

# Harnessing Improv to Improve the Confidence and Impact of Keynoters, Trainers and Facilitators!

Presented by David Gouthro, CSP

**PLEASE NOTE:** To ensure you get the most value and have the most fun in my concurrent session, please wait until AFTER the workshop when you get back home.

## A] I Can Work With That

A short (6 ½ minutes) podcast that reviews the value in using the phrase “I can work with that” or “I can work with this.



## B] A different perspective on improv . . .

This is a 21-minute interview with Thiagi (Sivasailam Thiagarajan). The question we explore is “Is improv the meaning of life, or does it put meaning into life?” Catch it on Zoom. It isn’t focused specifically on professional speakers; however, you may enjoy it anyhow!



## C] Unexpected Events for Professional Speakers!

This list is a summary of a ThoughtExchange survey that gathered real-life experiences about some of the unexpected events & circumstances that professional speakers have faced. Some of these were used in the concurrent session to practice an improviser’s mindset approach to responding to them more successfully. What would YOU do?

- The speaker in front of you just went over their time by 45 minutes.
- The emcee just came back onstage ready to thank you at the end of your 20-minute keynote but your time isn’t up yet.
- You arrived at the venue and the organizer just told you they decided that you didn't need a microphone (because they hadn’t arranged for one, and that you should just speak loudly).
- You are about to start and the tragic death of participant’s family member was just announced.
- An audience member just stood up shouted "You’re a racist!"

- You arrived at the venue only to discover your client forgot to book an appropriate room. There are now 110 participants crammed into a room with a 50-person capacity . . . and there is no A/C.
- You are just about to start your concurrent presentation, looked at the agenda and discovered all the keynotes were given to men . . . in a predominantly female audience.
- The keynote speaker just passed out. You've been asked to replace her literally at the last minute and have been requested to do a 75-minute presentation.
- You just presented an award to wrong person since you weren't briefed by the meeting organizers.
- You requested a projector but discovered the organizer has just set your room up with a slide projector and you are about to take the stage.
- An audience member just brought up what is apparently a critical topic/question that you haven't even considered and are completely unprepared to address.
- You're waiting to go on the stage as part of an expert panel and accidentally learned you're only getting paid 70% of what the men on the panel will be receiving.
- You've been engaged to present remotely and an hour before the presentation you've been told a mandate just came down from the client's IT department that it has to be on MS Teams (even though your contract specified Zoom).
- The host just introduced you using a 3-page intro instead of using the two paragraphs you provided.
- Your client, the key decision maker who co-created your keynote, just got onto the stage and expressed complete disagreement with the key messages you just finished presenting.
- A bulldozer crashed through the back wall, to your complete surprise and that of the 40 participants in the room.
- You just started your presentation and realized every single person in the room knows much more about the topic you were engaged to present than you do.
- You walked into the meeting room minutes before you're scheduled to begin and discovered the organizer decided to set it up theatre style rather than in the rounds of 5 your contract specified.
- The event organizers disappeared and left you to jump in as emcee and meeting organizer in-between your keynote and the breakout sessions.
- In your introduction, the MC mispronounced your name and told the audience you are going to speak about a topic you know nothing about . . . as you slowly climb to the stage as you head to the lectern!
- You heard a speaker earlier in the day cover the same content you're supposed to present and even used some of your examples.

- The power just failed in the middle of your heavily A/V dependent presentation.
- A fire 🔥 alarm just went off and 1,000 people have to clear the building.
- The group just totally rebelled as you began your presentation.
- You've been asked to do present some ideas about innovation to a small group. The "small group" turns out to be close to 800 people.
- You feel you really nailed your presentation and everyone is 'high-fiving' as they leave the room. In the washroom you overhear members of the audience chatting with the CEO that it was a total waste of time.
- Your sponsor is changing their thinking on the fly.
- Guess what? You are now going to co-facilitate your session with someone you've never met before.
- The projector bulb just blew and you're presenting in a tent in the Northwest Territories, 200 miles from any form of civilization.
- Your client is dragging their heels on paying your invoice and your office is 1000's of miles from their head office.
- You can hear distracting noises cut through your room from the speaker next door, including sounds like shots being fired.
- You're on the second leg of your flight to a client even and just received a text that your event has been postponed due to circumstances beyond their control.
- As you're walking on stage your client slips you a list of phrases you shouldn't use in your keynote—many of which are part of your signature story.
- You were presented with a 5' tall statue of Lenin after presenting to a very senior group of leaders in Russia. You decided to leave it in your hotel. You're seated on the plane for your flight back home. Two FSB (used to be called KGB) officers just stopped the airplane door from closing and have boarded to give it back to you!
- You finished the last of 18 keynotes for a client. Each time they give me an identical 10" x 6" piece of polished granite. You just received your 18<sup>th</sup>!
- You encouraged participants to engage in table conversations and now you can't get them to stop!
- You are experiencing panty hose creep; it's rolling its way down to your crotch . . . and then. . .

## D] How Can Improv Help Professional Speakers Deal with Unexpected Challenges?

This article is written entirely by Chat GPT. Days before the Convention I decided to reach out to my AI pal, submitted a request and this is what was produced by the following:

Please create a 750 word article on how embracing an improvisors mindset can help professional speakers respond more effectively to unexpected problems or challenges.

**NOTE:** I actually agree with everything in the article-perhaps you will, too!

In the high-stakes world of professional speaking, where preparation and precision are critical, the unexpected can still arise: a malfunctioning microphone, a disengaged audience, or a sudden change in the schedule. While such scenarios might send ripples of anxiety through even the most seasoned speakers, those who embrace an improviser's mindset can navigate these challenges with grace, adaptability, and creativity.

Improvisation is not about abandoning preparation but rather enhancing one's ability to respond to the unknown with agility and confidence. The principles of improvisation—being present, embracing uncertainty, and collaborating effectively—offer invaluable tools for professional speakers to turn potential setbacks into opportunities to shine.

### Staying Present and Observant

A cornerstone of improvisation is the ability to remain fully present in the moment. For professional speakers, this means tuning into the energy of the room, observing audience reactions, and adapting accordingly. Imagine stepping onto the stage only to realize that the audience is far less engaged than you anticipated. Rather than rigidly sticking to your planned script, an improviser's mindset encourages you to pause, acknowledge the situation, and pivot. You might ask a thought-provoking question, share a personal anecdote, or even incorporate humor to re-energize the room. By staying present and responsive, you demonstrate authenticity and connect with your audience on a deeper level.

**Practical Tip:** Practice mindfulness techniques before your presentation to center yourself and cultivate a heightened sense of awareness. During your talk, make eye contact and observe body language cues to gauge your audience's engagement.

### Embracing Uncertainty as an Opportunity

Improvisers thrive in uncertainty because they view it as an opportunity rather than a threat. Similarly, professional speakers who embrace this mindset can transform unexpected disruptions into memorable moments. Consider a scenario where your tech fails mid-presentation, leaving you without slides. Instead of panicking, channel your inner improviser by using storytelling to convey your key points or engaging the audience in an interactive activity. Your composure and creativity will not only salvage the situation but also leave a lasting impression of your adaptability and professionalism.

**Practical Tip:** Prepare a “Plan B” for common disruptions, such as a backup method to display visuals or a way to deliver your key message without slides. Beyond logistics, remind yourself that your expertise—not your tech—is the core value you bring to the stage.

### **Saying “Yes, And” to Build Momentum**

The principle of “Yes, And” is fundamental to improvisation. It involves accepting what’s happening (even if it’s not ideal) and building on it constructively. For professional speakers, adopting this mindset fosters a sense of curiosity and collaboration, allowing you to work with what you’re given instead of resisting it. For instance, if an audience member asks a challenging question or offers an unexpected comment, the improviser’s approach is to acknowledge their input and build on it. Instead of dismissing or deflecting, you could say, “That’s a great point, and it reminds me of…” This validates their contribution while steering the conversation back to your message.

**Practical Tip:** Practice saying “Yes, And” in everyday conversations to build the habit of constructive responses. This will make it easier to apply the technique naturally in high-pressure situations.

### **Building Emotional Resilience Through Play**

Improvisation involves an element of playfulness that fosters emotional resilience. When speakers approach challenges with a sense of play, they are less likely to feel overwhelmed by pressure and more likely to view problems as puzzles to solve. Playfulness doesn’t mean being frivolous; it’s about adopting a lighthearted attitude that enables you to think creatively and maintain perspective. For example, if you trip on stage or mispronounce a word, a playful improviser’s mindset might lead you to laugh it off and turn the moment into a joke, instantly endearing you to your audience.

**Practical Tip:** Engage in playful activities outside of work, such as improv classes or games, to strengthen your ability to think on your feet and remain adaptable under pressure.

### **Creating a Connection Through Authenticity**

One of the greatest gifts of the improviser’s mindset is its emphasis on authenticity. Audiences connect most with speakers who are genuine, even in moments of imperfection. Improvisation encourages you to embrace vulnerability and use it to build trust with your audience. For instance, if you forget a point during your talk, instead of awkwardly fumbling, you could candidly acknowledge it with humor: “Looks like my brain just took a coffee break! Let me get back on track.” This authenticity not only humanizes you but also makes your message more relatable.

**Practical Tip:** Practice improvisation exercises that require you to think aloud or respond spontaneously to prompts. This helps build confidence in showing up authentically, even when things don’t go as planned.

## **Cultivating a Growth Mindset**

Finally, the improviser's mindset embodies a growth-oriented approach. Every unexpected challenge becomes a chance to learn and grow. By reframing "mistakes" as valuable experiences, professional speakers can continually refine their skills and become more resilient. After each presentation, reflect on moments where you had to improvise. Ask yourself: What went well? What could I have done differently? Over time, this reflective practice will strengthen your ability to handle surprises with ease.

**Practical Tip:** *Keep a journal to document your speaking experiences, including the challenges you faced and how you responded. Use this as a tool for continuous improvement.*

## **Conclusion**

For professional speakers, embracing an improviser's mindset is not just a survival skill—it's a superpower. By staying present, embracing uncertainty, saying "Yes, And," and fostering playfulness and authenticity, speakers can navigate unexpected challenges with confidence and poise. In doing so, they not only enhance their ability to connect with audiences but also leave a lasting impression of resilience and adaptability.

Improvisation, at its core, is about trust: trusting yourself, your abilities, and your audience. When you trust that you can handle whatever comes your way, you unlock the true potential of your speaking craft, turning obstacles into opportunities and challenges into triumphs.

-Authored by ChatGPT-4o