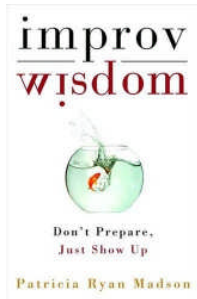


Better Business Through Improv

An email conversation with Patricia Ryan Madsen, author of *IMPROV WISDOM*



Author: Patricia Ryan Madsen

Book Title: *IMPROV WISDOM : Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*

Purchase Link: [Amazon](#)

Website: <http://www.improvwisdom.com/>

Recently I struck up an email conversation with [Patricia Ryan Madsen](#), author of [IMPROV WISDOM](#).

Readers of the [BRAND AUTOPSY](#) blog may recall I'm [learning how to apply basic Improv skills](#) into my every day business life. I'm also learning how to carry these lessons into my every day personal life.

IMPROV WISDOM is a worthwhile read whether you are trying to become more open, accepting, and spontaneous in business or in life. While the book is geared more to encourage us to take chances and do more of the things that are important to us in our personal lives, the Improv Maxims Patricia shares are highly applicable to business.

The following is our email conversation where Patricia answers some questions on applying Improv in business.

For folks not familiar with Improv, please demystify what Improv is and why we can benefit by using basic Improv techniques in our daily work/home life.

[Patricia Ryan Madsen] *Great question! Improv is just a way of doing things. "Demystify" is the perfect word since a common misunderstanding of improv is that it is a form of comedy done by witty and talented performers who, unlike most of us, are skillful in "coming up with fast, funny replies." Hence, improv is probably not for me.*

And, while, the word does also mean a form of comedy, as I present it, it is actually a paradigm (a value-based approach) that can be used by everyone to solve a problem, or encounter everyday life.

To "improv" or "improvise" is a way of doing things, a methodology that involves paying attention, responding supportively, and acting constructively. Anyone--a banker, a baker, a stay-at-home mom, an entrepreneur, a physician--can benefit from this way of working. It is an optimistic, practical and creative approach. People can have fun, too.

You may be surprised to learn that improv is not simply "whatever..." or "anything goes..." There is always a context. We are always improvising within some structure or for some purpose. Improv actually has rules, or, I prefer to call them, maxims or guidelines which help us know how to handle the unknown.

For example, an improviser is trained to say "yes-AND" to offers or suggestions that come his way. This predisposition to looking for what is right about the situation and building on it is a terrific way to run a business. It fosters the "can-do" mind.

Since most of our daily lives actually are improvisations, doesn't it make sense to use some of the time honored strategies that the pros use?

The subtitle of your book is "Don't Prepare, Just Show Up." What do you mean by that and how can business professionals apply that thinking into their job performance?

I want the reader to know that his entire life has been the preparation for this moment. I want him to trust his mind and experience. I'm not really against any kind of preparation or analysis. It is simply that time and again I see people, business professionals in particular, who substitute preparation for action. They plan when they should be executing, or trying things out. Fear of failure invites inertia or at worst, paralysis.

As we apply the improv model, more important than planning is placement. Where do you need to be? Show up there. Don't wait until every hair is in place before stepping out.

The old real estate tag line is applicable: "location, location, location..." Are you where you need to be? If not, go there. The timely application of this advice is essential in business. It also implies being punctual and present.

The advice you gave on being more natural while delivering presentations was spot-on. You say to write questions to oneself instead of writing out a full script of what you want to say. Talk about that advice as well as how it relates to Improv where it is less about 'what' you say and more about 'how' you say it?

Consider how different it is to hear someone "reciting a speech" / "reading a lecture" and the same speaker "just talking". Isn't ordinary speech more compelling?

Public speaking is one of those arenas in which most people are attempting to do the wrong thing, I've observed. Everyone fears public speaking, even if they enjoy the limelight. We fear our ability to think on our feet, to respond sensibly and naturally, even if we are "the life of the party" in private.

So, we imagine that the only thing to do is to prepare mightily. "Write out your speech carefully and then rehearse it until you can speak it letter-perfect." Oy. No wonder most of us fear speaking in public.

*Forty years of teaching actors how to deliver a script convincingly has reinforced the folly of this approach. No matter how beautifully your speech may be phrased in print, if you are reading it, then you are **READING IT**.*

It is nearly impossible to make a written speech sound natural. The "sound" of reading is the kiss of death to really effective communication, in my view. I want a speaker to tell me something, to talk to me about the things they know, the product they believe in. Telling and talking have a human quality.

Reading or reciting, even with correct emphasis, will never have the same persuasiveness or authenticity of natural speech. What we may lose in elegant phrasing, we win in communicativeness if we allow ourselves to speak naturally.

I suggest to work from a series of questions as prompts. (A bullet outline can also work.) Answering a question is usually easy. And, even if we struggle a little to access the best word, that process is a lively, human one. You get to edit and correct yourself as you speak.

If you think about it, all human speech is an improvisation (unless we are reciting a script). I'm convinced that we respond favorably to someone who seems real, natural, "like us" and who is using the kind of speech patterns that come from ordinary usage. That naturalness is something that no amount of preparation can buy.

An audience listens with its humanity, judging a performance not so much on its content as on its belief in the speaker's trustworthiness. Wouldn't it be better in the long run to simply allow yourself to be yourself in public? It really is easier.

So much of business life is spent living in the 'projects.' Every business person is a project manager in some way. Which of your 13 Improv maxims you write about in the book will benefit a project manager the most and why?

Two of the maxims pop to mind. "Wake Up to the Gifts" seems an important reminder. Project managers are often looking at the big picture, keeping their eye on what isn't working and why. If we constantly notice what is wrong we are likely to miss the hundreds of things that are going right or overlook them as givens.

Great team leaders, project managers and bosses are champions at seeing the detail of what everyone is doing well, doing right, doing on time. They observe the contributions of others on a continual basis and express appreciation. They never take a team members work "for granted". This appreciation spreads from those on the team to others who contribute: suppliers, support workers, janitors.

The other maxim that pertains here is "Face the Facts." To run a project I need to keep a clear eye on the detail of the reality around me. This includes facts that bug me-- the unpredictability of others, "acts of God," what is actually going on. Reality is often different from what I want, from my vision of how the project should be going. Skillful management seems to me to be a dance between a realistic eye and a generous and appreciative heart.

While working at [Whole Foods Market](#) I was impressed with its company culture of interdependence. In the company's [Declaration of Interdependence](#), it is written,

"Our ability to instill a clear sense of interdependence among our various stakeholders (the people who are interested and benefit from the success of our company) is contingent upon our efforts to communicate more often, more openly, and more compassionately. Better communication equals better understanding and more trust."

Link that thinking to the Improv skill of making others look good.

What an inspiring company credo! I wish everyone in the world understood the truth of interdependence. Until a person learns that his personal happiness is tied to the happiness of others, taking care of others may seem like "charity work." I seem to be hardwired to want what is best for me. Each of us has his own self interest at heart.

In the world of improv we discover that this natural selfishness is an impediment to success. Until I really do "make my partner look good" we aren't likely to move forward together effectively.

Whole Foods insistence that communication is at the center of this respect is an excellent reminder. It is hard to imagine someone not agreeing with their injunction to foster more honest and compassionate communication. The trick is how to do that. One tip for open communication involves a readiness to say thanks and I'm sorry.

Cultures that are quick to notice the work of others and say so, as well as observing when a person's actions or neglect may cause trouble and bring this up with an apology are healthy cultures, in my view.

I've heard business professionals say that to apologize shows weakness. I think just the opposite: apologizing strikes me as a strong action.

The idea of "making my partner look good" isn't just window dressing--advertising. What I need to learn is that my partner IS good. Developing respect for the diversity of different working styles and personalities should be a core value in business. It is not always easy, however.

You recently "retired" from the Stanford University faculty; however, something tells me you are not really tired. So, what is going on in your life post-Stanford?

Actually, I am a 'little bit' tired. But, since retiring I'm getting a lot more sleep.:-)

Seriously, you are right: I'm just shifting attention to different venues and projects. My favorite thing is to help an individual or some organization become healthy and productive. I'm at the ready to "show up" when someone needs improv advice.

I'm staying on the faculty of Stanford's adult education program: [Continuing Studies](#). I'll be teaching two sections of my class "Improv Wisdom: Showing Up for Your Life" next winter, starting in January. And, I'll be a presenter at the [Applied Improv Network Conference](#) in New York. I'm teaching for the Esalen Institute in late July, 2005. And, my [web page](#) is updated regularly with new gigs and appearances.

Oh, and it looks like my husband and I will be joining [Jana Stanfield going to Bali](#) in December to help fund a new roof for a girls orphanage. I'm always ready for an adventure and to try to share what I know with others. I'm trusting that Reality will send me stuff to do.

Patricia, you have up to 250 words to freestyle on anything regarding your book. Your words begin now ...

First, I want to thank you, John, for inviting me to speak. Your questions have been insightful and fun to answer. Publishing a book has been a marvelous journey, and now that it is out in the world I'm having the deep pleasure of meeting people around the world who link up through the printed word and through the miracle of cyberspace.

I want to make two offers to the readers of the BRAND AUTOPSY blog. First, I have 10 copies of IMPROV WISDOM to share with anyone who would like to read my book, but can't afford to buy one. Just [email me](#) and I'll see that you get a copy.

I wanted to make two offers to the readers of this column: first to anyone who would like to read my book, but can't afford to buy one, just write to me or email me and I'll see that you get a copy.

And, secondly, to anyone who already owns a copy, but who wishes they had it autographed, just contact me and I'll send you a hand-made bookmark with an autograph on it to tuck inside your copy.

Thanks to all your readers and especially the Brand Autopsy crew. You are doing great work.

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