

# The Human Conversation

## Podcast Newsletter



Get To Know Our Guest

## Dr. Isabel de Bruin Cardoso

She is a leading scholar and practitioner in nonprofit ethics, recognized for her pioneering work on the ethical challenges unique to the nonprofit sector. She is the **founder of the Gradel Institute of Charity's Nonprofit Ethics Lab**, an initiative born from her doctoral research at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University. Her research introduced the concept of the “**NGO halo effect**”, demonstrating how nonprofits' missions, moral identities, and people are often idealized in ways that obscure unethical behavior. This groundbreaking work has positioned her as a thought leader in shaping nonprofit ethics as a distinct field of study and practice.

Before embarking on her PhD, Isabel accumulated over 15 years of professional experience across a wide range of organizations, including NGOs, religious congregations, philanthropic foundations, the United Nations, and the World Bank. Through this work, she observed that moral missions and strategies such as codes of conduct, safeguarding training, and whistleblowing systems often failed to prevent unethical practices. These insights motivated her to pursue doctoral research and ultimately establish the Nonprofit Ethics Lab, which bridges research and practice to develop approaches to ethics that are fit for purpose in the nonprofit sector.

Currently, Isabel serves as a **lecturer and coach at the Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University, where she teaches organizational ethics and nonprofit management**. She is also a visiting lecturer at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, extending her influence to international academic audiences. Alongside her teaching, she consults with NGOs worldwide, helping organizations navigate ethical dilemmas and strengthen their ethical cultures. Isabel also contributes to nonprofit governance as a board member for several NGOs.

Her academic contributions include publications in scholarly journals, practitioner outlets, and newspapers, reflecting her commitment to engaging diverse audiences. She is presently co-editing a book on the paradox of nonprofit discrimination, further advancing discourse on the complexities of ethics in the sector. Isabel holds a PhD in Management from Erasmus University, an MA in Human Rights from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs, and a BA in International Affairs from University College Utrecht, Utrecht University.

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### HIGHLIGHTS & TAKEAWAYS

- **KG:** You've had such an interesting career, research, education, consulting across the world, to name just a few. *Is there a red thread that ties all of it together for you? What's the driving force behind all that you do?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** I think a lot of where I am now was based on always a drive to be involved with human rights, not necessarily only from a legal rights perspective, but more human rights as a principle as well. But the different stages and phases of my life have also been shaped a lot by circumstance, by people, and by opportunity.
- **KG:** *What are the terms ethics and integrity mean to you?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *How I look at ethics versus integrity, I think that ethics is like the framework. That's really kind of like the North Star, the moral compass of what we stand for. As individuals, these can be our values or also as an organization. So ethics would be what is incorporated into a code of conduct or let's say safeguarding policy.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *Integrity is the implementation thereof. So it's really practicing what you preach. So without ethics, you can still have integrity, but you're not necessarily having that North Star guiding you. And without integrity, you can have ethics, but then you're not implementing your ethics.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *Ethics really kind of as an overarching guiding principle, if you will, and integrity, the implementation of it.*
- **KG:** *What can you share with me about how you make that make personal sense to you? Is there a personal story, for example, when you yourself felt tested on these two issues of ethics or integrity?*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** So I think ethics, especially with respect to dilemmas, is thinking through how will a decision impact on the people or the stakeholders around you. Ethical dilemmas and making decisions around them are tough. It's never win-win. So being very conscious of the so-called moral remainder or the moral impact of our decisions.
- **DR. ISABEL:** *I think with respect to how I approached ethical dilemmas to the extent that I have the luxury of time is to think about it, to take the time to think about it. Try and get as much information, perspectives as I can in order to make as informed a possible decision as much as possible. And also being very conscious to kind of reflect on what the outcome of that decision is.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** Several times in some of the organizations that I worked for. But then the dilemma is what do you say? And how do you say it? And to whom do you say it? And yes, I suppose we are talking about whistleblowing now, but that dilemma also of the uncertainty of not knowing how that will impact you. So the ethical dilemma speak up or not?
- **DR. ISABEL:** *I think that experience led me to also do a PhD in the sense of how can we explain both kind of that goodness of these organizations, as well as the fact that they can behave unethically. The ethical dilemmas that I've seen at work can also encourage me to undertake a PhD on this topic.*
- **KG:** *Let's acknowledge both exist, pick a path after considering all your stakeholders, all of the important factors, and instead of getting paralyzed by it, choose a path and then make that reflect on those decisions. It might sometimes be a wrong decision.*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** So a decision, you have like a good decision, which is different than the right decision, which is different than the fitting decision. And I suppose it also depends on how one perceives what the correct decision is.
- **DR. ISABEL:** *The right decision could be about following the rules. You know, it's very clear, I have to do this because that's what the rules say. The fitting decision could maybe be thinking about the potential outcome of something. And the right decision could maybe be based more on implementing one's own virtues, what they stand for.*
- **KG:** I feel that particularly nonprofit sectors in areas of work and life where people are very much giving for the betterment of the planet, betterment of humanity or other species really, there is an even deeper expectation of goodness, of good values, of ethics. And the burnout can be so much higher. The cognitive dissonance can be so much starker when people act unethically or organizations show lack of integrity or lack of alignment with stated values, they do not walk the talk.
- **KG:** So the research that you are doing and your pursuits through your PhD and I know the work that you do now are so pivotal. I'd love to hear a little bit more about that.
- **DR. ISABEL:** *When there is a sense of cognitive dissonance or a sense of an emotional reaction, if you will, when our values are aligned with those of the organization to the extent that one has the privilege of choosing where to work and people work in the nonprofit sector, people tend to work for organizations whose values are very similar to their own.*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** *In the sense of your own values can get flamed by the goodness of what your organization is doing. Like it reflects back on you. You think that you become really, really good because your organization is doing so well, creating a Halo effect. And that can also be reinforced even more within the organization itself.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *If that sense of others' goodness is also idealized, it's easier to turn a blind eye on their unethical behavior. It's easier to give another chance. So people can be prioritized over integrity.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** You mentioned burnout and that's something that I've also seen within nonprofits. I think one way of also explaining that within nonprofits is if this achievement of the mission is also haloized, that the mission is the end all be all for what the organization does. And if the mission is prioritized above other considerations like staff well-being or whatever else. There can be this tendency indeed for burnout because whatever you're doing, it's not good enough because you still haven't met the mission. So you need to be accessible at all hours of the day. You need to come in on weekends. There is no rest for the hungry, so to speak, because the mission is always there pushing you.
- **KG:** One of the problems is also if one is attempting to focus on employee well-being and also diverse perspectives around the board of the nonprofit, it can feel challenging to assess what to focus on. *Do you have any advice for non-profits struggling with these kinds of things?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *That struggle is inherent to nonprofits. Nonprofits are dependent on others for their resources. And this sounds like a paradox, but by excluding, you actually can include more. Because with limited resources, you are forced to make these decisions about what do we focus on. And by focusing on less, but you're able to do one thing arguably better.*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** Is the question too, about do you fundraise based also on what the donor would like you to do? Because there's also an ethical question. If the donor says you were referring to water sanitation, water, washed water sanitation, if the donor says you can do this, but also let's say education, to what extent do you then drift from your intentional mission to accommodate the donor? Or, you know, are you more conscious to fundraise from particular donors who might give you unrestricted funding and allow you to implement as you see best? So these are also decisions that nonprofits have to face. Where do you want to get your money from? Because this has implications too on how that will be used.
- **KG:** *What are your observations on real world ethical dilemmas most relevant to non-profit boards today and what is your advice to them in those situations?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** We know that nonprofits at various levels, boards, and executives face their own dilemmas, but they are rarely accessible in the public to begin with. And I think that also comes back down to that assumption of, because these are so-called morally good organizations. They're not made publicly available because of potential scrutiny against the organization or stigma. But they're also not used for training or teaching purposes.
- **DR. ISABEL:** So there's also this assumption that just because of business ethics, let's say that a code of ethics work, we assume that it also works in the nonprofit sector. We are a different type of organization. We have a different role and positioning in society than business and then governments. But how ethics is understood and spoken about and discussed and trained on is we're kind of borrowing from public administration in terms of values and implementing values. And we're also borrowing from business in terms of how they consider and actualize ethics management.



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- **DR. ISABEL:** This is also the intention behind the lab to have conversations on this. *Like we were talking about regulation, should the same regulation or accountability standards apply to nonprofits as they do to business, for example, because you're assuming then that the organization are black boxes, we fail to then take into consideration their inherent characteristics, what makes them unique, and their also unique positioning in society.*
- **KG:** That nuance of higher purpose organizations, morally good organizations, and the lack of structure and how each organization can have a unique problem, how this is under-researched and therefore there's no category. As a researcher who's looking at ethics myself, I think a tripartite collaboration would be very good for societies, the government, the corporate sector and the nonprofits. But those are extremely difficult. They can feel unwieldy.
- **KG:** *Have you seen any examples that are successful where morally good organizations, nonprofits, governments have all been able to come together to address perhaps some key issues, constraints, discussed constraints, we discussed lack of research. Have you seen any successful examples around these kinds of collaborations?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *This phrase of morally good organizations and different contexts, you're absolutely right, because it's not in all contexts that nonprofits or NGOs specifically are considered to be morally good. For example, in Brazil, several parts of Brazil, they are mistrusted. And trust is something fundamental for nonprofits because it also allows for them to do their fundraising. And that lack of, that perception that they are not good can also be exacerbated when there is one example of unethical behavior.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** In terms of partnerships with governments, I think it very much depends on context again, because *sometimes nonprofits are like the government's service delivery arm, if you will.*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** *One of the characteristics of nonprofits is that they are private, meaning that they have in principle the autonomy to create their own mission, independent from the political ideology of the governments. And you need organizations like that as well for advocacy purposes. You need organizations as well to bring kind of a mirror to civil society about what is wrong and what needs to happen.*
- **KG:** *Lack of trust and excessive public scrutiny and echo chambers in social media and digital world means that any negative thing is magnified and amplified.*
- **KG:** *When I'm working with nonprofit boards too, they're so anxious and paralyzed by not wanting to do anything bold. And they take very, very cautious, minute steps forward, which slows the progress down. But the argument I often hear is we have had a pristine reputation and a storied history of doing good work in the community for over decades.*
- **KG:** *Around this caution, do you have any advice for nonprofits? Is anxiety around trust, losing trust, being cancelled due to public scrutiny?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *Nonprofits are held to a different standard of accounts. At the end of the day, it's a group of people working in an organizational form, just like a group of people might be working in a business form or in a government form. The question is, we should be able to humanize, I think, all types of organizations and should be cognizant of the fact that there are people behind the organization.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *The fact that there are mistakes doesn't necessarily mean that they need to be brushed under the carpet, but rather it allows for an opportunity to have a conversation with the organization is where do we go wrong? And how can we do better to prevent it next time?*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** *I think the more trusting the organization is then perceived because it humanizes. Certain ethical dilemmas can create anxiety, of course, in terms of will I lose funding? Will I lose other influential stakeholder groups? Then it's also that deep reflection of, if I do not communicate this, for example, to what extent does an organization make a statement about a crisis situation, **even though their mission might not necessarily be focused on that part of the world or deal with issues affecting that part of the world, yet they feel morally obligated to make a standpoint.***
- **DR. ISABEL:** *Having conversations on dilemmas, being reflective about what is the ethical dimension of this dilemma. We know an ethical dilemma is different than a dilemma. So what makes it have that ethical components? Having these conversations about how do you see it? How do you perceive it? What would you do? How would you not do it? **These conversations also help clarify what the organization stands for. Ethics is about the gray as we know. It's not about the black and the white. The black and the white people are clear on. The gray is unclear and that can also change over time. That can change with circumstance, with crisis. So the more that that gray is spoken about the clearer kind of it becomes like a black or white issue. Like you want to minimize the gray and then the more minimized it becomes, the clearer people in the organization know what the organization stands for and how to implement that as well.***
- **KG:** *What advice do you have for whistleblowers in the field of nonprofit work?*

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- **DR. ISABEL:** In terms of whistleblowing, it's also understanding your organizational context. What would it mean if you were to encourage anonymous whistleblowing? That might mean also harder follow-up when you do get an anonymous complaint. But if it is not anonymous, the person who might want to make the complaint might not necessarily feel psychologically comfortable safe in raising an issue. *There has to be also the sense of culture within the organization that encourages speaking up. Speaking up that encourages also listening and then being very clear as what has been done with the listening. Not listening for the sake of listening, but active listening and actually doing something what has been heard.*
- **DR. ISABEL:** *There is no one size fits all in terms of whistleblowing. Again, context matters and there are various dynamics that can also be encountered through setting up whistleblowing processes and structures.*
- **KG:** *With your foundation, do you primarily work with organizations? Or would such a whistleblower, perhaps a well-intentioned, passionate person working within a nonprofit seeking some advice, seeking some help, would individuals also be helped? by your organization? Are you primarily looking to help and advise only organizations and not individuals?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** Advice in terms of being able to set up or implement any kind of ethics management infrastructure, yes, and that would include whistleblowing. But to receive complaints or suspicions or advice as to how to go about if you wanted to whistleblow, I am not sure if we would do that. We would, however, make can do bespoke training.
- **KG:** *So the hypothetical I had in mind is there's someone sitting on the board of a nonprofit that's small, doesn't have any processes in place and they certainly feel like there is a problem, whom can I speak with for advice? Are there resources you can suggest for help?*



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- **DR. ISABEL:** That would probably on Charity Commission's websites probably have guidance around who to contact and for what issue. It could be that charity regulators would have, across the world, would have resources on their websites potentially on this. But an ethical dilemma can, especially at an individual level, can also be discussed maybe with a peer in a different organization to the extent that they feel comfortable doing so. Because again, *having that different perspective of someone who might be going through the same thing or is in a similar situation or context can provide that perspective.*
- **KG:** *Is there a peer community that you've observed for nonprofits, but that is a niche community need. Have you observed or seen come across anything like that, a peer community for nonprofit leaders?*
- **DR. ISABEL:** Sometimes funders also facilitate these communities of practice or these learning opportunities where they bring together their grantees and they discuss their experiences, not that the donor is necessarily present, but they fund for the opportunity to allow grantees to come together to discuss a specific topic. Then you've got these umbrella type NGOs. So for example, in the Netherlands, you have Partos and you have Goede Doelen Nederland.

### REFERENCES & LINKS

- **DR. ISABEL's Social Media Platforms/Resources**  
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[GIC Ethics Lab](#)
- **The Human Conversation Podcast Channels**  
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