

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 37 - David Crone

Peter: Hey, welcome everybody. I'm really excited today because wow I got a full house today with this interview. First I'm I'm with David Krone, a comedy ventriloquist a speaker and sometimes IT guy. So first and foremost thank you David for taking time out of your busy schedule to be part of this podcast.

David: Good morning Peter. It's quite an honor.

Peter: It's nice to see you again and you know I have to say good morning to some of the other people who are with us. Gus, good morning. Great to see you. It's been awhile.

Gus: Yeah, whatever.

Peter: Yeah okay so you haven't changed one bit.

Gus: Course not. Where's my beer? It's about that time isn't it.

Peter: Well I it's five o'clock somewhere. And Eugene, how you been these days?

Eugene: Yeah I'm good. You know busy busy busy. Doin' all that kinda fun stuff. Oh yeah.

Peter: Staying busy is good.

Eugene: Oh that's good, yeah.

Peter: And Wilmer, how have you been?

Eugene: [sigh] Well, I gotta get my coffee. It's too early.

Peter: You don't prescribe to the beer in the morning routine?

Eugene: Oh gosh, he's got all that stuff, yeah.

Peter: I should have gone ladies first. I apologize, Edna, but how

Edna: Oh it's okay. I know you get confused. It's okay.

Peter: Well I am getting older and I do get a little more confused these days.

Edna: Well you're still a young guy.

Peter: Well hey. In comparison maybe so. [laughs]

Edna: Yeah.

Peter: Dave, you get a full house there today. We may have to get the wider angle on the lens to see it.

David: Always crazy.

Peter: I can only imagine. So I met David a number of years ago. We were introduced to each other because we were both downsized at one point in time in our careers. We both with the right management services and my old career counselor was your career counselor and gave you my name and you give me a call out of the blue and we we met. David, give us a little about your background.

David: Wow okay. A little background. So I'm gonna try and keep it short. By training, I'm an electrical engineer. I went to university of pittsburgh. My first job out of school was both hardware and software engineer. I figured out very quickly that I suck as a hardware engineer because I make too many mistakes.

Peter: [laughs]

David: I realized that it's a heck of alot easier to fix your mistakes in software than it is in hardware. Fortunately I was actually a pretty good software engineer. So you know I moved around, did the usual career growth, lots of strange companies. Then it kind of gets interesting when I got to CompuServe.

Peter: Wow

David: Back in the day.

Peter: Back back.

David: Oh yeah. And during that process of writing code my hands gave out. I'm one of those people that lost the use of my hands, on a regular basis of keyboard.

Peter: Oh

David: So you know that old adage of those who can do, those who can't teach, and those who can't teach manage. Well I couldn't do and I couldn't teach so I managed.

Peter: [laughs]

David: Of course that's the joke. I went into management and that's why and that's how, and I kind of really dove into it because I always wanted to be good at whatever it is that I do. So I just don't dove in and I said I can't code anymore so I might as well be a good manager if I'm going to do it. AOL came along and bought us out. I moved into more of an Operations role leading network operations, data center things, along those roads. AOL took very good care of me and along the way I decided to pull the puppets back out and actually create new ones. I had been a hobbyist magician and ventriloquist since I was a kid. When my kids came by in the early nineties I put everything away, and then when they got older and I have a little bit more time on my hands I got it all back out again and decided, you know, this is where I want to go with things. Just a short story: I went into engineering school for a number of reasons. One was that I had this vision as a kid of inventing something and then living off of the royalties, and that never quite happened but I kept the dream alive someday owning my own company and was looking around trying to figure out what the product would be. In 2004 I had one of those head smack moments of "Oh, dummy... I'm a product!" And so I just dove in, like I do all things, and just worked at being a really good entertainer, a really good performer of what I did in the craft. And in 2007 I walked away from AOL. You and I ended up in those rooms together. So it was it was a voluntary layoff action, if you want to go there with me.

Peter: Sure

David: I never turn down the opportunity to learn more things so when I went through the right management stuff I was looking specifically at transition tools and how to launch my own business. How do I do that? Didn't quite get it figured out so, in 2009, at the urging of a friend of mine, I went back to the corporate world. I was director of networking telecom for a major healthcare organization here in town. I won't name them, for their benefit. [laughs]

Peter: [laughs]

David: And then, in 2013, basically I ran out of vacation time because my own business had taken off to the point where a I lost the ability to do both. All of that time I kept doing and building my own business, really kind of doing it more right this time around, and so I stepped away in the summer of 2013 and here we are. It's been quite a ride ever since.

Peter: A couple of things: you said that, when you left AOL... when I left a Victoria's Secret, I was voluntold that it was time to move on to the next... so I thought that was kind of neat on their part. I was voluntold. And you mention your business. What is your business?

David: So my businesses ImNoDummy.com and thats it. That's the website. I am a comedy ventriloquist, corporate speaker, entertainer, sometimes coach. Every once in awhile I get pulled back into the IT world. I am at least on the books as a contract or / consultant with an IT firm here in town. They really don't care how much I work. I'm just kind of on the books there. Kind of an interesting arrangement... you know the best way I describe it is it's like having a chair at a hair salon. When I do work through them I pay them a fee but they take care of all the booking

and the billing and all that kind of fun stuff, and I just go out and do the thing and then they take care of getting the money and send me a check. So it costs neither one of us anything for me to be associated with them and so they don't really care how much I work. They like it when I do but most of my hands on work there's a lot of cobwebs to get to that. I am more of a people person at this point: managing and helping other people get their stuff done and this particular contracting firm doesn't really work that way. So it's been interesting.

Peter: So I hear a couple things here. I hear electrical engineer.

David: Yes.

Peter: I hear perfectionist. I hear leadership management. And I hear entertainment.

David: Yeah

Peter: And knowing the struggles between perfection and managing and entertaining, can you talk about the differences, and have you been able to figure it out?

David: Sure. Well, how I've been able to work at figuring it out. Haha.

Peter: Well said.

David: As an engineer I always want to figure it out. I always want to have the answer and I am absolutely a perfectionist in everything I do because that's the way engineers are trained. That's kind of what made me a good engineer at the time. But what I realized is that I've always called myself an entertainer, and what I realized over the last several months and years is that, to date, I've been more of a performer. And there's a difference between performer and entertainer, so let me get into that. When I got into this, I wanted to be the best performer, the best ventriloquist I could possibly be. So I worked on my technical skills: manipulating the puppet, working on the voices, not moving my lips, writing material, finding good jokes. Really, the performance aspect of it. And through studying other artists and watching other things I've realized that there's more of an art here. To move from performer to entertainer you have to move away from doing the technical skills and having those simply in your back pocket. You're good at them, but now you've got to go beyond that. I kind of drew the connection with that with leadership. And let me just the spew for a minute here, if you will.

Peter: Oh please do. Just don't let Gus spew.

David: No. He's still working on his beer. He's good. He doesn't care what time of day it is.

Peter: [laughs]

David: [laughs] So when I was a manager I worked on being the best manager and doing things perfectly. Through those roles and through becoming a leader, stepping up into executive roles, I realized at some point along the way – it was kind of in the back of my mind, it was less conscious than it was just something that happened – that the staff that worked for me really liked it a lot better when I was not perfect. They found me more approachable. If I was perfect it put the pressure on them to be perfect, and the fact is none of us are perfect. All of us are gonna make mistakes and I've long had a saying that making mistakes is fine; repeating them is not.

Peter: Right.

David: So we need to learn from our mistakes – but you have to make the mistakes in order to learn from them. I'm just scatterbrained here today Peter, but it's okay. Growing up I watched my brother make mistakes and so I tried to learn from his mistakes and not repeat his mistakes, so you know I think there's a lot of things you can learn from other people's mistakes. You don't actually have to make them yourself, but you do have to be willing to make the mistakes.

Peter: Okay.

David: So what about the Entertainer side? I use music as an analogy a lot. When you watch a concert pianist, nobody wants to listen to you practice your scales. Yes, it's great that you can do all these fancy runs and arpeggios and play it to perfection but if you just hit every note right that's not music – that's playing all the notes right. That's playing what's on the page. But when you go to a concert and listen to some great pianist, you know that they have the technical ability to play all that stuff but when their passion comes through in the variation and playing the music and their feeling comes out through that, you forget how many notes are being played and you just get sucked up in the moment and enjoy it. That is where I'm going for with the entertainment side, of going from performer to entertainer, and I think that that is where we can go in our working lives. Yeah, you're good at crunching numbers. Yeah, you're right good at writing code. But how do you make it a piece of art? And how do you work with other people and enjoy the process of creating all of this whatever it is that you're creating? I hate to say that artwork is a spreadsheet, but you know it can be. You can do some really cool stuff. And when you're engaging with other people and involving them and having a conversation instead of just everybody go back to their cube and add up the numbers and get to the same answer, it's a lot more fun.

Peter: It is a lot more fun. It's taking that perfection, those technical abilities that we spent years developing, but bringing the human factor into it. Bringing the relationship factor into it. Bringing the people factor into because, as you said, you are a leader. And I like what you said: you you don't want to come across being perfect with your team because when you're perfect they expect themselves to be perfect, and nobody's perfect. When you can come across as being a vulnerable human, making a mistake and owning up to it I think you get a lot more productivity

out of the people that you manage. I think you've made an interesting connection between the performing arts, entertainment, and even into the leadership aspect of the business.

David: Mhm. I'll give you another story here, speaking of that. One of my clients from that many years ago was a manufacturing firm in Ohio that had, about a year previous to me being there, been purchased by a Japanese conglomerate. So the way that they ran things was they had a guy from Japan who was there as the boss. The president of that organization. And his right-hand person was this guy from Germany. Physically, they could not have been more different. A stereotypical Japanese man from the US looking short. He's maybe five feet but extremely professional. Tie down, button down... and then there was this 6-foot + german guy with broad shoulders and you think Claude. And the the President had a had a very weak command of the English language. He could understand it to listen to it but his speech was difficult. The german guy was second-in-command and he ended up acting as translator most of the time. So you took a Japanese guy speaking mostly Japanese or bad English being repeated through a guy with a very heavy German accent, and the staff could kind of figure out what they were asked to do. Now that's sort of the background. So I do the show and the way I close out my corporate shows, usually, is I bring up to people and I put masks on them and I turn them into puppets, or what I like to call people puppets. And it's almost always the boss, and in this particular show I brought up the boss and the second in command. So there's the short guy and the tall guy, and and we do the routine and everybody's laughing and having a good time. Well, the HR Director that hired me came up to me after the event and said "I hope I have a job on Monday. I didn't know you were going to use them."

Peter: Oh! Uh-oh.

David: So I'm a little nervous. I'm thinking uh-oh maybe I just did something bad here. Not five minutes later the two guys come up to me approach me with big smiles on their face and said "Thank you. That was awesome. Thank you for using us in that way because we are never allowed to let our guard down. We are not allowed to be fallible. We're not allowed to be real people. We have to play a part and you allowed us to show a different side of ourselves to our staff that's gonna pay out in dividends down the road."

Peter: Wow.

David: Yeah.

Peter: I got goosebumps.

David: Yeah. [laughs]

Peter: I'm serious, I do. That's a great story.

David: Yeah.

Peter: it was Japanese conglomerate, so it was the corporate culture that said that failure was not an option, and they had to basically play roles there. But by doing this their people saw them as vulnerable. People saw them not in the same way that probably paid dividends tenfold.

David: Oh yeah. It was great. And of course I got to go to the HR person and say I think your job is safe. [laughs]

Peter: [laughs] I think when the HR person said do I have a job on Monday I think my thought was "will this check clear for today?"

David: [laughs]

Peter: So going into your corporate shows. You do a lot of these. You usually bring up the the the boss or whatever. So do you ever ask permission or do you ask for forgiveness?

David: I usually go for forgiveness, and there's a couple reasons for that. First of all, I do ask the person that hired me now. I say I close the show by bringing two people up and it's usually the boss, and do you think they would go along with that? Now here's interesting side effect of this. I'm gonna get philosophical on you for a minute.

Peter: It's okay.

David: When the person is coordinating it says "oh no don't use the boss" I know what kind of company I'm working for. And the people that they say "oh yeah they're gonna have a great time. Yeah go ahead that will be great," also defines what kind of a company I work for. it's amazing how many times I've seen this play out that the companies where the boss is a real stick in the mud, and I'm told by no means to ever use that person, they're the ones that get up before the show and say "well we're having some struggles here we're, really having a hard time and thanks for sticking with us. We're going to keep working through this." And the ones where the boss is laughing and having a good time, those are the companies that he's saying "hey we've got another great year, we've set all new records, we're going to continue having fun with this." It's amazing to see that connection. Cause and effect? I don't know. But there's definitely a trend in the companies that I've worked for.

Peter: Well I think the companies that I've worked for where the boss has been the no-fun boss, strict, whatever... I think I know people walk into work and the walk on eggshells the whole time. They're literally afraid to make a mistake and those companies that I've worked for that the boss has been little more light hearted, a bit more realistic, a lot more vulnerable, willing to laugh, willing to laugh at their mistakes as well as as your mistakes. It just invigorates people. It just makes me want to work harder vs want to work harder productively vs working harder scared so they can keep their job.

David: Right.

Peter: and I know who I'd rather work for.

David: Yeah. So people ask me who is my ideal client and I define my ideal client as a company where the boss takes their work seriously but laughs at themself.

Peter: And are you finding that there's more companies like that than not? What type of ratio do you think you're looking at?

David: Heh... my client base is definitely swinging much more towards the fun boss because I self-select.

Peter: That was my next question. So how are you picking your your clients? Is this something in your initial questionnaire that you're asking?

David: I try to get to that crux and I ask right off the bat "Do you guys like to have fun? Tell me about your office environment?" And if I find out that it's a strict stick-in-the-mud kind of environment, I charge them more because I have to work a lot harder.

Peter: Wow.

David: And they either don't hire me because now it's out of your price range or they hire me and we make it fun anyways because they hired me and I'm gonna work that hard and make it work.

Peter: Make it work. Wow. And I assume it's your busy time of the year. We're recording this just before Thanksgiving, so I imagine that your corporate gigs increase as we get near the holiday season and Christmas?

David: Absolutely. This is it. And you know I'm still getting last-minute requests. There's still one or two dates in there but it's pretty full, yeah.

Peter: So basically Gus stays drunk the whole time?

David: [laughs] Pretty much, yeah.

Peter: Eugene, Wilmer, Edna can't keep them straight, can they?

David: No, although Wilmer says he wants to join you for a scotch once in awhile.

Peter: Uh, well, I'd be happy to. I'll let Wilmer drink the scotch. I'm more of a bourbon drinker. But I'm sure we can find some medium ground.

David: [laughs] Some kind of amber liquid a small glass.

Peter: Bingo. So you have your corporate comedy ventriloquist but I also know that you're a speaker. You go out on the speaking circuit, keynote at conferences. What's your main thing? What are you talking about there?

David: My main message is that work should be fun and everything really goes around that. My blog is workshouldbefun.com and the topics that are right about, primarily, are leadership and things along those nature. But it's it's all about how we make work fun. It is difficult for me to come up with a topic because usually what I do is find that people that are having an event and I talk with them about what their event is, what's the theme, what are the issues, what are your challenges. And if I have something to offer to those challenges and the struggles then it's a good fit we work something out. If it's not I send them to somebody else. But I'm not your typical keynoter. I don't have one speech that I deliver over and over again. In a speaking world, I don't think I've ever delivered the same presentation twice. In the performance side I have. It's typically the same thing. Sometimes it's just a matter of which characters are coming out to play and then each of them has their pretty much stock bits, but it's put together differently for each event. But the speaking side it's all customized very highly to the exact event that we're talking about.

Peter: So let's say that you're contracted by a CPA firm to come in on January 15th, prior to everything get into high gear, and they want to know how they can have fun at work at the most productive time of the year. At the busiest time of the year. What advice would you give them other than drinking beer and drinking bourbon?

David: [laughs] Well the main advice I'm going to give them as to get up from the desks. Get up and walk around. Remember that there's other people in the office with you. It's gonna be hard for me to tell CPAs go ahead and make mistakes.

Peter: True. It's like telling engineers to make mistakes.

David: And you know there's a difference between where you make your mistakes. I'd rather have you making mistakes in getting your clients than making the mistakes on the client's tax forms.

Peter: Right.

David: Right, so there are areas for mistakes in their areas for perfection, if that makes sense.

Peter: It does. I'll even that it depends on the level that we're talking about here. The level of perfection should be up in the senior manager, partner level when they're reviewing it to make sure that it's right. At the staff level, especially the early staff level, you want them to make the

mistakes or you want them to come to you sooner rather than later and ask the question so that they're not just sitting there spinning. But through that whole system, by the time that tax return leaves or the financial statements leave the accounting firm signed off on, hopefully we're looking at from a tax perspective, to some degree, as much perfection as we can get, although there is a lot of gray area in the tax code

David: Yeah. There are certain things, let's be real, there are some places where perfection is required. A surgeon better be perfect.

Peter: Yeah

David: A pilot better be perfect.

Peter: yeah

David: There are some places where it is required, or at least some aspects of the job, but you can still have fun doing it. That's really the whole thing is just trying to keep the mood light. Keep the energy level up but the pressure off. I've been fascinated, lately, watching NFL players. It's interesting to me to see the difference that happens between the college level and the pro level, and seeing the more senior college level people – I've watched Ohio state, obviously, since I live here. The quarterback is the leader of the team.

Peter: Right.

David: and he just got sacked and he gets up and he helps the defender to his feet. He reaches down with a hand like that was a great hit. We're all playing here, we're having fun, we're all doing the job that we're here to do. And you watch that in the pros and it's more and more people respecting the fact that we're all here to have fun. We're doing our jobs and this isn't personal. Yeah we're going to hit each other hard but at the end of the day we might be teammates next week. We don't know.

Peter: I agree wholeheartedly with you, but with one probably minor exception. I'm not sure that the Ohio State player will do that when they're playing Michigan.

David: [laughs] You said the M-word.

Peter: [laughs] I don't think that's gonna happen, but actually looking back at prior Ohio state-michigan games I know that it does happen. It's just very infrequent. But you're right. So you you look at these football players, you talk about these football players, did you happen to catch the Seattle Seahawks-Cardinals game some weeks ago where it came down to a 6-6 tie?

David: No, I missed that one.

Peter: So it went into overtime and the Cardinals kicker, I don't remember his name, missed a 35-yard field goal wide left. And then Seattle had the ball, they took it down, and the Seattle kicker missed a 25-yard or something like that and the game ended in a tie. And at the press conference they asked the coach of the Cardinals, Bruce Arians, what would you tell your kicker? He said "I would tell him this is professional. We hired you to basically go out and kick the football. Go kick the football through the hole." Something along those lines. You know, this is what you're hired to do and this is all you do, go do it. And then they asked Pete Carroll what would you tell your place kicker? He said "I'd tell him that I love him, basically. He made two of them, he's made more than he missed. He missed this one. He's still my guy at the end of the day." I went wow. I can't imagine how that kicker from the Cardinals felt versus the kicker from Seattle. That was one of the most true leadership pieces I've seen lately, or heard lately, coming out the NFL was Pete Carroll's comment about his kicker and not throwing them underneath the bus.

David: Yeah.

Peter: We we need more that. So you speak at corporate events, whether it's a key or some type of seminar, talking about having more fun at work. You also have your corporate speaking ventriloquism comedy, and knowing you for a while I know that you want to build up both of them. Where are you in in that ratio now, approximately?

David: You know it's probably... I don't know it's hard to say. Even being an engineer, I'm not a numbers guy.

Peter: [laughs]

David: But yeah, I don't know, somewhere around twenty percent maybe are more speaking. It's really rare to do a pure speaking where there isn't any fun. To just do serious stuff, because I don't like to do that.

Peter: Right

David: But I have one coming up, for example, leadership program in January where I'm doing the opening keynote and it's primarily entertainment, but it's with a message. So it's blending a lot of things in for these burgeoning executives. People who are coming up into the executive ranks and kinda getting them kicked off on a week-long intensive program for them. And I get to kick them first. So I get to motivate them and give them some seeds which, hopefully, will play out the rest of the week.

Peter: I'm the CEO of my own business, where CEO stands for chief edutainment officer.

David: There you go.

Peter: I hear from you that the more than I can entertain, the better that they can retain, and that's the key.

David: That's right.

Peter: The more that they retain what it is that we're try to do and to do it as Ben Stein in Ferris Bueller's Day Off: "Anyone? Anyone? Anyone? V-o-o-economics? Voodoo economics?" Yeah, if you remember that scene, all the kids in the classroom were just like bored out of their mind.

David: Yeah.

Peter: What we try to do is just the exact opposite. To entertain them and make them laugh. I read "when laughter ends, the listening begins."

David: Yeah, that's good.

Peter: And that's not mine. I think it's a quote from David Mill. But it's true. The more we can make him laugh, even in your corporate ventriloquism stuff. Make them laugh, make the boss vulnerable, that goes a long long way.

David: Yeah. Well so here's where I go with some of the things: Often what happens is that I've put so much effort into the routines, into the performance, into how everything conveys. And so when I do speaking things, depending on the message... one of the things that I will do in January, for example, is do a routine, let the laughter died down, and then actually go back and say "alright here's exactly what we did." So basically deconstruct the routine. "Here's what I did, here's how this routine evolved, here's how it developed, and here's why it was successful," and the particular message out of this one is that it's bringing an audience volunteer up. It's just one person at this point. And I have a different prop that allows me to make them talk. The point is that, when they come up, I give them very very few instructions. I say here do this and then we just kind of go from there and I let the person take off and it's amazing how far people will go and where they take it on their own, and the leadership lesson there really is set the goal. Set your parameters, but then stand back and see how far other people are gonna take it if you just let them go. If you define very very exacting parameters they'll fit inside that box, but you don't how big that box can be unless you really open up and let them just have at it.

Peter: As I read somewhere, and I think it was the current CEO of Darden Restaurants, basically said "build the team and then get out of the way and let them do what they need to do" and, to your point, don't put them in that box because then you're limiting their abilities.

David: Right.

Peter: So that's a great message. As we begin to wrap up, David, is there anything else you'd like to tell the audience here? A piece of wisdom that you have tucked away somewhere that you'd like to share with them that maybe you haven't shared already?

David: Me, wisdom.. wow that's a heavy demand there Peter.

Peter: Aw, that's not an oxymoron.

David: [laughs]

Peter: Come on, I've known you for a while. I know there's a tremendous amount of – well, you've shared a lot of wisdom already with us.

David: Here's my bit of wisdom, here it is. Look at where you struggle. What do you have a hard time with? For me, a lot of it's lightening up. I've had that mantra for ages, because I'm an engineer. I'm a stick-in-the-mud. It's so easy for me to be there. Lighten up, have some fun. So for me that's a lot of what I talk about, where I come from, comes from that struggle that I have. And each person has their own struggle and where are you most challenged? Dig into it and now share that and share that struggle with other people so that they can learn from that as well.

Peter: See? That was great. That's worth the price of admission right there.

David: Alright, I'll take your word for it.

Peter: I think it is and I think my audience will walk away with that because that's very profound. So as we begin to depart, I must say goodbye to the other four that are in the room. And I will be I will be gentlemanly this time and tell Edna, it was great seeing you. Thank you very much.

Edna: Oh thanks Peter. It's good to see, as always.

Peter: and Wilmer, we'll get together and you can have a scotch and I'll have a bourbon.

Wilmer: [snore]

Peter: Maybe he's already hit the Glen a little bit. [laughs]

David [laughs]

Peter: And eugene, it's always good to see you.

Eugene: Oh yeah. Get the techie stuff going. Watch out for those spam filters. Hehehe.

Peter: [laughs] And Gus..

Gus: Yeah, whatever. Only when it's happy hour, okay?

Peter: Guy never changes one bit after all these years.

David: [laughs]

Peter: David, thank you so very much for taking time out. I greatly appreciate you being part of this. I know my audience will have a lot of takeaways that they can begin to use in their daily and professional lives, so thank you so very much.

David: My pleasure. Remember work should be fun.

Peter: Yes, it should be a ton of fun so thank you very much.

David: [laughs]

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