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Adam Meyer

University of Central Florida, Adam.Meyer@ucf.edu

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What if We All Treated Life Like One Big Improvisation Skit?

By Adam Meyer
UCF Forum columnist
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Whenever I need a good laugh or a light TV moment, I find relief by watching *Whose Line is it Anyway?*

I am fascinated by the concept of improvisation and how quickly the comedians can create things off the cuff and pull together some interesting skits and stories. Even when it does not make sense or there is a clear fail, there is power, wonder and humor in watching them fall short. I have always wondered how they make it look so easy.

A few years ago I stumbled across a book called *Yes, And*, written by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton. The authors discuss the highlights of what makes improvisation work and suggest that it is a strong business practice to implement in the work world.

Since reading that book, I have read four other books on improvisation. As I have learned more, I do see the merit in treating each encounter in life as a moment of improvisation because that is what we are doing as we engage with one another. We are often working off the cuff in response to what someone else says or does and we are contributing to the interaction in a way that impacts the overall experience.

In the end, we are likely hoping to create a wonderful scene that comes together (such as a productive business or social outcome, a positive collaboration and connection with other people, pleasing moments we will always remember or that propel us forward positively, etc.).

Below are five core improvisation strategies from my readings that have impacted me. I have tried my best to put these into practice in order to make a difference in my daily and regular encounters:

- *Yes, And:* The “Yes, And” concept is considered the bedrock of improvisation. It is what makes a show like *Whose Line is it Anyway?* work. When one of the performers offers an idea for the scene, the other performers have two choices. They can either accept the idea and build on it or reject the idea. When the latter happens, the scene stops dead in its tracks. All momentum is lost. When the idea is accepted, the adventure continues and leads to roads known and unknown. When operating from a “Yes, And” mindset, one does not have to act on every idea but needs to give every idea a chance. It is important to validate the idea and the person sharing the idea by accepting more and judging less. The other critical element of “Yes, And” is a willingness to welcome and embrace other people’s ideas rather than believing that your ideas are the only ones that matter.
- *Be an ensemble, not a team:* Teams often have clearly designated leaders and important people who take charge and lead the way. However, an ensemble, when highly effective, has no recognized leader. It is a true collection of voices where there is on-going give and take. People take the lead at different times based on the situation at hand and then know when to step back and allow others to grab the reins. Being part of an ensemble requires being in the moment with each person and places a priority on taking care of one another before oneself. It is about the entire group looking good, and not one person.
- *Listen as if your life depended on it:* Being in the moment requires focusing on what is unfolding before you rather than focusing on what you will say next (or need to be doing next) or what you think the person with you will say or do next. You can only build upon what is truly before you and you can only know what is truly before you by listening. Since reading this guidance, I have been amazed as to how much easier it is to contribute effectively to a conversation when I am fully in the moment.
- *Make mistakes often:* Fear of failure often stops innovation in its tracks and prevents people from being bold and taking action. Mistakes should be embraced and seen as an opportunity to grow and to do better the next time around. We often learn more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. When we stay comfortable, we may avoid the mistakes but we also evade the opportunity for remarkable growth and memorable experiences or outcomes.
- *Have fun and enjoy the ride:* Life is short. It is important to enjoy what you’re doing at work, at home and in your community. It will not always be easy but it can be exciting.

I wonder how much better our work experiences, our social life and our society would be if we were all committed to treating life like one big improvisation skit?

Adam Meyer is executive director of UCF's Student Accessibility Services office and Inclusive Education Services. He can be reached at Adam.Meyer@ucf.edu.