

EPISODE 247: BRAD MCMURRAN – IMPROV AT WORK

Brad McMurran

It's about being in the moment. It's not about tomorrow. It's not about yesterday. It's about right now being, in the moment, but it's also about how, in the moment, can you take that moment to get the most rapport with a human being.

Female Voice

From William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, produced by the William & Mary School of Business and its MBA program. Offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and executive MBA. For more information, visit wm.edu.

Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Improvisation. You probably know it as comedy and communication on the fly. It often consists of short scenes or sketches beginning with an idea from the audience. Many of your favorite comedians and entertainers have considerable improv training. As modern improv comedy grew, business professionals took note, realizing improv training could greatly help in terms of communication, success, and teamwork. Well, when the new MBA students at the William & Mary School of Business arrived a couple of weeks ago, they were given improv training by Brad McMurran, who, among other things, owns Push Comedy Theater in Norfolk, Virginia. Just minutes after training the new MBA students, McMurran sat down with us to discuss improv, how it builds rapport, and helps people become more comfortable when conversing with others. Here's our conversation with Brad McMurran.

Ken White

Well, Brad, thanks so much for joining us. You just left, maybe 60 seconds ago, an entire day of working with MBA students on improv. What was the experience like?

Brad McMurran

It was so cool. I have never done that. I have done a lot of work on improvisation, but what was cool for me was this was different, getting the phone call from you to come up

here with this. I've taught students, but not this, but also the consecutive order of it, doing them that many in a row. Normally, I come in and do one a day or something like that, but it was really cool. And watching them respond to it was magical. You were in there. It was magical to watch these guys that are going in for business and probably wondering, What the heck am I doing in here for improvisation? And then finding out the connection.

Ken White

Yeah, it was so fun to watch. We're talking about repetition. You did four classes right in a row, and anybody who's taught knows how difficult that is.

Brad McMurran

Absolutely. Being present the whole time, have to listen. But I will say they made it easy. You've got a good program here. You really do.

Ken White

Any surprises in there?

Brad McMurran

The last one we just did, that woman that just went in there. I have been teaching a while, and I have not seen somebody that present. I said, Hey, have you taken an improvisation? She's like, No. It just comes natural if you're hearing me. When she said, Don't think and listen, I think she's going places. I won't say names because we're in students, but still, she was phenomenal. Then there was a guy that we had in the last class that was extremely funny, right? Where you're like, I wouldn't have to, no offense to this. I'll be straight. We're on this podcast. I wasn't thinking I was going to come up here with MBA students and then have funny. He was a riot, just keeping us in stitches. I'd say a couple each class were really surprising.

Ken White

I know you teach improv, but what else do you do? You do a lot of things.

Brad McMurran

I do. I'm a writer. Unfortunately, my claim to fame is I wrote an off-Broadway musical, The Hit, for a while, and I also write a lot of these things. I perform in Vegas and all around the country and stuff like that. I have a theater in Norfolk, Virginia, where I do some teaching of improv. But the thing that I'm up here for is been really hitting up corporate workshops, things to go to corporations, militaries, all sorts of things, and using the skills or the training of improvisation to help them in their world. It's been something that. Hey, I admit it. I'm one of those guys that always shoots straight. It's paying more than a lot of the other gigs are, which has been really nice.

Ken White

Fantastic. When people call you and say, Hey, we'd love to do a day, a morning, an hour on improv, do they even know what they want?

Brad McMurran

No. What I'd say is some do. You'll get some of those ones that are innovators, where they've gone and done their research. I really love those guys because they'll come in and they know what they're trying to do with it. Most, as we talked about, I think earlier, it might have been you or it might have been somebody else I was talking to earlier, is they I'm walking in with two arms crossed. I just was doing something military, I can say this, with a joint arm service at War College. They told me, walking in, Nobody wants you here. They're like, Only one guy believes in you. Can you do this? And by the end of it, they're hiring me now for four more sessions because it's great for camaraderie, Ken. It really is. You saw that, the camaraderie of these guys. Would they know each other three days a day? That's it. Yeah, and you see them almost each minute becoming more and more comfortable. So we'll go teach companies all over the place, lawyers, doctors, real estate agents, medical fields. One that comes to mind recently that it's hard for me to sell to people. This is the hardest sell, but it is, in my opinion, the most important part of it. I'm working with lawyers, and I'm working with a guy that everybody hates, Bill from accounting. He's boring. He's not somebody that's approachable. Then they do an improv class, and that day, he's playing like a romantic giraffe. At the end of the day, he's a little more human. Does that make sense? That there is a little more camaraderie or chemistry. I have to admit, I love that.

Ken White

How do you define improv? What is it, and why do businesses think this is something our team needs to know?

Brad McMurran

Well, I think improv, as we said, and I've said it, now this will be the 100th time today, I've got to say it with you, which is great on this, but I think you know this, too, is about being in the moment. It's not about tomorrow. It's not about yesterday. It's about right now being in the moment. But it's also about how, in the moment, can you take that moment to get the most rapport with a human being. How do you bring the best out of them? The golden rule of improvisation, of course, is make your partner look good. Right now, how do I make the team look good? At William & Mary here. You have a team. You have other professors. You have to have each other together. I'm sure you've had this. I doubt you. I'm going to admit it on your radio here, but I'd say this to you: when that camaraderie is not right, what that team feels like. It's not fun to go to work. It's awful. When you have that moment where, and I know you have a little bit of sports background on this, when the ball moves, as opposed to where it's just in one corner and

everybody's not doing it. That's really what I think I get called in a lot for is, how do we get it back to where we all enjoyed it again and made it fun?

Ken White

Where did you get your improv training?

Brad McMurran

I went to Upright Citizen Brigade, which is Amy Poler. It's a very big one in New York City. I was one of those ones that I had. Originally, I was going to Second City in Chicago, and I was going to the one in New York. It closed down, and I decided to go to Upright Citizen Brigade, which I am really glad I did. I trained up there from I don't know, 2006 to about 2012, '11, something like that, and then started traveling around the country, doing it all over the place, and really got fortunate, and have not had a real job since, which has been great.

Ken White

You talked a couple of times about the Chicago style. How's that different?

Brad McMurran

Well, Chicago style is where it all comes from. I mean, you got to look at this. It is the mecca. Second City, really, is where it all comes out. You can go all the way back to the Compass players back there with those really, really lovely people back in the day that were really figuring it out. And all these lovely people on it. But it has always been, Chicago has always been a driving force in improvisation. Canada, too, has a lot of really good stuff up there. But I would say it started to spread across the country, and it really started to move around 2012. It really started to spread across the country, where even places like my place in Norfolk started to open, where it wasn't just like. It kind of happened in theater, too, if I can be honest with you. It used to be you had to go to these three cities: New York, LA, or Chicago. It was where you had to go to make it, right? And something changed. Something changed around the pandemic. It was probably a big part of that, too. But it was like, Wait, you can go down the street and learn it. You can go down here and do it. It's not just that. So it's had this really revolution, which has been nice.

Ken White

Any idea how it made the transition from let's go to an improv show and laugh, to let's bring it to our organization in terms of business?

Brad McMurran

I think, yeah. My answer to it is that they watch people making something up on the spot. And you were talking about earlier, I was eavesdropping you on, but that spaghetti

thing. I don't know what you were talking about this, but there is that thing. It's like, wait a minute. If these guys can make something from nothing, right? How do we do that in our work? Because that's what you're doing in work. There's not one job of work that doesn't have a pattern with the other job. Even if you're all the way down from an ice cream store all the way up to IBM, we all have these things in common. But you see this building. It's to me about building.

Ken White

What you're referring to as a spaghetti challenge is which one of the things I'm sure some of our listeners have done. Our students did it their first day here in orientation, where they have to build a tower out of uncooked spaghetti, and it's got a marshmallow on the top. Again, it's a team building.

Brad McMurran

It fascinated me when you brought it up to me because, again, it related right back to improvisation. As I said to you earlier, there's this kidlike mentality, and you had said something about young people did it better than older people, which is so cool to hear that. Yeah.

Ken White

Right. Our alumnus who comes in and teaches us lets us know that the kindergartens tend to be more successful in the spaghetti challenge than CEOs do. One of the big things that you taught over and over and really tried to drill home was the yes and concept. Can you tell us about that?

Brad McMurran

Yeah. So the first rule we've said in improvisation is make your partner look good. My whole goal is to make you look good, and your whole goal is to make me look good. How do we do that? One of the best ways to facilitate that is through communication. When we're doing this is that if you can make a great play or a bad play, that I'm going to be there and I'm going to say, Yeah, I heard you, and I'm going to add to it. And then you're going to say, Yeah, I heard you, and I'm going to add to it. Keeps you in the moment. It keeps it all about on the spontaneity of the moment, but more importantly, like dance, where each move is as important, which is a lovely, lovely thing to see, is it becomes this game we're playing with each other. If I had more time, this we're going into the very, very fundamentals of improv. The more you go into it, we are looking for something called game. I don't mean to bore you on this, but there's something that happened even there all day. You saw all day that I'd love to be able to talk to you some other time about is there's a gameplay that comes about. It's called the weird. The first weird comes up of the scene, and we can notice that by listening, and they heighten that, and exaggerate that, and have one of us be the straight man on that, the other one be the crazy man on that. It becomes this gorgeous dance that does have training. Just like a

dancer would have, or like a fencer would have, or any of these things would have. But it's really all about listening and playing off your partner, and also treating them like a genius.

Ken White

When you're putting them through these exercises, you have to listen to succeed up there, don't you?

Brad McMurren

You can't do it without it. It really won't work. It is one of those things, the best players in this. Chris Farley, they talk about a lot in this. They said it was terrible off stage, but on stage was a sponge. The best players I've ever played with in my life, they listen.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Brad McMurren in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. When it comes to choosing an MBA program, there's much to consider. The curriculum, the cost, rankings, the quality of the faculty and students, the culture of the school and program, and the time it takes to earn your MBA. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, check out the William & Mary MBA. It checks all the boxes and indicators of quality, like a world-class faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with Brad McMurren.

Ken White

You dropped some names in there. Can you share some of that?

Brad McMurren

Absolutely. Right now, Colin Mockery from Who's On is in any way. But if you're really going to the ones that are in the legend, Hall of Fame, Bill Murray, Tina Faye, Stephen Colbert, back in the day, was a big, big Second City guy on this. You've got a whole bunch of people in this. Let's look it up. At this point in time, if you want to just Google who's all into this, it's great. Donald Glover, new guy that's really, really great in this. I've been fortunate to work with some of these guys, which has been really cool to actually meet some of my heroes over the years to be able to do this. But it really is about listening. It's listening like a thief. There's so much information in every word that's said. I think that when you brought me up about business and about how we're in here, that's easily translatable to anything.

Ken White

Absolutely. Yes, and you were training them and went to respond with the word yes, and then add to it. Sometimes people would throw in questions, and you were trying to get them away from that.

Brad McMurran

Yeah. When you're first starting off an improvisation, it can become a crutch. If I'm doing a question, I can control what I'm asking you. So right now is like, Tell me about yourself, Ken. Where are you from? Where did you do there? Did you like it? How's that been? Which is not a bad thing. It's not. But I'd also say, it's not us building together, it's my controlling you. Now, later on, just so I don't sound like a quack here. You do bring questions back. There's a difference between, Hey, how are you? Or, Hey, where are you going with that rabbit suit and that gun in your hand? That's a different question. Does that make sense? So it really does play with that a lot.

Ken White

I think, especially with students, as they're learning to network, sometimes they will question someone to death, thinking that's the approach.

Brad McMurran

I loved you said it. When you were in there, you actually helped me a lot today. I'm not just saying this because we're doing this. When we were talking about, I kept calling it Houston, you said they had something going on down there. That helped me, if I may say this to you, because when you said that they pepper, I guess it's an organization.

Ken White

Career fair.

Brad McMurran

A career fair. I hadn't thought of that because I don't have a real job. But what I would say to you on that is how important that is. That would bore me. If you came in as like, Hey, where'd you go to school? Where'd you do this? I get asked that by every newspaper there is. Something that would be so cool to me is I'm really interested in improv because I met somebody while I was younger that did something. I'm like, Okay, now we got a story. I love that you were a part of that. That actually helped me a lot.

Ken White

You call it a couple of times, the art of BS.

Brad McMurran

It is. It is the ultimate art of bullcraping is to be able to say to somebody, no matter what they say to you, and I'll add to it. Right now, it doesn't matter what you say. I love that because I believe you're training students to never, ever be a deer in headlights in any situation you're in. You can control that moment by just stalling with that yes moment and then adding to it.

Ken White

How difficult is as someone is learning improv to still be authentic and still be themselves? Because you could see the pressure some of them felt in the training.

Brad McMurran

What happens a lot of them is they're waiting to talk. You saw that when we were up there, they're waiting to speak. They're trying to plot, which is an improvisation. Again, I said it in there, plotting or storytelling is something to leave to the sketch comedians and the novelist. We're behaviorless. We're more about being in the moment. What's your behavior light? When they try to steer it, we have something called super powers and kryptonite and improvisation. My kryptonite, believe it or not, is still that, is actually plotting because I came from writing background. So I'll have moments where I'm like, stop trying to steer the scene. Stop trying to see it. My superhero moment might be kinesthetic responses, playing off of you. Does that make sense? When I play that, Brad, I'm the best Brad there is. When I play the other one, you miss. But I would say to you, nothing they do is uncommon. I would say that there was nothing in there we did that was wrong today. It's just the way it works until you train out of it.

Ken White

You took the next question right out of my mouth. What are some of the common things you see as you're training?

Brad McMurran

Yes, but the biggest one is that we forget that. I still do it. I told you, I came from a law family. So for me, it's so second nature to argue with you. We were talking about sports earlier, Ken and I were, and you were like, Yeah, but I'm not sure if UVA really was at the quality Duke was. Yeah, but we're already starting that argument. Instead of just saying, Yeah, and they did have a good program, and I'd like to hear more about it, things like that.

Ken White

Does that follow under? You were using the words conflict and negation. Is that where that falls under that header, or is it different?

Brad McMurran

It is, right? Negation is going to kill it dead. I'll give you a quick example of negation on this, and people forget this. You can still yes and negate. That's one thing that we forget. I didn't have a whole lot of time with them, so I would if you were in a longer training is I could say, I'm really nervous to be at your office today. I hate being at the dentist office. You say, Yeah, and I'm not a dentist. That's a negation. We now have to go backwards and figure out the exposition of why I thought you were a dentist. No, because you're seeing me rolling my eyes, but your ear, as opposed to saying, Yes, and that's the thing I love about being a dentist is your pain, right? Or whatever that way would be, as opposed to doing that. So you see a lot of negation. But remember, I think we're programmed that way. I really do. I teach this every day of my life. I really do. I rarely get a day off these days. It's our second nature to have that. I'd love to actually know why. I don't really even think about why anymore. I just see it so much. I'm like, it's going to happen. We have to reprogram our brains not to be that way, which I think there's probably something to it. I mean, if you really think about it, we got to defend ourselves in life. We got to be survivalists. It's tough to make your partner look good at all times. People are after you. You really do have to rethink.

Ken White

I think people feel, if they haven't seen any improv training or taking part of it, they might think, Man, this is going to take me way out of my comfort zone. What do you tell people?

Brad McMurran

I hope so. I hope it does take you out of your comfort zone a little bit, because what I'd say is, anytime you get too comfortable, I think is where we're in trouble in life. I don't know how you feel about that, but I really would say that one man that was in there a minute ago has told me that. He was like, I was so afraid to be out there with this. And I said, Well, how about now? And he's like, It made me figure out what to do when I don't know what to do. And I'm like, That's why I'm here. That literally is why I'm here. But what I'd also say is, if you work with a good trainer in improvisation, like I did with Upright City Brigade in Second City or wherever you go, Push Comedy Theater, if I can get that plug in there, is they're going to help you through that. That's part of the game on that. It is a training. Because I do like sports, you got to learn balance, elbow, eyes, and follow through when you shoot a basketball. Cool. You learn that, and I'll go shoot it a thousand times. Learn it yourself by trying it, just like I hope they do today is go home, try Yes anding, see what happens. It will change their life a bit.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Brad McMurran. And that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time,

the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Brad McMurrin, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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