



### ScratchThat Podcast Episode 37: “Yes, and...” Conversations

Emily: Hey, I'm Emily Chenevert, advocacy nerd, Peloton enthusiast, wife, and mama to two and CEO of the Austin Board of REALTORS®. Every day, real estate is changing. So we're taking it to the experts to unpack major topics that you need to know about to be successful in this business. Scratch what you think you know about this business, and listen up for a fresh take on an old industry. Michelle Clement is a force to be reckoned with as the CEO of the Chicago Association of REALTORS®, she has been dubbed the voice for real estate in Chicago and ever since her arrival at CAR in 2018, she's been redefining how REALTORS® promote equitable change in Chicago and across the industry. Overall, I spoke to her about how CAR has become an influential leader when it comes to promoting fair housing and taking the issue of anti-racism seriously, she shared some great insight on how organizations like yours and mine can successfully advocate for diversity equity and inclusion. Michelle, we have been on the scratch that podcast in a season focused primarily on professionalism and to the extent that that intersects with our commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion as an industry. And when I first met you, one of the very first things that we talked about were those issues. We came into our own CEO positions at almost the same time, both work in mama's with amazing stay at home husband, dads.

Michelle: Yes that's a better podcast. We need to do that one day.

Emily: To do. Yea That's the whole, that's a whole other, yeah, but we had a lot in common and I was so just enthusiastic about your passion for what we could be doing to reconcile the things that have not been pretty about our industry in the past. And so I wanted to kind of start there with you. You got to Chicago association of REALTORS® early on. You said, let's just apologize for red lining. And how did that go? Like what happened when you put it out there? How did it really go?

Michelle: Well, you know, I started in April of the year of the 50th anniversary of fair housing, so right when it was kicking off and one of the first, uh, actually the first business trip I had was to mid-year when we were commemorating the 50th anniversary. And I remember sitting in the audience and hearing, you know, the program and being emotional, thinking about what that moment meant, um, not just for the industry, but then as an

individual, reflecting on how, wow, I'm, you know, the CEO of an organization that, you know, within my parent's lifetime, I would not have been even been able to join. So that was, that was deep for me. And it was really about something was still missing, you know, and it was like, it felt like there was something that just wasn't quite closed as far as closure in a sense. Um, and we started having a conversation, not officially, it was more like that water cooler talk or, you know, in the Uber and the Uber talk and just kind of talking about what we did or what happened or have we ever acknowledged that? And eventually, um, it just made its way to the board agenda. And we talked about it as a board and I remember that meeting. So clearly it was an emotional meeting, not because people weren't on the same page, it was emotional because people have been thinking about how much this would heal for so many people around that table. Um, so there was a lot of peers in that regard and for the people that didn't know that history, it was eye-opening for them. Um, so it was about the learning opportunity as well as an opportunity to heal some wounds. Um, so that's kinda where it started and the board voted unanimously to, um, to do this apology. And when it was done at the, at our fair housing events, um, our president at the time, um, had the full board up there because it was a full board decision and everybody supported it and wanted to be on record as supporting that. So that's really how we got to that place. And it was all about, you know, owning what we did, you know, apologizing and owning what happened and telling the truth does not cost the thing, but it is so powerful and that whole concept of empathy and being empathetic to individuals that we have wronged with an association that remember not being able to join that are now members, how that has to feel. And if you don't start with, I'm sorry, there's nothing else to do.

Emily: I think that that's powerful because I think a lot of the conversation that we've had as an industry, at least over the last year, especially following the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement last summer has been focused on now, what do we do now? How do we move forward? How do we do better? And that's amazing. And I value that focus. I think it's right. I think there's a "yes, and..." there, and I think that you gave the "and...", but you also have this obligation and opportunity to heal and to reconcile where we've been involved in things that were not right. I think that's important. I feel like that the step that we missed a little bit at large, but I think you can help lead the way in that too. Yeah.

Michelle: Yeah. I think the "yes, and" is important, you know, and the "and, but..." is important. Like you have to have those conversations and be open to the response that may not be comfortable for everybody. Um, and I think that takes, I go back to empathy so many times, because I think if you push yourself and choose a various people from every side of the coin, it helps you look at the bigger picture and really decide like, what's our next move. What's our "and...", but what's our but what's our "but..."

Emily: What was the outcome? What, what was the response like from the city, from the community, from other civic leaders, as you offered that reconciliation,

Michelle: You know, honestly, uh, it wasn't a big splash. Like we thought it could be, and we were looking more at it from a backlash perspective, you know, that you would hear people like, Oh my God, why did you do this? And we didn't do anything. Cause that was kind of the narrative I kept hearing was, well, we weren't here when that happened. So we

we've moved on. Like we don't, we weren't a part of that. So we sponsor stuff now, so we're good. And so we were worried about that piece. And one of the regrets I have is that, you know, we did not publicize that apology probably as much as we should have. There was an air of caution there. Um, and, and looking back, that's the, one of the areas where I said, if I could do it all over again, I would have pushed it and really made sure everybody, you know, knew that that's what happened. But, um, because we were a little bit cautious of it, you know, it didn't reach far and wide within the city limits. And I didn't actually realize that until last year I was in, um, a program with the urban league of Chicago and it was a fellowship and one of the segments or the classes was all on housing in Chicago, and I'm reading the materials and preparation for the class. And, you know, Chicago board of REALTORS®, board of real estate is all in there about everything that we did and the hand that we had and segregation, and I'm like, Aw, you know, we want to go to this class. They're about to hang me into, it's going to go on and on. But I reached out to the full class and sent our apology. I sent like some of the work we were doing. I said, I know we're really, you know, focused in this class, but I want you all to also see what's happened. And the professor, and it's just through the university of Chicago booth, he said, you know, I had no idea that you all had done this and I've been teaching this for years. And so now I get to teach it from another angle and a different perspective. And that's when the light bulb went off for me. Like, people don't know, you know what I mean? That we're not that same organization. They don't know that. So that's when we really started pushing more of our external affairs and consumer advocacy programs to make sure that people did know where we are and where we're trying to go.

Emily: I guess, speaking, just of, not that organization, you were taking on organizational shift across the board, they had had a very long time predecessor to you, which was amazing. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that, but you come in behind that and you start to peel the layers back and say, okay, now what is our organization about? What does it look like moving forward? I think it's amazing that you started from a place of looking backwards, but then using that as the opportunity to redefine your culture moving forward. What, what do you feel like the staff has taken away from that experience as an organization?

Michelle: Um, I think the whole idea around collaboration has been big for the staff team. Um, we don't, we try not to as much as we can not to make decisions in a silo and not have the staff involved. Um, so even what the apology like staff was aware of it, staff supported it. Um, staff was proud of it. And so that, that felt good to have that, you know, embodiment of it. But I think culturally, we were really intentional about what our culture was and what it should be and how we wanted it to work. And one of the first things I did was start a culture task force, um, strictly for internal operations and strictly to determine like what's important to us. And we, I was not involved in it. Like we kept balling the executive leadership out of it because we want it to not be a top down approach. We wanted it as a bottom and I don't even like using the word bottom, but a more bottom up approach. And then we turned it into more of a circular sphere where we all were contributing to it. Um, so now we're in a place where we can have these tough conversations and we can, you know, know that no, one's going to be judged. We did a seven week course for the just the staff team called race and privilege. So it's called all in, but it's on race and privilege. And it was every week for seven weeks and it

was deep and it was hard and it was uncomfortable, but we were only able to do that because we had already built a culture of a safe space where you can have these tough conversations.

Emily: Enough trust right.

Michelle: Yea enough trust for sure.

Emily: And so you, you apologize, you start to shift the culture of the organization. You get the operational team that moving that way, your leadership's behind that. Then what good work has come now? Like what, where are you invested now? Where do you feel like you're, you're putting that energy today?

Michelle: Well, we have an external affairs department, um, whose sole role is to show and be a good community partner. Um, so we're doing a lot. That's in the community. We launched our 77 diversity committee and that is named after the 77 neighborhoods in Chicago. So we have one REALTOR® member from every single neighborhood in Chicago. And that was all about meeting the members where they are and making sure that everybody had a voice that this is everyone's association. So that's been a really fun launch, um, to, to see it come to fruition. We, we still kind of think it's in its pilot stage or there's still some things that we're tweaking, but the kickoff for that was actually, um, sadly right when we saw a lot of civil unrest in Chicago, and there were a lot of riots across the city and that group was able to mobilize and do a lot of the community cleanup efforts and a lot of support. And we actually were able to raise a lot of funds for the foundation that we are using in forms of grants in the community, help communities rebuild and sustain, which is really important for us. We've also been able to, there's been new scholarships launched as a result. That's been huge to get more people into the industry, through pre-licensing. Um, we've also implemented some mandatory cultural humility and unconscious bias training for our staff and all our volunteer leaders. So like our board, our foundation trustees, our, or our committee chairs and vice chairs. And that was big. And our board voted on that, that it is mandatory. And we want to be able to not just talk the talk and walk the walk, but we also want to be prepared to do so. So we make sure that everybody understands that these are the tools you need and it's ongoing. So the unconscious bias portion will happen, um, in the next quarter. So we're, we're trying to not do like a one and done training. We're also working with some of the other brokerages and a state association as well, who has an amazing program. That's offering some training with brokerages. So we're going to partner with them and see even more things come to fruition. Um, I'm excited about a lot of it. We're really tackling for housing in a different way, and we're redoing our course completely to make it more Chicago centric, but we've also given a free for housing course to any member that, um, you know, renews in 2021 and really just trying to overtrain, you know what I mean? And over providing resources, keep the dialogue open.

Emily: But you know that is the thing about when that thread is tied through everything that you do. It does become a part of who the organization is and who we are as people that are involved in that. And I think, you know, still often, not just on a staff side, but from a programmatic side, we tend to silo the things that we do. You know, I grew up a

government affairs volunteer or no, I came up on the professional development side and its neat, you know, people find their niche, passion as volunteers thoroughly against in the association. But the, your point is that I don't care which niche you're a part of your ability to understand other people's experiences is an expectation of you regardless. Right. And that's powerful. That's amazing. I want to talk to you a little bit about just leadership overall. I have watched you be such a little, a rock star over there. I love, love, love when I see my peers shining. I think it's fun. And it gives me energy to want to push harder. What's in you that makes you want to push that hard

Michelle: It's passion for what I'm doing. I mean, I, I really, really do love association management as a career path. Like I, I think it is just the coolest, most underrated career you can have because you get to interact with people on a daily basis and you get to help people do the best that they can do. And, and that's across the board at any association. Um, but really what's been driving me here is that I'm from Chicago, you know, and I am a product of the policies that we, CAR, put in place. And I can look back now and see where it's still affecting me today, where it's still affects my husband today, where it's still going to affect my son, um, and, and decades for him as well. And I want to undo that, you know, I want that, that to be undone. And I really know that REALTORS® have such a unique opportunity to make that difference. Um, REALTORS® bring home ownership to people. They bring an opportunity to have a roof over your head. They provide a lot of services that go beyond just that transaction. And, and I even know my own experience with my REALTOR® on my first home purchase, what that felt like and how integral she was. And when we went through, um, a closure, on one of my brother's houses and having him work with her, um, during the downturn and realizing he was a victim of predatory lending again, which is why these things are still happening, you know, it was the resources and the comfort really from a REALTOR® that, that helped us get through a lot of these difficult times. So that's why I'm passionate about it because I know it affects everyone in different ways. Real estate is everywhere. It's, it's, uh, I came from a commercial real estate association and I used to be just so engulfed in the, the office space and, you know, the different residential compared to high-rises and things. And so now it's just, it's even more personal because it's where I'm from. Um, so that's one of the pieces. And I think about quite frankly, my son and the world that I want him to be able to grow up in and the choices I don't want him to have to make as far as what neighborhood you can live in and, you know, growing up or cannot, and not have to worry about, you know, a predatory lending situation and not have to worry about unfair appraisal. Those are things that can make or break a generational wealth stream. And for him and all the kids after him, I just want that to be a, a big thing in the past and not the current place.

Emily: How does that passion translate into the relationship you have with your board? How do you keep them as motivated as you are? And it's hard. I mean, the gig is you get up there, there's a marriage and a divorce every year, right. You worked with this president all year long, you've got them all going, they're cooking in the right direction and then they're out and the next one's in and you're, you're the continuity. Um, and you've got a lot of passion, but how do you keep them all running in the same direction?

Michelle: Yeah. I've been fortunate that they all have that same fire and passion. Um, and that was actually one of the things that really attracted me to this role. I saw it in my

interview. I felt it with the board and with past presidencies, um, I could feel it and, and that's been something that it has not been hard. Um, they motivate me and I think I motivate them right back. And it's a good match. You know, we all want Chicago to be a better city. And I think that is what really drives a lot of us as far as like the continuity goes. I mean, that's, that's the world of associations and AEs, you know, you always have the, the new leader that comes in, but I think we started developing those relationships so early and we have a really awesome board. We call it a board advance that we do. It's like a board retreat, but we call it advanced cause it's how to move forward. And that advanced creates that relationship and that bond and that passion and that motivation for one of those board members, regardless if they're the president or not. And so it's matched, you know, so by the time the next person comes in that culture that we all know, and that community that we all built from the advance just really carries through. So it's been, it'll be three years for me here in April. Um, so I've been fortunate that that passion has been met.

Emily: Yeah. Time flies when you're having fun with them.

Michelle: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Emily: Let's touch just on the, on the obvious the stuff that we're all living every day with COVID and coronavirus and, and even the inequity in the way and ways in which that has impacted communities, what role is the association playing in Chicago to help kind of, you know, just work through and around and with the environment that we're in?

Michelle: Yeah. I mean, I say, when you talk about leadership, this pandemic is..

Emily: Yeah nobody gave me this handbook, let me clear, right!

Michelle: Right. Not in any of the books I read: Leading through a pandemic.

Emily: Right.

Michelle: So I think, but what really started to drive me was a blog post. I read right at the start of the pandemic that said, this is a once in a career opportunity for leaders to really, you know, step up and show their value. And I took that to heart. Like I said, you know, we, as the association has got to step up and make sure that we're providing as much value as we can to the members in such an uncertain time and things were changing so quickly, we didn't even know what was going on, but we really worked hard to, um, pivot like everybody did. Um, so for us, we ended up doing things like, you know, creating an, a denim, a purchase and sale, a denim, as things were changing. It provided that to our colleagues in the state and other locals to use, like, throw your logo on there and go, um, we want everyone to have access to this. So that was a big piece for us. We worked with our attorneys to create a FAQ just on the stay at home order, because it was so quick. And what did that mean? And we're fortunate that real estate was deemed essential in Illinois. Um, but then what does that mean? You know, so we were breaking it down. We held a town hall meetings. We held almost a weekly, um, managing broker forum to make sure that we were giving everybody all the information

that we had. Um, one of our dads came up with a really great idea to hire a contract person, to talk people through unemployment benefits. She came in and she helped our members get millions in unemployment claims back for them. She worked with them individually. Some of them that might not have ever been in this situation before never had to file for unemployment, never even believed. And she was so caring and took a lot of time with them as individuals to walk them through the process. So it was a dedicated line for any member to call. And that was really huge. Um, then she also did individual webinars for people to use just the resources we tried to put out as fast as we can for what anybody needed was really vital during that time. And now with the vaccine out, you know, we're of course working with the city and the state to try to get more concrete information on when that will be readily available. Um, I know our state is really lobbying for real estate professionals and REALTORS® to be included in distribution a little bit earlier. And we're going to be hosting a town hall at the end of the month with some of those officials as well, to talk about what that rollout looks like, but also to give really good information about the vaccine. We have some medical professionals that will be joining us so people can make decisions for themselves on what they want to do, but it's just been about what can we get out on the information side from the resources side, we moved our courses to virtual, which I know so many have done. We've tried to do a lot of virtual events and put spins on them. And we've had some red carpets live from a member within his bathtub. No comment on that. That was a different one.

Emily: Yeah. How did HR feel about that one?

Michelle: Yeah. I got some calls, but it was all, you know, it's fun. We've just really been trying to raise people's spirits as best we can and, and continue on the services. And we've created an online library of, you know, just things that so many of us are doing, but we're just trying to like, make sure that it's relevant and timely and important for the people that need it.

Emily: It's funny as I hear your son in the background, because I'm sure you've heard mine,

Michelle: That's it that's the life.

Emily: But you know what? I mean I was telling somebody the other day, I think that this is such a special time, because I think that we have the opportunity as associations to care for the people in really special ways. I mean, we have always served up their real estate needs, always served up their education needs, their professionalism needs. Um, but to get to think about them at a time that we are all so stripped down so raw, this is an incredible experience. And it's a, um, a blessing really in some ways to get to know them on that level. So I think, yeah, I think we'd take that, take what it's worth, you know, with that as well. Let's end there and have a couple of fun questions. You good with that? Okay. What is your favorite quote or mantra?

Michelle: It's a Michelle Obama quote, "If you're not willing to use your seat at the table, get up from it..."

Emily: "... Then give it to someone else."

Michelle: Yeah. But, um, that's a heavy one for me. And then my, one of my mantras is "Don't let anyone steal your joy."

Emily: Oh, I love that. What is on your bedside table?

Michelle: We moved. So there was nothing on my bedside table. It was just pretty, but, um, that's not going to be for long, but I normally be, it's definitely a water bottle for sure. And I have a photo that hopefully will get out of a box and have a, my grandma and my mom. Um, and when they were young and they, they look like, I remember them as a child and my grandma died when I was in eighth grade. But, um, the last year I really felt her presence so much stronger and being a mom now, I, you know, understand my mom a lot more and our relationship has grown. So I have a picture of both of them, um, an old school picture on my nightstand and a bunch of books that I, that I don't read.

Emily: Well, they're just there for looks. Right, right, right. Color coordinate. Uh, what song or album could you listen to on repeat?

Michelle: Ooh. Anything with Prince. I'm a big Prince fan. Like any one of his albums and all things Beyonce.

Emily: Well, I mean, you know, the queen.

Michelle: The queen. Yeah.

Emily: I feel like that was a given. And then you go.

Michelle: then, you know, Prince, but it's Beyonce too.

Emily: That's right. Michelle, I truly think you're awesome. I love watching what you do. I know we all have a lot to learn. Um, and I appreciate your time today. Thank you.

Michelle: To you are just as inspiring to watch too. And, you know, I mean that, you know, wholeheartedly, and I really appreciate this opportunity. I just think the work you do is just as important. So thanks for giving all of us an opportunity to share that

Emily: You bet. Thanks for tuning in. Like what you hear, let's continue this conversation. Give us some love by leaving us a review on iTunes and let your friends know about this show by sharing this episode on social media. You can also follow along and tag me @EmChenevert. That's E M Chenevert. Until next time.