

Embrace Your Inner Superpower: How Using Applied Improv Can Supercharge Your Communication Skills

By Liz Farr, CPA

“Everyone here in this audience is a superhero. If I can make you aware of it, then you’ll use it for the greater good for yourselves, your organizations, and your community,” said Peter Margaritis, CPA, CGMA, Chief Edutainment Officer of [The Accidental Accountant](#), in his keynote at the recent NMSCPA’s Pride in the Profession luncheon. The superpowers Margaritis was referring to come from strengthening our abilities to communicate with our team members, with our clients and with the world at large.

Communication skills will be a bigger part of what we need just to stay in business in the future, according to Margaritis. Blockchain, artificial intelligence, robotic process automation, and all the other accounting technology innovations mean that our jobs as accountants are transforming, and those changes are coming sooner than we might imagine.

These technologies mean that businesses will need fewer accountants to do the work. As Margaritis said, those that stay in business will be the ones who are most adaptable and who embrace their new role as communicators of business insights and translators of the foreign language of accounting.

“We still have to technically sound, and we have to be able to find the answer, not so much to crunch the number, but to communicate it, as an advisor, within our firm within our organization, to the outside world,” said Margaritis.

But how do we get better at communicating? Margaritis suggested using the business tool of applied improv, to improve our communication skills. “Improv has nothing to do with being funny, but the ability to tackle improv is to look at our experiences, our backup, everything that we’ve done and adapt to any situation possible.” In today’s quickly moving world, we need to adapt faster than before.

These principles are fully developed in Margaritis’ book, [Improv is No Joke](#), and begin with the foundation of “Yes! And...” When we respond to another person with “Yes! And...” this serves as an opening to further communication.

The default mode for most of us when we’re confronted with something unfamiliar or which contradicts our understanding is to respond with “Yes, but...” or “No, because...” Both of these act as brakes that block further communication. To become expert communicators, we need to remain open to find a solution.

Margaritis emphasized that this openness does not mean that we let ourselves be pushed across our ethical boundaries. For those situations, the answer is always “NO!”

The foundation for improv is six interconnected principles, which all build on each other.

Respect: We need to have mutual respect for each other.

Trust: We need to be trustworthy in order for our trust to be earned.

Support: We need to provide support for our people so they can be successful.

With those in place, we have a foundation to develop our superpowers.

Listen: Listening means we are focusing to understand. It means parking our agenda and not interrupting. Listening is not formulating a response while the other person is speaking and waiting for a pause so we can have our say.

Focus: Be present and in the moment when it counts during those critical conversations with clients and with staff.

Adapt: When we listen and focus, we can adapt to changes more easily.

By using these principles when we speak with clients, our team members and people in our communities, we can get to the core of what the issues are, and come together to devise a solution.

These are simple ideas, but can be hard to implement. After his talk, Peter took the time to answer a few questions for me. He also showed me his cuff links, which say “YES” on the right, and “AND” on the right.

LF: What are some practical tips you have for busy CPAs to put the principles of applied improv into action?

PM: Well, one thing that would really help them is to keep something in front of them to remember. When I discovered improv and “Yes! And...”, I put index cards, post it notes in my car, in the bathroom, so I would see it all the time because I knew I had to create this habit. If I wanted it bad enough, I had to create a habit, so I had to remind myself.

I have been a student at this for 25 years, and I still have a reminder list every time I speak. See my cuff links? It's that daily reminder. Simon Sinek said, “Just because you attend a management seminar, a leadership seminar, doesn't make you a good leader. It's practicing that every single day.” Baby steps. In order to do that, we have to be reminded.

LF: What advice do you have for the younger generation CPAs who want to embrace the principles of applied improv, but who work with older CPAs who aren't convinced of the value of “Yes! And..”?

PM: My advice for them is you're not going to change them, but you can change you. You can work with the team. Giving them your responses back to the boss. You can still be the Yes, And! But, accept the fact that you cannot change this person. But you will become a better leader. And, in order to become a better leader, you have to do this every day. If I'm not successful at work, then try it when you interact with other people, when you're out at restaurants, or doing other things, Jay Sukow [of Second City] says, “If we could all take just one improv class, the world would be a much better place to live.”

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Liz Farr is a CPA and freelance writer. After spending 15 years doing tax and accounting at small firms in Albuquerque, NM, she ditched the 10-key and timesheet to write full time from her home in Los Lunas, NM. Her work has appeared in the Journal of Accountancy, and she is a

regular contributor to [AccountingWEB](#) and [Intuit's Firm of the Future Blog](#). You can find out more about her at [Farrcommunications.com](#).