



The Intersection Between Ethics, Improvisation and Gaming

Aired on [WGN Plus](#) and hosted by [Second City Works](#), this podcast discusses leadership, improvisation, gaming and culture.

Guests:

[Kelly Leonard](#) EVP, The Second City;

[Jen Ellison](#) teaches ethics at DePaul University; and

[Erica Salmon Byrne](#) EVP and Executive Director of Business Ethics Leadership Alliance

Leonard: Today's podcast is going to be a little different. I will be joined by two guests who both traffic in the world of ethics in very different ways. Erica Salmon Byrne is the Executive Vice President of compliance and governance services for Ethisphere. She is also the Executive Director of the Business Ethics Leadership Alliance. Erica was previously a member of the New York Stock Exchange Governance Service Executive Team. She practiced law in Washington DC and she has taught business ethics at the University of Denver. Jen Ellison teaches ethics at DePaul University and is a member of the Comedy Writing Performance Faculty at Columbia College Chicago. She has been performing, writing and directing in Chicago for nearly 20 years as a resident director at the Second City, Jen has over seen two national touring companies, developed multiple shows for their outreach and diversity program and directed for the ETCC stage. Other directing credits include Collaboraction, Trap Door Theater, WNEP and the New York Futurist where she is an artistic associate. Erica and Jen welcome. One of Second City's most successful ventures has been a thing called Real Biz Short, which are short funny videos that provide context for E-learning modules. When I tell people that one of our most successful categories is in ethics and compliance and they are often surprised. That is until I remind them what fertile ground ethics is for the world of comedy. Like this clip...(Insert Clip from 10 years ago). Erica, in March of this year your company held a Global Ethics Summit in New York and I was pretty blown away by what I read in the report from that summit. For example, 1 in 5 employees polled would sell their work credentials to hackers and 44% claim they would do it for less than \$1,000. That's amazing.

Byrne: It really goes to the point of all this from my perspective is, and I've always felt this way, compliance and ethics risk is all about people risks. It can't actually do anything. Everything it does, all of its stuff is done by individual people. The job of the



compliance officer is to try and grab as much of the heart and mind share of a company's employees as it can to make sure they're at least asking the right question and hopefully asking the right question before they do this stupid thing.

Leonard: It's so funny how often this comes up in this podcast. We talk to all people in all different industries and we look at the core problems and we're like oh yeah stupid, it's about the people. One more stat note that millennials have a high risk for non-compliance and it says 48% have observed misconduct and 26% they would turn a blind eye to that misconduct. Is the millennial generation really that different?

Byrne: No, it isn't. IF you look at some of the other statistics employees are 27% to witness misconduct in a time of transition; lay offs, restructuring—that kind of thing. They are more likely in those circumstances to keep their mouths shut because they don't want to rock the boat and risk their job. If you look at the statistic behind misconduct 1 in 2 don't report misconduct in fear of retaliation – something bad will happen if I speak up or the company isn't going to anything about it anyway so why bother. I can sit on my hands because nothing would come of it anyway. If you think about it, telling the company that something has gone wrong is an act of courage whether it's a compliance failure of quality failure and how do you contribute to an environment in which people are comfortable telling you they've screwed up.

Leonard: That's really well said. Jen you teach a lot of millennials at DePaul, tell a little about what you teach over there.

Ellison: I teach ethics and video game development and cinema. When I tell people that it's met with a ton of question marks shooting out of people's heads. The idea is to lay the framework for ethical language and talk about it with regards to video games and cinema also the Internet and how do we read ethical norms through cultural material. What's interesting to me is being able to, I've had a couple of plagiarism issues, but I think that's college students. I think there's something about them that they're often terrified that they're going to get caught or maybe they didn't study or they didn't spend enough time writing a paper or whatever that might be. What I have discovered is that the kids actually want to do the right thing but the fear they have of being yelled at or told that they're wrong or being shamed in a way – shame is a huge factor in that. I think that when I'm able to lay the groundwork for look if you're having an issue you can come talk to me, we can have a conversation about it versus sort of the steely eyed gaze of if you come talk to me you're going to be trashed, they respond to that very well. I think that relates to the cultural compliance stuff if they are comfortable and feel able to talk to about something they have seen or have even done themselves I think it makes it easier to experience that failure, learn from it and start again.



Leonard: Both Jen and Erica are familiar with how Second City have played in this, which is using comedy and comedy's good because people pay attention. I was interested in how improvisation might play into this. I am a novice in this area so I Googled a lot. I came up with some really interesting stuff. I want to get your reactions on a quote from Samuels Wells. Wells wrote a book called *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. Wells writes, "When people are trained to work in theater they are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they act from habit in ways appropriate to the circumstances. This is exactly the goal of theological ethics." I was actually quite interested in the idea that you need to create habit of compliance, a habit of truth. Erica, what do you think?

Byrne: I think that's exactly right, one of the things that I find in my conversations with managers and let's face it, for most companies when someone is promoted to be a manager they are promoted to be a manager not because they're a good manager, but they were good at the job they were doing. A new challenge in the organization. They are very, very rarely prepared to be a leader, which is a different skill set, but they are often thrust into a role of leadership. What I think improvisation does so profoundly for that group in particular is create the habit of active listening. It's going to be the very rare employee that marches into your office, shuts the door and says; hey I just saw so and so hand over a bag of cash to such and such. That's not the way these situations tend to come up. If you've got your tablet open, your computer open and you're looking at your iPhone and you're answering a text message from another one of your work colleagues that person is going to take a message from that interaction that you're too busy to listen to their concerns. They're going to sit on it. That's a missed opportunity for a company to get out on a potential issue. In this field it's all about trying to prevent the problems so that if something does go wrong it doesn't hurt the company too profoundly. That training, that habit of actually listening to what the person is saying not thinking about what you're going to say next or what you're going to have for lunch, that is something I think improve brings to the table for many in this space.

Leonard: Definitely active listening and focus and I love how you weaved that into leadership because the other interesting thing about improvisation is it surrenders leadership and takes it back. When you join the ensemble you are given leadership training even though you aren't the director. I think this idea of practicing what it's like to be in charge without actually having to be in charge is very much in an improvisers mindset.

Ellison: It is very fluid that it does promote active listening, but it also promotes a certain culture and dynamic. What Erica was saying about someone watching you answer a text while you are in a meeting with them that messages to that person that that behavior is

acceptable. Humor works in the same way. When you start telling jokes about certain things it's a cultural signifier telling people that it's okay to joke about certain things and number one the people we're joking about, potentially the target, that it is okay to target that group or that idea. It is a way for us to sort of communicate ideas and improvise that listening and that communication of behavior in a lot of ways that is what ethics is partly the study of how we behave, how we should behave. In those situations, improvise listening and allowing for failures and mistakes that translates into other areas where you can use those skills. If you are someone who is in a leadership position and you have fallen down on something, it puts you in a position where you have that muscle where you can accept responsibility for that and move through it with the help of other people.

Leonard: I also find an interesting take from Jonathon Friedman who talks about improvisation as it relates to legal ethics. He wrote, "The lecture method ignores the individuality of the listener. Improvisational model succeeds most directly with permitting students how to handle themselves in conflicts by enhancing their self-regulatory competence and confidence." This is very interesting, "Competence and confidence in a skill can only be achieved by doing. Sustained improvisation provides a clear advantage." I thought that was a really interesting idea that you really need – Erica you were on this before, the idea that you need that confidence to speak and competence to understand what's going on.

Byrne: Absolutely and I want to circle back on the point Jen made about failure. I do think one of the other things that improvise teaches you that it is okay to screw up and maybe the thing you screwed up is going to turn into something truly fabulous and maybe it won't. Both of those things are going to be just fine. That is one of the things we are seeing, the more and more your organization has a failure response of assigning responsibility, which sounds conceptually like a good failure response. But what it really means is looking for someone to blame, that's the tipping point. If you're looking for someone to blame – Oh Kelly, that scene was going great until you stepped in and said Bob Dole – or whatever it may be. If it's that response you're going to be a lot more guarded the next time around. This idea of confidence and practice and the bravery to make a mistake and the organization response being that it's okay those are the factors that at the end of the day contributed to someone raising their hand and saying I've got a quality concern, I've got a safety concern, I've got a compliance concern.

Ellison: This actually happened when I was teaching the video game ethics class. When I first started I had my eyes and my nose on my lecture notes and I would lecture directly to the students and they were bored out of their minds and I was bored out of my mind. As an experiment I had my bullet points but I engaged in more conversation with them. Then put them into groups and they would have to come up with things and it became



more of a dialogue versus me just standing and talking at them. I noticed the more I offered those opportunities to them and had that confidence, because initially when I was just reading off my lecture notes and they would challenge me on an idea I would be like no please don't, everyone be quiet. As soon as I put that aside and engaged with them the grades sky rocketed because they were learning in the moment rather than me telling them something that they could barely memorize anyway. That was an instance where having this continued practice, engaging them in conversation we could have those moments of in time learning it paid off. I threw that stuff away and changed the model of the class.

Leonard: Erica, what I think you're both saying is this stuff is too important for check the box learning.

Byrne: Yeah, what we've seen is check the box learning is the kind of thing that you can do if you really don't feel like – basically, if you're resulting to check the box learning, what you're saying to your employees is this is a topic we feel is important enough to really engage you on. That's not the message. If you look at it from a learning and development perspective and you look at it and say I'm going to make this engaging, I'm going to make this story based, I'm going to make sure this is something you really retain this information because I wouldn't make you take this training if it wasn't important. That's when you start to see some of those outcomes turn around and you get the results you want.

Leonard: I was talking to John Mackey who co-founded the Conscious Capitalism movement and they talk about how doing the right thing can be at odds with profit and gross. I was trying to find a quote in this field. I found this really nice quote, which goes back to our people discussion, "Our very lives depend on the ethics of strangers and most of us are always strangers to other people." So, in addition to acknowledging that bad acts are going to happen, which is something we talk about, we also acknowledge that people are very different from one another. Perspective, I think, becomes very important when we talk about wanting to be ethic. I think we have a simplistic idea of our ability to think right from wrong because we're really just seeing it from our own POV.

Ellison: I think that's very true. I think it's often hard to put yourself in the shoes of another person. But – this actually happens with video games when we have the discussion about what it means to do perspective taking – when you are playing a video game particularly sandbox first person shooters video games that you write into the action, something like Skyrim. Those games give us the ability to be somebody else, respond to the world as somebody else and empathy can go up if we are afforded those



opportunities with videogames. However, if those video games also deal in stereotypes in that particular class of person it goes the other way.

Leonard: I'm curious, Erica, have there been any virtual reality advances in the learning model around ethics and compliance?

Byrne: It's interesting that you ask that because it is something that I know a lot of companies are looking at right now. There's been an evolution over the last ten years; courses are getting shorter, there's more and more of the online and the live environment, things are getting more engaging. The Second City shorts are a great example of that where you take a real life scenario and you make it a tiny bit ridiculous to get the humor in there but you're really driving home a really vivid and engaging point with it. Virtual reality is the place that we're headed. We are certainly seeing some game based activities; I would call it more gamification than gaming with some of the gaming elements and putting it into training. A little bit of that competitive piece of it to engage the employees with the scenario. We have a long way to go. Let's call a spade a spade here, we're certainly not in the first person, virtual reality situation, but I think we're going to have to get there because at the end of the day as human being we learn through experience. That's how we end up engaging with each other, that's how we've always engaged with each other. I can take an abstract concept like conflicts of interest and I can put it in very real terms for my organization and I can run you through it in such a way that you really feel the scenario I have gone a really long way towards helping you gain the tools you need to make the right decision when your brother in law comes to you and says, "hey you have to hire my company for this next thing that you guys are doing."

Leonard: I think you're right about VR, it is really fascinating. I think potentially it will be a bit of a game changer. I experienced it at a story telling festival and this was actually a person who wanted to introduce VR into news experiences because she thought that we were getting none by all this news. We could put on the goggles and we were in a cell at Guantanamo next to a prisoner; it was very powerful. It was an empathy booster shot when I experienced it. I think this gamification or game idea – I think it's interesting how we started this conversation about using media to more effectively train people in the areas of ethics and compliance, but it's the proliferation of new media that is likely muddying the waters around ethical behavior. I'm thinking about gamer-gate and social media in general.

Ellison: This is sort of an easy answer to that. I think that when you can go online and just spew whatever it is that you want to spew. I'm a big fan of the internet, I think it's a wonderful place, but there are those places that are less wonderful. This is actually proven that when you engage online without any other information – let's say you and I



are having a Skype conversation; I can read so many visual cues from you and I don't have to fill in any holes in terms of what I'm getting from what you're saying to me. When we are online it is sort of like you're in a car, there is so much coming at you all the time you have things that challenge your own identity constantly. When we don't have to engage with people one on one or even in a visual Skype sense we fill in very negative holes around what people say to us. The result is then escalation rates that are very high from a very polite disagreement to you're what's everything wrong with the world. I think that when we're talking about – and because of that so much of it is consequence free – so we don't get a sense of well I've put this out in the world and how it actually might be affecting people. We're talking about how we ought to live and how we ought to live often extends to social groups. If we don't get any sense of what we're getting back from our behaviors, then all it does is solidify that what we did was right.

Leonard: Of course. Erica, how has social media effected you and what you do?

Byrne: It's been a very interesting process to watch companies try to figure out how they can effectively use social media especially as the demographics are changing. We are seeing a lot more compliance officers logging, writing or tweeting other sort of ways of communicating around some of these key issues. We are seeing the rise of ethics and compliance related apps that companies are using to reach their employees just in time information; oh hey the travel and entertainment systems just showed me that you booked a flight to India, let me ping you on the company phone that we gave you with a reminder about our travel and entertainment policy and our limits around what you're allowed to buy in terms of meals for a government official while you're in India. That sort of information right at the moment that you need the information has been the most exciting area that we've seen from a social media perspective for a lot of folks in my space. It also comes with a ton of risks. What can you say on social media, what can't you say on social media? Should your managers be Facebook friends with the people that report to them? There's a whole host of risk areas that come with some of these different tools. It's like anything else new, people are figuring out how to use it appropriately and what the social norms are. Then also how to really effectively leverage it as a tool.

Leonard: It's funny, my son just graduated high school and this summer he has become Facebook friends with a bunch of his teachers. I was like oh yeah they wouldn't allow that before. It's fun to see that dynamic change. When I was Googling I found this very interesting article from New York Magazine in May and the title is, "Unethical Amnesia Explains Why People Conveniently Forget Their Awful Behavior." First of all, I think unethical amnesia would be a great name for a punk band. Basically it says that recalling unsavory actions causes psychological discomfort so people have fuzzier memories of the



bad things they've done. That makes perfect sense, right? I didn't know that was a thing before I looked it up. That is fascinating to me.

Ellison: It goes into taking on somebody else's POV. It's really hard for us to fail, accept criticism and we have biases that tell us that we are right. We over estimate how right we are so when something happens when we behave poorly or have done something wrong we tend to forget it more easily.

Leonard: This also feels like basic self-regulation – the stuff that we're supposed to be learning when we are little kids and maybe we forget that we need to keep learning it.

Byrne: Again, at the end of the day it's all about people and figuring out how to reach people who are out there creating risks for you on a daily basis, whether its through things like improve skills and active listening for your managers or looking at tools and controls. There's a ton to learn from psychology like the research centered on why people lie and what could potentially stop them from doing it. Ione of the more fascinating examples that I'll throw out for you guys is if you move the certification that you've complied with the travel and expense and gift policy from the last thing you do on your T&E form to the first thing you do on your T&E form so before you do anything on your form the first thing you have to do is check the boxes that says everything I'm going to put on this form is going to be in line with our policy you see T&E fraud decrease dramatically. It's because you immediately reminded somebody before they've done the stupid thing of what you expect of them. Those kinds of insights are what I'm most excited about for the future of this space.

Leonard: Richard Taylor would be very happy to hear all of that because you just did a nudge, that's choice architecture stuff, which is something... I don't know if we talked about this Erica, when we talked before we are actually working with Richard Taylor at the University of Chicago about how choice architecture and its theories can be matched with improvisation because improvisation is all about making new and better and different choices.

Byrne: Yeah and getting yourself in the habit of doing that.

Leonard: It's really fertile ground and we are at 30 minutes and I could talk about this for another 30. I'm going to ask you both one question; Jen I'm going to start with you because you're an improviser and you're used to this stuff. The title of this podcast is "Getting to Yes And" and the idea behind that is so many people in business say no because no is the safer choice. When you say "yes and" to something you are putting yourself out there, you're exploring and heightening. Can you think about something in



your life that was a “yes and” moment where you could have said no but instead you said “yes and...”

Ellison: I think it was when I directed my first outreach and diversity show. I was anxious especially because of the climate; it was the first entirely black ensemble with the first black music director and I’m a white female. I am very sort of strict with myself when I’m honoring people's perspectives and not being the white person who is going to explain racism to everybody. So I had hesitation about it and actually in thinking about it, it became clear to me that I needed to do this because it made me a better person. It was one of the most powerful experiences I ever had. It was less about me telling people what to do and more about hearing what was going on in peoples lives and how they responded to it. For these actors to be in a space where they could totally fail if they needed to and it ended to them succeeding. I’m forever grateful for that experience and I think that I was afraid of being that person and instead of going along with that fear I opted not to.

Leonard: You allowed yourself to be fueled by discomfort rather than defeated by discomfort, which is an improvisational thing.

Ellison: I was enormously uncomfortable with just having to confront some of my own ideas.

Leonard: Your own cognitive biases; we all have them.

Ellison: Absolutely, but it seems very big for me to say it was one of the most rewarding and fantastic learning experiences ever. As an achievement as a director I loved that show because I felt a part of it versus on top of it.

Leonard: Erica do you have a “yes and” story.

Byrne: It might not be exactly what you have in mind, but it was the time I did “yes and” training with Second City. I was actually part of a group that went up to do a combined effort project with the Second City folks and myself. I was the content expert from a compliance standpoint and the Second City guys were the improve guys. It was for the 100 top managers of clients of mine and we got up in the room and the 100 top managers were very nervous about this improvisational thing and what the heck was going on. The compliance officer was very nervous. Doing this project with us was his “yes and” moment. He had no idea how this was going to go down. I originally was the content expert I wasn’t going to do the improvisational part then the director of that program looked at me and said if you don’t do this they’re not going to do this so let’s go. I actually got up on stage with the whole troupe and we did “yes and,” last word and we



did all the exercises. We did thank you, active listening, attitude of gratitude stuff and I had always thought myself to be a good listener and communicator before that but it made a really profound impression on me to be able to go through those exercises on stage, which I was not particularly comfortable with. I've used those skills ever since so that's my "yes and" moment.

Leonard: I love it because it's terrifying and transformative. Honestly, I've been around this for 30 years when I get called on to improvise I immediately just go in my head, I'm uncomfortable in my body and then after I do it I feel great. It's like the best workout. It was funny my friend at the University of Chicago talks about this in a diversity and inclusion sense. She feels like we are getting this conversation wrong. She uses this gym metaphor, which is if you don't feel the burn you're not doing it right. This idea of we need to be able to talk from the discomfort and maybe that's where the discomfort meets the improvisation. That's where end this conversation, thanks for joining me.