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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

EPISODE 69: JOYFUL SIMPSON – IMPROVISATION & BUSINESS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Soft skills, emotional intelligence, the willingness to be comfortable being uncomfortable well, companies everywhere are seeking employees and leaders who possess these qualities. Organizations are using multiple methods and approaches to teach a set of skills that improve communication, creativity, and teamwork. For a number of organizations and professionals, improvisation training has become a popular method. What was once found strictly in the theater is now readily found in business. Well, last week, when attending a global business school conference, I took part in an improv workshop led by Joyful Simpson, a California-based actor who teaches improv to businesses and professionals. After the workshop, she sat down with us to discuss improv, what it is, and what it can do for professionals and their teams. Here's our conversation with Joyful Simpson of Pro-CreativeArts.

Ken White

Thanks so much. It was really wonderful meeting you yesterday being in your workshop, and then after the workshop, I said we've got to talk about this. And so, my first question is that how do you define improvisation? Because I think most people don't quite get it.

Joyful Simpson

Yeah, absolutely I know it's a good question. So one thing to know about improv is that it's derived from theater, right? So its ancient origins apparently were commedia dell'arte which was a form of theater from the sixteen hundreds where people would travel from town to town, and they had set characters like stock characters that they would play and stock storylines, but then they would improvise a lot of it. And so a lot of the games and the things that we call improv now came from theater. So the simple definition is simply making up performance on the spot in the moment.

Ken White

But you talk about applied improv.

Joyful Simpson

Yeah. So applied improv is a kind of umbrella terminology, and I'd say actually applied theater or applied improv both terms used, and it's the use of improv or theater training in an educational setting or therapeutic setting, any setting outside of performance-driven.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

Right. So there's many artists or pedagogies is like Augustus Boal is, a Brazilian who created theater the oppressed which has a lot of there's just a lot of really great material there where he's really taken a lot of theater and made it applicable to work through social situations. He's probably the most well-known in terms of he's developed a pedagogy, but then improv, as it's been taken out of the theater and into this world, is called applied improv, and there's a network called the Applied Theater Network. So a lot of this use of improv outside of the theater has many names. You know, people are calling it all kinds of things, and people are calling it organizational improv. You know, I've chosen to call it applied improv because I really like the organization. There is applied improve network. And I just really like the organization. I hung on to the term cause it spoke to me.

Ken White

So why are businesses so interested in improv? Everywhere you go, businesses are talking about this.

Joyful Simpson

I know it's so interesting because they're interested in it, but they're still they want to use it. And I feel like they don't quite understand it. So improv, at face value, is very playful. It's very freeing. We've kind of turned a corner in the last ten years where people are understanding that business isn't working the way it used to. People don't get a job and stay in it for 40 years. Right.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

There's tons of turnover. And so that's like the modern business person needs to be very nimble and they need to be ready to deal with change, they need to be good listeners, they need their soft skills right. We think that we're hired just because our technical skill.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

But really our people skills are immensely important. So improv is this wonderful way to teach these elements like listening cohesive base. I'm kind of skipping around. So if you think about the elements of good communication and you teach communication so, correct me if I'm wrong but like clarity, listening, active listening,

Ken White

Absolutely.

Joyful Simpson

open-mindedness, agreeableness, an interest to come to a resolution as opposed to proving yourself right. Let's see, help me out. What other elements of good communication?

Ken White

Presence.

Joyful Simpson

Presence.

Ken White

I think situational communication is really important.

Joyful Simpson

Situational communication, yeah.

Ken White

We don't communicate the same way with different people. We adjust.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly and then being attuned to the finer subtler levels of reading someone, not just their face but like what are you getting from them. Where are they at, and improv is sort of like a scrimmage match to teach these things because those are all the skills you need to be a good improviser.

Ken White

My guess is, though, this isn't something you do for an hour and get through.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly and that's where I was saying businesses want it, but they haven't quite figured out because it's so playful, and it seems it's still an art form. It's hard to stomach. I think, you know, really giving it the resources or the airtime that it needs to really make the impact that it can.

Ken White

Sure.

Joyful Simpson

Like I was saying yesterday in the workshop, I think there's two strands like. Right, you can use this improv applied improv or these type of workshops as an orientation or as sort of a social glue if you want to get a cohort of people off the ground and connected and ready to work together. Oh, that's another thing. Teamwork right? Collaborative ability is like that is the essence of improv because in order to be a good improviser, one of the ethos of improv is not to make yourself look good but to make your partner look good, right? So like, if you're improvising a scene and your partner is sort of not listening to you and trying to steal the limelight

Ken White

Yes.

Joyful Simpson

it ruins the scene.

Ken White

And you hear actors will say that they'll complement other actors by how giving they are.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly right, and giving means like presence and mostly like tuning in making eye contact. Like really being in the moment with that person, so you can do it as an

orientation, or you get it, and you can get a lot out of an hour. But, of course, it's like anything. You're not going to learn a skill in an hour.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

It's a training of a muscle, and the more you do it, the more facile you get with it and the more it sort of becomes a way of life. Becomes a way of interacting with the world, which is much more engaging and much more, I think, rewarding because we're always sort of hiding and worrying, and I think if you kind of come to communication with a more engaged presence, you'd get more out of the interaction.

Ken White

Sure it sounds to me like where communication training and professional development in terms of communication was ten years ago. A lot of companies and organizations sort of said come on, give me a break. We all know how they do this, and now that's accepted, and companies want it, and professionals want it. It seems to me that's where improv now is coming about. It is what professionals are saying, and maybe I will bring this, and maybe there is value. So we did some interesting exercises yesterday. What do you try? Can you maybe describe a couple of those?

Joyful Simpson

Yeah. So I mean, I borrow exercises from that's one thing to note about this work is that we're all sort of feeding off of two major pedagogies. I'd like to go way back to the beginning when he said what is improv.

Ken White

Yeah.

Joyful Simpson

What is modern improv now sort of comes from two big mothers, Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin. They took a lot of theater pedagogies and kind of created what is the modern improv.

Ken White

Yeah.

Joyful Simpson

Anyways to go back, so we borrow exercises from them, and we all sort of take these exercises and make them our own.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

So yesterday, I did an exercise that I learned actually from a French theater artist named Leacock, which is a funny name. And so, for instance, in order to you can create trust between people in a moment. Right. And you can give people a real physical, experiential feeling of that trust by this exercise where you have two people in a partner. One closes their eyes, and the other puts their hands on their shoulder and stands behind them, and the one in front closes their eyes, and then the person behind gently guides them through the space is their driver, and they surrender their control, and they trust the person behind them. And you have, you know, 20 pairs of people mingling around the room in this fashion. And then I have people gradually speed up until they're going through a little jog. I love that exercise. It's fun to be in. It's a perspective shift. You have to give yourself over to somebody. And the feedback I get after that exercise is I really trusted that person. It's like a non-verbal language. You communicate with people, and you realize that that's always there underneath our purple because they say that only 10 percent of what we communicate is actually verbal.

Ken White

But the exercise is its trust to carry that over to business. If I don't trust my teammates, we're not gonna go too far.

Joyful Simpson

You don't get to get anything done right. Because if you're always working at different, if you're just working in different odds, you're not going to like improv games like that continue to point you in the direction that you act to access the collective intelligence of the room you're going to get the best product you're going to get the best results right because ten people thinking about one project are going to have a better result than one person if they know how to work together.

Ken White

So it teaches us collaboration.

Joyful Simpson

Definitely.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Joyful Simpson of Pro-CreativeArts in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education helps companies and organizations from all over the world by creating and delivering business and leadership development programs. If your organization is looking to get to the next level, contact the Center for Corporate Education to discuss how we can create and deliver a program that specifically fits your needs and gets results. For more information, visit our website at wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation on improvisation and business with Joyful Simpson of Pro-CreativeArts.

Ken White

There was an interesting exercise we did where each there were three people, where we were all in a circle. We had 15 or so. So one person would just run in the middle of the circle and strike a pose. Then a second one voluntarily would do the same. And then, the third, I remember thinking, I don't care about the point of this; I just don't want to fail.

Joyful Simpson

Right.

Ken White

So failure seems to get in the way.

Joyful Simpson

It really does, and that's such a big thing that improv shows you how to do right so, and failure, and I know you're going to ask me that vulnerability. Failure and vulnerability are like two sides of the same coin, right? How many things in our lives do we not do because we're afraid of failure and okay, I'll go back to that exercise. But we, you know, we want leaders that are thinking outside the box and taking risks and leading us to the new level. Right. So this is a exercise that shows you in a microcosm how to do that in real-time in the moment. So you're in a circle with people, and you go in, and you strike a pose, and the directive is to not think about the pose, to not try to make a good pose, do not try to be clever but to surprise yourself. Just go out there and allow it to happen. Be spontaneous allowed to happen. It's a low-stakes arena where failure doesn't really add up to much. So say you make a pose that is stupid, right? In my class, there is no way to look stupid or to try not to look stupid.

Ken White

Exactly.

Joyful Simpson

So, you learn, oh, it's not that big of a deal. I'm sitting here making a funny shape in front of my colleagues, and everybody is giggling in a loving way, and it just like pops the air out of fear a little bit, even though it's terrifying. I know as a participant when I'm a participant, I get all the same fear. You know, even though I've been doing this for 20 years.

Ken White

And it was interesting because we were in a group of individuals who were all in the same profession. We sort of know each other but by no means are we a team.

Joyful Simpson

Right.

Ken White

And I could see a team of people of the dozen people who work together on a daily basis going through this, really creating tearing down some barriers and creating some of that trust and teamwork through these exercises.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly. Someone said yesterday you know it's funny. It's a very egalitarian art, and I know that doesn't necessarily seem to always jive with business. But I think business is starting to really understand that the old model isn't necessarily working for now and that we people want, you know, that they want collaborative ability in their people, and that's, and that's a really hard thing to define. But if you do an hour of these exercises with a team, even you guys, right like by the end of that workshop, you felt like a unit.

Ken White

Very much so.

Joyful Simpson

Right, and you knew each other peripherally, but you didn't, you know, and like, imagine doing having done that two-hour workshop and then going to work on a project and keeping some of those strings that you were practicing like maybe people would be more bold maybe people would listen better.

Ken White

I think people would participate without worrying about failure.

Joyful Simpson

Right.

Ken White

Without worrying about I better not say this might not be good, but I think after going through that, most of us would say, of course, I'm going to share this idea because my teammate might make it better.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly, exactly like this idea of a seed of this idea is there even the way I say it isn't perfect right. It's not letting like the good enough like be the perfect big enemy of good enough right. And that's where the vulnerability comes in that it's a little scary to say something that maybe you don't think is going to be right.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

But that's where you know, we're always sort of in this battle between fear and vulnerability, and actually, I do an interesting exercise that I got from a gentleman who wrote a book called positive intelligence. He does this exercise, and I often do it. I love it. I didn't do it yesterday for lack of time, but I give people a little note card, and I ask them to take a moment and write on the card. You know what is something that you're afraid to share with people because you think it'll risk your reputability? He does this with executives, and I do it with, you know, executives as well. And first, when I start doing this exercise, I think oh, this is too scary. People are not going to want to do this. So I have it anonymous, and then I fold, and I have everybody put it in a box and have everybody go back to their chair, sit down, close their eyes, so nobody's looking at each other, and I read them all out loud anonymously. And it is incredible.

Ken White

I bet.

Joyful Simpson

I always and that people come away with that exercise being like, oh, that little thing that I am so afraid of, and I have so much shame about ten other people in this room have the same fear. So why are we all hiding from each other?

Ken White

Yeah.

Joyful Simpson

You know, and when we stop hiding, we can get so much more done, you know.

Ken White

It's so much not like Whose Line Is It Anyway.

Joyful Simpson

It's so not.

Ken White

This is teamwork build.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly.

Ken White

It's coming together by trusting each other.

Joyful Simpson

Exactly and we think of improv as like this, you know, like goofy thing, and it does have that ability, and a lot of times, there is a lot of laughter, and that's actually one of the benefits of improv. But it's not there is in improv. Actually, one of the rules is you don't try to be funny, right, because when you try to be funny, you're usually making a plan and forcing things and overthinking and letting the inner critic get in the way. But when you just sort of allow your first instinct to go, and you trust your instincts, you find that a lot of times that's where the great ideas are right, the good ideas and the bad ideas are together, and sometimes you have to shoot out ten bad ideas to get to the good idea. But if you're in a culture that is not afraid of the bad ideas and just letting them fall at their own rate, and that's something in the theater that we're really accustomed to is, you know, we understand that the creative process is a little messy, but that's how you get there.

Ken White

So a professional and executive CEO says I'm not so sure. I don't know if this will work for my team. What advice do you have for them?

Joyful Simpson

Right. So it depends on you know what are the stakes, right? How much, how much, how many resources are on the line, you know but like, say, yeah, a team has an idea, and the CEO is like, no, I don't think it'll work. You know, maybe there's an idea very close to that idea. The CEO can say well, I'm not sure about this, but I like the emphasis. I like where

you're going. I like this about I like that about it, like let's see what else is in there instead of being like, no, it's not going to work.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

Come back to me with something else.

Ken White

Right.

Joyful Simpson

Be like it, you know. I mean, the yes and thing is a little played out, but it's like, okay, I see the effort. Not quite there, but this is great. Keep moving.

Ken White

What about improv itself for a skeptic who might be a professional? What do you tell them?

Joyful Simpson

Yeah, no, it's so funny. I mean, what I tell them like I want to get you in the room because you know it's hard to explain. And for a skeptic, I'd say there's a lot more than meets the eye to improv, and it's something that theater artists know well. The joy slash productivity slash of being in the creative space. So the room, the atmosphere that you create in an improv setting or in an improv class, is like a very great culture. It creates a culture that is its ripe right. And so I would say, you know, like you have to access that, like come experience it, and people are always more afraid. They're like, I'm afraid when they come to the workshops, and they're always surprised at how unscary it really was. Right. And it's that practice of jumping through the fear and realizing you're okay on the other side. That is such a great muscle to practice. I feel like I can really deal with skeptics in the room. It's harder from the outside, you know, from just trying to explain it because it's such an experiential activity.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Joyful Simpson, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs and get

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