

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



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ELIZABETH POWER – It's the People Stuff

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Elizabeth Power, M. Ed. is the CEO of EPower & Associates, Inc. She is a speaker, facilitator, teacher, and consultant via the EPower Change Institute and The Trauma Informed Academy. She is a subject matter expert on trauma-informed care, trauma-responsive systems, change and resilience and is also an Adjunct Instructor in Psychiatry at Georgetown University Medical Center. Power develops cross-cultural adaptations of models of care for the mental health community. Her current projects include helping Japan create a culturally appropriate model of trauma-informed care, supporting several NHS trusts that are addressing how to help frontline workers develop hope in the face of chronic moral injury, and finishing her Healer series of books. Power's Trauma Responsive System focuses on mastering 9 elements akin to applied emotional intelligence. She was recently published as third author of an article in Family Medicine about the outcomes of the NIMH research project assessing the effectiveness of the use of the core principles of Risking Connection by Primary Care Providers in their clinical settings. She received her M.Ed. in HR Development from Vanderbilt University's Peabody School of Education in 1997 has multiple coaching, educational, and facilitation certifications.

In this episode, Power discusses "the people stuff":

- How to deal with the increased levels of adversity brought forth in the COVID-19 pandemic by breathing, reframing, and embracing the principles of emotional intelligence;
- How to develop emotional flexibility and why it matters;
- The techniques to overcome tool fatigue;
- The importance of mental hygiene in creativity;
- The central role of leaders in modeling mental safety;
- The positive impact of a diverse approach to diversity;
- And more!

Michael Lee

Thank you, Elizabeth, for being here on At the Edge. And welcome.

Elizabeth Power

Thank you so much, Michael, it's a delight to be with you today.

Michael Lee

You come from a bit of a different angle than most of our guests. You talk about outcomes after adversity. We're in a time that people could say we are definitely during or after adversity.

Elizabeth Power

The thing is that we always have adversity with us, but not quite as often and as long and as pervasive and as pronounced as we have now. Companies and teams around the world have uniformly experienced higher levels of stress, lower levels of productivity, impediments to innovation, the inability to find effective staffing, the inability to keep the staff they have. It's basically turned business on its head, absolutely on its head. Everywhere I've gone, I've seen very few companies, only a few, that have flourished and thrived and turned this to something that's to their advantage.

Michael Lee

And so what do you advise companies who are dealing with this to do to make this something that they can turn to their advantage?

Elizabeth Power

The first thing is take a deep breath. Because most of us quit breathing when we're stressed. And when things are going difficult, if you quit breathing, suddenly you're depriving yourself of the one thing you've got to have to be able to problem-solve effectively, and that's oxygen.

So I advise them to take a deep breath and to recognize that the challenges that they are seeing and that their staff are seeing are surmountable. Especially when they take a perspective that reframes from difficulty to opportunity, which is not just positive mental attitude. And then they recognize that this impact impairs the emotional intelligence of the organization and impairs the emotional intelligence of their employees, which makes it a lot like a profoundly traumatic event for everyone.

But if they go down the road of thinking of mental health and mental illness, they will divide and separate their staff and their clients and their culture in ways that are not helpful.

Michael Lee

First take a breath.

Elizabeth Power

Yes.

Michael Lee

I invite the listeners to do that. Now that we've taken a breath, what next?

Elizabeth Power

Frame and reframe. When people get angry or frustrated with each other, it's really easy to call each other labels and names and say, Oh, he's just a jerk, or, She's so bipolar, or, He's so borderline, or, You sure you don't have a mental illness? or, Oh, that's just PTSD!

Stay away from that. Focus instead on how likely is it that ninety percent of the people who are not hospitalized for some serious difficulty might be having some reactions, and then begin to look at the things that we can do to strengthen ourselves in the face of those kinds of reactions.

The first of which is looking at your interconnections. Look around. When I'm talking to people on calls like this, I see your bookshelf, I know you've got something bright red on the top of your bookshelf, and it looks really interesting. Tell me a story about that bright red thing. Or, that's a really cool picture behind you, tell me a story about that picture.

We forget that everything from recipes to favorite songs to playlists to ringtones to tattoos, all of those symbols are things that have stories behind them, that connect us to things that make us feel more comfortable. So there's a lot of self-soothing that we can use by looking at those interconnections. What's your favorite piece of clothing? If I'm teaching a group in person, I'll say, How many of you have on a piece of jewelry that someone gave you? Now unless it's the rock that you got from a divorce, and you're not pleased that you did that - Where'd you get that rock? What's the story behind that ring? Do you love that ring? Does it remind you of somebody you care about? Almost inevitably the answer is yes. When you look at that ring, that's an automatic thing that you can do to help yourself feel better in the moment.

Or I'll say to them, who's got a favorite recipe? And boy, the hands go up. "It's a family recipe!" "So what makes it your favorite recipe?" And they'll tell a history, "I was with my girlfriend or my boyfriend and we were cooking dinner and I came across this recipe and they helped me tweak it a little bit, and it made it so much better, and every time I think of them, every time I cook that recipe, I think of them." Which is great, as long as you still like that person.

There are so many reminders we have that we can use to help us self-soothe. It's unbelievable. And self-soothing is the first thing you have to do, neurobiologically, when your brain is in a state

of fight or flight. Or when it's frozen on the very front end from fear, you can't really be creative or productive, you're just at the survival level.

So we help people master some self-soothing that way, without going into the mental health side of it. We also say, "Let's talk about managing emotions." How many of us know we even have emotions? How many of us have emotions that we can turn up and down before they hit the breaking point?

And one of the things that's really tough on employees and on staff of all sorts is when the leadership doesn't have its ability to manage feelings in place, takes things personally, takes things seriously, goes off like a bottle rocket about something that's as insignificant as a leaf in the wind. So we help people look at those things from the perspective of increasing their emotional intelligence, which by the way, are the same skills that you need to recover from trauma.

Michael Lee

How do we institutionalize this? You mentioned employees, but how do we help an organization actually make this a regular thing that employees are aware of? That they actually ensure employees are keeping themselves emotionally intelligent?

Elizabeth Power

Well, I think the first thing is - assume that it's necessary. When we assume that emotional intelligence is the most important thing an employee can have, and that it will spill over to their home life as well as into the workplace and their social circles, suddenly, we're in a position to start looking at how can we push small niblets of learning and practice to people in ways that are unobtrusive and acceptable.

One of my clients has asked me to put together a series of micro-learning pieces, thirty seconds to one minute to two minutes max, videos or exercises that can be pushed through their computers. So every morning when they sign on, they get something that is an encouragement or practice that helps them set for the day. We use box breathing as one tool. We use circular breathing as another. We ask people to set intentions. What's your intention for today? Is their intention to have a great day, to do good things? Or is their intention just to get through another dead God-awful day? Your intention creates your self-fulfilling prophecy. It may not solve everything you face that day, but it certainly makes it easier. So we are developing micro-lessons to push to people in ways that help them find different sweet spots for coping during the day.

We also help people master, through hands-on learning and through online learning, the simple components of what we call the trauma response system, which incorporates elements of emotional intelligence. Some organizations that we're working with are asking us to couple these things with employee reward systems so that people are getting rewarded for being willing to

practice being optimistic. This won't change a toxic work environment. But it will certainly help. Especially if the leadership does it as well.

Michael Lee

There's the physical, like breathing or yoga or meditation. And then there's attitude. How do we convince the organization of the incredible importance of a positive mental state?

Elizabeth Power

Well, some of it is by talking about the fact that attitude is learned. If people are dealing with terribly stressful times at home and terribly stressful times at work, it's hard to help people have a great attitude. Sometimes it may be looking at the best attitude you can engender.

Part of that is by talking with organizations about the fact that attitude is contagious. We set the weather in the room, even my office. When I'm here by myself, I still set the weather. I may not be able to choose some of the changes I face, but I can choose how I think about them and how I handle them. So we emphasize choice, and we do some exercises to look at that.

Okay, so let's assume that everybody has a choice in a matter. We give people secret choice slips. They're the only ones who know what their choice is going to be in the activity. And we run these scenarios – “What’s your Choice?” And people have to respond to the choice on their card.

And as we go through this scenario, which is a little harder to do online than in person, we begin to ask people, How is this helping you set the frame for what you're going to do at work? What might be the outcome? How might the outcome be impacted? If you choose this choice or that choice, what else might you be able to choose in this environment?

So we really focus on the role that choice plays in everything from financial planning to execution to customer service to innovation, to help people begin to recognize it. As Rollo May once said, You can stand it till you die. The thing is you forget you have choices in between.

We do interesting things that help people recognize and develop emotional flexibility. I call it the victory cycle. It's a triple association of days and colors and qualities. Today's today. And the questions people ask run like this: What am I feeling right now? Frankly, I feel stupid and awkward. Doesn't mean I am but I feel that. So what do I want to feel? Hope. When have I felt hope before? Let me tune in and turn it up. Okay, great. So I can remember a time when I felt hope and then I just amplify the feeling. If you could see my face, I bet I busted a big grin. Now the color I paired with hope is blue. So I look around my office and I see a blue picture and I see blue lettering on a French poster - I taught in French-speaking Canada. I see a blue glass bottle. I look outside, I see a blue toy across the yard in my neighbor's yard.

And suddenly I've anchored that exaggerated feeling with the story in my body. I didn't have to have anything happen except ask those questions. I took total control over my emotional state.

And I've got some calls coming up this afternoon that are going to be tough. And I really needed that! So thank you.

Michael Lee

I like to do what I can to help the podcast guests help themselves. We're looking at hybrid work. How are the issues more acute in hybrid work? And then second, how do we get there? How do we how do we deal with them in the hybrid situation?

Elizabeth Power

That's a great question, Michael, because hybrid work is always more challenging for people. What if home isn't a safer place to be? What if things aren't so good at home? And you have to work from home? What if you don't have enough room in your home to work at home? What if you don't have the technology to work at home? What if you live in an area that is remote where there's not good internet connection?

So the issues always become more acute, at a different level. Who owns the liability for ergonomic issues and hybrid work? Does the responsibility for workplace safety get transferred to the employee? There are a lot of questions to be answered.

So there's a level of acuity and acuteness that I think is a critical force. Plus, you have some people whose brain type - brain type's the best phrase I know for it - and personality type do great with the isolation of hybrid work. And others who desperately need the socialization that the office brings.

The most successful organizations recognized that and shuffled quickly to find ways to make hotelling available, small workspaces on-site along with support for workspaces off-site. The thing it requires the most is fabulous leadership, who are willing to explore the difficult challenges that hybrid work brings. Safety, ergonomics, socialization - how do you preserve workplace culture when some of it's remote? What do you do with leaders who are frightened to turn people loose to actually do the work at home? How do you accommodate that?

And so suddenly this need for the kind of emotional intelligence we're talking about becomes even more critical. Employers have choices to make. Organizations have to decide, do we want to be on the leading edge of the future with all of the innovation that requires? Do we find ways of implementing organization-wide technology that allows us to capitalize on innovation in these unique settings? Do we stay in the same box we've always been in?

I promise you, there are lots of workers who will not come to work for you if you do that. Do we actually engage the people at the effect of the situation in creating the solution for the situation? And I think people always respond, "Best of luck!" They help create the employers that have the courage to lay it out and say, "Look, hybrid work is here to stay and we're going to embrace it. Now let's talk about the assurances we need to know that things are happening."

Some will micromanage and keystroke-log, time-log. Others will say, As long as this product is delivered by this time, this meeting, these specifications, we'll be good. Who do you need to help you with that? How can we get those meetings set up? Some employers will stay stuck and they will probably flounder. Hopefully more employers will begin to be excited about the opportunities to repurpose physical facilities, to find new ways to be creative and engage with communities, because engagement is the key.

And it's not just employee engagement, it's employer engagement. What about an employer that set up a co-working place in a town? Like here in Nashville, we have Amazon and Oracle coming. What would happen if they set up a co-working place for hybrid work? Where people could come and work three or four hours a day together with their team and then disperse again?

So we actually begin by looking at creativity and innovation as the key drivers for adapting to the hybrid workplace. And then you begin to look at, is it going to be employer-led or employee-driven or a combination? What about the use of technology in that equation? How do we use technology to drive this healthy mental situation that we began to think about? How do we create apps and programs that allow us to look at different elements and function within an organization and capitalize on those in collaboration, in problem-solving, in developing creative ideas, and innovation in shared design? How do we begin to do that?

And how do we teach the team the kind of etiquette and behavior required to let everybody play? We discovered that when we added another application that allows us to do a level of project management, it lets us collaborate with each other much more effectively than just going back and forth with email, which we might miss.

Michael Lee

When you talk about all these tools, we start to get to another form or source of stress, which is tool fatigue.

Elizabeth Power

Oh! Software fatigue, tool fatigue is real, let me assure you. And so then, in terms of organizational process, it begins to need very careful sourcing on the front end. The more you plan, the less expensive it is on the back end. You can get analysis paralysis, don't get me wrong. But in terms of looking at what are the specifications that we need for an application, or a tool to meet, how does it allow us to parse work in ten to fifteen minute chunks in most cases? What does it do to push people to get up and walk away and stretch and do something different? How do we make the UX and the UEX as easy as possible to navigate? With whom do we test this to make sure we're meeting the mark?

Because I bet you know as well as I do the tools designed by the developers and the programmers, they have all kinds of bells and whistles. And the average user is going to just want to get on and

do THIS. So I mean, what level of stress does that actually introduce, looking at the capacity of the human being to master new technology, and rolling it out slowly.

I work in electronic health record implementation, and invariably somebody wants me to teach everybody the software. They don't want me to teach them the ten tasks they're going to use the most the first three weeks. They want me to teach them everything.

And that's just foolish. If you expect them to learn all the details about the application from the get-go, they may not be able to do the tasks they have to do every day professionally. So this is about parsing work and applications and their use in smaller chunks.

Michael Lee

So you avoid some of the tool fatigue that covers implementation. But what about ongoing use? Because if you're in hybrid, you've got to be online all the time.

Elizabeth Power

Well, you do have to be available all the time. And there are a variety of ways that people can master that. One is leaders in the organization need to look carefully at the expectations they're setting. For example, we know that the average attention span is now seven minutes, not fifteen. Seven. So why are we expecting people to take classes that are four hours long? By which point they'll be snoozed, their behinds will be sound asleep, they'll be bored out of their skulls, and you've lost your audience. It's a waste of your resource.

When you feed people's creativity, when is the most valuable time for people to be creative? Do you have problem-solving and ideation meetings at the times when they're most fatigued or least fatigued?

It's hard enough to take into account the needs of a whole bunch of different employees who are all individual human beings. Now you add to that hybrid, which means that now they're working at different times, in different places, with different equipment.

Michael Lee

How do you keep up with all that?

Elizabeth Power

Imagine if each individual on a team, for example, was assigned a unique color to plot their time availability. And you can blend that to an average or a common time availability for that team that shows to everybody else. So if you think about workforce scheduling in the call center, this happens fairly regularly in a different way, looking to different work cultures for different models.

Imagine my team, for example, is scattered across the Atlantic time zone, the Pacific Time Zone, the Hawaiian time zone. If I'm going to capitalise on my team's best skills, I need to know who's available when to do what. And when we schedule meetings, I have to find a time that is least painful for all of us. It's a major investment, because it requires looking at data points we don't usually look at.

It's like, "I pay your rent baby, you show up at eight o'clock, you leave at five o'clock, you do what I want you to do, because I'm renting your behavior." - workers are saying, "NO MORE." Workers are saying, "I am more than the behavior that you are renting from me, I'm a human being who needs recognition, acceptance, affection, love, meaningful work, to know that my work matters."

And so this is about compassion and collaboration as well as creativity. If you're treating people as widgets and things, you won't get what you need from them. And we've forgotten some of those simple things about how we build trust, how we build agreement. Everybody has to have a stake. It's not, You do this because it's my favorite pet project. It has to be important enough to the organization that everyone is committed to it.

And you don't do that with an ad campaign or a marketing campaign. You have to build influence, yes. But in hybrid work, that's a whole different bag of bones. Leaders, in particular, those of us who are called leaders, or who consider ourselves leaders, or who sit in the C-suite, need to sharpen our own saws about how we help people deliver their best work. We need to look at, Are we driving ourselves into the ground?

I was an inveterate seventy hour a week worker. And I finally realized, When I go, my legacy will be there, and about six months after I'm gone, I'm pretty sure it's not gonna matter nearly as much as I think it might. Why am I burning myself out? And so I slowed down my work. And amazingly, the slower I go, the more I get done.

We need to look at our own emotional intelligence. What's my reputation among my colleagues and peers? You've got to be willing to look at the painful side. Sometimes I can be a driver, okay. If I'm driving, do I have a whip in my hand? Are my expectations unrealistic, given the things that everybody else managed? It's turning the concept of leadership from power to shared power with other people. And that's also about getting beyond the whole notion that there will never be enough for any of us, and the only way we can get ours is by beating the other person down.

When you look at innovation, Michael, I'm sure you know, it's much more about collaboration, shared power. It's much more built on an indigenous and effort-centric model of how people relate to each other. Community over individual. Present over future or past but including future and past collaboration over competition.

We cannot beat each other half to death and expect to win in business. Our clients will know it. The alarm, the misalignment, will show keenly. If you have to design the ultimate employee experience that accounts for the facts of hybrid, it must account for the need to pay attention to individuals as humans. And it also must account for the need of a company to get results.

Michael Lee

How would you describe that?

Elizabeth Power

I would say let's get all the people or the employees together. Let's ask some key questions about what is most important to you and how you work. When do you do your best work? What brings you joy in your work? What do you despise to do? What would you be willing to do once in a while even though you don't like it? What are the things you're simply not good at?

Okay, great. So we've got a pretty complete map. Instead of hiring people like me, I'd be looking for a diverse population of staff. And once I'm satisfied that I've got a nice diverse population in terms of personality styles and traits and experiences and cultures, I'd be saying, Here's what we're going to achieve this year. Given what we all bring to the party, how might we best do this?

Michael Lee

Speaking to the leaders out there who need to make their companies work in hybrid, as effectively as possible, what message would you want them to go home saying, This is the message from Elizabeth Power?

Elizabeth Power

Change is all there is. When you begin to engage the people who do the work and bring you your success and the changes that have to be made, you'll be amazed at the good things that can come out of it.

Michael Lee

Give us your key to powerful change.

Elizabeth Power

The willingness to look at choice. The willingness to recognize that even if you are being held hostage in a cage in the middle of a swamp, you still have choices that you can choose about your experience. No matter where you are, no matter what change is happening, there are always choices. Even if they are only choices of thought or choices of feeling. The more you practice making choices in the direction of your desires, the more powerful you become internally and externally.

Michael Lee

Taking all that stuff you just talked about for an individual, if we consider the organization an individual, how do we apply this?

Elizabeth Power

I think it's the leadership. Because the leadership forms the primary corpus of the organization in terms of driving its direction. Or at least I think they do. If the organization is willing to recognize that every single employee is doing the best they can given the culture and the opportunities that have been set for them, then it's up to the organization to decide how do we make sure that we give people the opportunity to do the very best that they can with the least impediment to success. And suddenly managing diversity disappears, morale and employee problems diminish, and we begin to see the organization shifting slowly towards the success it needs. You can use all kinds of technology and tools to help with that. It gets down to people at the bottom level. It's the people stuff.

Michael Lee

Elizabeth Power. Thank you so much for sharing all of these bits of wisdom. I think it's gonna make a big difference for everyone who's listening.

Elizabeth Power

Thank you so much, Michael. It's an honor to be with you.