

Episode 51: Why Visibility Can Feel So Difficult

Mandy: Why the heck does it feel so hard to be visible, especially if you're someone who struggles with perfectionism and feelings of not enough-ness, and what can we do about it? You know, I like trying new things here on the pod. So this is a mostly solo episode with a couple of helpful pop ups from some previous guests, including Darrah Brustein, Kanchan Prinsloo, and Anita Feron Clark.

We're gonna get really curious about what might be underneath your hesitation to put yourself forward or to speak up at work. Tips and tricks are useful and Darrah Brustein is going to share some of those. But I wanna take us deeper first, maybe you've tried some tips and tricks and you still find visibility tricky and unintuitive.

Let's explore what might be going on there. Noticing is the first step of changing anything, and a little heads up, I wanna explore more around visibility and taking up space in future episodes, so watch this space. But before we kick off, Hello, welcome to Enough the podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Lehto, executive coach and recovering perfectionist and overachiever.

This show is for anyone whose life looks shiny and successful from the outside, but inside you're exhausted. You're brutally self-critical, and you never quite feel like you've arrived in spite of your impressive achievements. I do a lot of solo episodes here, but I also riff with experts, and today's a bit of both, so why does it feel so hard to be visible?

Let's explore.

What's the story you're telling yourself about taking up space and being seen? I've heard things like, "ugh, it feels inauthentic. It's showy offy. It's just not me. It's so unnatural. I'm not good at it." If we dig a little further, think about the societal or cultural or familial messages that you heard growing up.

Maybe things like, 'don't get too big for your boots', or the 'tall poppy gets cut down', or 'nobody likes a show off', or 'who does she think she is'? Was there something like that for you? And if so, whose voices are those still playing in your head decades later? Chances are they're not yours. So much of our socialization as women is around blending in and being agreeable, likable, approachable, a team player, not making a fuss, not being self-aggrandizing. So to be visible is to put oneself at risk. Harkening back to the tall poppy phrase. This can also have cultural aspects to it. I remember hearing women in my community growing up saying things like, "Oh, I'm a nothing. I'm nothing special". And when a woman did take up space, there was always a bit of side eyeing and like she's making a spectacle of herself.

I didn't even know what that meant as a kid, but I knew it wasn't good. So I grew up in a very Scandinavian community in rural Canada, and it was only years later in university that I learned about this thing called the Jante Law, which is a set of cultural codes that emerged from Aksel Sandemose book in 1933 called *A Fugitive Crosses his tracks*.

Now, these are some, I'm not gonna read all of the rules of Jante, but here's a couple of them, you'll get a feel for them. So don't think you are anything special. Don't think you're smarter than we are. Don't convince yourself that you're better than we are. Don't convince that you know more than we do, we as in the collective, don't think you're more important than we are. Don't think you're good at anything. Don't think that anyone cares about you.

So when I read those in my twenties, I remember thinking, "Oh, that explains so much". Even though I had never heard of that book, no one ever mentioned that book. It had infiltrated into the culture. So yes, these are aspects where it's not just the dumb thing to be visible. These are aspects that, you know, feed into our lives.

In episode 33, Anita Feron Clark shares how as a person of color being visible and putting yourself out there also felt risky in her culture.

Anita Feron Clark: I've had years and years of being invisible because growing up I was not fair enough. I was not slim enough. I was called aubergine by my family, dark and round.

I was called sparrow legs because my legs were too thin. I was subject of a lot of racism. I was called Paki and the N word at school, blah, blah, blah. I was criticized by my mother, by my sisters, because you know, Indians generally, sorry to generalize here, don't have a filter. By the time I got to 27, I was like so bloody confused because I was told not to do this, not to wear that, not to appear too confident, be more shy, be a bit more coquettish.

Then it comes to a point where you are so confused in your mind that you think, do you know what? I need to just find my own way.

Mandy: Kanchan Prinsloo from episode 35 grew up in an Indian family too. In her corporate career, she was well aware of the importance of being visible, but it didn't feel natural to her, so she found a way to create a persona that seemed to fit in whilst still creating a sense of safety for herself.

Kanchan Prinsloo: I always kept a bit of a distance. I always led fairly large teams, but I always kept a bit of a distance under the cloak of, 'you don't wanna mix, you don't wanna get too close to the staff that you're with or teams that you're with because you've gotta make hard decisions.'

Oh, no, I just didn't wanna share who I possibly could have been.

I could make an excuse for why I was separate from my teams, and then I had kids. I had a neutral third party I could talk about and people could figure out who I was, but they didn't. It was such a performance. I curated every conversation. I went in, did the joke where it needed to be timed. I did the, I did the connection where I thought was gonna be, and I became this, this person where people would go, "Oh my God, we're such good friends, because I share so much. Right? You share so much with me. I share jackshit about myself. Because I'm only handing out what I think is safe enough to hand out. So I wasn't even true to myself, let alone the relationships. And I, I literally designed relationships where people felt so close to me, and I'm like, "Oh, hell no".

I got four people that I'm close to. They're my family, my husband, my kids, and one friend. The rest is all performance.

Mandy: In my 15 years of executive coaching experience, I've supported so many exceedingly powerful women who still feel uncomfortable standing in the fullness of their power. Heck, I mean, that's still me sometimes. So this stuff has long roots. This got me thinking about Reshma Saujani's Ted talk linked in the show notes, of course, where she says, and I'm paraphrasing, "That women have been socialized to aspire to perfection, and they're overly cautious. They take less risks in their careers than men do". So what if girls were socialized to be brave instead of socialized to be perfect? If it wouldn't make such a terrible clattering noise in your earphones, I would do a mic drop right here. So how do we find a way forward? Noticing what might be contributing to your hesitation to be visible is a helpful first step.

I also like surrounding myself both in real life and on social media with women who are doing the deep work of allowing themselves to be seen. So on socials, I love watching women like Robin Arzon from Peloton and Lizzo talking about body positivity. And I've also created a real life circle of friends who are committed to being brave and visible in work and in life.

Having these people, these champions, these cheerleaders, these role models in your corner, can start to chip away at those longstanding narratives in our heads. Remember Darrah Brustein from the Christmas cracker episode. She's a coach and business strategist, and also happens to be an expert on networking and visibility.

She's back to share some practical tips on how we can lay down our perfectionism around visibility and cultivate courage instead. She's gonna share a big mindset shift that can help you reframe your visibility from being too focused on you, which is where the ick can come from.

Darrah Brustein: The biggest shift for me and what I've seen really help shift other people, is changing the focus from, it's about me to it's about me being a vessel in act of the service of the thing. So for example, if you feel like stepping into the spotlight or taking credit or you know, getting out in any way, shape or form is, it feels like, ego-y or it feels like I don't want that, or I don't want the attention, I wanna be in the background.

The second that you shift, or for, I'll speak for myself, the second that I shifted from, I'm just simply a vessel in service to fill in the blank. And some people will find benefit from that in the unique package of me at this timing and the way that they intersect it. And so for everyone listening, it may not be that you're building a business or a brand, so that may not work in the exact same way, but for you, if it's in a corporate environment or otherwise, it's that same thing where you are there because your job matters and what you're doing matters.

And when you step up in representation of the impact of what your work is, you are just simply the flag bearer. You're the representative. It's not really about you. And I find that that takes away from feeling like I have to perform to, I get to be of service and it takes it away from, it's about me too.

It's about the impact. And while the action, again, this goes back to something you and I have talked about, of two seemingly identical actions can be driven by different intentions and therefore not the same even though they look the same. This goes back to that, that if my intention is in service and not about self-aggrandizement, it feels very different than coming from that place of, 'Hey, look at me, look at me. Give me all of the awards and the applause and everything else'. And I'm not here to say that there is judgment on doing that, but I am here to say they will feel very different.

Mandy: Let's play with what this could look like in real life. Shifting the focus onto being of service. So maybe there's a specific project that you've been working on, and without sharing anything that might be confidential, would anyone, say, on another team benefit from an update on what your project has achieved.

Maybe a highlight reel or an executive summary, or some of the key learnings? So you are the one initiating and therefore being visible, but you're sharing from a place of service and helpfulness. I call this 'value add visibility', which makes it feel so much better. Or here's another option. Perhaps you've heard someone speak on a panel or there was a zoom round table, or you've heard a corporate podcast with a really amazing guest.

So you could connect with them in person if they're in your building or via email or LinkedIn to share what impact they had on you. Please don't just say, "Oh, that was great", because there's no value add to that. It's fun and, and it's nice to hear, but they don't actually know what it was that they said that had an impact on you.

So for example, let's say there was somebody sharing about their career path, for instance, and you might reach out and say, "Hey, that really opened up some possibilities for me that I hadn't considered, and I really wanted to thank you for your perspective, which was useful. Thank you so much". That can be very useful and feel good to the person receiving that feedback.

So it's visibility, you're starting a conversation, you're having a dialogue. Okay, here's a third way you could focus your visibility into being of service. So what if you used your voice to shine a light on someone else? So it could be a colleague in a meeting that your colleague did something great that week, and you're giving them a shout out in the meeting if it's appropriate to do so.

And be specific. So say, Sarah was really great with one of your clients when you were poorly or something. So you give a shout out to Sarah in front of your boss and in front of your colleagues, and be specific what she did. So you're being visible by speaking and you're being of service to your colleague by sharing a spotlight on her.

There is a beautiful line in Lisa Olivera's article, the Discomfort of Self-Promotion, also linked in the show notes, where she says, "Discomfort doesn't mean anything's wrong. It means I'm at an edge. So let's learn how to manage nerves, if you are at an edge and you're determined to push through it, but then your inner critic starts shutting you down."

So Darrah, what can we try when our self-talk gets nasty?

Darrah Brustein: There's a neurolinguistic programming practice that has to do with this where if you imagine that voice in like a silly voice or one you wouldn't take as credible, that can really help where you're like, 'oh, that sounds absurd, and why am I giving that so much weight or credit?'

Another could be to just write them down and be like, whose story is this? Is this mine? Do I wanna continue to perpetuate this story? And sometimes when we see it in black and white like that, it helps us depersonalize it and see like, huh, there's a disconnect here, or discordance. And sometimes it helps just get it out of our head in the first place.

Another place to potentially get like a double win here is one, and being more visible is just to bring in people in your world, maybe in the workforce that you say, "Hey, I'd love to sort of be buddies on this, or accountability partners on this. Can you help juice me up or gas me up a little bit to do these things when I feel uncomfortable and vice versa."

And it allows you to say, okay, "Growth really exists in the places of pushing through the boundaries and that we can move forward in spite of the fear or alongside the fear, and that it may not feel comfortable. It may not feel natural or organic, but what happens if you gave yourself the opportunity to say, "despite this thing, I'm gonna do the uncomfortable thing anyway" and see how I feel on the other side, and allow that to be a data point and or to look back at historic evidence and say, when were times that I did this same thing, or I did something like this that can give me the confidence in this moment to move through those voices and say, "Well, in the past that went okay, like that the data supports, the historic evidence supports me doing that thing?" And also to look at it from the perspective of what's the true worst case scenario? What is it I'm really afraid of? And can I face that? Because if you say, well, the worst case scenario is I lose my job, and you stop and you think there's like 19 steps between me doing this and me losing my job, therefore is that fear even, at all likely? No. And is the possible potential byproduct of positive outcome outweighing enough the potential negative outcome? Then what do you need to say? Okay, great. Now I know that that's true. These voices can quiet a little. What do I need to get myself into action? And sometimes the action is a micro-action.

It's not the jump to the thing that might feel the scariest. It's what's one small step that I can take to build the momentum to get myself out of this thinking, because I've always found that the voices quiet down when we are in movement, or in action, but that the action can't just be a knee jerk, like I need to busy myself so I don't hear the voices.

It... it is best serving you when it is intentional action as a resultant of slowing down enough to understand, okay, which voice am I wanting to listen to? Because we've got a lot of them. They are not all factual. Most of them are our reptilian brain trying to protect us from what it perceives as danger or change, when really most of the time these things are not actually what our brain is purporting it to be.

It's just, 'Oh, it's uncomfortable and that's okay'. There's good on the other side potentially, and it's worth taking a step, any step, that moves me potentially in that direction.

Mandy: Imagine now somebody's sitting in a meeting room and they've listened to this podcast and they're thinking, "Okay, I'm gonna speak up. I've never spoken in this meeting. There's a lot of senior people in this meeting, and they're kind of like, getting them into the brink, doing the thing and all the voices are crowding in, so there's, they've done all these things ahead of time that you've said, you know, doing the risk assessment, all of these things.

Do you have any advice for when we're actually just about to kick off or when we're in it and we're having the physiological reactions. So some people get that like red blotchy thing that starts creeping up their neck or their mouth dries out, or their armpits turn into Niagara Falls or whatever else starts to happen.

What would you say for somebody who's in the heat of the moment or just about to do what feels like a really, really brave thing, what would you say then?

Darrah Brustein: So my heart starts to go really, really fast, which also is often a reminder for me of like, this matters to you. So that's a good sign. And so I'll usually ground myself.

If you're sitting in a chair, you're standing just re-routing my feet, re-routing myself and taking a deep breath, that doesn't need to be obvious to anyone but me. And just reminding myself, "Okay, you're here. This is, you can do this. This is okay". And sometimes it's looking at like the version of myself on the other side of it, of how am I gonna feel when this is done?"

It's that visualization of, well, I'm gonna feel relieved, I'm gonna feel proud. I'm gonna feel like I contributed. And starting from that place so I can move into it with that expectation or that intention. And if you need to think to like who someone that I admire who would show up in this way and can I sort of embody a little bit of their energy when I'm doing it or if it's even to have written down and just to kind of like glance at the thing that I wanna say so I feel supported in it.

And then when it's time to not use my notes and come out and say the thing. Or to even have some sort of physical thing in your hand, like you could have a little rocker, you know, have a bracelet on and you're just holding it, and that can be almost a symbol for you of groundedness, of strength of all the things that you wanna be feeling.

And allow yourself, like some people, like put their fingers together and sort of a moodra like you would when you're meditating. And let that be that reminder of, "Okay, you're okay. This is going to be okay. You'll still be here on the other side of this", and just give yourself that thing to support you and ground you.

Mandy: Years ago I did this half day workshop for a corporate client. There were about 25 people in the room, maybe 30, and they were mostly really engaged. And then there was this one person, mm-hmm. . There's always one, isn't there? And this person sat there with their arms folded looking so underwhelmed for that whole session.

And I noticed the people pleaser in me wanting to try to convert this person, so like me, like me, please, like me, or at least don't dislike me. And then I realized that this person was at choice as to how they wanted to show up. And so was I, so I could focus on this one person who didn't like how I was taking up space in this room.

I could start doubting myself. I could start hustling for approval, or I could take a deep breath and ground myself, like Darrah said. I could imagine myself on the other side of this workshop feeling good about how I held my space. I could remind myself that my worth was not dependent on a hundred percent approval ratings or on this person liking me, right?

So I let her be in her experience. And I stayed in mine and as I asked each person to share one thing that they were taking away from this session, there were other really deep, profound takeaways. And when it was this person's turn, I felt my body clenching up. And I asked anyway, and this person sat there, slouched over, wouldn't make eye contact with me, arms still folded across her chest and she said, "Nothing. I'm taking zero from you". So my inner critic is nothing if not persistent. It tried again. "You suck. You're an idiot." And I took another deep breath and grounded myself. "I'm okay. I really am okay." And lo and behold, dear listener, I'm still here to tell the tale I didn't die of someone's disapproval when I stood in my visibility.

I often close an episode where a guest shares a brick of wisdom, something that you can mull over. I know some of you use these as journal prompts, or you talk them over with a friend or a coach or a mentor. Brilliant. I love your creativity, how you're using these bricks of wisdom. So Darrah, take it away.

Darrah Brustein: Well, I think the thing that I have noticed is so important is that we need to be our own biggest advocates and cheerleaders, and that can feel very hard when we're often our biggest critics. But that, how can we expect others to support us in ways that we are not showing up for ourselves? And I think so much of this comes down to these seemingly simple, but often hard in practice exercises to reconnect and ground with ourselves to say the beginning see the germinating piece of this is my relationship with myself, and that for me to go out and be visible or for me to go out and build connection in any of the ways that we've talked about. When I don't feel like I'm rooted and grounded in some way, even just 1%

more than I am right now, then it's a lot more difficult for us to build that connection and to put ourselves in situations that are gonna stretch us and push us.

Because we don't have that rootedness, that groundedness, that security in: regardless of how this goes, I feel safe and secure at in the home of me and with myself. And that's not to say that there's a perfection seeking need there, that we always need to feel that way. We're not going to, but when we can say, so what if the thing doesn't go that way?

So what if that person doesn't like me? Or, so what if I stumble on my words? I know that that doesn't define me.. I know that I am valuable. Intrinsicly, I know who and what matters to me, and that I have found makes us so much more unshakable in the face of feeling shaken.

Mandy: Who do you know who'd get a lot out of this episode? Thank you so much in advance for sharing, and before you head back into your day, if you haven't already, please go ahead and hit the follow button on Enough, the podcast so you never miss an episode. I hope you found some new ways of thinking about visibility and what might be holding you back under the surface, and I hope you'll also play with some of Darrah's suggestions.

Find her on Instagram at Darrah Brustein, which will also be in the show notes. And as ever, thank you so much for listening. Let's do this all again in two weeks.