues and within the family, about what is history gonna look back at this time and say? Where things changed in terms of our social structures, and our work structures? We moved during the pandemic. And many people are moving to areas where you can live where you want and still be connected and do the work. If you've got technology and connection, you don't have to be living in the middle of the city. I live in western North Carolina, and some people recently moved from Manhattan down here, because they don't need to be in the crazy prices and the urban location.

***Michael Lee***

*We put out our own poll on LinkedIn, and we've got 88% right now saying they want two days or less in the office, only 12% wanting three days or more. Some statistics are shocking. 70% of employees in a Microsoft survey recently said that they would want to keep hybrid work as an option going forward. Only 30% are willing to go back to work full time. Another survey said that 90% of companies will have to keep a hybrid work setup going after the pandemic ends. 90%!!*

**Susannah Childers**

For people who are working in the information field, we're talking about lots of different kinds of jobs, service jobs are struggling. There's some businesses where the work needs to be done in the physical world. I think we'll see people who are working in the information economy and the realm of ideas and technology have more flexibility than people who are working in service. So we'll see how that ends up playing out. Because not everyone has the flexibility.

***Michael Lee***

*There are also a lot of studies and thinking being done around the idea of using innovation as an engagement tool. In other words, being able to use innovation processes to get people engaged. As someone who's very versed in innovation as a practice, what do you think of that sort of circle?*

**Susannah Childers**

They definitely are reinforcing. I think it goes back to people doing work that matters. It's exciting to be part of creating something new. So people are going to be more engaged when they're included and involved in what's coming next. And I think while we have a love-hate relationship with change, innovation is creating change, or change is happening anyway. So if I can be a part of it, I'm going to be more engaged, because I'm driving some of those

outcomes, as opposed to having to sit back and wait and see what happens to me. And I'm more responsible. I'm a part of whatever my organization is bringing forth. So I think that's a powerful way to drive engagement.

**Michael Lee**

*My question would be, if I come to you as a leader of an organization, I say to you, Susanna, I would like to have our organization be more innovative. So what do I do?*

**Susannah Childers**

Well, we start with trying to understand where they are now. What's their current situation? Where are their strengths? Where are their challenges? How are they defining innovation? What is their business about? So starting with kind of that current assessment - how do people see what's working well and what's not? What is the current process for bringing new products or services to market for engaging employees, whatever place they're wanting to be more innovative in? So it could be policies and procedures. Or systems and ways of engaging everybody. Everybody starts from a different place.

Once you understand where people are, then you can start to ideate against what do we want to do that would be different? How do we look at best-in-class practices that can help drive better innovation here? Are we working on communication to people who need to work together? Do we not have the right resources deployed properly? So there's many different ways to tackle the problem. Once you know what the problem is.

**Michael Lee**

*What have you seen, in terms of your experience, as being the core problem that usually happens. Or the most common problems.*

**Susannah Childers**

It's probably around collaboration and communication. Setting clear expectations and then having You know, a clear understanding of what it is that we're trying to solve. So when we have siloed departments, for example, within an organization, they're not talking to each other. So there could be a marketing idea, but we don't have the technology to support it. We're never going to innovate, because we're not going to be able to bring those two pieces together. So improving collaboration and communication within organizations can really help to boost overall innovation.

**Michael Lee**

*And how do you improve that collaboration and communication in the organization?*

### **Susannah Childers**

We find that people change the way they work by doing work together in a different way. So that's what we do with facilitating work processes, is give people different ways to engage with each other by stating and clarifying personal intentions as well as collective intentions and goals. Giving people means to work together. As graphic facilitators, we like to use a lot of visuals to help people see the big picture and literally map systems and processes so that they're being able to share what's going on, when people start to see that all voices are important and heard and can be involved.

People start working in a different way, we've seen that over, you know, twenty, twenty-five years of being in the specific situation in business and facilitating innovation, people are changed. If you change the individuals, you change the organization and the culture and the expectations. So as the culture changes, people start to work differently together.

### **Michael Lee**

*And yet, as much as culture eats strategy for breakfast and culture so important, and all that the other perspective, and that is culture can't be changed very easily, at least. So how do you? How do you deal with that when you go into organization, and people are saying, well, the culture is the culture, you can't really do anything about it?*

### **Susannah Childers**

Well, there's organizational culture, at a macro level, and then there's kind of departments or groups. I've worked with a company a long time ago. They were a new product development group within a larger organization. And the larger organization was about innovation. But there was some managers who were saying, No, you need to be at your desk, you can't. So this was a lot. This was pre-COVID. And we're feeling like we can't, there's too many boundaries and constraints that we're not being really allowed to innovate.

So they were able through working together, and we worked with them to have some facilitated conversations where the managers could then see that those were some of the challenges that they were facing. They were putting constraints on people that were coming from old-mindset ways of working, that work was more dependent on the time you put in at your desk versus the outcomes or the ways that people might actually be able to drive innovation in the lab. And then through conversations, through random connections, for new ideas, to create something new.

So that starts to change culture at that group level, which then can bubble up the kinds of things that we do, starting with the individual. So individual reflection and integration, creating ways for people, we use graphic templates.

Are you familiar with David Sibbett? We've done a lot of training and graphic facilitation training with him. It's not about the tools, it's around what they enable in terms of conversations, for people to see where they contribute to have more productive conversations instead of circular arguments. By mapping things out, everybody can literally see where people fall.

This is an old story, but an interesting one where we were using some graphic facilitation with the community group. And in communities, oftentimes, they have town halls, people come in, they want to open to the public, let people have an opinion. But you know, people get up, they get their two minutes at the microphone, and they give their talk, and then they have to sit down and it's all time boxed. And a lot of people would say nothing really changes, or it's all political. We worked with the community and created conversations where people were allowed to share their stories. We captured those stories using large bright graphic framework sticky notes, not super high tech.

When people tell their story, and then they tell their story again, you can literally just point to that sticky note or the collection of sticky notes and say, Did we capture what you are feeling about this? Because usually it's coming from feelings when people can express their feelings about a topic and know that they've been heard. Then they're like, Oh, okay, you haven't fixed it, but at least they know they've been heard in this particular situation.

This one man who had been coming in every Town Hall complaining about his pet topic was able to move on because he's like, okay, they heard me. I see that they wrote it down. And they've heard me and we're able to move on. So it's a relatively simple but very powerful tool to increase engagement. This person went on to have all kinds of other ideas and was a very engaged member of the community. So they could get a lot more knowledge from him about what might be possible. They could get past being stuck on that one issue.

### ***Michael Lee***

*We need to have people be heard. If I wanted to give you the opportunity to be heard, Susannah, and share with people, what's the thing that you would like them to remember about you when they think of this podcast? What is the one thing you'd like people to remember about Susannah Childers?*

### **Susannah Childers**

What really gets me excited is helping people bring their true authentic selves to their work and helping people collaborate better together. I focus that work around facilitation and innovation. So understanding experiences and creating experiences for people to bring their best selves to their work and then their lives, ultimately.

### ***Michael Lee***

*If someone's listening to this, how can they be their authentic self. Besides hiring you, of course, to help them?*

### **Susannah Childers**

Well, I think I starts with tuning into yourself, and what is it that you want. It goes back to understanding what your vision is, what your values are, what's important to you. So we all start working as individuals. Sometimes we get caught up in doing and we forget to be. So

tuning into yourself, and then getting out of your way, looking for what you know, if you know what it is you're striving for, you may not know how to get there, but you have a lot better chance of achieving that particular outcome.

The company I created, Aha, we started doing that by defining, What do we want our lives to be like? And what work will support that? Instead of, What work can we do and who knows what will result from that. So we created some really different ways of working as an organization and with people to support the way we want to work and the life we want to live, more than what we're doing. So if you know your Why you have a better chance of getting there.

***Michael Lee***

*Well thank you, Susannah Childers. Thank you for spending time with us and sharing your insights and wisdom.*

**Susannah Childers**

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.