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**Celeste Headlee:** People often think that this is something you're born with, that some people are argumentative and some aren't. The truth is, is that having a civil discourse, learning how to talk and listen, most importantly, listen to other people, even when you disagree, it's a skill. And a skill can be learned. It can be learned, and it can be practiced.

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Celeste Headlee, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! We're a podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. On this episode, Celeste Headlee talks about how to have better conversations. She's a journalist, public speaker, and author of the book, *We Need to Talk: How to Have Conversations That Matter*. Her TED talk on this topic has been viewed over 19 million times.

I'm Sam Fuqua, along with co-host, Jes Rau. Hi Jes.

**Jes Rau:** Hey there.

**Sam Fuqua:** Celeste Headlee, welcome to the program.

**Celeste Headlee:** Thanks for having me.

**Sam Fuqua:** Why this focus for you on having conversations?

**Celeste Headlee:** Um, I, I hadn't thought about it until I became a full-time radio host and I wanted to get better at interviews. Um, and so I started doing research to try to learn everything I could about the science, what, what we know about interviews. And what I discovered is that an interview is, is basically a formalized conversation. And I also discovered that we just don't have a lot of good advice about conversation. The reason I know that is because I tried out a lot of the advice that we've been given in the past. Things like, you know, maintain eye contact and say "uh huh" and nod your head. I tried out all of those things while I was in the studio and, um, not only did they not make conversations better, uh, they usually made them worse. Um, over the course of my research into becoming a better interviewer, as I started learning more about that, I started to realize that I, I just wasn't as good in conversation as I always had assumed I was. Um, I had always thought that because I was a good talker, that that meant I was also a good conversationalist and, and that is not true. So that was a, it was a tough realization for me, but it, it got me started on this field of study.

**Sam Fuqua:** You gave a very popular TED talk called *10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation*, and in your book you write about how when you meet people who've watched the Talk, they have, uh, questions they want to ask you, but there's also questions they don't ask, which often indicate a lack of self-awareness we sometimes have during conversations. So when it comes to our own conversational behavior, what are, what are the questions you wish we asked ourselves more often?

**Celeste Headlee:** The big category there is asking what it is that we could do to improve. You know, more than four out of five people say that a relationship in the past has, um, ended or encountered trouble because of poor communication. And yet fewer than one in five of us think that was our fault. And that math doesn't, doesn't quite work, does it? Um, we have a tough time seeing what it is that we're doing wrong, and that makes sense. We're not observing ourselves. We're not hearing our tone of voice. We don't have that objective outlook that other people might if they're observing us. And so therefore, it's, it's much easier for us to see what other people are doing wrong than it is for us to see our, where we have room for improvement. So that's the category of question I would love to hear. I'd love to hear somebody say, "You know what, it turns out I interrupt all the time. Can you teach me how to stop interrupting?" That's a question I don't think I've ever been asked, but it would be great.

**Jes Rau:** It's obviously really important for us to learn how to have these conversations, how to talk to each other in general, but often those things are seen as really trivial or not useful. Once I was in a situation where somebody said, "At least you didn't get a useless comms degree," and I did get a comms degree. So, um, it's really trivialized. Just wondering how you would suggest or think about how do we get the idea that we need to learn these things into the mainstream and seen as, as important and critical?

**Celeste Headlee:** So this is an extremely important question. And it's when I, you know, I give speeches all over the world and it's one of the things that I start with. Um, we tend to think of conversational skills as soft skills, right? They're not, they're not the really important things. And when we hire people, we so rarely look for communication skills, and yet, uh, bad, poor communication is unbelievably expensive for a corporation. For example, um, a recent report showed that poor communications costs about \$37 billion a year for larger companies around the world. And they did a survey of 400 different corporations and found that, um, ineffective communication costs about \$62 million a year for larger businesses. Those are businesses that have like more than a hundred employees. So not only is it incredibly costly, um, but that doesn't even include the cost of, uh, a, a lack of creativity, um, which is often caused by poor communication. A lack, lack of innovation. When you have good communication among a team, meaning that they become transactive, that they are both sharing and receiving information, um, they're much more likely to be creative problem solvers. They're less prone to make errors.

But here's another way to think about it. For a very, very long time, evolutionary biologists and psychologists were trying to figure out how homo sapiens ended up being the human species that survived, right? There were six human species. Neanderthal was a very impressive species, by the way. We give Neanderthal a bad rap. But it took them a long time to understand because we're not particularly strong, we don't run all that fast, we're not incredibly resilient. It turns out that what homo sapiens has, our evolutionary superpower that allowed us to survive so far was incredibly sophisticated communication and collaboration. What that means is that we are one of only two species, us and wolves, that can take down a bison on a regular basis. How do we do that? We do that because we can communicate. Who has the best horseback riding skills? Who has the best aim with a spear? Who knows how to butcher a bison once you've, you've gotten it? That's a level of communication that we don't see in other species. That means that if you, uh, a tiger is not gonna come to your village night after night after night and drop, pull people out of it, because if you're messing with one human being, you're usually messing with more. We have



survived by being able to talk to one another and being able to work together. That is our evolutionary superpower. It is not a soft skill. It is a survival skill.

**Sam Fuqua:** The present moment indicates we're having, uh, great difficulty working together and even talking to one another, whether it's about, uh, the elections or about racial justice and racism. The difficult conversations that we need to have, some of us are having them, some of us are trying, and a lot of us are avoiding, uh, them. Why should we have these difficult conversations? And what can you offer to folks who are struggling to talk to their neighbors, their friends or coworkers about these, uh, very difficult issues?

**Celeste Headlee:** So the, the reason why we have to have them is because we've tried it the other way for a really long time and things have gotten worse. We've tried it the way where we don't bring up these issues in polite company, right? We've tried it where you, um, avoid difficult subjects because you don't want it to become an argument. That clearly is not working. That's the way we have been doing it, and things have gotten worse and worse and worse. We are perhaps, by some measures, more polarized now than we have been since the Civil War when we were literally killing each other. So what I want people to do is don't avoid the conversations that might cause an argument. Learn how to talk about them without arguing. People often think that this is something you're born with, that some people are argumentative and some aren't. The truth is, is that having a civil discourse, learning how to talk and listen, most importantly, listen to other people, even when you disagree, it's a skill. And a skill can be learned. It can be learned, and it can be practiced.

**Sam Fuqua:** So within your, uh, your guidance and the strategies you offer, what stands out? What is perhaps different from other people who are working in this same space and trying to help people communicate?

**Celeste Headlee:** Obviously, I can't speak for everybody else who's working in this space. There is a lot of us. Um, but I will say that a, I try very hard to make sure every piece of advice I give you is backed up by solid, clinical research. So it's not just my experience, although that is there. Um, it is also research that shows us this is how uh, psychology works. This is how neurology works. This is how cognitive thought works. I think oftentimes we focus too much on getting along. Um, I don't really care if you like each other. There's actually no scientific evidence that shows, um, liking each other makes you better team members or makes you better problem solvers. I don't. If you like each other, great. If you don't, that's absolutely okay. The skills I'm trying to teach you are the skills that you need to work alongside one another to problem solve together even if you don't like each other. The skills I'm teaching you aren't about, um, changing somebody's mind. I don't want you to persuade anyone. I want you to have the conversation and solve the problem while you continue to disagree. There just is so little evidence that there's an effective way to change someone else's mind. It is incredibly rare. And therefore, instead of continually trying to learn how to persuade people or educate them, um, I, I feel like we need to just accept that that's probably not gonna happen. And so now what? And so how do we work together anyway?

**Jes Rau:** I've heard you talk a little bit about the need to give up control as a part of listening and, and actually really listening. Um, can you talk a little bit about what, um, that means? 'Cause I

was surprised to hear that that was an element of control when we're not, um, listening or giving the, the mic to other folks as much.

**Celeste Headlee:** We really like to talk about ourselves and what we think and what we like or don't like. We like to make, maintain control of conversations so that we don't end up talking about something we're not interested in. We like talking about ourselves, um, so much. Uh, you know, there was a study in, in Har, at Harvard that shows that talking about yourself and your interests activates the same pleasure center in the brain as sex and heroin. In fact, people in that study gave up a chance at making more money just so they could continue to talk about themselves and their own interests. Um, it's inherently pleasurable for all of us. Um, and so therefore, we try to avoid situations in which we don't get to do that. When someone else begins to talk, automatically, we're not talking anymore, but also there's a chance that they're gonna move into a direction or talk about something we don't really wanna talk about. You know, my son is a, a big board game player. He plays Dungeons and Dragons, and Malifaux, and other games, and when he starts talking about them, you know, my eyes roll back into my head. I try very much to steer the conversation back to something I care about, but I find that if I just, you know, take a breath and let him talk about something he's really passionate about, the conversation goes fine. He's super passionate about it. All I need to do is give him the opportunity to talk about it and ask him questions, and it ends up being more interesting than I thought. But yeah, it's this, it's this attempt to keep control of the conversation, mostly because we wanna control the topics. We wanna control the, the, the, the area of discussion.

**Sam Fuqua:** Sometimes we have a, or I, have a tendency to just bail if the conversation gets really uncomfortable. And, uh, a phrase in your book caught, caught my, uh, attention, "Silence is better than flight." So why, when the conversation gets really uncomfortable, is silence better than flight? What do you mean by that?

**Celeste Headlee:** Well, first of all, silence is way underrated. We, I mean, as human beings, we, we like to fill the void of silence. You know, detectives use this against us all the time, right? They're always, uh, leaving this uncomfortable silence, hoping that people will jump in and fill it with all kinds of details. Um, most of us do not like silence. Um, but if you can learn to be comfortable with it, it, it's good to allow a conversation to slow down. It's good to, to not always be constantly thinking ahead to what it is you're gonna say when, response. And instead slow down enough to where you can really hear what someone else is saying. Very often our discomfort is caused not by what someone is actually saying, but what we imagine they are going to say. We make our decision about what we think someone is saying within seconds of when they start speaking. Within 10 to 15 seconds, very often we think we know what, where they're going, and so our mind starts coming up with what it is that we are going to say next. If you can start to em, embrace not just silent, silence, but a slower tempo, it allows you to listen better and, and hear more of it at, what it is they're actually saying. And, and I know that very often flight is, uh, not just comfortable but familiar. But instead of flight, one thing that we know as journalists is that we have to hear stuff we don't want, we don't agree with all the time. Instead of running away, ask a question. What does that mean? I, um, what, what is your source? Help me understand what you're saying. I disagree with you on a fundamental level so let me dig down into how you got where you are, and understand how we could be so far apart. I, if you turn this into sort of an archeological dig to sort of find the source, um, you might find you have more



interest in the conversation than you thought you did, and there's no reason to run, in most cases.

**Jes Rau:** Your TED talk and book were incredibly popular, um, which kind of speaks to a need that seems like, that people have for this type of information and for a different way of thinking through conversations and communication, um, especially when things are hard and difficult. Why do you think that is? And even with as much, um, attention that it got, how, um, would you suggest we spread it even further and get this information to even more folks?

**Celeste Headlee:** So, first of all, I, I was the most surprised person in the world that it, the TED talk was as pop, popular as it is. Um, I did not expect that. If I had known it was gonna go viral, I, I would've done my hair or put on some makeup. But I, is, I, I do think it's heartening that so many people have searched for it because I think a lot of people get to my TED talk through a Google search or because someone else passed it on, and I think that reflects a growing awareness of how isolated we are. Even before the pandemic, we were already facing, um, an epidemic of loneliness. I mean, that's what our, our healthcare experts had been telling us for, for a number of years. We, we, again, we don't really give enough serious thought to loneliness in general. Loneliness will kill you. Maybe not directly, but it leads to the disorders that shorten your life. Loneliness degrades your internal organs. Loneliness is as bad for you as morbid obesity or smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. It, because human beings have evolved to rely on one another, to take so much benefit neurologically and physiologically from contact. Even just a wave as you pass down the street. Even just a "How's the weather?" to your barista as they make your coffee. We even take good impact from those. They're important to our health. And so therefore, I think that the TED talk became popular because number one, it offers tangible steps. I'm not telling you to live your best life and then not explaining how to do it. I'm giving you actual actionable steps that you can do right now that will make it better. But also, I think people are becoming aware that we're lonely and we're isolated, and that's a problem. And in order to spread it further, I, I think the best way to spread these concepts earlier is to model them yourself. I mean, that's how we learn. We learn by modeling. If you, uh, get a job and you go in on your first day and you're dressed in a three piece suit and everyone else is in shorts and sandals, the second day, you will not come in in a three piece suit. We model our behavior on other people's and on norms very, very quickly and flexibly and quite happily most of the time. And if you start to model better conversational etiquette, eventually the people you talk to on a regular basis will follow suit.

**Sam Fuqua:** One of your strategies for having productive conversations is check your bias. Can you explain what you mean by that, and how a biased blind spot, as you call it, can impact our ability to have a meaningful conversation?

**Celeste Headlee:** The thing is, is that every single one of us is biased. That's really important to remember, especially right now at this moment. There is not a person on the planet who is not biased. And by that I mean there is nobody who does not make unconscious assumptions about other people based on their appearance, religion, race, gender, et cetera. And there's not a lot that you can do at any given moment to change that. 90 percent of our thought is unconscious, and that's one estimate. So these thoughts are going on in your brain that, and you don't know about it. That's what unconscious thought is. So when you need to check your bias, you need to

take a moment and remind yourself, I'm biased, and I need to be aware of what it is that I'm saying, and be very cautious about how closely I listen. I need to not make assumptions about what someone else is saying, but really listen to what they're saying. And if I'm confused or if I find myself making assumptions, I need to ask them some questions in order to clarify. And again, and again and again, I need to put thought into my words before they come out of my mouth. As, as someone's walking toward you, it is important for you to be aware that your brain unconsciously is making assumptions about them. In order for us to, to fight implicit bias, we need to make it explicit. We need to become aware of it. In order for us to fight unconscious bias, we need to, need, need to make it conscious. We need to become aware of it. And that is what check your bias is. Literally, I want you to check, check in on yourself.

**Sam Fuqua:** There's one thing you said a few minutes ago when we were talking about, uh, difficult conversations, uh, around the elections, for example. And I think you said, uh, something along the lines of, well, you know, very difficult or you're not gonna change someone's mind. And, so I have a brother in Michigan, which is a swing state, and I am trying to change his mind in terms of who he is planning to vote for in the upcoming election. Should I just give up then? I'm not sure if that's what you meant.

**Celeste Headlee:** I don't, I don't think you should give up. Uh, we just don't have any evidence whatsoever that over the course of a conversation, you can change someone's mind or educate them. In fact, we know that because of confirmation bias, the tendency among human beings to discount information they don't agree with, and to search for information that they do agree with. We know that sometimes these debates further entrench someone into the position they already hold. So, you have to go another way around it. Um, and the most effective way to really affect someone is to create an empathic bond. Now, I assume you like your brother, right?

**Sam Fuqua:** Yep. Yep. Yep.

**Celeste Headlee:** And your brother likes you, right?

**Sam Fuqua:** Yes, I believe so.

**Celeste Headlee:** So, so having conversations, there's a, there's a couple things I can, I can say. He is most likely to be swayed or persuaded, um, because he understands empathically, why you believe the way you do. So, saying, you know, "I know you don't agree, but I just wanna tell you about this thing that moved me or upset me. Is that okay?" Letting him, using him as a sounding board to hear you so he more understands where you're coming from. And in turn, giving him the ability to do the exact same thing. That's gonna create the kind of empathic bond on these topics that just might change, not just him, but maybe you. Maybe you'll better understand where he's coming from. And it, it, it's the, it's every single time we see people who do this successfully. I mentioned Xernona Clayton in the book. Um, there's another man named Daryl Davis who is an African American pianist, and he is known for convincing guys to leave the KKK. There are a number of organizations that, um, Life After Hate, for example, who make it their business to go convince people to leave hate groups. And they will tell you that no statistic, no data, no argument you give is actually going to make the difference. The difference is in creating a



relationship. And if you already have that relationship with your brother, find ways to deepen that relationship and make it more empathic surrounding these specific topics.

**Sam Fuqua:** Celeste Headlee, thank you so much for speaking with us today. We appreciate the conversation.

**Celeste Headlee:** Oh, absolutely. Thank you so much.

**Sam Fuqua:** Celeste Headlee is a journalist, public speaker, and author of the book, *We Need to Talk*. It was chosen as the featured book for Conflict Resolution Month 2020 in Colorado. Celeste Headlee also has a recent book out called, *Do Nothing: How to Break Away From Overworking, Overdoing, and Under Living*.

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](https://sidewayspod.org). We also have information on our guests and links to more conflict resolution resources at the website. That's [sidewayspod.org](https://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](https://conflictcenter.org).