

# What is Innovation EP71 - Dr. Akhtar Badshah

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**Jared Simmons** 00:05

Hello, and welcome to What is Innovation? The podcast that explores the reality of a word that is in danger of losing its meaning altogether. This podcast is produced by OUTLAST Consulting LLC, a boutique consultancy that helps companies use innovation principles to solve their toughest business problems. I'm your host, Jared Simmons, and I'm so excited to have Dr. Akhtar Badshah

**Jared Simmons** 00:30

Dr. Akhtar Badshah is a Chief Catalyst at Catalytic Innovators Group, where he advises organizations and individuals to catalyze their strategy, focused on social and philanthropic investments. He also conducts purpose mindset leadership workshops with organizations to help individuals articulate their strengths and values and craft their purpose statement. A seasoned executive with over 30 years of experience in international development, managing a corporate philanthropic program, and Co-founding a global nonprofit for social enterprise. Dr. Badshah led Microsoft's philanthropic efforts for 10 years where he administered the company's community investment and employee contributions. He was instrumental in launching both unlimited potential and YouthSpark. The company's focus is to bring digital technology to underserved communities and youth all over the world. A distinguished practitioner at the University of Washington at the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance, and a faculty advisor at the Start Center in the Department of Global Health. He is the founder and curator of the university's accelerating social transformation program, a mid-career professional development certificate course on social impact. He is an accomplished artist, a doctoral graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the author of the 2020 release, Purpose Mindset: how Microsoft inspires employees and alumni to change the world. Dr. Badshah and his family are very active philanthropists in the Seattle area. Dr. Badshah, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm so excited to hear your perspective on innovation and look forward to learning from you today.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 02:02

I'm so glad to be with you, Jared. I'm really excited to share.

**Jared Simmons** 02:07

Well, let's dive right in. What in your mind is innovation?

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 02:12

I think most people think about innovation as something completely undiscovered and brand-new. It gets conflated with invention. That I think that innovation is very, very much how you approach the world. It's more of a mindset issue. We've come from a world over the last 20 years where we said, you know, we don't need to reward what people know. I got to fix mindset, we need to reward people for the effort they put in, and the ability to learn and grow, and that became a growth mindset. Innovation and invention got put within that frame. I am saying that we need to kind of go beyond that and we need to ask the question why? Why are we doing what we are doing? To me, innovation equates to a purpose mindset. Purpose is where you're introducing the trinity of the community. It is the ability to pick the right thing to do, not necessarily doing things the right way. Intent becomes part of how you think about innovation.

**Jared Simmons** 03:45

Intent. I see. That was such a new and fresh approach to thinking about innovation because it's so often tied to outcomes. You're saying connecting it to effort and the growth mindset but moving a step beyond that to why and the purpose aspect of it is the critical piece. That's fascinating. How do you see that play out? How can you tell when someone has a purpose mindset and an innovation context versus that other approach or view that you described?

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 04:17

We obviously need a growth mindset. My friend and colleague, Aaron Hurst, and I are working on this together. He's written a book called The Purpose Economy. I've written a book called Purpose Mindset. We both believe that at the end of the day, our approach should be that we need to do things for self benefit and for the benefit of our work. But true innovators, really asked the big question of why are you doing this and for whose benefit? At the end of the day, the benefit has to be added to the community at large. You're introducing the trinity of the self, the bulk, and the community. Now, that doesn't mean that you are actually in the social benefits space, right? That you're just doing philanthropy or just giving back, it is every day, how do you come out and say, I am here because I'm part of a larger community and if the larger community does not benefit, I don't benefit either.

**Jared Simmons** 05:32

That's a mindset that's missing from a lot of definitions of innovation, it has gotten co-opted to mean invention, or new technology, or something new to the world. But the element like this trinity of sales, community, and work, when I hear what you're talking about, I think of value. There are lots of different forms of value and if you attach innovation to just a monetary or a corporate definition of value, you would miss the self and the community aspects of it.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 06:04

Again, I want to be very clear that we want to make sure that people understand that we live within a capitalist business environment but we really shouldn't be living in a capitalist societal environment. Now, what has happened is that capitalism is the way we live versus the way we work or do business.

**Jared Simmons** 06:26

Oh, wow. All right. Capitalism has become the way we live versus the way we work. So by that definition, it cuts out the more purpose-driven aspects of our lives, if it has become the way we live, the community and self aspects have been diminished in that definition.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 06:51

So things are changing, right? I mean, people are questioning, people are questioning, people are saying and say, Hey, what you're seeing with the great resignation, what you're seeing with the quiet quitting, all of this is just a way for people to say, let me step back. If you look at the pandemic, I'm not sure that there is any individual in the world that has not got impacted, in some form or the other. With closures, different ways in which you had to show up, different ways in which you've communicated, the fact that many of us actually got COVID or know somebody that got COVID or got severely impacted by COVID. I took this whole journey of what everybody has gone through. People are now saying, am I just going to show up to work? Or are we expecting something different? Though is questioning the fact that people need to make money and earn a living, and have a system by which you're rewarded monetarily for what you do, but that shouldn't become the basis for your life. That questioning has already started. Some of the work that we are doing is getting people to start recognizing, crafting and creating, and articulating their own individual purpose. Most of us have never written down our own purpose statement. Why do you exist? We ask our kids, we're constantly telling our kids who do you want to be? We don't tell them, who do you want to serve? We don't ask them who you want to serve. It's that distinction. Now people are actually looking at it and saying, so we are getting people to craft the purpose statement, and through that connection to their work, and then finding ways by which their strengths, the values, and the purpose, individual purpose, their personal strengths, their personal values are then being utilized first and foremost, for yourself, for your family, for your community, and for your work. If you're doing all of that then you're starting to find meaning in what you do. Meaning just doesn't derive from work. That's the piece that... we've got so consumed by work. Hopefully, we're not spending more than eight, or nine hours a day working. The rest you're doing something that is outside and one gets purpose from that too.

**Jared Simmons** 09:45

As I'm listening to your explanation of this ecosystem of self-community, work, and family, it almost sounds like a corporate innovation construct, individualized. Almost like a portfolio of different focus areas and taking a more structured approach to thinking about how to balance those things in your everyday life, pulling the definitions of value that make the most sense to you, and prioritizing your time and your effort and your focus around your own set of priorities.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 10:26

We know there are several recent articles that have come out that highlight the purpose gap, where companies are going; McKinsey has done a study, and a couple of other folks have done a study and they show that the majority of senior executives believe that they derive purpose from their work. The reverse is true for rank-and-file employees, 85% of senior executives say that they derive purpose from their work, and 85% of rank-and-file employees don't derive purpose from their work. That's because we don't spend time getting those connections made,

what we are doing is trying to make those connections. One of the things that we are arguing is that your personal purpose and the purpose of your work should not be fully aligned because if it is, then you're just a robot. But there should be alignments, you and your manager and your team should figure out those alignments. As those alignments become stronger and those muscles become stronger. Then there is friction, and there will always be tension and friction at work. Those muscles withhold, and you can then realize, hey, I do this, because of this bigger impact we are having

**Jared Simmons** 11:44

It probably also makes organizations and individuals more resilient as well, if you don't have everything kind of tied up in the word.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 11:53

The big challenge is that we've kind of lost this ability to think that my purpose and my work have to be fully aligned. Now I go back to the thing, now you're only living to work. You're not working to live

**Jared Simmons** 12:07

I see. I get it now. So if it's in a full alignment, then you're still stacking the risk, or the sort of exposure, from a purpose standpoint, it's still all on your work, you're still connecting your worth to your work. It's just now aligned with your purpose, but the risk is still the same.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 12:24

Correct. Obviously, there are people who, most of their work... I mean, when you look at the Dalai Lama, or when you look at Martin Luther King, and when you look at Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa, I mean, these are people who have moved completely to the center of the bullseye. The bullseye being, we are all generous to a point, we are empathetic to a point and we are compassionate to a point. Whereas these folks are totally compassionate and they are willing to give their life for somebody else that they don't know. But most of us are not going to be there, we are only going to be on that journey. In that journey, we should still derive a value of our contributions for the time that we spend on this planet. Most people now equate that unless you have done something like that you have added no value.

**Jared Simmons** 13:19

I see.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 13:20

I'm saying, that's not true. Every single person has value. We discovered our strengths and we articulated our strengths, our values, and our purpose. Now you can use that as a way to prioritize what you do. Which doesn't mean, everything you do has to be from that because, at the end of the day, work is work. I mean, I got to make calls or pay the bills. I don't want to do that. I mean, I don't write memos. When I teach my class... I love teaching, and I love to be speaking, and giving a talk but after 10 papers, the 20th paper or the 30th paper, you have to read? You're gonna say, Oh, my God. Then you have to align it to your purpose, you say I've

got to give that same attention to that 30th paper that I gave to the 20th paper or for the first paper.

**Jared Simmons** 14:16

Again, this is a very interesting issue. What is it that gets you to be in a physical space with somebody? If it is just for a routine meeting, we now have figured out that, hey, I can do that as effectively sitting on Zoom. What if it is a collaborative task? And if I now understand the purpose of that collaborative task, versus that I have to complete that task; we may find that, hey, coming together and working on it is much more beneficial and therefore, I will commute.

**Jared Simmons** 14:16

That focus to do that comes from the alignment with your purpose. That makes sense. It feels like you talked about the great resignation, quiet quitting, and all these things. It seems like there's a broader misalignment around how tasks are viewed in the context of work. The two things we care about a lot are working from home, and these different remote work scenarios and environments. It seems to me very task-focused, analogous to your grading papers example. It feels like we're missing the broader conversation around purpose to your point where the headlines and everything have focused more on a tactical aspect of the experience and less on, why is this a deal breaker. Why is whether you drive to the office every day or not suddenly a deal breaker? To me, it's because just what you're describing, the alignment is off. It's more about fixing the alignment than deciding whether it's two days or three days or four days or one day in the office.

**Jared Simmons** 15:55

Exactly. But in that example, the purpose pulls you into the office, instead of you being told that you have to be in the office.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 16:03

Exactly. That's what work that we've done now with over 3000 people who have participated through our workshops with large companies, small companies, government organizations, universities, and nonprofit organizations from around the world, we've had participants from 70 different countries. CEOs of companies to board members of organizations, deans of institutions, ministers and government agencies, young people, rank and file folks. What we found is the energy that comes in as you're getting people to actually not talk about the title of the job that they have versus the larger purpose of what it is that they want to see as an impact. Again, it brings you back to this notion of doing the right thing versus doing things the right way.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 17:00

In my book, I gave an example of an organization that does corneal transplants. The new CEO that came in, she came in from Microsoft and brought in the typical ROI approach of efficiency. That's correct, I mean, she's saying, "Look, we're a resource-constrained organization, we're not like Microsoft, where (we have) an unlimited amount of resources. We are a nonprofit, we're doing some work around transplants. Let me just look into how I can make the process of us performing procedures around the world much more efficient. If we can reduce the tasks and if

we can reduce the cost, which means we can actually do more with the same amount of resources." Logical, she quickly discovered that if she went down this path, she was just going to lose her staff.

**Jared Simmons** 17:54

Gotcha.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 17:55

She then understood, and said, "What if I took some of our top talents in the US, that (are) highly trained physicians who basically sit here and get them to travel around the world and mentor people, other physicians in these resource-constrained environments. What would that do? What it did is that it brought a new acumen and new insights to these folks, whether it's in India or Africa or other parts of the world. Her cost of doing these transplants went down from \$600 to \$134.

**Jared Simmons** 18:31

Wow. That's unbelievable.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 18:34

She figured out that it was not efficiency, that was important, it was effectiveness. If you can get to effectiveness, you're automatically being efficient. It is, again, the perspective of which path do you want to go down.

**Jared Simmons** 18:51

Now, that's a great example, because she took a people-driven approach, a knee-jerk response would have been a process-driven sort of approach. Let's go revamp the process. Let's look at where the pain points are. Let's drive the cost down and teach these folks how to do this more efficiently as you said.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 19:11

It's also a very well-established approach. We got the tools and techniques to do that it. Whereas the other one, she had no idea whether this would be successful.

**Jared Simmons** 19:21

Exactly. Takes a lot of courage and a lot of foresight for her to take that approach.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 19:25

It is risky.

**Jared Simmons** 19:28

For sure, but I think it's more sustainable. That's what I've learned, as we've been doing consulting and coaching work in my firm, we tend to lead with the more humanistic people-centered solution first versus the efficiency-driven process approach. Because when you lead with the process, there tends to be more of a rejection of the solution, even if it is the right

approach if it doesn't spring from something that people feel some amount of ownership and buy-in and investment and it doesn't really stick

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 19:59

That is correct. That is exactly correct. It is this understanding of this determination. When I look at my purpose mindset in my book I got came up with five principles. The first is to work from your strengths. We spent way too much time focused on our weaknesses, I've got to improve. If I don't put down a litany of my weaknesses, you know, it will never... But if you can identify your five strengths, just write down your five strengths, what are you good at? Then figure out on a daily basis, weekly basis, are you utilizing that in some form or the other. and if you are now, you're bringing value and impact because that's what then drives you. By the way, this is a neurological phenomenon, neuroscientists will say your brain reacts much more effectively when you're working from strengths than from weaknesses.

**Jared Simmons** 20:57

It makes sense.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 20:58

Peter Drucker basically says the task of leadership is to align strengths so your weaknesses become irrelevant. The first thing is to articulate your strengths and then keep track of whether you're actually applying your strengths or not.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 21:15

Second, put on a lens of abundance. We get too mired into this frame of scarcity, if only I had this if only I got permission if only somebody opened the door for me. Just as an example, during the pandemic, in May of 2020, a bunch of us basically came up with this crazy idea that if we could get everybody to wear a mask, we could keep our economy open and everybody safe. We just started off to evangelize it and over a year-long effort to just grabbing resources from here and there. Around the world, through our outreach and advocacy work, we reached over 100 million people. We did this through Facebook and Facebook ads. We measured it and we had a 4.5% conversion rate. Which is huge.

**Jared Simmons** 22:11

That's very, that's amazing.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 22:14

That essentially led to saving of lives.

**Jared Simmons** 22:17

Yeah, no doubt.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 22:18

We just did it because a bunch of idiots felt that this is a good thing to do and we started off with nothing. We just found connections and connections and connections and just did it and that was the purpose within. Abundance is important.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah 22:35**

The third is to focus on the effectiveness of what you're doing versus the efficiency. I just gave you the example of picking the right thing to do versus doing things the right way. We are now in the age of igniting movements. We are no longer in the age of just creating organizations. Organizations are a vessel by which movements are eventually formalized. Therefore the skills you need are no longer being an effective manager but you have to be an effective conductor and a synchronizer. you synchronize movements, you conduct movements, and you catalyze movements. You don't manage movements. Then eventually, as I mentioned earlier, how do we move on that path from generosity to empathy to compassion? We are moving away from the focus on me to the focus on the 'we' and the common good. That to me becomes innovation.

**Jared Simmons 23:40**

It's such an elegant construct, to think about it in because just among those five principles, it touches on a lot of the things in terms of leadership, it touches on resource allocation, it touches on prioritization, but all in a humanistic first principles way that makes it easy to engage in and to think about how to apply it to the way you work and live.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah 23:40**

In March of 2021, I got a call through some mutual introduction. These five individuals were on the phone on zoom with me and they said, Hey, we've been asked to get in touch with you. We've been recently released from prison. We've spent over 20 plus years each, incarcerated, and we found purpose in prison. We've been released and we want your help. I mean, we are all biased, as humans. I'm seeing their faces and I'm listening to them. My wife is in the other room and she's just listening to the voices. She came back and said this one of the most articulate folks, group of people that I've ever heard. Who were you talking to? These are some of the most well-read individuals. They all spent 20-plus years in prison. They now want to change the way in which we treat formerly incarcerated people by focusing on their minds and not on their bodies and getting them to work in the high-tech sector. Interesting, because what they said was that when we went in, we were all in our 20s. We were essentially in the California penitentiary system. We were essentially told that the only way you come out is a pine box, our physical environment was confined, but our minds were never confined. It took us a while to recognize that and once we recognize that, then we started to try. They work with training prisoners to become entrepreneurs, to become educated, to stop doing drugs, and all of those things. That, to me, is the spirit in which we think about innovation through our minds. Now, these guys have all been out, they work with the California state legislator, and they've now got a substantial amount of funding to make this a reality.

**Jared Simmons 24:02**

That's fantastic and wonderful.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 24:07

Again, these are people who you would never expect to contribute anything to society.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 24:30

As you think about it, it's such a powerful story. Is that something that is scalable and re-applicable? Do you think this is something that was unique to these five individuals? Their premise is that they can scale this to other folks, do you think that's feasible?

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 24:58

Yeah.

**Jared Simmons** 25:08

What's the mechanism behind that? Is it the same sort of approach that you're describing? Like you said, there's a lot of bias and constrained resources, I'm excited by the prospect of what they're doing and I'm curious what scale looks like for that?

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 26:40

This is a perennial question, right? That we have somehow convinced ourselves and the world, that scale is the most important thing. Therefore, our view of scale, is that every single thing should become aware. Whereas actually, you can have the same amount of scale by thinking of yourself as a salmon. Salmon is far more plentiful, far more nutritious. So how do you think of scale? Are you going to do it all? Or are you going to find avenues through which it will multiply? Are you going to take the McDonald's model or create a franchise? Or you're going to take a Chinese restaurant model and say it's a spread? Spread versus scale, both achieve the same thing in different ways. Ideas spread, and businesses scale.

**Jared Simmons** 27:33

This goes right back to igniting a movement versus creating an organization.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 27:39

Now, if they're successful in their way, they can inspire lots of people in different parts of the country and the world to do the same thing or modify it, or change it.

**Jared Simmons** 27:55

I'm so glad you said that because it is the first thing people talk about is scale. In the business world and entrepreneurship, accelerators, incubators, all those things, how do you get to scale? I was fascinated by your igniting movements versus creating an organization because to me, that's how you break that mindset. It is the fact that ideas spread and if you see things as a movement, then you don't have to spend time operating outside of your strengths, trying to figure out how to build an organization with a construct to prepare for scale. You can focus on igniting a movement that spreads of its own volition with synchronized connectivity versus focusing on management. That's fascinating. We've talked about innovation is about how you approach the world and we've looked at some examples from your work. Those things in my

mind, lead me down a path of advice. What advice do you have for innovators, movement starters, however, you want to frame it; what words of wisdom or advice can you offer?

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah 28:57**

While I was at Microsoft, people would come to me all the time and say, I have a passion to make a difference in the world. I want to work with you. I would always shake my head and I'd say if you've got a passion to change the world, just go do it, why do you need me? Go, volunteer. Nobody stopping you from going and volunteering, go to a food kitchen and spend a weekend, go help a child read or do math. Nobody's stopping you in doing that. It always annoyed me to a great extent that people just threw in passion as a stand-in for Hey, I'm so good.

**Jared Simmons 29:38**

Interesting.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah 29:40**

That's part of the reason why I wrote the book on purpose. There has to be a different way to think about it. When you even bust out, what does it actually mean to be innovative? How do you think about that? I came up with the 6 Cs. First and foremost, you've got to have conviction, that is in your ability and yourself, which starts with your stretch. Second, you got to be creative. You've got to have some vision of something that you want to leave behind, which is not just going to be for yourself, but for somebody else. That's what innovation is for. Third, you've got to then have built your capability. Probably not know everything about it so you've got to go build and learn. I don't assume that I know everything.

**Jared Simmons 30:38**

That's from a knowledge standpoint, not from a strength standpoint, you're not trying to fix your weaknesses, you're closing the knowledge gaps you have

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah 30:45**

Correct, it's the knowledge gap. Then you have to build the capacity, which essentially means who do I bring along with me? Who else do I need? I don't have to go fix my weaknesses, I can get somebody else's strengths that align and complement. If we all in a group just sat down and listed all our strengths and say, Okay, let's work through that almost all weaknesses would be eliminated. Then there is this whole question of commitment. Because you will run into obstacles, you will run into failures, you will run into setbacks, you will run into naysay, and that's all good. Constraint, you will run into constraints. Constraints are excellent for innovation. That commitment and constraints of what will eventually get you to succeed and you only succeed if you have developed compassion, with whatever you're doing is for the greater good.

**Jared Simmons 31:51**

Wow. The compassion piece, I can imagine there's an element for the external world. But there's also an element of self-compassion as well, in terms of people who have; I know,

personally, I deal with perfectionistic tendencies and trying to get everything right versus trying to be helpful, I would imagine there's an internal and an external need for compassion as well.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 32:15

It is an internal change, but it doesn't actually change yourself.

**Jared Simmons** 32:21

That's amazing. Such a great list for innovation. That's what's been core to this podcast is, there are curricula for innovation, but there's not a set definition or a set set of skills that people agree on and say, Alright, this is what you need to do to be innovative. This is what an innovator looks like. I love this list, because it is agnostic of technology, it is agnostic of scale, return and value definitions, and all those things. I think this is something that can be universally useful to folks as they think about impact.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 32:55

Again, when you think about these lists, the list becomes your how. I'm not interested in the how. I'm interested in the why. Why do you exist? If you can figure that out, then the how is easy. When you think about it, Amanda Gorman, a poet laureate, who read a poem during President Biden's inauguration; she said it fantastically. When she said, for there is always light if we are brave enough to see it if only we are brave enough to be it. Purpose is the light switch turned on. We are alive. You can smile or you can frown. You smile, you light up. Think about innovation from that frame.

**Jared Simmons** 33:39

That's powerful. That's very powerful stuff. Thank you so much, Dr. Badshah for sharing your thoughts with us around innovation and all the context around purpose, thoughts, that innovation is how you approach the world. Then the various contexts you shared around the 'how' that will empower us to be able to focus more on the 'why' because the how is the easy part. I really appreciate your time and thank you so much for joining us today.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 34:05

You're very welcome, Jared. I greatly enjoyed this conversation. I really love this open-ended conversation that allowed us to be a little bit more engaging.

**Jared Simmons** 34:16

It went in some really fascinating and powerful directions. I'm sure this will be great... It was a great conversation for me personally and I'm sure it'll be powerful for our listeners so thank you so much.

**Dr. Akhtar Badshah** 34:26

Thank you. Take care.

**Jared Simmons** 34:27

All right, take care.

**Jared Simmons** 34:34

We'd love to hear your thoughts about this week's show. You can drop us a line on Twitter @outlastllc, or follow us on LinkedIn where we're @outlastconsulting. Until next time, keep innovating! Whatever that means.