

Transcript - Max Dickins - Should you be winging it more at work?

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Ross D 00:07

Hello, you're listening to the Future Talent Learning Podcast, developed to help you build your leadership and management skills. I'm Ross Dickey.

Ross G 00:13

And I'm Ross Garner.

Ross D 00:15

This week we're asking, should we be winging it more at work? Something I know just a little thing about. It has this question. We're speaking to stand up comedian and playwright Max Dickins. Hello, Max. How's it going?

Max 00:26

Hello.

Ross G 00:27

Max, to get us started, what is improvisation?

Max 00:33

Improvisation is a lot of things, but the definition I prefer to use is this, that improvisation is the art of acting without a script. So improvisation is the art of acting without a script. Now, that happens on stage for entertainment, as it does in comedy clubs, in the comedy club that I'm a director of at the moment.

Max 00:54

And on TV, Whose Line Is It Anyway? Obviously, a big improv comedy show people listening may have heard of. But how much of life, and especially at work, are we forced to act without a script? And so what improv offers is a metaphor to understand these situations better, a set of tools and techniques and mindsets to deal with them with more poise, more confidence, more effectiveness.

Max 01:24

And if you choose to go and do a workshop, a practice, something, some way you can actually go and get better at reacting to these situations. So that in a nutshell is what improvisation is.

Ross D 01:36

I said in my intro that is something I know a little bit about. Ross seems to have this impression of me that I just turned up to everything and wing it. I think that is true to a certain extent.

Ross D 01:49

I think partly though there's like a method to that. It's not just laziness on my part. So I think giving a presentation, for example, I often won't memorise what I'm going to say word for word because I find that stressful for one thing.

Ross D 02:02

But then also I think it kind of makes it feel less natural, I think, than if I leave myself some wiggle room to think on my feet and then respond to how the audience is reacting to what I'm saying as well.

Ross D 02:14

And it strikes me that the stand-up comedy is very similar to that.

Max 02:19

I mean, so just to kind of get clear on definitions, he said in a hilarious way. So, stand up comedy is different from improvised comedy or improvisation. So my background is in stand-up and that is scripted and it's way more scripted than you think.

Max 02:37

But improvisation is about a group of people on stage creating game scenes, sketches, in the moment based on audience suggestions. So that really is completely unscripted, completely spontaneous. Now, when I was on the circuit as a pro stand-

up doing clubs and things, was I using a lot of improvisation?

Max 02:57

Absolutely. But just so people kind of know the difference. And because I think the metaphor is purer when you understand what we're talking about as that kind of second form of improvisation.

Ross G 03:08

Is it worth contrasting it to planning? Because I think what Ross just described is that he actually plans everything and seems like he's improv-ing. But what you might be talking about is improv-ing where it seems like you're planning.

Max 03:22

I mean, this is all interesting stuff and there's probably lots of grey areas between it. So firstly, improv is not the opposite of planning, right? So for example, an improv show, you come to see a show in a theatre, you're sat in the audience, the lights have been put up, organised, the electricity's been paid for, there's a technician who knows what they're doing, running everything, the seats have been laid out, the theatre is clear, the acoustics are brilliant, we as performers have practised together so we have our chemistry.

Max 03:53

We don't know what the content's going to be but we know what the rough structure of the show's going to be, we know the techniques and how we're going to interact together. You in the moment as an audience are going to shout out stuff that we're going to use and it's going to be completely new content but it's not completely made up, flying by the seat of your pants, that is not a good idea.

Max 04:12

And the reason why I think this is important is I don't think you choose between improvising and planning, you look at the context and ask yourself what's most useful here and often the answer is a balance.

Max 04:24

This situation without getting too meta is a good example. I know Ross and Ross have prepared for this because I'll let you in on a secret, we've had a prequel talking about what we're going to say. I don't know everything you're going to ask me, we certainly not scripted out the conversation.

Max 04:39

I'd imagine they've done some background research on me as you can tell on initial questions. I, for an hour before this, have just been thinking about what may I talk about on this based on our prequel but this what I'm saying now completely made up and the reason why it's important is you want enough planning so that you have something to improvise around and you can reliably get a good outcome.

Max 05:01

But what you want to do is be open to the opportunities in the moment and an interview is a very pure example of that because we are going to try and connect as human beings, you're going to bounce off some of the ideas I leave out there, I'm going to bounce off some of the ideas you leave.

Max 05:15

So we talk a lot in our world of improv and I know I'm talking a lot here and we talk a lot about listening to the impulse and this is not a great example.

Ross D 05:22

I don't know, the two of us are listening.

Max 05:24

So hopefully, hopefully other people are listening as well. Yeah, exactly. So we talk a lot about offers. So this is kind of the main currency of improvisation. So imagine anything somebody does or says is an offer or something in the environment is an offer.

Max 05:41

So someone walks into the room and they're walking really fast. The offer there is, oh, they look a bit anxious or, hey, they look high energy and driven and excited, depending on how they're doing it.

Max 05:50

They say something, the tone of voice gives you an offer, the word choice, the metaphor, the context we're in gives you offers. The world gives us offers all the time. So improv is about being really open to those offers.

Max 06:02

So we can make the most of them. Now, the way this connects to planning is people who are addicted to plans and who over plan miss what's in the room. Right. And so improv is not saying, hey, completely bullshit your way through life.

Max 06:17

It's going, be really aware of the riches in the moment as well as the riches you can prepare.

Ross D 06:25

And then just to expand on those offers a little bit, when you're seeing somebody walking across the stage with a sort of nervous energy, it's an offer to you that you can decide whether or not you want to comment on that or make an observation about that. Is that how it works?

Max 06:41

Yeah, well, in a purely we're in a scene, we're making up a scene. I have no information about that scene at the start of it because it's all made up. They walk in like that. It's telling me a lot about them as a character they're playing, right?

Max 06:52

So we're getting information out to make this less abstract for people who are not on stage, which is presumably... Yeah, it's like you're having a conversation with a client. Perhaps it's the first call of a potential business partnership, say.

Max 07:10

You're talking about your offering and you can see their eyes slightly glaze over. Now, that is an offer. The offer is not necessary. I think what you're saying is completely rubbish. It may be this isn't engaging me because it's not my area of concern on this call.

Max 07:26

It may be your language is choosing is not your choosing is not relatable, but there's an offer there, right? So we just about being really aware of that. And also, you need to put it in different situations.

Max 07:37

In a brainstorming situation, there's lots of offers coming from all directions and it's about being really aware so you can accept and build a fit. So most of improv is about being really present and noticing a lot more than anybody else because you've trained yourself to do that and then using it to brick by brick build something interesting.

Ross D 07:57

I think that's kind of what I was getting at when I was talking about this presentation example where I could turn up to a presentation with like, prepare to speak for an hour. But if I realise after 15 minutes that it's not really landing or as you say, their eyes are glistening over, they're losing interest, I want to give myself enough wiggle room in there.

Ross D 08:15

It's sort of in the moment to adapt and take a different approach. So it's not that it's unplanned or unprepared, but yeah, it's having that sort of flexibility to change based on the situation.

Max 08:28

Yeah, absolutely, that's a great, great example.

Ross G 08:32

There's all sorts of work scenarios where you'd imagine that you want to go and plan, but if you've already decided what the outcome is going to be, then it's not really a fruitful interaction to have, whether it's a client or whether you're brainstorming, whatever.

Ross G 08:44

It's if you're locked in the idea that you've already thought about beforehand, then why are you having that conversation? You're not going to turn into partners in that engagement. You're not going to build on what each other is offering.

Max 08:56

Absolutely. So we often talk about the point of improvisation is groups of people coming together to create something that they couldn't have created together or something that is

Ross G 09:06

That sounds just like work

Max 09:08

You what sorry?

Ross G 09:10

That sounds just like work. That's exactly what we do. We get groups of people together to do something they couldn't do apart.

Max 09:15

It is so I mean what we it's about we call it group mind and improv. And what's interesting is the experience of doing on stage. Is when you work with somebody else they pull stuff out of you that use on inaccessible to you without them, which is really interesting.

Max 09:31

You say things you like where has that come from is because of the collaboration with the other person. But you also come up with things together that are beyond what is possible. So without getting too boring and anal as an example in my book about this stuff about emergence.

Max 09:47

Right. So emergence is when different things come together and they produce a behaviour or an output which is beyond what is. It's not just one plus one equals two. It's one plus one equals five. It's something it's like a different quality.

Max 10:02

So let me give you an example to make that less abstract. A load of Starlings flying the air. They start swarming and making these amazing beautiful patterns. How they're doing that it looks designed planned beautiful.

Max 10:15

But actually it is just what happens when people come together and genuinely collaborate. And that for me is that that is what I mean by group mind is like an intelligence that's beyond just your both your intelligences added together.

Max 10:29

And that's an amazing feeling when you're doing it properly. It's like a great conversation you have. You're like, Oh my God, I feel like I've known this person forever. This is fascinating. It's unreal.

Max 10:40

Or you're with teammates at work and you're trying to solve a problem. Oh my God, that's brilliant. So glad we've done it. And on stage it may be a laugh you get or an idea you stumble across. But it you get to that through certain behaviours and what improvisation does is make something that can be quite ephemeral and kind of abstract and in the moment and break it down into kind of more incremental behaviours.

Ross G 11:03

It's also incredibly frustrating when the opposite happens. You know, when you're in a meeting and you realise that someone has already decided and it's a performative act, but not in the improv performative sense, performative in the sense that they already know what they're going to get to and they're just, you know, trailing you along for the ride for a little while.

Max 11:23

Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. I mean, we talk a lot about status in improvisation. So we might come back onto this later. So I won't talk about it for too long, but one of the main blockers of this sort of real collaboration is trying to drive status.

Max 11:37

So the example you gave just there is somebody wanting to show that they're the smartest person in the room or they're in

charge and completely blocking the action developing. So we talk a lot. I mentioned the word offers and we're going to talk about some language around improvisation.

Max 11:50

Blocking is like an ethomer to an improviser. So you always want to advance action if you're on stage and in the conversation or in a meeting, you don't want to be the person blocking action. So if somebody says, how about this?

Max 12:04

You don't want to be the person going like, no. It's always about trying to accept and building off offers. Not always agreeing with them, but accepting and building with what you're giving.

Ross G 12:14

So as a manager, how do you go about creating the conditions for this? Does there need to be some sort of structure? I mean, I guess there is a structure to improvisation. You were saying this and you know kind of what the topics are going to be, but you know roughly what the structure of an improv night is going to look like.

Max 12:34

Yeah, I mean, you know the structure, but probably the best way to think about it is in terms of behaviours. So I'll finish an example I gave earlier, and then I'm going to answer your question more specifically.

Max 12:44

So the Starling's example of them swarming. Computer scientists watched this happen, and they were like, I don't know how on Earth, how would you program that? And there was, I can't remember his name, tell the story in my book.

Max 12:59

I'm sorry, I can't remember his name. But computer scientists basically made an equivalent of Starling's. They were like cursors, you would get kind of cursor shaped birds. And he thought, well, what would I have to program these birds to do to swarm and operate in that way?

Max 13:16

And actually, the instructions a computer scientist had to give these imaginary things was very small. It was like, stick together when somebody goes left, go left, like really small. My point is it's small things that if everyone does, you create this amazingly complex interaction.

Max 13:34

And improv works the same way. I'm going to tell you some things now about how human beings do this on stage and in life. And it's not rocket science. It's pretty simple. But when you get everyone executing some simple behaviours, the collaboration and the outcome is really special.

Max 13:49

So the first one is, if you look at improv on stage, you think, God, they're so funny, so clever. They're geniuses. How do they do it? They just must be the guy at school who's like,

Ross D 14:00

Oh, it seems kind of like magic when I go to an improv show. Like, how do these people do this? Yeah.

Max 14:06

It's like magic. And really, we don't talk about being fast, clever, interesting. We don't really mention that at all. The biggest thing you do is train presence and listening and really getting into the guts of what amazing listening is.

Max 14:25

And it's about noticing more with your eyes and your ears, your heart and your gut. So we call it full body listening. Really taking as much information as possible. And a great improviser just sees more.

Max 14:36

It's as simple as that. And a key part of listening is being changed by what you hear. So it's about being flexible, taking in information but being changed by it. So you say something to me on stage, Ross.

Max 14:52

Lands on me, it changes my response. Again, it's not always agreement, but I'm really letting the information land on me. So the second thing we talk about, second behaviour is kind of building off this.

Max 15:04

And it's probably the idea of, if you know anything about improv, you'll know this phrase. It's yes and. So yes and is a simple technique we can use to develop action in the scene. But it's more, I more see it as a mindset and as a tao, a way of being in the world.

Max 15:20

It's more, don't think of it too specifically and too anally applying it to everything. People go like, well, I can't say yes and to everything. But I do sometimes, I do workshops sometimes. If someone says, set yourself on fire, I'm not gonna say yes and give me the petrol.

Max 15:35

I'm like, you gotta see it more specifically.

Ross G 15:37

Sorry, just to clarify, for anybody is unaware of what yes and means. Basically, the idea is, as I understood it, is you accept anything that is offered to you on stage, that's how it works?.

Max 15:51

So, yes, yes and is about accepting and building. So the yes is I accept your offer. It's not, it's suspending judgment. I'm going to play with it. I don't have to think it's brilliant. I'm going to hold it in my head alongside maybe the idea I've got.

Max 16:07

I'm going to accept it. I'm going to say yes more metaphorically than literally often. And then the and is me going from the height of my intelligence, my experience, my point of view, my set of knowledge.

Max 16:17

What can I apply here to expand it, embellish it, move it forward, explore it with you. So you've given me an offer. I'm going to show I've heard it connected to it, understood it. And then I'm going to pivot from there somewhere.

Max 16:33

And I'm going to try and make you look good. That's the key thing we talk about. So we're doing a scene together. We're not competing in the scene to be the funniest person in the scene. We are together.

Max 16:44

And I'm trying to make you look good. You're trying to make me look good. Now, making me look good is sometimes not agreeing with me. So this is when you get sort of more complex. It's not just saying everything is brilliant.

Max 16:55

Sometimes the yes and is a no or it's a it's a pivot sideways, right? It's more that's why I mean you got to see it more broadly. It's about noticing lots, accepting and building where you can. So you make me look good and we are together pushing one agenda rather than me pushing mine, you pushing yours.

Max 17:16

And that's where we don't we don't quite connect. And so those are kind of the two big ideas. And then there are three other ones that I can go into. I don't know if you wanted to if you had any questions on the first two.

Ross D 17:30

I'm more of a reflection on the yes and to be honest, I was recalling a client I worked with where I was in a room with two people from the client organization and they were on the face of it totally agreeing with one another and left the room both feeling great about it.

Ross D 17:47

But it was clear sitting from the outside watching them that they were arguing for completely contradictory ideas. And what was getting in the way was a relentless positivity and an inability to say that they disagreed with the other one.

Ross D 18:00

But that's not what you're talking about. It's not that you're everything.

Max 18:05

No, no, it's not. And I talk about that kind of scenario dynamic in my book, but when I get into listening to one of the big problems when communication goes wrong. I would say is asymmetric information, which is a very uptown way of saying something quite simple is that when we're not on the same page.

Max 18:26

Because was something unsaid or something I don't know about you or you don't know about me because I'm not saying it and you're not saying it. So really so much of listening and we talk about this a lot and improv about we call it being obvious in our world.

Max 18:42

Some people get confused by that concept. It's more about surfacing the unsaid. Now the unsaid in your example there, Ross, was two people clearly disagreeing. Now good communication there is to go, it seems to me that you think this and I think this.

Max 19:00

And then even if you are in conflict, at least you have a basis of truth and shared knowledge to build off. If you don't do that, then you can't ever connect. And I think the purest example is actually an improv scene.

Max 19:14

Like I said earlier, we don't know anything about this. I don't know who you are. You don't know who I am at the start of this. I don't know what's going to happen, what we're going to do, where we are.

Max 19:23

We have to surface everything as quickly as possible and be direct so we can really connect. So I mean there's kind of part of the yes and idea is that we have to make sure we understand each other first before we can really connect.

Ross G 19:41

Is that easier for people who are extroverts or otherwise able to portray themselves confidently than it is for the quieter person in the room?

Max 19:53

I would say yes, it probably is. If you're more assertive, that is certainly true. There's no reason why these things don't apply to written communication, for example. The introvert extrovert thing's an interesting one.

Max 20:07

It's something I get asked a lot. I would say that regardless of your basic personality type, we all are faced with similar situations. Introverts can't opt out of certain ways of communicating and say with extroverts like, I'm quite an extroverted person in most contexts, but I have to be very careful in how I listen to detail because that's clearly important.

Max 20:29

Whereas a lot of introverts are great on detail and not great at some of the other stuff on average. I know not everyone is the same. But with introvert extrovert thing, I think it's about creating a culture.

Max 20:43

If you are a manager, because the first question was about being a manager, a culture where it's inclusive of different personality types, different communication styles. And that's about extroverts having the self-awareness to go, not mistake silence for agreement.

Max 20:59

That's a key thing. Not mistake silence for agreement going, oh, Johnny's very quiet. You have to go, Johnny, we've not heard from you on this. Oh, are we on the same page? What do you think here? And really pull it out of Johnny who in this situation is an introvert to be clear. It's about being more active in how you facilitate that.

Ross D 21:20

I think that's a super important point actually because I was saying before that I, you know, whatever I've been to an improv

show, I think that seems like magic. And the other thing I think is those people are so brave.

Ross D 21:29

And so the more generous interpretation of that, that person that shows up to the meeting and they've already decided what the outcome is and they're not really allowing space for improvisation is that they are maybe scared of what improvisation is going to result in.

Ross D 21:45

It's safer actually to turn up with, well, this is the way we're going and I'll have a bit of a chat about it, but it's a much clearer end point to the discussion than, well, this could end up somewhere completely different than where I've thought about it and what I'm comfortable with.

Ross D 22:01

And so what would you say to people who are maybe nervous about the prospect of improvisation?

Max 22:07

I always find this question interesting because if you came to... So, as well as I've written a book about this, I run a training consultancy, do a lot of work on this as well as perform. I run a director of a company called Hoopla, a big improv school and theatre.

Max 22:23

And whenever you came to our classes, you would not go, it's full of extroverts and confident people. You'd actually probably say the opposite. I mean, in many ways, the world of improvisation is very nervy, anxious, nerdy.

Max 22:37

That's kind of the... It's not like, you know, the guy in the pub who's like, quip, quip, quip, is like, you know, six foot five, cheekbones, hilarious, garrulous. Like, it's not that person. They don't need to be fun.

Ross D 22:53

But, yeah, I mean, why do people do it? Why are all these nervous wrecks turning up to do improv training? Is it because they're nervous?

Max 23:03

To not be nervous wrecks anymore. So here's a massive thing that they get out of improv. And this is why the experience of it, I mean, we're talking about it now and that's great.

Max 23:12

But if you can take a class, even if it's a dropping class or something, it's the experience of improv. I was never this sort of person, kind of a professional communicator out in front of audiences, never.

Max 23:26

But improv has really built my confidence. And how it's built it is you get, you fail so often through the little exercises, not just in front of audiences, but through the exercises, that you become immune to it.

Max 23:39

And you realise firstly, it's not a show-stopping disaster. No, nobody literally dies. You also realise that the mistakes and the things that go wrong are often the bit in the scene or the show that become the most useful and the most potent, comedically and creatively.

Max 23:57

And you also thirdly know where you learn about your own resource and you learn how to trust yourself. People are way more able than they think. And I often think when people say, oh, I couldn't improvise.

Max 24:13

You improvise all day long. Every conversation you have is improvised, right? So you're using it. We block ourselves up in certain contexts. And if you're the sort of person who is quite stiff, I always think like, why are you stiff?

Max 24:31

Like there's, it's how you see, I think the moment or the context, which is we bring certain rules to it. I mean, Ross, you said

at the beginning, a presentation. I do a lot of presentation skills work with clients often.

Max 24:42

And I call it business schizophrenia, where they step into a version of themselves, which is just not them. And I watch them do it and I'm like, this is, this is shit. Like, oh, this is shit. But we always start and I say to them, you can be completely unprofessional in this, right?

Max 24:59

Completely unprofessional. And they're great. And then they go professional and they're crap. And it's because they brought a load of rules there. So we think about, we attach certain rules to certain contexts that can make us stiff.

Max 25:13

How you see yourself, which is you won't be able to respond, which is often not a fair judgment on yourself. Often we respond with great elegance in conversations that are not high stakes. There's no reason really why you can't replicate that. And secondly, it's about...

Ross G 25:29

Well, but the stakes are real at work though. I think that's the, I would push back on that a little bit because I think that's why people feel uncomfortable in the work environment or they don't want to, they don't want to be too bold with what they're saying or improv too much is because work has consequences to making a fool for yourself.

Ross G 25:45

You could get a reputation for either the rambling or being too assertive or whatever it might be.

Max 25:55

Yeah I mean, you shouldn't improvise everything. If you work in a nuclear power station, don't improvise risk management. If you're doing a very high stakes presentation to an audience that won't interact with you, you shouldn't do much improvisation, right?

Max 26:11

Of course, it depends on context. I think people massively overestimate what you've just said. Yeah, in their head, the story is way exaggerated. So we can always bring it back and look. If I go in the context in my life that are high stakes, I'm probably the balance between improvisation and preparation, professionalism and spontaneity, if they are even opposite, you have to think through.

Max 26:42

But I think the story in your head, and you're right to push back on it, but really the story in our head is far an exaggeration on the reality of that. And then just to finish the loop of what I was saying, is that the third thing is how we see other people and our colleagues.

Max 26:58

And this is slightly in relating to what the point you just made, which is other people's perception of our errors or our behaviours, right? And often they don't perceive us in the way we think they will when we're being spontaneous or we make errors.

Max 27:13

And also our colleagues are there to help out. But mainly if you think about a conversation, we get frozen up because we think it has to be perfect and it has to go a certain way. We have a script in our head of how this is going to go.

Max 27:27

It goes off it a bit. We're like, this is going badly. But really communication is a bit of a mess. Creativity, innovation, how you want to frame that is a bit of a mess. And if you understand that it doesn't have to be a straight line, you relax a bit and you often find, I think opportunities in the moment that people who are unwilling to step outside of that straight line cannot find.

Ross D 27:51

I was laughing there because my wife probably once a week will tell me about something that happened at work that she has mortified by. I've been thinking about it ever since. And it's more often than not the most minor thing.

Ross D 28:04

And she'll say, what do you think? My colleagues think? And I'll say, they probably didn't give it any thought after that thing happened. They'd be astounded that you were dwelling on this minor thing that happened at work today.

Max 28:16

Yeah, yeah. Or they give you the benefit of the doubt. Like I had something last night where a writer I know, I won't name them but a very good nonfiction writer. I sent him something I'd written for a new book I'm working on.

Max 28:27

I say, have you got any notes on this? And he took the time to read it and sent over some notes. And I read it and I meant to reply, very helpful, thank you. And I must have had, I don't know, a brain injury that day or I must have not been concentrating.

Max 28:41

So I just wrote, unhelpful, thank you. And sent an email, right? And then I didn't hear from him for weeks. And then he followed up saying, sorry, I couldn't work out if you were joking or I was like, wait.

Max 28:55

And I read the email and I was like I'm mortified that you think I'd send you that email. But my point is, my head was like, when I was looking back in hindsight, I was like, oh my God, I'm so embarrassed. But he was just like, oh, okay.

Max 29:11

That's either a mistake or a joke or he's having a bad day. Like the consequence was no where near as big. There are situations where it is bad, right? Obviously, some mistakes are really bad, but Amy Edmondson, I'm sure you've had this on the podcast before, talks a lot about psychological safety.

Ross G 29:30

She's on this podcast.

Max 29:31

Oh, she's on it, oh, fantastic. She's, I won't put words into her mouth, but she's, she may have told the story about the hospitals, the ones that are, the highest quality hospitals in the States, who's in her research, are the hospitals that make the most mistakes.

Max 29:47

And that's kind of a paradox. It's because they admit to the mistakes. And she has this very simple breakdown. I think it's into four pots of errors that we can make. And not all mistakes are created equal.

Max 30:00

So a basic functional error, like, you know, a typo is not a good mistake. Nobody learned anything from that. That's maybe not a showstopping disaster. There are certain errors. So she says, errors arising from complexity and not errors.

Max 30:14

And I think this is an interesting thing at the moment. We were talking before the podcast began about COVID. But if you think about our perception of public figures, they do make mistakes from corruption and from incompetence.

Max 30:28

But a lot of the time things happen because they're operating in a complex environment, they're then written off as the other two, as malice and incompetence. And I think you've got to understand the nature of the error.

Max 30:39

And I think that's the big thing I've got from improv. And I think people can take from it is understanding that you've got to really think about and debrief your errors and team errors with a lot more nuance than we think of it.

Max 30:51

It's not kind of a yes, no answer.

Ross G 30:58

So, Max, you were talking earlier on about the role of status in improv. I was wondering if you'd just elaborate on that

concept a little more.

Max 31:05

Yeah, so the way improvisers see status is a bit different to how normal people, if I can use that phrase, see status. So we often at work see status as a position on a hierarchy, right? So you're managing director, you're manager, you are blah, blah, blah.

Max 31:21

And so we can kind of get that. And that's definitely true as well. But improvisers see status a bit differently. We see it as a behaviour. So you can play a status high or low status. So you may be objectively, as in hierarchy wise, high status, but choose to play low and vice versa.

Max 31:38

So for example, you're 23, new at a company, you've got to go and give a pitch on behalf of your company, your low status, but you may choose to play high status. You may sit in the chest out, high, you know, loud voice, assertive use of language and you're playing high status.

Max 31:55

I think status is a really interesting thing to think about in numerous ways. So for one is that if you're a manager and you want to bring people out of their shell, status really affects how rooms work.

Max 32:08

If you don't, if you kind of want to see this, the next time you go to a dinner party, look around the table and ask yourself, who's got the highest status here? And there'll be things like people taking up space.

Max 32:18

They'll be talking the loudest, talking the most. They'll be interrupting people, things like the highest status behaviours and see how it changes the dynamic. And I think once you understand status is something you play and something you can give to people or lend to them or take away from them, it changes how you interact.

Max 32:35

And it's one of the key things in creating a collaborative environment, but also in developing rapport. And if you are naturally quite low status or you play low status, it's important, I think, when you meet a high status person to status match.

Max 32:50

And that's just about mirroring a lot of their behaviours and you'll find that helps you have authority and also generate rapport. But this kind of idea is status being dynamic and everything being a status battle, if you like, or at least an exchange.

Max 33:06

I think some really interesting one and is a clear example of how something from the world of theatre is actually applying to to real life. Right. And so I thought, yeah, I think, I think it's as a concept, people can use straight away. That's maybe an interesting one.

Ross G 33:24

Yeah, absolutely. So, Ross, what will you be taking away from this conversation and applying in your life this week?

Ross D 33:35

So I think I really like the yes and technique. I was thinking about conversations that we have at work. So we'll talk about podcast ideas, or we'll talk about videos that are getting put together and that kind of thing.

Ross D 33:47

And I think how I respond to people's ideas can either encourage more fruitful conversation or it can shut that conversation down. And possibly it's a bit of a status play at times, I think now, Max, that you've mentioned that.

Ross D 34:00

So thinking about how I constructively use the yes and technique will be a big one for me.

Ross G 34:07

I think for me, it's, I had seven questions that I'd prepared to ask Max. I think I asked the first one and then our conversation has just taken us where it's gone. I think it's, Max pointed out early in the podcast, you know, what we're doing right now is improvising.

Ross G 34:22

And so I think the way I'm taking away is the importance of having a plan, but also being willing to adapt and improvise depending on what the situation requires. Because I think we've touched on all the topics we wanted to, but not on the exact order that I'd planned.

Ross G 34:37

Max, what will your takeaways be?

Max 34:42

The thing I'm going to take away, I think, for this podcast is something that happened in our conversation. So I talked about offers about noticing and building off offers. There's something interesting that happened there.

Max 34:52

Ross pushed back on something I said and went, well, actually, I'm not sure that's right. I'm not sure I agree with that. And two things could have happened there. We could have just got into conflict and just faced off and gone, well, I think I'm right.

Max 35:04

Or we can use it as a way of finding mutual understanding and exploring an idea. And I think a way of seeing conflict like that is really useful. And I use that quite a lot in pitches and things like that when people go, oh, I'm not sure I'm into this or I don't understand that.

Max 35:22

Well, that doesn't seem right to me. It's often gives me an opportunity to re-communicate or explore how they see the situation, which gives me a different angle for me to connect to them. So I just think conflict, framed right, and treated with some flexibility and some grace can lead to productive conversation.

Ross G 35:50

All right, let's move on to a regular feature, one thing I learned this week. Ross, do you want to go first?

Ross D 35:56

Sure, I was reading about creative hot streaks in The Guardian, man about town that I am. And it was a bit of research from Professor Dashan Wang of Northwestern University, who was arguing that 90% of people have at least one hot streak in their career, by which he means a period where the creative is on a roll.

Ross D 36:18

One of the examples they gave us of a template creative person would be Peter Jackson, the film director. He created all sorts of odd movies and then smashed it with the Lord of the Rings trilogy, won a heap of Oscars, and then has kind of sort of meandered around ever since.

Ross G 36:35

So this is a criticism of the Beatles documentary.

Ross D 36:37

No, I love the Beatles documentary, but he has tried lots of different things since. Maybe the Hobbit films were less successful. And so what Wang was looking at was the conditions that lead to hot streaks.

Ross D 36:48

And so he looked at IMDB ratings for films, auction prices of art, and citations of research papers as indicators of someone having a hot streak, and then use artificial intelligence to identify patterns.

Ross D 37:00

From what he found was that the hot streaks tended to follow periods of huge diversity. So essentially people try lots and lots of different things, and then they land on something that works, and then they double down hard on it for a while.

Ross D 37:11

And that tends to be the most successful part of their career. What he didn't look at, which I'm interested in, is why the hot streak ends, but maybe that's something for the future.

Ross G 37:22

Taste change, I suppose. Possibly. You get bored. Yeah, bored of seeing the same thing. Max, what's one thing you've learned this week?

Max 37:32

So what I'm going to share is I've got this new book that I've been working on for two years, coming out in July 2022, it's all about men and friendships called Billy No Mates, about why men have no friends. It's a memoir, unfortunately.

Max 37:47

And it's coming out. And it's kind of a hybrid between sort of a Malcolm Gladwell and a Danny Wallace style book. There's lots of jokes in there. And it's a long old slog writing a book. Like it's two years, it's like 90,000 words, awful lot of feedback.

Max 38:04

And it can feel quite overwhelming. Now I saw this article by Bill Bezrich, he's a sports psychologist on Adam Petey's work with Adam Petey, The Swimmer. And he wrote this. Adam follows a mental ritual to get in the zone ahead of his 6am and 6pm training sessions every day.

Max 38:21

He makes a point of pausing before he enters the pool and focusing on, quote, training like a champion. Right. He sets his standard at that moment. This is how an athlete builds mental strength. Now what I liked about that was, Adam, I'm not comparing myself to Adam Petey.

Max 38:35

He's an Olympian, competes four year increments, maybe some world championships in the middle. But every training session is what builds the success. And I find when I'm writing my book, like I want to sit down each morning and treat it like a day and make it the best day, not less it will be a big wash.

Max 38:55

Like it's kind of who cares is another day it takes so long. But every day being focused and going, how can we make this a really good writing day today? So I found that quite inspiring.

Ross G 39:10

Yeah, love it. Yeah. So, this week I have learned about a productivity technique called Eat the Frog, which might be familiar to a lot of our listeners, but is not something that I'd heard of before.

Ross G 39:24

So the idea of eating the frog comes from Mark Twain. So there's a quote from Mark Twain, If it's your job to eat a frog, it's best to do it first thing in the morning. And if it's your job to eat two frogs, it's best to eat the biggest one first.

Ross G 39:37

So the general idea of eat the frog is start taking the toughest task on your to-do list and starting with that early in the morning because as the day goes on, you're more likely to find reasons to procrastinate and put it off.

Ross G 39:50

And it's something that resonated with me. Something I think not even necessarily the toughest technique, but often the technique that I find least fun, I will put off and then it just stays on my to-do list forever.

Ross G 40:02

So yeah, something that resonates.

Max 40:05

Do you think cultures that actually eat frogs, that's a very popular technique already? Do you think that's really... they're excited by it?

Ross G 40:13

Yeah. Before we wrap up Max, is there anything else that you want to mention?

Max 40:22

The only thing I'd like to mention is I keep on speaking about the improv book I've written. It's called *Improvise. Use the Secrets of Improv to Achieve Extraordinary Results at Work*. It's one of the FT's top business books.

Max 40:34

Last year, it's available on audiobook. If that's your vibe, it's available as an ebook. It's available hardback, paperback, in shops on Amazon. ImproviseTheBook.co.uk is the website. I run this improv training school and theatre called hoopleimpro.com we do a lot of work with corporates.

Max 40:57

If you listen to this and you're thinking, I fancy giving this a go, you don't need to want to perform. You can just do a beginner's drop-in or a beginner's course. They're amazing fun. People do it for personal professional development.

Max 41:09

It's one of the best things I've ever done in my life. I'm not just saying that because we're doing a podcast about it. Drop me a line on LinkedIn or something. I can help sort you out.

Ross D 41:21

Great, we'll put links to all those in the show notes. And that's it. You will listen to the Future Talent Learning podcast with me, Ross Dickey and Ross Garner. Our guest this week was Max Dickens.

Ross D 41:35

Until next time, bye for now.