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**CHRIS DAVIS:** Hello and welcome to the *CARC Podcast* of the Career and Academic Resource Center. I am Chris Davis, the Associate Director of the Career and Academic Resource Center here at Harvard Extension School. And it is my great pleasure to have with me today, virtually, of course, Jessica Halem, MBA. She is a diversity, equity, and inclusion expert and consultant. She was the inaugural LGBTQ Outreach and Engagement Director at Harvard Medical School.

Prior to joining Harvard, Jessica ran the Lesbian Community Cancer Project in Chicago, where she implemented the nation's first cultural competency training through the CDC. And she also served on Barack Obama's first LGBT Advisory Committee. Jessica has published on informed consent and transgender health optimism and organizational change and mentoring across differences.

Jessica, it is such a thrill to have you here today.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** This is great. And I love this. You've really-- we've got the voices for podcasts, don't we? We've got the voices for podcasts.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Back in the day, I was not the biggest fan of public speaking or presenting. I don't know how you feel about it. But over the years, presenting for students; in front of students; or doing these kind of conversations or presentations with faculty, guests, other people, you kind of get that experience. I find my voice has kind of melded to that.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** Yeah, yeah. Chris, how did you get more comfortable? I mean, that's a great segue to dive right in. How-- so there you just admitted it was a fear of yours. You had anxiety. It was like it was something you might have dreaded needing to do, right.

And here you're getting to interview incredible experts; beautiful, amazing people like myself. How did you overcome-- how did you get more brave? What helped you to be more brave?

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Jessica, that's a wonderful question. I'm sure the answer would be different from person to person. But for me, as I said, it just-- it was through experience and kind of having to get through it.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** And that's what I feel like. Part of what we're talking about today, part of it is how do I fast-track some of that experience? Students are listening to this, going, oh, great, I'm still at the early part of my career. I'm stuck in the middle of my career. I'm trying to rev it up. How do I get experience when I don't have experience?

That's one of those awful professional development moments, we've all heard. Well, how do I have the experience if I don't get the experience? But how every day we could practice some of this experience, so that every day is-- we are practicing this? So when we get to the big public speaking, or when we get to a big management role, or when it's our job to facilitate the team, we're not sitting there really stuck, or full of dread, or feeling apprehension or anxiety.

That some of the skills that we will talk about in this workshop are things that you can start practicing every day, in personal interactions in professional interactions, with one person, with a big team. And that's what I love about this workshop, is that it really demystifies this idea of getting experience with a lot of different people in how we communicate, how we get more brave, how we step into conversations more.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Uh-huh. Thank you so much, Jessica. So regardless of what industry people are in, what career stage, what age, this is always something-- speaking, presenting in a work context or in any other context is something that brings a lot of anxiety to people. And in the work that you've done and the experience that you've had, what is the number one kind of fear or anxiety that you see people have about public speaking or presenting?

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** Well, let's just be real. We know that there are some forces at play that are making us feel anxious. You know, I was so glad that you touched on my work in diversity and inclusion because I want to start off by recognizing the elephants in the room, which are power dynamics, power differences, hierarchies.

And that sometimes plays out around a gender. Sometimes it's race. But it's always in the room with us.

And so let's just say, upfront, there are very real reasons why many of us fear speaking up. We have maybe gotten in trouble for it. Some of us get fired. I mean, we are judged in little ways and big ways.

So there's very real reasons why we are all walking around anxious and fearful. And so I want to just recognize that that's happening and that's in the room with us. Power, hierarchy, it's in the room. But we can't let that-- I often-- I can't wait for the revolution before I'm ready to take up some space. I can't wait for the revolution to happen before I feel safe in this office or in this environment.

So I like to say, how can we make this more of a brave space? And a brave space really comes from very small ways that we can support and be there for each other. So this question of what's that first step? How do we do that?

And it's just this-- I mean, I live by this improv rule, which is yes, and. And I just gave away the workshop. There you go, everybody. Spoiler alert, that's the workshop. Thank you very much.

But this improv rule, that when-- we'll talk a little bit in the workshop about the history of improv, where it all comes from. But this yes, and philosophy of life for me is how I live my life professionally and personally. And that, for me, is just about being brave, and bold, and fearless, and being-- and putting yourself out there because it is so important, because who you are is important, what you have to say. The world needs us, right.

And so I hold all of that. And I just make those brave first steps. And being the improviser that I am, I can't even remember what the question was.

[LAUGH]

**CHRIS DAVIS:** But-- no, no, I did want to ask you, because I'm very interested. And I was really intrigued. That's one of the reasons why I also wanted to reach out to you, kind of utilizing skills that one learns in improv to be more comfortable communicating at work. And I wanted to hear from you a little bit, how-- I mean, you have a background, I believe, in stand-up comedy-- and, yeah.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** I'm a proud theater nerd, proud theater kid. And I worked in stand-up up comedy for 15 years. And I still consider myself a writer and an improviser at heart. I would get back into acting if I wasn't so terrible at it.

[LAUGH]

You know, I am-- I have to say I'm always so surprised that we don't meld all these skills together in the workplace. I think I'm always so surprised. I always-- when I'm with a group-- so we do this workshop, I'm always so struck by how much everyone loves comedy, loves to watch comedy. We talk about *Saturday Night Live*. We all watch that.

And somehow that all becomes sort of an after 5:00 o'clock endeavor. It's like, well, after 5:00 o'clock, we do art and theater. And I listen to good music. I do things that make me happy.

But somewhere along the line, between 9:00 and 5:00, we have to-- no one's allowed to have a good time. No one's allowed to be a real person. We can't-- and I don't know where that happened. But it's a terrible way to live because not-- human beings, we are not bifurcated, segmented people. We don't turn it off and on.

We're all the same people, all the time. Of course, I use a professional voice sometimes. I don't curse as much at work. But other than that, we have to start bringing in some of our real parts at all times at work.

This is the part-- again, you're finding the synergy between being-- thinking about diversity, equity, and inclusion and these improv skills is-- we so often say-- in diversity work, you'll hear everyone say, we want you to bring your whole self to work. We want you to be your authentic self at work.

And how-- this is missing piece, that I have felt for years, which is the-- having a sense of humor, being more optimistic. Improv teaches us empathy skills. It teaches us in optimism.

And those are muscles we have to practice. That's all acting is, is practice. Your getting over your fears of public speaking, Chris, it was just practice.

So this workshop is about learning some of the skills to practice and strengthen our muscles of empathy, of optimism, and bravery. And so it's about practicing that in little ways, and small ways, big ways, every day, so that it gets-- we get we get more confident.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Thank you so much, Jessica. And, yes, you brought something that I also wanted to segue into. Your diversity, equity, and inclusion work is also something that I think is very relevant.

Our students are adult, part-time learners. They're generally not traditional college-age students. They are-- their average age is in their mid-thirties. Some are mid-career folks. Some are senior-level career folks.

And so that's certainly a factor that they're also thinking of they're bringing with them to their experience as students at Extension School. And I did an unconscious bias webinar with a wonderful presenter a couple of years ago. One of the questions, that I think was asked more than once in the unconscious bias webinars that I hosted, came from students who said, I am-- whether it's race, or ethnicity, or sexual orientation, in whatever sense, I'm kind of a minority in my work environment, in my professional environment.

And there are a lot of inclusive messaging and language that's coming from our senior leaders, which is wonderful. But in practice, I still feel very much kind of isolated and not seeing-- I can't singlehandedly change my workplace's culture. But what can I do to make a difference here? What would you say to that?

**JESSICA**

**HALEM:**

Well, it's-- I mean, I think that's the million dollar question, right, that everyone's spending \$1,000,000 on. We can have all the committees in the world. And we can write all the white papers. And we can-- I really-- I get a lot out of the unconscious bias science.

There's a lot of science behind that, that I think actually helps me understand our brains a lot. And a lot of that influences my strong commitment. It brought me back to this improv work.

I've been doing improv for 25 years now. I've studied improv comedy in Chicago, worked in improv comedy in Chicago for years, studied with the greats. And then I just see such a connection between our need to change workplaces and our inability to communicate authentically with each other.

And so improv is about empathy. And it's about being present. And I feel like one of the bridges between all the committees and the managers, who aren't making any change, and how do we make big change, it's also these small interactions. It's these small moments of being present with each other.

So improv, at its core, is about listening, and empathy, and being present. You cannot be an improv-- you can't be an improv actor. You can't be a comedian. Your success is about being present and listening.

But, gosh, I mean, just think-- those are life skills. That's what we are asking of each other. That's what-- if you asked any diversity trainer in the world, they would love-- they would say, my gosh, that's the golden ticket right there.

And I'm telling you, you can do that with a sense of humor and a sense of optimism. And we can be more present with each other. And I feel like that is the missing key to all the committee work and the big managerial trainings.

It's not the-- it's not the replacement. But it's a missing key to all of that, which is empowering and strengthening our ability to communicate with each other in a way that's honest, and equal, and thoughtful, and loving. Really, when you learn these improv skills, you hear at the heart of it how much love there is for each other.

You have to be open to each other. You have to listen to your people. You are-- improv is about co-creating something. In our workplaces, we are striving for more co-creation.

We are saying, bring your full selves. Everybody should participate. We know that that is what our diversity message is, everyone's ideas at the table. Everyone's voice is heard.

But how do we actually practice that? So I'm saying this improv stuff, which is-- I'm not going to make anyone a comedian. No one's going to go out and be able to be a great actor after this. But it's just a way of communicating with each other, that practices some of these big picture skills, like empathy, love, optimism. It's just-- it's a way to practice on an individual basis some of the big picture stuff we're talking about.

**CHRIS DAVIS:**

That's great. That's great. I also want to expand on that a little bit because you did this work also within academia, at Harvard, at the medical school for many years. Is there any other layer of that, that you would add to an academic setting?

Now, I know that you worked at the medical school With presumably medical school faculty and students.

**JESSICA**

**HALEM:**

Yeah.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** And that presumably looks somewhat different than classrooms that are in other subjects, other fields.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** Of course, everyone. It's harder. It's harder. It's like the 1970s in medicine. Medicine classrooms are very, very difficult. But the classroom setting, higher ed, academia-- Again, I go back to this point that we made around power and hierarchy are just seeped into everything we do.

And it's-- I see it just crushing people. It's crushing students, that anxiety about speaking up with faculty, amongst each other, the power dynamics, people who feel they belong, people who feel like an imposter. I mean it's just the elephant in the room. It's just there at all times.

So what's the secret sauce? I mean, listen, I think people at the med school-- I'm very proud of what we achieved at the med school. I'm very proud of what I did there. And I think the secret sauce truly was my sense of humor. And I think I have a great sense of humor.

[LAUGH]

I laugh at myself more than other people laugh. I take myself lightly. I have a sense of humor. Things roll off my back.

I think fast on my feet. I have a sense of humor. I love people. I feel joy.

It doesn't mean I don't have hard days. But I try to lean into my sense of humor because I feel like it's the kind of life skills that connect us to human beings, like we just want the world to be better. We just want to do good work. We want our days to be meaningful. We want to make an impact.

And so the least I can do is shed some of the skin from the outside, some of that hardened layers that I've developed, the walls that I've put up. The least I can do is shed some of that, and take some risks, and be myself, and be more open and loving. And that's what I mean by having a sense of humor.

And I think in higher ed, it worked I think people respected it. I think people liked it. I think it was a breath of fresh air.

People would say that all the time to me, Chris. They'd be like, oh, my gosh. This is at Harvard all the time. Oh, Jessica, you're such a breath of fresh air.

And for those of you who work in a place like Harvard-- there's a lot of places like Harvard-- you know it says-- that says more about the other person than the other-- than it does about you. I'm like, I'm just me. That says a lot about you.

People, we're all in this together, like everyone's thinking the same thing. I feel like the pandemic really reminded us all, like suddenly we're not together. Suddenly we're ripped apart. I'm alone in my house. I miss people.

We feel the air is unsafe. I'm running in and out of restaurants. I mean, getting my food.

You know, life is short. And I hope that doing this workshop at this time, as we start to think about life after the pandemic, I hope that people will start to say maybe I, too, could bring my sense of humor to work. Maybe I, too, could be more optimistic. Maybe I could remember why I got into this in the first place.

It's very easy to be negative. It's very easy to know all the reasons why things won't work. It's very hard to find the empathy and optimism. So that's the challenge, right.

And so I think the people, to go back to your question, I think if you ask the people I worked with at Harvard, they would say she reminded me to be optimistic again. She reminded me of why I got into this.

She brought us back to the real-- the core of the matter. And that's what everybody can do. Everybody can do that. Let's get back to basics. Let's get back to why we're here. Let's get back to our shared mission and our shared goals.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Do you think that communicating virtually, more so than we've ever done before, has changed the way people think about communication, how they relate to each other? Have there been, do you think, any advancements made in that area or are we just kind of a ticking clock, waiting to go back to what we were a couple of years ago?

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** I think it's a great question. And that's why I was excited to develop this workshop that I've done in person so much. I was excited for this time to develop it for the Zoom environment because I do think we have to approach this differently.

I'm working with a team that is like a startup tech company. And they all work virtually, obviously, now. And they will continue. They've decided they will continue to all live in different areas and work virtually. And I'm working with that team. Once a quarter, we get together to talk about communication online.

And for them, they needed permission to say-- this is something different. Working online together is different. And we can't just bring our old way of operating and put it onto this.

And so we are really trying, from the ground up, rewrite the rules of engagement for how this team is going to operate. And I just feel like the manager-- the manager who brought me in, she's like, I don't have time to rewrite this. I have to keep doing the work.

So it's about taking the time to say, how are we going to operate? What's OK? How much-- it can't just be-- it's so funny. I was talking to someone. They were like, oh, you would love our office. I love working here.

And I said, oh, why? She said they don't expect us to do email over the weekends. And I was like, oh, man, the bar is so low. The bar-- the bar is so low, people. Like, if literally-- she was like, this is the best team. We don't have to do email over the weekend.

So I was like, everybody, we've got to talk about this. We have got to stop meeting like this, like this is ridiculous. Like, of course, we're not going to do as much email over the weekends. Like if that's when you catch up, fine, great, whatever.

Like, everybody, put it on the table. Like, we have got to talk about this. And when you specialize in talking about gender and sexuality, which is my specialty-- I talk about gender and sexuality-- I mean, there's nothing harder on the planet to talk about than that, right.

So let's get it out in the open. Let's have some hard conversations. Again, we want to do it with empathy and grace. We don't want to be mean-spirited.

We have to navigate these waters carefully with each other. We don't want to hurt each other's feelings by saying, Joey, you're the biggest jerk on the team. You've got to-- we've got to find ways to communicate with each other with empathy, and optimism, and love. But we've got to rewrite the rules of how we work together. Like, this is-- it's just like absolutely.

And then when we all come back into the office, or it's going to be hybrid, no one's going to expect us, especially the kind of professional-level class-- professional class, that I know many of us listening to this are-- we just can't. It's not business as usual, the way it was before. And so be brave. Have those conversations. Rewrite the script.

Find out, how can I bring my best foot forward. And just be honest about it, right. Just be honest about what you need to operate.

I use a lot of exclamation points in my emails. I'm not going to feel shamed about that anymore, people. I'm not taking them out. I'm putting them all in.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Jessica, I'm so glad you said that because-- yeah, I've heard from people that work in organizations where-- I think in the last year, they've become much more mindful and thoughtful about work/life balance. And other employers, other organizations, that have gone the other way, and basically said, well, you're working remotely. And your computer's home. So you are on-call more than ever.

So it's interesting. There's definitely been a bifurcation in, I think, how some people have approached this. But it's definitely not going to be going away with snap of our fingers. So we'll see.

**JESSICA  
HALEM:** Chris, you know what I think the answer-- I mean, one of the reasons why I believe-- I know why we spent-- we are not-- I'm not the first person to say this. We are not working strategically. And we're not working efficiently.

And part of-- getting back to this workshop that, at the core, it's about every meeting, every interaction, could be life changing, could be work-- it could be the big meeting. You could come up with breakthroughs. You could figure out the answers. You could get more done, get to it faster.

One of the reasons why we have too many meetings and too many emails is because we are not doing them well. We are not being honest. People are not participating.

And we just got to-- we've got to rip the Band-Aid off and figure out how to get everyone to participate, everyone to bring their best ideas forward. That's the key of this.

I would like to see-- I'm all for the four-- three-day week, four-day week, four hours a day. But, my gosh, if you're giving your all for four hours, and people really feel like they're collaborating, and co-creating, and people are listening to them-- and you're-- what we do in improv, it's like building on each other's great ideas-- then we could get it all done in four hours, people. We could.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Yeah, that's right. So, Jessica, I am going to close with one question, that is going to sound entirely out of left field. But I couldn't help asking, partly because I know that there are younger folks, that have no idea who this person is. And I think it's important that people do remember her.

You had mentioned that your first job was working for Bella Abzug.

[LAUGH]

Now, she is one of the-- for me, one of the great figures of 20th century history. And I just wanted to close by asking you, what was it like working for her? What did you learn from her?

**JESSICA  
HALEM:**

Oh, that's such a-- thank you so much for asking about her and honoring her. She was a member of Congress in the '70s, from New York City, life-long, went to law school, was a lawyer, labor lawyer, civil rights lawyer, women's movement architect.

Everything that the-- people, like Gloria Steinem, that-- all the things that she said, it was figured out in a strategy session with Bella Abzug. And Bella really was the architect and behind so much of the great social justice work of the 20th century. Thank you.

I had the opportunity to be her executive assistant for the last few years of her life. She was working on her memoirs. We ran a nonprofit in New York City.

I learned-- I mean, I think it goes back to what we've said. I learned about how precious every meeting could be.

Bella would never let an opportunity go by. Bella would never let a conversation with anyone-- someone hoity-- hoi polloi, someone-- she would never let an opportunity go by to not make a connection, to not ask them a question or make a demand. She was always advocating, always lobbying, for something.

And so one of the takeaways I got from her was like-- she always had an ask. She always had something she was ready to ask an elected official for, a celebrity for, whoever came in our-- across our path. But she also took every opportunity to get to know people's stories because she was knitting together her view of life.

She was a social justice warrior from the gut out. No one needed to tell her how to understand things. She intuitively saw all the connections and made it happen.

And I think that's what I really got from her is, she never let an opportunity pass to not make a deep connection with a stranger or an elected official. She never let an opportunity pass to not push somebody on an issue. And she never missed an opportunity to laugh.

She had a terrific sense of humor. She loved to laugh. She loved to have a good time.

And there was-- she never separated it. Her activism, and her good time, and her relationships, they were all forged together in the fire. Those relationships were forged through love, humor, and fights. And they were all intertwined.

And that, to me, is how I think-- I think I've continued to live my life that way, always bringing joy and the hard work together. And we owe Bella so much. And I hope to-- I hope I make her proud every day by living my truth and pushing wherever I can.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Well, with that, Jessica Halem, I want to say thank you so much. This was a fun conversation. It was an informative conversation

**JESSICA  
HALEM:**

I'm really excited about the work that you do there. Thanks.

**CHRIS DAVIS:** Sounds good.

**JESSICA** Thank you, Chris.

**HALEM:**

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**CHRIS DAVIS:** You have listened to the *CARC Podcast*. This is the podcast for the Career and Academic Research Center here at Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.