TMM370: What Improv Can Teach Us About Leadership

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Mamie Kanfer Stewart 00:00

What if the secret to being a better, more confident communicator was embracing the fact that we're always improvising? In this episode, we're diving into the world of improv to uncover powerful, practical tools that can make you a more confident, adaptable, and empathetic communicator at work, even if you never do an improv activity with your team.

Today's guest is Jeff Mandoro. Jeff is an improviser, learning designer, executive coach, and a dad. He started his career in finance but discovered the world of improv in his mid-twenties and never looked back. If you like what you hear from Jeff's Podcast Plus members, get the extended episode where Jeff talks about the link between a growth mindset and improv, as well as how to appropriately use humor in your workplace and podcast.

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Are you a manager, boss? Support team leaders who aspire to level up and unleash your team's full potential. You are listening to the Modern Manager Podcast, and I'm your host, Mamie Kanfer Stewart. Each week I explore effective strategies and provide actionable insights that supercharge your management abilities, optimize team performance, and foster a healthy workplace culture. Become a rockstar manager and help your team thrive at bemodernmanager.com/more.

Thank you so much for joining me today, Jeff. I'm really excited to talk about how improv can be used for our own personal development, because I've talked to other folks on the show about improv, and it's always been in the context of the team and how it can really help your teamwork. We've never really jumped into. Why is it good for you? Even if you don't do it in a team setting, you just do it for yourself. What are some of the things we can take away from improv? So thank you so much again for joining me today.

Jeff Mondoro 02:02

Yeah, I'm so happy to be here and talk improv.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:05

Why don't we just kick this off with the context setting of What is improv? I know most of us probably heard that, and maybe even some of us have done it, but just in your mind, what is improv all about?

Jeff Mondoro 02:18

Improv, to me, like in its most simple form, is acting without a script. It is performing and not knowing who you are, what you're going to say, or what you're going to do, and it's the act of building all of those things with another person. So contrast to traditional theater, where you have a script, you know your character, you know your lines, you have improv, and all of those things, you and your scene partner or your series of scene partners are making it up in the moment.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 02:44

So basically, improv is every day at the office. When you're encountering a team member sitting in a meeting,

Jeff Mondoro 02:50

So many people I meet say oh, okay. I improvise all the time. And I always say, yes, you do. Yes, you do. And so what we're about to do in an improv setting is no different. I'm asking nothing more than what you do every day, and so breaking that barrier is a big part of the work that I'm doing to demystify what it means to improvise because so many people hear that word, and they say, oh my God, that is the most terrifying thing I've ever thought of on a stage. Reminding them that's what you do every day is just a key part of my work.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 03:24

I have to tell you, I am having my mind is exploding. Aha. Moment. Yeah. Because every other person I've talked to about improv, I'm like, I'm the one who's in the back of the room is no, thank you. I'll sit this one out. Like it's so hard for me to have the confidence to get up and do it. And now I'm like, oh, wait a second. If the little mindset shift is just. You do this every single day. So what's different by doing it with a different topic or under a different context? Because all we're doing all day long is improvising.

Jeff Mondoro 03:51

That's right. That's right. And in fact. Improv, in specific, as an art form, is distinct from sketch comedy or stand-up comedy, where you're trying to be the funny one. In those other art forms you're trying to, you thought about something at home,, and you're here to make someone else laugh. Improv. That is the only thing I will stop a scene and say, You're trying to be the funny

one. Don't be the funny one. I absolve everyone of coming up with the creative thing the funny moment. Because what that does is it breaks the connection,, and improv is all about, like, how are we connecting and building with one another so that's why I love it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 04:27

So what are some of the things that we do, right? If we're not trying to be funny, what are the things that we are trying to do when we're improvising?

Jeff Mondoro 04:35

So I had an early scene improv teacher named Chris Birdie. He always said the answer is in your scene partner's eyes. I really love that. And so all we're trying to do is build a connection. And improv is used, right? A lot of us know it as Whose Line Is It Anyway? And that is a specific type of improv that's, it's called Short Form Improv, where there's a game and you're playing at that game and it's listening and responding and it's quick actions, quick hits, and that's very fun. It's very presentational. I do a lot more of, and what I teach is towards long form improv and so where there's no game, there's no construct. We're often getting just inspiration from the audience, and we're asking for a word, and then we're just building something together. And for a moment, oftentimes the two actors are just on stage building a scene, and no one the actors, the people on the sideline.

The audience knows what's funny yet. No one does. And then the actors just allow themselves to listen and respond, to listen and respond. And then all of a sudden that first unusual thing happens and everyone kind of says, Oh, maybe that's what this scene is gonna be about, and what's so electric about it? What I love about it is that the audience is part of that discovery. So we often talk about improv is about discovery and not invention, right? We know when someone does this, they look up and then they like come up with the perfect thing to say. It's no. We wanna stop. We wanna just stay with one another. And really can we naturally discover what's funny about this? And so from a like performance perspective, that's really what I love is saying something, not knowing that it's gonna be the funny thing, but then all of a sudden that gets a reaction and then you're trained as an improviser to say, Oh, did you like that? Then there's gonna be a lot more where that's coming.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 06:30

So what I'm hearing, if I tease this apart Yeah. And tell me if I'm taking this in the total wrong direction. No, please. First that improv is about listening. That you're really having to listen in addition to speak. Yes. Because what you're saying is in connection with wherever your partner is, which in a meeting setting means you have to really be listening to the conversation. Otherwise, you're gonna be taking it off on a tangent or jumping in with something that feels irrelevant. Second, I'm hearing that. You don't have to have the best idea before you speak it.

You say what comes to mind because you don't know what's gonna land with your audience or with your partner. And again, in a meeting it feels very similar.

Like we hold ourselves back sometimes because we're like, I have to have, I have to jump in at the right moment. I have to have the right thing to say. I have to have my ideas fully formed and in It feels like that we have to be pulling it out of the out of air to be able to contribute when actually. If we're using an improv approach, we just say, what comes up for us? Because you don't know. That might be the insight that changes the whole dynamic or changes the direction of the conversation in a really positive way, but you're not going to know it if you don't share it are not on point.

Jeff Mondoro 07:40

I would say. Brilliantly made. I like, I think the first piece that listening, if you've studied improv, if you hear about improv, you've heard, probably heard this notion of yes and right. And so yes. And is the type of listening that we do. It's, if I break it down, it's, yes, I accept what you say is true, and now I'm going to try to build with that. And so that is something we practice all the time so we can be listening and responding to what's in the room and keep us really present. And I think oftentimes, we've all been in that meeting where we speak. We've maybe like laid out something for a few minutes, and then someone raises a question, raises their hand, we pass it to them, and they ask a question that they had been thinking about the whole time. And then all of a sudde,n what happens is, okay, everything I've now added is kind of been negated because this person came in with an agenda.

They wanted to get to this question, and here they are. They got to that question. And if the meeting goes around and everyone's doing that type of participating, that type of listening, then we all leave having asked the question or said the thing we wanted to say, but on different pages we haven't connected. And so improv forces us to stay really present and say, I coming in with my agenda. I don't have to drop that. We're no longer in the space for me to ask that question, right? And so if Jeff or Mimi have been leading this, it's my job to either, I have to show folks that I'm responding to what they brought and synthesizing it with what I'm bringing, or make the decision that you know what this question I have to table this for a moment because where the room is at is somewhere different.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 09:19

This is such an important just moment in meetings where. You've said something and it feels like it didn't get its airspace because it's moved on and we lose so many insights and so many opportunities to dive deeper when we just jump from question to question. So I love this point of before you jump in with your own thing, just listen and see where the conversation's headed and then figure out. What new things have come up for you from what this person said, or how can you integrate what you wanna say with what they've said so that we don't just run past all these good ideas? Oh I'm like loving this so much, especially just 'cause I love meetings and how to make meetings more productive. And this is, I had this integration of improv techniques and

meetings that is making me very happy. Oh, me too. Okay. What other techniques besides the Yes and might we employ? In our meetings or just in any conversation that we're having with someone.

Jeff Mondoro 10:30

Yeah, I think the, there's another kind of delightful thing that happens within the world of improvisation where you always want to be, you wanna get out of ambiguity as quickly as possible. And so what that looks like on stage is if I bring you a present and I say, oh, here's this present. It's really special. You say, oh wow, this present is really special. That's amazing. And then we go, both go back and forth, just calling it a present. And we say, oh, when someone opens this, it's gonna, we're building up that tension where it's harder and harder to name, like by the time we have to name what the present is, maybe two minutes later. It's been built up so much. It has, we're putting a ton of pressure on coming up with the, like the funniest or most interesting thing, because now we've been building it up for a few minutes and no one's named it. Versus if I come in and say, here's this president. You say, oh my gosh a pair of tap shoes. Thank you so much. We're just like, quickly naming that thing and then moving on from it or now.

Now it's like a gift because you've named it, and now I get to build with that. And to me where I think about the parallels is there's so much, whether it's an acronym, whether it is a new strategy, what oftentimes in meetings, in presentations, you are using language that your audience doesn't fully understand. So for me, part of it is creating that space for folks to raise their hand and say, Hey, you just used that acronym. what does it mean? 'Because the longer we go without asking that question, the harder and harder it becomes. And oftentimes I'm in spaces where I have the benefit, where I'm the outsider. I'm coming in to facilitate a conversation. And so I have no qualms with saying, I'm sorry, what does that mean? And I'm trying to model that posture, both so I can understand, but two, to normalize. Stepping in asking that question so it doesn't become harder down the line.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 12:07

Oh my gosh, yes, it is really, it's really embarrassing when you've gone through the entire conversation and you don't know exactly what the team is talking about. And you're like now if I ask, it's gonna be really weird because it's gonna be clear that I did not follow. And so then you just don't ask. So definitely ask the first time around, even if it feels awkward. And usually you're not the only one, right? Like other people are sitting there. Having the same question, but no one wants to be the one to speak up. So definitely ask your questions, ask the other thing that same me think about is sometimes, even if it's not an acronym or a terminology or a concept, sometimes it's just okay, we're talking about this quarter's goals, and we use that as a shorthand, and we assume that everyone remembers.

Exactly what those goals are. Like we're saying, I got you a present and the present is like A generic term for the item. We didn't just say, I got you. Tap shoes. Yeah. So we're using these kind of generic terms to talk about very specific things. And if we don't get to that clarity, everyone is sitting in a different place mentally. So we're not actually talking about the same thing. 'cause I'm talking about the present that's tap shoes, but you're talking about the present as if it was, I don't know, a fruit basket. Beautiful. Yeah.

Jeff Mondoro 13:19

Yeah, exactly. And I think too, as the leader, if you are the one facilitating that conversation or delivering that information, you wanna make it as easy as possible for folks to chime in. And so yeah it's both sides. It's asking the question and it's creating the space to ask the question. And just to me, having that awareness is a really crucial part of being a leader and making meaning, which is something you're always trying to do, I think as a manager.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 13:45

Yes. In both your improv and in your meetings, you're trying to make meaning together. Can you tell us, Jeff, about a client or a story from yourself about when you've applied some of these techniques and approaches in your work life?

Jeff Mondoro 13:58

Yeah. I will share kind of my story, why I am most passionate about. Improv and theater and using it. Is that, so I always say my parents met when my dad's accounting firm took over my mom's accounting firm. All I knew was the world of like finance and accounting and that, that's why I studied in school and worked, as a consultant for the first few years out of college, I was someone who, until he was 25, physically shook to speak in front of people. I had a high degree of anxiety that prevented me from. Kind of really making that connection, feeling anything other than nervous and like wishing this part would be done and improv is the thing that allows me to step out of that because it was through the study of improv. It was taking that forced first class kind of being forced in. That opened my mind to this art form that asked what if it wasn't about getting it right?

What if you were just trying to build something with someone else? What if the audience actually did want you to succeed? And so all of these questions were completely counter to the narrative that I'd had for 25 years, which is, there's an exact right thing to say. There's an exact right way to say it. Your entire audience knows what that is and has a script and will be judging you every time you veer from it, even like. Moment and that, or some variation of that is what I hear from so many folks who I end up working with, which is there's a right way to do something and I'm just trying to figure out what that is. And so much of what we end up working with folks on is there there's a hundred right ways to do something. There's a, what matters is you finding one, like what feels authentically right for you? And two, working on it and allowing yourself to try something new, to iterate, to be open with your team who are going to, and responsive to the

feedback you get from them. Saying this approach doesn't work for me, or This approach was great and we were able to do X, Y, Z thing differently. But relating to every moment as a work in progress versus a script to be delivered perfectly or imperfectly has something that has legitimately transformed my life,, and it's why I love working with clients on this because I hear a version of that story, and I think improv is such a gift to combat that story.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 16:27

So powerful to just shift the narrative in your brain, right? Shift your mindset and not be so worried about all the perfectionism that is hiding back there and continues to creep in. And you just gotta say, Nope, that's not what this is about. Yes. So if I wanted to try to adopt this mindset and show up differently. Do I need to just do it or can I like practice these techniques? Do I need to sign up for an improv class or can I practice at home in some way in my corner of my bedroom, and no one is going to hear me? How do I start to move in this direction?

Jeff Mondoro 17:04

Yeah, I would say a couple of options. I basically do recommend. That 95% of the people I meet take one improv class in their life. I think it is a very scary thing. It is a very scary proposition for so many on the from the get. And I've never talked to someone who I've like really pushed it and heard them say, I really regret. That I took that class you told me to take Jeff. I think it pushes you out of your comfort zone. And we talk about that. How do we like all the time, how do we get out of our comfort zone? 'cause that's where growth happens. And great improv teachers are so aware and honoring of what we're asking you to do feels really scary. So we spend so much time building that environment that rewards. Those little steps and celebrates those small steps. So to me that is a huge kind of, if you want to, and it's also a great way to meet some [00:18:00] friends, like to. Socialize. I talk about all the time as we get older it's harder and harder to meet friends.

It's harder and harder to get in spaces where we're connecting with new people, and I think an improv class is a great setting for that. I think when it comes to how do I try some of this on at work, for me that looks like very small steps. At first, it's what if for this next meeting I really tried to listen to understand. And even though I want us to end in a certain space, I'm gonna make 20% more space for others to talk and just listen right? To me that those are like the small, those micro experiments that you can bring into your everyday life that feels okay, if I were to experiment with a little bit of this ethos, I can do this in these small settings and then I can reflect on. Where did that meeting go? Where might it have gone if I had jumped in and she had moved it in one direction. I think a lot of managers I talk to often come back when I give them that. Okay, in this next meeting don't say anything or or don't, say 50% less. We'll come back and say. I was surprised by where my team took it. And I think that's great because you are always trying to be that multiplier, create that space for your team to show up and lead. And so that starts with listening and that starts with those small experiments that you can make here.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:27

One of my favorite ways to get myself to not talk as exactly as you're saying is to just say, oh, tell me more.

Jeff Mondoro 19:33

Yes.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 19:34

And it is, and that way I still can say something, because I often it also; it depends on the conversation. Sometimes it feels like there needs to be a back-and-forth so the other person's not monologuing. Exactly. But that's simple. I'm gonna say something: that's actually encouraging you to say more can be part of that journey.

Jeff Mondoro 19:49

Yes. I love, tell me more. That's like one of my go-to facilitator. Tell me more, gimme a little more on that. And the other that I really love, which kind of gets to what you were just saying of not putting it all on that person, is what do we think about what Mamie just shared? And so it's you're engaging the group to really respond to that person. So it doesn't become this one-on-one dialogue. And it's how where are we all, how are we all making meaning about this one thing?

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:14

Yes. And oh, I just did a yes and

Jeff Mondoro 20:17

We love

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:18

So unintentional, but yes, and that also keeps the conversation on the same topic going back to where we were earlier, right? If you're asking the group for thoughts on what was just shared, you are countering anyone who might wanna be jumping in and. Just taking over and going in a new direction. So it really gives you that opportunity to sit with and dig into the ideas that were just put into the room. So that feels like a double win on that front

Jeff Mondoro 20:44

there. It's, yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 20:46

Alright. Are there things that I can do on my own to also get myself ready or are there? Preparation techniques or practice techniques or anything else that you know we can be doing to give ourselves that mindset shift so that when I do enter in those situations, in those meetings, those conversations, and I've told myself, yes, this is what you're gonna do today. You're going to sit on your hands, and you're gonna not say as much, but I'm more fully ready for that.

Jeff Mondoro 21:18

Yeah. I think in the context of practice it at home, with your partner, with your kids or with your friends, leading with some of that, like those small micro experiments. I think I have a personal belief that like improv is such a social practice that it's hard to just read a book. It's hard to just do this thing because where the rubber meets the road is, how do I. Use some of these really cool concepts. So I really do always encourage folks to anything they are thinking about and want to try, do it with one other person, do it with a trusted peer or colleague or friend. And there is a book by Violas Bolen who's like the godmother of modern improv really.

And she called improvisation for the Theater. And honestly it has a ton of really great practical exercises for. Improvisation like teachers and in schools and, but it has this preface that really I think, has taught me a lot of the ethos that I try to continue in my improv work. And so if you are looking specifically for a book to read that speaks. In a way that I think is really cool and really interesting. It has just some really cool things that opened my brain up a few years into my improv practice and really transformed it, I would say. So I think that is a resource that if you're super, super interested and wanna do like a deep dive, that's what I recommend.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 22:43

Awesome. And now it's taking me go back to thinking if you wanted to practice alone, because you don't wanna practice with your partner or your friends or your colleagues, that feels too risky. Take an improv class where you can practice with strangers

Jeff Mondoro 22:55

and that is the thing, like the stakes are a lot actually, and it feels counterintuitive, but the stakes are a lot lower with strangers, right? Because then. You're at with friends and with family. It can sometimes feel like I'm adding that after we end this improv, they're gonna be thinking about how I did about the improv. But when you end an improv class with strangers, they don't think about you. For better or worse,

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:17

Ah, the joy of interacting with strangers, they never think about you again. They never compared to your colleagues who are talking about you all the time.

Jeff Mondoro 23:23

That's right.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 23:23

Just kidding. I wanna take this in a slightly different direction now, which is what if we're the manager and we want one of our team members to try some of these techniques, are there ways that we can support them to be better listeners, to not jump in and shift the conversation to share their ideas before they feel fully baked without making them take an improv class?

Jeff Mondoro 23:47

Yeah. I think to me, this is a two or three-parter. And so the first, as a manager, you always wanna be having those developmental conversations with your teams. And so I think this can be added into a little bit of a. Coaching conversation if you are like seeing how they wanna grow. And if that aligns to it, then you can say here's something we might try together. But that being the posture, and if it is more direct, if you are saying here's something I want you to try, laying out the case and saying here's why is super important. So here's what I, here's what I've been seeing in our meetings and I want us to break out of that because I think you have great ideas and i've been noticing that we get to them when they're 80 or 90% of the way through, and they're awesome, and I think it's gonna help the team if we hear them when they're 20% through and we're 30% through. So here's my ask, here's my invitation,, and what do you need from me in order to try that out? So it's those two pieces.

And so like how am, how are you as a manager creating the environment where your team can take those risks, where your team can show up differently? That to me is like super crucial. Again, anytime we're trying something new, it comes with that vulnerability and that risk. And so we want to be trying to mitigate that the best we can and as their manager in the spaces that we are running. You do have some ability to support, to name that, and so it's like agreement beforehand and support during checking in quickly after. How was that? What worked, what you notice, and then all of that becomes the first iteration, and then you continue to do that. Time and time again.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 25:35

And that approach works for all kinds of feedback and growth opportunities.

Jeff Mondoro 25:39

Exactly.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 25:41

Which makes it easy.

Jeff Mondoro 25:41

Yeah.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 25:42

Alright, but we do need to start to wrap up. So Jeff, can you tell us about a great manager you worked for and what made this person such a fabulous boss?

Jeff Mondoro 25:48

Yeah. I worked for a while at a company called Performance of a Lifetime, and I had really awesome boss who was the CEO at the time. Her name was Maureen Kelly, and the thing that she always did was. I put myself into situations before I was ready. It was the, that was like classic. Jeff is not gonna grow. Jeff is never going to be a hundred percent able to do this thing. Until he has already done that thing. And we were a boutique consulting firm and she would put me into rooms before I was ready and some of those rooms were pretty high, very high stakes for me, pretty high stakes for the company itself. We had a couple of very large engagements each year, and so that meant when I'm stepping into lead one, the risk of it going away because something I. Do wrong or incorrectly or, yeah, it is high and it has a huge impact on the company.

But because I was put in those spaces, because I stepped into that role of running an account, leading a client, I was, became able to do it. And so that I just really have been such a. To my growth over the years and my stepping up and my working with more and more senior populations, feeling super confident in, I have a lot to bring to this room. I don't have to be looking to someone else. And so just, it allowed me to take that ne next step in my career, which was, wouldn't be here without it.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:15

Yeah. And then that's what we should be doing, right? Help our people grow, give them those opportunities, and support them to be successful.

Jeff Mondoro 27:20

That's right.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 27:20

Amazing. And where can people learn more about you and keep up with your work?

Jeff Mondoro 27:24

Yeah, so I am the owner and CEO of a consultancy called RIF Consulting. We. Do team building and workshops using theater and improvisation skills building. So if you wanna work on presentation skills or first-line manager training or anything that live communications, connections, or anything that lives in that world. And then we also do transformational offsites. So we come, and we get to know your team. We spend a few months actually learning about who you are and what you do, and then all leading up to that big offsite around, whether it's a strategic initiative launch, whether it's checking in, whether it's post reorganization, we help build your team and then also drive some of those business outcomes you're looking to do.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:07

Amazing. And what's your website? So people can find you

Jeff Mondoro 28:09

riffconsulting.com. RIFF.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:13

Thank you again so much for joining me today. This is really fun. And I think I at least have now have a whole new way of looking at improv,, and maybe I will sign up for a class.

Jeff Mondoro 28:23

Yes, please do. Please do. Thanks for having me. This is awesome.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart 28:26

Jeff is hosting a free one-hour workshop. Intro to improv for members of Podcast Plus. In this one-hour class, we'll explore some of the fundamental tenets of improvisation, presence, active listening with a yes, and the ability to quickly pivot and build with your scene partners. This virtual course will be highly experiential. And involve a series of paired and small group exercises. We'll also debrief and discuss how you might apply each principle in your work as a manager. This virtual workshop will be held on Thursday, September 25th at 11:00 AM Eastern,

which is 8:00 AM Pacific, 4:00 PM British Time, to join this workshop and get many more guest bonuses.

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Thanks again for listening. Until next time.