

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 39 - Maureen Zappala

Maureen Zappala: People with self-confidence will take risks. They'll go to school, they'll try out for that position, they'll put in for the promotion, they'll take on the responsibility. The confidence gets them to that position... but yet the internal dialogue in their head makes them doubt their right to be there.

[Music]

Peter Margaritis: Welcome to Improv is no Joke podcast, where it's all about becoming a more effective communicator by embracing the principles of improvisation. I'm your host Peter Margaritis, the self-proclaimed chief edutainment officer of my business, [The Accidental Accountant](#). My goal is to provide you with thought-provoking interviews with business leaders so you can become an effective improviser, which will lead to building stronger relationships with clients, customers, colleagues and even your family, so let's start the show.

[Music]

Peter: Welcome to episode 39 of Improv Is No Joke podcast. Thank you very much for download this episode. Today's guest is Maureen Zappala, who is the founder and CEO of High-Altitude Strategies. She's a mechanical engineer who has reinvented herself into an outstanding speaker with a powerful message. Maureen and I start our conversation off by talking about how she became a better speaker by joining Toastmasters. Now she's still involved with Toastmasters and has moved from competing in competitions like the world championships to provide content to Toastmasters' monthly magazine. She's currently writing an article about the corporate Toastmaster clubs and Harley-Davidson. Now that's cool! She also states that a recent Toastmaster poll on "Why Did You Join Toastmasters?" and the number one reason was to get past the fear of public speaking – not to become a better speaker. Listen carefully as Maureen talks about surviving the fear of public speaking. Great advice. Then we'll discuss the current speaking business and how her business changed after reading the book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, and it was about the Imposter Syndrome. That's when she had an aha moment because she had felt that way every day she went to work at NASA. She lived it and built her business around this topic. Now the Imposter Syndrome is a concept describing high-achieving individuals who are marked by the inability to internalize their accomplishments and have a persistent fear of being exposed as a fraud... you know, it's a story that you have in your head. We all fight it and Maureen has some great advice to help you move past this syndrome. As I reflect on this episode and the principles of improvisation, this is very much a Yes, And interview. Yes, And is implied throughout the entire conversation, from getting past the fear of public speaking to dealing with the Imposter Syndrome. I'm sure you will enjoy this episode. If you've been listening to my podcast for a while, you know that one of my goals with this podcast is that it will help you begin to make changes in your work and your personal lives so you can better connect with others and create

meaningful relationships. Many people have said that it takes 21 days to start a habit, which I just learned this week from Dr. John B Molitor, PhD, that's incorrect. John is the Dean of psychiatry and community at Michigan State University. He said that the research shows that it takes 66 days to create a habit. So now we gotta put in some extra work to create that muscle memory. That's why I created the Yes, And challenge: to help keep these principles in front of you so you can build up your improvisational muscle. To sign up, please go to PeterMargaritis.com and scroll down to the Yes, And challenge call to action and click to register to begin building the productive habit of Yes, And and the principles of improvisation. And remember to show your experiences on twitter using the hashtag #yesandchallenge. If you're unsure of what the Yes, And challenge is all about, I discuss this in detail in episode 0. Go back and take a listen. Remember you can subscribe to my podcast on itunes, stitcher, and google play. To pick up an autographed copy of my book *Improv is no Joke: Using Improvisation to Create Positive Results in Leadership and Life*, please go to my website, [PeterMargaritis](http://PeterMargaritis.com), and you'll see the graphic on the homepage to purchase my book. With that said, let's get to the interview with Maureen Zappala.

Peter: Hey everybody, I'm here with Maureen Zappala. First and foremost Maureen, thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule and taking time to be a guest on my podcast today.

Maureen: Thanks for letting me join you, Peter. It's been fun getting to know you and I'm really privileged to hang out with you today.

Peter: Oh, well. The check's in the mail. Thank you very much.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: Maureen and I are both members of the National Speakers Association and the Ohio Chapter, but we really got to know each other earlier this year when we were in a virtual mastermind group and I have a lot in common. She'll talk a lot of what she speaks on, but I don't want to give away her background because I can't do justice to a background like she could do it. So Maureen, if you could tell us a little bit about yourself. Let the audience get to know you a little bit before we start our conversation.

Maureen: Sure, Pete. It's kind of interesting. I started out as an engineer. I worked for almost 14 years at NASA. NASA has a center here in Cleveland, it's now called the NASA Glenn Research Center, but back when I was there is the NASA Lewis research center. I did research in jet engine propulsion. Jet propulsion engines... long story, won't go into. But I worked there for almost 14 years, quit to raise a family, and then started doing some speaking on the side. Now it's kind of ironic because my background is mechanical engineering. I went to University of Notre Dame, and you know what? Engineers.. we're really not known for verbal skills.

Peter: Hey, welcome to my group! [laughs]

Maureen: I know you speak to a lot of accountants, a lot of know you know number crunchers, left-brain thinking, logical type people. But I found that I had a skill for communication and the skill for speaking. When I was at NASA I was in a management position and we had to make a lot of presentations and my boss said I was awful. That I was awful... and I was. When I quit NASA, I took a cash buyout actually. The government was downsizing. I joined Toastmasters.

Peter: Oh!

Maureen: Yeah, and it's funny because I didn't join Toastmasters to become a better speaker. At the time, I was also selling Mary Kay Cosmetics.

Peter: Okay.

Maureen: And because of my background in NASA, mostly men... men and color cosmetics are not a good fit. So I needed to meet women... So I say I joined us message to meet women!
[laughs]

Peter: [laughs] Okay! I'm thinking maybe I should have started selling Mary Kay products many years ago.

Maureen: [laughs] So I no longer do Mary Kay but I have done a lot more speaking, professionally speaking. When I get my key notes and I talk about being an engineer, as a speaker, it's just fun to bring up the contrast of how engineers were not known for our skills, but if I can do it anybody can do it.

Peter: And Toastmasters helped you achieve that goal, I take it?

Maureen: It did. It completely transformed my speaking, gave me opportunities to connect with people that could hire me as a speaker, helped me to formulate my topic... plus it's a great, fun environment. Lots of fun people, lots of energy, it's encouraging, uplifting, celebration, applause. It's a great environment.

Peter: I joined Toastmasters not to meet women but to learn how to speak and do presentations in public, and I can still to this day see the person at the end of the table counting the ums and ahs. They really do a good job of getting rid of those filler words. They really do a great job of taking that diamond in the rough and polishing it up.

Maureen: Yeah I found the same thing. It was one of the first noticeable pieces of improvement I saw in my speaking: getting rid of those verbal crutches. Some people may take it to an extreme, but everybody's a little different. I know that all of us can sit in a sermon at church, we consider a meeting, we could even watch newscasters or public figures on television, and once you start to realize how much they ah and umm their way through, it starts to get distracting.

Peter: Yes it does.

Maureen: And you don't even know you do it yourself until somebody calls you out on it, and once you start being aware of it then you can make the conscious efforts to eliminate it... and wow does that make a difference.

Peter: Yeah it really does. And, actually, uh... there goes another um.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: I found that, after they pretty much get rid of about 90 percent of it, I had another verbal crutch that I didn't realize I had, which was the word okay.

Maureen: uh-huh

Peter: and it wasn't until I got evaluations back from one of the speaking engagements that they said I overuse the word okay, we've turned it into a game, and one of them said we broke our lead you said the word okay so much. And I never heard it until I went to teach that next monday or tuesday and I heard it, and I made my class, over a two- to three-week period, anytime I said the word okay they threw stuff at me, they made raspberry sounds, they did everything distracting so I would start to hear it. Because you don't hear, or nobody calls you out on it, but it is very very distracting.

Maureen: Mhm. I agree.

Peter: So you are a professional speaker now, but let's back up. Are you still involved with Toastmasters?

Maureen: I am, to a much lower extent. I joined Toastmasters originally way back in 1998, I think. I can't remember the exact date. 97-98. I took a few years off when my kids were really little, and when they went back to school full-time I rejoined. I was really plugged into the contest side of Toastmasters. There's basically two sides: communication and leadership. Communication has a lot of contests. I love to compete and I did pretty well, and I competed again this past season. I actually made it to the semi-finals in the world championship and had a great run. It was great, it was great.

Peter: Wow.

Maureen: It was fun, fabulous, exciting. I didn't even care that I didn't win because it was such a great adventure.

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: I still am a member of a club, but my biggest focus now has been contributing as a writer for their monthly magazine. That's been a lot of fun. I did not realize how much fun it was to write. Even as a speaker, I do a lot of writing to create my keynotes and to just brainstorm ideas. But to focus it on a magazine article, about once a month once or every other month, has been a real joy for me.

Peter: What are your articles on? What's the topic? I imagine it's a variety of topics.

Maureen: It is a variety because Toastmasters will come to me and say "here's a topic, would you be willing to research it and find some people to survey or interview and write an article on it?" I said sure, why not. For example, I'm currently writing an article on the the corporate clubs that are sponsored at Harley-Davidson, at their corporate headquarters.

Peter: Cool.

Maureen: Yeah it's really cool because I'm going to get a chance to interview some of the c-suite level executives and get some background on their corporate culture. It's really fun, so I'm excited about that.

Peter: Where's the Harley-Davidson headquarter located?

Maureen: in Wisconsin.

Peter: Wisconsin, okay. What's the the crux of the article?

Maureen: They've got four corporate clubs up there right now. Their first club was started by a member of the IT team who saw that people in IT, and I'm sure you see it with accountants and I thought with engineers, they needed a little help with their communication skills. Whether it was for an internal presentation they were making or maybe just communicating with vendors or customers, whatever, they just needed a little bit of polishing.

Peter: Well, why do so many people need to be polished, as you say? Is it because of the fear of having an audience and having people look at you when you speak?

Maureen: Yeah, in fact I just saw a statistic not long ago... somebody polled a bunch of Toastmasters and asked "why did you join?" Most people didn't join to get better at making presentations. They joined to get past what you just said: the fear of speaking either to a group or even in conversation. They wanted to get past that crippling, mind-numbing, body-sweating fear. And I'll tell you, and I'm sure you've probably experienced it too because you do a lot of speaking, that's fear doesn't always completely go away.

Peter: Oh, no. I never want it to completely go away.

Maureen: Yeah, because it is kind of energizing, and it keeps you on your toes, but at least you know that now the techniques and the specific things to do to get past it. You know your topic, you love your topic, you are an expert at your topic, you know that you're there to give something of value to the audience. That's all part of diminishing that fear that most people don't know before they maybe even joined Toastmasters.

Peter: I was actually doing a presentation on public speaking and presentation skills and somebody in the audience, it was probably about a year-and-a-half ago, said "Peter you do this all the time. You probably don't have any fear." I said I do have some. And then they went "but you don't know what the fear is because you've gotten so far past it that you forgot what it's like."

Maureen: Oh no [laughs]

Peter: And you know I kind of took that to heart.

Maureen: Ah.

Peter: and earlier this year... as you know, I've done some stand-up comedy in my day.

Maureen: Mhm.

Peter: And it's been on and off, but I decided to get back up onstage earlier this year. And for somebody who's a professional speaker, who can go eight hours, I was terrified. I had those same feelings that somebody has if they're getting up to do a presentation within their organization and I had to use my improv skills and the word Yes, And just to get through it. But same thing: I worried so much about it that those internal demons were just beating me up, but after it was said and done I kept saying it wasn't that bad, which really helped me to relate again with my audience. Yeah, I know exactly what you're feeling, and to some extent it can be absolutely paralyzing.

Maureen: Mhm, it is. And there's some validity to what your friend said, that you've been doing this so long that you don't know what it feels like. However, it's that you do know what it feels like but you know that you're going to survive it.

Peter: Right.

Maureen: And a lot of people don't know that they're going to survive it, and that's why they shut down. That's why they would rather go vomit. That's why they gotta go pee in their pants, you know whatever it is. Just they're not familiar with this and they don't know how to get past it.

Peter: Yeah, that's that's true. But going back to earlier this year, I forgot how to get past it. My wife is out of town and my son had ski club, and he was gonna get home about nine thirty that

night and that's the time I'm supposed to be onstage. And that morning I said Steven, you sure you don't want me to be home when you get home?

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: I texted him at school and I text him on the bus ride. He said Dad, stop it. Just go and do your comedy thing. And I was trying to find an excuse... but that really that really did help me once again realize what others go through in getting up and getting past that fear.

Maureen: Mhm.

Peter: So Toastmasters helps you get past that fear.

Maureen: It did. Mhm.

Peter: And helped you become, obviously, a better speaker, to get to the World Championships. Now when you made it to the World Championships, what was your topic? What was your presentation, your speech about?

Maureen: A little bit of background on the whole contest: it's a six-year journey. It starts, usually, around February, around the world. Close to 35,000 people enter the contest, around the world, in January-February time frame at the club level. Then the winners advance through different levels. By the time they get to the finals, which is usually in August, that field of 35,000 has been whittled down to nine or ten... depending on the year.

Peter: Wow.

Maureen: Yeah. In 2009, I made it to the top 10. This past year, 2016, I made it to the semifinals, which is about the top 85-90. Somewhere around there. Still very significant. Now, there's six levels of the contest. At each level you can give the same speech, until you get to the sixth level, the last level. You have to come up with a different speech. So in 2009, my final speech was on the topic of how to overcome pride. Now it is kind of interesting because people are like, "well that's kind of a weird topic." Well, you have to know your audience. Toastmasters really enjoy motivational, inspirational, character-building, you set the world on fire, kind of dream it do it kind of speeches. So I chose that topic how to overcome pride because I have struggled with pride my entire life. I have parents that built into me, told me I was great, and I think that's a good thing to do, to build into your kids until then they're great, but when they start to define their whole life by "I am great" you have a problem, which is exactly what I did. I really really thought I was all that more.

Peter: Yeah.

Maureen: So I had life situations kind of knock me down and really recalibrated my whole sense of self. So I spoke on that topic, and you don't just speak on a topic. You build in stories, you build in humor, you use metaphors and analogies, and it's a seven-minute speech. So you have to take them on a pretty good ride in seven minutes.

Peter: Wow, yeah.

Maureen: Yeah. This past year, this past season, my semi-final speech was about, basically, rebounding after a setback in your life.

Peter: Okay.

Maureen: I lost my parents when I was a teenager, and that was a literally a trampoline into other great things in my life. I use that as a springboard to talk about how do you bounce back from other things in your life. You know, is the pain in your life useful? Is it constructive or destructive? Choose to make it constructive.

Peter: You said something earlier: you know your audience, you know what you're looking for. And and in any get type of presentation, the more that you can add some humor...

Maureen: Oh yeah!

Peter: It goes a really long way of keeping them away from their cell phones,

Maureen: Oh yeah [laughs] well I'm sure you know, being in the NSA, that the line is "you don't have to use humor unless you want to..."

Together: Get paid."

Peter: Exactly [laughs] and humor does... David Nihill, founder of Funny Business, I think that's the name of it, I kind of stumbled upon him and he's talking about how to write humor into your stories and along those lines, because engineers, accountants, when we have to do a presentation, the more that we present data, the more we put more words up on the screen and don't build an emotional story and add humor and stuff, they're not gonna retain it. It's just going to fall flat. So the more that we can use humor in a presentation, one, I think he says "after the laughter stops the—

Maureen: learning begins."

Peter: Yeah.

Maureen: I've heard that. Where the peak of learning comes after the peak of laughter, or something along the same lines.

Peter: Yeah, and he says, and I believe this, that when you laugh and you hear that you are more inclined to be more “what’s he going to say next, what is she going to say next?” Be more engaged in to it vs “oh my god I can watch the grass grow and have a better time than listening to this guy. Anyone? anyone? bueller? anyone?” You know, it’s Ben Stein’s scene in Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: So you’ve gone from being a rocket scientist.

Maureen: Mhm.

Peter: Now I actually know somebody who’s a rocket scientist.

Maureen: Well it’s funny because I use that line a lot in my keynotes, also. I’ll tell them I have a background in engineering, I work Jet Propulsion, I’m a genuine rocket scientist... but don’t be impressed. It just means that when I do something stupid, you can say oh what are you a rocket scientist? and I can say yes!

Peter: [laughs] that’s great.

Maureen: Yeah it’s a pretty good laugh.

Peter: It got a great one here right now.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: So you’ve taken all of that and you’ve built yourself a speaking business. Tell the audience what you speak on these days.

Maureen: That’s funny. I spoke for a long time on leadership. Generic, vanilla leadership. As an engineer at NASA, as a lower level / middle level manager at NASA, I figured I can talk on leadership. I was led by great people, I led great teams. Leadership. But there’s a million and one leadership speakers, so what else could I talk about to really cut to really set me apart? I read a book a few years ago called *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, and it was about something called the Imposter Syndrome. As I read through the book, I really felt angels were surrounding me and singing. I thought “this is it, this is so me,” because the Imposter Syndrome is an internal voice that usually strikes educated, successful, influential, creative people that have really made a mark in the world. It’s the internal voice that says “oh my gosh, everybody thinks I’m smarter than I really am, or everybody thinks I’m more talented than I am, or everybody thinks I’m more prepared than I am,” and so you think of yourself as an imposter. You think to yourself I’m faking it and they don’t know, and I’m a millisecond away from being

found out as a fake. When I read through that book, I thought oh my gosh I lived that at NASA. Every day I walked into work thinking “it's a fluke that I'm here.”

Peter: [laughs] Wow

Maureen: “It is an accident they put me in this position as a manager with all this responsibility and all this accountability.” I mean I was world-known for the job that I did, for the position that I held, and I really thought it was only because I was a girl that they put me there.

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: So back then I didn't think of it as an Imposter Syndrome. When I read through this book I thought oh my gosh yes, and so I had to backtrack through my days at NASA and think “what did I say to myself when I walked into work every day that let me stay there and not go flee to the hills in shame?” Well. there were some things that I did tell myself that, yeah, I did earn this position and I do have a background in this field and I have a record of establishing relationships and making things happen, so I definitely had the criteria that allowed them to put me in this position so I need to own it. So when I speak on the Imposter Syndrome, I teach people the things that I did for myself to get them through that that mind-numbing fear or that almost-paralysis that says “I don't I don't deserve this job and I don't belong here.” Yes you do. You did something right to get there. They're not idiots for putting you in this position. You didn't fake it, you didn't you didn't snow them. You legitimately own the right to be in this position. Now let's move on from here.

Peter: So we were talking earlier and you said that self-confidence that gets in the way, because you have to have that self-confidence to get to that point.

Maureen: Yeah, and that's that's the kind of a paradox about it. It is people with self-confidence will take risks, they'll go to school, they'll don't try out for that position, they'll put in for the transfer or the promotion, they will take on the responsibility. So the confidence gets them to that position... but yet the internal dialogue in their head makes them doubt not even their ability but their right to be there. That somebody else made a mistake. So it's an unusual cognitive distortion. It's this distortion of believing the facts. It's like they look at their own resume and they think well that looks really cool but it's really not me.

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: But, well, it is you because you created that resume. So it's not a confidence issue – it's a cognitive issue. Because confidence is more of an emotional thing.

Peter: Right.

Maureen: Whereas the Imposter Syndrome definitely is a thinking thing.

Peter: And I remember when I published the book and my friends' comment to me was "does it come with crayons?"

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: I remember when.... fill in the blank. And for a couple I laughed at them, but I'm still thinking "okay, what the hell is going on here?" Because I think I was, to some degree, going down that imposter syndrome. Like my mother would introduce "my son the author."

Maureen: Aww.

Peter: and I'm looking at myself thinking I never thought those words would be in the same sentence as my name, and it took it took me a while to... accept it? I don't know if that's the right word. I'm like I'm not an author... I took the risk and I have the self-confidence enough to do it, but then I think once it was out there I was like what have I done?

Maureen: Yes. People that have the Imposter Syndrome tend to discount their own accomplishments, and when you say it took you a while to accept it... acceptance is part of it, but really it's identifying yourself with the accomplishments. It is really owning it, it is really putting you in the place of the person who did the work (and not somebody outside of you or a set of circumstances that that allowed to happen). You created it, you did it, and now you need to own. So it's tough... it's a big leap for a lot of people.

Peter: Oh yeah, I can see that. So what groups do you speak to? Is it any and all? Because I imagine most people who are successful entrepreneurs in corporate America might be a little bit hesitant to come to a presentation on the Imposter Syndrome.

Maureen: Yeah, it's really interesting that you say that. I will speak to entrepreneurs, I'll speak to tech groups, engineering groups, professional associations... the common thread is that they are the target audience. They're educated, influential, successful, accomplished. I've spoken to blue collar workers, line workers... this doesn't resonate with them because that's just not their world. They have a different identity. But it's interesting that you mention... I don't know if I want to go here and talk about Imposter Syndrome. I spoke last last year at a conference called CodeMash, which is the biggest conference for computer coders. So these are tech people on steroids.

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: This is the heart and soul of our communication industry, and the name of the talk was called "how to oppose your imposter," and I put it out there and then later on I realized that's probably not good marketing. Like you said, anybody who walks into that room is admitting that they're an imposter. Yet, the room was filled. I thought it was going to be mostly

women, because originally the Imposter Syndrome was identified as a female thing (of course now I know that it's not. It affects men. Men and women respond to it differently, which is a whole nother question). But the coding world is a male-dominated industry, so there were hundreds of people in this session and it was really cool because I read the tweets afterwards... the tweets blew my mind! Over and over I said "wow I was surprised to see so and so in there, it's good to know I'm not the only one."

Peter: Oh wow.

Maureen: That was a lightbulb moment for me because I realized that one of the points I make in my keynote about the Imposter Syndrome is that the Imposter Syndrome is both magnified and alleviated within community. Now it's magnified in community because, when you're by yourself, you can be your own rock star. You could say "I'm a rocket scientist, I'm the best, you know I'm really awesome."

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: But you get into community with your workmates, your peers, and then you start to feel a little "oh I don't know... I'm not as smart as they are or not as accomplished as they are" blah blah blah. So the imposter voice starts to get louder... but it's diminished when you get in a community and you realize "wow I'm not the only one," but the only way that happens is if people start to talk about it. So what I do in my keynotes is I give people their permission to start a conversation. I'm not gonna ask them raise your hand if you feel like your imposter, although I will say in the keynote that I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand if you think you're an impostor but the very fact that you walked in the door kind of gives it away... so let's just all get it out there. [laughs]

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: And that that breaks the ice and it starts the conversation, so it's both magnified in community and diminished in community. And that's the turning point for a lot of people. Once they realize "wow I'm really not alone in this."

Peter: So it sounds like group therapy.

Maureen: In a way it is. [laughs]

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: You know, in a very high professional level.

Peter: Exactly. But I did make a note to ask you: where does ego come into this? and I'm talking very large, strong ego. Or does it come into play?

Maureen: I haven't done research on that but that's a really good question, because on the flip side of the Imposter Syndrome is something called the Dunning-Kruger Effect. It's not quite on the opposite, but if you were to call something an opposite this would be the closest thing. And if have you ever seen talent shows like The Voice or American Idol?

Peter: Not a lot, but I've seen some of them.

Maureen: American Idol is really good for this, especially the early parts of the series where they'll go out into the field and they'll find really awful singers.

Peter: Yeah.

Maureen: and have them sing and then the judges are are telling them to go find another line of work. Then the singer walks out all storm and stopping mad "they don't know talent when they see it!" Well people that suffer from the dunning-kruger effect think that they're way more talented than they really are. Imposters are not convinced that they are as talented as they are. So ego tends to be more along the line of that dunning-kruger person.

Peter: Okay.

Maureen: They really do have a very inflated sense of self-importance. Sometimes even narcissists or other people that have suffered from borderline personality disorders. People that suffer from Imposter Syndrome, but yet are afraid to admit it or think "oh no that's not me," I wouldn't say that's ego... it might just simply be they're not yet informed. And once they realize what it is, what the symptoms are, how it may have held them back, how they can overcome it... they tend to be a lot more open to exploring the idea.

Peter: So share with the audience a couple of things that, if somebody's listening to this one going "good I'm glad on my in my car. I hope nobody sees that I think I'm an imposter." But what advice would you give them to get past this syndrome, per se?

Maureen: One of the first things is to realize you're not alone.

Peter: Okay.

Maureen: Many people suffer from it. When you realize you're not alone, you can start to have your radar up to look for opportunities, maybe, to talk about it more or to just have the internal dialogue with yourself that says "I'm not alone. I really am as good as my resume says that I am." The next step would be to realize that there is no possible way you can know everything about the position you're in, about the technology you're involved in, about the company you work for, about the reach that you can have. there's no possible way, so you need to let yourself off the hook from needing to know everything about everything. Another thing I tell people is it's

okay to say “you know what? I don't know that yet. I don't know the answer to that, let me get back to you. Let me put you in contact with somebody who can tell you.” I know that, when I was the engineer at NASA in the management position, I was terrified that somebody was going to ask me something that I didn't know the answer to... terrified! And it never occurred to me to go ask for help! To go find somebody who knew. I really felt that, because I was a manager, I had to know. Well that's not true. Practice saying to yourself “I don't know yet, let me get back to you,” or “I don't know, but I'll find out for you,” or “I don't know, I'll put you in contact with somebody.”

Peter: It's interesting you say that because, in an earlier podcast within the last few weeks, I was interviewing a gentleman by the name of Matt Horan and we were talking about leadership. Now Matt went to the naval academy, he spent six years out at sea, and we were talking about leadership. He said one of the first things you learn about leadership is just to what you said: I don't know everything, and if I'm in a meeting and somebody asks a question or they're talking about a specific topic, he would go “Okay, can you help bring me up to speed here because I'm not quite sure,” but it said it took him a little bit of time. I don't he said the word courage or whatever, but to realize that he doesn't know everything. Even though as a leader we were perceived to know everything, but he had to ask those questions. I thought that ties right into what you're saying.

Maureen: Yeah, it is, and you know what there is a level of respect that you earn when you admit you don't know everything and that you're willing to ask for help. There's something weird about it. It's welcomed by the people that hear you say that and you need to accept it in your own head that it's okay to say that.

Peter: Well, I think the people looking at you going “oh my god she's human.”

Maureen: And not only are they saying “wow he's human,” but they also might be saying “pick me, I want to help!”

Peter: Exactly. I can get from the boss look better now. And as we move up any type of ladder in our careers, I think one thing, especially with linear thinkers, is that we love to be right.

Maureen: Mhm.

Peter: We love perfection. And I when I talk to my our my audiences about standing in front of an audience, I say the first thing you need to do is let go of perfection because you will mess up. And I said, especially, like if you're in a Q&A and you get asked a question and you don't know... don't BS an audience because somebody out there knows it, and they will rip you to shreds. Hopefully not in public, but after the fact. I give them a couple tips and say, if you don't know the answer but you're pretty sure, ask the audience if anybody knows it. So maybe somebody'll chime in, which will give you a few more minutes or seconds to think through it. Maybe you do

know it and you had this little block, and if not then you ask after this come up, give me a business card, write the question, and afterwards I'll research it for you.

Maureen: Oh yeah, mhm.

Peter: But the caveat there, if you're doing a 10-minute Q&A, and after the 10-minute Q&A you get 10 business cards...

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: Yeah, you didn't do your homework. If you walk away with zero or one, you've done a great job.

Maureen: Mhm, yeah. Good point.

Peter: But it's letting go of perfection because we love being right and saying that, one, I need help or I don't know. I think that actually might be even scarier than doing a presentation, for some.

Maureen: Mhm. Yeah, I think you're right. Yeah we just feel like our identity is tied up in what we do and what we know, and when we say we don't know something well there's chink in the armor, and that's not true.

Peter: And I call that the sheldon cooper syndrome. From Big Bang.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: Because he's right about everything.

Maureen: Everything.

Peter: In that perfection, even when he's wrong, he's right.

Maureen: [laughs]

Peter: You were saying this doesn't resonate with a lot of blue collar workers, per se, but I bet it does when that person gets moved into a management role.

Maureen: Oh yeah.

Peter: That gap, at that point, has to be huge.

Maureen: It does, because I think there's a flaw – and I speak from my own experience in engineering with NASA and government facility – but I see a lot of parallels in the industry and manufacturing and sales organizations. They will promote into management from the technical positions... not smart, because they're not trained to be managers. They are trained to be technical experts. So you lateral them into a into a management position and don't give them the right people skills, the right management tools... and it's sink or swim. The sink or swim... that's the breeding place of the Imposter Syndrome. It really is.

Peter: I take this quote from peter drucker and he says we're using the peter principle. We're promoting them to the level of incompetence.

Maureen: Yeah. Mhm.

Peter: And to your point, because we haven't provided with with the necessary people skills to become that manager role. Now if I'm a technician and I'm working on the line, no matter what I'm doing, and I get moved up into a manager role... I still want to be buddies with my buddies but I'm trying to also manage them. Who am I to be here? And I can just imagine that dynamic is probably maybe even 10 times worse.

Maureen: Yeah. It does depend, too, on the corporate culture. It depends on your own personal culture: where you came from, childhood messages you got, the incidents in your life that shaped and formed you, how you view relationships and people and success. I mean there's just so much that goes into the feeding this imposter sense. This feeling of being a fraud.

Peter: So if anybody in my audience is listening to this one thinking “man I gotta get her into my organization,” how can people find you?

Maureen: I am probably one of the most findable people on the planet. My website is MaureenZ.com. My contact information is there, my phone number, my email. I'm on facebook all the time, a little bit on twitter and linkedin, but Facebook is is my happy place so I'm easy to find on facebook.

Peter: And you're based out of the Cleveland, Ohio area.

Maureen: Right. In cleveland and Akron, an old town called Medina.

Peter: Oh, I know Medin. I had a good friend who used to living without any Peter Korte. Well, Maureen, thank you so very much for taking time out of your schedule and I really enjoyed this conversation. I realized a few things about myself that maybe I didn't at the start of the conversation, which is always good. Self-awareness goes a long way. I have enjoyed the conversation. I look forward to seeing you at the upcoming NSA Ohio Chapter meeting, and by the way... she is the incoming president of our chapter beginning in the Summer, so she's got a lot on your plate.

Maureen: You know what, you talk about Imposter Syndrome...

Peter: [laughs]

Maureen: Yeah, I hear it loud and clear. Because, as you know, our chapter president now Lisa Ryan is a total rockstar.

Peter: Oh yeah.

Maureen: She's just jamming. And so now I have to step into her shoes. And she's a good friend, dear friend, I know she'll be in my back pocket as I take over... but still you hear that voice that says "can you do it? Is this an accident? should I even be here?"

Peter: And the answer is yes, you should be there.

Maureen: Well, thank you. I appreciate that. [laughs]

[music]

Peter: I'd like to thank Maureen again for taking time out of your schedule to give us ideas on how we can get past the fear of public speaking and the Imposter Syndrome. Lots of great advice Maureen has given us. In episode 40, I interview Phil Kim, who is an associate professor of business at Wallace University in Canton, Ohio. He is also the founder of Idea Path Consulting, which is a management consulting firm for entrepreneurs and small business owners. Our discussion is around his very powerful TEDx talk that he gave in Albany, New York titled "Chase One Rabbit: The Power of Small Wins." Thank you again for listening and remember to use Yes, And to get past your fear of public speaking and dealing with your Imposter Syndrome.

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