

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 70 - Annie Conderacci

Annie: [00:00:00] So that moment that you know even when things aren't perfect that you can still enjoy it and that you can watch these actors enjoy themselves messing up and relishing in the mistakes. You know the happy accidents they make. I just really wanted to be a part of that.

Peter: [00:00:27] 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 to show.

Peter: [00:00:58] Welcome to episode 70 and today my guest is Annie Conderacci, who's a change management consultant and has studied and performed improv at The Second City, Annoyance Theater, and IO Chicago. She performs improv and sketch comedy all around the city of Chicago. She's a graduate of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and a graduate of Rice University. As a change and management consultant, she frequently uses her improv skills to facilitate growth and positive change in organizations. Annie does an outstanding job of describing how improv does apply in business and discusses how you can use improv to defuse difficult situations. My advice to my audience is that if anything that Annie talks about resonates with you, go back and listen to the episode again and then go to her podcast episode on my website and download the transcript. This is great stuff. Before you get to that interview, I would like to talk about [the first five episodes of this podcast are now qualified for CPE self-study credit](#) in the NASBA category of personal development. Those interviews are with Clarke Price, former CEO of the Ohio society of CPAs. Mike Sciortino, author of Gratitude Marketing. Tom Hood... Well you've been introduced to him and you will be introduced to him again. Ed Mendlowitz, who's a partner at Withum, Smith, and Brown. And Karl Ahlrichs, who's H.R. professional at Gregory and Appel. These episodes are located on the MACPA-BLI self-study Web site and they are mobile friendly. Create an account and purchase an episode. You can listen to them on your daily commute or while working out, or even at your desk! When you're finished, take the review and final exam on your mobile device or your computer. It's that easy. While all Improv is no Joke podcasts are available on my web site, only those purchased to the [MACPA-BLI self-study Website](#) are eligible for CPE self-study credit. You can get detailed instructions by visiting my website at PeterMargaritis.com and clicking on the graphic: Listen, Learn, and Earn improves is no joke podcasts on my home page. I hope you enjoy this exciting and flexible new way of receiving CPE credit. OK now let's get to the interview with Annie Conderacci.

Peter: [00:03:38] Annie, welcome to improves is no joke. Thank you so very much for taking time out of your busy day to have a conversation with me about really the power of improvisation.

Annie: [00:03:52] Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to chat about it.

Peter: [00:03:56] And I can already tell just within a few moments this episode is going to be ten times better than the one I've done with your dad.

Annie: [00:04:02] I'm sure it is.

Peter: [00:04:04] Hahaha. And I'm hoping. I hope he's laughing right now.

Annie: [00:04:09] Well you know he wasn't trained the way I was trained so you know he's self-taught.

Peter: [00:04:13] Hahaha. Exactly. So I'm curious to start out if you could give the audience the backstory on how you found yourself attracted, enamored by improv, and how you took that and created something really cool for yourself.

Annie: [00:04:35] Sure sure. So I guess my whole life I been a fan of comedy Saturday Night Live but I never really thought it was something that you could pursue professionally or in your free time. It was not something... especially I grew up in Baltimore. There weren't a lot of improv theatres or teams. You can do and kind of in college as a hobby but that seemed too terrifying to me. So really it was after my first promotion and as a consultant that I was trying to think about now that I got this promotion What do I really want to do and how do I really add value? What are my skills? So I asked my teammates, I asked people I worked for where do I really differentiate myself, and what came back was really it's how you kind can bring people together as a team. Your sense of humor really helps. You are kind of this beacon of you know fun in a kind of boring workplace or a stressful workplace, and just around that time a few of my colleagues and I went to Chicago, saw a show in Second City, and a light bulb went off and I said I have to do this. I don't know what that means. But at second city they close every show with smart marketing saying if you want to do this and it looks like fun, come to the training center. And I was hooked so I knew I had to go there. So the way I planned that out was that if I got into business school, work would transfer me up there and I could take classes at Second City, which was a very expensive and roundabout way of getting there but it didn't seem to work out, which I'm very happy.

Peter: [00:06:24] So you were working by day and improvising at night.

Annie: [00:06:29] Yes. Improvising and going to business school at night.

Peter: [00:06:33] Oh oh oh wow both at night.

Annie: [00:06:35] Yes. So sometimes I was getting to work at 6:30 so I could make class by six and then make rehearsal by night. It was intense.

Peter: [00:06:45] So you never slept?

Annie: [00:06:47] No no no I did not sleep. But. I'm really grateful for that time it was... Talk about energy management. That was a time when I needed it.

Peter: [00:06:56] Oh yeah exactly. So what was it. What was the big aha moment that you had? Do you remember what it was in either watching the show or your first bet at the workshop that really grabbed you and said This is me? This. I get it.

Annie: [00:07:14] So there were a few. I think that first show part of it was realizing that you can have mistakes and everything is not perfect all the time and it's not scripted, but that even watching the actors make mistakes and embrace those mistakes and have fun doing it... that fun was contagious. So there's you know I kind of came into it with my hands or arms folded saying you know which make me laugh. Let's see what you can do. And it wasn't necessarily scripted content they weren't workshopped and work work work that made me laugh the most. It was that that energy is contagious and that camaraderie was contagious and you all kind of felt like you're in a living room at a party with your friends kind of just fooling around and playing games and making things up. It really is electric. So that moment that you know even when things aren't perfect that you can still enjoy it and that you can watch these actors enjoy themselves messing up and relishing in the mistakes. You know the happy accidents they make. I just really wanted to be a part of that. And then my first class so I took my first class level A with Brian Posehn.

Peter: [00:08:28] Oh yes.

Annie: [00:08:28] Amazing.

Peter: [00:08:29] Amazing amazing.

Annie: [00:08:31] Absolutely amazing. And that first class was... I never felt so instantly part of an ensemble, part of the crew. And like whatever I did was right in that I couldn't say anything wrong, that the group was there to support me, and that it just felt like you know the best play date you had as a kid.

Peter: [00:09:00] Hahaha.

Annie: [00:09:00] You know your parents set you up on these blind dates. But kids don't think it's awkward. Right. They they click you know and they just they are the best improvisers right because they just make stuff up and have a ball. And it was just unlearning a lot of these behaviors we have that oh that's awkward or oh I shouldn't say that - it was just so such a blast. And I got the bug I mean from that first class I just had to keep doing it.

Peter: [00:09:29] I just... I had Brian as-- I was up for a three day intensive and Brian Posehn was my very first instructor. And you're right. I mean it was it was such a potpourri of people that were in this group. There was actually like an ER doctor, a heart surgeon. I was I was the token accountant.

Annie: [00:09:49] Haha. It sounds like a bar joke.

Peter: [00:09:52] Yeah it does! But almost immediately the group kind of came together and he had a great way of having his you know his mAnnierisms and the way he did. But it was way that just brought everybody together. And I would walk back to my hotel taking notes in my notepad and just fill this thing up. And that was the best three days and I came back from that and I could not stop talking. It's like you got me -- I'm talking about it again!

Annie: [00:10:21] Yeah yeah yeah. His energy is contagious. I mean he's just an incredible teacher. And I had Jay Suko a couple terms later and he was the same similar experience of

just feeling like that level was more challenging. So I felt more challenge but at the same time so supported, which I think that was one of the lessons I learned that I really ended up taking back to work quite a bit is that you can still challenge people in a way that makes them feel supported and taken care of, and you can take bigger risks if you feel like you're in a safe environment.

Peter: [00:11:01] Exactly. And I think that's a big challenge in corporate America is one the ability to take risks because those who I've talked to the mantra that I hear is the C-suite wants us to you know think outside the box. But if we don't have the right-- if we think outside of the box and it fails we will lose our job.

Annie: [00:11:21] Mhm.

Peter: [00:11:21] So there is not there's not that level of support there. You know it's is the fear factor versus the environment that you know as I say bad ideas are just bridges to good ideas.

Annie: [00:11:32] For sure for sure. And you know it's it's that's what I loved about... You know creating an ensemble where you trust each other. Right. Is that I'm going to say whatever I have at the top of my brain. I may judge it. But I have a group of people who won't, who'll say yeah that's ridiculous. Let's go with that and let's see what we can build together. You know so that's why you have a hot dog stand on Mars.

Peter: [00:12:02] Hahaha.

Annie: [00:12:02] Because why not. And I think in in business you know. Right. I think drawing that bridge between you know you're not building a hot dog stand on Mars in business, unless you're maybe Elon Musk. But you know this idea that if I'm soliciting ideas, there are no bad ones it's just... if we can't do that, let's go with what's pragmatic. What can we do that's close to that? Right so you want hot to stand in you know the conference room. Probably not. But what is it about a stand that you want? And by saying yeah OK how could we make that work or what else is like that that we can do, it frees people up to you know take risks and you get better work. People aren't really motivated by fear, and you'll get kind of safe decisions and safe work out of them, if they were motivated by fear.

Peter: [00:13:02] Right. And in order to come up with these ideas you have to have a culture that supports-- you have to have a culture that supports failure.

Annie: [00:13:10] Yes. Yes, and that freedom to fail is so important. I think even just framing failure as learning opportunities. Right. Is that you know I think one of the great things about being an improviser is you will have so many bad shows - way more bad than good. But I think the culture is such that improvisors go see other improvisors perform all the time and at the end of the show someone will say you guys sucked. When are you playing again? It's the joy of the bad show because that's one more bad show that's under your belt for the good show. Right. And then you can celebrate the good show. But you you have a bad show and you're it's just great. You know you can say that was really bad. You know I can learn from it. And it's the bad shows that you really learn the most from.

Peter: [00:14:06] Exactly. I got to share a story with you. I was doing a workshop a creativity workshop for a company in the Baltimore area, and they had brought their emerging leaders in

from the U.S. and Latin America, and I set the culture to say you know that bad ideas are just bridges to good ideas. Don't don't don't censor yourself. Whatever said stays in this room. There's no senior management here. Nobody's going to-- you know. And one of the areas that they wanted us to tackle was come up with some ideas on how to increase profitability. So I threw that out there, throw in ideas, you know raise revenues cut costs. OK OK we got that. Dig deeper. Let's figure this out. And this one gentleman from Latin America says I'll tell you what we're go to do my friends. This is how we're going to increase profitability in our company. We are going to kill all of our competition salespeople.

Annie: [00:14:58] Hahahaha. All right. That's an approach.

Peter: [00:15:01] And everybody just broke out in laughter, and for a moment there I panicked and I went in my head like what the hell am I supposed to do with this? Then I went wait a minute! If you believe this.... Think about it for just a brief second. I looked at the group and said I'll tell you what. Let's play this idea but we're going to take murder off the table because I don't look good in orange or Orange Is The New Black.

Annie: [00:15:25] Haha. Right. Right.

Peter: [00:15:26] But instead of killing them, what if we identify our competition's top sales people and, instead of killing them, let's poach them. I said I still don't know if we would have got to that in that session with out that one gentleman giving us a horrible bad idea.

Annie: [00:15:45] Right.

Peter: [00:15:45] But felt confident that the culture was going to support him. I don't know if they implement it but just it led down this wonderful path.

Annie: [00:15:54] Yes yes completely and I think that culture... I know I heard it said many times right that culture comes from the top down. So when you're not in the C-Suite what what is there to do? And I think we all own responsibility for continuing and perpetuating that culture. Right. So even if you know you are in you know the worst culture in the world, you can still do what you can within your own space, and you can make the conscious decision to not perpetuate a culture that is counterproductive. And really it's... if you're fun to work with, people are going to want to work with you, especially if your methods create some sort of results. Right. So nobody has to see the ugly process that you know the bad ideas that lead you to the good one. You know all your customers care about is the good one. Right. So it really is helpful to kind of get out the cobwebs and make people feel like I can learn, I can grow, and I'm with people that are going to support that process.

Peter: [00:17:01] I wholeheartedly agree. And you know I always think... is there two words that might be used in the workplace that might spur this kind of positive energy? I don't know. I'm pondering. Do you happen to know a couple of them?

Annie: [00:17:16] I'd say Yes And! The cardinal rule. I've wanted to get a tattoo that says yes and forever, but you know after many conversations with my dad... He's like you know you could just get a T-shirt. But you know I believe so wholehearted and that there is just such a mantra. Right. You know Jay Suko said that the yes is implied when you say and, which I like too - get it

down to one word, but it really does... When you first start improvising, you are forced to say yes and, and you become so sensitive to how often you're saying no. Or but or well.... You know it's that No we are building this process together. See I just did it... it's this instant agreement in that you feel like yes someone is on board, and we are now creating together. To the point that my dad has now trained himself to disagree with me using Yes And.

Peter: [00:18:30] Haha.

Annie: [00:18:30] So every time he disagrees with me it's Yes, And... yeah my improvising guru friend, coach, mentor Jay Suko, who I will continue to sing his praises, his son and he were at the playground. A friend of mine told me the story secondhand. But his son who was three at the time was playing, and he asked him Jack do you want your sandwich now. And he said no. He says Jack what are we say in on our house? And Jack says yes, and later.

Peter: [00:19:07] Hahaha.

Annie: [00:19:08] But I think you know I laugh about it... But the idea if you think about how many times a toddler will hear the word no... having a dad who is you know the primary caretaker during the day who is pumping him full of yes and yes and yes and, you know you can see the kid is calm, he is happy, he is creative. So you know just seeing it in a family context is is really cool to watch.

Peter: [00:19:44] Well the next time you see Jay... how old is his son now?

Annie: [00:19:49] I think he's about five.

Peter: [00:19:51] About five. So when he becomes a teenager, he's really going to be challenged to maintain Yes And. And my son now is 17 but when he was 14 he came up to me one day and he says Daddy why are you yelling at me all the time? I am not yelling at you!

Annie: [00:20:13] Right right right.

Peter: [00:20:13] Then I start thinking about my conversations and I was going yes but no because....and my book had just come out and I went Oh my God I I didn't see it. I was I was I was completely blind to it. So I consciously made an effort to not say no and but, and just Yes And and tell me why you think that. And three months later he came back to me he says Daddy you're not yelling at me anymore.

Annie: [00:20:46] Yeah. Wow.

Peter: [00:20:47] Don't you still love me?

Annie: [00:20:51] Hahahaha. Right.

Peter: [00:20:52] And we talked about it and we figured out it was the yes and. And you're right. We've become a lot calmer with each other and have developed a really richer father son experience because you know... the one thing that I love about yes and is the empathy - you put

yourself in the other person's shoes, and quite frankly I forgot what it was like to be a 14 year old boy.

Annie: [00:21:19] Right.

Peter: [00:21:20] Get out of middle school and to go to high school, got those hormones going.

Annie: [00:21:25] Yeah.

Peter: [00:21:26] And once I could relate with him, have empathy with him, discuss with him... the stress and the calmness come right down.

Annie: [00:21:36] For sure. One of my favorite improv exercises that I've done and it's a little more of an advanced exercise... But you would go into a scene and your scene partner would say the worst thing that you could possibly imagine. Right so they say they start with conflict all these... They break every improv rule. So they go to anger. They try to start fights. Sometimes they as a really mean question, and your whole job is to defuse that situation.

Peter: [00:22:05] Oooh.

Annie: [00:22:05] Because you'll find -- it's a great exercise -- and you'll find as an improviser right, Especially with newer improvisers, A lot of times you want to go to conflict and anger because, when you are stressed, and not knowing what you're going to say and having an audience especially is very stressful. So I'm going to default to anger and defensiveness because I don't want to look dumb in front of an audience full of people. So a lot of times you'll see these scenes just kind of devolve into... even if they start really happy and they're remembering their yes and, they will ultimately devolve into these these fight. Because it's I know this is what's comfortable in a situation where I'm stressed out and high pressure. And you know at work you have high pressure stressful situations all the time. So one of the things that I love about exercise is how can you defuse when someone's coming at you with you know why did you do this or why. You know what's wrong with you. But you know where is this person coming from. Right? And how can I take care of my scene partner. What is it that they need or that their character needs that they're not getting? And I think one of the greatest ways to initiate a scene is to make eye contact and smile.

Peter: [00:23:33] Right.

Annie: [00:23:34] You convey that I'm comfortable, I've got your back, you've got my back, and even in just a look you can do that. But I think it's... It's that at work right when you're presented with a stressful situation, or you know someone's yelling at you or mad at you, it usually comes from a place of stress. And sometimes it is culturally right. Stress rolls downhill. This is what I've learned that when I'm stressed I put stress on to whoever is below me.

Peter: [00:24:14] Right.

Annie: [00:24:15] So they can feel the pain that I feel. Whereas what I found to be more productive is hey I notice you're stressed out. You know my superior. What can I do to diffuse that and What can I do to help that situation? How can I make you look good? Right and that's

an improv rule too. You want to make your scene partner look great. You want to make your team teammates feel like geniuses.

Peter: [00:24:40] Right.

Annie: [00:24:40] So I think this idea that you coming at me with anger or from stress.... That's about You. It's not about me. So how can we work together to kind of alleviate that stress?

Peter: [00:24:54] OK two questions here. What's the name of the improv game that you just described?

Annie: [00:24:59] Oh man I don't know the name of the game. I will have to look it up and I send it to you. But I mean it's just to deflect and diffuse.

Peter: [00:25:12] And the second thing is so you know we can do that on an improv stage. We can do that in a workshop. But when somebody comes at you and they're mad, I think you their body language is going to make you become defensive.

Annie: [00:25:26] Of course.

Peter: [00:25:27] And it takes a lot of energy to diffuse that to say what you know what seems to be the problem and how can I help us in this situation. But so if I'm the cause of his anger or her anger, how do you dig out of that?

Annie: [00:25:49] Yeah. And actually it brings to mind... I was interviewing a young woman for an analyst position out of college, and she was a soccer referee and she refereed 10 to 12 year old girls, and she would have parents you know.

Peter: [00:26:08] Ohhhh Yeah.

Annie: [00:26:09] And I asked her a similar question. Right. So how do you deal with that? And keep your cool during the games. And she said you know to me I think it's actually really empowering. Right. I think it's you know it's just a game. It's 10 to 12 year old girls playing soccer and I know that's not about me. It's kind of a compliment that I can make you that upset.

Peter: [00:26:33] Hahaha.

Annie: [00:26:33] You know I'm just a college student trying to ref the game doing my best the best I can. But you know it's it's... And she says I usually address them with calm. You know it's calm and relaxed, and that defuses it because the thing is, what happens when you come back with that anger and defensiveness it just escalates. So. So it's very hard to continue to fight when it's a losing battle. Right. You're you're not.... You want to fight with me? I mean one of the best tips that I got from Jay was if someone's trying to start an argument with you in a scene, you can say I'm not trying to fight with you. Character to character, improviser to improviser, employee to supervisor - I'm not trying to fight with you. I'm just come from a place of honesty, and I think that's that's the improviser way too. If you don't know what to say, start from truth. Right. So a lot of times... I mean I've been in plenty of situations where things have gotten heated. Right. But I think it's knowing that your body physically will get defensive. That body

language. Acknowledging that this is something that my body is reacting to, but you know cognitively I know that this is only going to escalate if I continue with it. Right. So sometimes it's OK let them get out whatever they have to get out, and then where can we where can we get that common ground right. And acknowledging how they feel, that I understand your stress, I understand that you know I don't know the report was late. Help me understand where we can... We can do better in the future. Right.

Peter: [00:28:26] And that takes me to a Harvard Business Review article that came out a few years ago that basically said, if you can take emotion out of a discussion of an argument, you'll get to a solution faster. And one of the suggestions was is let them get the emotion out.

Annie: [00:28:43] Right.

Peter: [00:28:43] Let them get that anger out let them get the sadness out - let them get out of the system and then become a little more rational and you'll stick to the facts. And then how can I help you or does this help me get better. And it turns into a much more productive... and it is to a degree what you are saying, defuse.

Annie: [00:29:01] Yes and I think as an improviser one of the things I've learned is acknowledge the way somebody feels. You'd be surprised how powerful that is. To say I understand you maybe stress or I get that you're stressed out, because that is... even just having someone acknowledge that can be a huge relief. Right. So and seeing the words right as opposed to you know from my body language you can tell that message is received, you're stressed out, you're angry. It's so much more productive. Right. I think at the end of the day it's not... Yes I am kind of touchy feely and I think that everybody's feelings matter, but and really at the end of the day you get to that productivity work quickly when you can acknowledge and say it's... address the emotion I would say, even instead of get past it. Right. It's that it's that this is a valid thing. It's valid that you're stressed. It is valid that you're angry. Now let's unpack that.

Peter: [00:30:06] Yeah exactly. And how can I-- how can we figure out figure it out and just make it better. And just so it doesn't happen again. You know I had a boss once and I had a huge screw up and I was expecting to get chewed up and I went into her office and and told her the mistake. And she did not flinch. She looked as calm cool and collected. And then she asked me what my solution was, which I had none because I panicked and I went in there. She then she you know jumped me. Then she really chewed me upside down the other side. But these words I have never forgotten. She says Pete. I expect that you will make mistakes because you're human. I go Holy cow. Nobody's ever told me that before. But she says but I also expect you come into my office with a solution. I don't care for it's right or wrong - it's going to start the conversation.

Annie: [00:31:05] Exactly.

Peter: [00:31:06] And I mean... although she did know at the time, she was improvising.

Annie: [00:31:11] Of course great boss. And I think the context is important. Right. And I took this with me as with my employees. Is that even if they've screwed up the biggest thing that you know they could have possibly screwed up right, in the grand scheme of things it's like you know the company stock isn't going to crash because this thing is late. Right. You know it's it's like

let's put this in context. It's important. And I think saying you know yes even if it makes your boss look bad. Right. I think for me the worst is when I feel like I messed up and made my boss look bad. It's part of their role to make sure that you know you learn from it right and how can how can I learn better from it. And then if I am managing people how do I serve as that shield? How do I put that into perspective for my own employees? Right. How do I provide that environment? You know like your boss right. To say that you have that freedom to fail and mess up because I want you to be able to work, and you're going to learn from making mistakes. You're not going to learn and retain and grow by doing the same thing over and over again. You know in that 70 percent 80 percent good. Right. You know I want to stress you and challenge you and make you better.

Peter: [00:32:35] I have not for all the bosses I've had in my life... Nobody has ever addressed it like she did.

Annie: [00:32:43] Yeah.

Peter: [00:32:44] And some won't even address the issue. Some would just you know ignore it and maybe will go away or maybe he'll just go away. But I mean her name is RoxAnnie. I give her.. those words will stay with me forever and I tell all she was the best leader, one of the best leaders, one of the best bosses I've ever had in my life because nobody said I expect that you will make mistakes, which really scared me.

Annie: [00:33:15] Hahahahaha. Well, right, you're like all the time?

Peter: [00:33:18] Yeah. Oh really I love my job now. I can relax and be myself.

Annie: [00:33:23] Right. Right. And I think you touched on... I think there's a difference between a manager and a leader. You know so. So your manager. Right. I think of a manager as almost micromanaging right. They manage tasks right. It's very internally focused and internal to the organization right. And that's a certain set of skills. Right. And I'm not knocking those skills. I paid a lot of money to get those. But I think there is something about leadership in that you know a leader is someone that inspires and motivates. Right. And I think you can have organizations where you have managers, really great managers, in leadership positions who don't know that piece or aren't skilled at that piece. We see that in corporate America a lot. You go up the chain in management and you get to a leadership position where you don't know how to inspire and motivate because that's what you're good at. That's not when you've been practicing for the last you know umpteen years. So it's it's that... How do we teach leadership? Right because that's something that isn't really part of your KPIs, whether or not you're doing a job you know how are you motivating your team? How are you really inspiring people to do that work? Do people trust you? Those are much harder to measure and much harder to get to and say... this is kind of that X factor. Right. We call it executive presence or something like that.

Peter: [00:35:01] It's it's funny that you go down this path because you know corporate America... they spend a lot of money to bring people come in teach them leadership and they think well I've had an eight hour. I've had a conference course on leadership. I can be a leader, but... I think maybe I saw this on a Simon Sinek video interview but he said you know leadership is something that you have to practice every single day. A seminar doesn't make you a leader. Reading books on Lincoln doesn't make you instantly a leader. You have to take a someone

named Phil Kim did a TED talk. You know you have to have these little have these little wins in order to win to win the battle. And I think you know you know this has always been one of my frustrations as somebody who who teaches leadership-- is the ability to follow up and make sure that they're keeping-- but you know I that's not my responsibility. It's to inspire them to continually to try to do this because you know they get back you get back to work you get right back into that rut.

Annie: [00:36:08] Of course.

Peter: [00:36:09] And if you forget and it's like OK... did we all just waste our time and money for... to check a box?

Annie: [00:36:18] Yeah. And you have things you have behaviors, a series of behaviors, that have made you successful thus far. Right. So it's very hard to unlearn those things. And that's one of the things you know I'm bringing it back to Improv that I was learning. I have these behaviors. And for me one of the behaviors I wanted to unlearn was I used to go to a joke right away when I was stressed or there was tension. Right. It was tell a joke and diffuse the situation that way. And you know that's not great either. You can make a lot of people very mad when you do that.

Peter: [00:36:52] Uhhh Yes you can. Voice of experience.

Annie: [00:36:56] Exactly. So I think that was part of the reason I wanted to train. I want some control of when I use it when I don't. And I think that that was the behavior that I had learned to work you know on the playground, and had worked you know in middle school and high school and college... that it didn't work so well you know at work. And you know you have to unlearn those behaviors. And I think one of the things that being a little bit type A, as I would say a control enthusiast.

Peter: [00:37:31] Hahahaha.

Annie: [00:37:35] You know there are certain behaviors that you have right that you know that you built up that made you to a certain point of success. So there is absolutely a fear in unraveling those. Because it's worked so far. And I think in organizations right to culture change right... Well this is the way we operated for 50 years. And it's especially if you're profitable right... if it ain't broke. You know and I think that's one of the great things about Glassdoor is doing right is that Glassdoor is giving that power to employees to say you know all the stuff that used to just kind of go away... with you know once I leave the company it doesn't matter... that things like that are really starting to matter. That culture leadership really you know now you can start to measure it because people are filling out there satisfaction surveys and they're and they're putting it online for everybody to read. I think it's quite a good thing but I think organizations are really having to adjust because people are demanding it.

Peter: [00:38:48] Exactly. I'm going to turn this just a little bit a different direction. It's tied into there. So to learn, to do... What's your thought on having a course as part of the curriculum within middle school, in high school, in college, as it relates to improv.

Annie: [00:39:08] Oh I mean I think it's fantastic. I I volunteer with an organization that actually does that. It's called Room to Improv. It's run by a fabulous woman who went through A3 at second city and also took courses from Jay Suko. And it's precisely that. She used to work at schools, was a retired schoolteacher. And within a couple classes she realized this belongs in a classroom because she was in her 50s when she was taking the class and she's realizing you know all these behaviors that she built up. And she's saying wow you know if we started with kids right, and kids could start acknowledging these behaviors early, building good teams, teamwork, leadership skills, thinking quickly on your feet, supporting each other... that it can actually make a great difference. Not just personally for them, but also you know for the school. So she's in quite a few schools. She's in charter schools right now. But you know the students notice the difference of course. I think the teachers, too, do notice a difference in behavior. And now we're working... I'm working with her on actually type metrics that. So attendance. Does that change? Nobody wants to miss improv day.... because it's a lot of fun.

Peter: [00:40:48] Haha. Yeah.

Annie: [00:40:49] So I think there's a way to actually start measuring it, because that's the thing that I have struggled with in business is I can preach about how great it is all day but I think they want to say OK give me the metrics. Show me where the value is. Because a lot of people think it's just you know cracking jokes all day... and so showing that value. And I think the great thing about schools is that you can you can look at attendance, you can look at grade point average, you get a disciplinary record. And I think it absolutely makes a difference because I just believe it and I know it and I've seen it myself, anecdotally, but I've also seen it in these students.

Peter: [00:41:29] I've thought about it... if I was in town more often than not I thought about something, maybe taking it to my son's high school, and just start something like that. Just because I truly believe... and we've had this conversation via e-mail about I'd love my son to spend a year studying second city, studying improv in Chicago, because I think overall it would have such a big benefit to him when he was into college, when he would get into the workforce, and it would be the big differentiator between him and another candidate. I don't know.. do you know Alison Estep?

Annie: [00:42:06] I don't think so.

Peter: [00:42:07] She studied at second city and she was a graduate from the conservatory and I interviewed her not too long ago. I met her... She was at the time working at the Indiana society of CPAs as a marketing person and she whole heartedly-- same thing. We need to get this in the schools is be great for kids. It really is life changing, and that's what I love about it because you know when I when I discovered this I was doing standup and there's no support there.

Annie: [00:42:38] No no no.

Peter: [00:42:40] It's it's very... can be kind of a kind of cutthroat. But when I was introduced to improv all this is this is when I made that realization that aha moment. It's much more than just being funny. It can be a way of life.

Annie: [00:42:54] Of course. As an evangelist I wholeheartedly agree.

Peter: [00:43:00] Well I'm carrying... I'm behind you with your robe holding your robe and carrying your cane and tooting the horn for you.

Annie: [00:43:08] Thank you.

Peter: [00:43:09] Because think about my audience, which primarily when I speak to these groups of CPAs, and to say that they might be skeptical could be an understatement.

Annie: [00:43:24] For sure.

Peter: [00:43:25] And you know I could see that they're going it's all about comedy. Who's that Drew Carey dude. It's just about silliness. But once I was able to get them in room, once I was able to within the first five to 10 minutes show them that it was much more than comedy... I could see their aha moment.

Annie: [00:43:48] For sure.

Peter: [00:43:49] And then they began to understand, and that was a big challenge when I wrote the book because I knew that was a hurdle I've been trying to scale for years, and it was at some point in time I finally had that aha moment on how to get past that. Knowing that they think it's silly and being able to convince them that it's really wonderful leadership / life tool.

Annie: [00:44:16] Right. And really the comedy is it is just kind of a happy output. Right. I think most of improv is not funny. Or it's funny because you're watching people... you know you're watching your teammates struggle and enjoy themselves. Right. But but I think we almost do ourselves a disservice for saying that it's about the funny because it's it's really about truth and honesty. Right. And I think most of the laughs you get in improv are when you speak to that truth and specificity. I'm seeing someone... specificity just such a gift. As a performer right. It's that I use I say I'm making Boboli pizza instead of just pizza, and people laugh. Right. And you Boboli itself isn't funny. Right. But it's that you are doing something that I can identify with. And now we immediately have made this connection. Right. And so it's not it's it's that truth in comedy. Right that I laugh because I recognize and I laugh because I can relate, and I think some of the funniest improvisers are not "funny people." Right. I think you mentioned you took your first workshop with you know a bunch of professionals.

Peter: [00:45:38] Yeah.

Annie: [00:45:39] And I had the same experiences. Most people taking the class are not there to be on Saturday Night Live. They're there are to gain confidence in public speaking, they're there to do something different, meet new people. A lot of them have other reasons for being there. And luckily in Chicago people know what it is and they see the value in it. But still you find some of the funniest improv is from people who aren't being funny at all... they're just being honest, and it's just such a relief.

Peter: [00:46:18] Well yeah. I'm thinking Truth and comedy... wait a minute that's an improv book.

Annie: [00:46:24] It is.

Peter: [00:46:24] I've read that I've got that somewhere in my bookshelf. And I think that was the first improv book that I read and then I turned into a student of it. But you're right. Boboli is kind of a funny word.... But you put it in context that everybody can get.

Annie: [00:46:43] Yes.

Peter: [00:46:44] And I think that's something... as you said, I went son of a gun I think you've just helped me here because you know I mean I started a new book called Financial Storytelling.

Annie: [00:46:55] Can't wait to read that.

Peter: [00:46:57] Yeah. Because think about you know when you have the CFO or whatever and they're delivering data, delivering numbers, it's boring. I'd rather watch grass grow.

Annie: [00:47:11] Haha.

Peter: [00:47:11] But there's importance of these numbers so it's getting behind and understanding and finding out what that story is. What I put as part of financial storytelling is taking complex stuff and putting it in a context that everybody can understand. And when you said Boboli pizza, and that would connect with everybody in the room, my light went off and I went that's exactly what I've been doing. I just didn't put it in that same context.

Annie: [00:47:40] Great. Right. And I think when you're speaking, when you're doing public speaking or on stage or anything, there's that barrier between you and the audience right. And anything you can do to break that down and make that relatable, especially if you can get a laugh right because a laugh... you know it kind of lets information sneak in the back door. It releases this executive function.... that you are now willing to listen a little bit more and retain a little bit more because you know, chemically, your brain saying this is something you want to pay attention to. Obviously, brain chemistry and all that is not my forte, but it's true.

Peter: [00:48:22] It is. And brain chemistry is not my forte either. However I have been immersing myself, as it relates to these emotionally charged events such as laughter, and in a book I've read by John Medina called Brain Rules states you know when we laugh like that, it's just like your brain is emotionally charged event. It's like taking a posting and slapping it on your brain. Remember this. Remember this. And those are emotionally-charged events laughter sadness shock whatever. Stick with us versus boring data, which is mind numbing, but we tend to do that. And I did... a very complex piece. The night before I'm sitting there going I'm gonna put them to sleep on this consolidation of a VIE or whatever, and I'm like I had my slides, I had my words, and somebody asked me what did you do? I said I try and break it down to the lowest common denominator. They're trying to move something from here to here. They're trying to put something someplace that doesn't want to be. And that's when I got the idea to use mother in laws as part of my presentation on this topic because I knew I had 200 CPAs in the room and I know a bunch of them had to be married, and a bunch of a bunch of them got mother in laws. And then I went from the body language of when I put this initial slide up of body language grab my phone to when I hit the punchline on the mother in law, then it went to instant laughter and

everybody leaned forward and they were engaged. Putting things in context that other people could understand. Improv taught me that - you helped me realize that.

Annie: [00:50:09] Oh well, thanks! Hehe.

Peter: [00:50:11] Wow. Because I mean you know I've had so many people ask me when I when I do that, how do you do that? And you just put it into context - I'm improvising. I'm throwing stuff out. I'm asking those questions. I'm trying to find that lowest common denominator; put things in context that everybody can do, and we all can do it. It just takes time and practice.

Annie: [00:50:35] For sure. Yeah. And you know Boboli means something different than dominoes right.

Peter: [00:50:41] Right.

Annie: [00:50:41] You took the time to make Boboli... But I didn't have enough time to make it from scratch.

Peter: [00:50:47] Haha. Exactly. And before Domino's changed that within the last couple of years, Domino's did not have a really positive... as really as it relates to pizza.

Annie: [00:51:00] Yeah.

Peter: [00:51:01] Exactly. Oh my gosh we could talk for hours.

Annie: [00:51:04] For sure.

Peter: [00:51:05] And we will. But I want to have respect for your time and and I just want to say I enjoyed this conversation. And we will have another conversation again and go in different directions. The name of the not for profit again was?

Annie: [00:51:23] Room 2 Improv.

Peter: [00:51:27] OK I'll make sure that I put that in and the show notes, if anyone wants to visit or understand, Or better yet provide resources and send money to the nonprofit.

Annie: [00:51:39] That'd be wonderful.

Peter: [00:51:39] More than happy to do that. I hope some day here in the near future get to Chicago, get a chance to meet with you, and just pick your brain even more because I've learned a ton. You've brought a different perspective than I thought this was going to go. And you did great job related back to really work and how to manage, how to lead, how to diffuse, and how to provide such a wonderful culture to an organization, and your employer... you know let your employer listen to this, especially this part. She deserves a raise and a promotion.

Annie: [00:52:15] Oh, thank you. Thank you. I appreciate that and this was so much fun. I look forward to talking again, and when you're in town I'll take you out Lou Malnati's.

Peter: [00:52:24] And that is?

Annie: [00:52:25] The best pizza in Chicago.

Peter: [00:52:27] Oh. OK. You had me at the best pizza.

Annie: [00:52:32] Exactly. I had to be specific. Some people are Giordano's fans, but my money's that Lou Malnati's is where it's at.

Peter: [00:52:39] Outstanding. Well I look forward to having the pizza. Thank you very much. And we'll talk soon.

Annie: [00:52:45] All right. Great talking to you, Peter.

Peter: [00:52:50] I would like to thank Annie for giving her time to discuss how improv applies to today's business. As I've been saying for a long time, Improv is powerful stuff. I would like to talk about [the first five episodes of this podcast are now qualified for CPE self-study credit](#) in the NASBA category of personal development. Those interviews are with Clarke Price, former CEO of the Ohio society of CPAs. Mike Sciortino, author of Gratitude Marketing. Tom Hood... Well you've been introduced to him and you will be introduced to him again. Ed Mendlowitz, who's a partner at Withum, Smith, and Brown. And Karl Ahlrichs, who's H.R. professional at Gregory and Appel. These episodes are located on the MACPA-BLI self-study Web site and they are mobile friendly. Create an account and purchase an episode. You can listen to them on your daily commute or while working out, or even at your desk! When you're finished, take the review and final exam on your mobile device or your computer. It's that easy. While all Improv is no Joke podcasts are available on my web site, only those purchased to the [MACPA-BLI self-study Website](#) are eligible for CPE self-study credit. This is not nano-learning - this is self-study learning. You can get detailed instructions by visiting my website at [PeterMargaritis.com](#) and clicking on the graphic: Listen, Learn, and Earn improves is no joke podcasts on my home page. I hope you enjoy this exciting and flexible new way of receiving CPE credit. Remember, you can subscribe to my podcast on [iTunes](#), [Stitcher](#), and [Google Play](#). If you'd like to purchase an autographed copy of my book *Improv is no Joke: Using Improvisation to Create Positive Results in Leadership and Life*, for \$14.99 with free shipping, please go to my website, [PeterMargaritis.com](#), and you'll see the graphic on the homepage to purchase my book. Please allow 14 days for shipping. You can also follow me on social media. You can find me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) or [Instagram](#). Remember to use the principles of improvisation to help you better connect and communicate with those in your organization.

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