

Jenny Medrano: So I think in times of crisis, asking yourself, have I reached out to people who are being directly affected by this event? If not, why? And if I don't feel close enough to people who are affected by this, why is that?

Sam Fuqua: That's Jenny Medrano, our guest on this edition of Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful, and non-violent communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. Today we'll be talking about transforming conflict through deep listening and the specific approach that Jenny Medrano uses as the manager of the Shift Program at Building Bridges. It's a Denver-based nonprofit that began over 25 years ago by bringing Israeli, Palestinian and American young women together for intensive dialogue. Their programs for young people continue, and Building Bridges also does work with adults around diversity, equity, and inclusion through the Shift Program. We'll learn more about that right now.

Welcome everybody to the program. I'm Sam Fuqua, joined as always by my co-host, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

Jes Rau: Hey, how are you doing?

Sam Fuqua: Doing well, thanks.

Jes Rau: Perfect. Well, welcome Jenny. We're excited to have you.

Jenny Medrano: Hi.

Jes Rau: Hi there.

Jenny Medrano: I'm excited to be here.

Jes Rau: Great, thanks. Can you, um, just tell us, start out by telling us a little bit about your work, um, with Building Bridges and what is the Shift Program, specifically?

Jenny Medrano: The Shift Program is focused on adults and we develop adults in diversity, equity, and inclusion by means of communication and empathy. So we wanna help adults, either in their personal context or professional context, develop communication tools and a deeper understanding of systemic oppression that happens either in our public trainings or in our, um, DEI development trainings with organizations and businesses.

Jes Rau: So I'm, I imagine within, um, all of what you're doing within Shift, that conflict comes up a lot, especially in talking about, uh, systemic oppression. And wondering what Building Bridges' approach is to, uh, supporting people through conflict?

Jenny Medrano: Yeah, that's a good question. So, we at Building Bridges are all about conflict transformation. So not everybody has heard that phrase, uh, but it's different than conflict, conflict resolution because conflict resolution, uh, requires and has an expectation that there's gonna be a solution at the end of whatever conversation or dialogue that you're having, especially around the conflict. With

conflict transformation, we're actually more about a long-term process of being able to lean into conflict, uh, discover what layers are underneath the conflict on the surface, and then work together and be able to work as a more cohesive unit over time in being able to address conflict that way.

Jes Rau: I know that Building Bridges has a unique way of going about the conflict process. Partially, um, really focused on listening. Can you tell us also about that, what the listening component is like within the program?

Jenny Medrano: Yeah. So I'll, I'll say two things on that. One, one is that our conflict transformation model is also founded on the theory, intergroup contact theory, which requires that everybody is, uh, in as equal status as possible. And that looks like, uh, people having the same amount of space to talk. So when we were meeting in person, we'd have people sit in a circle so they could all see each other. Now, we're primarily on Zoom, so it kind of works for us 'cause everybody has a equal square to talk from. Um, but the listening component plays a key role in that because we ask our participants to do a lot of mirroring throughout the session, and we'll, we will pause the dialogue after someone has shared something either really deep or really personal, we will ask participants to mirror and reflect back what they heard that person say, so that that's really digested in the conversation.

Sam Fuqua: What challenges typically come up for people who are new to this work? For someone who's just, you know, going into a workshop not really knowing what to expect or what it's gonna be like, what, what do they typically encounter?

Jenny Medrano: I think that a lot of people enter our work around diversity, equity, and inclusion, hoping that it's gonna "fix them," or that they're gonna be able to come and listen to a seminar or presentation, check some boxes, and then leave and say that they understand inclusion and equity. What I think really challenges people is when they realize how experiential our workshops are, and that's in person and online. We don't, we don't want people to participate who are gonna be passive participants. Uh, we want everybody to be as actively engaged in the conversation as possible, whether that means sharing or intentionally listening.

Sam Fuqua: Can you walk us through an example of what people might, uh, have in store for them should they attend a Building Bridges workshop?

Jenny Medrano: Sure. Yeah. So, um, if you were to attend a workshop, let's say our Building Bridges Groundwork session that we just unrolled, um, there, it's gonna be a one and a half to two hour session typically. And we, we try to cap the amount of participants in the 25 to 30 range because we find that that's a sweet spot for, um, truly meaningful dialogue. So what people can expect is, um, setting of a foundation of group norms and, um, an introduction that involves checking in with people. We wanna first see you as people showing up rather than participants or professionals. And then we usually present some kind of framework. We have frameworks like the Four "I"s of Oppression or, um, an intersectionality framework or, uh, white supremacy framework. And then we, we read that together. We, we look at that together and that sets us up for a dialogue. Sometimes we start in the entire group. Other times we have small group dialogues and then we join back as a group. Um, and then every time we have some kind of checkout question that provides a, a little bit of closure, but doesn't tie a bow on everything.

Jes Rau: How would understanding DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion), uh, frameworks, like you're mentioning, how does that support folks as they're, uh, engaging or trying to transform conflict? What role does the, does DEI play in conflict?

Jenny Medrano: That's a great question. Yeah. I think people think the two are, are, can be separated, but they're so intertwined. The way that I see DEI in conflict, um, really connected is, now having, having been in the DEI world for so many years, I see conflict often having its roots in either, uh, cultural differences or, um, a lack of, of inclusion being applied to whatever decisions are being made, or, or words that are being said, or, um, a lack of equity and the way the conversation is being had or whatever is being talked about.

Jes Rau: Oh, thank you. I appreciate that. Um, and what are some of the skills that folks learn? I know we talked about listening, but what are some of the skills that people learn around conflict transformation through Building Bridges?

Jenny Medrano: So, one thing that I think is underrated in terms of a tool that people take away is our group norms. And one group norm in, well, I'm thinking of two group norms, in particular. One of them is called make space, take space. And this, this, uh, norm that asks people, if you are a person who tends to take a lot of space, maybe you're an extrovert or you have a lot of identities of privilege, we're gonna ask you to make space today. And then if you're a person who doesn't take up a lot of space, maybe you're introverted or have more, uh, oppressed identities, you're not used to having a microphone, we're gonna ask you to take space. And so when we typically, um, say that group norm, people are like, oh, I've never, I've never been asked to do that. And then throughout the session, we'll remind people about it. And it usually challenges people across the board in terms of reflecting on whether or not, or how much they participate in a dialogue. So that's a big one. Um, in addition, we have the group norm of speak from your own perspective. Use "I" statements as much as possible. That's huge. Like if you've done any kind of experience or training around conflict, that's a usual, um, expectation. For us, we see it being super powerful because people, um, talking about diversity and equity and inclusion can become controversial. So people like to hide behind blanket statements and they'll be like in general or in society, or people need to stop and we'll be like, wait, what do you believe? What's going on with you right now? Can you use an "I" statement?

Jes Rau: Those are so powerful as tools. Um, for the group norms, I wonder how, have you seen or heard of or how would you suggest that people use that in their personal lives? Say they're in a conflict with, um, just one other person. How might they utilize that skill of group norms, um, in that kind of context?

Jenny Medrano: That's great. Um, I know because I've been, since being at Building Bridges, um, fan and staff member, I do it all the time in my personal life. Um, I am so much more aware of how much space I'm taking in a dialogue. Like I'm doing, make space, take space all the time, even in one-on-one conversations. So I see this being super helpful as not just a norm, but a posture for people to take on when they have a conflict with one other person. Uh, 'cause sometimes, um, I become unaware of how much I'm actually sharing, um, or not sharing, and letting the other person talk a lot. So that's one thing. And then with the "I" statements, again, it's just like how, if I'm having a conflict with another person, all I can really own is my own experience and I can assume responsibility for what I've done, and that typically helps a conversation move forward.

Sam Fuqua: What if, uh, you're a person, well, like me, who's, who's, uh, introverted, doesn't necessarily want to volunteer information or talk about myself in one of these group settings. I'm afraid of being wrong or I just don't want to speak up. I avoid conflict. How do you draw me out or work with someone like that?

Jenny Medrano: That's so good. Y'all have the best questions around this. Um, I, that is an ongoing situation that we encounter with our participants, and I actually wanna talk about my co-facilitator and, uh, coworker Maren. She is an introvert to the tee. Like she is stereotypical introvert. Um, so she was brought into a training of ours, it was called Connect Through Conflict, two years ago. And she was one of the only white women present in a multiracial group, very much, um, practiced in this conversation of DEI and racial equity, and she was quiet pretty much the whole time. Uh, so what we had to do as facilitators, uh, a tool that we use is during the dialogue, we'll just name the elephant in the room. We'll say, "Hey, we've noticed that there's some people in the circle that haven't shared as much. I just wanna pose a question to you all. Is there anything that you would like to share at this time?" For Maren, that was helpful because she, as an introvert, she wasn't used to being invited into a conversation. Um, and that was something she needed to finally share. But then afterwards, it was also this really powerful reflection that she had around why didn't she share. What, what fear was coming up in her around conflict and how can she lean more into conflict in the future as an anti-racist. So I think introverts often have a really deep reflection in our kind of trainings because we will call them out, to an extent.

Jes Rau: I know that some folks have, um, in the past, had questions about, or feelings about the "I" statement frame that some groups use around, um, creating I, or using "I" statements that sometimes it can feel stilted or scripted. Um, are there ways that you can support people or that you have supported people with that feeling more fluid and natural and organic versus, uh, like a scripted practice?

Jenny Medrano: I will admit for myself, when I first joined Building Bridges, I did not like I, "I" statements at all. I actually felt like, as a woman who identifies as a Latina, part of collectivist culture, I felt like it was kind of anti that 'cause I'm so used to using we, um, instead of I, so that was, I'll name that challenge that came up for me. I think that it is tricky to get our participants to start using "I" statements in a, in a one or two hour training, uh, because it feels, it can feel like not natural. So what we do in person is we have visual reminders, um, that we would point to what we're developing mid-dialogue now online is having a hand signal just as a reminder to try to use "I" statements as much as possible. But really, we see people building that habit in our longer trainings or long-term plans.

Jes Rau: Great. Thank you. And, um, that's so interesting. The difference between collectivist versus individualist, uh, thinking and speaking are, is there more that you all do around that, specifically in conflict, and recognizing those cultural differences and, um, power differences as well in conflict?

Jenny Medrano: Yes. Uh, we actually have designed a workshop that we did with the Colorado Nonprofit Association, and it was called Individualism versus Collectivism. And it, it kind of went through different aspects of how each cultural preference, I would say, differs. Um, and we had people look, look through the list and identify ways in which it was, um, during, right when the pandemic was starting, we had people identify, uh, ways in which their reaction to COVID-19 was individualist or collectivist, and the ways they saw that tension playing out. Uh, but one thing I'll say about, uh, the "I" statements with that, we, we do a lot of race-based affinity groups within Building Bridges, and one thing I've adapted in our, um, POC or BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) affinity group, is allowing space for the we. That's a group norm we typically add because sometimes it can just feel so good for people in this race-based affinity group to be like, you know what, we, we need to do this, or I just feel like we, whatever the thing is. So we try to have more fluidity in our affinity groups.

Sam Fuqua: So much of this is ongoing work, and as you said at the start of our conversation, some people have a perception that they're gonna go to a workshop and, and it's gonna be fixed, and everything's gonna be great. Check the box. How do you approach that at Building Bridges? How do you get people to

understand, if you could say a little bit more about how you get people to understand that this is, this is ongoing work, that, uh, while there may be opportunities to return to Building Bridges for additional trainings or something, this is stuff that we need to work on for the rest of our lives in, in a sense. How do you help people maintain that awareness after they leave the workshop?

Jenny Medrano: There are multiple ways that we do that. I know that as an organization, especially Shift, we've been learning in the past three years how to do that better and better because in the beginning we didn't. I don't think our marketing was that strong or clear, and people would sign up for workshops and be really surprised and not want to do the level of deep work we were asking. So now we have a Client Readiness Survey that we ask all people to fill out if they would like their organization to have training with us. We also ask that people go through a preliminary training, like Groundwork, or get a feel for what we do, um, and then within those trainings, I would say the key behind, um, helping people understand that this is a long-term process is all in the questions that we ask. Our question-asking is on point at Building Bridges on our facilitator team, and it's very personal. It's, it, we won't really like, uh, throw a deep question at someone right away, but we build it up over time during a training so that people start to have a serious internal reflection process and that, that's what can be continued after you leave the training.

Sam Fuqua: Is there a question you could cite as an example of one of those deeper ones that you like to leave people with?

Jenny Medrano: I'll share one that was very relevant, especially with everything that's going on with Black Lives Matter, that I asked my friend who is white, and it caused a whole, whole reflection process in her life, and I didn't really realize, uh, but I just asked her. I was like, "Hey, uh, have you reached out to any of your black friends at this time?" And this was like in the beginning when we were talking about Ahmaud Arbery, and that question really started a reflection process in her of why she had not, and who in her life identifies as black and is actually a friend that she's close to that she would ask how they're doing. And since she did not feel like anybody was in her life that close to her, why is that? And why, why is her circle the way it is? So I think, in times of crisis, ah, asking yourself, have I reached out to people who are being directly affected by this, this, um, event? If not, why? And if I don't feel close enough to people who are affected by this, why is that?

Sam Fuqua: Thank you for those questions, uh, and for spending time with us today. Are there opportunities for listeners to participate in your work?

Jenny Medrano: Yeah, I would love to tell y'all about an opportunity that we just unrolled this week. It is a new online session called Building Bridges Groundwork. It is focused on privilege and oppression through the lens of racial equity, and it's happening in two race-based affinity groups. So one of them is for white individuals, and another session is for BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color). So, we'd so love if y'all registered, and you can find the link at buildingbridgeshift.org. Um, and you can also follow us on Facebook at Building Bridges Shift. We have all the events listed there. There's gonna be multiple Building Bridges Groundworks happening throughout the summer.

Sam Fuqua: Jenny Medrano is the Shift Program Manager for Building Bridges. Again, the website for more information on their upcoming trainings, and all their work is buildingbridgeshift.org.

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