**Listening Deeply**
**Meaningful Direction**

**Indi**:

Hi, everyone. I'm Indi Young and this is a course on Listening Deeply. I want to get started with kind of a big question which is why listening? Why are we interested in doing this sort of engagement?

Listening deeply has a couple of, I mean a lot of different advantages, but one of them is that we're really trying to focus more on the person's success, accomplishing their purpose. I know that that's been something that we've been trying to do as product folks, and UX folks, for a decade or two, and we've been having limited success. So, one of the other things that listening deeply addresses is actually shifting sort of the process that's underneath this all and the beliefs that are running the process. I think that's where we have to start so that we can get this to apply a little bit better.

So, when I talk about process and beliefs, I mean things like facing limited budgets, facing a limited team power, not having enough people to do the kind of work, or having your leadership not really recognize the power of understanding people and supporting them better. Maybe you might feel constrained yourself by the position that you're in, the title that you have, the things people expect you to do. And you feel like your hands are tied; you can't move out of that. You are also, we're all also, constrained by the entrenched processes and I want to talk about that today. Also, by unreasonable time scales. Oh boy, yes that is our issue.

And I've heard of it referred to as speeding down the highway in the fog. And as we speed down the highway in the fog, we are thinking that we're chasing maybe the competition, or the competition is chasing us. We're thinking that there are edges to this road. We're trying to feel out what's just 10 feet ahead of us so that we can go fast there. And we keep going fast 10 feet at a time, without really knowing what's down the road. We're kind of crossing our fingers about what's there. And all of us want to know what's down there. How do we blow this fog away?

Well, unfortunately, we need to build knowledge to do it and we kept, we keep being told that there is no time to build the knowledge that will clear the fog. So, this is the sort of Catch-22, the conundrum, the constraints that we're facing. And these are the things

that we need to address first so that we can have listening deeply actually make a difference.

So, I want to talk a little bit about a couple of the processes that you might be using. There's a whole bunch of them. There's design thinking. There's jobs to be done. There's this double diamond, discover and define, develop and deliver. There's this idea of sprinting and reviewing and planning, and sprinting and reviewing and planning as product development. And this idea that maybe in parallel we're also doing product discovery where we're coming up with ideas, we're making hypotheses, we're prototyping. We're testing these ideas, and so on, until we have some validated ideas that we're going to throw into the product development cycle.

There's probably more to be talking about here, but I want to stop here. This is where we're speeding along. These are the cycles that we're trying to get through really quickly. These are the cycles that leadership says, "Hey, there's no time to slow down and build more knowledge to clear the fog." And it's all driven by product strategy based on oh hey, the next big tech that came out, or maybe some correlations that our org found in our own quantitative data. Or, maybe, something that our own leadership got excited about and want to head toward, or something our competition did that we need to catch up to. And it's not really driven strategically.

I want to ask the question, where is the person in this? Now, we can definitely point to a couple of places where we see a slice of the person – in that discover phase, in the very beginning of design thinking, in the prototyping and designing and testing. We see little slices of people there, in generative and in evaluative research. We are allowed to do a tiny bit of this. Maybe a day or two. And that's where we're seeing our people.

But this is where assumptions are coming in and I want to talk about that word assumptions a little bit. First of all, we all have them, and we will never get rid of them because we all have human brains – unless your cat is watching this video! So, we all, like sort of evolved so that we can recognize patterns really well. Moreover, we act on those patterns really quickly. The recognition of patterns is not a horrible thing, but the acting fast on them is where our assumptions get baked in. It's where our assumptions about the patterns turn into some sort of design, or code, or interaction, or service part that we roll out that works only for people that we maybe think like us. So, the idea that we all make these assumptions, what we want to do is be more aware of these assumptions. There's no way to stop them, but we can be aware when we're seeing patterns and slow down the acting fast part. The making a decision about that pattern part.

So, going back to – I have this diagram here that sort of lists out those processes that I had described earlier, and the assumptions show up right there in the beginning of the product strategy part, where it's driven by data correlation and trends, and things the competition are doing, which they did based on assumptions. It's also coming in in our discovery and definition phases. It's also coming in where we're doing our ideas and our prototypes. If we're not being very careful about our evaluative and generative work, if we're forced to speed through that in 2 days, and do interactions with 40 people in those 2 days, that's where our assumptions are going to come in.

And the assumptions cause harm in the end. I want to talk about harm, kind of intentionally, because I think that this is a powerful word for us to use in our work. And I've broken it down into four different types of harm. There is mild harm, which is where our organizations have been focused most of all. Mild harm is where you're causing frustration. You're causing confusion. You're trying to fix some sort of an experience so that somebody no longer is frustrated or confused. And that's as far as a lot of orgs take it.

Medium harm has to do with something a little more detrimental to the person that you're trying to support. You're wasting their time. You're misleading them. Maybe you're causing self-doubt. Or you're causing them to feel unwelcome. This is an experience that clearly wasn't designed with them in mind, with their approach.

More serious harm could even result in injury, or death, like when you're talking about interactions inside of a car or interactions that have to do with systems that control utilities and access to things that we need as a society. That's also where lost productivity shows up in our serious kind of harm. Also, lost money. Also disinformation, the sowing of hatred. That kind of thing shows up in serious harm. This is harm that we've caused. We didn't mean to cause it, but we've caused it in various ways.

There are also the types of harm called systemic harm. We're all kind of growing up and living within the culture that thinks of things the way they've been thought of historically. A lot of bias is baked into that. A lot of bias finds its way into our laws, into the way that we work within our organizations, with each other. We end up accidentally making things that give unequal access to different people, that favor people in one respect and disfavor other people, especially with respect to people who are like us, who maybe have access to the tools that we have access to. Have access to the food and the utilities that we have access to. We tend not to think outside those boundaries, outside our own cultural approach, and our own systemic approach.

So, those are the four kinds of harm and I wanted to define them because it makes it easier for us to speak about them with our coworkers, with the people that we're trying to codesign with out there in the community.

So, how is it that we look beyond our assumptions? And it's the stuff that we're good at. It's the stuff about questioning the system, being aware that the system is out there. About questioning our beliefs. Slowing down a little bit, becoming more aware of that patterns/act kind of a pairing. So, what we want to do is slow that down.

One of the things I want us to think hard about is this idea of free-market thinking. Free-market economy is where most of our orgs think they're operating with limited resources. It is a zero-sum game. You have to take away resources for one thing to put them toward another. Also, the idea of maximizing profit. Now, that doesn't apply to like civic design, but it does apply in the way of like minimizing costs. Also, this idea of endless growth. In commercial businesses, it's a lot of growth for the shareholders, but in our education systems, in our civic systems, in healthcare, there is this idea of endlessly trying to include more people. And that can be good in terms of inclusion, but it can be bad in terms of like blindly racing through the fog down that road.

So, one of the things is that we have something in this area of free-marketing thinking called the market bell curve. The bell curve is like a hill. It's tall in the middle, short on the sides. In the middle, statistically, that would be where the most numbers of our audience, of our market, exist. And in the free-marketing thinking, that's where you focus. You only focus on that subset of your audience because that's where the most profit can be made. Where the most bang for the buck, we can do one thing and it will serve the most people. And you tend to ignore the low parts of that bell curve; totally ignore them.

And, in fact, some organizations refer to those low parts as edge cases. If you've heard that in your org, I've got something for you in another few minutes. Before I get to that though, I want to talk about that high part of the curve, which is defined, typically, by demographics. Or titles, or roles, or even psychographics, like Gen Z, or whatever. It's defined often also by the solutions being offered. And so we're thinking of this bell curve from the point of view of our existence as an organization, not from the point of view of the person. We're thinking of supporting our business, not supporting the people.

Back to that edge cases thing. It's inaccurate to refer to any human as an edge case. The words, or phrase, edge case comes from the idea of understanding a process and trying to encode a process. Trying to write it up. The process, like there's a typical

process, and then here is a different context where it might work differently. Here's another context that layers on top and it works, yet again, in a different way. And those are called edge cases. The edge cases refer to the parts of the process that are not typical. They do not refer to people. So, when you hear that in your organization, bear that in mind. You don't want to go around preaching, but you may have a place where you can start to change the way that the vocabulary is being used.

The reason why it's inaccurate is that no group is monolithic. So, if you hear somebody say, "oh, we're going to find out how millennials think about healthcare costs." And "here's how millennials think about healthcare costs." They have like one answer. They do the same thing for Spanish speakers who may think about their tax preparation, or software developers thinking about time-tracking. What about black, indigenous, and people of color? Women who are thinking about taking a speaking engagement? What about, hey, all the tall people who think about choosing theater seats? Or all the deaf people thinking about using that word "listen." In each one of these examples, you can see that not everybody in that group is going to think the same way about that purpose.

So, I mentioned a bunch of purposes – healthcare costs, tax preparation, time-tracking, speaking engagements, choosing theater seats, using the word listen. In each case, there are people in the group that think differently about this purpose. And so purpose is the way, the magic way, that we manage to understand people differently. That we manage to be able to speak with the rest of our organization about people in a different manner. So, rather than talking about them in terms of a demographic, or psychographic, or title kind of group, we're going to start talking about them by purpose and breaking them down differently into thinking styles.

So, our idea is to flatten that bell curve. There is no bell curve. We're moving towards this in the free-market economy. We want to support more people. We want to embrace more inclusivity. Let's try to understand a different way of knowing that every human is worth supporting. And that every human has a different way of approaching the purpose. There can be thinking styles that are involved and this is the key.

So, going back to that idea of that foggy road that we're speeding down, I want to take away the idea that it's a road, especially it's not a paved road. It might not even be a gravel road or a fire road. It might not even have a trail there at all. And there's no reason why we have to follow a road. I want to get us away from this mindset of having a road to follow and instead introduce the idea that there's a landscape out there that people inhabit.

So, if we have this landscape, we can see clearly that there are a bunch of different features in the landscape and that people approach those and pull them toward them, or push them away from them, as they try to address their purpose. So, this is the way that we blow the fog away. There's no road anymore. In the picture that I'm showing, there's a big rock formation. There's a creek in the middle. There are trees growing close to the creek. In the foreground, it's a little bit of an open territory that's kind of flat. In the middle ground, there's some interesting canyons to explore. In the far distance, there's a big mesa. Each of the people who are in the context of this landscape are looking at and addressing their purpose using different parts of this landscape, and we can explore this. We can find out how people address their purpose in different ways, and then measure the way that we're supporting them, and see the gaps. So, this is how we're blowing the fog away by getting away from that road metaphor.

What I'm showing now is back to that diagram where I had all the processes laid out. They're over on the right-hand side, and here I've labeled them solution space. Solution space is where we're speeding along through the fog, or just speeding along if we've managed to blow away the fog, doing our product discovery and our product development, or our discovery and our definition, or what have you, right? That's all normal. This is where we refer to people as users, or customers, or members, or passengers, or whatever noun you use to refer to the people that your org has a relationship with or a potential relationship with. That's where those nouns belong. Users are associated with the solution space.

Now, instead of driving all of this by some sort of trends in the data, we have something very specific we call the strategy space, and the strategy space is where we're deciding on our direction. We've got this landscape, where are we going to go first? We have to prioritize. We can't do everything at once, certainly, because of those resources thing, but we can choose, and we can figure out what makes the most sense to look at next.

So, this strategy space contains something called an opportunity backlog, and that is filled with information and the knowledge that we get from the problem space. The problem space in this diagram is all the way to the left. That's where we're talking about a person who has a purpose. We do not use the word user here because they aren't interacting with just your organization. They're interacting with other members of their family. They're interacting with other tools. And the way that we run the problem space, it starts with listening deeply. That's how we clear the fog. And that's how we fill up this opportunity backlog in the strategy space, so that we're driving that solution space, so that it can go fast, but we're taking our time to actually clear the fog in the beginning.

Okay, so why listening deeply? We want to then be able to reallocate our budget, reallocate our team power. Actually build relationships with our leadership so that we have trust between us. This will empower you in your position, and it will begin the shift of this entrenched process. It will begin the shift of the beliefs toward being able to embrace time to build a broader understanding of the different people and the different contexts in which they're trying to accomplish their purpose.

So, the point of this whole video is meaningful direction. We want to be intentional and aware of our assumptions. We want to slow down that jump to act on the patterns that we're recognizing. We want to be able to collaborate with each other, and with other people across our org, on clearly shared goals, on that clear landscape that we have built up through understanding people based on listening deeply. So, this is the way that we're going to be able to include people who have been ignored. This is how we're going to be able to include people who have been harmed. And this is the way that we will also shift the mindset away from one single solution and toward many solutions for the varied approaches and thinking styles that people have.

So, that's all for this video and I want to encourage you to take your time to think about this. We've got a couple of other definition videos coming up that are about thinking styles and about purpose. See you soon.