

Conversation and Improvisation Assembly

Conversation is one of the great joys of life. I hope we can all remember a moment when we have been part of a group of friends, all of us on form conversationally, and everyone has been reduced to hysterical laughter. Or we can remember a more private conversation, in which things were shared, confidences exchanged, and it made all the difference to us. Having a decent conversation is something most of us imagine we can do without any problem – and certainly without much thought. These things just happen naturally. Don't they?

But in truth, really good conversations come along very rarely; largely because too many of us think that we are born knowing how to talk to other people, rather than that good conversation is an art dependent on acquiring a few skills.

Some people get conversation badly wrong. These people are crashing bores. We have all met them. These are the people who use conversation as an opportunity to talk exclusively about themselves. These are the people who press their opinions upon you and require your agreement with them. These are the people who see every conversation as an opportunity to tell you what you should do, or engage in a long and dull story, or offer a list of facts. These are the people who see the part of the conversation in which you are speaking as an opportunity to think about what they are going to say next. We do not want to be like them.

So we should seek out and fashion better conversations.

Perhaps we should begin with the question of what a conversation is ideally for. Three basic functions suggest

themselves: amusement, finding common ground and clarification.

I place amusement first, because it is too often overlooked or belittled. On the contrary, I believe that the majority of our conversations with others *should* make amusement their primary purpose. We should all aim to be a fun person to be with. That doesn't mean you have to make others laugh all the time. Amusement comes in many forms. It could take the form of wit. It could be wry observation. It could be an idea perfectly expressed. Just be likeable. Whatever form it takes, an amusing conversation leaves everyone feeling better, stronger and more equipped to face the rest of life.

The second element: finding common ground between ourselves, is also crucially important in conversation. When we find common ground, we open our hearts to each other and

find that we are no longer alone; we discover that another person shares our thoughts, feelings or hopes. It is about honesty and openness. It builds trust and community. It takes courage. Too much of what we really feel isn't shared with others for fear that we'll be humiliated or cause undue alarm or upset. Too little of the most important part of ourselves has the chance to be discussed; until we find ourselves in a good conversation.

We can all feel insecure. But if we give in to insecurity, it can lead us to display only our strengths, talk only about our successes, suggest only ideas that we know others will agree with. As a result, we become boring. It is in the revelation of our weaknesses, in the display of our fragilities, that we grow interesting and likeable. It is almost impossible to be bored when a person tells you sincerely what they have failed at or

who has humiliated them, what they long for and when they have been at their craziest.

The last category is the pleasures of clarification. These are conversations in which another person sharpens our ideas.

Solitary thinking is hard: our minds jump away from the pressure to bring ideas into focus, preferring the charm of daydreaming or other distractions instead. How helpful, therefore, to be able to set about the job of thinking with someone who can hold us to the issues we need to refine, lend us courage to keep going with our hesitant opening thoughts and enrich our analyses with their insights.

We should be braver and more demanding about the conversations we fall into. We should strive to cultivate and develop them. So how can we do this?

How can one shape a great conversation? Well, there are rules. The rules were developed for a different purpose, but work perfectly well to assist us in getting closer to each other through conversation. These rules were developed to shape a form of comedy which I hope everyone here knows well - improvised comedy. You may have seen it in a television show called 'Whose Line is it Anyway?' Improv comedy is when two or more comedians make us laugh with a scene that they are making up on the spot, often using prompts which they have just been given by members of the audience. When the comedians have no script, no structure, and no idea how they are going to finish, it is clear that improv comedy is a high wire act. So how do they do it? And how can what they do help us with our approach to conversations?

The first rule of improvisation is **AGREE**. Always agree and **SAY YES**. When you're improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if you and I are improvising and I say, "Get down, they are shooting at us!" and you say, "That's not shooting, that's a firework display," our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, "Get down, they are shooting at us!" and you stand up and start dancing wildly then we have started a scene because we have **AGREED** that we are being shot at, but there is a comic misunderstanding about the meaning of the phrase, 'get down!'.

Now, obviously if we apply this rule to real life conversations I am not suggesting that you should always agree with everything everyone says. But properly understood, this rule reminds you to "respect what your partner has created" and to at least start from an open-minded place.

So approach conversation with an attitude that respects what your partner has created and see where that takes you. It is quite jarring when we meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. “No, we can’t do that.” “No, that’s not right.” “No, I won’t.” Where is the positivity?

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” it’s hopeless. You have said yes, but we’re at a standstill. But what if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you agree and add something, saying, “Yes, is it normal for this room to be full of smoke?” Now the scene is getting somewhere. YES, AND in conversation means don’t be afraid to contribute. In fact it is your *responsibility* to contribute.

Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion.

Trust yourself that the things you are bringing to the conversation are worthwhile.

The next improv rule is **MAKE STATEMENTS**. This is a positive way of saying "Don't ask questions all the time."

It would be bad if we were in an improv scene and I say,

"Who are you? Where are we? What are we doing here?

What's in that box?" I'm putting pressure on you to come up with all the answers.

To put this into the context of conversation, understand this rule to mean whatever the problem is, be part of the solution.

Don't see your role in a conversation to be about raising questions and pointing out problems and obstacles. We have all spoken with that person. That person is irritating.

The next rule in Improv is ‘Focus on the Here and Now’. This means that an improv scene is about the people in the scene. The change, the struggle, the comedy, the win or loss will happen to the characters on the stage. In improv, you don’t talk about other people. You focus on what is going on right at this moment.

In the art of conversation, this rule is not meant to prevent a discussion of the past or future, or people who are not there. ‘Focus on the Here and Now’ means: be wholly present in the conversation. Don’t be drifting off into other lines of thought. Don’t lose concentration on what the other person is saying. Be absolutely in the moment, focusing on the here and now, listening with every fibre of your being.

The last improv rule that I would like to discuss this morning is another great rule for conversation. It is this: ‘You can look good if you make your partner look good’. When you are in an improv scene, the better you make your partner look, the better the scene is going to be and, as a direct result, the better you are going to be. It doesn’t serve the comedy if one of the improv players enters a scene and they are focused on themselves. No matter how brilliant they might be as an individual, if they don’t serve the needs of everyone on the stage, everyone looks bad. Of course, this is also true for conversation. If all you want to do is serve your own needs in a conversation, and you pay little or no attention to those you are with, the conversation is poor. If, on the other hand, you make the other person your focus, if you make them look good, you both emerge the better for it.

So we can learn the art of conversation, by using the rules of improv comedy. And in doing so, our lives will be infinitely better: funnier, wiser, more informed and full of friendship.

And after all, aren't we all in an improvisation anyway?

Aren't we all in the greatest improvisation of all - as we live our own lives. With no script. No idea what's going to happen, often with people and in places you have never seen before.

And we are not fully in control.

So say "yes." And if you're lucky, you'll find people who will say "yes" back. And then, you might find yourself in a great conversation.