

Intro ([00:01](#)):

Welcome to the Workplace Forward Podcast with your host Executive Coach, Tegan Trovato, Founder and CEO of Bright Arrow Coaching. Are you a perpetually busy, always overstretched leader or executive, who feels there's never time to keep up with leadership trends in an always changing landscape, much less self-care? Workplace Forward will help you overcome both challenges and gain peace of mind through Tegan's conversations with executives, experts, authors and innovators about their leadership journeys. You'll get quick hits of two things you need the most, essential insights to help navigate the future workplace and best practices on the more human side of leadership so you're empowered to take care of yourself while leading others. Enjoy some well deserved time for yourself to learn and recharge. Let's get started with today's guest. Tegan, take it away.

Tegan Trovato ([00:56](#)):

Gina Fong is a consumer anthropologist, insights coach and keynote speaker at Fong Insight. She coaches organizations around the world to understand the insight into their customers, to build cherished brands.

Tegan Trovato ([01:09](#)):

She also teaches at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and transforms the classroom into a curiosity gymnasium to inspire her students to think with their head, heart and gut.

Tegan Trovato ([01:21](#)):

I personally had the pleasure of knowing Gina for several years and I have to say she is truly one of the most passionate people I have ever met when it comes to her life's work. You will surely see what I mean as we talk today. Gina, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Gina Fong ([01:37](#)):

Hi Tegan. Thank you for having me today.

Tegan Trovato ([01:39](#)):

Listen, we have to start with the basics. It is not intuitive what a consumer anthropologist does or who they are. So start us with that. What is a consumer anthropologist anyway?

Gina Fong ([01:53](#)):

Well, Tegan, you're in really good company because I think most of my family is still unsure of what I do even after 21 years of doing this, but essentially, a consumer anthropologist is somebody that goes into people's homes to understand how they're using products and brands to help companies make them better.

Gina Fong ([02:15](#)):

So really, I sit in this world of market research, but qualitative market research and some related areas that I work in our design thinking and user experience research. So really this discipline is about understanding what makes consumers tick to design products or make products better for them.

Tegan Trovato ([02:35](#)):

Got it. So if you're being hired by an organization so they can better understand their customers, how do you as an anthropologist go about those discoveries? What does it look like to do your work?

Gina Fong ([02:47](#)):

Yeah. Well, before COVID it required a lot of travel, so you have to go where the consumer is. So it's much like you go where the people are in their natural habitat and that's where that anthropology part of it all comes in. You aren't in a facility, let's say, and pulling consumers into your world, you are going to them.

Gina Fong ([03:09](#)):

So essentially what I used to do before COVID was fly around the world and go into people's homes to watch them use products. So let's say if I was working with a food company and we had to understand how to make dinner better for these consumers, I would be in someone's home during dinner time watching them make dinner.

Tegan Trovato ([03:28](#)):

Fascinating.

Gina Fong ([03:28](#)):

So over the years I've watched people do a lot of different things, wash floors, dye their hair, go shopping and grocery stores. You name it, I probably have watched it.

Tegan Trovato ([03:39](#)):

Fascinating. I can't even imagine some of the things you've learned and observed over the years.

Gina Fong ([03:46](#)):

It is interesting, and I'm always surprised, but delighted at how quickly people open up to you. I think when they understand that you're trying to make their lives better, then it really changes the way they can share their experiences with you.

Tegan Trovato ([04:03](#)):

So if you're in home, for example, if you're with the customers and your job is to gain insights and gather data, what's the role of insight versus data in your work?

Gina Fong ([04:17](#)):

Oh, it's such a good question because it is something that I still feel like in the market research industry we get confused with. So when I think of data versus insight, I think of data as the what and insight as the why.

Gina Fong ([04:32](#)):

So data would be, we know that 70% of people, for example, and I'm totally making this up, drink at least two brands of craft beer when they're at a party, but that tells you what. The insight is, why do they do that? What's the motivation behind that behavior? And so I'm responsible for that second part, the why, the motivation.

Tegan Trovato ([04:57](#)):

Why is that important for organizations?

Gina Fong ([05:00](#)):

Well, it's important because once you understand the motivation into your consumer or anyone really, you have the power to predict them. And when you have the power to predict somebody, you can also anticipate what they need. And so think about a brand that does a really great job of giving you what you need before you even know you need it.

Gina Fong ([05:20](#)):

It's because they understand your motivations and that prediction becomes so important because it's how a brand stays a couple steps ahead of its consumer, a couple steps ahead of its competitors, because it's always innovating or correcting something so that you're surprised and delighted as a consumer. And when you're surprised and delighted as a consumer, you continue to buy that brand.

Tegan Trovato ([05:42](#)):

Okay. This is getting me really nerdy. Now I want to know if your job is to figure out insight, how do you discover it? Since everyone listening is our leaders and we all need to know what makes our consumers, our buyers, our employees, as some of our stakeholders tick. How do you discover that insight into people?

Gina Fong ([06:06](#)):

Yeah, yeah. So a couple things. One, the first thing you have to do is remember that you have to meet your consumers where they're at. So for example, this is why I go into people's homes. We don't bring them into a facility and tell them, "Oh, tell us what you think."

Gina Fong ([06:21](#)):

We go to them in their natural habitat so we understand their world. So in that same vein with leadership, I would say you'd want to go to where your people are to understand them in that way in their own natural habitat. The second thing in terms of insight though is what I call your insight muscle.

Gina Fong ([06:39](#)):

So this is a framework that I develop for my students at the university, and I call it an insight muscle because I believe that we all have this muscle just like any muscle, but it is a muscle that can be a little bit more developed in others, but if we all work at it, strengthen it, we can get better at insight.

Gina Fong ([07:01](#)):

So when I talk about the insight muscle, there are six parts to it, and I teach my students how to get really strong in each of these areas, and I can take you through each of these areas and how to relate to my work and probably leadership.

Tegan Trovato ([07:16](#)):

Perfect.

Gina Fong ([07:17](#)):

But the six areas, just as an overview, our curiosity, introspection, empathy, observing, listening and inquiring. And so I take the first three, curiosity, introspection and empathy.

Gina Fong ([07:34](#)):

And I say, that's the mindset that you have to have when you're trying to understand somebody at a deep level. And then there's the skillset, the observing, the listening, the inquiring. These are the skills that I use as a consumer anthropologist every day.

Gina Fong ([07:49](#)):

But as a consumer anthropologist, I'm using these skills at a really heightened level because when I'm in a home with somebody watching them do something, I have sometimes only two hours to figure this out. So it is like these skills are really amped up so that you can understand really at a deep level, but also quickly.

Tegan Trovato ([08:15](#)):

Right. That makes sense. Tell us a little more about each one of these, if you will.

Gina Fong ([08:20](#)):

Yes. Yes, I'd love to because each one to me builds on and is related to all the other elements. There's not necessarily a sequential order, but I do like to explain them in this order because curiosity I think is the most important thing that we can have as business leaders and just generally in the workplace.

Gina Fong ([08:42](#)):

I'm continually surprised how many times we forget that curiosity is so important in any work that we do. As children, we're naturally curious, and as we get older, we lose some of that curiosity because we learn protocols, procedures, manners.

Tegan Trovato ([09:04](#)):

Frameworks.

Gina Fong ([09:06](#)):

Frameworks. Exactly, exactly. And so when I'm at the business school with my students, I have to remind them to tap into that curiosity. And the way I define curiosity is wonder without judgment. Can you sit in a place of neutrality?

Gina Fong ([09:23](#)):

And the way I coach my students to get to that place of neutrality is can you ask a question about a topic that you have no interest in? But when you use that question to reframe that topic, it's something that you really want to dive into.

Tegan Trovato ([09:41](#)):

Powerful.

Gina Fong ([09:42](#)):

Yeah.

Tegan Trovato ([09:44](#)):

I can just immediately see how game changing it would be if leaders could operate with this definition of curiosity, with operating without judgment and from a place of neutrality.

Tegan Trovato ([09:58](#)):

Because often as leaders, we come into anything into everything completely not neutral because we have an agenda and an objective, but that's where most leaders fail to coach their own people because they are coming in with an expectation or an answer they want the person to have already. So I'm fascinated by this piece and I'm so curious how introspection coordinates with curiosity.

Gina Fong ([10:26](#)):

Yeah. So the first thing is to make sure that you do come from this place of curiosity, this place from neutrality, wonder without judgment. Because to me, what curiosity is, it is the key in the ignition that turns the engine on. It's so important to be curious.

Gina Fong ([10:43](#)):

Like you say, with leadership and leaders, that if you come in with an agenda, it is so hard to discover something if you aren't open to it in the first place. So curiosity gets you back to that really neutral place.

Gina Fong ([10:57](#)):

And why I think it's important in the work that I do as a consumer anthropologist is because if I come into someone's home to interview them about a product or a service, but I already have a hypothesis, I am going to look for what I want to see. I am going to hear what I want to hear. And that is really not coming from a place of discovery then.

Tegan Trovato ([11:19](#)):

That's right. We'll find what we're looking for in that case rather than finding what else could be.

Gina Fong ([11:25](#)):

Absolutely. Absolutely. But you mentioned introspection. And my students are always pretty shocked when they come to class and they say, "Wait, we're going to learn introspection?" And they think it's going to be a lot of this dear diary stuff. And to a degree, introspection could be like that, although I show some different ways you can do it in the classroom.

Gina Fong ([11:45](#)):

But I think introspection is really important because I say to my students that you are about to embark on a journey to find insight into your own consumers, and in order to find insight into others, you have to be able to find it for yourself. Otherwise, it is like picking up a tennis racket for the first time, but then you're going to go teach someone else to play tennis.

Tegan Trovato ([12:06](#)):

Oh, well said.

Gina Fong ([12:09](#)):

So super hard. So what I do in terms of the introspection realm is I really coach my students to figure out what are their motivations, what makes them tick. So every quarter they work on a client project with me, and they have to go out and do their own ethnographies and figure out what these consumers want.

Gina Fong ([12:28](#)):

And before they even do that, I have them do an essay on their own relationship to a category. So for example, this last quarter, my students worked with a coffee client. And so they had to introspect about how they feel about coffee, how do they drink it, what does it mean to them?

Gina Fong ([12:46](#)):

Because what it does is it gets them practiced in a way that when they talk to their own coffee consumers, they understand how to ask the right questions and how to listen for the answers.

Tegan Trovato ([12:59](#)):

Well, and what came up for me as you described that is just to have some foundation for how the consumer may be connected to it, because they've already gained insight into their own connection to it. So it's coming in with a foundation versus coming in totally cold for the research.

Gina Fong ([13:18](#)):

Absolutely. And when you're interviewing someone else, especially in a topic as basic as coffee, for example, you don't think of it as this really deep topic that you can talk to someone about for two or three hours. It's important to be able to do it for yourself so you understand your own biases where the discovery is for you.

Gina Fong ([13:38](#)):

Because let's say you ask a consumer a question and they get stuck, if you've gone through this introspection process for yourself, you know how to get them out of that jam. You can pivot them and coach them through it.

Gina Fong ([13:50](#)):

Because ultimately when you're interviewing someone else, and I say this for any kind of interview, not even consumer interviews, you're ultimately coaching someone else to introspection. And so to coach someone to introspection, you've got to be able to know how to do it for yourself.

Tegan Trovato ([14:04](#)):

What a powerful pair. So you talked about, of the six pieces that comprise the insight muscle, curiosity and introspection comprise the mindset. So curiosity is wonder without judgment, introspection is really looking at ourselves first and how we might relate to a product or category before we then help others introspect.

Gina Fong ([14:25](#)):

Absolutely.

Tegan Trovato ([14:25](#)):

And by the way, I could talk about coffee for an hour for sure. Love some coffee. Tell us about empathy.

Gina Fong ([14:32](#)):

Yeah. I'd love to tell you about empathy. Empathy is now to me becoming this buzzword in any industry. And it's really funny because it's been around for a long time. And to me-

Tegan Trovato ([14:44](#)):

We did not invent empathy recently, you were right about that, but it is hot in the leadership space for sure.

Gina Fong ([14:51](#)):

Absolutely, absolutely. And empathy has been a foundation of anthropological work because when you think about anthropology, you're going in and studying other people, other cultures.

Gina Fong ([15:03](#)):

And so you have to come in with that curiosity, with that introspection, but also with this idea that you are going to try to relate to that other person. And that's what we're doing in the business world too. We're trying to relate to our consumers so that we can make a product or experience better.

Gina Fong ([15:21](#)):

So when I think about empathy, it is tricky because most times people will do one of two things or maybe both. They will confuse sympathy with empathy and or they will think that empathy also requires you to agree with someone else. So I'd like to unpack both of those if we can.

Tegan Trovato ([15:46](#)):

Yes, please.

Gina Fong ([15:47](#)):

So to me, the difference between sympathy and empathy is that sympathy kind of keeps you still at arm's length, that you can look at someone and say, "Wow, oh, that's bad." "Oh, I'm so sorry." But empathy is really putting yourself in someone else's shoes and being able to truly relate.

Gina Fong ([16:06](#)):

Now, in a lot of cases, that doesn't mean that you have to go exactly through what that other person went through. What I coach my students to do is to try to find an experience that's really similar.

Gina Fong ([16:20](#)):

So for example, I say you might go to a grocery store one day, you're not a parent, but you see a parent in the grocery store and they've got their toddler with them and the toddler is on the floor screaming and throwing a temper tantrum.

Gina Fong ([16:35](#)):

And you can't relate directly to this parent because you're not a parent, but you can say to yourself, I know exactly what it's like to be embarrassed by someone else and not have any control over that situation in public. And so you can access that shared experience, even if it's not the same thing. You can go from sympathy to empathy.

Tegan Trovato ([16:58](#)):

That is a great example. I know we are talking insight muscle comprised of all of these things, but you just made me feel like empathy is its own little muscle. Because I think as I hear you sort of articulate the example you gave of being able to relate to someone whose life is so different from yours, I know that that takes practice.

Gina Fong ([17:23](#)):

It takes a tremendous amount of practice. And I remind my students every day, just because you take a class or you feel like you've gotten to a point where you've experienced empathy, it does not mean that you've arrived.

Gina Fong ([17:35](#)):

It is not like riding a bike. You have to practice it every day. And as an instructor, I have to practice it every day.

Gina Fong ([17:43](#)):

I don't think there's any master of empathy simply because every day will bring a new situation, a new person, you will be in a different mood and it will stretch you in ways that you may have not encountered the day before. So to me, empathy can be its own mini muscle because it can atrophy if you don't keep it in good-

Tegan Trovato ([18:06](#)):

Oh, sure. Yeah, I could imagine that.

Gina Fong ([18:10](#)):

But the second thing I wanted to talk about with empathy, if I can for a moment, is this idea that sometimes people don't think they can be empathetic because they don't agree with the other person.

Gina Fong ([18:23](#)):

And so the way that I coach my students through this is I say empathy is understanding without an opinion, you do not have to agree with anyone, you just have to understand them.

Tegan Trovato ([18:36](#)):

That is so, could you say it again for the people in the back? I'm not even kidding. We are living in a time where we need more of that. So please say it one more time. Empathy is?

Gina Fong ([18:47](#)):

Understanding without an opinion.

Tegan Trovato ([18:49](#)):



Okay. How do you see that show up for corporate anthropologists or consumer anthropologists most often?

Gina Fong ([18:58](#)):

For me, it is working in categories that aren't my favorite categories. I know that you could talk about coffee all day, believe it or not, I don't drink coffee. It is not a category I participated for-

Tegan Trovato ([19:13](#)):

How have we been colleagues for this long, I didn't know this about you. But it is, I see what you're saying though, to find relatability. Again, this is the comparison of the woman with the child melting down when you have no child, right? Being able to talk to coffee drinkers, then you don't drink coffee.

Gina Fong ([19:28](#)):

Right. If I don't come in to that household with a curiosity, introspection, empathy, then I'm not going to be able to have a really rich discussion with this person for two hours about coffee.

Gina Fong ([19:42](#)):

So in my case, what I am doing is finding another category or topic that I feel is passionately about as that person might feel about coffee so that I can relate to them, but it doesn't mean that I have to agree with them about coffee.

Gina Fong ([19:56](#)):

Doesn't mean that I have to want to drink coffee. But what empathy means is that I can understand where they're coming from. Hard stop.

Tegan Trovato ([20:04](#)):

Okay. What comes up for me, which I just want to point out for listeners, is I don't know if everyone else is doing what I am, but I'm immediately like, okay, this is a great way to operate about politics in the current climate we're in.

Tegan Trovato ([20:17](#)):

And so we can actually find empathy for each other by being able to relate to how passionate we are about our own political standing and recognize the other person is probably equally passionate about theirs. And our shared experience is the passion.

Gina Fong ([20:34](#)):

Exactly. And if you come in with curiosity, you can stay in a place that's more neutral so you can hear what they're saying. And Tegan, I'll share a little story with you. On Thanksgiving Day, I received a LinkedIn message from a former student and he wrote to me and said, this phrase that you taught us in class basically saved dinner, maybe the entire Thanksgiving holiday for my family because it had to do with some political differences.

Gina Fong ([21:06](#)):

And the phrase that I share with my students in class is that it is a little bit like when you are kind of slouching and you feel like you've got some bad posture, and then you see someone next to you and

they're standing up really straight and tall and you're like, "Oh, I should really improve my posture." So you sit up a little straighter.

Gina Fong ([21:23](#)):

This is the equivalent of what I do when I feel some judgment coming on. This is my equivalent of sitting up a little straighter and getting my posture back in alignment. And that is I lean in and say, "Fascinating. Tell me more." And that phrase just helps me readjust my point of view, the way I'm coming into it.

Gina Fong ([21:45](#)):

And I was really delighted when the student wrote to me because it sounds like he was probably with a family member of her Thanksgiving dinner, a different political opinion was shared. And instead of coming at this person, he leaned in and said, "Fascinating. Tell me more." And just imagine if you're on the other side of the table, when someone says that to you, you were way more willing to share as well.

Tegan Trovato ([22:10](#)):

It's completely disarming. That's immediately what I thought is how disarming is that question. Love that. Okay. I too will report back because I'm going to try that one on real soon, I'm sure. So thank you for that.

Gina Fong ([22:24](#)):

Can't wait to hear how it goes.

Tegan Trovato ([22:26](#)):

Awesome. Okay. Anything else on empathy before we move on to observing and get into the skillset sub-components?

Gina Fong ([22:34](#)):

No, I think we've covered what we've needed to. Curiosity, introspection, empathy. Yes.

Tegan Trovato ([22:38](#)):

Okay, great. Tell us about observing.

Gina Fong ([22:42](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So observing is one of those skills that I think is the superpower of introverts. Most introverts pause before jumping in. They kind of take a look around to see what's happening. So if you're an introvert, this is probably one of your superpowers.

Gina Fong ([23:02](#)):

So pay special attention to this one because what I teach my students in the classroom is that people can say whatever they want, but their behavior will always reveal their true motivations. So it is that difference between body language and verbal language. Which would you believe?

Gina Fong ([23:20](#)):

If someone says they're going to show up on time, but then they show up 15 minutes late, which do you believe? And so when I'm in a consumer's home, there's always that concern for my clients that, well, they might be doing things a little differently because you're watching them or they might be saying something to you because they know they're being watched.

Gina Fong ([23:45](#)):

But when you are trained to understand and look at real details of fine behavior, you can see the nuances of what people are really doing versus what they're saying.

Tegan Trovato ([24:00](#)):

How can you apply that to the leadership space for us?

Gina Fong ([24:04](#)):

So I think in the business world, we say a lot of things that we may not always mean or may not be always wholehearted. So what I recommend doing is really watching people's body language. It's a little different when I'm in someone's home because I can really see them go through an activity like wash their floor or cook dinner.

Gina Fong ([24:26](#)):

When you're in a workplace, it's not like you've got this activity to watch, but I think you should pay really close attention to someone's energy and how they move and how they respond to you. That observation of body language will always reveal something deeper than what someone is actually saying.

Tegan Trovato ([24:44](#)):

Okay. What also comes up for me there is our leaders are often leading change or change management. And what we'll sometimes see in the corporate space is employees or other leaders saying, "Yes, we're bought in. Yes, we will go and do the thing."

Tegan Trovato ([25:00](#)):

But then the lip service may be there and the updates may even sound like they're in line, but the performance numbers don't show alignment. Is that a fair way to apply observing?

Gina Fong ([25:11](#)):

It is. It is. And related to that, I would say too, that when you've got some sort of business goal in hand that you want to make sure that you're achieving, what are the behaviors that you want your team to be doing to reach that goal? Because it's one thing to say, this is what I want you to hit as a-

Tegan Trovato ([25:30](#)):

To achieve.

Gina Fong ([25:31](#)):

But it's another thing then to say, well, here is the way we're going to get there. So I think that observation that the behaviors of how they're going to get there are also important as well.

Tegan Trovato ([25:41](#)):

And so often overlooked, might I say. So thank you for that punctuation. Okay. Anything else on observing?

Gina Fong ([25:50](#)):

Nope. I think that's probably a good nugget on observing.

Tegan Trovato ([25:53](#)):

Yeah, it was. I loved it. And then listening.

Gina Fong ([25:59](#)):

Right. So this one is the big one. We talk about active listening all the time, but I like to take it up a notch and say aggressive listening. Because boy, there is just no way to replace active or aggressive listening. I think that the greatest gift you could give somebody ever really is to listen.

Gina Fong ([26:22](#)):

I mean, how many times have we felt seen and understood just because someone listened. And I find in my work, I go into people's homes, I watch them do certain things, I ask them questions, and they're always so shocked when they say, "But you were actually listening to me." And I say, "Well, that's my job."

Gina Fong ([26:45](#)):

And I think what that does though is it encourages people to really share their authentic selves because I come in with the level of curiosity and empathy where they understand I'm a clean slate. They know that I don't work for the company directly, that I am this neutral person.

Gina Fong ([27:05](#)):

Sort of this middle person, if you will, that is bridging the gap between the brand and the consumer. In a lot of ways, I consider myself a consumer advocate, that I am going to take what the consumer was saying and represent that as authentically as I can back at the organization.

Tegan Trovato ([27:25](#)):

Makes sense.

Gina Fong ([27:27](#)):

But when I think about listening, there are a couple of things to keep in mind. They talk about making sure that you're listening and not hearing. There's a lot of stuff on how to listen in terms of body language and voice and tone.

Gina Fong ([27:42](#)):

But ironically enough when I teach listening to my students, it is the shortest lesson in the curriculum because you really just have to listen. It's just so much harder to do. So it's probably the one area that requires the most practice.

Gina Fong ([28:00](#)):

So what I say to my students is these three things. If you can stay away from these three things, then you are probably in a better place of listening. So if you are listening to somebody, don't argue, don't teach and don't sell.

Tegan Trovato ([28:17](#)):

Powerful. Oh, I love this.

Gina Fong ([28:21](#)):

If you are arguing, if you are teaching, if you are selling, you are not probably aggressively listening.

Tegan Trovato ([28:28](#)):

That makes sense. We're waiting and listening to speak. We're listening to respond. We are not wholeheartedly and selflessly listening.

Gina Fong ([28:39](#)):

Absolutely. And again, that's where that curiosity comes back. How can we listen with curiosity? We have that slate really clean and be in this neutral place. If I were in someone's home interviewing them, but I had that agenda in my head, again, I would just be listening for what I wanted to hear.

Gina Fong ([28:57](#)):

So the way that I define listening to my students and in my own work is that I say listening is caring without an agenda. Because you can hear listening in someone's voice.

Gina Fong ([29:09](#)):

Before we started getting onto all of these virtual platforms where we could see people, you could pick up the phone and talk to someone and you could tell in their voice if they were listening to you and if they were really caring.

Tegan Trovato ([29:21](#)):

Yes. That is powerful. And I have to say, as a coach, more than 50%, probably 70% of what we do is aggressive listening. I just have never had it articulated so beautifully and perfectly.

Tegan Trovato ([29:37](#)):

And I will say, coaching hasn't slowed down in the pandemic because people need us to see and hear them right now. So I love this reminder you're giving leaders, listening is a gift.

Gina Fong ([29:50](#)):

It really is.

Tegan Trovato ([29:51](#)):

It really is. Yeah. Oh, thank you. Okay. Your six component of insight muscle is?

Gina Fong ([29:58](#)):

It's inquiring. And so that's the nicer way of saying, asking questions. And it ironically is the last part of my insight muscle because I believe that when you're being curious, you're introspective, you're empathetic, you're observing and you're listening, the questions will flow naturally. They really will. But there is an art to the way we ask questions.

Gina Fong ([30:20](#)):

So a couple of ways that I coach my own students to get through this is that first of all, you want to start from the broad and then go to the specific. So if I'm in a consumer's home, I'm first going to warm them up and talk to them about their general life.

Gina Fong ([30:36](#)):

Much to some clients surprise, I don't get to their brand or their product until much later in the interview because you really want to get a good sense of that person before you dive into really specific things. So when asking questions, I always like to start with what before I get into the why.

Gina Fong ([30:53](#)):

Like what are you doing in your home this way with this product? And then we dive into the why. Then there are some question types that I think are really important to help somebody introspective on their own. Because remember an interview is really just coaching so much introspection.

Gina Fong ([31:10](#)):

So there are three types of questions that I think do really well in these situations. So the first one is what I call the open-minded question. And that is the better question to ask than what we would call the close-ended question.

Gina Fong ([31:27](#)):

And I think the close-ended question we're all familiar with that is the one that where you ask the question, and really a yes or no is simple enough to answer that question, but that really doesn't dive into anything deeper. So that open-minded question to me is the one that really allows somebody to go beyond just the yes or no.

Gina Fong ([31:46](#)):

So the way I explain it in my world with product management or brand management, let's just pretend we're working for a snack bar company and you're talking to a consumer about snack bars. It is a difference between saying or asking, so what do you like in your snack bar versus saying, do you like the way your snack bar tastes?

Gina Fong ([32:06](#)):

The second one, yes or no? The first one says, well, what do you like about it? And then that person's free to answer it the way they want to. But to me that's an open-minded question, really staying away from just real obvious yes or no answers.

Gina Fong ([32:19](#)):

And those close-ended questions are more likely to come up too if you're not being very curious. Because if you're not curious, you're looking for an answer, you're just trying to prove something that you've already got in your head.

Tegan Trovato ([32:31](#)):

That makes sense.

Gina Fong ([32:33](#)):

Yeah. Right. That's the first one, the open-minded question. The second question type that I like to use in my work is what I call the discovery question. And the discovery question is a much better way to ask something than what I call the leading question.

Gina Fong ([32:48](#)):

And we ask leading questions all the time, Tegan. And it is shocking to me how much that has become a part of our language. So that leading question is when you ask the question, but you populate the answers, you make it multiple choice.

Gina Fong ([33:07](#)):

So again, just following this thread of let's say we are working for a snack bar company, we talk to our consumers and we say, what do you like most in a snack bar? Is it the texture? Is it the taste, or is it the flavor?

Gina Fong ([33:20](#)):

And you've really predetermined how they can answer, but the discovery question leaves those answers out of it. And again, keeps it open, but dives in a little deeper to ask the why. Why do you like the snack bar that you do?

Gina Fong ([33:35](#)):

And then it allows that consumer or person to get into their own space and ask it the way they want to. It is shocking that if you give people some predetermined answers, they will probably follow your lead and you may miss something that you haven't even thought of before.

Tegan Trovato ([33:51](#)):

Right. Of course, people will follow your lead. How many of them will say it's actually none of those things? It's really more. X, especially in your field where they know you're there to study them on particular things.

Tegan Trovato ([34:03](#)):

So the same would be true in the leadership space. If you tell the people essentially it's one of these three things as your answer, they're probably not going to challenge you unless they may be another leader. So fascinating.

Gina Fong ([34:16](#)):

So true.

Tegan Trovato ([34:16](#)):

So true.

Gina Fong ([34:17](#)):

Now the last question is a technique we use in the market research field. It's technically called a projective question. I call it an imaginative question just to get it out of this more technical field of market research, but these can be some fun questions and they're better than asking basic questions.

Gina Fong ([34:37](#)):

So if I'm following this thread, if you're a product manager for a snack bar company, these are the kinds of fun questions we ask that really get into someone's imagination. And that is, I might say to somebody, so if your snack bar showed up at a party, what drink would it have in its hand and why?

Tegan Trovato ([34:56](#)):

Yeah, that is fun. I like this line of questioning.

Gina Fong ([35:00](#)):

And so this is the kind of question that if you were with colleagues, you weren't a brand manager, these could be the fun questions you asked to get to know somebody.

Gina Fong ([35:07](#)):

These are the icebreaker questions. These are the ones that get people's juices flowing in terms of the way to connect with other people beyond just the work itself.

Tegan Trovato ([35:17](#)):

Right. I love it. This is really powerful. Six components of the insight muscle. I hope that listeners are really absorbing curiosity, introspection and empathy are mindset oriented. Observing, listening and inquiring are the skillset associated with it.

Tegan Trovato ([35:38](#)):

Tell us, when you teach a course on this topic at the Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, I'm curious about the impact this has on students in terms of their leadership. And before you answer that, I want listeners to understand you teach both the graduate, undergraduate level, but then also executive education. Correct?

Gina Fong ([36:00](#)):

So I teach graduate level-

Tegan Trovato ([36:02](#)):

Graduate level.

Gina Fong ([36:03](#)):

And then I teach in exec ed.



Tegan Trovato ([36:05](#)):

Okay, thank you. That gives some context to the level of understanding that your students are already coming in with and their ability to go apply this in the world. So I'll ask the question again then. When you're teaching this course, how does it impact the students in terms of leadership?

Gina Fong ([36:21](#)):

What I think I see the most is that they come into this class that I teach thinking they're going to learn about their consumers and understand how to make a better product or experience, which is absolutely true. And I think what they're shocked at the end of 10 weeks is that they've actually learned a lot about themselves.

Gina Fong ([36:41](#)):

Because again, you cannot understand other people without understanding yourself. And so when you do that, you understand who you are as a person and where you fit into the world. And I think these six elements of the insight muscle, as I frame them, are really useful devices for leadership to come in with curiosity, to be introspective.

Gina Fong ([37:06](#)):

Because then if you've thought about your own experience, you're more willing to either share or inquire about someone else's experience. Empathy, as we talked about, is so important in leadership to understand the person on the other side of the table. And we know when someone understands truly what we're going through or not.

Gina Fong ([37:25](#)):

And when we know that someone else can empathize with us, it changes the relationship, the dynamic you can have with another person. And then observing, listening, inquiring. I mean, these are just really important skills to understand other humans.

Gina Fong ([37:40](#)):

So my students I think realize that when they come out of the class, they've not only got a taste of what it's like to understand consumers, but the same skillset can be used to understand other people in any other situation, whether it's my student sitting across from his family at Thanksgiving dinner or whether it is a leader sitting across from his or her team trying to understand how can he or she motivate them to the next level.

Tegan Trovato ([38:08](#)):

And it's coming up for me too, I think you speak on this topic as a keynote speaker for organizations as well. So you've already bridged the gap between consumer anthropologist and leader as anthropologist pretty well, I would assume.

Gina Fong ([38:25](#)):

Yeah. The connection there is the fact that whether it's a consumer or someone that you work with, it's all about humans, it's people. And ultimately what I feel like I'm doing is, and we have this saying in anthropology that our job is to make the unfamiliar familiar.

Gina Fong ([38:45](#)):

And so when you're in a leadership position, you are trying to take something that's unfamiliar and make it familiar to your team. It's trying to make something that's unfamiliar to you and make it familiar for yourself.

Gina Fong ([38:58](#)):

And so when you lead with curiosity, when you lead with empathy, when you can lead with really good questions and great listening, then you can truly understand somebody at a deeper level.

Tegan Trovato ([39:10](#)):

Okay. I'm going to challenge our listeners to pick just one of the six components of the insight muscle and start there. As I listen to this, I know that all six of these are skills or mindset oriented and our leaders are moving so fast, they always have, but they're moving faster than ever. There's this need to slow down for this practice.

Tegan Trovato ([39:33](#)):

And so if you're listening, instead of biting off all six of the components of developing your insight muscle, I want you to just try one, maybe one a week. And in six weeks you will be a much better anthropologist than you were six weeks prior.

Gina Fong ([39:49](#)):

I love that idea, Tegan, because it really is something that takes deliberate and nuanced practice. And in the classroom I isolate each one too. So we work on curiosity first and then we'll move on to empathy.

Gina Fong ([40:02](#)):

And while they're all related, much like any new skill that you're trying to learn, it's helpful to just focus on one thing at a time.

Tegan Trovato ([40:12](#)):

Sure. Absolutely. Well, Gina, listeners don't know this, but I'm going to out you a little bit. I mentioned your keynotes, but I happen to know, and I won't say them, but I happen to know some of the brands you've done work for.

Tegan Trovato ([40:24](#)):

And so I want our listeners to know that you could go open any door in your pantry and see multiple brands that Gina has done this work for. Is that a fair way for me to say it?

Gina Fong ([40:37](#)):

It is. It is.

Tegan Trovato ([40:38](#)):

Okay. Yup. Which I think is so fun about you and so interesting about your work. And so I'm sharing that because I want listeners to understand that this insight muscle has been leveraged in some huge, huge companies and it has proven itself out.

Tegan Trovato ([40:54](#)):

And so if our listeners want to learn more about you and the work you do, Gina, what's the best place for them to find you?

Gina Fong ([41:02](#)):

I am on LinkedIn, so that's probably the best place to shoot me a note. And I will say, Tegan, building off of your suggestion that they work on one part of the insight muscle at a time, I have a slew of exercises.

Gina Fong ([41:13](#)):

So if you write to me, I'll give you some of the things that my students work on in class to strengthen that part of the insight muscle, whether it be curiosity or empathy or observing or any of the others.

Tegan Trovato ([41:25](#)):

That is so generous of you. Thank you for that. I will warn you though, you will hear from listeners. We hear from listeners when we offer this up. So get ready and thank you for that, Gina. Listeners, we'll put her LinkedIn URL in the show note so you can find your way to Gina to connect with her and follow her work.

Tegan Trovato ([41:42](#)):

So Gina, as we close here, the podcast was created to discover the behaviors, practices, beliefs and skills the future leader must possess so that they can successfully lead these systems that have changed and will continue to change at hyper speed.

Tegan Trovato ([41:58](#)):

To get your read on what's required here of future leaders, just finish this sentence for us. Leaders of the future will?

Gina Fong ([42:08](#)):

Leaders of the future will be curious and empathetic listeners.

Tegan Trovato ([42:14](#)):

Beautiful. What's one step you think our listeners can take to be more in a place of curiosity and empathy?

Gina Fong ([42:24](#)):

Yeah. I think that first step is to remove the judgment and to remember that to understand somebody does not mean that you have to agree with them.

Tegan Trovato ([42:33](#)):

And say more about what it means to remove judgment.

Gina Fong ([42:38](#)):

Removing judgment truly just means being in that place of neutrality.

Tegan Trovato ([42:44](#)):

Okay. So aggressively listening from that place of neutrality, to pull it all back together. So I love it. Leaders of the future will move into a place of curiosity, empathy. Wonderful. Gina, I have personally learned a ton today.

Tegan Trovato ([42:58](#)):

I am just amazed at how rich this framework is that you've put together and how much it just makes a lot of sense. I'm also sort of stepping back and going, it sounds so tidy, these six components of the insight muscle, but what a practice each of them are.

Tegan Trovato ([43:19](#)):

And I'm just humbled by that. I think leaders stand to learn and benefit so much from trying to apply what you've taught us today. So thank you for joining us. It has been just enlightening to spend this time with you. Really appreciate it.

Gina Fong ([43:33](#)):

Well, thank you, Tegan. Was a pleasure.

Speaker 1 ([43:36](#)):

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Workplace Forward Podcast, where leaders and executives can stay ahead of the curve on emerging leadership ideas and self-care best practices.

Speaker 1 ([43:46](#)):

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Speaker 1 ([44:00](#)):

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