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# Improvisational Acting for Actuaries

By Jeremy Hoffman and Larisa Treyster

“Why did you combine the experience of both products in this exhibit?” the chief actuary asked me. My heart raced for a few seconds. I realized that while I had carefully prepared answers to a number of possible questions, this was not one of them.

I quickly regrouped, and said in my most serious voice, “We only have six months of experience for this product, and only a few hundred members in each product, so showing the experience for each product individually would not show credible experience.”

Even though I had been caught off guard, some recent class work really paid off.

That class was one on improvisational acting that we took in Manhattan. Both of us happen to be actuaries, but at different firms. We thought it would be fun to enroll in some improv classes in New York City. What we weren’t anticipating was how we could translate what we learned in our classes into the business aspect of being an actuary.

In one particular class, I had pretended to be an “expert” on cheese and had practiced answering all kinds of difficult

questions on the subject. In my meeting with the chief actuary, I had much more knowledge about the model used in the study. As a result, answering his questions came more naturally to me. But my recent improv class experience made it even easier.

Improv is an acting form where audience members suggest a topic and the actors perform a scene based on that suggestion. You may be familiar with it based on the popular TV show, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

Those in the entertainment industry recognize improv as a great way to learn valuable skills to help them in their profession. In fact, many in the class were aspiring actors, writers, directors and comedians. Others, like us, were from the corporate world, and work as accountants, lawyers and actuaries. We were easily spotted. We were not the ones wearing skinny jeans and Converse sneakers, so we stood out in our collared shirts and dress shoes.

Only recently has the business community started to recognize how improv can teach people valuable soft skills, as documented in various business books, such as Daniel Pink’s *To Sell is Human*, Val and Sarah



Gee’s *Business Improv*, and Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton’s *Yes, And* (although in full disclosure, we have only read Pink’s book).

We can attest to the valuable lessons we learned as we took classes and performed onstage at the Magnet Theater in New York City. While we encourage everyone to try improv for themselves, we’d like to share some of what we learned, which you can apply to your everyday work as an actuary

## FURTHERING THE STORYLINE WITH “YES, AND...”

“Yes, and” is perhaps the most well-known aspect of improv. The idea is for performers to continue a storyline. In its most basic form, you agree and add details to keep the story moving.

“Yes, and” is critical to continuing any project, whether it is the brainstorming, implementation or review phase. For example, imagine you have an issue you need to raise with your boss. Part of your discussion should mention the issue and, in addition, provide a potential solution. Without the additional commentary, you are relying on another person to keep the process moving, which can be a risky proposition. Leaders are also much more impressed when you show you are adding to the discussion, providing potential solutions, or taking more responsibility for next steps.

You do not necessarily need to say “yes” to follow the rule. In his book, *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out*, author Mick Nاپier uses the example of someone handing another individual

an envelope. You can reply with “no” as long as you provide an additional detail, such as “I do not want to open the envelope as I have already been rejected from four colleges.”

At work, there will be times when your opinion differs from that of the person delegating the work. Discussion can help lead to the best possible result. For example, I worked on a project related to merging two pension plans. My contact in the business and I had different opinions as to which approach to take to complete the assignment.

After discussion, I raised the question with my manager. I presented background on the situation, noting the two alternatives we had considered, and requested guidance. My manager, in turn, provided extensive detail on the situation, including the fact that the recent passage of a law had nullified prior guidance that would have determined the appropriate approach, but did not provide an alternative. As a result, the client did not have clear guidance on how to proceed. I contacted the client, informing him that we appreciated his suggestion and had vetted the approach, but since the legal environment had changed, we had to use an alternate approach. I then explained the advantages of the solution we recommended. By offering a “no, and” suggestion, we were able to recommend to our client a better and more comprehensive solution. The client appreciated the communication. Even though we didn’t use the client’s suggestion, we demonstrated that we listened and considered the

client’s needs before making a decision.

### PAY ATTENTION TO NONVERBAL CUES

When improvising, it’s not enough to just listen to what is being said. One important aspect of improv is to pay attention to the nonverbal cues and effectively respond.

A performer can say, “Thank you for attending.” How he or she says it and their other actions will provide context for what they mean. Saying this with a scowl while crossing your arms across your chest means something completely different than if the phrase is said with open arms and a positive tone.

Watch meeting participants, as well as non-participants. What they say and how they say it will provide clues about how to proceed. A confused look is a good time to clarify or expand. No words or questions may indicate it is a good time to pause to ask if there are any questions. Someone continually checking his watch may be a sign that you are running long or the audience has lost focus. In that case, you will want to check for questions to get the audience back on track.

### PUBLIC SPEAKING

People often feel uncomfortable when asked to present. From our own experience, practice provides the easiest and most effective way of overcoming that fear. Even if there are limited opportunities to present, improv is a chance to share your knowledge with others and polish your speak-

ing skills. Another option is to enroll in a local Toastmasters club. Toastmasters is a forum that provides people with opportunities to practice speaking in a friendly environment, and is one that we have both taken advantage of at our respective employers. A recent article in Toastmasters’ monthly publication suggested that improv would provide a good opportunity to practice public speaking and even noted that some clubs had adopted an improv format.

There are two main differences that make improv a unique venue to practice public speaking:

1. Speeches at Toastmasters are in a conference room with the lights on. In contrast, the culmination of an improv class is a presentation onstage with the lights lowered. Any difference in the forum provides valuable experience. It may have the added benefit that speaking on a stage with lowered lights may provide a slightly more intimidating (and, therefore, even more valuable practice) version of public speaking that is still in an extremely welcoming environment. Similar to Toastmasters, the environment is friendly, and one in which classmates invite guests, the audience laughs as they enjoy the show, and other people from the theater sit-in to provide their own laughter to the background.
2. Each audience is different and so that unique experience of presenting to strangers is persistent at each show. With Toastmasters, since you tend to speak in front

of the same group, we have found that you can grow at ease with the group of people that you are presenting to, which may limit your personal growth over time.

### WORKING IN TEAMS

A show is a group performance. One class, “Building Character,” taught us how to create believable and funny characters. We arrived expecting to learn how to make funny voices and other peculiarities that would help to make us the star of the show. We discovered something quite different.

One funny character requires the rest of the performers to make it work. An offensive family member will work better if the rest of the family is normal (think of Jason Bateman’s character in the TV show *Arrested Development*, who acts as a straight man to contrast to some of the more colorful characters). Further, the rest of the team needs to provide the opportunities for that character by creating situations that they can respond to. The one funny character may receive all of the compliments at the end of the show, but it only worked because everyone else played their part.

Over time, the business environment has become more and more team oriented. We rely on others to ensure we can meet deliverables. At meetings, only one individual may present the results, but it took a team effort to produce that deliverable.

This lesson helped us to better understand another aspect of work: Give people credit when

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they helped you succeed in a task. Although only one character receives the credit after a performance, it's important for the rest of the troupe to know it was a job well done by the team.

If you're a manager who just nailed a killer presentation on proposed forecast assumptions, make sure you verbally acknowledge the analysts, interns, admins, programmers—and anyone else—who helped you achieve the final result. An acknowledgment or a thank you takes very little time, but can make a huge difference to those acknowledged. Not only will you give a boost to someone's image and career, increasing loyalty and retention on your team, but it will reveal you are a true team player, which may help position you for leadership opportunities down the road.

### PLAYING DIFFERENT CHARACTERS

When you describe your job to a new hire in your department, do you ever say "I wear many different hats"? The days of being the back corner, number crunching actuary are long gone. Most of us, in addition to being actuaries, are also managers, sales people, accountants, programmers and underwriters. How do you learn to excel in those roles, especially the ones with which you don't feel as comfortable?

For example, most actuaries hate being sales people. We're okay with crunching the numbers to calculate a rate, but when it comes to convincing underwriting that the rate is actuarially sound, we would rather go debug an Excel file gone astray.

Improv can also help with these situations. In improv, you wear a different hat during every class and every performance. In Wednesday's class, you may be acting as a doting grandmother in a scene with your mischievous granddaughter. In Friday night's performance, you may be a professional basketball player who's frustrated with his demanding coach. You never know what will come up, and you have very little time to get into character and portray a realistic depiction.

This is great practice for the business world, since you never know what may be thrown at you. In improv, as in business, we need to convince the audience (colleagues) that we're right for the role. As one improv teacher told us, all characters are some variation of you, admittedly with different backgrounds. We are not doting grandmothers or pro basketball players (or athletes of any kind), but our personalities make the characters our own. Similarly, the "sales" pitch to underwriting will still be in your unique voice. The key is to know when and how you need to change your hat to fill the appropriate workplace role.

### GIFTING

Improvising is a team activity. There are no props or costumes. The performers create props with their words and actions. We only have the stage. As part of the performance, improvisers are supposed to help their fellow performers by "gifting" them with some attribute, such as an imaginary prop depicted through body lan-

guage, or a characteristic that helps to define their character.

Imagine that I walk up to another performer who is pretending to lean on an object. He doesn't explain his stance, and we simply discuss family life. After a few minutes, I add, "Every time I see your bloody sword, I am reminded of the struggle of the war." With that one comment, I have transformed my partner from an ordinary person discussing family life into a soldier who has just completed a battle. This "gift" helps to better establish his character and makes it easier for everyone onstage to interact with him.

The takeaway is to help co-workers whenever possible, even if there is not a direct benefit for you. This is a lesson echoed in many business textbooks. Keith Ferrazzi in *Never Eat Lunch Alone* emphasized that one key to networking is to figure out how to help the other person, offer to help, and not keep score. We heard a lecture from Adam Grant, relating to his book *Give and Take: A Revolutionary Approach to Success*. He mentioned that the most successful people are givers or those who help others without expectations of a returned favor. (He also mentioned that some givers were the least successful, which may imply that you need to be somewhat judicious in when and how to be a giver.)

Recently I offered to help a colleague extract information she needed from a document that I had produced. It took me all of five minutes to sift through and send her what she needed. It would have taken her at

least 30 minutes. In general, we should gift others when we have knowledge that can help them. We depend on others to gift us when we need help at times, too.

### IT'S FUN

Hopefully, we have convinced you that improv is good for your career. But unlike many other things improv is genuinely good fun. We looked forward to class every Wednesday and our end-of-class show. There was no pressure, nothing to prepare or research, and we were able to have a creative outlet outside of work.

I doubt we would have gained such positives from the class, especially in our careers, if we didn't also enjoy the process. Most of us spend many long years studying for exams, so it's important to find a hobby that lets you escape yourself. And if you end up learning something in the process, that's even better. ■



Jeremy Hoffman, FSA, EA, MAAA, is an actuary in Prudential Financial Inc.'s Group Insurance business, with prior experience as a retirement actuary. He can be reached at [jeremy.hoffman@prudential.com](mailto:jeremy.hoffman@prudential.com).



Larisa Treyster, FSA, MAAA, is a dental actuary at Horizon Healthcare Services Inc., New Jersey's oldest and largest health insurer. She can be reached at [Larisa.Treyster@Horizonblue.com](mailto:Larisa.Treyster@Horizonblue.com).