

Aurelius Podcast

Zack: Hey everybody. Welcome to this week's episode of the Aurelius Podcast. This time around we have Indi Young as our guest and what a wonderful conversation we had with her. Indi has been doing some very deep thinking with a ton of experience in the research and synthesis and empathy space, within our field of design and UX for a very long time. We had a conversation with her where we talked about what she's doing now, what she calls problem space researcher. We actually talk about the difference between problem space research and solutions research and why that matters. We then get into what a lot of Indi's recent thinking has been about which is thinking styles in research and then how we apply those things in design. We cover a number of topics ranging from how artificial intelligence can help create emergent experiences in the future, different types of empathy and even tactical examples of how we can make better sense of what we learn from user research to make better design and product decisions. This was an awesome episode from a very awesome, a very smart guest and someone I've had a ton of respect for, for a very long time and I think you're really going to enjoy the show. Just one more shout out that I want to let you know. We are actually still in beta for Aurelius, our user research and insights tool for design and product teams. You can go and sign up for beta right now and the reason I mention that is because we're actually getting ready for our public launch where we're going to start charging for the product. If you'd like to get in and check it out for free, see what we're up to, just head over to our website, sign up and we'll send you an invite. With that, let's get on to the show.

Welcome to Aurelius Podcast, episode 15, with Indi Young. She is a problem space researcher, author and consultant. Indi, welcome to the show.

Indi: Thanks so much.

Zack: We're very glad to have you and I know I can speak for myself, and many others. I've been following your work for a very long time and I would say for me, probably close to 10 years after I read your book, Mental Models, and was implementing that at the company I was working for at the time. And very grateful for that. Again, honored to have you here.

Indi: Thanks so much. It's been a long 10 years, I guess. We were talking earlier about where you met up with me at one of the conferences.

Zack: Yeah, UX Week – 2010 I believe it was.

Indi: It was a good conference.

Zack: It was a great conference. One of my favorites, all time. So, 10 years, what have you been doing recently? Tell our listeners a little bit more about the work you're doing now.

Indi: What's top of mind right now is I'm kind of trying to get my next book started. You know how you get this sort of itch to do some more writing about something. The point that I want to try to do is combine this idea of supporting non-dominant thinking styles, which comes up in the diversity arena, with product development – with technology. And trying to sort of draw a line, make a case that these are two of the same things. And then on at least the technology product side, make a case for the idea that problem space research can really support those efforts. Can really actually sort of define the pathways that you can follow and there are many, many pathways, but it will help you delineate which ones there are and help you have a discussion about prioritizing those.

Zack: That's great. We've talked about this a couple of times now and you even described yourself as a problem space researcher. And I can imagine that even the people listening to the podcast might say, "what does that really mean? How would I know if I'm calling myself a problem space researcher?"

Indi: Theoretically, if you're listening to this podcast, you've heard of the phrase solution space and the phrase problem space. You've heard of design thinking. You've heard of the phrase "fall in love with the problem." It all sort of has to do with really focusing on the people that you're trying to support. Oftentimes those people are called the customer, or the user, and what I've been trying to do is separate that out a little bit farther. I think when we still refer to people as customers and users we're looking at them through the lens of our offering – through the lens of our organization, what we do to support them and how we think about them. All the knowledge we already have about them, but it tends to force us back into the mindset of problem solving. It tends to encourage us to come up with new ideas; do idea generation, innovation work, that kind of think. Where I would like for us to insert a little bit more knowledge that has nothing to do with innovating, that has nothing to do with idea generation, that only has to do with understanding. This is what my second book was about, Practical

Empathy. It's the idea of taking that first step in design thinking, which is called empathize, and snapping it off and making it not a part of a cycle; not a part of something that you go around and around on to improve a product, or even to come up with new ideas or new directions for a product where you're then prototyping and testing – where the very next step is the exciting step. I think everybody gets credit for good ideas and it's exciting to talk about ideas and a lot of attention is paid to ways to generate ideas. I know Christina, on your podcast earlier, was talking about not doing brainstorming where the loudest voices or the most extroverted people will have their ideas out there, where she does sort of quiet idea generation on sticky notes and then these ideas of having to create a number of ideas in a certain amount of time, etc. But all of this focus on ideas is I think very tempting for people to just skip over the understanding part. So, the reason I'm snapping it off and trying to make it into a completely separate cycle – I have diagrams about this on my website, and actually in the book practical empathy, is because if you think of the problem space just as understanding a person, not understanding a user, not understanding a customer, not a member, not any of those words that you use to reference the people who have a relationship to your organization – if you just try to understand a person, you let go of your need to solve problems. That phrase, fall in love with the problem, is like in a way it really starts to fade into, or edge into, fall in love with solutions for the problem. Fall in love with solving the problem. There's that shadow word "solving" in there which puts it still in solution land, right. So, actually instead of that phrase, fall in love with the problem, I like to say build an enduring relationship with the problem.

Zack: Okay. This is a very interesting term.

Indi: Everybody loves falling in love. Falling in love is fun.

Zack: It can be. It cannot be too.

Indi: It cannot be too, but it's a thrill. We can say it's a thrill, positive or negative.

Zack: That's true. It does release endorphins which we all enjoy. That's absolutely true.

Indi: But the building of the enduring relationship, the thing that lasts over time, the thing that enables you to understand the other person and live with the other person and work with the other person, that takes work. That takes effort. It's hard.

Zack: Definitely. So, this is really quite curious for me. It sounds to me like you're advocating for almost more kind of point in time, much deeper, but longer shelf-life type research. And it sounds to me like this is tapping into the philosophy of a person, or a group of peoples which is perhaps more important. To kind of bring it back to a more tactical place, because I think that helps people understand things sometimes, even accessibility is a perfect example of this, right, where the things we build have to be accessible to all peoples and so because of that, starting with an accessible point of view in mind first, actually helps us realize how the way in which we're building things should be. Perhaps fundamentally different than the point of view we have which, of course, if we take the next level deeper, we can say well that's what research is all about, so we can move beyond the point of view or perspective we have. But again, please keep me honest. It sounds like you're advocating, which to my excitement I hope I'm summarizing right, because it sounds like you're advocating for almost trying to – as you would say – codify someone's philosophy. The people you're trying to serve. Not focused on the problem, but just focused on them as people and understanding themes and patterns across that as opposed to focused on how you can solve a problem.

Indi: Exactly. That's really well said. As you were talking what ran across my mind is Sara and Eric's book, Design for Life, they talk about stress cases as opposed to edge cases. What they're trying to do is come up with some accessibility and also, in a way, contextual situations where people might not be behaving the way that you're "average (which never exists) user" wouldn't behave. What I'm doing is codifying that. I am allowing people – and I'm calling them thinking styles. I'm allowing you to take some primary research and understand what different thinking styles might be out there. Now, you can't understand all of them, but you can understand a set of them that you are most interested in right now and then later on let's go find out some more. For example, I did some research for an airline. This was a different case. They actually did 8 studies within the course of 14 months – very rare. Typically, people will do one study like a quarter or a year.

Zack: Or longer.

Indi: Yes. But during the course of these 8 studies we can up with four different thinking styles that kept replicating, kept getting confirmed over and over again. What it helped the designers understand was that they were designing for one thinking style. And maybe that's okay. Maybe that's fine because business wise that thinking style –

let me tell you a little bit about the thinking style. I've written this article called "Describing Personas" which is all about trying to get away from demographics. I know that you talk about that.

Zack: Definitely

Indi: The thinking styles represent – like in this airline example, one of them represented the person who trusted that the airline is going to get them from point A to point B, reasonably time wise. So, they're kind of Zen about it. They're laid back. "Okay, I've sort of set this whole day aside." And that's the one that they were all designing for. There were two others. One is called the frustrated and one called the just get me there who had different approaches. The just get me there treated the airlines as a bus, like a bus in the air. So, they're like getting to the airport at the last minute, trying to get their meetings done, crushing in this extra meeting before they actually leave for the airport. That's all within the realm of a business passenger who is their big focus.

Zack: That was the first thing I thought of, totally.

Indi: You would look at these contexts also within the realm of vacationers and your context changes. So, you might be the just get me there for business, but you might be one of these laid back Zen people when you're taking your toddler on vacation.

Zack: We had this brief conversational like pause moment (for those of you who can't see) and the reason for that was because I finally clicked with what Indi has been talking about with this idea of thinking styles. This is like a bombshell of brilliance on my head right now because what we do – I won't speak for everybody, but the way I've done research in the past is I want to find the commonality between what people are trying to achieve and what they're trying to understand and what outcomes they want. Whereas what you're saying is there is this thinking style which is perhaps an entirely other dimension which either we have neglected at worst, or at best touched on tangentially, which is to say actually those commonalities can be split, or fractured if you will, in different ways depending on context and if you were to focus on the way somebody is thinking about their life and their outcomes, those things have different combinations.

Indi: Yes

Zack: And I realize I'm talking in very broad terms right now. So, I guess what I'm saying is if you're writing a research report about this stuff, you want to report on here's the themes we found – I think that's a very logical and sensible step, but what I'm taking from this is if you focused on thinking styles you can say, "here's how to know how to combine these insights or these themes based on the context."

Indi: Exactly. And based on the phase of what people are going through.

Zack: In time?

Indi: Phase of approach. So, as a passenger you might go through a phase that's like, what does it take to get there? Right now, we don't have any tools that allow you to figure that out, except to pretend that you're making a reservation. Or you might be in the phase where you're like, okay, I have to get to the gate on time. Or, I have to figure out how to get a seat that I like, or something. And you could be going through that phase in a number of different time points, but you're thinking style, your context and your phase is going to intersect. And those combinations are the combinations that then your organization can say, "okay, I want to focus on this one, this one, this one and this one and not those for right now." So, I'm going to keep us from falling into that rut. And the other things I want to do – so, here's where I'm sort of going forward with this is machine learning. Machine learning is this whole idea where the developers are like oh we have all this data and the data is going to tell us how to treat each person differently.

Zack: Well – okay.

Indi: Theoretically, it could lead to emergent experiences.

Zack: Provocative

Indi: It could lead to the machine having a listening session with the person interacting with it and adjusting the way it works for that person. But, to do that, that machine, that algorithm, needs to understand its own boundaries, where it cannot adjust or understand. Where there's going to be a limit. Right now, we only have one algorithm and it tries to serve everybody. What happens is that it assumes it can do everything. It doesn't assume that it has a boundary. When you run into problems and you're

getting frustrated with it, it is like la-la-la I'm serving you perfectly because it doesn't realize...

Zack: Yeah, totally. It keeps pumping in the things that you say that you like. I am not trying to get us in a rabbit hole or anything like that, but we have a beautiful socio-economic case study here in the United States about that exact thing happening, even with our own political elections this past year. That exact thing very much happened where there is even an investigation going on right now as to whether or not there has been influence over that, knowingly, that that could possibly occur. This is interesting to me because you're staying on the bleeding edge of our responsibility as people who are serving these people. Hopefully, for the better, but knowing that these things can take a different turn. I kind of want to take a step back and share with you what I had in my mind as you were describing some of what you were talking about, as like a very tactically applied piece to what you were describing. So, you were saying modes of thinking, right?

Indi: Thinking styles

Zack: And at certain points, so sequences. What I had in my mind was almost something similar to a service design blueprint or a customer journey, but rather those touchpoints could have a 360 view based on thinking style which is a curious application of that because as you said, then a business could come in and say, "actually, yes, this one covering the 360 point of view of that touchpoint, or that moment in time, or that moment in sequence, is extremely important to what we're trying to do in the experience we're delivering." And hopefully balanced by saying, "also very important for that person and we can tackle that."

Indi: Yeah. That makes me think of a conversation I had a little bit earlier today with someone who was talking about how he used a mental model diagram. Actually, it was an opportunity map. So, it had the capabilities of his organization mapped underneath the towers. It was a piece of enterprise software and they were trying to support internal people who were doing configurations for external clients or customers. So, that was what the opportunity map represented and he said he loved that it was so simple, that it was not as complex as trying to do touchpoints and three dimensions. In that it just showed you know the one dimension – well, I guess it's two-dimensional really because there's a line – one dimension would be a point. But anyway, it showed this line and it allowed him and his developers to recognize that

they were talking past each other. It allowed them – without any words being said you can look and you can go like, “oh, oh, right. Okay, wait.” So, because this thing happens three or four times throughout the whole process, and it is sort of the same thing, doesn’t mean that we want to put it all in the same place in the interface. So, it was the idea that we were looking at it very simply, I guess, that allowed them to see that. I don’t think it’s necessarily – for that case, that was a communication win. That was the ability to get people on the same page which it worked really well for. I think the idea of doing maybe a journey map with touchpoints and stuff, and having this data layered in, would also help with kind of the innovation side of things. I personally don’t have that much experience with journey maps because for the past 10 years I haven’t been designing anything. I’ve just been helping people get knowledge, get really deep knowledge and learn how to add to it and learn how to use that knowledge. Learn how to apply it. Somebody was saying, “what we do is we cup our hands around this section of what we’re looking at and now we’re going to have a deep discussion about this particular thing, but we’ve got the way that these three thinking styles are approaching this same phase and we can talk about different contexts that they’re in.”

Zack: Yes, okay. It’s at this point where I realize there’s a couple of things I think we should clarify for people listening that would be useful for them to not only distill, but apply what it is you’re talking about. Even very briefly, we have mentioned mental models a couple of times. I can imagine there’s probably some people listening who maybe don’t know what that is. So, the 60 second version of what a mental model is?

Indi: A mental model is defined a lot of different ways. The definition I’m using is that it’s a model that your team holds together of the way the people you’re supporting think their way through to a purpose. It looks like a city skyline with a bunch of buildings in it. Some buildings are tall. Some buildings are short. The buildings all have boxes in them. The boxes actually represent what’s going through people’s minds. This is where the empathy part comes in. My second book is called Practical Empathy. There are many, also, definitions of empathy. I use two of those definitions. I do not use emotional contagions, but I use emotional empathy which in a listening session, when you’re trying to draw a person out, trying to get that person to tell me their inner reasoning, their reactions and decisions they’ve made based on those reactions and their guiding principles. And to get deeper than explanation. Get deeper than statements of fact and opinions and preferences, which is what a lot of interviews are

about. This is how I do it, this is why I'm doing it, but not my inner voice as I'm doing it and the little things that go through your mind.

Zack: The gold flakes that surround all of the answers somebody gives you.

Indi: Exactly. To get at those you have to use emotional empathy which means be with that person in their emotion which is like who the hell are you and should I trust you and do I want to tell you my inner thinking and what the hell do you mean by this? And are you going to laugh at what I say? Or are you going to judge me? And the more you support the person, the freer they feel, the more trusting they feel. I have gotten so many people telling me, after they do these listening sessions, that the participant thanks them because they've never had a chance to unburden themselves of all the inner chattering that's going on in their head.

Zack: So, even right there, Indi, I have to stop and pause and just say for anything listening to this podcast, if you took nothing away from how you can do your work better today, is that when you talk to customers, truly, truly, listen and show that you're there to support and understand them and nothing else and I promise you your work will get better. Because it's such a profound thing.

Indi: It is. Nobody gets to be listened to very often.

Zack: Yes. And particularly in our culture. We are US based and in America there's often a saying where in a conversation most people are just waiting for their turn to speak, rather than listening to the person speaking. And I think that that's very true and why empathy has such a powerful like impact when we actually see it happen. Okay, I'm going to go back...

Indi: So, wait. I want to hop on that for a second. That is emotional empathy and I use that in the listening sessions when I'm trying to collect this information so I can then develop empathy. There's a difference between applying empathy and developing empathy. Everybody wants to jump on the apply empathy – I want to walk in their shoes, right? But, how do you get in their shoes? You have to develop the empathy first. You use emotional empathy to support them, to collect the data, but then you use cognitive empathy to go through the transcripts that you get and piece together what they really meant to tell you. They will say a thing one way in the beginning of the conversation and mention it again in a slightly different way and again and again

and by the end of it you've got a clear understanding of it while you're in the conversation, but you walk away half an hour later and you can't quite remember exactly the brilliant clarity of it. So, I go back to those transcripts and I pull those concepts together and I get that brilliant clarity and I stick it there in my spreadsheet. Then I get to compare that to somebody else's approach and I look for affinities. And I build those together. Those then become the towers for the buildings in the city skyline and the boxes represent their words. The boxes are actually how you stand in their shoes.

Zack: Yes. My follow-on question, you went there without me even asking which is to say okay, so we get this, we use this as Indi would say, emotional empathy to gather the data. We use cognitive empathy to apply it. That was going to be my next question is to say that's great – we go out and we talk to people. Let's say we've sold our stakeholders on the fact that research is important and we're trying to do that really, really well and we use the emotional empathy to gather than really rich data, the gold flecked data as we were talking about – cognitive empathy to apply that, right?

Indi: Right

Zack: And this becomes what? I don't think that there's really anybody listening to this that would say, "yeah, no, that doesn't make sense to me. That's exactly what we should do. That's brilliant." But we have to share this, empathize, even with the people we work with to help them understand why this is important for them. Even on a personal level, why it's important for their job or their company, but also it's important for our customers, so how do we do that?

Indi: That's why I'm trying to write this next book.

Zack: Well great. Let's dive into that.

Indi: Not enough of it is being done and we've become, at least in the US had our noses sort of smeared in the fact that our digital world is not rosy and we're responsible for it. To one degree or another, maybe even just bystander responsible for it, but that's still responsibility. And we've got to fix it. How do we fix it? How do we communicate the value of it? One of the ways is to understand what's on the minds of the people that make the decisions about the budget? A lot of people say you have to learn the

language of business. I personally do not know the language of business and I should learn it. It's one of those areas that completely falls off of me.

Zack: May I add something to that? It's really interesting. Only because you brought it up. It's something that's been on my mind, and has pervaded talks I've given recently as well, is this idea that design is a business. So, the reality of it is design is a business that serves this overall umbrella of business as well as anything else and as soon as we started treating it that way, and some are better than others, as you might mention, the sooner we start treating it that way the more effective we can be. So, I guess, simply what I'm saying is I actually think that you're probably better at the business thing than you give yourself credit for because people are people and you understand people really well, right? People have needs. We talked about at the beginning of this, people want to be loved. Everybody likes to fall in love. So, if we can just understand sort of what motivates people and we can help them see why serving other people is good for them.

Indi: I think the problem with business, the problem with tech, at least, is that in a way it's all ROI based. Sara's book, that she just put out, Technically Wrong, talks about this. I was just talking about this subject with a developer friend of mine. Thinking beyond the ROI, thinking beyond the metric, thinking beyond the profit is not something that is pursued. It seems as if it's tightly tied to this idea of being able to support people, and especially being able to support people who are of the non-dominant thinking styles.

Zack: Yes

Indi: Let's say – take it outside of technology. Let's say you're an insurance company and we're just going to look at having auto accidents. There are different thinking styles around auto accidents that happen in different contexts. There's this let this be a lesson, to the other guy, or to me. Or there's the downplay it – "this will never happen again. That was a really perfect storm sort of accident thing." There were a couple of others as well. But, to tell an insurance company who is focused on profit, who is focused on being able to pay off all of the hurricane or wildfire claims, to tell them oh, hey you could support the people who want to downplay it differently than the people who want this to be a lesson, they're going to say for what reason? So, what I have to do is tie it to market potential somehow. The argument goes (the developer friend of mine was telling me) we can solve the problem for most of the people and maybe 20

people it's not going to help them – whatever. And I'm like those 20 people could represent 2,000 actual human beings. Or maybe even 200,000 or 2 million or 20 million actual human beings and you're going "whatever" about them. So, what I really wish is that the rest of us, because we are developing so many more coders and so many more talented young people, let's have those young people have the freedom to go out and design apps for the 2 million people who aren't being served, right? Why is that not happening? There is a vacuum they call it right now. Those 2 million people are not being served by any of the apps that are out there right now, or any of the services, but there is no choice for them. There is no alternative for them. If there were, if that alternative appeared in the market, those people would – like iron filings to a magnet. So, why is nobody pursuing that? I think the young people probably see it and could pursue it, but maybe just don't have the money. I think the startups are run by venture capitalists who really have their minds in a different place – most of them.

Zack: That's a very democratic way of saying that, by the way.

Indi: They're all still running by metric, by ROI. Right?

Zack: Um-hmm

Indi: Do you remember the argument about the long tail? It used to be with bricks and mortar, you could only have so many products within a certain amount of square footage and so you had to make decisions about that. And now, since it's online, it means that we can go and have so many more products and serve like so many more people. I think this argument applies here. It's a slightly different argument because we're not talking about square footage. We're talking about thinking styles. And we're talking about front to end software. We're talking about experiences, that if we have this machine learning future, where we do have emergent experiences, then we want those emergent experiences to support that other 20 or 20 million people.

Zack: And it's almost like – I don't know if this does it justice, but to summarize a bit of what you were saying, this self-imposed restraint which is so important, I think, in the field we work in. And I assume of course that people who are listening to our discussion are in the technology or software field. I think the majority are – this self-imposed restraint, this self-imposed focus. I think we could have a whole other podcast that talks about the reasons why that's very hard for us, particularly in the United States,

because that gets into politics, economics, sociology, all of these things. But yes, if you are able to do that – and I like to go back to, just kind of throwing a shout out to some folks we admire over at Basecamp, formerly 37 Signals – David Heinemeier Hansson and Jason Fried. They talk about this kind of thing where it's like you don't have to build a company to take over the world. That doesn't have to be your aim. You can build a company, or an organization, or a product, or a service and all those things it just simply serves a need really well, better than anything else that currently does that.

Indi: Right, right

Zack: And allows somebody else to tackle that other problem, as you've said, that clearly still will exist and is actually a very scalable way of doing it.

Indi: Maybe this is a William Gibson or a Kim Stanley Robinson sort of a future. One of the things I was bemoaning the other day is that we've got so much dystopian entertainment and we don't know how to think optimistically about the future. But those guys sort of can show us some interesting things about the future and maybe collaborative groups, being able to create things. The idea that you have to have big capital to create something – we know it isn't true and yet it still pervades. We still have this myth about starting in a garage. Adaptive Path, we started having weekly meetings in each other's living rooms. You don't have to have capital, but yet there's this myth in Silicon Valley that you have to go – I don't know, raise funds? Maybe not. Maybe not. That's why I have so much faith in the new generation. Maybe they're unsullied by this. I don't know.

Zack: I'm going to go on record and say it's horseshit. I completely agree with you. We're going to edit this part out, that's for damn sure – I'm not going to get too political or socioeconomic on this. I think it has a lot to do with American culture that has create a Westernized culture as to why we feel like this massive, big bang, bottle rocket on steroids kind of launch and like coming to terms of a business needs to exist. That's not true. You can build an honest, stable, problem solving thing that is more reliable than anything else that you've seen.

Indi: It doesn't get the huge media coverage. Why do you need the media coverage?

Zack: But you know what, it solves your problem better than anything else has. The thing that's really interesting about that is that's exactly who we are at Aurelius. And part of what we're doing is not only just building software or something like that. Like that's fine – I don't mean to trivialize our product. I think what we do is great, but the other higher level – and since we're talking about philosophy on this discussion, it's important to us that we do this and we do it well, as an example that you can without the funding, without the big PR releases, without X Y and Z, to simply say we've understood people – knowledge drop on my head – people's thinking styles and serve them really well in a certain space and not everybody prospers as a result.

Indi: “Serve some of them pretty well.” You know there are a bunch of organizations that are going in this direction. Like Code for America, UX for Good. There are a lot of organizations. This one with the folks in the UK government digital office. They're doing it down in Australia as well. There are people working on this that aren't sucked into the glory of the giant IPO and blah, blah, blah. One of the examples – this is what made me start thinking about this. In Sara's book, which is called Technically Wrong, one of the examples was about an application for tracking your period and it was called Glow and it was originally about people who were trying to get pregnant. But for some reason the organizers of that decided that they wanted to serve people who also were not trying to get pregnant, but they didn't change their interface that much. And then a student of Christina's did a rant about that particular chapter and said there are some men who have periods, or trans men who have periods. For example, if you go in the men's room you're not going to have like the little bin for your pads and your tampons. You will in the women's room, but not in the men's room and blah, blah, blah. So, she's all like why are you making this application pink? I think the application owners should have just focused on people trying to get pregnant and then okay, let's do thinking styles within people who are trying to get pregnant because there are probably a lot of different thinking styles – significant. And why is like this student not deciding – not as if I know anything about this student, or their resources, or the amount of time any of us have, but why couldn't that student go and make the period tracker for people that could include trans men, for people who are not trying to get pregnant and not into pink and all of that sort of thing, who have other reasons?

Zack: Very, very separate, very distinct thinking styles, that almost, through this conversation, may be averse to another mode set of thinking styles. Is that fair to say?

Indi: I don't know enough and I have not done the research. The theory was that they were trying to correlate mood with period, or see if there was a correlation and I don't know what the purpose was. There was probably a purpose, like I feel like I'm depressed all the time and why am I depressed? I don't know, but there's got to be a purpose and that was like one thing that they were doing towards that purpose. I don't know what the whole scenario is there, but it's a good example of like hey, there's someone who recognizes this and could go out and do a little bit of their own research and like cobble something together and get some friends together and put something out there. That's probably what the app stores are full of, like little apps that work for that very particular thinking style, but what's wrong with that?

Zack: I have my answer to that, but I'm not going to actually share it. That's an awesome set of ideas. For the purpose of our show, I'm going to use it as a segue of bringing us back to a certain like of talks.

Indi: We promised each other we would try to keep it short.

Zack: That's true, but I'm enjoying this conversation. So, we talked about thinking styles and we talked about problem space research, right?

Indi: Um-hmm

Zack: We talked a little bit about what that means and focusing on the deeper, longer term effects of that understanding of a person, rather than focus on the problem. So, this is great and I can imagine at this point in our podcast people are going I want to know how I can do that tomorrow? I need to convince the people I work with that we should do that, what they're going to get and how it benefits them.

Indi: So, starting with the what they can get and how that benefits them. One of the ways that I go about figuring that out is to do listening sessions with my stakeholders. What's been on your mind? What are you trying to solve? I will look across stakeholders and see the affinity. I'll also see like they're saying the opposite thing and we'll have a discussion about that. But that's one place to begin. You're not necessarily going to – it's a beginning. You may then start to see themes that then you can pull together and say, "hey listen, we can solve this by understanding a little bit more." For example, with the insurance, there was actually a client that I had, and they were in an innovation center. Most of my clients are in innovation centers

because they're the ones who get the budget! But they were interested in trying to support a particular segment better. That segment was small business owners. Within small business owners we didn't know enough. Basically, what the problem was was we didn't know enough to come up with – we had like all sorts of ideas – we meaning they – but all sorts of ideas for supporting small business owners, but which one would have traction, right? Which one would give you the most success going out the gate so that you could build on it later. To answer that we needed to know the thinking styles and we needed to understand the approaches that people were taking. All of the reasoning and stuff that went through their heads as they were trying to achieve a purpose. So, what we did was we set up a study where we scoped it down to where the purpose was – growing your business. We could have had different purposes like just starting a business in the very first place. But it was like growing your business. And within growing your business, what are the thinking styles? Within growing your business, what goes through people's minds? There was a whole section on financing. There was a whole section on competitive analysis. There was a whole section on griping about the person who did you wrong – the vendor or whoever you're working with, that kind of a thing, and trying to deal with the people who are going to mess you up. And those are not necessarily things that insurance is going to cover, but it's going to help them understand, in addition to those things, the other very concrete areas that people are worrying about.

Zack: Yeah

Indi: And be able to then come in with some product that will not only help a part of it, but there are several insurance companies who are associated with banks and could coordinate – there's a really great example from USAA where they were looking at – I think it was auto claims. One of the things was that they thought at the end, when the claim was closed, that was a good thing. We're done. We got good marks for closing the claim, but they found through this kind of research, that it's not over for somebody who was in an auto accident when the claim is closed because they still have to recover physically. They have to recover emotionally. They may be feeling guilty about damage they did or an injury they caused. So, there's psychological stuff going on too. They may also have to buy a new car because theirs got totaled and they may not be in a financial situation to buy a new car, or to finance a new car. And USAA is associated with a bank. Could they not put a package together?

Zack: Definitely. I apologize that I interjected, but that right there is like the answer to the question, right, is to say how do you apply this to your work? It's like because we're going to understand those places where we don't know where we can offer things. That it's good for our business to offer that. We won't know those unless we do this kind of explorative research.

Indi: They also changed metrics because they were measuring their success in ways that had nothing to do with the success of the person.

Zack: That goes back to – you mentioned Christina Wodtke. She talks about OKRs. We talk about it as goals. That's the way I've done it in my work. It's all the same thing under the same name, but if you understand exactly what it is you're trying to do and you can point to your design or your product or your research recommendations from that thing, all of a sudden, the clouds part, the sun shines down and it's that moment of clarity as you've described.

Indi: Right. Exactly. It's eye opening. It's also clarity for what you don't want to get involved in. Or not yet.

Zack: You know, it's really interesting that you bring that up too because I think that's often not talked enough about in the work that we do with research and strategy. I can't remember who the famous quote is – maybe it's Peter Drucker or Jack Welch – which is to say good strategy is simply understanding the things you should say no to.

Indi: Right, exactly. Or say, okay we'll do that later. Or, that's for a spinoff. Or, that's for this little set of people we're going to incubate.

Zack: Yes! And so, you say you work with innovation groups. What innovation groups should we fund we know that actually will have legs, but we know nothing about right now.

Indi: What can't a corporation fund incubation? Why can't a corporation do those kinds of things? Like bring groups of young people in who have this idea, as opposed to those young people feeling like they have to rely on venture capital?

Zack: I had the very distinct honor to be part of an innovation group that was from a local service design company here and they brought together a bunch of people. I won't actually name names because I don't know if I'm allowed to, but their clients came in

and one of them was actually from a large US based bank. This woman talked about exactly that and that's how they actually funded their innovations, where they literally invited groups in of people who could traditionally be seen as potential competitors to them and say, "build us a way that you would actually slice our needs" so to speak.

Indi: Interesting. Also, you know how in sports they go out and scout, we could go out and scout and scout in places that are not like the Carnegie Melons and Stanford's, MIT or whatever. Let's go out in some very small schools or very specialized schools. Let's go scout in places where people have different thinking styles, different approaches, and see what's cooking. And maybe something that's cooking would be something you want to pick up.

Zack: That's definitely the crux of what we were talking about, that kind of thing and that bank that was doing that. It was actually very interesting to hear such a regulated industry was working in that way. Indi, I realize we're coming up towards the end of time. To wrap this up, one of the things I want to ask you is if people are sitting here listening to our show and saying, Indi, I agree with everything you're saying, what are the top three things I should focus on tomorrow, next week, next month to do? To help our organization do the research in this way and apply it towards these.

Indi: The answer depends.

Zack: Always in the UX space.

Indi: Where are you? How much power do you have? Blah, blah, blah. I don't know that I can answer that that quickly. Doing stakeholder listening sessions. Picking up my book and learning how to do a listening session. Maybe you have all the power in the world and you want to just do this. Maybe you've got the power, but no team or no time. Hire me and my team to do it. There's all sorts of different things you can do tomorrow. I think another thing though is to build your own understanding and vocabulary about this idea of non-dominant thinking styles and diversity. So, read books about diversity. Listen to podcasts, like Code Switch and stuff. Find out about becoming woke and see if you can learn something from that to apply in your own area. There is a group called Code2040 who's focused on the science side of this and bringing young people. They have Fellows and a Fellows program. You could get involved in that. There's Black Girls Code as well. A little bit younger group – they focus on younger people. There's all sorts of ways you can get involved on that side

too with the younger folks coming on. But maybe just learn. Learn more. Open your eyes to it. That's what I'm kind of going through right now because I want to have some framework and framing that actually exists out there to use in my new book.

Zack: Okay. As my usual style, I'll try to wrap that up in some kind of summary of what you said and again, please keep me honest. Start with understanding the people – practice empathy with people you're working with and for. And then educate yourself on how this diverse and differing perspective can actually help benefit them. And do your damndest to sell them on that and then start doing that work.

Indi: I like that.

Zack: Good. You know what, I've got a decent track record so far. Fifteen episodes in and I'm summarizing these awesome, varying complex thoughts as best I can.

Indi: I was going to compliment you on that. You're good at summarizing. That is a skill.

Zack: That's a massive compliment coming from you and I mean that very genuinely.

Indi: I wanted to mention one other thing which is I just released a piece of software, a little app, that takes this kind of data and spits it out as a diagram. It spits it out as the top half of an opportunity map, the mental model diagram part. The part that looks like a city skyline. It's up to you to actually start filling in that diagram with stuff below those towers. You can read more about that on my website. That is available to use and to talk about freely.

Zack: Awesome. That was going to be my next question. Is there anything, for the folks listening to this episode, that you would like to share? That is definitely one of them. You have an upcoming book as well, I understand?

Indi: Hopefully. Also, I'm trying to get a second edition out of Mental Models. It's overdue for that. I've been trying for a year though and have nothing to show for it, so I really need to be serious about it. I've been doing a lot of podcasts and a lot of talks which have been recorded. Those are all on my website. You can spread those around. Try to get people talking about it. Also, if you have a UX book club, or even an internal book club at your organization, I will do free chats with your club after you've read the book. Kind of do Q&A or whatever. There you have it.

Zack: Very good. And we are going to make sure that we include links to all of those things in our show notes. You just go ahead and head over to our website, aureliuslab.com, and the link to this episode with Indi Young. And we'll make sure we have links to all of that stuff. I can personally vouch for Mental Models, version one, and I will look forward to version two whenever she gets around to it, but very instrumental to my work and definitely attributed to where I am today. I'm honored to have had this conversation with you, Indi.

Indi: Thank you so much Zack.

Zack: We will see you next time. If you enjoyed this episode, consider leaving us a rating on iTunes or wherever it is that you listen to our podcasts and also you can fill out our podcast survey where you can let us know of someone awesome that we should have on the show and even tell us about the things you would want to hear about, topics that are interesting for you. You can check that out in the show notes, or on our website.