

# Neil Mullarkey

## Losing your fear of being "mad, bad or wrong"

### Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Neil Mullarkey

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** hello everyone and welcome to another expert interview on creativity and innovation summit 2017, very happy to have Neil Mullarkey with us today, Neil is a holly wood actor, UK actor, improviser, author, speaker and is probably most famous for being one of the co founders of The comedy store players, one of the most famous improvisation groups in the entire UK. Neil is lovely having you with us.

**Neil Mullarkey:** Thank you very much, I have stalked you on twitter and elsewhere being intrigued by your work, so I am delighted to be talking to you now.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely, and we are very delighted to have you, I am sure ewe are going to have a lot of value today talking about creativity, improvisation, innovation and how those all fit together. But for people who don't know you and where you started out can you give us a brief background on when you got into acting and improvisation.

**Neil Mullarkey:** I was in university in Cambridge and I was president at the Cambridge university foot lights which is a comedy sketch group because that's what I wanted to do, I didn't tell my parents that showbiz and comedy was my hoped destination. But I got to be president, we toured around the UK and Australia, and I got my quit card which was the thing needed in the 1980's to be an actor in the western or on TV. But I started economical and social political science and I really got interested in that, but I was spending too much time writing, directing shows, review, sketch shows pantomime for the forth lights. But then we toured round Australia, we toured round UK and I found myself with my former foot lights charms, the gate theatre in Nottinghill, a small pub theatre now one of the highly commended off west end theatre and we were doing our show, it was kind of a Dario foe sq crazy fast if you like with the sketch show afterwards and the sketch show was called get your coat there we are leaving and the other one was called feeling the benefit and we found ourselves in this small theatre and I came up the stairs one day, there is this Canadian guy selling tickets and he was sitting in a wheel chair because we used all the regular chairs on the set , that was the only chair left, he was sitting there hunched over, scared, coat selling our tickets , we got chatting and seeing the name Cambridge foot lights on our poster, he had come from second city touring around Canada and his name was Mike Myers, unlike most British people I had heard of second city but I didn't know it was that improve I didn't know that this place had created so many stars who had gone on to movies and sadly not alive and specifically the Bruce brothers which I liked very much and an older from mash and Ed Asher from Lou grant. I didn't know improves, I knew

sketching and Mike said no there's this whole world of improv. I had heard of improv because there was a group called Umber broadcasting company and they use to do improv shows and I had this friend of mine gone to see their show and she said it was really great, it was funny and I said how did they do it, they must cheat because I came from a world of written sketches, you write the sketch, you try that and re write it and you copy and paste. She said no they take suggestions from the audience and create scenes immediately and I thought it was a cheat. It must take a suggestion of cheese and somehow I am buying some cheese today, for my cheese sandwich and taking my lunch to this garage or whatever, she said no I believe it's truly made up and Mike said yes it is, that's the whole thing about improv, behind improv he talked to me about some of the elements of improv, listening is the main skill, accepting offers, giving offers endow in your partner, making choices about what you do in the scene, giving things to your partner, taking what they give as a gift. We started doing a double called Mullarkey and Myers which was doing well and people say you guys are funny and then kid holla back and Dave Cohen spoke with the comedy stuff and said we are going to try some improv on Sunday nights, nobody really knew what improv as it was talked about in those days was, the regular people would say what do you make it up as you go along so in the world of theatre, we knew about improvised drama or devising through improvising but actually to make it up there and there in the front of the audience was not part of the general culture. So the first half of the show was standup comedy, and we did the second half improv. Ken holla back at work with Robin Williams in San Francisco, Mike obviously had a very good grounding from second city touring Canada. So October 27<sup>th</sup> 1985 before you were born Nick, I am not sure when you were born

**Nick Skillicorn:** I was two years old at that point really tragic

**Neil Mullarkey:** So we tried it and the audience liked it, it must have been really bad but there was this wonderful energy for a member of KITT and Mike was very experienced. They taught us at basics to run workshops for us to perform but also for anybody who wants to have a go and I sometimes taught often from what I have learned from Kit and Mike and gradually gradually I got the bug, I attended a week long workshop with Desmond Jones, Desmond Jones had been in theatre machine with Keith Johnson and I really loved it, I could see how joyous it was and how creative it was and that if you apply bit of structure which is say yes. We incorporate, bring things back, so we have running teams, characters who re appear, you can create stories, and actually it's really hard not to think that this was better than scripted comedy and certainly as it happened around that time, saw the film spinal tap, Christopher Guest says hang on a minute, I don't see many films as funny as the improvised stuff. There is that energy of improv. Mike and I carried on with Palmerton and then Josie Lawrence and Richard Branch, it was a success we fell and after a year, the comedy still wasn't sure we weren't getting great audiences but we carried on and within a couple of years we were doing well but certainly our audiences improved when who is in line anyway came along. They tried improv before amna broadcasting tried improv but the genius of Dan Patterson and Mark Levenson and Hatrick was to have Clive Anderson there with the audience behind him, so what looked like a messy unformed thing which looked like in a theatre you can forgive it for two hours on TV, you tighten it up and you have Anderson buzzing in trying to keep the energy up, keep it going, disrupting and reminding the audience that this is truly improvised. So who is lying helped us and by 1989 we started doing Wednesdays as well, we weren't sure how many people will turn up, first Wednesday we were sold out. So that has been my improv background, that's my improv

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family, the comedy store players every Wednesday, every Sunday and we will be thirty two years old in October 2017. So that was as a performer then around 1999, I was thinking what do I want to do, what do I really enjoy, I kind of drew out what I enjoyed, I really enjoyed the coastal players but there wasn't a lot of other show business that I particularly enjoyed, a lot of television was fairly dissatisfying for my character. I am not really good at those kinds of shows for example and I have been looking around and when you go to a movie set or a TV single camera set, the person who is really working and got the most interesting job. The director, I had done some directing courses then I wanted on a producer course and the thing that really tickle my interest was business, negative equity or equity funding or debt financing and whatever, profit and loss, all the things that shouldn't interest a so called creative person, I would love to have my own little business and I wrote down the things I like, teaching improve and running my own business and writing things down help enormously, I thought about doing an MBA , I did really well and think all the GMAT and , the graduate management aptitude test, bath business school, I went down for a day out luckily one wonderful woman who is a lecturer there said hang on a minute, Neil Mullarkey are you the guy who does improve and I said yes, well do you really want to do an MBA, we will love to have you with your different perspective and she said you need to think about that and I spoke to her colleague who had been a professor on the MBA courses, he said well in a way if you want to do training, coaching, leadership development, you don't need an MBA, you have it already, maybe you should keep your virginity as well, I started saying to people I want to do this and things came my way, searching, searching, wanted some creativity training, they just see me on the stage and they say well look at that guy let's let him in. so I fumbled my way around an improve course, a workshop for Saatchi, Saatchi for their planning and strategy people, and then a leading management consultancy found me through my wife attending a hen night of a partner there and said you know what we are helping people with their presentation skills with shakes pear and actors but that's about projecting and your voice and confidence in the body but what happens when you get a tough crowd, somebody pushing back the clients is what about this, what about that and that's when improves come in being able to think on your feet to treat what even a disgruntled client might give or say as an offer so those are the skills of Improv. Have I gone on too long?

**Nick Skillicorn:** Not at all, it's all good

**Neil Mullarkey:** so that's what I continued to do and I had this real feeling that the skill of improve number one is listening, I have four other words and my friend John from the many days and Brighton, he has two others listen, accept, commit. I have got four others but I thought listening is a really important skill in any organization to create wrapper to be more creative. Real listening which is not just listening to you, I am nodding, I am hearing, I am using what you say in the way that I respond, listen and link what I say to something you said and gradually I discovered that improve has many more applications over above that what you might call soft skill but actually its quite hard, but I have spent some time facilitating some sessions at Astride business school which is just out of London now part of ass Charles business school, and they were talking about emergence and complexity, what was fascinating to me was they were talking about improve mirroring how organizations are, they are just a bunch of people talking messy un informed conversation, it's not a straight line, it's not how the architecture we have you believe when you draw chief executive, CMO, CFO its much more fuzzy than that and improve is about that it can cope with ambiguity, cope with uncertainty and the emergence of how things emerge and how a strategy is something that is a

result of different conversations and use of sort of find things that emerge rather than you say here we are and we end up there. I saw a man called Henry Mintzberg, he said strategy, it pretend it goes from A to B but usually it's just a bunch of little conversations sort of funnel, a to sort of d and see insight you can see where you are heading but often like an improv scene, it's started out messy, you thought it's going to be about that but it turns out to be only later you found out what the spine. Am in the purpose of the sketch was, so there were leadership applications, how can I as a leader cope with ambiguity and now I don't know Nick do you feel you live in a UK world

**Nick Skillicorn:** What do you mean by Luka?

**Neil Mullarkey:** Luca is a thing, volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity now you can see any improv scene has that. Its volatile, could go anywhere uncertain which is at some point you don't know where it's going to head, complexity which is that thing that seemed unimportant could emerge later as being important, there are partners, there are little themes emerging, some of which are may get lost, some which appeared have got lost and re emerged, ambiguity I don't know what you are thinking and you don't know what I am thinking always but we can still create something together. So VUCA is a big by word now an organization I think it might have emerged from the financial world or IT world I am not sure but I find out there are more parallels in an organization, more parallels with improv than virtually any other ethos certainly in the old mechanical command and control pictures of how organization are, didn't seem to resonate with how people experience it, things like change programs. Never really quite achieve what they think, they want everyone unites against the leader not because the leaders tells them what to do, the leader doesn't always know the answer and the real strength of leadership is to know when you don't know the answer and how to accommodate the curate to coach your team to create an answer or to live with the questions before they know the answer all of which sounds quite unlike all of the stuff you might learn in old fashioned leadership management classes.

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's funny you say that because I have spent many years doing management consulting and it's all about structure, it's all about process, it's all about essentially planning out everything in advance and then keeping to that plan, that's what I specialized in and then the sad matter of the facts is you can plan out things in X level of detail but after a couple of months there's always going to be something which changes the trajectory or the timelines or the availability of the people and people need to adapt and react and its always a lot more fluid than people in the consulting and management space

**Neil Mullarkey:** Yes the thing about Improvs is actually there is structure in some aspects because people are scared, improv sound let's go crazy, let's all go naked and hang around and not have any meetings and just chill and noise wander around smoking dope and wearing flip flops, actually improv does have structures in terms of the show, you know comedy store player, we start at seven thirty on a Sunday and we finish at nine thirty. We know the games, we are going to play, we know the team members, comedy store has always sorted out who is going to be doing the lights, the sounds, the drinks, the foods, the tickets etcetera. So there's efficient structure and in light of what you said you got out of plan and I think else where I said there is a difference in a plan and planning you must have a plan but then the plan dies when you hit the enemy but you continue planning, so you are sort of living in the dynamic, that's why I really like the word from Ralph Stacey, Ralph Stacey from the university of Hartford and his views on complexity of leadership which is in some respect,

you have got to keep the plan, you have got to keep producing the widgets, you got to know an agenda whilst still holding lightly the idea that things may change and adapt because it's not all chaos and it's not all rigid planning, the reality is we need a bit of a sense in what might happen on the other hand we must notice that adaptation will be necessary flexibility. Charles Darwin first said that if you adapt, you will survive. So I want the idea of creativity to get people thinking about structure, so you have structure to start with and also you if you have ever seen an improve show and I wonder how many people have, they should definitely go and see a show, not only have a structure to begin with, we kind of know who is in the game so we start with those two people or whatever and there may be somebody saying freeze, can we have another film style or another emotional whatever, so these are structures there but there is an emerging structure, it's a scene in a hospital so I as a doctor and a nurse, what kind of doctor, what kind of nurse, what history do they have, so you are creating structures you go, that's what I mean by an emergent structure and many of the best teams are the ones who create their own structures, they make their own rules and I saw John Cleese speak once he said the most creative environment from their research tends to be small team, finite deadlines and a clear budget now that's exactly how it is in theatre and showbiz basically. You know the play will end, you start rehearsing, there is a finish date, you quickly get to work, you start be intimate with people perhaps tell them about yourselves but you know that the rehearsal space is one way, you need to get on with the work often you bond through the work rather than going on away days and stuff that in business we think we have to go away for three days and get drunk and build a raft and of course the work you do isn't building a raft so why not bond over the way you talk, the way you share, the way you co create and improve is directly pick a book because it's about people and it's about conversations.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I love the fact that you talked about these relationships between how improves work with theatre and the business world as well, because I have been in a lot of improves performances, I have seen many improves performances as well, people who don't know what goes into a good improve show they often say it looks like a bit like magic, I could never do that because these people are just essentially being completely spontaneous and coming up with something in a very what seem like chaotic way but people who are in the show, people don't realize all the work that happen before hand about figuring out what the kills and techniques about what makes good improves versus bad improves. So could you give us a bit of insight from yourself about what it takes to learn what is good improvisation and where you always perfect at it or did you also have to work at it?

**Neil Mullarkey:** I had to work at it, my first teacher was Desmond Jones, we used to work with Keith Johnson and I spent a week, you had to do lots of stuff, where you go to a box and you pull out a hundred things and of course after about five things you can't think of anything and you notice that quickly that the way to think of something is to associate, by playing games sometimes with groups, they can just say anything they like and of course after a while they go into themes, they go orange, apple, grape fruit and you begin to realize that creativity does need a bit of a structure, it may look like free association but our mind, left brain right brain they work together so I say creativity, think of twenty six animals that's tricky, okay what about if you thought of an animal from each letter of the alphabet, you could think of twenty six animals perhaps not sure if I need begin with X but you think well one is cheating this if you are using a structure, so the thing that I learnt through improves is shut down some of your judgmental capacities and there are two things to say about that, Keith Johnson who is the sure certainly here in the UK of improve his book called improve and he said

when you let go of the fear being seen as mad, bad or wrong that's when you become a good improviser and actually that's when you don't appear mad, bad or wrong. You will say things that you didn't expect, you will say things that surprise you, but if your focus is what is the other person said, how can I use her offer to build and I am not thinking too far ahead, I am just batting the ball back and the other thing that I saw, a TV show here in the UK, a documentary called horizon and it looked at some jazz musicians improvising jazz in an MRI scanner and two parts of the brain shut down, one was volition, which is I meant to do this, I know where its coming from, the other one was what are people thinking of me, so that is what improv is so wonderful about, it's that counter intuitive, once you can forget to censor and filter and just go with what the other person gave you and what may be inside yourself as well, sometimes you have to say yes to yourself and see if it makes sense. And people say o you are so clever, you are so witty and actually I say to them it's not witty in terms of Oscar wild or really well written piece, its ill informed, sometimes you could write it down, sometimes you might say it later but often the joy is you had had to be there. What did he say, how did she pack it; pick up that theme, where did they take it and the joy of not knowing. When I do theatre sometimes and I do a play with script, I kind of hope something will go wrong because I want that joy, o the spontaneity, the expected which is very not in me really but the main skill of improve is to accept what is there, to use what is there and Mike Myers use to teach us, he is a great teacher and he used to say you are always looking for why the gods of improve chose this scene today why now and because a really bad improve scene and it might be worth explaining that to people watching improve seem like magic well its magic in the same way that a magician has really practiced his skill or her skill , a bad improve is no look there is a theme, I can see it who are you don't know, that makes me happy who cares, so Michael do say specific specific specific why the gods of improve chosen in terms of creativity it's hard to say hey lets come up with creative ideas, so a lot of the creative games I do is just start somewhere. For example I am not great at drawing but if I scribble something on a piece of paper and turn it around and say what could it be , start with something Picasso said the paper defends its whiteness, so the creative games in the organizations you might say what is the worst idea or what is the idea that children would come up with or what's the idea you would have if you aren't working in this sector, if you were motor mechanics or if you were another culture rather than look at it really hard how we can make this idea better than it is now or how can we somehow cut cost, think of it laterally. In fact there is a guy he is called John Kay who wrote the book called Obliquity which is the noun from a bleak common things from oblique , so many times creative break through has come from where you least expect it. Classic one being post it notes that came from somebody trying to make a really strong glue, he kept failing, came up with a really weak glue which was perfect some years later at that friend who was a choir master who wants to just remove a page and remove them, the post it note as it became and put it somewhere else and it could likely attach. Penicillin another one mistake, so he did entirely the lab, now we have penicillin. So improve has structure but it allows spontaneity and a really good book in fact John Clesse favorite book on creativity is called hair brain taught her smiling. Hair as in the rabbit, the hare and the tortoise. The story of the hare going fast, so fast head falls asleep and tortoise came along later and hare brain taught us mine by a man called Guy Claxton like Claxton but with a t. Guy Claxton is a professor of learning and he talked about our hare brain which is fast, problem solving can show its working and the tortoise, slow ponderous questions assumptions, the tortoise mind, the under mind is the one you are in the shower, you are driving and you suddenly think o I remember that word or ah yes that was her name you are not even thinking about it and

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something comes up and so what brilliantly improves supplies is you could have structures, you have a game, you got some sort of structure to the games but you could bring out some thoughts on creativity, where did that come from I don't know but I enjoyed it, allowing it to emerge or facilitating my colleagues at the moment where he or she needs a thing sort of picture, we don't know where it came from, then the writer asks, many writers will ask where does it come from they say I don't know and I don't want to know I just know that I need to sit and let it come or walk and let it come

**Nick Skillicorn:** There's also a lot of research behind how that happens, some of the other people during the seminar have been talking about insights into the brain of how it essentially able to work auto pilot in some ways and the difference between when you are focusing on a challenge and that is taking up all of your mental ability versus when you allow your mental ability to focus on less and essentially spread out a bit more, that's when these moments of insights come to you

**Neil Mullarkey:** Yea that was somebody who done a PhD in neuroscience was a consultant and now is in private equity, he told me that the brain works in parallel not in series, so there's still stuff going on, that's why I say to people don't for goodness sake try and write your presentation the night before, start writing it three weeks before then your under mind is thinking about it, as you go get coffee you wander around chat to people and instead of back loading in the night before, I must write my presentation, just get started, get thinking about it, just get ten minutes talking, go away and then you are using all that bandwidth in your brain that is so valuable and so I despair when people have meetings in boardrooms with low ceilings, no natural light and they are not really allowing all of the embodied intelligence that they have if they could walk around think and go to different places. In fact there was one major consultancy that use to have a creativity centre, somewhere out of London, I won't say where just in case people identify it but there are different rooms, so one room like the brain run, one room was a teenage bedroom, one room was a family living room and the idea was that you can go to these different environments and start thinking about your different clients or the different consumers and there was one room which was a board room, guess which they most choose to do meetings.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Unfortunately the board room

**Neil Mullarkey:** Yea and even the human brain which had shape like a brain, you lie on the floor, they put chairs and tables in that to make it more like a board room and in fact guy Claxton who I mentioned had written a book I think it's called intelligence made flesh because there is so much research now that says that your brain and your body are not separate, Amy Cuddy who talked about the power pose and many other places, we know that we are not just a head with this thing attached, say embodied intelligence, use your body go for walks, research says that if you have higher ceilings you have more ideas on the other hand when it's time to implement those ideas, go to lower ceiling room, you know you get on with sorting out the idea project managing etcetera. None of this is considered I am sure by many people, many organizations, what's the creative environment that we are setting up for people and it kinds of annoy me when people say let's go away to brainstorm, let's go away to team build and you go away to somewhere else and you come back and here we are back in the day. So I think need to be running through your day, go for more walks, look up, really look up.

**Nick Skillicorn:** One thing I will like to ask you about is what you touched on previously which is this idea of letting go of the fear of seeming mad or seeming bad because a lot of people who aren't as fortunate professional stage performance like yourself in corporate situations, they are petrified of the concept of speaking out if they have an idea because they are afraid what if someone thinks it's not very good, what if I am not sure about it, what if it is not perfect, what recommendation would you give to people like that

**Neil Mullarkey:** well, I have a friend called John Higgins, and he is working with Megan Rich at Ashridge business school and they are working on the project they got an article called speaking truth to power. What stops us speaking up like that, why did these memories like errors and elsewhere happens, it's the same thing there are many interviews with people saying well I didn't speak up and then well hang up, you are the leader, and do you allow people to speak up. So I am thinking about the situation it talks about, so I got an idea and I don't want to say it in case I am seen as mad, bad or wrong well I can understand that you can get upset, you don't want to waste people's time or money, however I would say start trying to find moments where you can say those ideas, if you can create an environment for yourself with your team, with your colleagues or with one other person where you can speak up and don't worry about saying I don't know where this came from but how about this, I also teach people about asserted body language it is very often being so, look I don't throw this very good ideas and they are creating an environment for themselves down play their idea for their fellow player to feel oh this is not such a good idea, so that small tweak so I don't want you going in like goliath tomorrow saying hey chief executive I got a good idea you schmuck, the world is a series of tweaks, there may be some huge revolutions but it's hard to further use that in the day to day. So notice and think about how to best present that idea you may have to like Henry Mintzberg said the strategy leadership team came up with lots of ideas, lots of messy stuff and then somehow post rationalized it maybe wait for the right time to mention your idea but certainly try and create an environment at least where you can, where you are modeling a more creative conversation and I often ask people when I teach them improv, it's okay or me I can get up and do scenes where there is deaths in appropriate sexual things or what most of which come out of somebody making a mistake or can't remember something and they have forgotten and we can go anywhere, we can go to heaven, we can have ghost, we can have people coming back from the dead that's okay and I say actually what are the small things that you can do, what are the tweaks and my friend Steve Chapman who has a blog called dart and a book called scorpions smoke, he talks about small modest experiments, SME, small modest expounds just try a little thing, maybe re arrange the kitchen, put the coffee cups in a different place, put a smiley face somewhere and have the meeting not in that meeting room, talk to somebody who you didn't think you could talk to, try and say something in that meeting that even questions the nature of that meeting

**Nick Skillicorn:** And there is so many moiré things that come to mind, we are coming up to the end of the interview unfortunately, what I like to ask all of the experts is if you have got one tip that people can try out this afternoon, this week to getting value out of what we have talked about today, what will you recommend they try out

**Neil Mullarkey:** Well improvisers often talk about the game yes and the ethos yes and, we never verb to yes and. That sounds scary because I can't say yes and to everything in life, can I walk and I am working as a cardiologist or an accountant or whatever, so I would say simply say two words both beginning with L, listen and link, try and consciously listens to what somebody says and use one



word or idea to link what you say to what they said. Listen and link, that's what it is, That's the yes and in action you don't say the words yes or and but its underneath what you are saying, listen and link and there is so much research that shows that create raptor and can be so much creative.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, we are going to have links to all of your resources and information up on screen, can you just let people know where that's going to take them

**Neil Mullarkey:** I would like them to go to neilmullarkey.com immediately my whole name is my twitter user name, so you can find out that I am always putting up articles that I like, neilmullrkey.com, you can find out it's got two parts little bit like the screen we are on now, one is called learn and one is called laugh and actually they are very much alive, one is my career in show biz, one is my teaching, keynote speaking coaching stuff and if ever you are in London I would love to meet you , in real life we perform the comedy store place at the comedy store every Wednesday, every Sunday get to meet me and see what I am talking about, come and see if what yea and, if we are listening and linking is actually people often say you talked about it in your workshop and I can see you, we are just doing it and that's all you are doing.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, Thank you once again for coming here and I look forward to being at the show with you again in London.

**Neil Mullarkey:** Thank you