

Chelsea: Yeah! Okay, great. Should we have David join one?

David: Me?

Chelsea: Yeah! Come on up here David!

David: Okay.

Chelsea: so you're speaking to a graduating class, and we're just kicking off a graduation ceremony. Why don't we have Mark start...

Student 1: My.

Student 2: Goodness.

Student 3: Look.

David: At.

Student 4: You.

Student6: Shining.

Student 7: Bright.

Student 8: Students.

Student 1: Intelligent.

Student 2: Luminescent.

Student 3: In-debt.

David: Miserable.

Student 4: Old.

Student 5: Students.

Student 6: So.

Student 7: My.

Student 8: Advice.

Student 1: Is.

Student 2: Learn.

Student 3: How.

David: To.

Student 4: Eat.

Student 5: Well.

Student 6: Under.

Student 7: Duress.

Student 8: And.

Student 1: Forget.

Student 2: About.

Student 3: Everything.

David: They.

Student 4: Tell.

Student 5: You.

Student 6: Because.

Student 7: Everything.

Student 8: Is.

Student 1: A.

Student 2: Lie.

Student 2: My.

Student 3: Hunch.

David: Is.

Student 4: They.

Student 5: Are.

Student 6: Controlling.

Student 7: You.

Student 8: And.

Student 1: Manipulating.

Student 2: You.

Student 3: I.

David: Think.

Student 4: You.

Student 5: Deserve.

Student 6: Better.

Student 7: Much.

Student 8: Much.

Student 1: Much.

Student 2: Better.

Student 3: So.

David: In.

Student 4: Conclusion.

Student 5: I.

Student 6: Recommend.

Student 7: That.

Student 8: You.

Student 1: Wear.

Student 2: Clothes.

Student 3: Sometimes.

David: While.

Student 4: Its.

Student 5: Warm.

David: I'm David Zax and welcome to Creativity Unlocked, the show designed to unleash your potential at work. Creativity Unlocked is a new collaboration between Fast Company and Microsoft 365. Today's episode: The Rest Of The Story.

David: We live in a world that's constantly demanding us to be more creative, but also a world that seems designed to drain us of creativity. With endless meetings and deadlines and distractions, how do we find ways to step back and engage our imagination; to truly listen and build on a colleague's ideas; and to slow down so that we're faster on our feet when we need to be? So come join us as we explore the solutions that help some of Fast Company's Most Creative People.

David: Don't laugh, but of all things it might be improv comedy. Could this comedic art form actually be the key to unlocking creativity in business? To find out we turned to the experts: Upright Citizens Brigade, commonly known as U.C.B. The theater was founded back in the 1990s by a comedy troupe of the same name featuring Matt Walsh, Ian Roberts, Matt Besser, and Amy Poehler. And today UCB has theaters in both New York and Los Angeles and it's been the launching pad for everyone from Donald Glover to Ellie Kemper.

David: Chelsea Clarke is a long time UCB comedian and instructor in New York. In addition to teaching classes for aspiring actors, she also leads improv workshops for companies, encouraging teams to open their minds to new creative possibilities.

Chelsea: I've been performing there for about 12 years and teaching there for maybe nine years.

David: I'm a fan of UCB. I've taken some classes there over the years. It's a lot of fun. My first improv class was actually at another theater called the Magnet Theater. I was so terrified that I had a flask of whiskey in my bag. That's my own story,

Chelsea: Let's see. I actually took my first class in 2003 and I had been watching shows at UCB for a long time, a couple years. I went in high school, and when I walked in, the first time I walked into UCB, I walked right out. I was like, "I cannot go here. This isn't the place for me. Everyone's very cool." I was there with my aunt in high school.

David: She was in the class too?

Chelsea: No, this was just walking in to see my first show there. We stayed for the show; I kind of pushed through that anxiety. I thought it was great. And so when I came back to the city for college, I went every weekend, multiple nights a week. One friend said, "Why don't you just take one of these classes?" I was like, "I can't do that! That would be crazy." Then I was like, "Wait, maybe I should," so I asked for one for a Christmas present, and I took it.

David: And so then when you went in for your first day, your first class, this was your first time doing improv yourself.

Chelsea: First time doing improv.

David: Were you like, "Who am I kidding?" What were you thinking?

Chelsea: I was so nervous. I only remember one thing from the whole class, which was me sitting in the seats waiting to go on stage and just planning what I was going to

do because I was so nervous, which is like the number one no-no. You don't plan ahead.

David: What were you afraid of?

Chelsea: I think I was just afraid of not being funny and people not liking me. Turned out to be a baseless fear, but I was so nervous, I was at times outgoing, did theater in high school, but in certain situations I was very shy. Didn't want to go meet anyone new or go to a place where I didn't know exactly what was going to happen, so that's kind of like the opposite of what improv is.

David: I think I had a fear that I would say something abysmal and just unforgivable. I think I had a fear that I would just collapse in paralysis. I think I had all these fears that just didn't materialize. And even sometimes I did see them materialize, like I did see someone kind of freeze up on stage. You know, she just got back up on her feet in the next scene. Everyone was supportive. Everyone understood. It wasn't a big deal.

Chelsea: Right. There needs to be kind of a nonjudgmental space. And that's what Yes And does. It helps you kind of just filter other people's ideas through, "What could be great about that? What's genius about that? What's funny about that?" Instead of, "What's not good about that idea?"

David: You take a line that someone else improvised, and instead of shooting it down or contradicting it, you build off of that idea.

Chelsea: You agree and then add new information. You're looking at their information as a gift and then you're adding onto that, but not with a prepared thing that you were going to say no matter what. You really are trying to go off of the top of your head. That really does require non-judgment of the other person, because you have to just make that idea great. Not only just making it great on the surface; you have to internally be like, "This is a great idea." I think that that's a thing that a lot of people in the class can connect to, like, "Oh, I have to be nonjudgmental of another person," but another really important thing for comedy and for improv is to be nonjudgmental of yourself.

Chelsea: There's a time for reflecting and figuring out what went wrong, and it's not when you're on stage. You can think about it later, but to beat yourself up puts you in your head, which hampers your listening. Then it just snowballs. Being okay with unexpected things happening and mistakes happening is a prerequisite for success in improv.

David: So UCB teaches classes to students who walk in off the street, but you guys also have like a consulting business. Like, you teach classes in corporations of all places, right?

Chelsea: We do. We go to companies, or companies come to us. They want to learn improv. "We want a team-building experience where everyone can just get to

know each other and have some fun together," "We want people to be more creative with each other and more productive in their creativity with each other," and "We want people to be better at communication, whether it be with clients or in presentations." And so those are the three main reasons why a company would want to bring improv to their employees.

Chelsea: We would cover the basics, listening, Yes-anding, rolling with the unexpected and authenticity, with them. And I think you walk away feeling a little bit more confident and having worked on listening, which is maybe something that you don't really have to do as an adult.

David: We wanted to learn more about how companies use these UCB improv sessions. So my producer Shannon Boerner went and interviewed one company that did these.

Shannon: Hi David.

David: Hi Shannon. Who did you visit with?

Shannon: So I talked to New York based beauty brand Glossier

David: You spoke to two people. But one Eva Alt in particular, this was her idea.

Shannon: Yeah, so Eva actually is on the communications team and their team does an activity once a month, like a team building, outing sort of thing and it was Eva's turn to choose what they wanted to do... You would think because they're on the communications team and this is what they do, they'd be really good at it, but, they even found that they had things to learn.

Bela: Eva didn't tell us what we were doing. It was a surprise event.

Shannon: This is Bela Yousif, communications manager at Glossier.

Bela: I was really excited. I'd never done improv before but have friends that are pretty involved in the UCB community and had always toyed with the idea so I was very excited that I got to do it at work and with my team members who are my closest friends.

Eva: Yeah, I was very eager to reveal the secret.

Shannon: And this is Eva Alt, social media editor at Glossier.

Eva: I definitely wanted to keep it a secret because I knew people might be a little bit nervous or turned off to the idea.

Shannon: So the 12 of you show up at UCB and what happens?

- Eva: People were game. I was quite happy with everyone's response even some of our shy team members jumped in. Chelsea lead us in pairs and one pair of people would get up in front of the room and she'd count to three, one, two, three and you and your partner had to say a word, any word that was on your mind and then following one, two, three, you had to say a word that you thought was in common with the two words you had already said. If I said spaghetti and my partner said pizza, the next word we would say, we'd have to try and find the same word. So we'd say one, two, three, maybe someone would say food, someone else would say sauce, maybe we'd both say sauce. If you get the same word then you win.
- Eva: The funny bit was that I was paired with Kim Johnson who's our community manager and she's one of my best friends and we could not find... like we never ever, ever, ever got the word. and then two of our other teammates who were newer to working with each other Then found it in two or three tries and I thought that was really interesting because Kim and I, we were thinking about it I think too much and it was just so fun to see newer team members click in that way.
- David: Okay so the mind meld exercise sounds great. It sounds like a good like, team building exercise. What else did they do?
- Shannon: There was this other activity that Chelsea would take three of them, put them at a table and just start asking them questions and they had to answer. But they didn't know who they were, or why they were being interviewed. It was this interview panel and they had to roll with the unexpected and roll with what their other panelists were saying.
- David: So it was like, they were holding a press conference but they don't even know who they are?
- Shannon: Exactly.
- Bela: I think my turn was about being in the most famous boy band in the world and you just ...
- Eva: I was in this one with you.
- Bela: You were in this one with me. I had so much fun with it but I think trying to tell a story with three people where none of you know what the story is, is very useful in that you can play off of what each other is saying and you really reach in your destination that you didn't know that you would and if you're trying to think about what you want the destination to be on your own like working in a silo, it doesn't really work. I actually would have been more successful if I was just listening to my teammates and just carrying it on so that it could keep living...

Eva: You can't be the project leader where you're just like, "I'm going to do everyone's work." You know what I mean? it's about a shared goal, so you really are working with other people.

David: Okay so I can see how this is like, could be really fun, could be a nice break for your team, a nice team building exercise. But does it actually impact the way you work after that?

Shannon: Yeah, especially for brainstorms and for meetings. You know a lot of us want to plan for what we're gonna say, how we're going to present something. It's exactly what Chelsea was saying earlier, that you just need to roll with the unexpected and dive right in.

Bela: It taught me a bit about letting go of control in terms of having a meeting and sometimes it can get further if I can just tag team it with someone in the moment and look at them and know that they're struggling to verbalize an idea and I'm going to come in and help them with that or ... obviously, that doesn't mean that you should never plan for things in a work environment, but I think that it does allow you in terms of presenting and having a team member with you or multiple team members, it can kind of like, it's easier to pass the ball around.

Eva: You're more comfortable.

Bela: You're more comfortable and it's easier to just pass.

Eva: Besides listening, one thing I've been trying to be aware of and catch myself is when I say but when I mean and. Right? When people are sharing ideas and are trying to come up with something. If you're like, "Okay, but ..." blah, blah, blah. You've just canceled out what that person said and rather than saying but try and, as way of building on something that they said or "and this is how another way that we could think about it."

Eva: You don't have to accept it, you don't have to agree but to have psychological safety and feel like you guys are working as a team I think adopting this, and, not, but, comes through in improv a lot when you have to build on each others ideas and you should build on each others ideas even if you don't agree with them.

Shannon: It sounds like you almost had to retrain your brain. As we grow up, we learn the ... don't say um, don't say this don't say that and we become really self conscious of that but there are these other words that you brought up that also have connotations or might be roadblocks when we're working with other people.

Bela: Totally. Now that I'm thinking about it, there's ... one of the exercises we did was everyone says one word and you go around the circle and tell a story and I feel like even when it lands on you and your word was just like the, or, and or then you could ... even though it's just a small word, that was your chance to make the

story go forward and so I think you learn these little moments continue things and give things life actually are just valuable.

Eva: It's especially important for brainstorming when you are trying to get people open to ideas and find a collective thing that you're all excited about. Sometimes it's good to have no road map, maybe some goals but not necessarily a preconceived notion and then sometimes it's good to pave the way.

Bela: I think when you have fun especially when you're brainstorming, sometimes it almost feels like an improv class where you free fall a little bit and if it's again, using my hands to quote, not a great idea, it's like you can easily bounce back from that and sometimes something else comes out of it.

Eva: Totally.

David: That's really cool that idea of, easily bouncing back, not being afraid to throw out an idea and that all comes from improv.

Shannon: Yeah and it helps the team to move forward together.

David: Thanks Shannon. That was great.

Shannon: You're more than welcome.

David: So as you might expect one of the major benefits of improv for teams has to do with coming up with ideas it gives people the confidence throughout one that's maybe not so good and then someone else builds on it and you build on it again and you build something great together. But as it turns out as you dig deeper into improv there's another important skill that it gives you: conflict resolution I talked to Chelsea about it.

Chelsea: So whether it's a customer who's saying - who's putting up like a obstacle, "This is so expensive," or if you're a team who's come up with a great solution for another team or for a client and you know it's going to be a tough sell for them because it goes against the way they've usually done things, you're going to have to Yes And to communicate with them through the things that are tough for them to get over.

Chelsea: You can make that feeling with people who normally you would maybe say are opposed to you. That doesn't have to be a negative fight. That can be an argument where you feel like a team with them, and where you're really thinking, "Big picture, what do we both want here, and how can I really listen and show you that I understand what your problem is, to help you see how I see it and vice versa?"

- David: Is there not a sort of ideological conflict between a lot of workplaces in which there is understood to be competition internally for the best idea? The spirit of improv, which is sort of like everyone's ideas have equal merit ... When do you apply improv and when don't you?
- Chelsea: I know. Isn't that scary? I think that in doing improv with people and Yes-anding, and in our workshops with companies, we make them do just ... we give them a really tough idea, and they have to Yes And a solution to it.
- David: What's an example of that?
- Chelsea: you've got a team of four people from your company, and I say, "You guys own a major airline company in America. The worst idea I can think from your suggestion box is your next fleet of planes won't have seats."
- David: Yeah, that sounds not comfortable or fun at all. I would not buy a ticket to that airline.
- Chelsea: Right, and maybe you'd also be really mad if you worked at that airline and you were like, "Wait, what are we doing with our next fleet of planes?"
- David: Stock price would tank, I believe.
- Chelsea: Right, you'd be really mad. You might even be so mad about what a bad idea it sounds like that you would be incapable of brainstorming with someone else about what could be good about that idea.
- Chelsea: But then let's say, "Okay, just for fun, let's pretend that we had the limitation of, the next fleet of planes is going to have kind of a very nontraditional ... no rows of seating. What could be great about no rows of seating?"
- David: So we're pausing basically and we're just saying, "Don't shoot it down. Let's Yes And that idea, at least as an exercise."
- Chelsea: Yeah, and so maybe someone says, "Well, if there's no seats and you have to stand, you could just strap in." You'd be on and off quicker, and you'd ... because you're standing, it would have to be a shorter flight, so it could really appeal to like a commuter market. Could be 30-minute flights for \$30, something just sounds insane and great.
- Chelsea: Or, once we've maybe worked on that, then someone else might say, "Well, what if it is like luxury and lounge seating? I could see that being like a real Silicon Valley, like ... "We are young enough CEOs that we don't have private planes. In fact, we'd rather be on a plane with a bunch of other young CEOs as well, so maybe we want that kind of experience. We want to be facing each other and being able to have meetings on these planes

David: Okay, this is starting to sound like a really good idea.

Chelsea: David, let's go into business!

David: Okay, so this idea that seemed terrible is actually ... when you kind of Yes And it and think creatively around, "Well, what if this wasn't a terrible idea?", it actually starts to seem kind of good and to give you a lot of new ideas.

Chelsea: Right. Even if there's a big main obstacle in that idea that will never happen, at least we've then maybe identified some good ideas. There's so many interesting conversations and ideas behind working with someone on something that isn't obviously great right away. You have to be in this open, trusting environment with that other person in order to even float those ideas. I think great creative teams really are cool with, "I'm just going to pitch David an idea, and I don't know that it's a good idea. I just want to see what his brain does with it, because I trust him and I think he's a genius and I want him to kick around some of my ideas and vice versa."

Chelsea: And you will then feel much less protective over your original idea, or you won't feel this feeling: "Well, if it's not my idea, I can't work on it. You know, if you're a creative person, there's a part of you that really loves being the one who gets to be the star or the originator of the idea. There's a time for that, but there's also a lot you can get out of getting the best of everyone's brain in your group.

David: [I had a great conversation with Chelsea, but I began to realize that talking about improv is a bit like talking about music. You really got to hear it. So here's Chelsea and her class in action at UCB. This time, the exercise centers on a relentlessly positive football coach who is surrounded by a team full of naysayers. Everything negative one of his players throws at him, the coach spins into something positive.](#)

"Coach": Guys, I'm so excited for this team today. We win this game, we're going to the state championships. And I believe in each and every one of you. I believe today we're gonna play our best. Yes, Kyle?

Student 1: But coach, I have arthritis, and I'm the quarterback for the team.

"Coach": Yeah, Kyle. You're our quarterback, and you have arthritis. You have 18-year-old early-onset arthritis, Kyle. That arthritis, every time you receive the ball, the pain of an 85-year-old person runs through your body. You have the experience of an 85-year-old person. Think about what that does to your brain, Kyle. Yes, Jonathan.

Student 2: I lost a lot of weight, and my pants keep falling down.

"Coach": Yeah, that's right Jonathan. You've lost a ton of weight, and those pants are too big now, and they keep falling down around your ankles. Every play, they fall

down. And you know what the other team is distracted by? That. And that's gonna play to our advantage guys. Make sure you realize, that when Jonathan's pants are down, that's when we really attack. I love you guys. Yes.

Student 3: Coach, I'm the number one running-back, and I just had laser-eye surgery, so I'm not gonna be able to see anything.

“Coach”:
Yeah, that's right Shawn. You just had Lasik, and you're blind as a bat; you're our number one running-back. It doesn't matter where you run, Shawn. It's gonna be the best. We're gonna point you in the right direction, and you just close your eyes, and you focus all your energy on running. You're not gonna have to worry about seeing. Yes.

Student 4: Yes, coach. I'm just fundamentally not very good.

“Coach”:
That's true. Bryan, you in every phase of this sport, are inadequate. You are mediocre at football. You are not good. But that makes the rest of the team look better, Bryan, and that makes everybody feel good about themselves. Yes, Tanner.

Student 5: Coach, the game's already started, and the other team are out there creaming us.

“Coach”:
Yeah Tanner, that's right. That's right. It's five minutes left in the third quarter right now, we haven't taken the field. They've scored 135 points on us so far, Tanner. And this is gonna be the greatest comeback...

Chelsea:
Alright. Yeah. Okay, great. Great. It's really hard to do that. It's not as hard probably in an improv scene, but when you really believe in something that you feel passionately about, and someone else has a problem with that, it is good to use yes-and to confront, and to have a positive confrontation, where you can communicate with the other person.

Chelsea:
Okay, so Juan doesn't think the same thing as me, but through truly listening to what his problem is, I can learn a little bit about how he thinks, and use that as an in to talking to him about what I care about, and without him just tuning out what I'm saying, because it's not what he cares about. Great Job.

David:
Chelsea, it was really fun visiting your class and having you in the studio today as well. Thank you so much.

Chelsea:
Oh, yeah, thank you. Thank you. It was a blast having you there.

David:
[Okay I didn't walk away from my interview with Chelsea and my visit to her class as some sort of master improviser, but in the days that followed I found myself thinking about -- but in the days that followed I found myself thinking about conversations with coworkers differently. I tried to... I tried to focus more on what](#)

they were saying instead of what I wanted to say. I started thinking of them as a scene partner almost. I tried yes anding, being positive. I think it helped.

David: Creativity Unlocked is a collaboration between Fast Company and Microsoft 365. Microsoft 365 is a family of offerings designed to unlock the creativity and ingenuity of everyone in an organization. The show is a production of the FastCo. Works team including Chuck Salter, Casie Lesser, and Shannon Boerner. Our editor is Laura Morris, our music was created by Chuck Lindo. Special thanks to studio center and to Chris Arbisi.

David Zax: In our next episode I'll be exploring something very different... meditation. And I might have to get a little vulnerable. See you then.

David: Okay, I'm gonna do this, yeah.

Loren: We're gonna do this.

David: Okay, I'm closing-

Loren: We're gonna do this.

David: ... my eyes.

Loren: Okay, and then we're just gonna breathe in and out through our nose really deeply ...

David: You do kind of just get a little endorphin rush. You're like, "Oh yeah, I forgot to breathe for the last eight hours."

Loren: Exactly. I haven't been breathing deeply all day.