***Improv to Improve*** by TM Michael Wader

Global Improv and Storytellers Toastmasters Club

Improvisation has gotten a bad rap as being **only** for comedy actors. In reality, it helps produce very successful Toastmasters and help business people become better leaders around the world.

Twenty-six years in the military and 25 years of teaching Leadership in 18 different countries taught me to improvise and adapt my words and actions in unfamiliar cultures and places. My years in Toastmasters International have taught me to respond to Table Topics questions with award-winning responses that seem to be prepared ahead of time.

My research revealed that prestigious Business Schools around the world had added Improvisation training to their MBA programs. Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and universities in England, Finland, China, Malaysia, and UAE have done the same in recent years. Students are being taught that management decisions are often seen as spontaneous and augmented by creative ideas that are rapidly executed and called improvisation.

Toastmaster's long-standing tradition of Table Topics is improvisation that helps members develop their ability to organize their thoughts quickly and respond to impromptu questions or topics in the meeting and at work. This an increasingly sought-after skill in business today.

Research completed by School of Business Management, University Utara in Malaysia, and School of Busines, Duke University, USA, surveyed 128 Malaysian private companies(1). They found the firms with a high level of improvisation training had managers who were more willing to be risk-taking and more flexible. The research also showed that higher levels of improvisation lead to higher learning levels and higher overall management skills, although the age of managers was almost the same.

According to author Bob Kulhan's book, "Getting to "Yes And" Published by Stanford University Press, improvisation is an intended strategy that combines intelligence and reaction. Improvisation is how people can actively practice expanding their thinking process while reducing the time for it. Learning to process available information and innovate immediately is a true talent.

Many people make two incorrect assumptions when discussing improvisation. They believe that improvisation is only about comedy and believe people make stuff up, only as a "last resort."

The art of improvisation is really about making fast decisions and adapting when faced with unanticipated situations. The quality of those improvisations is directly influenced by the improviser's abilities developed through training and preparation.

**Examples:** Improvisation is often used by Emergency Medical Technicians. It takes place in sports when facing an opponent. It's a part of the expected skills and talents of a fireman in a volatile situation. These situations dictate the improvisational reactions needed – and none of them include comedy. Emergency Medical Technicians and Firemen face 1000's of different situations, and for many, there is no set procedure. Sportsmen on a fast break down a field respond to the unpredictable reactions of their opponents. They improvise different moves to get past their opponents and score.

These improvisational acts have three parts; listening, reacting, and communicating. The first step is listening intently to the person speaking to you. The second step is reacting to the situation. This is not reacting blindly or out of panic, however. With effective improvisational reaction involves being focused on the present, being in the moment, and being completely open to the idea of responding to whatever the question or scenario requires. The third step is communicating to others with words or actions. Giving your full attention while listening carefully and reacting quickly with purpose are combined to create the result - communication.

**"Improvisation thrives where experience and**

**practice meet unexpected circumstances."**

Improvisation is not just making up hair-brained ideas as the last resort. The ability to listen, react, and communicate are direct skills you can develop through Toastmaster's participation. In the "real" moment of the event or scenario, being alert is imperative to your improvisation success.

Whether you're in a Toastmaster's meeting or the workplace, Table Topic skills' mental preparation and practice can produce successful results. You can learn how to put yourself in a position to succeed when communications are needed in unforeseen or confusing situations.

Business owners are looking for new leaders who have these skills. They are turning to improvisation for help in running their business. They believe that this spontaneous ability to react to unusual interactions with other employees can lead to creativity, collaboration, and innovation. At Toastmaster's meetings, you can learn these skills – but you have to participate.

So the next time you attend a Toastmasters meeting, and the subject turns to Table Topics, do three things;

1.Volunteer to participate

2. Listen to the question or scenario description very carefully

3. Unleash your experience and knowledge as you turn Table Topics into a "fun" and unexpected experience for you and the audience.

With practice, you will be known as the Toastmaster who can think on their feet, respond creatively, and as the employee that your manager will want to be a leader.