



Episode 37: "How Can Behavioural Insights Help Organizations Be More Diverse, Inclusive, & Equitable?"

Part 1 with Sylvia Apostolidis, President of the Jasmara Group.

Sylvia Apostolidis joins us for our first ever double-header set of episodes! In these two episodes, we return to the intersection of Behavioural Insights and Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. In Part 1, we start with basic definitions, talk about how BI can help us move from awareness to action, and discuss examples of how organizations can and have used BI to become more equitable, diverse, and inclusive in areas such as hiring, promotion, and retention.

Transcript:

KIRSTIN APPELT, HOST: Welcome to this edition of Calling DIBS! I'm your host, Kirstin Appelt, Research Director with UBC Decision Insights for Business & Society or DIBS for short. Today we're "calling DIBS" on Sylvia Apostolidis. Sylvia is the President of the Jasmara Group. She has spent over 15 years working in the field of equity, diversity and inclusion, and she's been gradually adding behavioural insights to her toolkit over the last several years.

I had the good fortune to meet Sylvia when she enrolled in the Fundamentals of BI course, and after her very first discussion board post, I immediately knew this is someone I wanted to talk to more and I really wanted to have opportunities to chat with Sylvia about the intersection of behavioural insights and equity, diversity and inclusion, which is an area I'm really interested in as well. So I was delighted when Sylvia accepted my invitation to the podcast, and that brings us to today and this conversation I've been eagerly anticipating. So welcome to the podcast, Sylvia. Thanks for joining us.

SYLVIA APOSTOLIDIS, GUEST: Thanks for having me, Kirstin.

APPELT: Why don't we start by just having you telling us a little about yourself?

APOSTOLIDIS: Well, I live in Toronto. But I am from Vancouver. I actually did my undergrad at UBC. I live here with my husband and two kids. I have two 14-year-old twin boys who actually the name of my company is named after them: Jasmara. Yeah, so it's Jason and Marco, and I named it after them because one, I think it's really important that they see their Mum do something so important. And also because it's just so important to raise boys, especially white boys. And now they're really tall as well. And we know that your height gives you advantage, I think they have a really important role to play in creating inclusive societies and inclusive workplaces. So, yeah, the Jasmara Group is Jason and Marco.

APPELT: Wonderful. I love that, and I love that you, not only that you incorporated their names, but like you said it, it sets for them that path of you have a role to play.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. And I also, there's feminists right -- they're brought up in this family, and they are very in tune to language and they're very in tuned to equality issues right away. I think it's really important for them.

APPELT: Wow. I love that. Well, let's go from there right into your EDI journey. And I think as we get into that, maybe we should have some definitions. I know for some people when you're newer to the space, there's so many acronyms DEI, EDI, D and I. And also, just confusion about what is the difference between equity, diversity and inclusion, aren't synonyms. So maybe can you walk us through what those distinctions are?

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, for sure. We could think about diversity as the mix of people. Often, we identify an individual, we say that person is diverse and an individual themselves cannot be diverse. It really is the demographic mix of people and that's what diversity is.

Equity is really about eliminating all the barriers that exist so that everyone has equal opportunity. We know, for example, that workplaces are not equitable. They're really designed for primarily white, cisgender men. And that's historically and it still exists now. So, equity is really about removing those systemic barriers and making it fair and equitable for everyone.

Inclusion is the act, that intentional act of creating equity, so that everyone feels like they are included and that they belong as well. Sometimes those terms inclusion and belonging gets mixed up, and understandably so. Belonging is really that feeling that people have that their voices matter, that they are being heard, that they belong in an organization. And we know that belonging is one of our three psychological needs. So often organizations can say EDI, D and I, DEIB, DEI. And so, they're all really the same. Sometimes organizations choose to lead with one of those terms, and that's why they might choose EDI over DEI. But really, it's the same thing.

APPELT: Yeah, I think that's really helpful, and I think you jumped off right there with that helpful that individuals aren't diverse. We contain multitudes, but we're each one person. It's a group that can be diverse, not an individual.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. And also, the way we define diversity is really different. It might be different here than it might be in another country, and that's part of it as well. So, we have to often, a global organization has to redefine what those demographics, and how they collect them in the different countries that they operate, because diversity itself, as a definition, is not necessarily stagnant.

APPELT: Yeah, and absolutely. And I think it also is agnostic to the variables. So, in some organizations like you said, it might be based on cultures and some might already be culturally diverse, but then they might realize that they're not gender diverse or they have everyone is senior career stage and no junior folks. So, it's about, yeah, the different mixes, the different ways we can be diverse.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah.

APPELT: Well, now that we do have a common lexicon to work from, let's hear about your journey. You've worked in the EDI space and a lot of different capacities, I think.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. So I started working with an organization in 2005. The organization is Catalyst. And Catalyst, a research-based organization, a nonprofit. It started in the 1950s to help women get back into the workplace and then quickly realized that that approach was trying to sort of fix the women, when really, we need to be fixing the corporations, and they move to a member-based model. A lot of their members are larger organizations that are really focused around creating diverse and inclusive workplaces.

They started out with that focus on gender, and then, over time, as the field progressed, they also moved towards defining diversity and inclusion more broadly. I was there for 10 years and did a bunch of different things, from advising and consulting with organizations, to launching big event programs, a lot of speaking engagements, but then decided, "Hey, I wanted to really move this in-house". And so, I moved to a big telecom company where I developed the strategy -- I was the first E-and-I lead. I, you know, worked towards implementing the strategy as well, before I stopped and said, "Okay, what we're doing more broadly isn't really working. We've been at this for a really, really long time. We need new approaches".

I left and spent I could say like a year or two just really learning because I'm a learner. And that's when I really came across behavioural science and kind of landed on the question of, you know, we're trying to change behaviour here, but we're not bringing any understanding of how people actually behave to our solutions. And so, that kind of, asking that question just took me down there, the BI or the behavioural insights rabbit hole, you know, and that I learned more and more around how we can apply it to all aspects of diversity strategy and then operationalizing that strategy as well. That's when I launched the Jasmarr Group.

APPELT: I love that it really came organically. So, you realize that some of these things aren't working and where is the evidence and then that really just connected you to behavioural insights.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. Well, there was a really great book by Iris Bohnet called "What Works: Gender Equality by Design," and that changed my life, just because it was all about an evidence-based approach to diversity and then applied behavioural insights as well. And that was the first book that I read and just had my "Aha!" moment, really.

APPELT: And so, you mentioned a bit about it, you found that things weren't working and it felt like "We've been working in this space and we're not making progress". Were there any other pieces to why you started adding a BI lens to your work?

APOSTOLIDIS: I think because I realized that we just need another tool or more tools, we need to move away from this "best practice" and we use that term "best practice" all the time, still. And we need to, if we really want to make progress, we need to have more innovation. We need to move towards next practice. We need to challenge everything that we're doing. If we really want to get beyond the tick, the box initiatives that make us feel good because we're doing something, but really, when you look at the representation numbers today, the number of CEOs on the S&P, TSX, Composite Index, is still 96 percent. There's more "Michaels" than there are women as CEOs on that list, still.

And that's, you know, after some companies have been working really hard and spending lots of money and lots of resources for a long, long time. So, it was all of that. And at that time, I said to myself, "I'm either going to exit this field that I'm so passionate about or really spend the time to bring something new to these organizations". And that was sort of the launch or the start of the Jasmarr group.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think that really, to me brings up one of the ways behavioural insights often gets inserted into conversations is there's this initial phase of raising awareness like "This is an issue. People need to know this issue". Previously, they didn't realize it was an issue. But then, you know, at some point you're just raising awareness and everyone knows it's an issue, but you're not making further steps.

And so, there's this idea that awareness is just the first piece, you need to do something with that awareness. And I think that's where BI can really come in. You know, awareness is great, but it's not the end we need. We need action. But as individuals, we often need help taking action.

We're all aware of so many things like basic personal needs, like eating healthy and saving for retirement, abstract needs like an equitable, sustainable society. And BI can help us actually move towards accomplishing satisfying those needs by creating the choice environments, restructuring environments, that make it easy, attractive, social, timely to act. So, does that resonate for you at all?

APOSTOLIDIS: For sure. You know, the D and I space is still I'd say really focused around awareness, and under the assumption that if people are aware of it, that their behaviour will change. And behavioural insights show us that it's not the case at all. If anything, it would be the opposite.

You know, when you start to do something, then your mindsets and your beliefs change. But we've been approaching it as like, "Okay, if we can create an awareness program around trying to change beliefs and mindsets, and that's going to, of course, lead to people doing things differently". And behavioural science tells us that's not the case at all. And all we really need to do is look at how much money and resources is being spent on unconscious bias training and diversity training. It's an \$8 billion a year industry. And really, if it just stays there at awareness, it's not having the impact and it can also be working against us.

So, a lot of times, the evidence shows that when people go through that unconscious bias training, they're even more biased afterwards towards their subordinates because they think, "Oh, I've done this training, great, okay." What we assume works isn't always the case, so we have to challenge our assumptions with evidence, and that's where I think we need to bring that perspective to the corporate world. It's not always easy to get people to shift their mindset even around that, but that's really where we need to go.

APPELT: Yeah. And I think it is really hard because it does so many programs, like implicit bias training. They seem like they should work. And so, it's really, you know, like, "Oh, that sounds like we're taking a concrete step. It seems like it should work". And then it's just hard that there's that disconnect. "Well, actually, it doesn't and if anything, it might be harming." And that's well, that's scary for people.

APOSTOLIDIS: Exactly. I often talk about research paper around diversity statements done by Dr. Sonia Kang here at the University of Toronto. And so, you would think that if a company has a diversity statement, and publishes on their website, then that's a good thing. But what she showed is actually it's not.

So, first part of her study, she interviewed participants, Black and Asian participants and discovered that they whiten their resume and they whiten their resume because they know that their last name, people will anchor to their last name, and they won't even get that first interview. So, they whiten their resume. But when they see a diversity statement on a website, they trust the organization and they don't whiten their resume. And so what ends up happening is they still don't get that interview. And then the company that really wants to recruit people from underrepresented groups also don't reach their goal, either.

So again, you'd think that diversity statements are a good thing or at least a neutral thing, but evidence points to "not necessarily". And that's where I think we need to really be challenging everything that we're doing. You know, is this something that we've been doing because we've always done it because it feels right because of course, it would make a difference? Or is it backed by evidence that actually confirms our assumptions or not? And a lot of times as we've seen it, it just doesn't. I think that's where the benefit and the beauty of behavioural insights apply to inclusion is so powerful.

APPELT: Yeah, and absolutely. And I think there's also this piece of like maybe a diversity statement is a good first step, but maybe sometimes it ends up being the first and only step.

And then like with behavioural insights, we see a lot of things about changing some of the text is helpful, but it's the things where it substantially makes it easier and attractive or social timely to just go back to the EAST framework, that's when we see actual changes, not just having words which often as people, we're busy, we don't read them, we don't ingest them, we don't act on them. So how do we actually transform it to action?

One thing else I wanted to pick up on is going back to this idea of implicit bias training is we do use the word bias both in the EDI space and in the behavioural insights space. And I wanted to just take a moment to clarify terms and how we're using the terms. A lot of times too people in behavioural insights throw out "heuristics" and "biases" as if there are two synonyms. But actually, a heuristic is the mental shortcut that usually helps us, but sometimes hurts us. And when it hurts us, it's leading to a predictable error, which is what bias is.

The heuristic is the shortcut, the bias is the error, and to use an example from a completely different context, let's say you have a heuristic that if you're driving and you missed your turn off, you go to the next exit, you turn right and you keep turning right, which usually will get you back to the road before your destination. And usually you'll find it, occasionally it could backfire. That could be a dead end. There could be something else in the way, and so you might end up in the wrong spot. We know that if you use this heuristic too much, it'll lead to predictable errors. Like we know, if Sylvia is using the right turn heuristic, and we have a map will be able to say, "Oh, she's not going to get to her destination, there's a roadblock."

And so back in the world of psychology, a heuristic could be something like thinking "The present matters more than the future", which makes sense. One dollar today is worth more than one dollar in the future due to things like interest rates, certainty. But the issue is that we overweight the present and that becomes present bias, which means that we know people who are present biased will sometimes make the right decisions, but sometimes they'll make errors like maybe overpaying for expedited shipping. And of course, these are general across people. There're cases where paying high costs for expedited shipping is the right direction.

But biases, in the world of psychology, aren't always a bad thing. Sometimes if it's the heuristics, sometimes it gives you the right answer, sometimes it gives the wrong answer. So now let's think about bias in the EDI space. And so, I've heard you talk before about how cognitive biases jump into the EDI space. So, things like similarity bias, something from psychology, leads to gender and racial bias, so could you talk a little bit about that?

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, so all these cognitive biases impact our decisions around people. And so, if you think about similarity bias, which is really a bias that we treat people similar to ourselves better than those not similar to ourselves, you can imagine that would impact our recruitment process. So that if we're viewing a CV, and we see somebody that is from the same city, or has the same interests, we might treat them better. We might interview them, might go on to that next phase of the recruitment process and vice versa. And you can imagine how someone similar to ourselves would also, we'd promote them more readily.

And when our organizations are primarily led by men, then that just, that similarity bias can really have an impact on who gets that job, or who gets that promotion opportunity. And so, it's quite prevalent, but there's a lot of other ways, too. You know, when you anchor to that name, that's anchoring bias, the availability bias, or the recency bias, the last resumé that you see, or the information that's most available to you in your brain, that is what you're going to act on. But that's not necessarily the most objective decision.

So, there's all these cognitive biases that impact all these really important talent decisions. And so, often when I talk about bias, I talk about these cognitive biases because that impacts those identity biases. You know, we often talk about gender bias or racial bias or age bias or weight bias, those demographic or identity biases. But

behind those are those cognitive biases that are impacting all of that. And I think that's the opportunity that we have in order to design out of that. Because in that moment, as we know, of making a decision, it's really, really hard, if not impossible, to see our biases in action.

People want to make an objective decision, for the most part. I mean, behavioural insights doesn't tackle the explicit biases that we have, but it's more the implicit, unconscious ones that we can design out of. I mean, if someone is racist, we could talk about what that definite, what that means. You know, you can't necessarily design out of that. But if somebody, and I think this is for the most case, somebody intends to treat people equally, but our actions, our intentions don't always match. And behavioural insights provide us an opportunity to design to align people's intentions with their actions.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely. I think if we think about things like you said, like similarity bias in the moment, it's hard to realize that that's what you're doing. You just feel a connection to the person, and you start chatting, and you, "Oh, they're great", positive feelings. You don't realize that that's what's happening. And so like you said, that's a way to disrupt when the intention is there. But the action, there's the intention-action gap.

APOSTOLIDIS: It happened to me when I was hiring. When I worked at Catalyst, I was hiring for an Event Lead. There was a few candidates and one candidate quote "looked like me." She was more outgoing. She was white. She was young, at least at that time, I was young too, and I gravitated towards her. There was another candidate who was male, who was Asian, who was part of the LGBTQ community. And luckily, one of my colleagues actually mentioned it to me and said, okay, what you know, basically called me in on that, and I was able to go back. And we ended up hiring the male, Asian candidate instead.

And I think that's part of how we can design out of it as well is at some point in that recruitment process to have other people involved so that you get a diverse perspective. And this was really helpful for me. So, it happens to everybody.

APPELT: And it's that idea, too, I think of when we're in System One thinking we're just like, "Yep, this is great", motoring along, taking our right turns missing that, you know, maybe getting there, maybe not, maybe judging the person based on the fair merits or not. And then, when we set up the choice architecture to kick us in the System Two, whether it's by consulting with an external person, that can help us say like, "Oh, this is one of those cases where my cognitive bias is leading to racial, gender or another type of bias, it's not one of the cases where it's just overvaluing the present or taking too many right turns."

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, exactly.

APPELT: So, I know in previous conversations you said that there's a clear business case for applying BI to EDI. You've already kind of laid that groundwork today. And you've also mentioned some things around diversity statements and places where it's not quite worked. So how has BI been used to help hiring and talent acquisition be more equitable, for example?

APOSTOLIDIS: I'll give you some examples of some nudges that have interrupted bias in the recruitment process. One classic example is with the orchestras in the U.S. So, years ago, there was only five percent women in the orchestras as musicians. And so, people thought, "Okay, this doesn't seem right at all. I mean, I'm sure that there is just as many talented women as there are men".

What they did is they put a curtain in front of, so that the evaluators couldn't actually see who was playing. And in the beginning, it didn't really work because they could hear still hear the people coming across and

they could hear whether it's a man or woman. So, they got people to either take off their shoes or they laid down carpet. And today, the percentage of women in U.S. orchestra is about 40 percent.

This idea of blind auditions is used today in corporations where you may take off somebody's name, any kind of identified information, and really stick to the skills and competencies that you are looking for. So, this is a practice that is being used more and more. So that's good. Other ways that we can design out of our biases in the recruitment process is transparency.

LinkedIn did a study, and what they did is they showed the number of applicants on a job posting and what they were trying to do was trying to increase the number of women in STEM positions. And they found that by showing the number of applicants, more women applied, that didn't change the number of applicants for men, but it did for women. Now why is this? Because we know that transparency drives fairness. So using that insight, they were able to increase the number of women who were applying to positions that are typically harder to recruit for. That's another example.

Another thing that organizations can do, and where behavioural insights provides us some of that evidence is batch recruiting. So, we know that variety emerges when you recruit in in batches. If I were to ask you, Kristin, and say, "Okay, Kirstin, I'm going to buy you lunch this week, and I said on Sunday, what would you like?". You would say, "Well, on Monday, I would like a cheese sandwich, and on Tuesday I would like a soup, and on Wednesday, I'd like sushi". You'd like sushi. You'd give me variety.

But if I were to ask you every single day, then you would say, "Oh, that sounds, yesterday was really good. I'll just have that. Oh, the sandwich was really good. I'll just have that.". You'll give me less variety. If an organization can recruit in batches rather than individually, they may end up with a more diverse candidate pool, more diverse recruits just from that insight around how, again, how our mind operates.

So, these are the kinds of ways that we can design to interrupt those biases and the recruitment process, but we can do that in the promotion process. We can do that during meetings, as well. We can also use behavioural insights not just from a process perspective, but also, how do we motivate people or how do we reframe data so that people engage more. So, across everything that we do in inclusion, behavioural insights have an opportunity to impact all aspects of implementing our diversity strategy.

APPELT: Yeah, those are great examples, and I love how, you know, like starting with that first one with blinding auditions, pulls clearly on what you were saying before about similarity bias. So if it's blinded, that helps with similarity bias. If its batch recruiting, then it helps with this idea of when do we pick multiple options versus the same repeated option. It's nice that you can see why these fixes work.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah, and it breaks the stereotypes that we have as well. "Musicians are male". Well, not necessarily. Or "Nurses are female". Well, not necessarily. So breaks the stereotypes that we all have.

APPELT: Yeah. And like you said, it's with folks who are intending to do the right thing. But then just System One thinking gets in the way. I think you've got some great examples, and I think we've been talking about a number of ways I can help with EDI goals. So given that, what are the adoption rates like, where are companies at with respect to applying BI to their EDI challenges?

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. So, I think that some companies are looking for innovation, and that's good. And so there is an appetite for that innovation, especially organizations that are larger, that have been at this for a long time, like the financial industry, for example. With that said, there's a lot of companies that are in the

beginning of their diversity journey, if you will, and are always looking for best practices. But again, the problem with best practices is that they're just not really working very well.

I think right now, it's very, very early on. And when you look at behavioural insights as a field as well, it's quite a new field. In the last five years, it's exploded really, and it's become more mainstream. Only now are we seeing more and more behavioural insights teams in organizations. It's mostly in government right now, and they're not necessarily using those BI teams for inclusion yet.

When I often speak about behavioural insights and this connection with inclusion, there's always an interest, and there's always a "I've never even considered that before." And so, the field is really there. It's at the stage where we're still educating and companies are just now becoming aware of the power of behavioural insights and the connection to drive inclusion in organizations. So, it's a ripe field and it has so much potential.

APPELT: Yeah, absolutely, it sounds like two areas that are just so mutually compatible, that's like kind of a match made in heaven where we have these social biases, they pull on cognitive biases. We know the evidence. And like you said, best practice doesn't necessarily mean based on evidence. Best practice often just means that the status quo, which we know is a bias, there's a total bias. We like it because we've done it, not because it works.

APOSTOLIDIS: Yeah. And you know, people like to feel good. They like again, doing something, you know, and they'd look at what's traditionally been done, because we like the status quo. We don't necessarily like risk. And that's also what behavioural science tells us as well. And we're also really stuck to around in the D and I world around fixing the underrepresented group, when really, we should be looking at it, we need to be fixing the system instead. And that's where behavioural insights, applied behavioural insights really has that potential because we're going in to fix the system, we're going in to try to interrupt those biases in our processes, for example.

APPELT: That reminded me, you mentioned risk there, and I think that's an interesting piece, because a lot of times change feels risky. A lot of times using behavioural insights might seem risky because it's new. Trialing something during an experiment seems risky, but in reality, when there's evidence there, it's actually less risky than doing the status quo or than not trialing something.

But at the same time, we know that experiments, they're not risky, but they are sometimes resource intensive. When we're looking at how organizations can use BI, do you think it's using trials? Do you think it's pulling actual best practice or best practice means evidence informed practice? How do you see organizations using BI?

APOSTOLIDIS: Oh, I think right now one of the things that you talked about is the behavioural lens versus the trial. And I think we're at the behavioural lens. I've done work with organizations where we've dug into the evidence, and we're able to sort of analyze their process at a high level, and provide evidence so that they can strengthen that process. You know, "That has worked elsewhere, and perhaps it can work in your organization as well?". That's that behavioural lens.

And I think there's more of an appetite for that right now, than there is with the trial. Ideally, we'd like to get to the trial so that the organizations could say, "Yeah, this works in my organization". We know that there's evidence around what works to increase self-identification rates, for example. But will that work in a specific organization? We don't know until there's that trial that we that we launch and we do.

There's work to be done to one, get organizations to do a behavioural lens and take an evidence-based approach and not just go with assumptions and move beyond awareness. And there's a next step of going to those behavioural insights trials.

APPELT: Yeah, and I think that's really interesting, because some of the techniques, something like, you know, simplifying language, the removing some of the biased language, for example, those are things that we know will work or we're fairly confident will work across organizations. Other things like going to our old favourite best practices, things like encouraging self-identification. We know that it does depend on the organization and what the levels of trust are, and who's making the ask.

So, like you said, there's kind of a first wave where we can do some things that we know are, again not know, but are highly confident based on the research that they will work across organizations. Then other things that really do need these trials because they can backfire because of, again, whether the organization has trust or whether it is a diverse group, or whether it's an idea that has even been trusted in certain cultures or in certain organizations.

APOSTOLIDIS: Exactly. That self-identification research that was done, what actually was more beneficial, they found, was providing more information. Whereas behavioural insights doesn't necessarily say that that is actually a sort of a best practice or an evidence based approach, right? And so you don't really know until you test it and trial it. And at the same time, you know, going to the evidence rather than relying on our assumptions and what we think works is way better.

APPELT: Sylvia's and my conversation about the intersection of behavioural insights and equity, diversity, and inclusion couldn't be contained in a single episode. So we'll pause part one here. In part two Sylvia and I will turn from how the BI approach can advance equity, diversity and, inclusion to how advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion can improve the practice of behavioural insights. I hope you'll join us again for part two of our exploration of behavioural Insights and EDI.

In the meantime, I hope you enjoyed part one. Thank you for joining us for another episode of Calling DIBS.
