

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Are you listening? with Ximena Vengoechea

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Hi WorkWell listeners. I am really excited to share that my book *Work Better Together* is officially out. Conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you inspired this book. It's all about how to create a more human-centered workplace and as we return to the office for many of us, this book can help you move forward into post-pandemic life with strategies and tools to strengthen your relationships and focus on your well-being. It's available now from your favorite book retailer.

Listening is something we all naturally do, but there is a difference in listening to hear what someone is saying and listening to really understand someone. Actively listening with empathy is critical to building authentic connections in our personal and professional lives. Fortunately, it's a skill we can all learn and practice on a daily basis.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being. I am here with Ximena Vengoechea. She is a user researcher, writer, and illustrator whose work on personal and professional development has been published in Ink, the Washington Post, Newsweek, Huffington Post, and more. She is also the author of the book *Listen Like You Mean It, Reclaiming the Lost Art of True Connection*.

Ximena, welcome to the show.

**Ximena Vengoechea (Ximena):** Thank you so much for having me.

**Jen:** Absolutely. So, tell us about you, tell us your story, tell us your journey, we want to get to know you.

**Ximena:** Sure, so my background is in user experience research, which is a little known role in the tech industry, but essentially my job is to understand users what they think, what their motivations are, what their needs are in order to help build better products. I had no idea this role existed when I was in school, I had never heard of it, didn't know what it entailed, but when I discovered it, it felt like it was a really good fit for some of my interests which are being really curious about other people stories and getting to know them and I loved having an excuse to do just that. In that role, one of the key skills that a user researcher has, particularly if you work on the qualitative side, which is my specialty, is listening. So, we are often having conversations with complete strangers, maybe 45 minutes, 60 minutes, often at

most and so you have to really learn how to quickly get into a conversation and understand the other person and what they are all about. A funny thing started happening to me while I was doing these sessions and really building these skill sets, which is that I realized how much of this core skill set of listening was actually helping me in my everyday world. Usually, you are doing these conversations in a lab setting. No white coats, but there is a lab with one way mirror that thing and the more I did, the more I realized I was using the skill outside of just that setting and felt like I was just connecting far more with other people and just seeing the bigger picture a little bit quicker and things like meetings and things like that. So, that really is part of what led me to writing my book, *Listen Like You Mean It*, which is all about listening and how we can leverage it to build better relationships.

**Jen:** This is a topic that just fascinates me because my husband tells me regularly that I listen to respond, I don't listen to understand. But I also feel like the connection between user experience and technology, like what is the impact that it's had on our ability to be good listeners?

**Ximena:** Sure. Technology is changing a lot all the time. I think when you think back to 10 years ago, not everyone had a mobile phone, a smartphone in their pockets, and now, I think we would have to look pretty hard at most of us to find someone who is not in that camp. I think that technology has in many ways made it more difficult to have those deep, meaningful conversations in part because it's a brilliant tool, but it can also come with all these other distractions, and so there is research that shows that even having a phone in your line of sight during a conversation, even if it's turned over, which I think many of us think as a sign of respect, I will turn my phone over, but it's still there, even just that reduces our capacity to empathize with the other person. So, that's a pretty big deal. It's disrupting an otherwise very human process. That being said, I am certainly not in the camp of technology is the cause of all of our problems, I think that in many cases, it has exacerbated really human issues which are we all have a really deep desire and need to be heard and in the process of wanting to be heard, we can actually talk over the other person or be stuck on our own internal monologue or be unaware of the cues because we are concentrating so hard on that, it's not necessarily deliberate. We think that technology has made that harder in some ways, but certainly isn't the cause of it.

**Jen:** So, what about like people is it true that like some people are just naturally good listeners or better listeners than others or is it innate or is it a skill that you can develop.

**Ximena:** I would say it's both. I think that we often think of people as being naturally good listeners or naturally poor listeners. There is maybe a subset of us who have already written off our ability to listen like, oh, that's just not something I am good at, I am not like so and so, that one colleague or that one friend who is an excellent listener. I think there likely is a core proclivity that some people have where they naturally are better listeners, but that doesn't mean it can't be learned. I think when you look at fields like user research or journalism and reporting or being a therapist, those are all careers that really rely on listening as part of the profession, and there are some very clear tactics and techniques that you can take up in your conversations and really begin to hone that. So, I think of listening as maybe some of us have a better starting point than others, but it's like a muscle that you have to learn how to use it effectively and strengthen it so that it doesn't atrophy.

**Jen:** So, let's talk about what some of those tactical strategies are. I know in your book you talk about a listening mindset, so can you explain what that is and then also talk to us about what some of those strategies are that we can develop our listening muscle and I will try them out on my husband, I promise.

**Ximena:** Yes, perfect. So, listening mindset, I think that when we are going into conversation, usually we are not really thinking about it very hard. We sort of just show up and listen to the degree that we are capable of in that moment without being particularly deliberate about it. What happens when you do that is that you do catch some of what's being said, maybe you catch the literal words that are being said, you are catching enough to nod and smile, to be polite, to not lose your job, you are not so far off the mark, it's a good starting point, but I think we often stop there and we miss the subtext, we miss what's not being said, we miss the hidden meaning that if we focus a little bit more, we could be in tune too, and we miss the emotional experience that the other person is having. So, when I say we need to cultivate and bring in a listening mindset, what I really mean is that we are being intentional as we enter conversation and specifically, we are bringing three qualities in which are humility, curiosity, and empathy and these are important because again, we are not always intentional about bringing those in and so with humility you are really coming in from the position of a student as opposed to an expert or a teacher, and this can be hard because we have these preconceived notions, assumptions, opinions, expertise, whatever it may be that we are often bringing into conversation and it can cloud what we are able to hear. So, we really want to keep an open mind and be ready to learn from the other person even if maybe we are a subject matter expert, let's say, we can still learn from the other person their relationship to that topic, why are they bringing up this topic, why are they bringing it to me, what does this tell me about them as a person?

The second piece is to bring in curiosity. So, once we have got that open playing field by bringing humility, then we can go deeper in conversation and I think that there is a little bit of a misconception, especially when we are meeting new people or building relationships, that the key to building those relationships is to appear interesting, to tell the great story at a cocktail party, to puff ourselves up a little bit in order to keep the other person interested and engaged. Actually, what the research shows is that it's less important to be interesting and more important to be interested in the other person. A great way to do that is by expressing curiosity. So, it's really about turning the focus on them and understanding who they are, what they are bringing to the table, and I think sometimes we get in our own way when we have a lot of knowledge on a given topic. We think okay, I know all of this already, but you can always ask well, what else can I learn here, like what else is happening here, and I think that can be particularly useful when, for example, it's a topic that you are not drawn to. We all have these. It could be sports for one person, it could be finance for another person, there is always that topic that you just automatically your brain kind of clicks off a little bit, especially in those cases if you can find the edges of there is something interesting there, particularly if you relate it to the person. So, maybe you don't like sports, but the person who you are talking to, why are they so passionate about sports, is this tied to their childhood, is this tied to their culture, like what can you learn about the person through that topic is a great way to continue to stay curious even when it's maybe not a topic that you would ever choose for yourself to be talking about.

And then the third element is really empathy. So, we are going deeper and deeper, we are starting open, we are getting a little bit about the person, and then we want to get to this place of empathy where we can really understand someone's emotional experience and relate to it in some way. Empathy doesn't mean that I have to have experienced the same thing, so it doesn't mean that if someone is sharing a personal story about, let's say a divorce or a toxic workplace relationship and I haven't experienced that that I can't empathize with them, it's really about removing the scaffolding of the specific situation and finding the emotion underlying it. So, is there grief? Well, I know what grief feels

like. Is their shock? I know what that feels like. Is there betrayal? So it's really tuning into those underlying emotions and connecting at that level.

**Jen:** As I am listening to you, I am reflecting on is there a difference in the world that we have been living in, where we have been a lot less in person. Are there differences, are there nuances, what does this look like or feel like when you are in person versus on a phone versus on video with somebody.

**Ximena:** Yeah, absolutely. There are some differences. I think in terms of that listening mindset, you still want to bring those in no matter what channel you are speaking to someone on. The difference, I think is in what other cues you can get about the other person. So, for example, if I am face-to-face, I have much more context in terms of body language, nonverbals. One of my favorite body language tidbits is where are the person's feet pointing. Are they pointing toward the door? Even if their shoulders or torso is toward me, that can be an indication that they want to exit the conversation, even if they are not saying anything.

**Jen:** I am going to start looking at people's feet now.

**Ximena:** Yes, feet are some of the most honest parts of the body. We get so much when we are in person and as you move to video, usually what happens is you get shoulders up, maybe you get a little bit of hand talkers who are bringing their hands above the camera, but you do lose a lot. However, you still have things like voice and tone, what is the pitch, what is the pacing, and specifically, you really want to listen for when is there a change? So, if someone is usually a deliberate talker, and then suddenly kind of speeds up and starts talking really quickly, that's a sign that something has shifted or the reverse maybe true. So, you still have those cues, and even if you remove the video aspect and are just on the phone, I think we can all relate to the feeling of hearing someone smile through the phone. So, there is plenty that you can still pick up on, it just is a matter of you are stripping things away, obviously the less visual information you have and so I think what that means in terms of listening in this environment in particular is being really strategic about when you need what kind of information. So, maybe there are situations, there are topics, there are certain kinds of discussions where you really want all of those cues in order to inform your understanding and maybe there are others where it's not necessary and in fact may be it's helpful to have fewer cues. So, for example, being on the phone, taking a walking meeting, that can be really, really helpful, particularly for difficult conversations where maybe it feels adversarial to stare someone down through your webcam. Maybe it's really helpful to just remove that element and allow each party to walk freely in their own neighborhood at their own leisure and generate an open conversation in that way because we know that changing environments, adding movement, all of those things help us to have more open conversations. So, I think when we are thinking about listening across these different remote or in-person or hybrid environments, one of the best things we can do is rather than think about what we lose, think about what do I really need from this conversation and then pick the channel that will help you gain the most information.

**Jen:** Got it, that's super helpful. So, one of the other things that you talk about is the importance of questions and this is something that I am really passionate about and I think is so key, especially in the current environment moving past the typical how are you or how is it going or how was your weekend? I feel like in the business world in particular, we tend to just say, great, fine, all good, and move on to the business at hand, but really, how do we develop this skill or think about asking people more meaningful questions? One I like to use is how are you sleeping because it's just not a typical question that people get asked, so they stop in their tracks and they are like why is she wondering how I am sleeping? And

then and then it creates a more meaningful dialogue. So, can you talk to me about how we can ask better questions or questions that kind of lead to a deeper conversation or a deeper connection with others.

**Ximena:** Yes, asking the right questions can radically change the nature of our conversations and I love the question that you mentioned because it is surprising and so somewhat disarming, but it also gives you a lot of information because we know how essential sleep is to someone's overall well-being. So, it is a really effective way of getting at that bigger question that I think many of us think we are asking sometimes when we ask how are you, but we sort of miss. So, I love taking a sort of fresh approach, that's great.

I think another thing that you can do is be cognizant of how you are starting your questions. So, there are certain kinds of questions that we are not doing it on purpose, but we may be inadvertently leading someone toward a particular answer. We may be biasing in them in some way. So, if I ask someone, for example, hey are you nervous about tomorrow's presentation, even if I don't mean it, I have inadvertently baked in the seed of an idea that perhaps there is a reason that you should be nervous about tomorrow's presentation. A better way to ask that question might be just to say, hey, how do you feel about tomorrow's presentation. That allows the other person to say I am really nervous about it or I feel great about it like I am so pumped, that's very different because we are opening it up as opposed to my starting from a place of I am going to put the idea of nervousness on the map from the get go. So, thinking about how you are starting your questions, avoiding questions that start with are, do or is, those tend to be more closed ended, they can be answered often in a yes or no response or other single word answer and really gravitating more toward how and what questions. "Why" can be effective for opening up a conversation, however, it can sound a little bit intense to our ears, it can sound like an interrogation. Why do you feel that way? Oh sorry, I didn't know I wasn't supposed to feel that way. So why I would say should be used sparingly. The other thing that you could do is to ask small follow ups, these are gentle nudges. So, you are opening the conversation first with your how and what questions, and then you are taking it a little bit deeper with these small nudges that sound like I will say more about that, tell me more, what else or one that I really like is to say because and give the other person a pause. So, someone says although I think it's going to be impossible to do XYZ, so I am not even going to try for this project, then I might just say and you feel that way because or that's because and wait and then I might hear well because we don't have the resources for it or because this person hasn't prioritized XYZ. So, you are just giving them a little more space to continue the conversation.

**Jen:** I really like that a lot. What about those people that are known to be good listeners and they are the person that everybody in their life, whether it be family, friends, colleagues, they come to that person when they have a problem and want to talk about it because that person is in their mind a good listener. But being that person can be pretty emotionally draining, and so as someone who is a good listener or someone that people come to a lot, how do you listen, but not necessarily I guess take on other people's problems.

**Ximena:** Absolutely. This is a great question and I think as with any skill, it's sort of a blessing and a curse. So, you have to really learn how to manage it so that it works for you, not just for those in your life. I think a big part of it is knowing your limits and setting boundaries that really honor those limits. So that might mean thinking about well, how many of these sorts of deep one-on-one conversations can I have a day. For some people, that's going to be four, for some people that's going to be one, but

whatever that number is, which you may have to discover through a little bit of trial and error, and maybe pushing yourself too far and then reeling it back in, it's really about finding that magic number and trying to stick to it. So, trying to design your day in a way that honors that boundary, that limit. I think also baking in breaks in between conversations is helpful. I know that there are many people who feel that they are a victim of their own calendar, at the mercy of their own calendar and you just have back to back and I get it, I have managed teams before and it's tough. But if you can bake in a few minutes break in-between these sessions, that's going to go a long way to not overdoing it, and not succumbing to what I call listeners' drain where you just are exhausted by creating space for other people for so much of your day. That break can be 30 minutes, it can also be 90 seconds if that's all you have got, that's okay. Even a micro meditation of just closing your eyes, breathing in, breathing out, coming back to present, releasing what you just heard in the previous conversation, so mantras can be really helpful, so saying something like this isn't mine to keep, this doesn't belong to me, and letting it go so that you don't carry that emotional burden into your next conversation can be very useful.

**Jen:** Let's talk about the workplace a little, I mean I guess maybe more generally. When you are trying to have a difficult conversation with somebody and maybe I am thinking work setting. So, if you have a teammate that's struggling with their work or you need to have a difficult conversation with somebody, what advice do you have for handling those kinds of conversations? Is there something different that we should be thinking about, is there a certain way to approach those conversations? I think you have already given a whole bunch of tips like don't do it on a day when you are back-to-back with all kinds of other conversations. But are there things that we should be thinking about when we are going into a difficult conversation at work, but really at any point in our life.

**Ximena:** I think something underrated that you can do is to think about the environment in which you are going to have this conversation. So, this may sound obvious, but I think we don't always think about these things. Maybe if I am having a really personal conversation with someone, if I am not sure what their response is going to be, maybe I should think about what environment is going to feel safe, especially if I am asking someone to be vulnerable or if I am going to be vulnerable. So, does it make sense to have a performance review conversation in a busy cafeteria style environment. I understand sometimes those are the only "rooms available," but does that really make sense, is that really going to help you or is it going to hurt you? You want the setting to be almost, you can think of it as a tool in service of getting through this difficult conversation. So, for some people, having a crowded environment can help, for other people it really does need to be more private and quieter. There is a delicate balance of going too quiet where it feels a little bit stressful to even break the silence, but I think just giving a little bit of attention to the environment is one thing.

The other thing I would say is just coming into it and being really explicit about this with the intention of understanding rather than convincing or debating or winning someone over. Often at the root of some of these difficult conversations is that we have a very strong belief that we are bringing in or an emotional attachment on some level to what's being said whether we are the speaker or the listener receiving that message. So, I think it can be helpful to just say up front what is your intention. So, if it's a performance review conversation, saying we are going to talk about how you are performing and acknowledging [that] sometimes these conversations feel a little bit awkward. I totally get that or even sharing I have struggled with these conversations in the past, whatever you can do to set the intention that you are on the same team, even though this is a difficult topic and that you are human too, especially if you are in a position of power can really help neutralize things.

Then the last thing I will say is if as you are going through this conversation because it is wonderful to start things off on the right foot and really have that intention, but things can go awry in conversation, we are humans. So if, as you are going through this conversation, you realize that you or the other person is emotionally activated in some way, then it's absolutely okay to hit pause, and I think we often don't give ourselves permission to do that. But if you are sensing for example in your body, you know what my throat is starting to tighten up a little bit, my heart is beating really quickly right now, my chest is tight. If you are tuning into those cues or if you are noticing that the other person is, for example, no longer making eye contact, they are shrinking in their seat where before they weren't, like something is happening and you can feel the energy shifting in the room, it's absolutely okay to hit pause and take a break and you can say this conversation is really important to me. I am noticing I am having a strong reaction to what's being said, would it be okay if we took a five-minute breather. Most people are going to be very amenable to that and you don't have to necessarily even share why, maybe you have that trust in place where you can say, I am feeling like super emotionally activated, maybe that's not there. Even just saying, hey is it alright if we take a quick bio break. Again, most people are not going to police that, and they are going to say alright, maybe not the best timing, but sure, and that gives everybody just a few minutes or maybe you need longer that's okay too, but it gives everyone a moment to just take a beat, breathe, notice what's happening, and notice when emotions are being activated and return to center and continue the conversation.

**Jen:** I love that, and I would think that chances are if you are feeling emotionally activated and it's a difficult conversation, perhaps maybe other people or other person might be grateful for the little break as well to regroup themselves. So let's switch gears a little bit from the workplace to parents and parenting. Are there any tips for helping your kids become more empathetic listeners or better listeners?

**Ximena:** I think that one of the best things that you can do is to model the behavior, that tends to work better and is more effective than simply telling your child what to do, I think we probably all and any parent has an example of that failed miserably when I just gave them the straight advice. But I think modeling the behavior is crucial, particularly think about doing that in your relationship with your child and that can be really useful, especially when kids maybe don't have the vocabulary to really articulate what they are feeling or thinking. You as the adult, you do have that vocabulary. So, you can bring that listening mindset in that we talked about earlier and then add a step where you are not just understanding your child but you are also reflecting back what you are hearing, which can be very validating. So, you can see and observe and have that conversation and say well it sounds like you are really upset about the rain because it has thrown off your play date and that's really disappointing to you or whatever it may be. I think that can be hugely helpful to feel heard in that way as a child and also to have that vocabulary because sometimes they feel upset, but they don't know why they feel upset and that's a great and simple way of beginning to model that behavior in that relationship.

**Jen:** My last and final question for you. This has given me a ton to think about. I probably would be a better listener if it wasn't all rolling around in my brain right now. So, when you think about your book and the purpose for writing the book, what is the most important takeaway that you want people to remember after reading it or there are kind of few Nuggets if there is not one single one.

**Ximena:** I think the biggest thing that I would say is to understand that listening is as much about you as it is the other person, and that it's important to have self-awareness around your listening and what you

are bringing into conversation. I think we often think of listening as something we do for someone else, and we are just there to receive it. But so much of how effective we are as listeners has to do with am I cranky that day, did I get enough sleep, am I feeling emotionally exhausted because I have been receiving a lot of heavy news today, am I distracted by my phone, all of those things, do I tend to hear things from the perspective of a problem solver like I am always ready to give advice even if that's not what's needed. If we can bring awareness to those things, it is going to make us much, much more effective listeners and so that would be my message. It's absolutely doable to improve your listening skills and it really has to start with understanding yourself and what you are bringing into conversation.

**Jen:** I feel like I have a lot of work to do now that we have had this discussion. So, that's a good thing. I am looking forward to improving my listening skills. Well, thank you Ximena for this conversation, for all of the rich guidance and wisdom that you have given to me and to all of our listeners, I have really enjoyed talking with you today.

**Ximena:** Thank you so much, I appreciate it.

**Jen:** I am so grateful Ximena could be with us today to talk about her story and the important skill of listening. Thank you to our producers Rivet360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word to hear more. If you like the show, don't forget to subscribe, so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher or on Twitter @JenFish23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback. Of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.