

# PODCAST VAAHINI CONNECT: HOW TO BE A VOCAL ADVOCATE OF INCLUSION AT WORK WITH SHRUTI PUSHKARNA

## AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to the Accenture Vaahini Connect Podcast. In season two, Meet the luminaries, we bring to you the unique stories of women Luminaries who share how we can all play a role in furthering big goals that impact society. Whether you're a salaried employee, an entrepreneur or a student, or just someone looking for a way to contribute to society, in each episode, we hope to bring to you inspiring stories and effective ways on how each one of us in our powers can make this place a better place for all. I'm Savitha Nanjappa, Success Coach, founder of Success with Savitha and your podcast host.

Meet Shruti Pushkarna, a former journalist who now works as director EnAble India, where she heads North India operations, as well as media and communications outreach. As an Inclusion and Diversity advocate, she works closely with Civil Society Organizations, Corporate Sponsors and Government bodies engaged in promoting Equity and Equality. She writes a fortnightly column on 'Media and Disability'. In this episode, Shruti talks about "How to be a vocal advocate of inclusion at work?"

The conversation starts now!

### Savitha

Welcome to the Vaahini podcast Shruti. We are looking forward to an in depth conversation with you here today. And thank you for making the time to be here with us and join us today. Welcome aboard.

### Shruti

Thank you Savitha. Thank you for having me in the first place.

### Savitha

Of course, it's an honor to have you. And I want to start off by asking you this question that I have, which is, today, more than ever, there's more conversation about inclusive workplaces, and we hear it all around us. Yet at an individual level, we lack the vocabulary sometimes or even the skills required to educate or confront others, especially when we see it happening around us incidents of micro aggression or bias. Since it is evident that change begins with us, what are the ways in which each of us can become better allies, according to you, Shruti, in your experience, and what you have seen along in your journey?

### **Shruti**

That's a very loaded question, I must say Savitha. So there are no simple answers to that, but I will try and make it as crisp for you as possible. Of course, you know, there are, there are a couple of principles that I have learned in life, and then more so in this sector as I stepped into it. Empathy works. And practicing empathy is the hardest thing. But it's one short, short way of, you know, bringing that change that begins with us, like you said, so if you are practicing empathy, and you can understand that even those incidents of micro aggression that are happening around you are stemming from something that might be affecting that person, then you don't really get agitated by the change that you don't see in others, but you get more committed to say, okay, you know, I understand I accept this person for who they are, and let me see how I can still impact that change that I am committed to bringing about, you know, so like, like I said, in everyday life, today, we are surrounded by acts of aggression. This comes from empathy. And then the next thing is, you know, like you said, there is, you know, we lack a vocabulary, but we can educate ourselves, we can pick up the correct terminology, we can have use appropriate language, there's a ton of information available online these days, we can easily learn those things, thanks to the right conversations about mental health, following COVID-19. You know, the pandemic has taught us to be, you know, being mindful of how we communicate to diverse groups and individuals

### **Savitha**

Yeah, absolutely. And I want to ask you this as an advocate, which you are and a lot of people are, I think the first thing to understand is your own biases. And often we think we don't have a bias and then unexpectedly you realize that you probably have the depending on the situation you're in what has been a new learning for You, when it comes to overcoming biases, which you didn't even know you had,

### **Shruti**

It's so true. We all are broken and biased in so many ways. That has been the biggest learning

for me, not only in the professional space, but you know, my personal learning. Also, I realized that my personal learning also steeped, when I started learning these on a professional terms, because biases, honestly, are a logical extension of our exposure to our respective environment. It can be work, home, community, anywhere, right? It's bound to happen. And also biases change, because the environment changes, exposure changes. So it's true that everybody has a bias, I had mine when I walked in, I would run the sector, I was very, first as a journalist, I was very opinionated. So first layer you shared out there, you know, you try and lose your own opinion of other people, their choices, you're judging people for choices, whether it's material, non-material things or whatever, specific to a disability, I had assumed a couple of things in life, you know, I said, I thought that, you know, all disabled people will need a lot of help to survive. But you know, it turned out that my assumptions were misplaced, because during the course of my work, in the sector, I've met enough people who are quite capable, super ambitious, and self-driven. They may need physical and technological assistance. But that makes them as dependent as I am on my glasses

### **Savitha**

So I want to ask you this shot, that has been something that you've had to kind of, you know, you understood about yourself, what do we I'm saying your advice? What do we need to learn in order to become genuine advocates, those who face discrimination, discrimination at work, and not be, you know, not be condescending spokespersons instead? And it can happen, maybe sometimes, because it's unconscious, usually. So what is your advice on how we can be genuine advocates?

### **Shruti**

So first of all, we need to drop the idea of making ourselves sound like we are Messiah, to these people,

### **Savitha**

Savior,

### **Shruti**

Like they need us. And if we were not there, then what will happen? You know, on the other hand, there are so many plus sides to the developments in the sector, and to the work that is being done in the line of visibility. But there's also one downside to it. People start basking in their own glory. True, right? So it's, you're completely right in saying that they come from a very condescending approach, and they unconsciously. So what, again, here helps this, we need to first off and not assume, when we are dealing with a person, and we are thinking that we want to advocate for their inclusion, we need to actually enable them rather than picking up the battleship and saying, Okay, I'll fight for you know, we have to ask, Do they even need our intervention in the first place? They might not know, asking and not assuming is the biggest lesson that I have learned and I insist on everyone learning that

### **Shruti**

Oftentimes, yeah, oftentimes we just assume that oh, this person, if you don't, I'll give you a personal example. i My mother is a wheelchair user. And I choose to go out like any other person and I like to go out and hang out with her in public places. And out of good intention. People come and want to push the wheelchair around or assume that she's in pain, even though she's not or even if she is, she will not like to talk about it. So these assumptions have to go, because that's where the person actually feels more discriminated, more excluded than included. I also add one more thing, you know that by and large, the intentions are in good place. It's ignorance on how to approach it. That's why when you ask this question it is very important, because most people want to be advocates and want to help out? They just don't know how to.

### **Savitha**

That's a very interesting observation, you know, because it comes very naturally. Like we think everybody wants help, we think like, okay, let's dive in and do our bit. And like you, when you're sharing about your mother, being in the region,

everyone wants to push when she doesn't even want or need to be pushed. That's very interesting. And I think I need to now that's something I'm going to watch out for. On this interesting note of people don't know how advocacy at work is not all about the position you're in or the role you have, like you don't have to be moved or elevated to a certain role for you to then become an advocate. What are some of the habits employees can incorporate right from the junior level, to build an inclusive workplace and things that they can do on their own without waiting for the organization's policies and action plans? And just be a vocal advocate themselves?

### **Shruti**

Again, good question. And very lengthy answers can be divulged into what has become the most simplistically, yes, yeah. So you know, today, everything is being talked about in terms of DE & I, this is the hot thing these days. Right. Everything is about the DE & I. And in our sector, we mostly think of inclusion opportunities in terms of employment, and education as most, right, recruitment is a big thing. So I want to say, like you rightly pointed out about level, it's really not about adhering to an equal opportunity policy. Of course, that's very important. You know, or making sure that there are enough workplace solutions, or as in the legal sense of the word reasonable accommodation there in your workplace, let's say, but it's really not limited to that. Those are just the starting points of the intervention of inclusion. Because even without those, even in spaces where accessibility or inclusion has physically not been incorporated, it's the culture. It's the culture that can be inculcated, which can reek of inclusion, you know, so a lot of times the top leadership, you'll see, wherever the changes, you've talked about companies, you talk about schools that are inclusive, you talk about communities that are inclusive, it will always be one person heading, spearheading the call. And you the leadership changes, and it all falls apart. Or it gets better, whichever way it's doing, right. So it's, it's definitely needed to make it a success, but then it needs to, it needs to trickle top down.



So the larger societal or organizational fabric, we need to ensure that the ideology is, you know, married into it. So let's say I'll give you an example of, you know, I, when I went to college, there was this buddy system and college, yes, we would be paired with one person, and it can be a disabled person.

### **Shruti**

So, research shows that, you know, 85% of jobs are filled just by networking alone. Right. So, we are not going to need equal opportunity policies, CSR initiatives, if we actually work on widening the networking circle of an average disabled person. Okay, you understand? Yeah. So you know, because individuals, like you and me, non-disabled person, for want of a better word, we have around 150 People in our social circle, this is the average research number. And now, juxtaposed to that the number is for an individual with disability, it is 15, which is nearly 10% of what we have. Okay. You know, so, so obviously, the opportunities are limited. Right. So if they start encouraging employees to socially engage nonprofessional settings, yeah. You know, things like those, those initiatives can bring about a not a policy level change, but an actual implementation, operational level change.

### **Savitha**

Very interesting. I hadn't even thought I mean, I didn't even know the statistic, of course, but I hadn't thought that, of course, you should, you know, socially try to engage in bring people in. And that can help support employment for disabled people.

### **Savitha**

I mean, everything that you say says, of course, on point, and when you're saying it's in the mind, and that's something that people need to understand as well as we go along. You touched upon your journey Shruti. And I want to talk about this a little bit, which is in your journey, and what has been some of the key moments that define you as the advocate that you are today. So share with us your own story and what you know, were things that led to you being who you are today.

### **Shruti**

Sure, it's interesting for me when I reflect upon it like that, so I started off, you know, I fortunately had the exposure at a, at a very early age, like I said, my mother is a person who uses a wheelchair. And given her chronic illness, I was always exposed to that part way of life. Except, you know, growing up, I never saw it as anything different than anybody else because that was my normal.

### **Shruti**

So what happened is that I grew up as that that was my normal, and then when you start interacting with the world outside, and you know, people come and tell you, Oh, poor kid, or your poor mother, that's realized, oh, there's nothing poor about this. You know, why are they using such terms? Yeah, and then you grow some more and then you realize why they are saying so and you'd also pick up on that terminology. Thankfully, I was conscious of that it did not affect me as much. My mother is a very strong person. So you know but that sense of advocacy, I think was, was innate, is what I'm trying to get at. Okay? Yeah, no, because I understood it from a very personal perspective, you know, that you need to empower and there is really nothing that requires a special, you know, like power, because I felt like my mother was an empowered, strong person in a lot many ways, you know, I looked at her very differently. So, then, when I started my journey of life, and I became a journalist, I ended up in TV news. And after a point, obviously, you know, I kind of exhausted myself in that profession. And I realized that I need to move out of the media, and I need to do something and I had earlier on interacted with, you know, this person who became my mentor in the sector, who spearheaded the blind World Cup in India, Oh, yes. And I, he became my mentor, and that was my first job in the sector. And it really turned out to be a whole different journey since then, because that's when I started, most of my colleagues, were persons with vision impairment, okay. So even though I, they thought that I was bringing a lot to the table as a professional, because, you know, it takes a lot



to quit a private sector job and go to the nonprofit sector.

I realized that there was a lot more learning for me as an individual. So I started learning the nuances of disability and also learning about how people live their lives, which are very different from what we assumed they are. I did not know how much technological advancement there was for a person with vision impairment. I learned about those things, every little tiny learning that came brought about a shift also in my thinking. And I started thinking of, you know, hey, advocacy for this is actually easy. In today's day and age of digital India, it is easy to come back. It just needs, you know, some vociferous campaigning.

#### **Shruti**

Every time, every time somebody's life, I changed, you know, through a little bit of an intervention that made me, you know, strengthen my commitment towards inclusion. There were a lot of cases, you know, that the helpline would get where you are speaking to somebody who's in some rural part of India and calling and asking for basic intervention. And sometimes you don't have answers to their problems. But the fact that you're there for them to listen to them to even advise them a little bit about life, brings in a change in their life.

#### **Savitha**

Amazing. I love the work that you're doing should be and I think for you, it's like, the question is that for you, you're exposed to it from such a small age and to so normalized, that your experience stems from that. And you're I think the question was about what were key moments that define you. And those were your defining moments that you that it happened very naturally. And of course, you moving into the nonprofit consciously making the decision to do this has been another thing that has helped you in your own journey of advocacy.

#### **Shruti**

And I would like to add one more thing. So, you know, for me, also, one defining moment has been to marry my experience of media and

visibility together. And so now to fortnightly column of that. Yes. So that has also been a transformative journey for me. So that I realized, you know, how people are reading it, what they really need to know, how they're responding to it, and what is it that we need to project out of here?

#### **Savitha**

Okay, and you also get live, like, you get feedback.

#### **Shruti**

So that feedback, there are people and the best part, which have been very heartening is that you know, your close circle of people, your friends and family, they turned around and become supporters, and soft advocates themselves, you know, they keep now people post pictures online, they will always ensure and tell me that you've added an image description for the screen reader user.

#### **Savitha**

Yeah, amazing. Amazing. What a great share so far from you. And it's been a really insightful conversation. And as we come to the end of this interview, I hope while it's being short and I would love to continue talking more about this topic and your own, you know, the stories that the lives that you've impacted the stories that you have to share. And I'm sure we'll do that again. But with that, I hope you've enjoyed sharing this with me as much as. I have enjoyed listening to you.

So thank you for your time. And for all the insights you shared. I'm sure our audience will find a lot of takeaways from this interview with that, you know, thank you for being here today and we come to the end of this interview.

#### **Shruti**

Thank you Savitha it's definitely been very, very delightful talking to you.

Thank you for listening to this episode. Remember, we may not turn into change



makers overnight. But all of us hold the power to lead small, incremental changes that can eventually make the world a more equal and fairer place. You can join the Accenture Vaahini network, a networking forum for women professionals, enabled by Accenture. The link to join is in the description of this episode. Also, don't forget to send in your feedback and thoughts to us.

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