



Podcast

Creating a level playing field for collaboration

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Episode 1 - Jane Lewis: Creating an environment where everyone feels successful

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Episode description

In this episode Jane Lewis talks about collaborative spaces. Creating an environment where everyone can feel successful. She tells the story of how this works in Studio Tainan, in Taiwan. A self-organizing space for co-creation. It starts with listening and understanding what people feel passionate about, so creative energy can lead. Jane is an experienced facilitator and researcher, living and working in Taiwan for over 30 years.

Introducing Creating a Level Playing Field for Collaboration

Welcome to creating a level playing field for collaboration. How do things work so that creative energy can lead in mutuality? How can we make a difference in the world together? In this series, we discover what works by sharing stories of lived experience from people who want to help with collaborative projects, as well as people affected by these projects. What can we learn from each other? By sharing experiences and insights, we want to contribute to co-creating a world that works for all.

Tonnie van der Zouwen: In this episode, we welcome Jane Lewis. I'm so happy you could join us today, Jane. You responded to my invitation during the summit, co-creating a world that works for all. And please, can you tell me what attracted you in my invitation?

Jane: thank you, thank you. Yeah, I'm happy to be here and you yourself are the... invitation in many ways. I've so enjoyed our conversations at the summit and after the summit. They've been a rich dialogue of storytelling, sharing experiences and thinking together, which for me, like that's my favorite thing.

Tonnie: In one of our conversations, you said for co-creation and creating a level playing field, you have to start with creating a sense of me. Could you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by creating a sense of me.

Jane: That's a good one. Because it has to be different every time. mean, who is the way it's always a new weed. But if there isn't a sense of weed, then it's kind of like, why are we here? There's a super easy thing I do that very quickly tells people this isn't the normal connection. This isn't the normal conversation. And what I do at the beginning, usually meeting people, people I know, people I don't know, I just say, Hey, let's check in. just kind of hear from each other. Why are we here right now? And then I, I usually, I do it conversationally. So I say, well, I say, like for me, for example, I like to say my name, how I feel. Maybe I have some random thoughts and then I ask myself, why am I here? And when I answer it, I sort of answer for myself, but everyone else can also hear. And then when everyone's checked in, because then I can say, check in and you know, next person. But once everyone has said that, the group is different.



We've just listened to each other. Each person saying something true that helps us move forward. It's a go-to move that I do to let people know that It's okay for everyone to listen to everyone right now. It'll, it'll be fine. So it kind of, it kind of sets a dialogue energy. How does that sound?

The importance of listening and understanding

Tonnie: When you're invited by, by a potential client, maybe from a company and you are invited as a facilitator or as a consultant, how do you start?

Jane: How do I start? They start, see, this is the beauty. They start. So if they call me. They're starting. And so my job is to receive. So basically I'm just delighted for every connection. And I, I could almost role play it, but like, it's just like, I'm so happy you called. And what is it about my work that interests you? How do you think I could be helpful? How, how may I help? Something like that. It tends to happen very naturally in a conversational form. And then I just say, yeah, tell me what's going on, what's happening. And then I can listen. And I might listen for 20 minutes where I'm just really trying to catch keywords and energy and then feedback to them what I just heard. Usually, well, I've checked, let me just check, did I hear you correctly? What I'm hearing is. And then give them a summary of the impact of their words on me. And usually right there, it also really changes our relationship and it changes the energy of the conversation because they know they were really, really heard. They were really heard, maybe deeper than they heard themselves. And it's pretty clear from my response that I'm, I'm listening for, I guess I could say this simply, I'm listening for the help that is present. I'm listening for their desire, their heart, the contradiction that they're facing. And I may say this back to them very, simply. And in that way, it's like something very complicated and unclear for them suddenly comes into focus. And this allows us to have a really helpful connection where we're now speaking quite honestly, and it's easier to navigate, do I actually have something useful for them and what might it be?

Tonnie: Yeah, okay. In my practice, then often we start with the proposal and then we say, we need other stakeholders or participants or people in need or people from the community or clients or whatever. And then I noticed that we are not collaborating on a level playing field. We invite them for our project. Often we know already some directions, what's good for you.

Tonnie: Yeah. How's that your experience?

Jane: Okay, that made me laugh. Two things. Just last week, there's two stories that link to what you say. So I can tell these stories. Because my work is primarily community. I work with businesses, but I'm primarily active in community, in building community. And so there's two stories last week. One is a client who wanted to hire me as a designer, a process designer. And the second story is a community person.

The importance of learning to think for yourself in African communities

So this person has just finished their undergraduates working on sustainability. They're in Africa and they're going home to Africa. And right before they left, they asked, if they could maintain connection with the community. And if while they're back in Africa, I could help them think that was exactly his words. Can I help him think when he's home? And I say, well, that's really an interesting request. Can you tell me more? What do you, what do you mean? So I've known him for three years, I should say, and he's been involved in the community. And he began to speak about



In Africa, he didn't use these words, but I'm gonna use this word now. In Africa, we are not encouraged to develop our own agency. He didn't say agency. He said, most people who come to help, they're actually, already have their own project. So they want us to do their project. They come in with a solution and we're just used to this. Everyone is used to having someone come in and go, hey, if you do this, I can give you this. So we don't, he said, I almost don't even want to repeat it, but he said, we don't think for ourselves. We don't ask each other what we want. But in this community that I'm part of, that's always going on. asked, we're always checking with each other what they themselves want. And anyone can lead a project in this community and they can invite others and whoever comes, those are the people who can do something. But yes, he sort of used your words there where people come in with a package and say, hey, buy this package. Okay, so that's one story. And the other one is a woman who runs a foundation.

Listening to what a client needs, not what she asks for

And so this week, there was a second story, which is a woman who runs a foundation. And she actually came to me a year ago. It was a short conversation because she, she wanted to buy some package event. And I said to her, don't, I don't have a package event. I, I design each time for the person I'm working for. So that was a short conversation. After a year, she contacted me again and said, yeah, I think maybe you can be helpful. And she began to tell me a lot of things. And then I, I just checked that I could listen helpfully. So I asked her for particular kinds of information. I summarized what I'd heard so far. And after that conversation and a couple of texts, she wrote back and said, I think I'm, I think I'm understanding how you work, which is not what I'm used to. I'm used to people coming in and selling something. give them money and then they just do something. But you Jane are really listening for context for what's going on and what's really useful and how to get all the voices out. So again, it was a dialogue. was me being curious about what she said and summarizing and asking questions. And then she found herself able to ask open questions for me too. I might've talked too much, but was that helpful?

Tonnie: Yeah, it was very helpful. What triggers me is when you say, how to get all the voices out? I know you're also an open space facilitator. Did you use open space in that process or not?

Jane: Thank you for putting it that way. Cause it's kind of provocative to talk about using open space. My thoughts, here's where my thoughts go. Basically I am open space. Like what we're doing here, even right now in this conversation is open space. It's, you know, speaking from one's own heart and inviting back and forth and people responding as their energy calls for them to do. yeah, and but formal open space facilitation. Yes, I sometimes do that. Not very often, but it's fundamentally what's behind everything going on in the community. Like keeping track of what topic is whose topic. Like if someone invites, they're the one to lead, and others are there to be helpful in the conversation. So keeping focus among ourselves is we use all of what we've learned in open space for our own communication.

Tonnie: So you are open space, that's interesting. And you told me before a little bit about how you put it into practice in an experiment in Studio Tainan. Could you tell me something about that studio?

Studio Tainan, a permanent self-organizing Open Space

Jane: Studio Tainan is a name. So when something is different, we find it helpful to give it a name. It's not an organization. And it's not a legal entity of any kind. But it's a name. Because people are asking what's going on, what is this and they can feel a difference. And so we gave it a



name, which is Studio Tainan. Basically, what happens with the Studio Tainan is people feel it before they hear it or think it, they just notice that something different is going on. So Studio Tainan, we named that, I guess it was 2018. It's just a way to organize it was using open we were using basically open space technology guidelines law of two feet. Just the basic dynamics of how I mean the way I see it. These are the dynamics of how life flows anyway. I'm a biologist and I'm a seaweed biologist. So open space technology makes perfect sense to me in terms of just life and community and how living organs organisms gather how they form units, communities. So people were noticing that how a group of us communicated was interesting. And they asked us what's going on and we gave it the name Studio Tainan. And so, yeah, inside this group, it's self-organizing and there's really no inside and outside. It's simply called it a way, the Studio Tainan way. There is no line, there's no membership, there is no in and out. But if people want to do projects, need to like formally agree among ourselves. But then it becomes individuals who self-organize so that we can create more of the world we want to be in. That's how I would say it. I think I'm the only one in studio town who says it that way.

Tonnie: But how does that start when someone has an idea or a project? Well, we're talking to each other.

Jane: We check in quite frequently. were friends, this group, and we might just meet for coffee. We might meet to check in. We might meet for conversation cafe. There's a lot of practices that go on around here. But in the course of conversation, when someone has a really hot topic and they want to do something about it, other people tend to join in the conversation until that person figures out what they can do. And then they go and do it. And when they do that, there's this, there's this feeling in everyone who is part of the conversation. It feels like everyone had a success when we can help one person get clear enough to take the action they most want to take. It's really, it's a group success. It feels good. It's fun. It's like we all learn together and we all grow together.

Creating a space where everyone can feel successful

Tonnie: I take from your story is creating a level playing field is also about creating feelings that everyone has a success. It's not about only the people who started it, not about the facilitator or the client, but for everyone to feel we are successful. Am I correct?

Jane: Ooh, well, I like that. I haven't been using the words that you just use level playing field. So if we bring it back to level playing field, it's kind of log two feet. Anytime we're in an environment where it's okay for us to leave when we want to, it sort of creates a level playing field without any effort. It's a way to have effortless power to organize using guidelines and law. And of open space and becoming aware of things like butterflies and bumblebees and you know, that saying open space is an environment where anyone can take responsibility for their passion. That kind of orientation structure and process by its nature creates a level playing field. That's where I'd take that thought. What do you think?

Tonnie: I think it makes sense. Also about what you said, there has to be a desire. You really have to want something to happen about a hot topic and the others help what they take from your stories. They help by listening, maybe asking questions or responding to get more clear what the desire is. What they really want to happen? Yes. Does that make sense to you?



Jane: Yes. And then the other thing is, I don't know about everyone, but I think about myself, it's easy when I apply it to myself. When I'm when I've got this really hot topic, it's within myself, it's kind of hard to sort out the truth of it. And then my previous experiences similar. So in order to see the real possibility there, I totally love more voices in the conversation because I will be biased, but by necessity, I only see part of the situation.

The Five Lines of ICA and creating an environment where everyone wins

I'm gonna jump here because one of the big inspirations for everything we do around here is an organization that's been around since the 1950s in one form or another, and it's the Institute of Cultural Affairs, they call themselves ICA. They were established in inner city Chicago and now they're a nonprofit with groups all around the world. But they have these five lines that I really love and around us, we're aware of this. kind of hard to imagine, but the five lines, kind of orienting lines are this:

All is possible. All is good. The past is approved. The future is open. I am accepted.

So these five lines, when we can really kind of take them in, it shifts how we see. All is possible. Wait a second. How is that true? It raises curiosity and we tend to want to discover more when we hear that line. It's like, You mean I can't, I really need to, if I think that all is possible, that really stretches my imagination. And I think in a good way, all is good. It's like, Ooh, that's an interesting one. How can I, how can I make sense of that? The past is approved. It's like, wow, there's nothing I have to go back and fix. The future is open. wow. You know, I could do anything. I, I can, I can live into openness. That's a wider perspective. And then I am accepted. It's like, woo, how many places have I been in my life where that's just a given. Whoever comes, they're accepted. And I think, so ICA and open space technology, things like that, they establish a different, if I use your word playing field, I think of it in terms of environments, like a relational environment and orientation where if a group orients this way, we can get a whole lot done fun creatively simply fast. The playing field is a metaphor, of course.

Tonnie: I think that I am accepted resonates with me. We are accepted, but maybe that could be another podcast episode because I would like to hear more about that. I think it's very important when we invite people or listen to people to know that you accept yourself as you are, but also accept other people as they are. So thank you Jane for sharing your stories and your insights. Would you like to share something else as a check out?

Jane: Well, just I've enjoyed this conversation with you. As have I might join all the previous ones just it seems like we're touching into areas I don't normally have conversations about we just sort of do it. And it's good that it feels really good to just sit back and think of it in the terms that that you're asking that the terms of our conversation here. So thank you for that. surprised me or what I liked very much is that the feeling for everyone to be successful in whatever way or whatever that means. I think that's quite essential part of the level playing field. Often the playing field is not level. It's really very steep, someone at the top and the others at the bottom. know? I like your term.

I like your term. did play in the middle. did play as I usually call it like environment and context, but it really is a playing field. Studio Tainan, we call it a studio. It's a playing field. It's a place to create art. It's a studio is for artists or musicians, well, musicians or artists. The studio is usually



messy and there's a lot of resources. And if you're in the studio, you can use the resources, but you don't know how until you have a passion, until you have some reason to create. So yeah, the playing field, I love that. Yeah. What is it we can do together that we cannot do alone? And I love that it's very studio Tainan because it puts the attention on together. And also it provokes, think in me, it provokes creativity, creative thought. It's like, well, there's all kinds of things I can do with others that I cannot do myself. And in order for other people to want to do it together, we have to figure out how to do it so everyone wins. How do we do it? So it's easy for everyone, effortless power, collective enoughness. And I totally love these things.

Tonnie: So, and also to add for the good of the whole, because the first thing you said, what is it we can do together? We cannot do alone. The first thing that came up is, is, is making war. So, but that's not what we, what we intend, you know?

Jane: So, for the good of the whole, right? I'm happy this came up because this is the conversation I had right before we met, because the person I was helping, started playing a very small game. And I asked myself, why am I helping them? They just changed. They changed from good of the whole to something very conservative. And I said, well, I offered to facilitate, but remember that my values are helping you do things in such a way it's good for everybody. But now I see you pulling back to play small and it pisses me off. I didn't say that, but it did. Wait a second, what's happening? And I love that because I need, it's part of my skill base trying to feel these moments and shift them to possibility. So it was a great conversation, but it was challenging. Yeah.

Tonnie: But then again, the metaphor of the playing field comes up because when the boundaries are very strict and the playing field is very small, there's no space for collaboration. So you just have to say no. Or see how you can shift the boundaries. It's not everything goes when someone asks you to help. They have to, I think they have to respect your values the way you're working.

Helping to think new thoughts by asking questions

Jane: Yeah. Yeah. Then that's on me. That's my job to do. My priority is not money. My priority is space for myself. So I live my life so that I have maximum space to navigate anything. That's my most valuable thing is space. So no matter what comes, I usually have resources to connect in some way. that's right, because you said something about having to say no. I almost never have to say no. What I do is I ask questions that cause them to think. And then they go away. So I got rid of them, but in a good way. Because now they're thinking new thoughts. So and I'm going to tell you this is really satisfying and strange, which is I have a lot of conversations all the time. Most, a lot of people I just see maybe once we have a great conversation then they're gone. But I hear from people 10 years later, 20 years later, where they say, you know, that conversation we had, it changed everything. Or I really started thinking different. And I think wow! That's even better than a job, because it was joyful for me. It was who knows 10 minutes, an hour, who knows, no burden on me, but somehow a seed was planted. And they grew it themselves. That's, that's my idea of heaven. So, good talking again.

Tonnie: Yeah. I thank you for being you and for our conversation. So thank you, Jane, for sharing your stories and your insights. Would you like to share something as a check out? Well, just I've enjoyed this conversation with you as have I've enjoyed all the previous ones, it seems like we're touching into areas I don't normally have conversations about. We just sort of do it. And it's good



that it feels really good to just sit back and think of it in the terms that you're asking, the terms of our conversation here. So thank you for that. Thank you, Jane, for being here, for sharing your wisdom, and for helping to bring this podcast series to life.

Outro

Tonnie: Thank you for listening. A new episode will be posted every two weeks with new exciting stories on how to create a level playing field for collaboration. I hope you will be back. Together we can make a difference in the world.