Improv Is No Joke 9: John Barlow

Peter: John, welcome to my podcast. It's great to see you. First and foremost thank you for taking the time to spend with me having a great conversation, so into the conversation we had on that Delta flight coming back from Atlanta. I greatly appreciate you taking the time and welcome to the show.

John: Well you're welcome and thank you for having me. I'm looking forward to it.

Peter: Thanks, John. Let's start off by telling the audience a little bit about who you are, about your background, a little about yourself.

John: Okay so I grew up in Pennsylvania, southeastern Pennsylvania. I like to say distant suburbs of Philadelphia to try to distance myself from Philadelphia. I grew up there. I spent a lot of time going to the beach for vacations, weekend trips. I absolutely love the beach, love sitting there, listening to the ocean. It's peaceful calming. Hopefully, my retirement location someday is a beach. Went to Penn State for four years. Got an engineering degree. Honestly, at the time when I was coming out of school, the job market was pretty bad so I had actually enrolled to go to grad school to get a masters in acoustic engineering, but low and behold, during finals week, I got a phone interview from Honda. Then they invited me out for a second interview and gave me an offer, and I've been there for almost twenty-two years.

So now I live here in central Ohio, got married, have two boys, now divorced. My boys are nine and thirteen, both very active in sports, and I like to volunteer to work with them. I like teaching kids. I like teaching people in general. I find it rewarding and - especially with the kids - you get to teach them about sports, and then also about life and being good people. Some of those kids don't have role models. They don't have somebody. With a lot of divorces today, they don't have a father figure sometimes that to teach them the right way to do things and how to be men. So you get to help mold them into young men.

So then, of course, I work as an engineer at Honda. I know you and I talked about this, but of course, there's the stereotype of the engineer. I don't exactly fit that mold to a tee. Most engineers think with one side of their brain. They're very analytical, all about numbers, but I actually use the other side of my brain for a lot of things. I play drums in a band. I also do graphic design. I design t-shirts and logos. I like to do a lot of different creative things. The creative side of me makes me a little bit of a different type of engineer at Honda. I usually see things from a much different perspective than other people and when we get engaged in conversation, arguments, disagreements, whatever; oftentimes I bring a different perspective to things. You know the interesting thing is one of my primary jobs is to actually understand how people use the interiors of vehicles and then try to make requirements such that we can accommodate the way people want to be able to use the vehicle. Sometimes they don't even know they can't answer you how they want to use the car, but if you observe their tendencies and study the way that people use cars, you can learn a lot of things. So I’m trying to understand the different ways that people use cars. They're vastly different so, in that kind of a position, you have to have a really wide viewpoint to be able to understand how all people used cars, not just your specific way. So that's one of the things that I try to impart into a lot of people that I work with, whether they be direct reports that are

in my department or people that I come across some meetings. I try to impart with them that you have to have a wider viewpoint, basically, be empathetic to other people and how they do things and use things and want to use things. I think my creative mind is what allows me to have a much wider perspective than most people. I'm considered, within our company, as one of the very out-of-the-box thinkers, very creative minded and open minded.

Peter: If I remember correctly, on the plane, when you were telling me about your background - and I forgot what's your title at Honda?

John: My title is a principal engineer, but I'm actually an interior technical strap veggie leader, among many other titles. So I work on creating strategies for future interiors for our vehicles.

Peter: Remember we were having this conversation, and you're talking about your being a drummer, and this creative side where I called you the accidental engineer, and I'm the kind of the accidental accountant. I branded myself because I like to use both sides of my brain. Probably my right side stronger than my left side. Sometimes I feel like a right-brain person in a left-brain world, but there was one of you said something about you almost became an acoustic engineer?

John: When I was signed up, I was accepted into Penn State for grad school to be going to the acoustical program for engineering. At that time, the reason why I wanted to do it is I played drums so I wanted to learn the acoustics, and basically be able to design recording studios and things like that. So if you ever go and look at recording studios or even think about movie theaters or anything like that, there's a lot that goes into the design of them. Everything from the angles of the all the walls, the shapes that are inside as well, as the acoustic treatments that go into it. Generally, those spaces are very well designed so that they fit the perfect acoustic needs of whatever the space is designed for. For example, if you're in a hall where maybe somebody's speaking and you want everybody to hear the speaking at the same volume level, you can design the ceiling to reflect the sound so that it goes and has dispersed to everybody equally. In a recording studio, general, you want to isolate the sounds so you make it such that the sound gets bounced around. It can be evenly dispersed, but you also want to absorb certain frequencies as well. I wanted to go and learn about all that stuff. At the time, my dream was that I was going to go start designing recording studios or something like that. I thought that would be fun...or something in the in the music industry in general. That was my big passion at the time, still is, but you know I also like cars.

Peter: You drive a Honda?

John: Yeah, I do.

Peter: So I listened to what you do at work and the people that you're interacting with at work, and you having such a really strong creative side, what's the biggest challenge that you have in dealing with the people that report to you, your peers or whatever, in a creative type and very much a left-brain world?

John: The hardest part is getting people to open their minds and to imagine things that don't exist yet because my focus is on things that are in the future that don't exist yet in a world that doesn't exist yet. I go to go to shows like CES for the consumer electronics, and I see the trends and I see what things are happening, and I essentially futurecast those things and almost, in my mind, predict what I expect the future is going to be like. I take that information and I tried to build it into something that I think our future customers will want, but getting somebody who doesn't think that way to understand the need and why we need to do things differently, so that we can be prepared for that in the future, is really hard because most people really look at today and at most, maybe they're looking one year into the future which is fairly predictive, right? You can guess in one year where things are going to be. Fifteen years from now? Nobody can really predict. I mean, fifteen years ago if you would have guessed that tablets and cell phones would be the way they are today. Nobody would have predicted that so somebody fifteen years ago probably did. They knew something, but getting those people to think that far into the future is really hard.

Peter: So what type of techniques do you use when you're trying to get someone to go into your mind and see what you're seeing when you know that they're having a hard time getting out of year one?

John: I carry a big club. It's a good question. Sometimes you have to use different tactics depending on who the person is that you're talking to, but a lot of it is really trying to build a logical storyboard. Part of it is trying to show a trend. Exactly the situation that I explained is one of the things that we do to people is, okay think fifteen years ago and what you knew then; and you tell them what the year is, and think about what technologies, and you show this to them on a PowerPoint slide. These are the technologies that existed fifteen years ago. Now look at today. Would you have guessed then that this would be what today is like? Now imagine fifteen years from now I'm telling you that these things are what is going to be happening. Can you imagine that based on what happened from fifteen years ago to today? When you start to paint things in that kind of a light, people understand how quickly things are changing, and then they start to open up their minds a little bit more and realize that you know some of the things that sound unrealistic, actually probably are pretty realistic and probably will happen.

Peter: We have a lot more than in common than I realize because I have the same conversation in my profession. There's a book - I don’t know if you read this - it's by Geoff Colvin, senior editor, managing editor at Fortune, came out with last year called Humans Are Underrated. He talks about the technology and technology changing, and he makes references to cognitive computing AKA Watson. I do a presentation called Leveraging in Your Leadership Through Improvisation so I take them back to 1995. In 1995, were using a 10-key. We use Excel now. In 1995, we have one computer on our desk with a back end about twelve inches to a foot deep. Most people these days have three or four screens, and I go, so where do you think we're going to be in 2025? I tried to make the argument that I truly believe. The way technology is going, that Excel will be extinct by maybe 2020, if not sooner.

John: It could be that very well could be. It's interesting because most people don't think about these things, but you think about today's cell phone and you have more computing power in a cell phone then the computers I had when I was coming out of college. So you're talking about twenty-two years, and all the sudden the computing power of something that small is greater than something probably the computers that actually filled an entire room. That's pretty impressive.

Peter: It is and part of my argument is if you're gonna have machines, the Watsons of the world that can do the computing for us, what roles do we need to start playing it was in the workforce? Then if I don't have to be the number cruncher, I have to be more of a relationship builder, much more so. You're doing that already with the way you approach your job and approach your day in and day out. You're building relationships because you gotta build some trust and support and respect with your team that they don't think that you're off your reservation so they've got buy-in. I'm sure that always takes time, but you also have to think about what could be next. The other thing that goes through my mind is I look at the universities full of engineering students, accounting students. Really what are we teaching them today? By the time they graduate, will they even be using any of that? What should we teach them?

John: For the engineers, I think there will always be something. I don't know what that next future challenge is, but you know it's interesting because when we talk about this future technology, you know part of it is actually trying to establish a relationship between human and machine because the more of a relationship you can build there, there's more trust in the technology. It seems like a lot of people strive for that, you know, especially as technology is starting to provide services for people. You don't want to come across as it's a machine right? Like you want it to be more personal than that so it's kind of interesting. I mean, yeah I don't know. There'll always be something there for those engineers, all the students that go to school, but they'll have different challenges I think.

Peter: In Colvin's book, he says, "Where we differ from machines is that we can communicate with creative and we can collaborate. There're our strengths. No matter what profession, what trade, whatever, that's where we excel. Where a machine is programmed and they can only do with what's within that programming", but then I look at - we're talking about changing technology - last July, Phoenix, Arizona McDonald's opened its first robotic McDonald's. Now there are three people in the store to make sure that they're well-oiled, they're not breaking down, they're not taking a lot of smoke breaks or something like that, but these highly repetitive jobs, he argues, that will be replaced by the machine so what can we do differently. You also mentioned something about using your right side of the brain. You said you're more sympathetic. He argues that that is going to be one of the key skill sets moving forward and he says that, in general, this is where men lack from women because they empathize better than men do, and they will become the future overall leaders of organizations and stuff as technology changes. The ability to empathize - maybe he should write it in a different way. Those who have the ability to empathize will become better leaders in the future then maybe in the past.

John: Yeah, you know it's interesting. I'm gonna have to grab a pen and write that book down because I want to read that. Sounds interesting. As much as I hate stereotyping, I would generally agree with him. I think, in most cases, women are better at empathizing than men are, but it's not a standard of course, right? I don't know if that will mean that women will be the leaders in the future because they can be more empathetic. I don't know. That's an interesting question.

Peter: It is an interesting question. It's an interesting concept that he brought up and knowing - John, if you pick up his book Humans Are Underrated - you fly a lot from Columbus to Los Angeles. I figure within one trip of flying out, flying back, you'll have that book pretty much knocked out.

John: Well it sounds like an interesting read so yeah, absolutely, I'm gonna have to pick that one out.

Peter: It really is a really good read. I picked it up immediately. It was on the front page of Fortune Magazine because it was a book that came out before that a few years ago called The Second Machine Age, which was written by a couple of MIT computer science PhDs. I read the book and this was pretty much over my head that I had to read it on the ladder and still was a little bit over my head, but I was able to get the gist of it. Basically, the gist of that book is along the lines of Colvin's book, but he brings it into perspective as of 2014-2015. These guys are probably back in 2010-2011.

I know there's another good book that you've read because I sent it to you. I gave you a copy of the book and you said that you read it, and you became almost an instant fan because you started sending me emails and stuff, after the fact, saying you loved it and you're able to apply it. Can you share some of those experiences?

John: Yeah, the first time I read the book, I connected with a lot. You know it really impacted me because the first thing I'll say is I don't generally read books. I'm not a book reader. I actually hate reading, but the books that I do read are generally books that are self-help or self-improvement or books that are of that nature. When I read your book, I was able to really relate to a lot of the stories that you gave when you talked about the principle of "Yes, And". It really resonated with me, and you know I love to people watch, especially at work, especially on trips. Just yesterday I had a perfect situation where I got to observe a conversation between two coworkers in my department. It literally was one person trying to force their agenda on the other person and they weren't listening. It's exactly what you talked about in your book.

The two things that stood out for me from your book; one was using the "Yes, And" instead of the "Yes, But" principal. The other one was listening to actually understand what somebody is saying instead of just listening to respond. That was a perfect situation where he was listening just to wait until she stopped talking and then respond, and literally almost like an animal pouncing on its prey. Today I actually talked with him about it and I told him that his approach was wrong, and I have actually given him a copy of your book to read. He hasn't read it yet and I keep asking them to read it, but he's a good friend of mine and I also mentor this guy from a personal and a business relationship. The striking thing for me is, I've read other books and they say similar things to what your book says. What I love about your book is it's very concise. The book's not very long, and it gets to the point quickly, and it gave great examples from your own personal life that I could relate to that emphasized the point.

It home with me, and it made me rethink the way that I deal with people, especially the "Yes, But" versus "Yes, And" really really stuck to me. It was because of the pushing your own agenda. I've done it in the past and I've seen it happen in the past. I was thinking about this actually before this conversation started, and I was thinking about today versus, say, twenty years ago, and how busy people are. I think because people are so busy with their lives these days, I think part of that forces the "Yes, But" culture because people are so time sensitive. They just want to get to the point and they don't want to listen to what the other person has to say so they pretty much shut their ears off and wait until the person stops talking, and then they just want to force their agenda and get to the end quickly. In a lot of cases, it

doesn't work because in a lot of cases it just ends up with an argument that goes longer than it probably would have if you would have just listened to what the other person was trying to say, understood, empathized a little bit with them, and then came to some final conclusion. Instead of being argumentative with them, basically acknowledging that you understand what they're saying and adding on to it. That's a lot of what I got out of the book.

I find myself at times getting back into the rut of falling back into the “Yes, But”. When I see myself doing that, I pick the book up and I will reread it. Something in my brain, it’ll readjust my brain and then I'll get back into the “Yes, And” mode of things. You know things are great so...

Peter: It's tough to say that you followed on a daily basis, on an hourly basis at work because you're surrounded by a lot of “Yes, but no because”. As I tell people, this is a very easy concept, but it's hard to implement. It's hard to be consistent in that implementation. I greatly appreciate the comment that when you find yourself getting “Yes, But ” you pick up my book, or you or gave my book to your colleague because that just blows me away. When I wrote this book I never realize things like that would be happening, but it's a real simple message that's hard to implement because once we get back into that rut, how do we how do we maintain that focus because as Aristotle quoted, “excellence is not an act, it's a habit”. Then I ask people, so how long it takes to have a habit. Everyone goes twenty-one days from what you hear out. I know. Well, that part correct. It’s twenty-one days to start a habit, it's a lifetime to maintain it because we've all started diets, and how many of us have given up on diets and give it up on a lot of stuff? We have those new year's resolutions that fall flat about maybe February 1st. It’s the same thing with the concept “Yes, And” and the principles of improv. It's just working that muscle on a daily basis and trying to continue to strengthen, as well as fighting off the “Yes, But's” in the noble causes.

John: Well it's interesting you talk about habits. I'm sure it's not exclusive to where I work. I think it's probably common for a lot of engineers, but a lot of our focus is actually finding problems and finding the fault in things, right? What happens is, at least what I've witnessed in myself, is I get so caught up in that in work. I let that become a habit in my brain. So then what I found in the past is I've looked for the fault or the weakness in everything, and I became super critical about things, whether it be personal life or work life. It's easy to fall into that trap. It's easy to allow that kind of mindset to impact every aspect of your life, and if you can take a step back and then look at things from a different perspective - that's what your book did for me. It allowed me to look at things from a different perspective and take that step back, and understand it, the way that you approach other people, how it impacts them. So if you say “Yes, But ” all the time, it has an impact on the other person, versus if you say “Yes, And”.

Peter: The “Yes, And” approach is not always about saying yes. There are times when no is appropriate, but as someone recently taught me, it's about allowing yourself to step into somebody else's reality, albeit for a moment, just to get a better understanding of where they're coming from so you can have that constructive conversation and move forward in a positive direction. It makes it may come back to a no, which is fine, but at least you explored it instead of shutting it down.

John: It's interesting that you say that because I basically say, when I explain it to people, I say the “Yes, And” Approach because I don't often say “Yes, And”, but it's the mindset that's more important. It's not actually the two words of “Yes, And”. I know I told you this in the response to the questions, but I actually had myself a bracelet made, and the bracelet says “Yes, And” on it. So every day when I find myself

falling into the trap of the “Yes, But” mindset, I have the bracelet in front of me every day so it gives me a daily reminder that I need to change my mindset. I need the need to have a different viewpoint, and I need to be empathetic to other people and understand their point of view and make sure that I'm supportive and not combative, I guess, you could say about things.

Peter: How have you seen, with this change, how people are responding to you?

John: In general, and I don't observe it just in myself, but I know other people that have a similar approach to things... People generally react more positively to it because they see that you're you're you're listening to their thoughts and your feet you really care about what they think about, but at the same time, you're trying to offer more information or a different option or a different solution. Generally, they're more receptive to it. The conversation becomes more productive that way as opposed to shut down. A lot of people as soon as you give them the “Yes, But” approach, they're done. They're like okay he's not listening to me I'm just going to go talk to somebody else. Yeah, that tends to make things a lot more productive, I think.

Peter: And you can see the body language, and you can see it in people's eyes when you “Yes, But” them. The shoulders slump. It's just as negative negativity, but you know when to start, like you said, it's not actually using the two words. Sometimes they’ll even give that Scooby Doo *impersonation*. Well when you work in a Japanese company you get a lot of those. The culture of the organization itself of a Japanese company and your role as being as creative as you are, I mean that's a lot of selling that you have to do on ideas.

John: Yeah it is. The two cultures are very different for sure so there's a different learning curve that's associated there, but just the same even with the Japanese Culture. If you sit in meetings with them, the more senior members tend to sit back and listen. They don't chime in until the very end. They let everybody else talk. They want to absorb all the information, and then they make a decision. That's from years of wisdom having gone through meetings and having gone through problems, and understanding, knowing that a lot of the solution can come out of multiple people talking. So if you observe the senior members, that's actually what they do. It's kind of a joke because you know we go through cross-cultural training to learn about the opposite culture when we have to work together. One of the things you'll notice - and this isn't so true from what I've seen with the younger generation of the Japanese, but with the older generation - you're sitting in a meeting, they look like they're taking a nap. They look like they're asleep. They sit back in the chair, they have their arms cross, and they have their eyes closed and their head down, but they're actually not sleeping. They're actually absorbing everything that's being communicated, and they're deeply thinking about the stuff that's being communicated and trying to rationalize it all and come to a decision. That's a different form of “Yes, And”. They're not communicating anything, but they're absolutely listening to what everybody has to say. Then they’re adding to it later. It's a different form. That's why I say you don't have to use those two words, but it's the whole mindset that's really what's important.

Peter: Well they are using two of the principles of improvisation. They're using that one, the listening to understand, but you're completely focused on the conversation. They're not sidetracked by I've got to be somewhere, next meeting. As they say in improv, they’re completely present, in the moment, and they’re

totally focused and listening to the conversation and figuring out ways to take that information and adapt to the situation. All of that is part of that whole “Yes, And” approach.

John: Yeah and it's interesting that you say that because you know going back to the how busy people are these days, you know you go into meetings and you see a lot of people sitting there with laptops open, and they're sitting and typing away on her laptop while they're in the meeting. More often than not, it's those people that are the ones that use the “Yes, But” approach because they're sitting there listening and waiting for the thing they disagree with and then they jump on it and a chime in. They haven't heard any of the rest of the conversation. They just heard the one thing that they didn't actually agree with, and then all of a sudden they just want to pounce on it, almost like they're in there to just judge and evaluate, not to contribute. I think a lot of it is related to how busy people get. They're trying to multitask and do multiple things at the same time. It's really hard to pay attention to what's being communicated, and communicating again in another form. It's funny because I just had this conversation with somebody last week about multitasking. You know my general view is, I think it's really hard to multitask when it's two forms of communication - but if it's multitasking like a drummer has to use all four limbs...I'm able to play drums and have a communication with somebody at the same time, but it's two different parts of your brain. I think that's what makes the difference is you can use the left and right side of the brain at the same time if you train it, but if you're trying to use the same side of the brain for two different tasks it becomes difficult. I think when people try doing that, I think it causes some of the “Yes, But” approach for people. I'm no doctor, no scientist, but it's just my own personal belief.

Peter: Well I think you may have actually hit the nail on the head because I've never thought about it that way. I'm not a believer that we can multitask, but I never thought about from from musician's standpoint. I think about I’m trying to teach myself how to play the guitar. It's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same time. It's using both sides of your brain. Wow!

John: But think about a guitar player who sings. It's basically playing guitar with one side of your brain and essentially having communication with the other side of your brain right? Singing is like talking, like talking to somebody. So I think you can train your brain to use both sides of the brain simultaneously, but if you try to do two tasks with one side at the same time, I don't know that it works so well. I could be wrong, but -

Peter: I believe you're dead on and prior to our conversation starting the podcast, I mentioned that I'm gonna let the conversation go organically. We’ll start off, your background and see where it goes, and all I can say is wow! I mean that in itself, that's a piece of gold!

John: I don't know if it's true, but it's just my own thought you know.

Peter: I believe there's a lot of truth behind that. For the first time - I will give you credit when I used your analogy when I'm speaking to people, but I think you're right because when we're multitasking... I've got oh sure you need five minutes of my time come on, and I'm sitting here doing this on my computer or not paying attention and the person's giving me some information that I'm completely tuned out. I'm not listening to it. That's why you don't text and drive. People still do. It's wow!

John: I used to try to type emails or do other forms of communication while sitting in meetings and I completely try to stop it now because I've come to the realization that I can't do it. I've tried. I can multi-task with two sides of my brain, but I can't do two things on the same side of the brain. I can't listen to one conversation and have another conversation at the same time. I just can't do it.

Peter: I think that's why webinars and some of that stuff don't work because we're always multitasking. We're not completely focused on the task at hand. That is...John, that is worth the price of admission. That's pure business gold there, and like I said I am going to use that, and I would definitely give you all the props on that. Well you know I don't want to take up too much more time. We've been having this conversation going on almost forty minutes. I just want to thank you for one, taking the time to be part of this podcast, two, imparting your wisdom. I know that the stuff that you have provided the audience here, that they'll be able to take some of the stuff and actually apply it in their everyday lives to start seeing the change. If it's just the smallest thing, which is the biggest piece here is: you can only multitask when you use them both sides of the brain. I deeply, greatly thank you, appreciate you taking time, and it's great to have you as a guest.

John: No, thank you. I enjoyed it. You know one of the things I love doing in my job is I love teaching people. It's a very rewarding experience for me to be able to try to teach younger minds and even older minds. Actually, anybody that I can impart some bit of wisdom to or different way of thinking, I enjoy it so now thank you for the opportunity to share in this experience, and I look forward to seeing what comes from this. If there's anything else I can do to help let me know.

Peter: Oh there is because I will be contacting you again. Cause I know the attention span of audiences and stuff, but I would love to have you back on a future podcast and pick up another conversation and see which way we can move that needle.

John: Oh absolutely anytime. Just let me know.

Peter: Great. Thanks, John. I greatly appreciate it and have a great evening.

John: Aw thanks, you too.