



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Follow Your Fear

by Bob Morand

Those words hold a lot of meaning to me. They were impressed upon me and the rest of the performers of an advanced improv class during a rehearsal at the ImprovOlympic theater in Chicago in 1991. The author of those words, the late Del Close, one of the original members of Chicago's famed Second City improvisational theater group in the early 1960s, was someone who could strike fear in the most accomplished of actors and improvisers. For four decades, Del was an actor, teacher, improv guru, one-time "Saturday Night Live" director and, more importantly, a philosopher of sorts, who shared his comedy and life knowledge, not to mention a good amount of drugs, with the likes of John Belushi and other soon-to-be-famous comedic actors in the mid-'70s.

"Chris, what the hell are you doing?!" Del barked from the back of the theater during rehearsal one evening, as a pre-SNL Chris Farley was flopping around on stage, ignoring the objective of Del's improv exercise. Farley's physical humor was hilarious, even if he wasn't addressing the point of the scenic exercise. But when Del spoke, especially in a raised baritone, the class would go eerily silent.

"Get the hell off the stage!" Del snapped. Farley listened to Del, and would skulk off stage to the back of the room, his reddish sheepdog hair covering his eyes. Del's was probably one of the few constructive voices Chris listened to. The two had a close relationship; Chris respected Del's expertise, mentorship and candor, while Del marveled at how Chris could fearlessly throw himself (often times, literally) into a scene and make comedy magic, even if Chris tried Del's patience during rehearsals.

What Del had little patience for was actors/improvisers who avoided making the most of their talent and craft, and particularly those who froze on stage. "Why the (expletive)," he would ask, "are you in my class if you're

afraid to be on stage? Follow your fear, man! Or get the hell out of my class!"

The words—actually the concept—of "follow your fear" stay with me today, even if it's been a few years since I've performed live improv. The premise of follow your fear is simple: confront and attack the things in life that are most uncomfortable for you and you will learn to master them; or, at the very least, you'll learn to live with your fears in relative comfort.

For many performers, specifically actors who have little improv experience, the thought of getting on stage without a memorized script is terrifying. It's just you and another actor in the spotlight, and the only things you have to work with are a suggestion from the audience and each other. Some actors melt and swear off improvisation for life; others thrive and rise to the challenge of creating something potentially rich out of practically nothing.

Many business professionals, including actuaries, are faced with somewhat similar propositions.

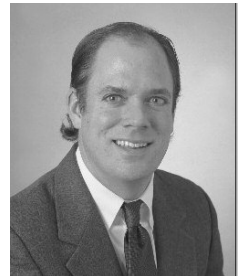
They're called presentations.

The mere thought of getting up in front of others and making a presentation can be mortifying. Panic hits and embeds itself well before the actual presentation. Sweat never knew so many pores; hearts never beat so fast; mouths never ran so dry.

So, say you're one of those who'd rather floss with barbed wire than give a presentation. What do you do?

Follow your fear, of course.

Easier said than done? Perhaps. But think about it...you're an intelligent human being who is working with, and among, some of the brightest individuals in the world. You regard yourself as a quantitative and technical expert. In fact, you've made the unstated declaration that you are really, really smart, simply by the profession you've chosen and within which you've succeeded.



Bob Morand, an actuarial recruiter with D.W. Simpson & Company and a veteran improv actor in Chicago—a graduate of the famed "Second City" Training Center and member of the Annoyance Theatre, both popular improvisational theater venues in Chicago—reveals one of the secrets of success afforded to those who "follow their fear."

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Therefore, why can't you give yourself the same permission to be a stellar presenter? You can, by following your fear. Below you'll find recommended avenues for pulling together the best presentation you can.

A successful presentation is part preparation and part performance.

The Preparation

First, know your subject matter thoroughly. This will give you the confidence to react positively to questions during and/or following the presentation. There's nothing more excruciating than watching an individual stumble for information while giving a presentation. Preparation will keep you one step ahead of your audience, which is why you're presenting to them in the first place.

Additionally, know your audience. To whom are you presenting and what questions might they raise? Be current on industry/market issues that might affect the subject matter you're discussing.

How many people will be attending? Know the room. Is it a small conference room in which people will be close to you? Or, will it be a hotel, sessions-style room that could hold up to 100 people? This will be important as to how you engage your audience throughout the presentation.

Dress appropriately for the occasion. If you have outdated suits or frumpy business casual wear, invest in new clothes. The fact that you're making a presentation means that others have confidence in you to perform at a certain level. This is an opportunity to build on that and, believe it or not, sloppy or outdated clothing diminishes that confidence.

Make sure all technical aspects of the presentation are in order. In addition, have a contingent plan in case the beautiful PowerPoint presentation you've prepared fails, due to unforeseen technical difficulties. One option would be to provide all attendees with a hard copy of the presentation, while you move about the room sharing various sections of the information with various sections of the room. Individuals who can successfully improvise (ahh...it all comes back to improvisation, doesn't it?) in the face of adversity truly impress those who witness such a recovery.

If you are presenting with other individuals, each person's role should be agreed upon (and preferably rehearsed) before the presentation. Should one of your fellow panelists stumble during the presentation, be prepared to help him or her out.

Get a good night's sleep. Wake the morning of the presentation with the mindset that your performance that day is an opportunity to enhance your stock as an actuary and, increasingly important, as a business professional in the eyes of key decision makers.

The Presentation

You've done all your preparation and now it's time to present. Get to the room early to guard against any last-minute glitches, e.g., another group has booked the conference room or the Society has moved the session elsewhere. The more in control you are of the event, the more confidence people automatically will have in you, particularly if you have to "save" a situation.

Focus. This is where the fear should disappear. If you focus on what you need to accomplish, i.e., preparation and performance, then you should have little time for the wasted energy of dread and nervousness. You absolutely must have, before this point, given yourself permission to be a good presenter. Approach the presentation as another problem-solving opportunity. Actuaries love solving problems, right? Put the presentation in this context and approach the "problem" with gusto.

Additionally, your focus should be on process, rather than the final product. If two improv actors went on stage hoping to have a successful scene rather than focusing on building a successful scene, more often than not they will fail. The same applies to business presentations: If you worry about being good or being liked by the audience rather than work-

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ing to give a polished presentation, you've been selfish to the detriment of yourself and the audience. Remember, the presentation isn't all about you; it's about the relationship you are able to foster with your audience through the interesting delivery of interesting information. Commitment to the process will ensure successful product.

Be yourself. Are you someone who doesn't normally crack jokes? Then don't try to kick off your presentation with "Have you heard the one about the priest, the rabbi and the duck?" Some people are naturally funny and can get away with that sort of thing. However, play to your strong suit.

Your charge should be to ease the audience into the presentation, including their acceptance of you as presenter, especially if the subject matter is overwhelmingly technical. You may want to consider a brief fact or anecdote about the facility, the city, or even something that happened to you that morning that, perhaps, you can tie into the presentation. It should be presented naturally and genuinely, but not out of the context of your personality.

If you are presenting to a smaller group of, say, five or 10 people in a conference room, try to learn and remember each person's name and role, if they are not known to you. Recalling such information in the Q&A period will be impressive to them. If you are presenting to a larger audience, that is, of course, not necessary. However, during the Q&A period, ask attendees for their names and companies when they present a question or comment.

For a smaller group presentation, make eye contact with all the individuals in the room. For larger groups, make eye contact with the various sections of the room. Don't turn your back on the audience and hide your face into a screen of information. Don't forget: this is an opportunity for you to shine by integrating yourself, industry information and an audience in a 30- to 90-minute presentation.

Finally, you ask, what can one do to get better at giving presentations? The following are some

suggestions that aren't a huge investment of time or money and might be fun in the process.

- **Take an acting or improv class.** They're mostly held in group settings and the instructors and fellow classmates are usually super-supportive. Also, consider taking an on-camera class. This provides a thorough look at how you come across; the instructor and you will review videotape of your performance, which will provide guidance for improvement.
- **Join a book club.** This will allow you to share ideas in a group setting.
- **Arrange for practice presentations with some of your peers at work.** Assign each other non-work related topics that might be light or fun for you to present. Be open and supportive with one another when providing feedback.
- **Attend speeches and take notes on what you liked or didn't like about the speaker.** Also, consider getting involved in school or community groups in which opportunities exist for one to express opinions in a group setting.
- **Self reflect.** Don't buy into the excuse that you're simply "not good at presentations." Commit to working on presentations as you would commit to solving other problems that interest you.
- **Follow your fear.** Life is too short to impose artificial limits on your personal potential and career. □

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