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Elizabeth Franz: I got rewarded for listening for the weaknesses so I could respond and prove I was right and the other person was wrong. I did not get any reward for listening and accepting somebody, even if I disagreed with them.

Sam Fuqua: That's Elizabeth Franz on how we listen. She's our guest today on Well, That went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful, and nonviolent communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds.

I'm Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey, good to see ya.

Sam Fuqua: And we're pleased to have Elizabeth Franz with us.

Jes Rau: Yeah, we're excited to have you here with us, Elizabeth. Um, Elizabeth Franz is a professional trainer and mediator who's worked for nearly a decade to support people in transforming conflict in their lives. Welcome. We're glad to have you with us.

Elizabeth Franz: Glad to be here.

Jes Rau: I know you've been focusing a lot in your practice as a mediator on listening, and just wondering what it is about listening that's so important to you or why that's a core focus for you right now.

Elizabeth Franz: I am putting together a listening lab, and that started with me feeling the need to share these wonderful skills that mediators have and use all the time with the, with the larger public and with my community. So when I was thinking about, well, what is the first skill that I would wanna share, and that skill would have to be the foundation, the skill that we need to build all the other skills on, and that ended up being listening when I discerned and kind of sorted through all of the things that I could start with. And then as I've been hosting the listening lab and as I've been sharing those skills, it's become clear and clearer to me that as a, as a practitioner, you know, it's, I've been in the field for nearly ten years now, and I think it's really easy to forget that all of these advanced conflict resolution skills and reflective listening, inclusive listening, and the way I deescalate people, all of those things, hinge on that I both hear and understand who's talking and that they feel listened to. And so that's part of why I've really come back to listening from a beginner's mindset, that I've really come back to it as a core foundational skill. And that's why I've been working so hard to share it in the listening lab as sort of the beginning of a larger series of communication trainings that allow other people to access the mediator skills that I have found to serve me so well in life.

Jes Rau: You would think that, um, listening in general would be such, just an innate, as a human skill, um, wouldn't be that hard. Why do you think it is so hard for folks to listen well?

Elizabeth Franz: So what I, what I think happens is there's a lot of social conditioning that happens that kind of gets in the way of what we innately understand as listening. So, as children, we're sort of absorbing everything around us in the world and how all the adults, especially our parents, are doing things. And it's so easy to absorb these bad habits because we are absorbing them from adults who have been highly, socially conditioned. And so I think about what maybe are barriers to my listening, and I know that once I addressed those, my, my general ability to connect to people, to be in relationship, and to be a better mediator improved. I had to listen in a totally different way than I was socially conditioned to, to be an effective communicator. And not just to be an effective communicator, an effective mediator, but to ensure that the people who are speaking to me feel not only heard, but understood. And so it took a lot of transformation of what I thought was listening, because that was something I just absorbed as a child and I just absorbed, um, by observing other people. But it took intention and time and effort to decide, okay, is what I've absorbed by my social conditioning really the kind of listening I want to be practicing? And the answer to that question for me was no. And so the next obvious question was, what do I want my listening to look like and how can I start practicing that type of listening? And that took a lot of time to discover and figure out, and I had the privilege of having participants in mediation educate me on that very thoroughly, and, uh, give me feedback and let me know if it worked for them or not, and that it was something that has been evolving over time. But I don't, I, I know that I'm very privileged in that position to have been, uh, able to listen to people in their, you know, most intimate, most difficult conversations.

Sam Fuqua: Yeah, I was thinking about your point on social conditioning, and certainly if a child sees, uh, their parent, for example, checking their phone during a conversation, that's sending a message about, uh, sending a mixed message about the importance of listening. And I'm thinking back to an interaction just a couple days ago where I was with two good friends, and the two of them were talking and one was checking his phone while engaged in conversation. So my, my other friend said, "You know, it's really distracting to me when you're looking at your phone when we're talking." And the, the other friend said, "Oh, you're right, sorry." And, and they, and they moved on. But I appreciated that he called it out in that way. That's so much better in my mind than just kind of dealing with it and being annoyed and the other person maybe not being fully focused. I just wanted to share that observation with you because I think it, it really connects with what you were saying about the bad habits we develop as listeners.

Elizabeth Franz: Right. Or even just habits. I mean, you're still listening, right, when you're looking at your phone you just, I think, I think there's a lot of research now in neuroscience that says, we do not multitask. That's not possible. That's been a myth in our society for a long time that, oh yeah, I can look at my phone and listen. It's like, no, you actually can't. Your brain actually physically can't do that, and you're not really fully paying attention. And I also wanna just, um, give a shout out to parents. That it is a really tall order to ask parents to put their phone down and listen to their kids with full presence and full attention all the time. So that's not an expectation that I'm throwing out there. I, I know that can be a lot, um, especially on parents. And at the same time, you know, if you're, if you have children, if you're around children and, and even around adults, I mean, we're always constantly absorbing what's around us. It's just children don't necessarily have the brain functioning at that age to decipher between oh, this is okay to listen this way and, oh, this is not okay. Or, oh, this is okay, but maybe it won't be effective in this, in this setting. You know, like maybe it's okay that mom is looking at her phone when I'm in the other room and I'm calling over to ask her for something and she can hear me, versus I'm sitting

at a table with somebody and you know, maybe that now is not a good time to look at my phone. So there is like an, there has to be more intention around being around children and then, you know, being around adults. I know I'm constantly sending messages, social conditioning to the people I'm around that teach them how to treat me. So if I let somebody sit there on their phone while I'm talking, I'm actually letting, I'm indicating to them that that's behavior that I'm okay with. That I'm okay with talking at them, even if they're looking at their phone.

And so what your friend did, which is really brilliant, and what we should all be doing more of is really indicating to people how we would like to be treated. And so your friend was telling the other person, you know, when I'm speaking, I would really like your full attention. I would really like you to put your phone away. And those kinds of requests or those kinds of asserting our needs is also something that we are socially conditioned to not really do. We don't really get to see a lot of examples of that. And it's the same with listening. We don't get to see a lot of examples of listening to understand versus listening to respond. We don't get to see a lot of examples of someone giving their full attention to somebody. We, we don't get rewarded, for example, for being con, for being really present in the moment. We often get rewarded for setting goals and being in the future or rehashing our past, but we don't often get rewards for I'm present and I'm here and I'm accepting whatever happens and I, I'm not looking forward or back, I'm just here with you. And then also for me, like quality listening, at least in my practice, I really picture emptying myself so that I can receive what the listener is saying. There also is not a lot of examples or rewards for showing up as an empty vessel ready to be filled and received.

We're often expected to come with our own expectations, our own opinions, our own wisdom, and we're supposed to contribute that because that kind of listening where we listen to respond gets rewarded all the time. Right, like that's what attorneys do. That's what debate does. And I mean, I did mock trial in high school. I was on the, I was always on the debate team and I got rewarded for listening for the weaknesses so I could respond and prove I was right, and the other person was wrong. I did not get any reward for listening and accepting somebody, even if I disagreed with them. There wasn't a team where we practiced listening, and listening in a way that makes the person feel heard and understood. There was no quantifying that. There was no ribbon for that. There was no club for that. And it wasn't until I did my first mediation training where I got trained in that kind of listening, saw the value of it, and then did get rewarded in terms of seeing my mediation be more effective when I was at the mediation table. But that took, you know, I was in a highly privileged place. I was in a university that paid for my mediation training. I've since taken three other trainings. And so I feel highly privileged in that I had access to that knowledge and that skill set. And then I've also had, like I said, the past decade to practice. So, in my listening lab, I really try to start people where they're at and meet people where they are with the very clear assumption. And it's been true so far that there isn't someone in the me, in the listening lab who has ten years of experience in mediation, right? So everything needs to be designed for who's learning, and that's something I do really intentionally with the understanding too that there are not these examples of the type of listening that I'm trying to cultivate in my life just easily available in the public and movies on TV.

Sam Fuqua: It strikes me that some of what you're talking about and that we've been discussing the last few minutes is there's a visual aspect to listening, uh, in that, people see that there is eye contact, uh, with the listener there. You know, uh, I'm nodding my head. I'm uh, like, I'm, I'm

hearing you. And, and then I think back to, uh, a meeting I was in some time ago where, uh, afterwards a person who had also been in the meeting said, "Sam, your body language in that meeting really seemed like you, you were, uh, objecting to it or uncomfortable." And I said, "Well, what did you, what do you mean?" And they said, "Well, you were, you know, you were leaning back in your chair with your arms crossed." And I thought, well, I was just, you know, trying a new chair position to be comfortable. Was I subconsciously uncomfortable and that's why I kicked back in the chair? I don't know. But it, it just, reminded me that we're sending so many visual cues, uh, as to whether or not we're listening or how we're feeling.

Elizabeth Franz: I love that observation, Sam, and I'm glad you brought that up because I think there is sort of this western culture and tendency to separate things and say, well, listening is only for the ears, right? We only listen with audio. But we actually listen with all our senses, and that includes visual, right? So that nodding and also listening with our, with our full body language, like I, I can really feel the difference between a hug from somebody who wants to be hugged and someone who doesn't, right? That, that could be listening too. And there, it is part of also language, right? So the English language has the word listening and that's immediately associated with ears and auditory. We don't really have words for like, what it means to listen with, you know, touching something with your hand. Is it hot or cold, right? We're just sensing it. Listening with our eyes, you know, what does the body language that, that person look like? Listening, you know, in an embodied way. I mean, even with our, our sense of scent, right? Our sense of smell. Like I can, I can observe, right, that I'm walking into a room, there are fresh baked cookies are waiting for me versus a room maybe where there aren't. And so, the English language and western culture really tries to divide up things and say, well, listening only belongs to the ears. And the kind of listening I'm really trying to cultivate is more a listening that is observation that includes all of my senses.

Jes Rau: Can you describe how you help people tap into that full body experience, um, when they're listening, and what that's like?

Elizabeth Franz: Yes. So I host a listening lab that has multiple, multiple modules, and I try to give people some time to practice with partners. And one of the things that I have them practice is asking for what they need to feel heard, and then having the listener provide that. And that's the first exercise just to become aware of how it's different for everyone, and that we need to ask ourselves that question. I can't really feel heard and understood if I can't communicate to others what I need to feel that way. So that's the first exercise. And then the second one is to get into the embodied listening where I have people tune into what's going on in their bodies. And a couple of the places that I have them tune into is where they keep their head, where they rest their tongue, what's going on with the back of their knees, their pelvic floor, and also where they're putting their feet, if their feet are grounded on the floor.

Jes Rau: And what have you noticed? Like how do people respond? What are the, the takeaways that you've noticed from folks?

Elizabeth Franz: I get a lot of feedback. I always ask because that's always helped me improve the listening lab. And I often have people say that they never thought about what they needed to feel heard or uh, understood. They'll say, "I should have told my spouse this years ago." Or they'll

have realizations of, wow, I didn't realize that I actually get really annoyed with nodding. Or actually I need more verbal cues than body language. And getting to reflect on that, having a chance to be asked that and have somebody model it for them, like getting to practice being heard the way you're asking to be heard, they get a lot of really good feedback and self-awareness. And then with the embodied stuff, I think it really helps people feel the difference between when we're just listening, um, not very intentionally, versus when we're listening using all our senses, feeling every part of it in our bodies, and what that can do to just create this richer, more vivid experience of really hearing somebody.

Sam Fuqua: You know, I was just thinking as you were saying that, I don't pay attention to the physical positioning of my body often when I'm trying to listen to someone, and I will try to remember that going forward. But it's a lot, it's a lot to do, right? We, we have to be listening to the person, what they're saying, but we also have to be cognizant of, you know, our position and a lot of things. It's, it seems like a lot of work.

Elizabeth Franz: There is a lot of noise. I mean, anytime that we're listening to somebody, we're listening to the speaker, we're listening to ourselves, our brain is picking up on all the stimuli in our environment, and then there's existing social conditioning that's affecting what we're hearing. And so when we tune in to our bodies, it really helps tune out a lot of the excess noise, but it's not something we're very used to doing culturally. So, you know, when I go through it in the listening lab, I kind of go from the head down, and, you know, one of the ways we tend to signal body language that we're listening to someone is we lean forward. And although I do like that, I still lean forward when I'm listening as a mediator or when somebody's venting to me and it's very clear this isn't a back and forth conversation. I'm really holding space for them. I've started trying to keep my head back instead of leaning forward so that I'm staying in my body instead of leaning forward and trying to almost extend myself into the other person. I try to sit back into myself and have what they're saying, receiving that in my body, instead of pushing my body forward and, and not feeling as grounded. So that's been a big shift for me physically in my practice, to not lean forward and, and actually kind of sit back, be in my body, have my head held back, and my chin tilted up a little bit. That for me has really shifted how present I am with myself when I'm listening, which is really a way to be even more present with the other person because I'm not trying to like project myself onto them or throw myself forward. I'm sitting back and I'm opening my space to receive what they have to say.

Jes Rau: That's so, um, fascinating to hear you talk about because I feel like we, just in the classes that I've had or in, uh, resources online about how to be a good listener, I see like lists usually of like lean forward, make eye contact, like all of these things. And what I've noticed about those is that those are not necessarily things that help people feel listened to all the time. It could change based on personal experience or culture. What is good listening mean to you? Like what does it mean to be a good listener versus those kind of tips on the Internet?

Elizabeth Franz: You know, I think there, I think if somebody on the Internet is saying, this is the way to listen, that is to me an immediate red flag that they don't know what they're talking about. There are infinite possibilities of how to listen, and it really depends on your listener and the situation. For me in my practice and what I've been trying to get better at is be more embodied. So I'm trying to focus more attention into where I, my body. So, like putting my head back. Also

understanding where my tongue is resting even. So when we rest our tongues, in western culture we often have our tongues rested on the bottom of our mouth. And actually your tongue should be resting at the top of your mouth. And the whole surface of the top of your tongue should be touching the whole surface of the top of your mouth. That's actually optimal, um, posture for your tongue. Also, the back of your knees. Opening those has been a big transformer for me. So noticing that I have a habit of crossing my legs all the time, and when I open them up, keep my full foot on, both feet on the ground, and then releasing the tension that I feel in the back of my knees. Either I move my, I slide my feet forward a little bit, I might slide them closer to me. But really trying to breathe oxygen into that part of my body, that's made a big difference too. So, I mean, I can go through, if you'd like me to, the whole head to toe thing that I, I try to do, but I'm starting to picture myself more as a vessel where I'm receiving the message than what the leaning forward can do, which is I'm projecting myself forward. Because when I project myself onto someone else, I'm looking for myself in them. I'm not looking to receive them as they are.

Jes Rau: Yeah. There's so many things that are told to us about our nonverbals that may or may not be true, so that's super interesting to think about.

Elizabeth Franz: I think it's well intentioned to say lean forward. I think it is something that we've all been societally conditioned to recognize as a signal of I'm being heard. So I'm not saying just, just get rid of moving forward or leaning forward, but I think I'm asking people to be more aware of what they're doing with their bodies and where they are. And because projecting ourselves onto other people is such a pervasive habit we all have, having people do the opposite of that can create much, a much bigger transformation if that's where you're starting. If you're starting with, I project myself onto other people all the time, then try to get like back into your body, have your head move back, put your tongue on the top of your mouth. If you're somebody who isn't projecting on other people and maybe you often don't engage in conversation, maybe leaning forward will help you balance. Maybe that is a good cue for your body because you have a tendency to pull back and not engage in the conversation if your body is leaning back.

Sam Fuqua: So what about when you're the person who is talking and wants to be listened to? We're conditioned as we've been talking about that, that leaning forward indicates attentiveness. And if I'm not seeing that as the person being listened to, maybe I'm thinking, oh, this person isn't really paying attention. What should we be keeping in mind when we're on the other end of the conversation - the person who is speaking and wants to be sure they're connecting, they're being listened to by the, the listener?

Elizabeth Franz: So this comes back to the, one of the exercise in listening lab I mentioned earlier where you need to spend some time reflecting on what you do need to feel heard and listened to. So you can identify, you know, I actually do like someone leaning forward or I need those nods. That's a, nodding for me is a big thing. I need to know that about myself. I also need to be unattached to making sure other people behave that way. I can't control how the other person is hearing me. I can communicate to them that those are things that I need, and whether or not they do it is up to them. But I need to first know what it is, have to communicate it, and a really important part of that is making sure I'm not attached to it and trying to impose that on other people. If they choose to do it, that's the way they can signal to me that they really value what I have to say in our relationship. It also could mean that they're just not nodders. That's just

not something they're used to doing, or they're very used to leaning forward, or they're not used to leaning forward, and I can't take that personally. I can't be so attached to that it is a demand and an expectation. I have to offer it as something that is a way for someone to know how they can get closer to me without that being, like I said, a demand or an imposition. And then the, the second piece of that is also setting your boundaries. So controlling your behavior. If somebody is on their phone while I'm speaking, that's a very strong, I, I don't like that. That really bothers me. And so I'll stop talking, right? If someone's on their phone and I'm talking to them, I know I won't feel good if I continue talking. I know I won't feel heard, and so I stop and I might ask them, you know, "Hey, I, I don't, I don't wanna distract you from your phone, but if you'd like to continue listening to me, I, you know, it'd mean a lot to me if you put it away." And if they don't put it away, that's my choice, my boundary to say, "You know what? I don't think I wanna continue sharing this about myself or continue talking because I don't feel heard when you're looking at your phone."

Sam Fuqua: What about the, one of my common behaviors in, uh, typically in work related conversations is note-taking. And I, you know, I often preface my bringing out the notepad with some statement, like, "I really am a compulsive notetaker, and, uh, it, do you mind if I take some notes while we talk?" or something, so that people will know that this is something I do. But I sometimes wonder because I have to look down at my notes fairly often, if that is sending a message that I'm not really engaged.

Elizabeth Franz: Yeah, I think note-taking and I, I'm with you, Sam, I'm glad you brought that up. I'm a big notetaker too. And I think one, you're doing something really good where you are communicating to everyone this is, this is just part of what I do. Like I, I'm a notetaker and I'm taking notes, because if you don't signal people, then they can, they don't know what's going on. So especially now that we're all on Zoom, if I'm taking notes, I actually will try to make my notepad and pen be in the frame of my picture, right? So I might hold my notepad like up and right, like with my hands and my arms because I want people to see it. I won't hold it there the whole time. That's incredibly uncomfortable. But every once in a while, I will just kind of lift my hands into the frame so they can see that I have a pen and piece of paper. And that goes for, in Zoom in general. Um, it's a very good idea to have people see your hands periodically. Use your hands when you're doing, body language, when someone's talking directly to you, if you can do hand gestures. Evolutionarily, the human brain is more relaxed when it sees the hands of another human. So if I don't see your hands, my brain's wondering, what are your hands doing? Do you have a sword behind your back that you're gonna stab me with? Are you on your phone and not paying attention? And so if you can show your hands, or like you did, Sam, just verbally let people know, that's what I'm doing, that's the first step in communicating that to people if you're gonna be taking notes.

I have found on Zoom especially, that I stop taking written notes and I will take type notes. So I'll split my screen or use another monitor and type my notes while I'm in the meeting so that my head is up the whole time. So that's another strategy that I found works really well. And I, now I have clipboards at my desk so I can hold them up and I actually have like an art easel that I can put my, my clipboard on, and then I can kind of write more vertically. But one of the things I ask people in the listening lab, at least the first module, is to not take notes at all. Part of why I do that is because the notes are also noise. It's, it's another stimuli. It's another thing you're doing that's

not focused on the person who's speaking and it's not putting you in your body. And so even though I love note-taking, what I've challenged myself to do is now I will only write down if there's a task that I have to do to follow up, or if someone mentioned a name or a statistic that I need to look up later. That's it. So my notes now, and I even limit myself to a small piece of paper, like I have one of those flip notebooks now that's very small. And limiting my notes actually has helped me remember more things, and it's cleared up a lot of clutter in my life.

And you know, when you think about it, when you have the most transformative, important conversations of your life with your family, with your friends, with your loved ones, you're not taking notes, and you remember those conversations. You remember the lessons you learned. You remember how connected you feel to that person, and that's way more important than the details. At work, yes, details can be important, so I will write them down. But the most memorable, meaningful conversations of my life, I don't have a notepad at. So I don't bring a notepad into everything because I think it kind of distracts me now. And I will sometimes prioritize capturing all the information in my notes over making sure the other person feels heard. And now I try to shift into, my biggest priority is that the person that's speaking to me feels heard and understood. And the second priority is I wanna make sure I remember that I said I would do this, or I wanna remember that website 'cause I'm gonna look it up later, or I need to remember that number because that's the passcode for something, and I can't just commit that to short term memory. I can't forget it. But that's all that's in my notes now.

Sam Fuqua: That's really good information and thank you for also giving us some tips on, you know, the way we're communicating now during the pandemic through these online meeting platforms.

Elizabeth Franz: One of my favorite setups now before I go into a Zoom meeting or a phone call, because now I lose all of the other stimuli that comes from seeing people in person, is I will play a song. I play the Chloe and Halle *Do It* song right now. And I wait for the bass to drop. And when the bass drops and I have the, the volume up, I feel those vibrations in my body. You can almost feel the sound waves going over the hair in your skin. And that helps me get tuned in to sound and really feel it in my body so that when I get on the meeting or the phone call, it's easier for me to be present to that person's voice and the sound it makes, because the sound it's making is what's really being sensed in my body.

Sam Fuqua: Elizabeth Franz is a mediator in Denver. To connect with her and get more information on the listening lab, go to humanzmediate.com. Humans is spelled with a Z rather than an S, humanzmediate.com.

Our podcast is called Well, That Went Sideways! We produce new episodes twice a month. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts, and on our website, sidewayspod.org. We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's sidewayspod.org. Our program is produced by Mary Zinn, Jes Rau, and me, Sam Fuqua. Our theme music is by Mike Stewart. And this podcast is a partnership with The Conflict Center, a Denver-based nonprofit that provides practical skills and training for addressing everyday conflicts. Find out more at conflictcenter.org.