Introduction

Improv Comedy???

The first reaction people have to the idea of applying improv comedy to their professional or personal lives is, "Come on now, life is serious. How can improv comedy apply to that?"

This response is more than a little surprising for the simple reason that *we all improvise every second of every day!* Oh, we all love to try to control life and the world around us, but ultimately we are all making it up as we go along. Once in rare while things will go as planned, but more often than not the universe will throw us a curve ball that we have to deal with on the spot.

Therefore, it stands to reason that if we are improvising every second of every day, then by understanding the principles of great improvisation we can understand the principles of a great life.

The keys to successful improv are the willingness to take risks, the understanding of how to tap into your own creative resources, and the ability to listen to and work well with other people. Show me a person in the whole wide world who wouldn't benefit from having a willingness to take risks, the ability to tap into his creativity, and the skill to listen and work with others.

An improviser must constantly take risks. The primary risk is stepping on stage with nothing prepared and trying to create something entertaining. Without embracing this risk, the

improviser does nothing. In a similar fashion, anyone who wants to grow and move forward (which really should be everyone) must push forward and try new ideas and methods. Without risk, there is no progress or innovation.

Creativity is often misconstrued as 'artistry.' In improv, it is clear that the performer needs to be creative. An improviser needs to generate interesting ideas immediately, without a moment's hesitation. While most artistic people are creative, creativity is about much more than art. Creativity is simply the ability to create. It is the ability to come up with something from nothing. It is the ability to create new ideas. These new ideas could be solutions to problems, innovative new ideas, or new ways of handling difficult people. Just because artists are creative doesn't mean that non-artists can't benefit from their own creativity.

Unlike stand-up comedy, where the performer is alone, improv requires cooperation between two or more players. When one performer ignores his partners and does not involve them at all, he creates a disharmonious environment that tears at the group. The best improv happens when everyone is involved and there is a free flow of ideas that are supported and built upon by everyone. This attitude is the heart of communication. Whether talking to a co-worker, client, friend, or family member, the ability to openly and honestly listen to other people and incorporate their ideas is the key to building strong relationships.

The keys to effective improvisation are the same as the keys to success in just about any other area of life. It really should not be that surprising though; life, after all, is the ultimate improvisation.

What is Improv?

Improv comedy is a form of theater where the performers take the stage with nothing prepared and make up instant comedy

based on the audience's suggestions. Contrary to popular opinion, improv comedy is not standup. Rather than one performer with a microphone telling jokes, improv consists of a group of performers working together to create improvised scenes on the spot. Improv requires teamwork and creativity, and, when done properly, is hilarious, energetic, and fun for performers and audiences alike!

However, there are many variations on this basic scene. Players can be restricted in what they say or how they move. They can be forced to act things out with certain emotions or in specific genres. They may be forced to work together in unusual ways (one player can act as the 'arms' of another, for example).

If you have ever seen the Drew Carey hosted the television show, 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?', then you have seen improv comedy.

In case you have never seen an improv comedy show, here are examples of some games an improv group might play:

Scenes Without the Letter _____ - The players are forced to act out a scene without using a specified letter of the alphabet in any word they say. If they accidentally use a word, they are removed from the scene and replaced with another player.

Yes And - Two participants have a conversation where every sentence must begin with the phrase 'Yes, and….' By starting every sentence this way, the players agree with their partners, and then build off of what they said.

Expert Interview - A player is assigned a topic on which to be an expert. The trick is, the topic will be something on which the player is most assuredly *not* an expert! The remaining participants then ask the expert questions on the topic, which he must answer without hesitation.

Bonus Improv Exercises On-Line

Each of the principles in this book comes from the world of improv comedy. One of the best ways to learn the principles is to play the improv games. It is one thing to read about something, or even hear or see it, but it is entirely another to experience it. Not only will you be practicing valuable skills, but you will also have a lot of fun.

For a **FREE** downloadable guide to over 25 practice exercises and improv games, complete with the point of the game, explanation of how to play, tips to make it better, and takeaway points, visit:

www.AvishParashar.com/bookbonus

The key with the exercises is to have fun and not get too stressed out over them. You will make mistakes; you will do it wrong; but that's the way you learn and get better.

The exercises are also designed to be silly and weird. Don't let that throw you. By making them silly they become fun. But the silliness will also take some pressure off. If you are playing something crazy, you can't get too upset or stressed if you mess up, right?

Thanks for reading!
Avish

Principle #1:

Have Fun!

Having fun! Sounds great, doesn't it? And yet, having fun is one of the first things most people forget about as they go through life.

When teaching improv comedy, I am constantly reminding people to have fun. Improv, after all, is a silly art form, and when people take it too seriously the performance suffers.

In the struggle to "get it right," most beginning performers forget all about having fun. They obsess over the rules and techniques. I actually find the easiest way to improve a beginner's performance is to call out, "have more fun!" The mentality often is, "when I get it down and do well, then it will be fun." Amazingly, the opposite is true. When you have fun, you will start to get it down and do well.

This paradigm works in life as well. Most people believe that things will be fun once they "make it." This is unfortunate because the way it usually works is that the more fun you have now, the more likely you are to make it. Yes, things get even better later on, but you'll never get there if it's all struggle.

Somewhere along the way, most of us learned to "be serious." Among school, home, and work, we were taught that having fun was not what it was all about. It was far more important to "be

responsible." Work and school were the times to be serious, and playtime was the time to have fun.

This is an incredibly unfortunate mentality to have. Think about it. If you work 40 hours a week, then that consists of about 50% of your waking hours. Between commuting and extra work, most people spend more than 40 hours per week. It seems like a crime to let more than half of your waking life be devoid of fun just because you have an idea that work is not a time for fun.

This seems obvious. There are plenty of people out there talking about doing what you love, and finding your passion. But if you look around, people everywhere are not having any fun! What's that all about?!?

What is Fun?

Let me make one thing clear. I hate people who are always "on." You know exactly whom I am talking about: the "comedian" who makes light of everything or the person who goofs off and misses deadlines. While I believe having fun is a number one priority, I do not advocate being irresponsible or insensitive. When I say "have fun," I mean for you to make sure that you enjoy what you do. Approach your life, work, and relationships with a smile. Look for ways to have fun and laugh, but do it within the context of doing what is right and responsible.

The key is to have fun *doing what you are doing.* The person who thinks he is having fun while slacking off is avoiding life. It's not about going to work and taking excessive lunches and breaks, or chatting everyone's ear off. It's really about finding ways of making the work you do fun.

You might be thinking, "Well my job is terrible – there's no way to have fun at what I do." If that's true, you have two choices: 1) find a way, or 2) move on!

Inertia

Newton's 1st Law of Thermodynamics is that a body at rest tends to stay at rest. This principle is the biggest reason why many people don't have fun. It's always easier to stay as you are than to change!

If your life is not fun, you will need to exert a little effort to find ways of making it fun. You can no longer shuffle in to work and do things the exact same way you have been doing them. The changes don't need to be huge, but they do need to happen. For example, can you listen to a radio or iPod while you work? Can you restructure when you work on things to get your high-stress items done first so you can feel good the rest of the day? Can you arrange your desk or schedule to avoid the annoying person at work?

The answers may not come immediately, and you must be willing to overcome inertia if you want to start having more fun.

Of course, if you really think about it and realize that you just can't have fun at work (maybe the person you work with directly everyday is awful; or maybe you just don't like the actual work you have to do), you should consider looking for something new. This requires overcoming a great deal of inertia, which is why so many people stay at unfulfilling jobs for so long. Many employers realize this and keep giving incentives for employees such as stock options, 401K's, retirement funds, and regular promotions. On a positive note, these sorts of things are designed to reward employees for loyalty and service, and to give them a vested interest in the company's success. On a negative note, they are designed to encourage people to remain with the company even if the work is not enjoyable. Consider this though – time is the only irreplaceable commodity! You may love your income, options, and funds, and leaving may set you back. But

you can always earn more. What you can never replace is the time you spend not enjoying life.

Inertia may be the single biggest destroyer of hopes and dreams. If you are not having fun and enjoying what you are doing (in or out of work), overcome that inertia and change it!

Why This is Important

Life is too short to not have fun. If you are willing to throw away 50% of your waking hours, then that's really too bad. But having fun isn't just a "quality of life" principle. It's a great performance principle too.

I don't mean "performance" in the sense of theater or improv. I mean it in the sense of how well you perform at the things you do in your life. The more fun you have the better you will do.

Think about something in your life that you do very well. Chances are, you also enjoy doing it (if not, then I am guessing that you used to enjoy doing it, and for whatever reason you are now burned out on it). Also chances are that you enjoyed the process of getting better at it. While I'm sure there was work and effort, overall, I'm confident that you enjoyed the process itself.

The more fun you have and the more enjoyable you find what you do, the better you will be at it and the more success you will find. It's just that simple, but because we have conditioned ourselves to think that work = serious, most of us never embrace this simple, yet powerful, idea.

Stephen King has a great bit of advice on this topic: "Ask yourself frequently, 'am I having fun?' The answer needn't always be yes. But if it's always no, it's time for a new project or a new career."

How to Have Fun

So right now you may be thinking, "Ok, that's all fine and good. But how do you expect me to have fun when bad things happen, or when I have an awful job?" Here's the first answer to that: It is never the things outside of us that dictate how we feel, but rather our responses to them.

You probably know some people who can always keep their chins up and maintain a positive outlook no matter what is happening. You probably also know some people who seem to look at everything in a negative light. If you showed people from both groups the exact same situation, they would probably offer up two completely different interpretations of the situation. All of the difference is in how you perceive things! To get a bit

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philosophical for a second, there is no reality, there is only perception. All of our own realities are in our minds, because we perceive reality through our own filters.

Ok, back to earth here. What this comes down to is that rather than taking a situation and calling it "good" or 'bad" and letting that affect you, you are much better served to "find the good" or "find the fun" in any situation.

We all know people who can always find a reason to complain. If they get new and better jobs, they focus on how hard it is to switch jobs. When they get into a relationship they focus on what's wrong with the other people, or how the relationships will end. Rather than pursuing their dreams they focus on how they will never happen.

If negative people can find the negative in anything, why can't you choose to find the positive in anything? You can, and here are a few ways to make sure you are having fun and staying positive in your life:

What is Your Focus?

The fastest way to bring yourself around to being positive and having fun is to control your focus. Remember, reality is what you perceive. What you perceive is based on what your focus is.

Negative people find themselves (or force themselves) to focus on the negatives; positive people focus on the positives. If you want to have fun, focus on what's fun in a situation. One of the smarmiest clichés out there is, "positive people take the sunshine with them!" Smarmy though it may be, it does offer up a nice way of looking at focus.

If you are going on an outdoor picnic and it starts to rain, how do you react? The negative person focuses on the rain and how the entire day is ruined. The positive person focuses on figuring out ways of having fun despite the weather. Who would you rather be? Who would you rather be around?

Imagine that a loved one is in the hospital. On what do you focus? Many people focus on the worst case scenario and get stressed and depressed. By doing this they feel that they are exerting some form of control of the situation ("If I'm stressed I'm doing something!"). Others react by focusing on the best case scenario, such as a successful procedure, a speedy recovery, etc. They don't diminish the danger, they do take whatever steps and preparations are needed, but they don't obsess over it.

To the negative, stressed person, the positive person appears to be taking the situation lightly. This is not the case at all. The positive person realizes one important point: *whether you focus on the positive or the negative, in that situation whatever will*

happen will happen. No one is influencing anything by focusing on the negative or the positive.

A friend went through a situation like this and he said something very profound (he was refusing to get depressed when his wife was diagnosed with a brain tumor and was going in for surgery in a few weeks). He said, "If the absolute worst comes to pass, I don't want to have our last few weeks together to be all depressed and weepy. I want us to spend our time laughing and joking and enjoying each other like we always have."

That's a pretty amazing attitude. If he can take that approach with a wife going in for brain surgery, do you think you could apply the same approach to all those little things that stress you out?

(Note: The procedure was done successfully – see, worrying would have accomplished nothing!)

Questions

The easiest way to direct your focus is to adjust the questions you are asking yourself. Instead of asking, "What's going to go wrong today?" ask, "What can I enjoy about today?"

Instead of focusing on the problem ("This is terrible!"), focus on the solution (ask, "How can we solve this problem?")

Shift your focus from blame to resolution (Instead of, "Who's fault is this?" ask, "What can we do to fix this?")

Change from asking "Why does this always happen?" to "What can I do to make sure this doesn't happen again?"

Ask yourself simple things like, "What's funny about this?" or "How can I make this fun?"

Your brain is immensely powerful. By asking these questions you shift your focus and improve your approach. And chances are your brain will start giving you good answers to those questions.

Play More!

Yes, you should play more! You should play at work as well, not just when you leave. As kids, we had it right! A kid basically has one purpose – to play as much as possible. As adults, we lose that attitude and approach, which is really sad. Find ways of "playing" in whatever you do and you will have fun and be more effective.

I am not saying that you should take this to the extreme – don't show up at work with a baseball and bat and turn the office into a ballgame! And don't play in a way that reduces other people's productivity or offends them.

But can you add some humor into the workday? Can you create some friendly competition (keyword: "friendly"!)? Can you turn work activities into "games" that become more fun to do? Can you work in a group with people you enjoy instead of keeping your head buried in your cubicle?

The rule of thumb is to work first, play second. This is a fine rule and a necessary one to make sure that what needs to get done gets done. But I say why not work first and play first?

Be Enthusiastic and Passionate

What's amazing about the world is how annoyed society seems to get at people who are doing it right! Have you been around someone who is incredibly enthusiastic? It's usually a very good and engaging thing. But if you look around at others, they

sometimes get annoyed by people who are enthusiastic. It's almost like they are saying, "What's she got going on to be so enthusiastic about?" What happens is on some level they are jealous of people who have some kind of passion in their lives.

My advice is ignore the naysayers! Enthusiasm is a great thing and an absolute must if you want to have fun and succeed! You have two options to create enthusiasm: 1) Do things you are already passionate about, or 2) Find ways to feel passionate about the things you are already doing.

Obviously, the first option is easier. However, it can be hard to find opportunities to do what you love (especially if you are trying to make it your vocation). Don't give up though, and don't assume you can't find ways of doing it. If you are enthusiastic enough and focus, your enthusiasm will give you the energy to find a way.

"Enthusiasm is a great thing and an absolute must if you want to have fun and succeed!"

You can also find ways of weaving your enthusiasm into things. For example, I love speaking in public. It's my career now, but even before that I would volunteer (at first, and then it just became expected of me) to make announcements and short speeches at events. I was often the "spokesperson" when doing group work and presentations. This was a way of taking what I was enthusiastic about and adding it into my day.

The second option is a little more challenging, but, with the right focus, it can be done. Think about your primary work activity – what do you spend most of your time working on each day? Are you enthusiastic about it? If not, then I would highly suggest you find ways of getting enthusiastic about it.

How do you do this? The first way is to control your focus. When you are doing your work, on what are you focusing? Is your mind wrapped around how you wish you were doing

something else, or how you can't wait to leave to go home? If so, you will never get a sense of enthusiasm. First, retrain your thinking to focus on what you do like about what you are doing and what benefits you get from this work.

Second, determine if you can modify the activity so that it is more fun. I once needed to do some mindless data entry, working at home, and I was not enthusiastic about it at all! I was into hardcore procrastinating mode at that point. What got me through it was when I realized that the task was mindless enough that it didn't really require that much attention, I moved a TV into my work area and watched movies during the day while entering the data. Now I wasn't doing just a mindless task. I was watching movies for fun while being necessarily productive!

You may not be able to roll a TV into your office, but you may be able to modify what you do. As I mentioned before, can you listen to music while you work? Can you break the task up into small enough chunks that you can enjoy doing them? Can you trade tasks with others in your group so you all focus on what you enjoy and do well?

We've all heard about people who say they are excited to get up in the morning and get to work. The reason they are able to do this is because they have enthusiasm for what they do. Find it for yourself, and you won't regret it.

Be Childlike

Being childlike is more than just playing. Think about a child in your life. No, not the annoying one that you can't stand seeing because he's a brat! Think about the one you like who smiles and laughs. What qualities does he have?

For one, he's probably very curious. When a child sees and hears something new for the first time, he is absolutely enamored. He also probably finds himself laughing for no reason. You would

do well do adopt a sense of curiosity. Consider how all those things in your life that you don't like or are afraid to do or try would change if you became curious about them.

Children are also persistent when they care about what it is they are doing. Persistence will be covered in the next chapter, but think about how a child can act when she really wants something! It's not just when she holds her breath until you buy her ice cream – it can also be when she is engrossed trying to figure something out. She will keep poking and prodding until she gets it.

Children also like to get involved. Until society makes them self-conscious and shy, children like to jump in, help out, talk to others, etc. They don't sit on the sidelines – they get in the game! What a wonderful quality to adopt. It's the people who get involved who have the fun and get the success. Most people convince themselves that they just like to sit and watch. But really that idea comes from fear, or from an inner resistance that has convinced them to "sit out." Everyone's idea of getting involved is different. There are definitely times I beg off of doing something, or stay in and read instead of going out. But if you always sit on the sidelines, chances are you are missing out on a lot of things.

What's amazing is how obvious this becomes when watching people improvise. When I have new improvisers act out a scene, they invariably "resist" each other's offers. For example, if two people are acting out being a married couple and the man says, "Honey, let's go out dancing tonight," ninety percent of the time an inexperienced improviser will resist that action and say something like, "Oh, I don't feel like it."

The thing is that when you improvise on stage, your first instincts come out. Most people react that way (resisting) in an improv scene because that's the easiest course of action! Even though it's just an improv scene, it's safer to take no action than

to say, "yes" (this will be covered in much greater detail in the section on "yes and").

What does this mean in the real world? At work, do you take on new projects, or committees? Do you help out in activities? At home, do you take part in your family's activities as a volunteer or chaperone? In your community or with any associations you join, do you just show up at events or do you get involved on committees or in leadership?

Getting involved doesn't mean you have to become president of every group you join. But you only ever get out what you put in, and that goes for just about everything in life. Kids are born with this knowledge, and then forget it as they grow up…

There is an important distinction to make here. Being "childlike" is good; being "childish" is bad!

To be childish means to be selfish, petulant, irresponsible, and petty. Many, many adults have no problem being childish!

To be childlike is to be curious and persistent. It means to get involved. You probably did these things as a child, so get them back and you will naturally have more fun in your life.

Laugh More

Laugh. Laugh often and laugh hard.

Laugh everyday. Laugh multiple times a day.

What should you laugh at? That's up to you. There's no "universal funny." I can't tell you what to do to laugh. Find out for yourself, and do it. Do it often. For me it's watching funny movies and TV shows and talking with friends who make me laugh. I also listen to the same hilarious radio show in Philadelphia every morning. For you it may be one of these, but

it may not. You may like to read funny books and articles, or maybe people watching makes you laugh. What you do to laugh isn't important, as long as you are doing something.

Even better than doing things that make you life is to see the humor in everyday situations. There is funny stuff out there, you just have to look for it. Once you simply start to pay attention to the world around you with the focus of, "what's funny about this?" you will realize how absurd the world is. Without even trying you will find yourself laughing and smiling.

When you laugh, your body releases positive chemicals into your system. Laughing reduces your stress, increases your blood flow, improves the immune system, improves your mood, and can even be used to reduce pain and cure disease.

The more laugh, the healthier you will be and the more able you will be to handle all of the unpredictable twists life throws your way.

Remember, to get free access to over 25 exercises and improv games to help practice these principles, visit
www.AvishParashar.com/bookbonus

Principle #2:

It's All In Your Head

After an improv comedy performance, I commonly hear the comment, "Oh, I could never do that." Even when I try to explain to the person that it's just a matter of practice and training, they will often come back to me saying, "Some people are just born with that ability."

The first thing that jumps into my mind in these situations is that a person who has never done improv is telling me, an experienced performer and teacher of improv, whether learning improv is possible! This is really not that surprising. It is easy to sit back and watch if you think that some people are just born with talent and it's ok for you to be unable to do it yourself. But if someone comes along and tells you that anyone, even you, can do it with the right training and experience, then suddenly you almost feel flawed. You question, "If anyone can do this, why can't I?"

This is, of course, fallacious thinking. You don't criticize a 3-month-old baby for not knowing how to walk, do you? You don't criticize a 16-year-old who's behind the wheel of a car for the first time for not being able to drive properly, right? In the same way, there is no shame in not knowing how to improvise *right now*. You've never been trained to do it properly.

There is great shame, however, in looking at something and refusing to believe it is possible for you to do it. You may decide that you don't want to do it, or that it's not worth doing. You may determine your priorities are elsewhere. Barring those few exceptions where a physical limitation gets in the way, you must acknowledge that you can do it, if that is what you want. For example, I may love basketball, but at my age and height (5'7") being a basketball star is not likely to happen (although shorter players than I have made it).

Most people don't succumb to physical limitations; they succumb to mental limitations.

Could you be a famous concert pianist, even if you have never played the piano? Unless you are tone deaf, the answer is yes. You would likely have to sacrifice every other area of your life to practice 8 hours a day and start touring the world performing. To most people, this cost would be too high. Again, there is no shame in making that choice. The question is, how many people do you know (maybe yourself included) have left dreams by the wayside not because the cost was too high, but because they decided they just couldn't come true? They didn't bother trying or starting something new or different because they believed it to be too late, too much, or just plain impossible.

There are a few mentalities that lead to great improvisation. When applied, they open you up to a whole new world of possibilities.

Technique vs. Mentality

Whenever I teach anything, be it improv, martial arts, communication, sales, or whatever, I always start with mentality. This often causes a slight problem because what people are looking for is technique.

For example, in improv comedy there are hundreds of games, many of which are described in this book. Often, whether in rehearsals with my own group or when I was teaching a class, people were eager to learn new games. We would work on one idea or game for a session or two, and people started to feel the urge to learn something new. At times, in fact, they became bored with repeating the same game. This is not to say that they mastered the games they knew already. That was far from the reality. Once they had gained familiarity with a game, they felt they were ready for something different.

This is not a slight against any of my former students. It is a very natural tendency in this over-stimulated, MTV world. We are all constantly seeking the next interesting thing. In any endeavor, however, the greatest impact does not come from learning more and more and newer and newer techniques. Greatness comes from practicing the fundamentals over and over again until they are completely second nature.

In sports, the fundamentals are physical and must be repeatedly practiced (shooting free throws, serving a tennis ball, etc). In music, fundamentals come in the form of practicing scales and drilling with fingering exercises.

In improvisation, the fundamentals are mental. While the creative space of the improviser is a stage, the world of the improviser is in his thought processes. Everything the improviser does begins in his head. As such, the best way to build a strong improviser is to train the underlying mentality rather than teaching him a variety of skills or games (In fact, most improvisers I have seen with heavy "skills" training from day 1 often have a cap on their potential because they have never built the underlying mindset of great improv).

"Greatness comes from practicing the fundamentals over and over again until they are completely second nature"

In the same way, whether professionally or personally, everything you do in your world begins in your head. To increase your effectiveness and success, seek first to adopt the key mentalities of achievement. For example, I conducted sales training where I interviewed attendees in advance to find out what were their challenges on the job and their expectations of the training. Sure enough, quite a few hoped to learn "a few new closing or opening techniques." During the session we worked on mentality and fundamentals instead, and the results were quite positive.

Why This is Important

Techniques are wonderful and needed, but only after the mindsets have been trained. They are like tools. They are incredibly useful, but relying just on those tools will not develop the underlying skills you need to deal with an unfamiliar situation when it arises. For example, if you know how to use a wrench, screwdriver, and hammer, you will be fine doing basic projects. But if those are your only tools, and a situation arises where pliers would be useful, you will have no idea what to do. In fact, you might try to force one of the other tools to work, which is a recipe for disaster.

If, however, you have an underlying knowledge of construction, you will be able to understand what needs to be done even if you aren't currently familiar with the tool. Rather than forcing an existing tool, you can look for something different and appropriate, or invent something new (indeed, this is how most progress originates).

Once you have an underlying mindset, you have freedom and flexibility to deal with any situation, not just the specific ones you for which you have prepared. The challenge is that it can be a longer and harder road to train a mindset than a technique, especially in the beginning. This goes back to the question at the

beginning of the chapter. If someone says, "I could never do that," the first half of the response is, "Anyone can do that, it's just a matter of training and experience." The second half of the response (usually left unsaid) is, "Most people are just unwilling to develop the mindset to be able to do great improv."

This applies to any area of your life. If you want to be great at something, learn and adopt the underlying mentalities that make success easy, natural, and inevitable.

Key Mentalities

Here are the key mentalities that lead not only to great improv, but also to success in many other areas.

Willingness

The key to success in any area of life, improv or otherwise, is to be *willing.* Willing to do what? You must be willing to do many things, actually.

Willingness to Fail

First, you have to be willing to fail. In improv comedy, you never know what's going to happen on the stage. Sometimes an audience is just not with you (or worse, they're drunk!). Sometimes an audience will throw you a curveball that for whatever reason knocks you off balance. Sometimes you don't connect with them, and sometimes you say and do stuff that isn't that funny. As a performer, you have to accept that these things will happen. You have to be willing to mess it up big time.

Life is the same way. Some days the wind just doesn't blow our way. Sometimes we won't connect with people, or we'll mess up

the interaction. Sometimes we will try our darndest and still come up short.

Again, you have to be willing to fail. The important distinction is that being willing to fail does not mean that you want to fail. In fact, you must want and intend to succeed. Acknowledging that you may fail just means you will not be paralyzed by fear. You won't avoid taking action because of thoughts like, "But what if I fail?!" One of life's great ironies is that the more willing you are to do so, the less likely you are to actually fail! Once you accept the possibility of failure, it loses it's hold over you. This lets you focus on doing the task at hand.

Imagine that you are an improv performer, and you are about to take the stage for the first time. For most people, this creates a sense of nerves and fear. If you put your attention on what frightens you, then you have less attention to put on the skills you have learned, on the audience, and on the performance itself. You have already reduced the likelihood that you will succeed before you have even taken the stage.

Another great irony is that in order to succeed, you must fail!

For years, I had the good fortune of getting a part at every single audition I attended. From high-school through college, and for a year or so afterwards, I never "failed" at an audition. By eight years after college, I only once was I not chosen for a part! I was pretty proud of myself. I thought that I must be pretty amazing to always get cast. Unfortunately, I was deluding myself. No one succeeds all the time. If you never fail, than you are simply not doing enough! I kept getting parts because I kept

"If you have no failures at all, then maybe you should consider doing more."

going to auditions where I knew I was eminently qualified for the role. I knew my chance of success was very high. This is the

acting equivalent of playing it safe. Yes, I played many parts, but I would never progress in my life or career by playing it safe.

Keep track of your failures. As long as you learn from them (and don't do anything stupid to burn bridges or hurt yourself!) they will be indicators that you are on the road to success.

I hope you end up with more success than failures. But, if you have no failures at all, then maybe you should consider doing more.

Willingness to Look Foolish

This could also be classified as the fear of embarrassment. As an improv performer, I have portrayed dogs, bears, gorillas, and a multitude of other animals. I have taken on accents and imitated celebrities that were very far off from reality. I have sung at the top of my lungs, usually off key. The wild and crazy world of improv comedy requires you to be silly and look foolish. You absolutely can not perform improv effectively if you are afraid of looking silly (although I have seen people try; it's not pretty…).

Chances are that you will never have to act like an animal in front of your colleagues or loved ones. However, if you are not willing to look foolish, you will not only reduce your chance of success, you will also miss out on some wonderful opportunities.

Think back in your life. Have you ever kept silent or chosen not to ask a question because you were afraid of looking ignorant? If so, have you ever had the experience where someone else spoke up and said the same thing you were going to, and it was well received?

Can you think back on an opportunity on which you missed out because you were afraid of looking foolish? Perhaps you didn't apply for a job, skipped an audition or tryout, or missed advice because you didn't ask for it. Has there been a man or woman

you didn't approach or ask out on a date because you were afraid of how you would look? I won't insult you by pointing out how foolish it is to afraid to look foolish, mostly because it is common and universal (and I suffer from that fear just like everyone else).

Remember this though: People are generally not afraid of *being foolish,* but rather of *looking foolish.* I suggest you ask yourself this, "To whom do I care about looking foolish?" Quite often, the answer is, "people I don't know or care about."

We don't do things that would better or enrich our lives because we are afraid of what people whom we don't know might think! How crazy is that??

Every time you make the choice not to take action because you are afraid of looking foolish, just remind yourself that you are letting other people determine the quality of life you will enjoy. You are putting more stock in their opinions of you than in what you want to do or achieve. Besides, half of the time you will be wrong, and they won't think you're foolish at all. In fact, many will admire your action. The rest won't think twice about you. Remember, "you wouldn't care what people thought of you if you realized how seldom they do."

Willingness to Be Rejected

Ah rejection…is there anything out there that we try to avoid more?

The fear of rejection comes from our desire to connect and belong. If someone rejects us, then maybe we have done something wrong. Rejection goes hand in hand with embarrassment. Often it isn't hearing the "no" that bothers us. We automatically associate the "no" with rejection and that causes us to feel embarrassment.

It's okay to not like rejection. You just can not be paralyzed by it. The problem is two-fold. First, in order to succeed you **must** face lots of rejection and learn how to deal with it in a positive way. Second, the more successful you become, the more rejection you will face! Because of this, many people choose to settle in their lives. If you don't understand how to positively deal with rejection, then of course you are going to avoid putting yourself in a position to be rejected. But the reality is that in order to really succeed at anything you choose to do, you must face rejection.

When I first started my own business (soon after college), I was speaking to a friend's father about how much I hated cold-calling. He looked at me and said, "That's because you have never failed in school. You've always gotten good grades and succeeded. The person who's got the edge is the guy who failed a class and learned that he could get back up and still do well."

At the time, that conversation struck me as strange. Here was someone telling me that having been successful in school was a limitation! I soon realized that he was right. Not that I think getting good grades was a bad thing, but rather, that having avoided major failure and rejection in my life, I had not built up a resistance to it. As his words sank in, I realized that I needed to overcome that fear.

Soon, after having made over 600 cold calls, I can't say that I enjoyed rejection, but I did get to a point where I no longer let it rule me.

Willingness to Be Wrong

Nobody likes to be wrong. In fact, from the day we start moving around and walking and talking, we are constantly being told what's right and wrong.

It starts at home, with parents consistently reminding us of what we can and can not do. Then we go off to school and the teachers pick up where our parents left off with regard to behavior, plus we are introduced to the concept of grades. From this point on, everything we do will be evaluated. And most of it will be presented with a sense of black and white – no gray areas between right and wrong..

For years and years we struggle and work to come up with the right answer, whether it's for a test, essay, report, or oral answer. It's no wonder that once people reach adulthood, they fear being wrong. We are so conditioned to find the right answer that we are always fearing penalties for being wrong. And yet, just like in our approach to failure, we have to be willing to be wrong to move forward in our lives. The only things we will know with 100% certainty are the things we already know well. I believe you will be hard pressed to move forward in your life and progress if you stay wrapped up just within what you know.

Being wrong may often be a precursor to failure. If you have an idea for a product you assume the world will love and you invest in it and are wrong, well, now you have a failure on your hands. As with all the other states of willingness, the point is not that there are no consequences to being wrong, Rather, you must accept that sometimes you *will* be wrong. In fact, being wrong, and learning from it, is how you grow. The reality is that most people learn from making mistakes faster than they do by being right.

When directing new improvisers, I have found that some people came in with natural instincts that allowed them to make good improv choices right off the bat (choices we will discuss throughout this book). Others, however, needed much "feedback" to learn how to do it.

Looking back, the people who became the strongest performers weren't the ones who came in with the most natural talent. The

people who became very strong were the ones who were willing to learn.

The people without natural talent who were willing to get out there and try, without fear of being wrong, were able to take correction and incorporate the lessons into their performances. They became very good very quickly, because they were willing to be wrong and learn from it. At times, some of the people with natural talent were the hardest to train because they had been doing things a certain way for so long and they found it very hard to let go of that to try things in a new and better way.

Remember, it's not being wrong that's the problem; it's not doing the right things when you are wrong to move forward. What are the right things? I'm glad you asked…

1) Admit It

There is nothing more annoying than a person who is wrong and will not admit it. You've probably seen the type: the guy who acts super-confident, turns out to be wrong, and then rather than saying, "Oh hey, I was wrong," he (or she – ladies are just as susceptible to this!) either moves on without acknowledging the error or blames it on something outside of himself.

Admitting being wrong is often perceived as a sign of weakness or lower intelligence (and understandably, since when we were growing up, being wrong dropped our grade a notch or two…). I have found though, that admitting error is a sign of tremendous strength and character. If you don't admit you are wrong, you can not learn and grow.

It takes a confident person to admit when he is wrong. If you admit a mistake you are saying to the world that you understand that you are human, and that you have the character to admit and it fix it. (This does depend a bit on your delivery – some people admit they are wrong so often and so meekly that they are betraying their lack of confidence. Don't admit to being wrong if

you clearly aren't, and don't lower your status – we'll cover status a but later – when you admit it.)

Admitting when you are wrong has long term benefits too. If you regularly interact with a group of people and never admit it when you are wrong, your credibility drops. In any disagreement, they will put less stock in what you say because you have a history of arguing strongly whether you are right or not. If, however, you admit to being wrong on occasion, then people will actually respect your ideas more. When you strongly defend a point, it will give them pause because they know that if you are pushing hard, you must really believe in what you are saying.

2) Learn From Your Errors

There is a famous saying, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me." Quite simply, this means that it's okay to make a mistake, but if you make it twice, than there's something wrong.

It's okay to be wrong, but if you are repeatedly wrong about the same thing, then you are not learning from your mistake, and you are doomed to forever repeat the error until you get a clue!

Here's a story of what an idiot I can be when it comes to this stuff.

I hate taking my car into the garage to get stuff checked out. I don't know much about cars and car repair, I don't like to take the time out of my day (and be without a car) and I'm always afraid that I will get fleeced by someone who knows how little I know. For a little while my car was a little slow starting. On occasion, the engine would take 1-3 seconds to turn over. I knew this could be due to a few things, so I held off getting it checked out.

One day, I found myself sitting in my garage in a car that wouldn't start. I turned the key and nothing happened. I was persistent, waited a few minutes and tried again, it worked!

This is a "fool me once, shame on you moment." The clear sign here was for me to get the car checked out. But did I? No, of course not! Why? Because the next couple of times the car started fine.

I know you can see where this is going. A week or two later, I hopped into my car that was parked on a street in North Philadelphia. I turned the key, and nothing happened. This time however, all of my retries netted nothing. I had to call a tow truck and wait in my car for an hour until the truck took me to a garage. One thing I can tell you for sure. I will not be letting "little problems" with my car go on for that long again.

This is a clear example of how we set ourselves up for bigger problems when we don't learn from our errors and take action. If you are wrong about facts or make an error in judgment, admit it, then learn from it and don't do it again!

Willingness to Do What it Takes to Grow

So far, we have seen that being willing to fail, make mistakes, be rejected, and be wrong all can lead to personal growth. What's amazing to me is that some people are even unwilling to grow at all!

It took me a while to recognize and accept this fact about people. I am a person who feels it is important to continually grow and improve oneself, so it was unbelievable to me that some people would choose the opposite. What I discovered though is that some people really fear the change and uncertainty of growth.

For people who are comfortable and set in their ways, this is not

so unbelievable. Why risk the potential upheaval of life changes if everything is hunky-dory as is?

In looking back on my own life, I realize that this is not so unbelievable at all. In my early days, when I had huge dreams but limited success, I would occasionally lament that it would be better not to try than to try and fail. If a person never tries, he could tell stories forever such as, "Oh yeah, I used to do improv comedy. I probably could have done it professionally, but I just got busy and gave it up." If he tried and failed, he would forever believe that he could not have done it.

I honestly think that this is what keeps many people from trying. Why rock the boat? You can always sit around the bar telling tales of the "glory days." But, when you take a long, realistic look at this, you quickly realize that is a crazy way to live – and a sure fire way to short change yourself of the quality of life you deserve. By not trying you preserve the dream – but that's all it will ever be - a dream. Deep down, you will always regret not going for it.

In addition to failure, rejection, and embarrassment, when you put yourself out there to learn and grow you also open yourself up to uncertainty.

Imagine that you work an ordinary 9 to 5 job. Let's say you go back to grad school to get an advanced degree. When you finish, you would most likely change jobs, or at least positions. For some people this is scary, especially it is an enjoyable 9 to 5 job.

One of the harder things I've done was to leave a job I really liked to start an internet company. I left stability, comfort, and people with whom I loved to work, for uncertainty. Many people leave jobs to start companies because they don't like their current situation. I actually loved my situation. I left only because I knew that if I was still there five years later, it would have meant I had not done the things I set out to achieve in my life.

And you know what? The internet company failed! Failed big time! Then I went full time into improv comedy – and that failed! But that led me to my current career – professional speaking and information marketing. I still use the improv, I get to perform, and I get to help people (while getting paid to do it!). I love what I do now, but it took stepping forward, taking risks, learning and growing, and a fair amount of failure to get here.

Seek out opportunities to grow. If you pass up an opportunity, make sure it is because you really don't want it, or that it really won't serve you in the long run. Don't let fear stop you from doing what you want to do.

Be willing – you won't be sorry.

Believe in Yourself

At the core of improvisation is your own belief in your ability to do it. Nothing else matters, in improvisation or any other area of life.

Some improv games are more challenging than others. On occasion, when I announce to a group in rehearsal that we will be working on a more difficult game, I hear groans or complaints from the group. While this can be done in good fun, it often belies an underlying dread of playing a difficult game.

So, I will often put in a "no-complaining" rule. That is, if I am going to have people do something challenging, I will forbid people from groaning or saying, "Oh no!" This is not just to create a positive atmosphere (though that is nice). If you convince yourself that something is hard, it will be.

I'm sure you can relate to the following story that illustrates this concept.

Now and then I will run for exercise. I'm not a super big fan of running, but I realize that from a cardiovascular standpoint it's incredibly beneficial. I don't go very fast, but I like to go for at least 20 minutes. I also happen to find myself really pushing and struggling if I run much longer than 30 minutes. .

"Don't let fear stop you from doing what you want to do."

One day I was on a treadmill and I was running along, listening to music. I throw a towel over the display so I can't keep looking at the time (a practice which makes time seemingly stop!). I was doing vague calculations in my head based on how long I thought the songs were and how many songs had gone by. I noticed that it was getting a little tough, but I knew I was under 30 minutes so I kept going. No big deal. When the final song finished, I slowed down and removed the towel. To my surprise, I had been running for 45 minutes! It turns out I had miscalculated – I underestimated how long how each song was, and I also forgot about two of the songs on my play list.

Here's the point – while I assumed that I was still running within my capabilities (under 30 minutes), I felt fine. Had I been looking at the clock, once the 30-minute mark passed I would have quickly felt tired and drained ("I can't go on!").

I'm sure you can think of a time in your life when you achieved far more than you thought possible because you mistakenly thought something was easier than you otherwise would have. And as result, because of your belief, it was! This is why I don't like improvisers complaining about difficult exercises. They are setting themselves up for failure.

In the same way, you should not focus on how difficult or impossible something is. Rather, adopt the belief that you can do it, no matter what.

This is doubly true for things that you have to do, but don't want to do. Take public speaking, for instance. Many, many people dread public speaking. Yet, many of these people often have to get up and speak in front of others for work or other presentations. The worst thing people can do is to think about how awful it is going to be and how, "I can't do this!" And yet, that's exactly the thought process that most people go through.

As clichéd as it is, you have to believe in yourself. Think about the little engine that could ("I think I can…").

This doesn't mean that you lie to yourself. If you have never spoken in public and are terrified of it, you don't have to say to yourself, "I am going to do the best speech anyone has ever seen." If you can say that and believe, that's great, but you would be better off saying, "I know I can do this and do a good job," in a way that you can believe.

The important thing is that you believe in yourself. The more you believe in your abilities, the better you will do.

Have Commitment

Commitment is a strange concept when you think about improv comedy, because it seems like very little commitment is required. Once the improvised scene is done (anywhere from 1-20 minutes) the scene is gone forever – where's the commitment?

Commitment in improvisation is about commitment in the moment. When a performer takes the stage, she must be 100% committed to what she is doing. This is the only way to be successful in improv.

I have seen many performers take the stage and begin acting out a character. But it was clear that they had doubts about their character choice (maybe they thought it was too goofy, or out

there, or weird, or they were unsure about their acting ability). No matter how funny or good their words were, something about the performance just didn't connect.

In improv, when a performer chooses a character, she must throw herself into it 100%. In an improvised game, she must be 100% there. When she isn't, the audience can tell and the work suffers.

A clear way to observe this is to watch new and experienced dancers. While there will be a difference in their movements and grace, one of the most obvious differences is in the commitment. A new dancer looks a little hesitant, as if she is holding back. Experienced dancers, while performing, look almost lost in their performances. That's 100% being there. That's commitment.

This mentality is a vital principle of success in any endeavor. Most people go through their lives, personal and professional, without any real sense of commitment. While at work, their minds are on their personal lives. While at home, their minds are on what they have to do at work. When trying something new, they hedge their bets and never fully try.

This is not to be confused with "getting your ducks in a row." Hedging your bets means never throwing yourself 100% into a task. This way, if you fail you can say, "Well, I didn't try my hardest." It also creates a false sense of security. Getting your ducks in a row just means that you set your life up so that if you fail, it won't be the end of the world. Getting your ducks in a row actually allows you to commit 100% because you know that no matter what happens, you will be okay.

Think about the things in your life that are not where you want them to be. Chances are you have not committed 100% to them. Yes, in many areas, you can "half-ass" it and do well enough. But in the important areas of your life (family, work, dreams, health, etc) you should never settle for "ok." Commit now to adopting this mentality and getting all you deserve.

Have Persistence

In the fast-paced, quickly-changing world of improvisational comedy, talking about persistence may sound very odd. Improv is described as "disposable theater," (as soon as a game is done, it's gone) so what does that have to do with persistence? Actually, it has a few very real things to do with it.

First, 99% of the people who begin doing improv start under the wrong assumption. They believe that improv is about being quick-witted and funny, and making jokes. Improv is not about these things, so almost everyone who learns improv has to have the persistence to drill and drill to retrain their minds to think improvisationally.

Second, from a performance standpoint, many people get the idea of "one-shot-homerun" in their heads. They believe that they need to start out with a great idea in order to create a great improv scene or game. This is not the case at all, but the performer needs the persistence to continue on with an idea that seems very basic.

Oftentimes in an improv game, an idea is introduced that doesn't get the best response from the crowd. An inexperienced (or just bad) performer may panic and throw that idea away or introduce something completely new in hopes of improving things. This invariably creates confusion both on stage and with the audience. It creates a disjointed game that doesn't make anybody happy.

The experienced performer realizes that with a little persistence and "sticktoitiveness" those offers can often lead to brilliant performance. It's only a matter of pushing through, trusting the process, and doing what he knows is right. When the performer does this, the result is usually a very solid game.

In life and in business, people are too often willing to throw in the towel when things don't work. Or they don't really get started until everything is right in place and the path is totally clear. The path will never be totally clear, and things won't always work. The key is to persist in the face of these things, trust your process (whatever it may be) and do what you know to be right. The result will usually be something wonderful.

The Flip Side

One caveat does need to be stated here: in life, as in improv, there is a difference between being persistent and being foolhardy. I have seen improv scenes go on far longer than they should because the performers refuse to let go and move on. Sometimes mercy killing is a good thing!

The same rule applies in life. Sometimes you have to let go and move on, whether it's regarding a job, a relationship, or even a dream.

When I ran my own improv group, it was my dream. I wanted to make the group huge and successful and world famous. Six years later, I decided it was time to close the doors and move on to other things. Was this because the group was failing financially or in any way? No, we were doing well. I just realized that the group had changed, my life had changed, and it was time to let go and move on. In retrospect, that decision could have been made earlier, but it usually takes longer than we'd like for realizations like that to sink in.

The nice benefit to letting go was that I discovered things that fulfill me even more than the improv group was. Sometimes you have to make space for new stuff to show up.

So how can you know whether you are being persistent or foolhardy? It's not always easy. The answer is to trust and listen to yourself. Persistence is when you know deep down that you

are doing the right thing for you and those around you. Foolhardy is when your ego is telling you not to give up because you will be a failure. Persistence is intelligent, foolhardy is stubborn.

The only way to make this distinction is to really be honest with yourself. Are you at a job that you don't enjoy because you honestly believe that it will get better once the "busy season" ends like everyone says? Or are you hanging in there because you don't want to look for another job? Are you staying with someone because you honestly deep down believe you are right for each other, or because you have a belief that you have to stick it out to be a good person (hint: if you're having these thoughts, that's a sign that the second is probably true!)

Understand the difference, and make to sure to persist in the things that are vitally important to you and that you know are right, and let the other stuff go.

Discipline

Discipline goes hand in hand with persistence. In improv, and in any other performance, there is the idea of the "creative genius." This is the idea that some people are just born with talent and can do things naturally. While there is something to be said for natural gifts, what most people don't realize is that behind the effortless ease and genius lies years and years of discipline and hard work.

The musical virtuoso may have had a natural gift for music, but chances are she sat at her piano for many hours practicing everyday. Great authors write and write and write, often writing volumes before their first success. Natural gifts only take you so far. After that, it's discipline that makes the difference.

Some people have natural gifts to which they don't apply discipline. They are called *hobbyists*. They are the "natural" cooks, handymen, knitters, storytellers, and speakers, etc. There

is nothing wrong with this. All of us need to prioritize our lives and decide where to put our energy. The point is to make sure that you don't delude yourself into thinking that the people who make it get by on just their natural talent.

On the other hand, people without "natural" talent can often make it by applying discipline. Hard work and consistent practice can lead to great things.

I have seen it many times while teaching improv. People with no special starting skill but with the right mindset of learning, improving, and working will always become solid, if not great, improvisers. By the same token, I have seen people who have a great deal of inherent talent, but no discipline, only go so far because they were unwilling to work at it.

"Behind the effortless ease and genius lies years and years of discipline and hard work."

This idea does not just apply to creative endeavors. Natural sales people have probably been selling their whole lives, even if they didn't know they were doing it. Great computer programmers have written thousands and thousands of lines of code. We all know that in the medical profession Residents work consistent 80-hour weeks developing their skills.

There is no substitute for consistency and discipline. With discipline, untalented people can make great strides. But without discipline, even the most talented person can only achieve so much.

If you were to stop reading this and do nothing but apply the mentalities in this chapter, I guarantee you that you would see magnificent changes in your life. I hope you continue reading, but as you do, keep in mind that every upcoming lesson comes from the same place - having the right mentality.