

Shad Kunkle

How improvisation helps you play the scene you are really in, not the one you wished for

Speakers:

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

Shad Kunkle

Expert Interview transcript:

Nick Skillicorn: Hello everyone again and welcome to another expert interview session at the innovation and creativity summit 2017, very happy to have Shad Kunkle on the line today, Shad is a friend of mine from Chicago and he's a improviser and facilitator from the Second City comedy guys and from also in improve Olympic, he's involved in just about everything there is to do with improvisation in Chicago and I'm happy to have him on the line.

Shad Kunkle: Thank you for having me Nick I'm no glad to be here.

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who don't know about your work and about improv in general why don't you tell them a bit about who you are and how you got into improvisation.

Nick Skillicorn: I started out right around the Y2K crisis which we all survived, I am happy to say in the late ninety's started doing some improvisation I was looking for a culture of people who were looking to do creative things with their free time and I got caught up in improvisation since that time I have audition for a lot of things and a lot of small parts here in the States also I have played on several Harrell teams and I own one that's gone on for about twenty years now or just about twenty years call Carl in the passions. I toured with The Second City for a number of years and did some shows with them and now I primarily just go into different businesses and talk about these practices that we do on stages improvisers where we have to be creative and innovative and create something out of nothing you know brief thirty to forty seconds in front of an audience and get their acceptance and how that same skill set can be applied towards being more flexible and adaptive to business environments as they're constantly changing as well.

Nick Skillicorn: it's one of the reasons that I love improv for anyone is interested Shad actually taught me improv when I was in Chicago, I can't speak highly enough of him but at a lot of people

have this misconception that improvisation is just for the arts so it's just something for jazz or is just something for the theater and how true is that.

Shad Kunkle: I think that any time you pick up a phone or you interact with another human being where you don't know what's going to happen you're technically improvising in that moment and there's a mix of emotions that come over you whether it's fear or anxiety and those emotions have to be focused. so the art of improvisation is about focusing the mind in the moment to do an activity in front of you I personally think that serves all things that we do now when people think of improvisation they think when people are taking bigger risks like playing a trumpet where they don't know what the next note is going to be or up in front of being in an audience but there is risk around us every day and I think that we just use those things to focus the mind and that is where I focus my energy on getting people how to be present in the moment and that's something that can follow you anywhere.

Nick Skillicorn: And something that I always talk about with my business clients as well improvisation is really the crux of creativity at a moment's notice when you need to be able to generate an idea without too much preparation behind it and I think it's a skill that I think really serves a lot of people well not just when they need to think of new ideas in an artistic sense but any solution to a challenge.

Shad Kunkle: Yeah I think what happens is in those moments where they say we need answers quick the first thing we do was panic and then we spent a lot of time dealing with our own personal panic and our own personal dialogue with ourselves thinking oh gosh am I going to be able to do this rather than focusing in on what is the first step, what is the next thing I can do right now, what are the table challenges that I can overcome In this short moment and get the ball moving forward and I think that yeah absolutely in a business environment where someone comes down on you and says we need to have this done right now your flexibility can be the difference between you being the person they go to in the future or not.

Nick Skillicorn: So for people who don't know much about improvisation, they think that it's just people goofing around but there's actually a structure behind it to help people towards good ideas can you just give us a brief insight into the sort of guidelines behind how improv can help make better ideas

Shad Kunkle: Yeah absolutely so when we improvise on stage the most important thing that we can do is we have to realize that we're not alone, two people get on stage and they build off of each other based on what the other person says. so we have to say yes to that information and that yes doesn't necessarily mean we agree with that, it means that we accept them we're thankful for the information that's provided for us and we move forward for instance if I was in the states doing an

improvisational scene and I ask for a suggestion, well every night we're asking for suggestions, every night nine out of ten times we're going to get the suggestion and it doesn't matter whether we want that suggestion or not that person in the audience it's their first time saying that suggestion to us and they think they're the first person ever to do it so with authenticity we have to accept that be thankful for that suggestion so if my scene partner says to me Well you're an idiot Well I don't like being called an idiot, I don't care to be called an idiot but if I can look past what I what I'm reacting to and see the gift that the person is giving then I give myself permission to take risks on stage and be an idiot. So the idea being that we wave off all are mistakes into whatever it is we're doing and keep moving forward and we do that through the philosophy of saying yes to the information and adding own point of view and that's how we build a scene from nothing to a lot of things in a very short period of time.

Nick Skillicorn: It's similar to a lot of people talking about deferring judgment when hearing new ideas is that right to say

Shad Kunkle: That's absolutely what we're doing, we're just following judgment of others and more importantly of ourselves because we have to accept the information we put forward as well. so it's very easy to defer judgment of others because we can remind ourselves to be nice because most of the time we're filtering all information through ourselves and this is what gets in the way of us being creative because if I'm having a conversation with myself inside my head right now and you are my secondary conversation then I'm probably going to not be quick and responsive to what you're telling me but if I made you the primary conversation, the conversation in my head the secondary conversation then I'm going to be quicker and more reactive to what you have say.

Nick Skillicorn: Is there not a risk though that you end up not thinking things through and making more mistakes if you do that.

Shad Kunkle: That is the fear and that fear usually comes when you start thinking about those things the mistakes you're going to make the possibility of failure we have to see ourselves a little bit and trust our competencies. so if I'm thinking those things that I'm going to fail I probably will but if I'm simply reacting to you I'm less aware of like is it pitfalls that I could step into and I'm more in service of trying to help you with your problem and therefore less likely to make a tragic mistake. In situations where we're talking about legal situations or if you're a surgeon for goodness sakes don't improvise but those people also are continuously trained in those fields and they have muscle memory that will guide them through those moments when they have to. For the most part in everyday conversations, people are going to be more accepting of you if you're focused on them and less Judgmental I've found. I've been doing this for a lot of years and the only times I make mistakes are when I'm over thinking things on my end versus being reactive to what the other person say.

Nick Skillicorn: So we've talked about this concept of yes and building on what other people talk about we have talked about the concept of deferring judgment what other sort of fundamentals of improvisation are there that people can wrap their head around

Shad Kunkle: Well one primary thing that we always forget about is the art of listening and listening primarily to the other person, listening to understand the human need as to why someone is bringing information to you. think about how often someone says something to you and you roll your eyes because you've heard this a million times, how little do we think of what is the human need behind why that person brought us this information, why do they keep repeating themselves, well they don't feel heard so how can we re tailor our conversation so that the other person feels heard so that we can get past this moment and thinking past our reaction to things and thinking more about hearing what the other person is saying, why they're trying to, how often in conversation do we listen to the very last word of what someone is saying versus planting out what we're going to say in advance and when we do that we miss a ton of information that they're telling us. How many people tell you a story and give you the headline right up front, how many people walk in and say the following story about how I got fired at work today well there was a cold breeze as I stepped onto the podium, we give them mundane information first and we built towards a climactic ending but if we're not listening all the way through the end all we're hearing is the mundane details and that tells us two things, first of all get to our point more quickly second of all if you don't listen all the way through you might be missing what the other person is telling us and that's one thing that we have to do with improvisation because what people tell us or what people do in front of us is the only thing that we have to build upon, there is no other incoming information and if we miss that we're lost and we've lost the scene partner and it's embarrassing because there's three hundred over serve people watching us for us listening in improvisation means that, if we don't listen the audience reacts by booing us or not giving us their attention and that is a blessing in your world if you don't listen what you say experience is, the word I'm looking for is the relationship spoils over a long period of time. so we get the benefit of being booed, we know when we aren't listening but in your world people just stop talking to you if you don't listen over a long time.

Nick Skillicorn: There's a really clear parallel that I always found between when I was on stage doing improv and doing corporate work which is the sort of people who try and plan out the perfect joke or the perfect punch line right from the beginning and then hold it in and wait for any moment to bring it out are quite similar to the people in work who are always just holding in either their best idea or they're there holding on to the fact that they're the best at something but if you try to do that in improv on stage everyone else is going to be building something together and actually making something of value and you can come in and either bloat something out and it makes you look stupid or worst of all it can destroy what everyone else has been building up.

Shad Kunkle: We say play the scene you're in not the one you want. we have to have a flexible agenda, I think a lot about sales people who come in and they've got a certain product that they're looking to sell no matter what and they walk in and they start pushing this product but they haven't

stopped to listen to hear what the problem is that the person is that they're selling to and how their product might help that problem versus them just wanting to make a sale and I think this is a common problem with us, we eat we start making a perfect picture in our mind of what the world is going to be like but the world doesn't operate that way, the world is much more chaotic we have to be reactive to what the world throws to us, we have to be competent and in present and exist in a chaotic world and react to that incoming information in dept. if we try to preplan the future, the future will betray us it most likely will not come that way it's an improvisation if you think of a joke you have to remember that the audience is improvising with you, as you're improvising on stage they're also going what will I say in that moment, what will I do and they have a collective energy of three hundred people thinking about what the next X better thing to say would be if you try to out think them, one against three hundred they're going to outguess you every time, you have to surprise yourself if you're going to surprise an audience.

Nick Skillicorn: What sort of advice do you have then about people taking this concept of listening and actually applying it to building new ideas and companies because you can listen to your team mates internally in the company but you can also listen to external people quite often the people who you want your customers to be.

Shad Kunkle: Yeah it I mean there's so much information going around, there's so much crossover that we get caught up in our silos at offices where we don't realize that what we're doing here affects people over here. So we listen to our coworkers we listen within our internal silos but to step back and understand what the nature of the work is that we do and how it applies to the rest of the business is very important. for instance I ask people a lot of in my exercises sometimes to describe how cell phone works or Smartphone and don't think all right great they will talk about specific apps and using Skype like we talked about here using different services and then I'll also have them step back and I'll say ok great now take that same and explain how a smart phone works to someone from the 1950's explain how smart phone works to somebody from the sixteen hundreds and now of a sudden you start to pull back as you listen to yourself because there's no frame of reference from the other side and as you pull back you start to see what is the function of what I do, what is the importance of what I do in relationship to the overall service we're providing to the client rather than the mundane details of what I do. It changes the scope of how you see your own work not to mention the effect it's having on your audience.

Nick Skillicorn: So we've talked about listening now another thing that I find fascinating about improvisation is yes you can try to do it alone but the best improvisation both on stage and in companies happens when there's multiple people building off each other what sort of insides do you have around that.

Shad Kunkle: In order to be creative you have to be reacting to something, the people who improvise by themselves are schizophrenic they are just listening to another mind talking and that

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works, that's ok it does work but there's something about watching people collaborate together, to see two minds of separated from each other acting as one, that really is beautiful and I think artists in general it's why jazz players might play different instruments with each other to build off of the last note that was played to take it for a little while to hand it off and I think that the harmony of two people building together is really where the beauty of it comes from and also just our basic desire to socially interact successfully with people, we're constantly wanting to be accepted and accepting other people first is the best way to have yourself accepted as well and improv is completely rooted in that premise take the other person's idea accept it and build up their idea. Show them how great their idea was by taking it only first second and loving it and giving it a chance to live for a little while and then having them join you back, the back and forth makes for terrific harmony.

Nick Skillicorn: It's something that we talk about when I'm doing innovation workshops you can be creative by yourself but you can't innovate by yourself because along the lines you're going to need to involve other people and I can't remember exactly what you taught me back in Chicago but you can you can build like a building as a group, what was the phrase you used

Shad Kunkle: Oh boy, build a brick bring a brick not a cathedral you don't have to build the whole thing yourself your responsibility is just one brick at a time and each person brings that brick and contributes it, if you sit back and try to have built the perfect building all on your own, It's going to take a very long time because we tend to judge ourselves we're perfectionists and that's ok, that's good to be to be right and correct yet at the same time we talk about operating from a place of abundance, get a lot of ideas out there how great ideas are always going to be great, they're going to happen they will always survive it's how we treat the lesser ideas that give us a chance to have the great ideas. when we do comedy writing we make sure to not say no to someone else's idea because how quickly will they jump in and provide another idea and now we've only got you know if we've got six people writing jokes at a table and two of the ideas you've said no to they're not going to contribute jokes you're going to miss out on that really funny joke later on. So we have to accept other people's ideas even if we're judging them we have to remove that judgment because we're creating an environment of support which gives way to more contribution into being by yourself usually gives way to hesitancy. your biggest critic is yourself and what you need is other people around to say hey keep going that first idea was pretty good what's the next idea, operate from a place of abundance, you know a lot of ideas out there being built

Nick Skillicorn: What about the people though who their main fear isn't the judgment of themselves by themselves, what about the people and this is so common in companies who their main fear is judgment by their boss or judgment by the other people in the company and the fear of failure if they try something.

Shad Kunkle: Yeah that is a tricky one, people are terrified of corporate culture and C.E.O.'s and people coming down hard on them, whenever we do our exercises we always put everybody in a

circle and the reason we do that is because everyone needs to see everyone and just because someone's a C.E.O. and just because someone is working or operating in the mailroom they all serve a larger purpose of the company and at the end of the day the client is not going to judge your product based on how well the C.E.O. did or how well the person in the mailroom did, it the client is going to judge your product based on your reputation as an organization and a lot of times we have people with high status and maybe they create environments to protect themselves because of insecurities or maybe they're open and allow people into their world to have good communication, I think that the most important thing is to realize you are part of a machine no matter what your status is and you have a responsibility to a service at some level in that machine at all times. it's when we focus on the greater goal that we get past the nuances of internal politics, it can be very challenging but I know that I walk in and talk to a lot of high end business people all the time my job is to come here and teach people how to be open minded not to win business and if I am more concerned about the next job rather than being present and aware in the moment while I'm doing the job I'm doing, I won't do that job well and I won't get hired. it's a confidence thing believing in yourself others will believe in you too even if those people have higher status than you or in a position of evaluating you or judging you, it's important that we operate from a place of self-confidence and know that they're probably thinking filtering information through themselves and you're filtering information through that yourself. If you can filter information through how can I be of service to them, I think those walls of status start to disappear a little bit.

Nick Skillicorn: I want to touch on one last things specific to improvisation and that is this concept of speed versus originality because when we talk about creativity, quite often the way you measure creativity is either the number of ideas you can generate per minute or how different each of those ideas are from one another and what usually ends up being of a bigger benefit to companies is the more original, more different ideas so are there any exercises or little tips that you can give from improvisation about how people can become better at not only generating more ideas just on the fly but also actively try and become more original in the ones they come up with.

Shad Kunkle: Well I think it's interesting because we are mind needs that needs boundaries and borders to work within one of the exercises we do is we have one person grab a person by hand and they point to things and they have to say they have to name that they anything that it's not and it's the most challenging thing in the world and you walk around and point your shoe right now and I am saying elephant and my next impulse is to say right answer is horse and I go through a list of animals now I'm established a system of it's all has to be all animals thinking outside of the box is really challenging and great creativity comes from inspiration. so we have to look outside of the box to a lot of times when people are creating a new service or new product it's in comparison to the products and services that are already out there and that's where we get into a challenge of why and why not take their service versus mine. if we can pull back our focus and filter it through a different source of information to build our thought, maybe here you're looking at other products and trying to do what they're doing but over here maybe somebody is looking at a different need in the workplace, we talk about creating lists top ten lists of needs in the workplace, top ten pull lists of solutions and really letting yourself go while really people are so afraid of saying something that's

outrageous we jokingly have people plan parties and we tell them you're going to plan a party we say budget is no concern, the space time continuing is no concern, if you want to have a party on the moon on an aircraft carrier with Abraham Lincoln as your D.J. we can make that happen and we just have people plan parties and we asked them afterwards what they thought people said what get out of hand it's a little crazy we are terrified of operating from a place of abundance because we're so careful to control the circumstances and what we have to do is we have to go too far to pull ourselves back and it can be as simple as creating a low stakes environment where you just have a brainstorming session and everything's on the table. when I improvise I try to tell people when they're really nervous and they come in and I say we're going to do bad improv for twenty minutes I want to see the worst ideas maybe not twenty minutes but I'll say you know for a full minute you're going to do a montage of just terrible ideas, show me the worst ideas you can possibly show me and just get it out of your system and what's crazy is in improvisation we tend to build up with those terrible initiation lines and make great scenes that are unexpected because we have to get ourselves out of that box of thinking we have to give ourselves permission to fail however we do it, fail first because that's when the great ideas come afterwards find a way to fail successfully in a low stakes environment.

Nick Skillicorn: Of course, fail fast fail cheaply is what you would say in innovation and then the last thing I want to ask you about because we're coming up to the end of the session is the Second City group they don't just do improvisation, they also do sketch comedy, so from your experience having done both improvisation and sketch comedy when you are doing a creative projects that actually needs to be planned out and have an end result What's your creative process, does improv always feature or is it completely different when you're doing something a bit more long term

Shad Kunkle: Well the first thing I do is I don't plan everything out, I get bits and ideas of what I want to do and I know that if I'm doing a scientific project I'm going to be building with somebody else so we're going to have partial ownership and so what I will bring to the table is an idea of what I want to have happen. The beginning, the middle and the end and I will then get into the space with somebody else and we'll start putting it up on its feet and then we act that we take it from the written page and put it up on its feet and react to it in the moment and if we do that in front of an audience we see what the audience is liking, now we're getting direct feedback as we create material and then we'll do that several nights and the next night will go up there and do it in front of an audience and get creative feedback as we're moving forward. So now what I've done is I've taken the source of input as to from the end result and tested stuff out before I've created my final product. This way I don't have to build something up to and have several layers like a novel of a scene and then have to go back and slowly kill off the things that I enjoy creating. I get to build it in time with the people around me so the finished product is accepted by all, so it's kind of an insight on how my creative process goes when creating

Nick Skillicorn: Shad, it's been wonderful speaking with you today but before we go what I like to ask all of the experts is, for the viewers and listeners who are keen to take some of what you've talked

about and put into practice if you go one sort of tip or one actionable insight that they can try out in a low stakes fail fast scenario and sometime this week

Shad Kunkle: I would encourage people to try and listen to someone else and not be afraid of the awkward silence at the end and trust that sit in that awkward silence for a little bit and just see what happens because no one ever got upset at somebody for listening, no one ever said you know what Nick's problem is he listens to much I would encourage people to in conversation try to listen all the way through and take a moment after they speak of contemplation of what they have to say and see if the answers are there for you at the end because our fear is that we won't know what to say but in that moment we will we have to trust our competencies and the more you do that the more you'll start to see the world is a lot less scary than we think it is.

Nick Skillicorn: Shad it's been wonderful having you here today we're going to have links on screen to where people can find out more about you and the corporate work that you do. Where are those links going to take them?

Shad Kunkle: They can go to www.shadkunkle.com I know you don't need the WS but I like to throw them out there anyway, I am old school and then of course at secondcity.com is an institution that I work with a lot and I owe chicago.com here in town is also another place to go to any of those places check out the links and learn about improvisation and how we talk to people every day.

Nick Skillicorn: Shad it's been wonderful having you here and I look forward to speaking with you again soon

Shad Kunkle: Hope to see you again Nick thank you.