

THE  
ECONOMIC  
CLUB OF  
CHICAGO

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The Club and Chicago Innovation co-hosted a special meeting, the “Art of Innovation” on January 24 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC). The evening included performances by students at SAIC and a panel discussion on the topic, moderated by Club member Howard Tullman, executive director at the Ed Kaplan Family Institute for Innovation and Tech Entrepreneurship at the Illinois Institute of Technology. The panelists that evening included:

- Eva Maddox, Consulting Principal at Eva Maddox Design Strategies, LLC
- Kelly Leonard, Executive Director of Insights and Applied Improvisation at The Second City
- Ashley Wheater, Artistic Director at The Joffrey Ballet

After the panel discussion, participants answered live questions from the audience. Below are excerpts from the program:

***On what skills business leaders can learn from artists....***

Kelly Leonard: “The [improvisation] training is to teach you to go into the unknown, to be comfortable with risk, to be agile, and it’s practice. It’s funny, people don’t recognize this idea of it being practice. You don’t go to the gym once and say ‘I’m good,’ right? If you want to be innovative you have to practice innovation.”

***On constraints in artistry...***

Eva Maddox: “I have never worked without constraints, and actually it’s not fun to work without constraints, because you have to find what the problem is, and then you start thinking and creating ways to make [a project] come about. Constraints help. In our profession, in terms of architecture and design, we always have constraints, whether it’s the site, or the money or the program. The creative aspect is trying to solve that and trying to find options that will make the brand come alive.”

***On the movement away from subscriptions to live performance companies...***

Ashley Wheater: “We sit in a unique position today, where in the last 10 years we’ve actually seen our subscriptions increase. That’s a rarity. [...] The reality is that you can never sit on your laurels. You need to look to the future and always be one step ahead, because we know that the day is going to come when it won’t be that way.”

***On relinquishing control of a brand and a narrative...***

KL: “I worked at the box office at Second City in the late 80s, and I used to get furious with people who called it a comedy club. [...] It’s a theater. It’s an actors’ equity theater. It has theater roots and people always thought it was a comedy club. Then when I started running the place in 1992, when I started

producing, I quickly realized that part of the reason we were so successful is because people didn't think we were a theater, they thought we were a comedy club. It wasn't expensive, you could wear jeans. I realized there's a whole context of how our business has been perceived, and we're only somewhat in control of that narrative. Sometimes when you learn to release your preconceived notions about the narrative, you're in a better place."

***On leading creative teams...***

AW: "You create a culture [in organizations], and that culture has to allow people to come to the table, and you have to want to listen. There is no bad idea. It might not work, but there's no bad idea. If you shut people down and you don't allow them that space, then you're killing your creativity."

***On what to look for when hiring creative team members...***

EM: "The idea of finding young talent who has a lot of dimension to themselves and has been able to explore different types of media; that tells you something. It tells you that they're pretty open."

AW: "We don't have so many boundaries. We all grow up in a certain way to do certain things, but I think an artist is able to break through all of that. Therefore, what you're looking for in people who come to work for you is that little window you can see that [shows] they actually have something they really want to say. You allow them that. You're not going to shut that door on them."

KL: "Stop looking for a cultural fit. That's bullshit and all you're doing is hiring people that look like you. There are stacks of evidence that show that diverse teams are the most successful teams, which means you're going to have people who annoy you, who come from a different socioeconomic class, who scare you maybe a bit. The reality is, you have to become comfortable with your discomfort if you're going to innovate. Which means you need shit-disturbers on your team. And artists are shit-disturbers."