

Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 037 - Bring Your Human to Work with Workplace Strategist Erica Keswin

Guests: Kathryn Eckloff, MaryBeth Pecha, Erica Keswin

Summary: Our hosts kick off the show with rave reviews about the multi-level marketing investigative podcast, The Dream. Then, Sonia and Colleen play a round of Persist the Game with creators MaryBeth Pecha and Kathryn Ekloff. Sonia interviews bestselling author, workplace strategist, and Founder of The Spaghetti Project, Erica Keswin. Our hosts wrap with a conversation about entrepreneur Alexa von Tobel's \$200M capital raise.

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(Music.)

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Welcome to episode 37 of Women in Business & Technology. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

SONIA DARA: And I'm Sonia Dara.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: We're kicking off this show in our Community Connect segment with a conversation that Sonia and I had with MaryBeth Pecha and Kathryn Ekloff, two of the founders of Persist the Game, a party game created from the female perspective. The website says that it's "the game you need for a legendary girls' night." We had some fun with them playing a round of Persist as well as chatting about how they got started as game creators.

SONIA DARA: And then, we'll dive into a conversation that I had with Erica Keswin, a bestselling author, workplace strategist, and the founder of The Spaghetti Project. We spoke about her new book, *Bring Your Human to Work: 10 sure fire ways to design a workplace that's good for people, great for business, and just might change the world.*

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Finally, we'll wrap things up in our Cutting Edge segment with a conversation about LearnVest founder Erica von Tobel's latest venture. But before we jump in, Sonia, I need to tell you about this amazing podcast that I've been listening to.

SONIA DARA: Tell me, tell me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: It's called The Dream.

SONIA DARA: Nice.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And it's not about dreams at all, it's about sort of nightmares. People who have gotten involved with multilevel marketing companies.

SONIA DARA: Whoa.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes.

SONIA DARA: Oh, that's cool.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. So these are companies to require their members to recruit their nearest and dearest. So they're largely making money off of commissions instead of selling makeup or purses or fitness bars or shakes or anything like that.

But the reason why I bring it up on this show is, they talk about how multilevel marketing is that women are particularly susceptible to getting involved in these organizations.

SONIA DARA: Interesting.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah. It's for a couple of reasons. Number one, they sort of recruit people who have some downtime, so who don't have like traditional nine-to-five jobs. So many women get involved when they're transitioning maybe from starting a family back into the workplace and they want to make a little bit of extra money. But they also talk about how women are the consumers of these products, and then they eventually just become sellers of them.

I thought it was a particularly interesting podcast maybe for our audience here. I think they might enjoy it. And the reason why I bring it up is, I know that there's a lot of entrepreneurial spirit in our listenership and I highly want to encourage it, but maybe take a listen to this podcast and be careful about the organizations that you get involved with when you're trying to realize your entrepreneurial dreams.

VOICE: Community Connect, get involved and stay connected.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So I have a career card and it's a would you rather, so we're all going to answer it. So would you rather be a leader at a Fortune 500 company or own a small business?

MaryBeth?

MARYBETH PECHA: I'm going to say small business, and I feel like I change every day, but same feeling, small business.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Why is that?

MARYBETH PECHA: I think it's because, and part of it is creating Persist, the intimacy of having something hatch from an idea and seeing it grow. You just feel like you're so close to the creative process. And there's something that I really love about that.

SONIA DARA: I'm feeling actually Fortune 500 today, I don't know why. I don't know.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: A little ambitious over there.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah.

SONIA DARA: I don't know, just like getting more women into those top positions, and if I could take an opportunity and take it.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I would also say small business. I love the process of seeing something through end to end, sometimes I'm a bit of a control freak. I'm really proud of that. So, yeah, I think small business for me.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Yeah, I'd say for me it's probably small business, too. I think I just have like that entrepreneurial spirit now that we've started Persist. And so I like that in a smaller business you get to own different aspects of it and really just kind of take control.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yes. So listeners, you've heard the company Persist a couple of times here, and I want to bring you into the fold. Sonia and I are here in the studio with Kathryn Ekloff and MaryBeth Pecha, two of the founders of Persist the Game. and that's what we're playing right now. Maybe we'll go around and do one more card.

MARYBETH PECHA: Yeah, let's do it. We've got a stack here. I'm going to ask this one with the Bachelor starting next week, this is a leisure sharing card. What's your favorite guilty pleasure TV show?

For me it is absolutely The Bachelor.

SONIA DARA: Excellent. I would probably say Supernatural.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: You love Supernatural.

SONIA DARA: I do love Supernatural. If Jenson Ackles is listening to this, you're the best.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: My guilty pleasure is The Office. I'm not really guilty.

SONIA DARA: No, that's something to be proud about.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: I think we need something guiltier.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Okay, I guess, I don't know, what am I watching? What's that movie, To All the Boys I Loved Before. That's not a TV show, though, but that's a movie that I was like, I should really stop watching this but then I kept going.

SONIA DARA: Maybe a rewatch is worth it, and you'll feel extra guilty.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And it is a movie. You're only supposed to watch it once, but I've teed it up a couple of times, so it feels like a show for me.

All right, what's yours?

MARYBETH PECHA: I would say lately I've been watching this show called Tara's House, which is the Japanese version of the Real World. So it's all in Japanese and it is amazing, subtitled, but it's like there's no drama, which is what's weird about it. It's not like the Real World, but it is.

SONIA DARA: I love it.

MARYBETH PECHA: They all live together, but they're very nice to each other. I just really like that.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So like without the drama?

MARYBETH PECHA: Yeah. It's like there's drama, but it's like it's very low-key drama. And they're adults. They like sit down and they're like, hey, you made me feel bad when you said this and they talk about it.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: They were using their words.

MARYBETH PECHA: There's no fighting. I love it.

SONIA DARA: My mind is blown.

MARYBETH PECHA: Yeah. Definitely check it out.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: All right. I'll have to check that one out.

Okay, so that was two rounds of Persist the Game, a little bit of adjusted play here. But Kathryn and MaryBeth, can you bring us up to speed. What is Persist?

MARYBETH PECHA: So Persist is a card game. We say it's designed from the female perspective. And basically what it is, it's a community game where you are trying to earn cards of the same life values. So we have career cards, relationship, health and leisure.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Don't forget leisure.

MARYBETH PECHA: and so just throughout the game you are doing different actions in order to earn those cards, sometimes you could act something out. Sometimes you're doing trivia. Sometimes it's sharing. There's a lot of different ways, but ultimately you are trying to collect cards of the same type.

SONIA DARA: And then how does one win persist?

KATHRYN EKLOFF: So the person who is going to win is going to collect three milestones. And the way that you get a milestone is on your turn, depending on the six different types of cards we just went through sharing in would you rather, you perform a different action. Once you perform the action you get that card earned. And once you get three of the same, that's one milestone. So I'm either trying to get three career, three leisure, three health, and the first person to get those three wins.

SONIA DARA: Nice. Who is Persist for?

MARYBETH PECHA: I would say it's for a lot of different people. I mean, it's definitely built for females in mind, and particularly ambitious females, but we've found that it actually works really well with male audiences as long as they're kind of openminded and willing to talk about issues that might not come up on a typical basis if you're a man. And really, it's just for people that want to have a good conversation and aren't afraid to laugh and won't take it too seriously.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I'm smirking over here because Sonia and I actually played with a few of our guy friends and one pulled the card that required him to describe what women's periods feel like. And, yeah, it was just like a really intimate and vulnerable moment that I never thought that I'd have with a male friend of mine. So it definitely breaks down some of those gender barriers and boundaries and opens you up to good vulnerable conversation.

SONIA DARA: Totally.

MARYBETH PECHA: Totally and I think, too, one of the things is we're millennial females and we have a certain point of view but we've had people play it cross-generations and it's actually really fun to do that, too, because then you're bringing in -- I know, Kathryn has played with her mom and you learn these deep family secrets that have never surfaced. So that's if you're really brave.

SONIA DARA: I can just imagine.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Wow.

MARYBETH PECHA: So that's if you're really brave.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, I wonder if like my grandmother would be scandalized.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: My grandma kind of was. She ordered one on Kickstarter, but she was very proud of us. She was like, you're trailblazers. But I don't think she actually wants to play it.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Will you tell us a little bit behind the origin story of this game? How did you meet, how did this come to fruition? Give us the garage upstart background here.

MARYBETH PECHA: Well, we didn't start in a garage. We started in a cocktail lounge.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: We're fancy like that.

MARYBETH PECHA: Exactly. So all of us met working at Amazon. We started the same year, 2015. And what we would do, in our area there weren't a lot of females in our group but we would get this happy hour probably about every month. And we would just use it as a time to vent, swap stories, really like come together in solidarity and be like, okay, we're not the only ones who are feeling this way.

And so me, Kathryn and Amber, our third co-founder who is in London, hung back one day and Amber is a really big gamer, and she was like, why isn't there a game that kind of puts this experience together in a box. You know, we leave these happy hours feeling so empowered the next day, just kind of that cathartic release and all that humor, and what if we explore this idea and concept of putting this into a game somehow. What would that even look like?

And at the time we had no idea. We went through all these crazy versions of like a pink Jenga, it looked like a stiletto or something. We didn't even know; the range was pretty broad. But it hatched in that moment of this hypothesis of what if we try to capture this experience in a game so that more women could experience it.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That feeling of being at happy hour, of feeling really empowered, hearing all of the stories around you I could like actually feel that in my body when you were describing it. And I don't want everything I say in this segment to be about women's menstrual cycles, but it reminds me of something that Megan McNally said once, one of my favorite things that she said was, women's ambition is like our

menstrual cycles, we tend to sync up when we're around one another. And how contagious ambition can be. And it's so great that you have like figured out how to capture that ambition or the provocation of ambition in this little box.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: I love that.

SONIA DARA: And it's such a pretty box, too. It's very well designed.

So you mentioned earlier your grandmother wanting to buy the game off of Kickstarter. You received 126 percent of your funding goal on Kickstarter. So why did you decide to crowd fund your project?

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Well, we just really felt like Kickstarter was such a cool opportunity. It's already a built-in audience of people that want to help entrepreneurs, people who are looking for new innovative products, and so there's just that audience is already there. One thing that we found which was a little bit challenging is that we did see that it tends to be a lot more male-focused products and a lot of audience is male. So that was something that we thought was a little bit of a struggle, but it actually, I think, worked out in our favor because people were interested. We were a little bit innovative, not just your standard game that was more of like a strategy/war style game.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Right. You were cornering a market that wasn't already flooded on the platform.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Exactly.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: And this title, Project We Love, can you tell me more about, did Kickstarter bestow that upon you?

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Yeah. They give a badge out to projects that they think are innovative and that they want to draw awareness to. So they gave that to us, which really helped us reach our funding.

SONIA DARA: That's fantastic.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Congratulations.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: The illusive badge that we were trying to, of course, being the Type A that we are ahead of time we're like, how do we get this badge? And there's no -- they're not going to tell their trade secret, but it really is kind of like an editor pick. So when we finally got it, I think it was like the second to last week or the last week. Yes, we finally got it.

SONIA DARA: That's awesome.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That is really cool.

SONIA DARA: That pushed the funding over the edge.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Totally.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: I know a lot of crowd funded projects are not successful, they don't reach their goal. So I just want to commend you. That's a huge accomplishment in and of itself. So congratulations on hitting your funding goals there.

You moved from concept in the cocktail bar to retail launch in nine months.

SONIA DARA: That is crazy fast.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: We have a biased reaction.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Fantastic. First of all, I love the femininity and that timeline, like this game was very much your birth -- your brain child, not your birth child. It's a little Freudian slip there. What motivated that fast pace? Why did you want to get this out there so quickly?

MARYBETH PECHA: You mentioned earlier how ambition is contagious. I think one thing that I've loved so much about Persist is having Kathryn in the game room. And I think if it was just me there's no way I would have done this in nine months. It would have been too overwhelming. But, I think having that built in kind of accountability and also excitement group where you're bouncing ideas off of each other and you're like, yeah, I can do this, I can do this. And also strategically you can break up different deliverables.

So, Kathryn can handle the creative and the design. I could work on meeting with the manufacturers and figuring out how we're going to get it built. So anyone who is trying to launch a business, if you can bring on co-founders and hatch an idea with other people, I think that's a great option. And I think none of us are super-patient people. We definitely live by the kind of try fast and fail fast if you have to, so you can iterate. And once we had a beta that people were responding to we were like we've just got to get this thing going.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: As you mentioned, you both met at Amazon. It sounds like you're still at Amazon. MaryBeth is a manager and, Kathryn; you're an analytical lead at Google. And you kind of touched upon this just now, but what have you learned from this entrepreneurial side hustle? You talked a lot about failing fast and kind of being

nimble, but what are other things that you might be bringing back into your jobs, day jobs and maybe vice versa.

KATHRYN EKLOFF: I think number one is patience. We aren't super-patient, as MaryBeth alluded to. But, we've had to kind of take a step back and realize that sometimes things aren't going to happen as quickly as you'd like and if you don't have the power of a company like Amazon behind you things are going to take a little bit more time and you just have to be comfortable with that. So that's helped us a lot. But, in terms of what I brought back to my job, I would say a lot of confidence and kind of looking at things in a creative way.

Persist helped me get the job that I currently have, because having that on my resume was just really intriguing to my hiring manager. And she knew that if I was doing a side hustle and was an entrepreneur that kind of clearly demonstrated that I had a really great work ethic. So for me that was a big help.

MARYBETH PECHA: I think for me one of the things it provided was this balance that I was kind of lacking. I think when you're at Amazon; I mean you ladies know you can kind of get like really engrossed in your day job. And I think this is why Persist is not my child, but metaphorically it is my child and probably one that I needed to offset some of the craziness and stress I was putting on myself at Amazon.

What's weird is it's kind of counterintuitive, but having that side made me better at my day job, because it forced me to prioritize and it forced me to be more strategic. And I could only have a certain amount of hours allotted versus kind of letting it linger. So I think that was really an unexpected benefit. Another thing for me is just the network that it expanded, because I think it's easy to meet people where you're currently working and have an org there. But, building a side hustle, I mean, Colleen, that's why we're here today, because I met you through Persist. And you've kind of opened up this new door of connections and that's a super-fun way to meet different creatives and get inspired in different ways.

I just want to echo some of your sentiments here. As someone who like derives so much of my identity from my job, I was really challenged by one of our recent guests, Ginger Chien (ph), who talked about this process of needing to define who she was without talking about work. And that was like very anxiety inducing for me. Yeah, to have to describe just my skill set, but not my job title, and I love this notion of creating a project that you're so proud to integrate into your identity and achieve more of that like personal balance and pride, like pride of owning something end-to-end, instead of being a cog in some wheel.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Kathryn and MaryBeth, what is your hope for the future of Persist?

KATHRYN EKLOFF: I'll let MaryBeth speak to this after me. I think we're still trying to figure it out. We definitely have a lot of great ideas and grand visions. But what we've realized as we've had to become more patient is that sometimes you need to live in the now and just be present. And that's something that recently we've started to do. And I think part of it is just all the things going on in our lives, MaryBeth and Amber were working in retail during a really busy time of the year. I have a daughter who is a year. She's become very mobile and I'm always chasing her around. And so we've actually decided that, you know, things are actually good right now. Let's enjoy our success and we still are going to have goals for the future and we have lots of plans. But let's take a moment and just kind of appreciate what we have.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Bravo.

MARYBETH PECHA: My hope for the future is I think what's super-powerful about the game is in this age of social media, where we're getting all of these kind of like artificial connection points that feel like connection points but aren't real. I love the idea of having different games or activities that actually build real connections in different ways and different empathy. So I hope people see the value in that and it just starts to proliferate. And I hope it starts discussions. I think one thing that's great about the game is I really believe in this concept of entertainment as a medium for change, because I think it has the power to kind of break down stigma, break down people's defenses. And so I hope people use it as a tool just to learn more about where each other is coming from, even if maybe we have differing opinions.

Yes, I think that these questions have definitely motivated deeper connections within my group of friends. You know, so many of these relationships that we start to develop post-college, starting a new career, are really around like drinking culture. Like you go out to happy hour with your friends, or you go out on a Friday night, or you go out on the weekend. And I'll never forget this e-mail that I got from Ryan James, shout out Ryan James a friend of mine. He sent me an e-mail about a school program that I had enrolled in and said, you know, I'm a really competitive person. I think that I want to enroll in this class and I thought to myself like I didn't know that about Ryan. I knew that he was fun and that we'd chat about like Seattle sports at the bar, but I didn't know this part of his personality, because a lot of that doesn't necessarily come out when so much of your friend time is party time instead of getting to know each other time.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: That's so true.

MARYBETH PECHA: So I appreciate the depth of conversation that you're really promoting here.

SONIA DARA: So for our listeners, where can they get their hands on the game?

MARYBETH PECHA: Yeah, so a few different places. You can go to our website, PersistTheGame.com and we're also live on Amazon. So if you want to go straight to Amazon and search Persist we will be there.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Fantastic, anywhere else that you'd like to promote here, Instagram, Twitter?

KATHRYN EKLOFF: Yeah, we have an Instagram, it's @PersistTheGame. And we also are on Twitter, although we always laugh, because our third co-founder Amber runs our Twitter. And MaryBeth and I often forget about it. And then she is like on it and one time someone reached out to us and said I follow you on Twitter and both of us were like, oh, we have a Twitter. So, yeah, we do. I don't know what our handle is, PersistTheGame.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Fantastic. Well, thank you both for being here today.

SONIA DARA: One more round?

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, we're definitely going to play another round. This is a really fun game. I appreciate all the work that you're doing. And listeners, we're going to get on with our interview, but we'll do another round here.

SONIA DARA: I'm thrilled to welcome to the studio bestselling author, workplace strategist, and founder of the Spaghetti Project, Erica Keswin.

ERICA KESWIN: Thank you so much for having me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Thanks for coming. So, Erica, your LinkedIn profiles touts that you are a speaker, workplace strategist and a dot connector. Can you share more about what your life's work looks like?

ERICA KESWIN: Sure. So I've spent 20-plus years working in the human capital space and I describe that as helping companies improve their performance through people. So I've done all the different aspects of human capital, from recruiting to performance management, to compensation, to looking at how companies should best be structured.

SONIA DARA: So you also have a Bachelor's in political science and government from the University of Vermont and an MBA with a focus on organizational leadership from Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Congrats, by the way.

ERICA KESWIN: Thank you.

SONIA DARA: We often consider education as a career milestone marker and I'm wondering if that's the case here. When did you realize that you had a passion for understanding workplace trends and transformations?

ERICA KESWIN: It actually took a little bit of time when I got out of undergrad I moved to Washington, D.C., and worked on Capitol Hill. Actually I had applied to law school and I decided to defer it and work for a year, which I would recommend to everybody, just to get a little work experience under your belt. And I ended up getting a job at the Four Seasons in their regional sales office. It was my first exposure to business. And it's actually a funny story. I did a summer house in Dewey Beach, Delaware, when you live in Washington, D.C., that's like the Hamptons of the Washington, D.C. area.

SONIA DARA: Delaware.

ERICA KESWIN: Right, Delaware, who would think. And I met a woman and she worked for Booz Allen. And I didn't know much about Booz Allen. I didn't know much about consulting. But I gave her my resume. And I ended up having about 10 interviews at Booz Allen. And finally a very senior woman partner said, you know what, you're completely unqualified for this job, but we see something in you and we'd like for you to come join us. And so I started working for Booz Allen and made a total pivot into consulting and business. And from there I decided to scrap law school and go to business school.

SONIA DARA: Wow, yeah, that's quite a pivot.

ERICA KESWIN: Yeah.

SONIA DARA: That's amazing. So when did you decide, though, that workplace trends and kind of that transformational work that was kind of where you were pursuing.

ERICA KESWIN: So when I was deciding to go back to business school I looked at five or six schools and when I went to visit Kellogg the school sort of had me at hello. There was something about the culture and the people and it just felt different and being new to the business world at the time I didn't know what that was. But it was a feeling. And Kellogg at the time was best known for its working in teams, which we all do now, but back in 1993 project-based work was pretty new.

So it was through I think choosing Kellogg and being in that environment where we weren't doing things solo, we all had to work together and my focus on leadership and organizational development was piqued. And that was my focus and the rest is history.

SONIA DARA: It's funny how your decision of choosing Kellogg helped kind of curate your career later on.

ERICA KESWIN: Right and I didn't know what that was, like I didn't even think about workplace culture. But, the culture of Kellogg, it is something that is different. My husband always says people all love their schools, but those Kellogg people there was something in the water.

SONIA DARA: So, Erica, you're here at Microsoft this week to share more about your new book, *Bring Your Human to Work: Ten Surefire Ways to Design a Workplace that is Good for People, Great for Business, and Just Might Change the World*. So what trends motivated you to write this book?

ERICA KESWIN: So, I'll share two stories and then some workplace trends. I would say in 1998 I took a trip to Bermuda and I had just gotten -- it sort of dates me. But I had just gotten my first cell phone, this amazing Blackberry, which to this day I still miss. And my fiancée, my now husband, was working, going to a conference in Bermuda. And I was working in executive recruiting and I didn't really have any time off. But with my new, handy-dandy device I was able to go with him and work from the beach and do a lot of work and see him at night.

And I remembered saying to myself out loud on the beach this is the life. It was so new and novel and I thought this is the best thing going. Fast forward 10 years later, I still have my Blackberry. I had gotten an iPhone, which had just come out. And at this point I'm walking around with two phones and trying to figure out how to integrate this in my life. And the contrast in that moment of saying I can't believe this is my life to that experience in Bermuda 10 years earlier got me thinking and seeing the impact of technology on corporate culture and on this new world of work.

And I started asking myself is it a good impact, is it a bad impact. And then the answer is both, that we need to find that what I call the sweet spot between leveraging technology and also putting it in its place. So studying this led me to writing this book and wanting to create a guide for leaders who want to create a more human team, department, division, or even a whole company. But also flipping it and sharing this with employees who might be out there looking for a more human place to work.

SONIA DARA: You also might be interested in this story that sort of demonstrated that I needed to write this book now. And it came about after an interview with a CEO who shared with me this story that a conference call had taken place in his company and he found out after the fact that all nine people had called into the conference call from under the same roof, all nine. So in other words, every single person was either in an elevator bank, a cubicle, or a desk, away from each other.

And it struck me in that moment and being a workplace strategist for so many years, I asked myself: a) what would make someone decide to forego that opportunity to connect with their colleagues face-to-face; and then, b) does it matter to us as people but also to the bottom line of our businesses?

So you asked about workplace trends, the spoiler alert is, yes, it matters. And when you have a more human workplace it does impact employee engagement which goes up, turnover goes down. There's less burnout, there's less stress. And so more and more companies are looking at these things, which are important especially in a tight job market.

SONIA DARA: That's great. And in the book, you profile several iconic brands, including JetBlue, the Union Square Hospitality Group. So how do you identify the companies that are really infusing humanness into their workplace culture?

ERICA KESWIN: So, people will say why are there ten chapters in the book, and do you need to do them all? And what my response is, yes, there are ten chapters in the book and everybody can pick and choose from what I call a menu of options depending on what speaks you to the most, except for Chapter One. And Chapter One is first for a reason. It's called Be Real, and it's about how to speak in a human voice.

So to answer your question about the companies that are really infusing their humanness, to me the companies that get this first chapter right are going to have the best shot at aligning everything else to it.

So it's broken down into three parts. The first is knowing your values. And many companies make the mistake of having, 10, 12, 14 values, and that's a problem for a number of reasons. One is, who can remember 10, 12 or 14 values. Two is it's supposed to drive behavior and if you have that many it's hard to drive behavior. So the test that I use is called the fork in the road. And if you're trying to decide who to hire, who to fire, should you launch this new product, do a deal, your values should help guide you.

So to me the sweet spot is three to six values really helps a company narrow it down to its core. But that's not enough just to know those values. The key is how do you get them off the walls and into the halls? How do you make those values feel alive in a company and how can you empower your employees to live those values when you or when the boss isn't looking?

And so in the book I profile a lot of companies you mentioned, JetBlue that does a great job of empowering their employees to live the values. They have five very clear values, so right in my sweet spot of three to six. The good news for the flyers out there is that their values are in a very specific order, safety being first, and fun is a value but as a frequent flyer I'm glad that it's five on the list and safety is number one.

And they actually have a term that they use to describe the importance of their crew members living their values. And they call it JetGray. And what they say is they know that life's not always black and white, it's often gray and that when you're at 37,000 feet

and you're trying to make a decision in the moment, we want you to live those values and be empowered to make what you think is the right decision.

SONIA DARA: So for our listeners who want to work at a truly human company, what's the best sniff test to figure out how a business actually ranks?

ERICA KESWIN: So if I was interviewing at a company, first I would look at the ten chapters in this book and I would say, which ones speak to me the most? In any company you can't have everything. So there's a chapter called Be Well. Do you want a company that's focused on wellness? There's a chapter that's called Give Back. Is it important to you to work for a company that is connected to outside organizations that allow you to feel connected to something bigger than yourself? There's a chapter called Take Professional Development Personally. And when we think about millennials and Gen Z one of the most important things that they want is to feel that they can grow on the job. So I would look at these ten and pick your top three and use them as a way to vet it. If I were to focus back on this idea of the values being off the walls and into the halls, ask for stories. So many companies have values that are platitudes and they're on a little frame on the desk, or they're on the wall. So ask for stories about what do these values really mean? Can you give examples of how people live them? And they should be able to do that.

SONIA DARA: The long game is another trend that shows up consistently in the book. Companies focused on a sustainable culture instead of short-term gains. So why is this long game perspective so critical in your opinion?

ERICA KESWIN: Change takes time. It doesn't happen overnight. And this chapter in particular is so, so critical. I mean we talk about women in the workplace and trying to move the dial on the numbers of women, people of color in organizations. And I know that's a big issue here at Microsoft. And it does take time, but it takes intention.

ERICA KESWIN: So this chapter is broken down into first talking about companies' diversity and inclusion strategies. But the second piece, I approached it a little bit differently and I talk about the importance of having what I call intentional work practices. So if a company does not have or think about parental leave or bereavement leave or allow people to work in a flexible way, they don't need to work from home all the time, but to have some of that flexibility built into the culture, the company will never be able to attract and retain a diverse workforce. They have to go hand-in-hand.

And the third part is what I call having an enlightened supply chain. So after you've done this for your own company, think about how your organization can make even a bigger and more exponential impact by working with business partners who have these similar values. And I actually read the article recently about Microsoft and was blown away where now at Microsoft you are partnering with working with suppliers, only with

suppliers that give a certain amount of parental leave. So I was very impressed and that is a great way to make an exponential difference in the world.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, the long game obviously takes time. Satya always talks about it whenever we talk about the changes and the growth and it's not going to happen overnight but you have to start somewhere.

So as an employee at a tech company I took particular interest in your findings on people's dependence on or even addiction to tech, specifically in the chapter called The Sweet Spot, finding that special something between tech and connect. So what does that sweet spot look like to you?

ERICA KESWIN: So I am pro-tech, as I said. I at one point was walking around with two phones, but I'm not necessarily pro-tech all the time. And excusing the pun, left to our own devices we're often not connecting. And so this chapter is about being intentional and identifying opportunities to leverage all that's amazing about technology, but then also putting it in its place and connecting in a more impactful way.

And so the way that I lay it out is to think about communication along a continuum. On the one end we have instant message and text to e-mail to picking up the phone to walking down the hall to getting on a plane. I took off in New York and here I am today in Bellevue. And those mediums of communication are not created equal. And what I tell people is that, and what I see, and this is not just millennial or a Gen Z thing, this is all of us from a societal perspective, we are defaulting to that technological end of the spectrum, and we need to pause. If I was running ten minutes late for this podcast, I could send you an e-mail or send you a text. If I needed to talk about something much more substantial, I need to pause and say to myself, what is a better medium to honor that relationship? And I think if we can all get into the habit of doing that that we will find it much easier to find that sweet spot.

SONIA DARA: So speaking of honoring relationships, so my work weeks are characterized by a lot of meetings, some of which can feel pretty transactional. But I really appreciate the challenge that you put forth when it comes to meeting of honor relationships with purpose, presence and protocols.

One of the examples that you shared was about how Refinery 29 creates the conditions for creativity. So we actually interviewed Piera Gelardi. She was a former guest of this show. What about her meetings was so striking to you?

ERICA KESWIN: So what I loved about Piera's approach to meetings is that it's just so intentional. She talks about the purpose behind the meeting and it's to get a cross-functional group of people in a room to share ideas which the data shows leads to more innovation and creativity. So people know the purpose and if that purpose is not aligned to something that you're interested in, then don't come to the meeting.

She thinks about ways to ensure that everybody is present. So you're not on your technology. She, herself, is pretty introverted and took an improv class, which maybe she shared with you. And so everybody comes in and they do an exercise where they shake it out, and everybody shakes their hands and loosens up to make themselves more present.

And then she has protocols, because the data shows that a very small percentage of people in meetings tend to dominate them. And, again, if we want to have more creativity and more innovation in our companies, we need to hear from a diverse set of people. And so she makes sure that everybody has a chance to be heard.

So when I met her at a dinner that I hosted and she was telling me about these peach pit meetings, and by the way they're in her office which have peach-colored walls, and everybody gets peach candy and a little bit of peach rose or something, it really fit what I was trying to say as it came down to meetings because we spend much of our life in meetings and let's make them work for us instead of against us.

SONIA DARA: So in my role with the Surface team we spend a lot of time in partnership with Steelcase to consider what an empowering and satisfying workplace looks like. You cite a survey by Steelcase where they discovered that only 11 percent of workers surveyed were highly satisfied with their work environment. But some companies are combatting that statistic, including Squarespace. Can you share more about what you learned there and why space is such an important consideration for a human workplace?

ERICA KESWIN: Many people are not happy with their work environment although the people at Squarespace are much happier on average given that they have done a phenomenal job of aligning the space with their company values. And the other part that they've done is that many employees don't love a fully open workspace. It's a great idea to some extent because people will bump into each other, which is important, and they will talk more. But many companies don't have enough closed and private spaces to go along with the open space.

And so you need a myriad of places to go to do your thinking work, to connect with two people, four people, eight people. I, too, I visited Steelcase as part of this as well, and look you walk through Steelcase and they have parts of the office that are set up like a Starbucks where you can do your busy work or connect with someone and be alone together; or they have an area set up like library where everybody knows to use their quiet voices. And it goes back again to being intentional and using space as a tool to help employees deepen their connections.

A couple of examples in the book that I'll cite are, and this was interesting, I hadn't seen this when I started, was that companies are even talking about their space in their

company handbook. So Food 52 was a company in New York City, they have two different kitchens. They're an online food company. And they lay it out and they say, here are the different spaces. Here is how -- this is our intention behind how we want them to be used. And, by the way, do the dishes. Don't leave your dishes in the sink. So you can stick some humor in it but using space to help you deepen connections.

SONIA DARA: That's great. I remember Steelcase has done a lot of our build outs and one of them is the teepee one, have you seen the teepee one? Singles workspace. I would get so Zen and focused in there if I needed to work. But thinking about all those different scenarios and, yeah, there's intention behind all of them and then it kind of fills out the practice and behavior right there.

ERICA KESWIN: Another fun example in the book is from Lyft. And one of Lyft's values is create fearlessly. And if you don't have a place to go to do your focus work, where are going to go to create fearlessly? You just don't want everybody sitting in an open office wearing headphones. And so the founder of Lyft, one of the founders, he's obsessed with Willy Wonka, and so in their San Francisco office they have a Willy Wonka room and it has the picture of Willy Wonka on the front, and it's like a secret room. And you go in there and it's set up like a library and everybody knows that's the place where you go to be quiet and to create fearlessly.

So that example does two things, it talks about why space matters, which is the title of that chapter, but it also provides an example of how to get those values off the walls and into the halls and make them come alive.

SONIA DARA: That's such a great example.

So millennials, we've talked about them, Gen Z, but millennials are often disparaged for job hopping in their quest for exciting experiences. So as a millennial I feel very justified and validated by your point of view in that quote: "One of the greatest gifts millennials have given the world is an understanding that human beings need to grow on the job." Personal development is a key component of a truly human workplace.

So how do you recommend that employees take a greater responsibility for their development?

ERICA KESWIN: Well, first I will just say I believe that millennials are bringing amazing things to the workplace, not necessarily new. These are many things that, I'm a Gen Xer, that I wanted, there just weren't enough of me to move the dial. So the rest of us are so grateful that there's enough millennials to say, you know what, work should have meaning, and we should get to grow on the job. So I think it's an amazing time to be in the workplace to see some of these changes come to fruition.

So why did I call this Take Professional Development Personally? When I think of real growth on the job, this is much more than giving everybody an off-the-shelf class that we can all take and check that box. The companies in this book take the time to talk to their employees about how they want to grow, up, down and sideways. There are no longer 20 rungs in the ladder as there used to be. And so it's a combination of asking what's important to you.

One of the companies in the book is DoSomething.org a not for profit, and they don't have a lot of money for professional development, and they asked their employees in addition to your technical skills do you want to become a better public speaker, do you want to have a byline in articles, how do you want to grow? And then they try to match those experiences that they can find to their employees. Now it's easier to do it for 75 people than the amount of people here at Microsoft, but there are ways to use technology to scale those kinds of approaches.

I also talk about how coaching used to be something that was just for the top of the organization and now many companies are having coaches at, I wouldn't say all levels of the organization, but they're certainly bringing it down further. And they also are helping to coach people about their own personal strengths and weaknesses, because they feel that the more people can learn about themselves and what makes them tick and what their strengths and weaknesses are, the better that they will be able to do some coaching of themselves after they become more aware of what they bring to the table.

SONIA DARA: I agree. I've seen a trend of coaching actually spreading a little bit more. It's more accessible to more people, which is great, and more people having interest in becoming a coach from all levels as opposed to just senior people becoming coaches. I've seen that a lot and that growing trend.

ERICA KESWIN: And I love the whole trend also of reverse coaching, reverse mentoring.

SONIA DARA: Absolutely.

ERICA KESWIN: Which also can be a great development opportunity for someone younger.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, absolutely. So your quest for more human connections also inspired the Spaghetti Project, a platform devoted to sharing the science and stories of human connections with global brands, communities, teams and individuals. Can you share more about the origins of the initiative with our audience and the progress you've made in extending those stories?

ERICA KESWIN: So when I started to do the research for the book, I came across a study out of Cornell University. It was done by a professor named Kevin Kniffin. And Kevin

was getting his advanced degree in organization development and he had to study what differentiates performance among teams. And Kevin's father was a firefighter. And so he grew up with firefighters and firehouses, that was his world. And so he decided for his project to study firehouses.

And, long story short, what he found was that the firefighters who were the most dedicated to that long-standing tradition of the firehouse meal, sitting around the table, building trust with their employees, those firefighters actually had higher performance and saved more lives.

SONIA DARA: Wow.

ERICA KESWIN: And so when I heard this story, this was something that I felt and knew intuitively, but I loved hearing about the data and the science behind it. I started interviewing a lot of firefighters and hearing their stories and looking at pictures, they're watching TV shows. And the stereotypical go to meal in a firehouse is spaghetti and meatballs.

And so that was the story behind the name, and launched the Spaghetti Project, which as you said is a platform that shares the science and stories of connection at work. And so I go into companies or community groups and talk about why we're not talking, talking about how technology can get in the way, how we need to be more intentional.

And this is both professional but also personal because the Surgeon General under Obama came out with a study that found that the biggest health risk facing our country is not smoking or second-hand smoke or even sitting, it's isolation and loneliness. And so if that's our health risk and we're spending so much of our day at work, it's important to all of us as people to build deep connections in the workplace.

SONIA DARA: Absolutely. We started implementing a lot of no laptop rules for meetings, especially if it's a brainstorm. I was like, you're distracted by something else you're not going to put your best idea forth, and what's the point of all getting into the room together in the first place.

So another topic is gratitude. And it's been a hot topic in the wellness world, there's gratitude journals, daily practices are all the rage. So what's the most compelling way that you've seen gratitude activated in the workplace?

ERICA KESWIN: So gratitude in the workplace sometimes will come through recognition programs where formally and informally where people are urged to thank their peers, their boss, their direct reports for something that they have done. I think it's a great way to link this back to the values of a company, that if you can thank people and identify ways that they've lived those values and thank them for it, it's a very powerful way to bring those values to life.

I recently had the opportunity to interview one of the cofounders of Away luggage. And they have a Slack channel called Team Love. And everybody in the company goes on the Slack channel and they identify and are asked to put in ways and thank people who have lived the values and the impact that it's had on them personally and on their team. And so it's a way to really scale a lot of this.

One company in that chapter that really impressed me was Indagare, it's a travel company. Every Monday at 9:00 a.m. the COO, Eliza Harris, and the head of HR, they get together and it's informal. Anybody who is around can come join them. And they go around and all say something that they're thankful for. Sometimes it's work-related. Sometimes it's personal. But then they also do an exercise where they wish well for someone. And I thought it was really interesting, because of the conversations that it generated.

So, one of the things about gratitude in the workplace is it also can raise the level of empathy. So if I say, you know what, I'm wishing well right now for my aunt. She's been really sick and I'm her primary care giver. And you and I work together. You know, you might cut me a little slack the next time. You're like, hmm, I wonder why she was late to the meeting, or she seems a little bit distracted. And so the whole idea of coming together and giving thanks and talking about what's going on in people's lives in a real and authentic way can also have directly, or indirectly some real bottom line implications, because if you're more empathetic with me when I'm going through a tough time, I'm going to feel more connected to you, to my team and to the company.

ERICA KESWIN: Yeah, we just had actually with my team a diversity and inclusion lunch just before this. And empathy came up. We went around, round robin style, of like background from your childhood, like a memory or something that you wanted to share. And just from that empathy grew of like, oh, I didn't realize that one of the managers hadn't left his home country until he was 25. And like he was talking about like -- he was like my background and upbringing was just very different from yours. And it already helps like bring the wall down amongst peers and allows you to just work a little bit more closely.

SONIA DARA: So, Erica, where can our listeners find you on the Internet?

ERICA KESWIN: My website is EricaKeswin.com, E-r-i-c-a-k-e-s, as in Sam, w-i-n.c-o-m.

SONIA DARA: Awesome. Thank you so much for joining us on the show.

ERICA KESWIN: Thanks for having me.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Cutting edge, our take on stories in the business and technology world. In this Cutting Edge segment, we're taking a look at an article by Samantha Sharf

that was published on Forbes.com on January 9th titled LearnVest Founder Alexa von Tobel Raising \$200 Million for New Venture Fund.

SONIA DARA: Okay, so first off, Alexa is like one of my heroes in life. I knew her in college. She had just graduated and she was just this beacon of hope for all of us and I love her to death. The last time I saw her was when she came on her book tour, *Financially Fearless*.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: So she ended up dropping out of Harvard Business School, but did you see her while she was there? Did you ever get a chance to meet her?

SONIA DARA: Yeah, I was like a fan girl. And she's like, oh yeah; this like random freshman is following me. I'm like, hi. Yeah, she's awesome. Okay, back to the article. The article cites paperwork filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission that day, which indicates that Alexa, founder of LearnVest and a former Forbes 30 Under 30 honoree, this is why she's so cool, is seeking \$200 million to start a new venture capital fund called Inspired Capital Partners.

COLLEEN: Okay, you're on a first-name basis, but I'm still going to refer to her as von Tobel.

SONIA DARA: Von Tobel, yeah.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Because of the SEC filing process, von Tobel is staying quiet about her plans for now. But Sharf, the author of the article, described that von Tobel's angel investments to date have been all about financial technology opportunities with this emphasis on underserved populations.

SONIA: This fintech trend is of course a continuation of von Tobel's initial founding of LearnVest, a company that provided personal finance content as well as financial planning services. In 2015 Northwestern Mutual bought LearnVest for \$350 million in order to reach a younger audience and become more tech savvy.

COLLEEN: During the first week in January of 2019, von Tobel announced her departure from Northwestern Mutual where she was serving as the Chief Innovation Officer. And just a couple of days later, that's when she filed all of this SEC paperwork. So she's really knocking out those New Year's resolutions pretty quickly!

SONIA DARA: Yeah and she has announced her third child on the way. So she is having like one hell of a 2019. I can imagine this vision board for her and she had her book, *Financially Fearless*, like we mentioned, that debuted in 2013. And there's all this great stuff still coming out of LearnVest, great personal finance content. I'm just really excited to see what's going to happen for Alexa and her career with Inspired Capital Partners.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Yeah, go get them.

Well listeners, that about wraps our show for today. Thank you to MaryBeth Pecha and Kathryn Ekloff for joining us in the studio and playing Persist with us! We cannot wait to meet up for another game.

SONIA DARA: Yeah, and a huge thank you to Erica Keswin for joining me in the studio to talk about creating more human workplaces. It was such a pleasure meeting you and hearing more about your work.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Listeners, please remember to rate, review, and share our show on Apple podcasts or wherever fine podcasts can be found.

SONIA DARA: And if you have any feedback or questions, you can email us at wibt@microsoft.com or tweet us @MicrosoftWomen.

COLLEEN O'BRIEN: Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to tap people to speak about their subject matter expertise and not always about the demographics that they represent. This mission is inspired by last-week's conversation with Edaena Salinas, the host of the Women in Tech show, who explained that many technical women get tapped to speak on quote lady panels or to talk about being a woman in tech. We are all for greater diversity in panel discussions and some conversations require a deep dive on identity. But give those people an opportunity to talk about their work beyond any feelings of otherness they might experience.

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