

Compliance Today – March 2018 Meet Alan Alda

An interview by Adam Turteltaub

This interview with Alan Alda (workshops@aldacommunication.com; www.aldacommunicationtraining.com) was conducted by Adam Turteltaub (adam.turteltaub@corporatecompliance.org), Vice President of Strategic Initiatives & International Programs, Society of Corporate Compliance and Ethics & Health Care Compliance Association.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Alan Alda almost as long as I can remember. He and my father worked together in the early 1960s, and our families have been friends ever since.

Always thoughtful and inquisitive, his passions and curiosity have led him to star on the stage, on TV, and in film; write and direct; host documentaries; and even author three books. His latest is The New York Times bestseller, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?*, published by Random House.

AT: First, let me tell you how much I enjoyed your book. I think your focus on improving communications is so very important for our members, since their job is about getting others to do the right thing, and that's really a communications challenge.

I'm going to begin and end this interview with questions about stories, since you argue very passionately about the importance of stories for communication. And, in fact, I'm going to start with a story you may not remember.

You were doing a play in Los Angeles, and Rhea (my wife) and I came one night. Afterwards, we went backstage to thank you for the tickets and to tell you how much we enjoyed it. I remember asking you if it was hard to do the same play night after night. You replied that it was different every night because the audience was always different.

It was something I had never thought of, and I felt both humbled and educated. It was something that I kept thinking about as I was reading your book. To me the central message is that even theater is a discussion, and that we need to think about not just what we're saying, but what the other person's reaction will be.

AA: Thanks so much, Adam. I'm really glad you enjoyed the book. Thank you for that story, too. I thought it was going to end with the response I often give to that question: It's different every time, like dancing. If someone says, "Would you like to dance?" you don't say, "No, thanks, I've done that."

AT: Where did your drive to improve business communications come from?

AA: I realized one day how important communicating with clarity can be when a dentist was holding a scalpel a few inches from my face and was about to cut into my gum. He was getting ready to do a surgical procedure that he had invented and was clearly proud of. He paused long enough to say one inscrutable thing: "Now there will be some tethering." I had no idea what he was saying. I asked him what he meant by "tethering," but his answer was just to bark at me, "Tethering! Tethering!" I was too cowed by his surgical gown to tell him to put the knife down and explain what he was about to do, which he went ahead and did. He severed the little tissue that goes between the upper lip and the gum. This resulted in a smile that looked more like a sneer. I found this out a couple of weeks later when I was playing a scene in a movie. I had to smile in the scene, and the harder I tried to

smile, the more I sneered. One good outcome was I could now play a whole new range of villains.

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