

Improv Is No Joke - Episode 18 - Mark Wyssbrod

Peter: Hey everybody I'm really excited that I've got the Mark here with me, Mark Wyssbrod. First and foremost, Mark, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule. I know you're a very busy individual as I follow you on Facebook and you're always somewhere. I think recently I saw you were either in China or somewhere in the Far East, so thank you for taking time. I greatly appreciate it.

Mark: Well I appreciate being here Peter. I always enjoyed our conversations and time together.

Peter: So Mark why don't you tell the audience a little bit about yourself.

Mark: Sure, I am a CPA. I grew up in the small firm world and decided to go out on my own. I had a special firm called Pro@ctive CPA. I wanted that to be the mindset instead of reacting to circumstances. To be proactive. And that led to a stint in Improv, during what I call the small business depression. I had to learn how to re-communicate with my clients. Being able to really communicate, but also improv allowed me to always look for solutions. It helps to address a lot of the challenging mindsets and financial conditions we face. So as we came out of those challenges my clients were well-positioned. About three years ago, I sold my tax firm and I vowed to transition my life into what I call a local capitalist. I spend a lot more time with my family, a lot more time volunteering, and I now have a firm called Small Business CFO where I have invested directly into local businesses and take a CFO position.

Peter: Wow. I guess the audience have picked up when you said the magic word on why we enjoy each other's conversation so much, when you said the word improv, and just so you know that mark is also a contributing author in the book [Improv to Improve Your Business](#). He contributed chapter 11 called Pro-Solution Thinking. It's still out there on Amazon. It's a good read. I've read two or three times over the years. I always go back and try to read a lot of my improv books like that that I've purchased, and I'm just always trying to get ideas. So tell us how you were able to have better communication? Looking for solutions during a very difficult time. Are there any type of examples that you could share with us that you did with your clients in order to achieve that goal?

Mark: Yes there's a homebuilder, \$20 million home builder at the time and my largest client, and I was in my late twenties. I approached him in mid-2007 and shared with him my concerns, and his response was, and I'm paraphrasing, but his response was, "change your attitude or I'm going to find a new CPA,"

Peter: [laughs]

Mark: And I went, well, that wasn't the response I was looking for. And so I said well the problem is probably that I've gotten used to my accounting chair and and I need to be able to effectively communicate, and part of that was remembering a childhood lesson and that was, I want to tell

you the the phrase that I was told: if you're going to complain about something or say something's wrong you have to bring three solutions or don't open your mouth. And so the combination of creativity in solution orienting from that childhood lesson, combined with improv, allowed me to then go back to this home builder and better communicate the challenges I see, and where they needed to try to adjust their strategy going into the tail end of 2007 and the beginning of 2008.

Peter: And how did he take to that conversation when you went back to him? Because I absolutely love that. Don't bring your problems, bring me the problem along with three solutions to fix it.

Mark: Yeah, he listened, and that was important. That's phase one. It took about three to four months of you, you know – Just because I took an improv class or decided I have the solution doesn't mean he would listen right away. He makes his living in this industry. He doesn't want to hear bad news. He has all his net worth at stake. He has leverage, and those are risks, so it was a fallout conversation, and letting him see some what if scenarios for him to begin making decisions about what risks were acceptable to him, and bringing up his own examples: Well would you have done this five or ten years ago? You've been in building 30-plus years, does this sound normal to you?

Peter: So I like how you did that. You put it in a context that he could understand. You said the magic word and he listened, which is the key, and really to everything but it's really the key and improv. And getting him to the point of listening and then helping him understand the challenges that he was facing because, quite frankly, I don't know too many entrepreneurs who like bad news. [laughs]

Mark: But you know, I tend to have a good accounting side where I don't like surprises, good or bad. Bad news isn't always bad news, it's how we interpret it. So the ventures I'm in now all have challenges. I'm there for solutions. I want to put my happy face on, but if we didn't have these challenges, good or bad, as professionals we wouldn't be needed.

Peter: That's a very good point. You know, I believe that I embrace change, actually embrace challenges, because, to your point, without them what would we be doing? It wouldn't be any any fun – it just wouldn't be any fun. It could go either way, good or bad, I guess that's one thing that, when I think about improv, its ability to take risks, accept risks, accept that failure is part – as long as it's not major failure – is part of that the process to find a better solution. And you were able to bring this at a CFO level to, you said, smaller kind of businesses that are out there.

Frank: Correct. So the the 4 or 5 major businesses I'm on now, for the most part, are under \$10 million in revenue and couldn't necessarily afforded a full-time CFO position, but what the vision and where these companies are heading, they need that guidance and they need the experience and they need someone that they could be open and honest with them and help navigate the course. These are individuals that I've known for, in some cases, up to 10 years, so

there's a comfort already in the trust. So you cannot be more direct in those cases with your communication but you still have to make sure that those experiences, that if you have a good idea or suggestion, you still have to communicate in a way where someone will hear. It's interesting that this year has been a challenging year in a handful those ventures, and what I've loved about it is no one's panicked. Most of the cases everyone's come back down to the basics and one conversation I had last week I said, "It's amazing how hard, sometimes, the basics can be." I think a good part that we have to remember as business owners and managers is, during those times of extreme stress, duress and challenge to stay focused, be bold, be strong, and definitely don't panic.

Peter: And would you say that during those times that chaos surrounds us, do you think sometimes that maybe business owners or individuals themselves tend to focus on things they can't control and get caught up in that process, versus – I think one of things that improv has taught me is only in those chaotic situations I tend to see more clear now because I focus only on the things that I can control, not the things that I can't control.

Mark: I'm gonna indirectly answer that question, maybe, and say that the crisis shows who the real leaders are, and who the people on your team that have character are. It's really easy to run a business when everything goes smoothly. It's really easy to be the nice guy when everyone says hello to you. But when you have a couple hiccups, you find out who is ready to step up. For most people it's very comforting to go back to, during those challenging times, to go to what they feel that they could excel at, but that's only one part of your business. For most of us, as small business owners, we're pulled in a facet of different directions, and we only specialize in a couple of them, and so we have to be really cautious in those times that we're not just doing what we enjoy to do.

Peter: Yeah. We have to do the hard stuff as well, but I like the way how you also said maintain that intense focus and not panic. I think sometimes when we panic we just exacerbate the whole situation even more. We get caught up in a little bit too much drama in itself and maybe make more out of it versus, at times, just taking a simple deep breath and then let's just think this through for a moment.

Mark: That's right. Fear's a dangerous force and it spirals out of control and you use all your your mind power on these what if scenarios that the probability of happening is close to zero.

Peter: So basically you tell me I need to quit doing the "what if I win the the lottery" scenarios [laughs]

Mark: [laughs] Stop "what if" and start saying "yes, and."

Peter: You know you may have just coined something there my friend. Stop saying What If and start saying Yes, I will give you credit all the time for that, but that is brilliant. Thank you.

Mark: I'm going to write that on my whiteboard after this.

Peter: I'm doing the same thing, and I'll just put your name beside it because when I do use it – which I will be – then I will give you credit for that. But that was worth the price of admission right there. So you're in the Atlanta area, you're in the Georgia Society of CPAs. Can you tell the audience – I just want to take a little curve here. I do believe, if my memory serves me correctly, over the last year or so you've received some pretty impressive awards, my friend.

Mark: Yeah I guess I won the the Super Bowl and then retired. In 2013, I was honored with a Small Business Person of the Year by the Greater North Fulton Chamber of Commerce. Spring of 2015 it was the Public Service Award by the Georgia Society of CPAs, and then I'm going to give away my age to a degree. I was named Top 40 Under 40 last Fall by the North Atlanta Business Post, and a lot of those were not just business contributions, but I love giving back. It's true volunteering. This isn't networking, it's not marketing, it's how do I improve my community, how did I take care of my neighbors in need?

Peter: You are very philanthropic my friend, and congratulations on those Awards. Well-deserved. And I think that's something that maybe we forget about at times because we get caught up in the hustle and bustle of everyday, and then with family and kids and everything else, and I'm guilty of that as well – of forgetting to give back, forgetting just to volunteer and just to help, and I'm trying to find new ways of doing that. But you know that that's also speaks to your character, which is of very high-quality

Mark: Well thank you. And I'll challenge you, Peter. Find something you're passionate about. There's a there's a non-profit out there, and if you align your passion, or one of your passions, with a local nonprofit it becomes a part of you. It becomes very natural to start giving more and more of your time and resources and energies to it.

Peter: Yeah I agree and I'm kibitzing a little bit on my giving back. For a number years I was on the Ohio CPA Foundation, you know, I helped them feed the pipeline. I owe a lot back to the profession, I will keep doing that in different ways, but it's what is that passionate outside of that it. And I know what it is, I have to take the step and volunteer and get more involved with it, but that's something that we all should be doing. So we've got entrepreneur extraordinaire, a gentleman who has embraced the principles of improvisation and continually uses them, as you've heard him talk about how to bring solutions. What has been the biggest challenge in all of this? That you could say, in taking that improv mindset, applied it into business and getting the buy in on the other end?

Mark: I think for me it is my personality. I'm very data-centric, so you could feed me data and then more data. I love it. I can't get enough of it. And matter-of-fact, in a lot of conversations I will give you facts and then I'll give you more facts and that's, I guess, that's my comfort zone. A lot of people don't necessarily appreciate all the facts though, because they say that's called speaking accounting instead of speaking English or human.

Peter: [laughs]

Mark: It's remembering that you still have to connect to a diverse audience. In each one of the business ventures there's unique personalities and characters and being able to relate to them. That means I have to come out of my shell and my comfort zone, but I need to know my personality, because the worst part is my personality says, under stress or duress. I become even more data-centric, until I have to make the conscious decision to make sure my word selection and phrases are appropriate for this situation. And I'll tell you that can be challenging to me. I tend to be more that accountant personality, and I wish I was a better oracle, I guess. Communication, but I have to work on the continuously.

Peter: I applaud you for working on it because I think a lot of lot of people in the profession, who are very data-centric, the professional financial services or whatever don't go the extra mile in what I call translating the accounting language, the data, into English. Because we do speak a different language in the financial community, and accounting is the language of business, but we need to become better translators. So I applaud you for recognizing that fact and finding different ways to connect with others who are not like you. A lot of people in the profession, and I know a number of them, refused to change that language because maybe it makes them feel smarter than their client. But what they're doing is they're really not connecting with them. And you've gotten out of your comfort zone, you've connected with them, and clearly you say you wish you were a better oracle, but I've known you for a while. I'll meet you in Atlanta and in Columbus, and for the times that we've gotten together man I would not call you a data-centric kind of guy.

Mark: [laughs]

Peter: So I'm learning a little bit more about you now. [laughs]

Mark: When it comes down to it we're in relationships with one another. The end product when I was in my CPA firm was a tax return or some type of financial analysis or correcting quickbooks, but if you can't connect with your client, if they don't understand your value proposition, if you can't speak their language then you're really just a bill to them. They don't understand you, they don't get you, so you're just a bill, and what you want to be is that confidant, what you want to be is that professional, that right hand arm – someone they could turn to not just in good times but in bad times to present solutions in ways that they could understand, so they could go implement them in their business.

Peter: Man, you just hit the nail on the head, and you put it so well. Because, as you well know in our profession, where we keep throwing around the word trusted business advisor, but to your point if you're not connecting with your client you're just a bill. You're just the CPA, You're just the accountant. But when you can connect with them then you get different perception about yourself and you're seeing someone who can help them in their business, not just provide

this end product. And that's number two that you've said already today. I mean, I don't know if you saw me but when you're talking about that I had my hands up, and inside my head I'm going, "Woo hoo!" That's what I've been talking about, and I don't know if you saw in Accounting Today, in the May addition, I had an article published. It says [it's time for us to get from behind a desk](#), basically speaking to that point. But the way you described it, if we're just perceived as a bill or naturally connecting is huge.

Mark: Well thank you. Oh you know it just reminds me of another example. What I love about some of the different ventures is I get to do different things and get out of the desk and see the other side of accounting. And one of the ventures I'm in imports product from overseas, and to build rapport with the warehouse team when a container comes in I actually go there and help them unload the container, and they want to see that the accountant is getting his hands dirty, but I also brought in the account manager who's there every day. And why am I getting my hands dirty? One, it gives me product knowledge. It has built more spirit decor than I would have thought. But also we're doing the count as the stuff comes off the container instead of taking it off the container and then doing the count. There's a lot of efficiency, so you know, getting out of behind your desk can be very beneficial, not just to you but for the the whole team.

Peter: That's well put because, "What's the CFO doing down here? Is something wrong? Is he bringing an Excel spreadsheet for me to look at? What do you mean he's rolling up his sleeves and counting? I mean, I can see the warehouse. It'd be instant connection.

Mark: It's great. I don't mind being a little dirty and we get to high five and kind of feel good about one another, and it's good work, so I enjoy it when one of those containers comes in. At the same time I'll tell you, part of that spirit in building that relationship is, I've missed a couple of containers. So today when I showed up, I got teased: Where was I for the last two?

Peter: [laughs]

Mark: So, when you start something like that, you better stick around.

Peter: Well said, well said. So out what type of our industries are your clients? Obviously we have an import business. Who else are you managing out there?

Mark: That one is a water collection business, and there's a small fund shop, a development company and a payroll company.

Peter: And is it just you and the business? Or do you have a team?

Mark: So the payroll company I'm a Founder and I sit on the board and give strategic direction, so that's pretty fun. In the development company my role is from office manager to bookkeeper to CFO, so it's like us being an entrepreneur, right? I'm janitor,

Peter: [laughs]

Mark: and yeah I might have some initials but sometimes you do everything. In the water coaching business I'm the CFO and do a lot of presentations and meet with some venture capitalists, primarily to tell them no, but to fine tune my pitch and to hear what the marketplace is willing to offer. They sent me to China to visit factories, to look at inventory timing, increase efficiency, so that's what I love. I love the challenge of putting all the pieces together, and just when you think you have them together then technology changes, or there's some business interrupter that keeps you on your toes.

Peter: Yeah, yeah. It doesn't sound like you have a boring day at all with all the hats you're wearing.

Mark: No, it's a quite entertaining.

Peter: So wait do you wake up on a Monday and you go, which hat am I supposed to be wearing today?

Mark: [laughs] Well, Mondays are usually the developer days. So I know where I'm going on Mondays.

Peter: How long were you in China?

Mark: I was in China almost two weeks. I started off in the Hong Kong area, kinda up the coast, and then in the Shanghai area when we exited. But just what what an amazing experience. And some people say the Chinese love it when you go in person because it shows respect and, you know, builds a relationship, but I gotta tell you Peter, I think anything in person – if you share a meal or a cup of coffee with someone – when you put that time, that effort or willingness, I think it's just a basic human thing that you're going to build relationships.

Peter: Yeah I completely agree with that, but I like the word respect. Even having breakfast or lunch face-to-face with somebody here in the States, whatever, there is a matter of respect that's immediately baked into that. So you're there for two weeks. Was this your first trip to China?

Mark: It was my first trip to China.

Peter: So how's your Chinese?

Mark: What I remember I've forgotten unfortunately. But I can speak *ein wenig Deutsch*.

Peter: What does that mean?

Mark: A little german

Peter: Oh, okay [laughs]

Mark: We have suppliers for that company also in German, actually.

Peter: Do you have plans on going to Germany anytime soon?

Mark: The two others owners enjoy going to Germany so they'll probably a take that one for me, unfortunately, but I actually really enjoyed China. It gives you a cultural perspective and appreciation

Peter: Yeah I can only imagine. I was in Tokyo, many years ago, for Victoria's Secret, and it gave me a different perspective on the rest of the world and some of the challenges the rest of the world has. Mark I tell you what, I have thoroughly enjoyed this conversation. You've knocked two of them completely out of the park and I'm writing them on my whiteboard as soon as we're done. I can't thank you enough for sharing your wisdom, sharing your stories on this podcast. I know you've been a great supporter of mine and I am a supporter of yours, and I look forward to the next time we see each other. It's more likely that I'm gonna be in Atlanta than you're gonna come to Columbus

Mark: Well don't count me out.

Peter: [laughs]

Mark: But I look forward to your next trip here to Atlanta.

Peter: I believe I'm down there in the Fall sometime, but I'll give you that information. Thank you again for taking time. I believe this audience is gonna walk away with a lot. I will have all your information, your email, contact. I won't put your phone number out there, but your contact information if people would like to get ahold of you, especially in the Atlanta area if you want to pick up a new client too.

Mark: I appreciate that Peter. I always enjoy our time together.

Peter: Thank you

Mark: Thank you