

DevOps is Improv: How Improv Made Me a Better Sysadmin

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Abstract

With the rise of DevOps as a prevailing software development model, organizations are finding that teamwork and communication are tools that are vital to the overall success of their mission. Three years ago, I took my first improv class, and in addition to helping me be more comfortable with public speaking, I have found that many of the techniques that help an improv team succeed on stage are directly applicable to helping a DevOps team succeed.

1. Saying "Yes And"

While there are many forms of improvisation, all of them share one major rule: saying "Yes And". Saying "Yes And" means that you are agreeing with the reality that is being established on stage and then adding more to it. In a DevOps team, saying "Yes And" means that you are open to new ideas, and are adding ideas of your own, rather than denying the contributions of your teammates. Saying "Yes And" also requires you to listen carefully to what is being said so that your contributions can add to the whole performance or project.

2. Supporting Your Team

Almost all forms of improvisation are performed by teams, and for a performance to be a success, the team must work together and support each other. It's common before a performance for improvisers to tell each other "I've got your back", and that is also needed in DevOps. If there is a problem or someone needs help, a team should work together to solve it, rather than try to find a way to assign blame. On stage, providing support to your scene partners makes them look good, and it ensures that when you are in the spotlight, your team will be there to provide the support you need to look good.

3. Taking Risks

Improv provides a heightened view of reality, and in order to provide humor for the audience, improvisers must take risks and take advantage of slips of the tongue and other unexpected statements or developments in the scene. Rather than being discouraged, these are called "gifts", and can take the performance in directions that no one expected. In DevOps, if we believe that our team has our back, it is much easier to take risks - and we may find that unexpected results may improve a project and make it more successful than it may have been otherwise.

4. Shared Success

On any team, whether in improv or in DevOps, individual members of the team will have various skill levels. At the end of a performance, however, the audience is not applauding for one player - they are applauding for the team. If a stronger player provides support for the other members of a team, that will help to ensure that the show is a success. Likewise, in DevOps, success or failure is shared between the whole team, and completing a project successfully relies on the team working together.