

The 6 Steps to Using Improv Comedy to Be a Better Speaker

By

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Public speaking. For some, the mere thought of getting up in front of a group of people and presenting a speech is more terrifying than heights, snakes, or even death. Imagine how terrified those people would be if they were asked to get in front of an audience and speak with nothing prepared in advance – no script, no speech, no nothing.

Sound crazy? Well that is what **Improvisational Comedians** do every day.

Improvisational (or “Improv”) Comedy is a form of theater where a group of actors take the stage with nothing prepared in advance and use audience suggestions to create instant comedy. If you have ever seen the popular television show, “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” then you have seen Improv Comedy.

The skills that allow an improviser to create instant comedy can immensely help any speaker to be more comfortable and powerful from the platform. Here are three reasons why, if you want to be a more effective speaker, you must learn how to be a great improviser:

- 1) **Improv Comedy, at its core, is about self-expression.** An Improviser has only himself on an empty stage. Every idea he puts forth comes from inside of him. The best improvisers realize this and trust their instincts and let their ideas flow out. Similarly, the best speakers realize that the audience is there to see them. Rather than hide behind other people’s ideas or style, they are 100% themselves as they speak. Many speakers make the mistake of taking acting classes to be more “dramatic” as they speak. The result is a speaker that looks fake and wooden. Audiences don’t want “dramatic;” they want natural. Practicing improv comedy techniques can help you be much more natural.
- 2) **Improv Comedy is an interactive format.** Improvisation may be the only art form where the audience is present at the time of creation. As a result, the audience’s needs, wants, and mood can be taken into account to direct the content. Great improvisers feed off of a crowd’s energy and build content the audience appreciates. The performer pays attention to the audience and makes subtle

adjustments as she goes. Speakers would do well to adopt this approach. Most speakers prepare their speech in a vacuum and deliver it exactly as practiced. However, every audience is different. If a speaker pays attention to the audience as she is speaking, she can also make subtle adjustments to increase her effectiveness (adjusting pacing, energy, volume, etc) If you do this, not only will your speech be more powerful, but you will also develop that coveted “rapport and connection” with the audience.

- 3) **Things will go wrong.** A speaker who relies solely on what they’ve memorized will be easily thrown by the distractions that invariably happen. If time gets cut, or a cell phone rings, or a heckler demands attention, the speaker will have no response. To an improviser, distractions are just one more tool to use to make their point. A key improv attitude is to “go with the flow.” As a speaker, this attitude will allow you to be unflappable from the stage. You will be deemed a true professional, and audiences will admire your ability to handle interruptions.

There are 6 steps to using improv comedy to be a better speaker:

Step 1: Adopt the Improviser's Mindset

Step 2: Deliver Content with Style and Energy

Step 3: Create Fantastic Content that’s True to You

Step 4: Tell Fabulous Stories

Step 5: Be Amazingly Entertaining and Engaging

Step 6: Be Impervious to Unexpected Surprises

Keep on reading to see exactly what each of these steps entails, and how you too can be a better speaker by using improv comedy!

For a look at the entire program, available as a 3-DVD set, visit

<http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>.

Step 1 – Adopt the Improviser's Mindset

To perform the best improv comedy, the performer has to adopt a specific mindset. This is because on stage, an improviser doesn't really have time to think through all of his options. Improv is a fast art-form, and a performer must react instantly and instinctively. The only way to do this is to have the proper mindset so that no matter what happens, he is ready to react in the proper manner.

If you are a speaker, the same mindset will make you very powerful from the stage. You will be more comfortable, more watchable and charismatic, and you will connect with your audience to a greater degree.

There are a few key mentalities that great improvisers adopt. Here are two of the most important:

- 1) **Have fun** - No matter what happens, an audience likes to see a performer (improv or speaker) who is having fun. Some improv comedy games are downright difficult. When a performer looks like he is struggling, the audience feels almost embarrassed for them. Similarly, sometimes a speaker loses his place or doesn't connect with the audience. Keeping a sense of fun immediately increases the "watchability factor," even in tough spots. Even if the speaker doesn't lose his place, audience's love to watch speakers who are having fun on the stage.
- 2) **Be willing to fail** - In improv, some games are designed to be done a "right way" and a "wrong way." Great improvisers realize that more important than doing things right is that they do their best but are willing to fail. A performer who stresses over "right" tends to be unwatchable (they looked stressed out and a bit anal...). Performers who mess up but do it good-naturedly will always be appreciated by the audience.

Once in a while, things are not going to work out. You'll mess up, or lose your place. Audiences understand this, and in fact, while some people fear the audience, the audience really wants you to do well (the better you do, the more they will get out of it) If you are visibly afraid of failing however, the audience will be uncomfortable and even pity you. This does not endear a speaker to the audience. Have fun and be willing to fail, and the audience will be 100% on your side.

Practice adopting these mentalities and you will find your confidence and comfort from the stage immediately increasing. More important, you will connect with your audiences in ways that you never have before.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you develop the improviser's mindset, visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Step 2 - Deliver Your Content with Style and Energy

The National Speakers Association describes its members as "**Experts who speak professionally.**" Speakers are experts in their field; indeed, what organization would hire someone to speak who wasn't an expert (or at least knew a whole lot about their topic)?

And yet, expertise isn't enough. We've all seen speakers who are incredibly knowledgeable on their topic but are terrible speakers. They are brilliant yet un-engaging. What is less common though, is the dynamic speaker who isn't very knowledgeable but can still engage and entertain an audience. Though it may seem contrary, the dynamic but less informed speaker will be better received and asked to return more often than the boring expert. The point of "Improv for Speakers" is to build speakers who are both dynamic *and* informed. The first, and most neglected piece, however, is being engaging.

In this capacity, improv comedy is a wonderful tool. An improviser can't pre-write her material, so she must rely heavily on her delivery. A great improviser can take weak material and make it hilarious with her style and energy; a weak improviser can make the funniest material fall flat.

To be engaging from the platform, try the following 2 things:

- 1) **Take command of the stage.** You are an expert, so act like it. Even the most knowledgeable expert will be betrayed by weak body language! Put your head up, stand tall, project confidence, and speak powerfully – the audience will respond.
- 2) **Add emotion and passion to your speech.** You don't have to be over the top emotional every second of your speech, but avoid being "wooden." When telling a shocking story, act shocked. When explaining how you were "befuddled," act befuddled. If you make an impassioned plea to the audience, let the passion come through. Too often speakers rely on the content of the words to carry the emotion. Don't do this! Vary the emotion in your voice and speech yourself and your speech will have much greater impact.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you deliver your content with style and energy, visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Step 3 - Create Fantastic Content that's True to You

One of the most common questions I would get after an improv comedy performance was, "what happens if you can't think of anything?" People have a tremendous fear of "blanking" on stage. In fact, I would say that when it comes to speaking, "going blank" and forgetting your speech (or losing your place) is one of the top two fears people have.

My answer to the question "what happens if you can't think of anything," is that it never happens. This is not because I am so amazing; it's true for anyone. The mind is always thinking of something. The real problem is that sometimes your mind may give you ideas that you are filtering out because you don't think they are good enough. Talented improvisers realize this, and remove those filters so that they can tap their creativity and flow freely.

This process is extremely useful for any speaker. As a speaker, you need to create content for your speeches (and articles and products, if you are creating those). Often-times, the content-creation process can seem like a huge wall. Whether you call it writer's block, a creative drought, or just the inability to think, the inability to generate content is a frustrating experience. Just as with the improviser though, the challenge isn't that you are blank, but rather that you are evaluating and filtering ideas as they come up. No idea is deemed "good enough" to get past your filter.

The key to generating content quickly is to remove these filters and let yourself flow. This is a great process not only for generating speech content, but also for writing articles and books. In addition to allowing you to create quickly, this process ensures that the content you create will be true to you. Rather than using other people's thoughts, what you come up with will come from inside of you.

Practice flowing and letting ideas come from inside, and you will be able to blow past writer's block and generate relevant and interesting content very quickly.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you create fantastic content that's true to you, visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Step 4 -Tell Fabulous Stories

As a speaker, you must be able to do two things - engage the audience, and make your point. The most effective way to do this is by telling effective stories.

Audiences do not enjoy being talked at and lectured to. Even when audiences think they enjoy a pure lecture, chances are that the speaker was weaving stories into their speech.

Storytelling has been around forever. Stories draw an audience in, keep them paying attention, and illustrate points exceptionally well. Don't believe me? Look at any religious text - chances are it's written as a story.

To be a powerful speaker, you need to be able to tell stories that make your points. To do that, you have to understand the basics of story construction. By constructing your story in a universal fashion, you create rapport with the audience and they find it easy to follow your story.

The most basic and familiar structure is the 3-Act structure:

Act 1 - Set-up, introduce the characters, introduce the situation, and introduce the obstacles

Act 2 - Move the story forward, make the trouble worse, advance the action

Act 3 - Resolve the story (the hero either gets what he wants or not)

This simple structure will strengthen your stories, improve your delivery, and get the audience on your side. Take a look at the stories you are telling now, and make sure you have a nice storytelling structure to them and your speeches can't help but improve.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you tell fabulous stories, visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Step 5 - Be Amazingly Entertaining and Engaging

We live in an entertainment based society. As a speaker, you *must* be able to entertain your audience. Being entertaining will not only ensure that your audience pays attention, but will also lead to repeat bookings and referrals.

Note: you have to be entertaining, not necessarily funny. There are many ways to entertain - you can be tender, passionate, lively, sad, etc. Humor is just one option (albeit a very good one...).

As an improv teacher and director, people often recommend their friends to me, usually with the line, "oh so-and-so is so funny; they'd be great at improv." Usually in these cases I just smile and say, "that's nice." The ability to be funny has very little to do with the ability to perform great improv. Improvisers who try to be funny invariably fail. Not only do they end up not being funny, but they also end up doing bad improv and not even being entertaining.

The first principle of being entertaining is to simply **be yourself**. While this sounds simple and trite, very few people are able to get up in front of an audience and be 100% themselves. And yet, audiences love to see authenticity from the platform. Speak from the heart, deliver content that is true to you, and have an authentic conversation with the audience and you will be engaging.

Second, **tell interesting stories that have points**. If you tell a funny story and nobody laughs, it's ok because the story has a point. If you tell a joke and nobody laughs, you are in trouble.

Third, if you can, **add humor**. I know that I said you don't have to be funny - but if you can, you'll be even more entertaining. An important note though is to add humor, not jokes. Humor comes from inside of you, from what you find funny in the world. Jokes come from the outside, and are often forced. Pay attention to what you find funny about your topic, and weave that into your speech.

If you can't be entertaining, you will have a hard time connecting to audiences and getting engagements. Add in a little fun, excitement, and humor, and you will be a powerful speaker.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you be amazingly entertaining and engaging (and yes, even funny), visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Step 6 - Be Impervious to Unexpected Surprises

On stage, as in life, things will go wrong. Challenges will arise, cell phones will ring, time will be cut, places will be lost, and audience members will speak out of turn. What differentiates a great speaker from an average (or bad) one is how he or she handles these challenges.

Many speakers get flustered by interruptions. Some push forward, ignoring the distraction. Others have pre-planned quips to throw out when something happens.

The best speakers, however, take each interruption as it comes and go with the flow. They address what needs to be addressed, use whatever they can to their advantage, and adroitly get the attention back on what's important - their speech and message.

This ability comes from having the improviser's mindset. An improviser obviously can not pre-plan much of anything. Since they are creating their content on the spot, all they

can do is take what's given to them and do the best they can with it. In fact, improvisers who try to pre-plan (and there are many of them out there...) invariably do the weakest work and end up being the hardest for others to work with.

Most people think that a speaker's ability to flow comes from experience. It does, but only because one way to develop the proper mindset is to be speaking for so long that the mindset naturally develops. To shorten the learning curve, you should strive to adopt this mindset in everything you do. Realize that things will not always go as planned, and when stuff messes up don't dwell on it. Keep your focus on moving the speech forward and making sure that the audience is getting your message.

This can be difficult, but the more you force yourself to focus on these things, the easier it becomes and the faster you become virtually unflappable from the stage.

(For specific information and exercises that will help you be impervious to unexpected surprises, visit <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>)

Keep Practicing

Those are the 6 steps to using improv comedy ideas to be amazing from the platform. As you improve your improvisational abilities, you will find your speaking skills improving as well.

The key though, is to practice. You can not just read about improv and expect to suddenly be great at it. The key to doing great improv is to make the principles ingrained in your head, so that what you do naturally and reflexively is the proper improv response. This will only come from practice.

One way is to find an improv theater where you live and take a class. This is a great way to learn improv because you will have an instructor giving you feedback as you go. The

class will also be a great deal of fun (it should be the most fun you've ever had learning) There are two potential drawbacks to this approach, though: 1) Depending on where you live, you might not have an improv group in your area (or there might not be a good one with a good class and instructor). 2) The class will not show you specifically how to apply improv skills to speaking – you will have to figure that out for yourself.

Another great way, of course, is to check out <http://www.ImprovForSpeakers.com>. This 3-DVD set will go through all 6 steps and show you specific improv games to help practice and develop the necessary skills for all 6. Each piece also explains specifically how to apply the skills to the speaking world. It's a great DVD set and the best way to learn how to apply improv skills to speaking.

Thanks for reading!

To your speaking success,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Avish Parashar". The signature is written in black ink and has a fluid, connected style.

Avish Parashar