

Town Hall Audience Encouraged to Embrace the Unknown

Things were progressing nicely as **Stan Anders** led KPMG LLP's Silicon Valley, CA, partners and employees through a recent Town Hall recap of local achievements and a look ahead at the coming year. That was until things veered off script.

Interrupted mid-presentation, Anders fielded an unexpected recommendation from a Town Hall "participant" that the office introduce clothing-optional Fridays.

Unknown to the audience members, Anders, the office managing partner, had invited the Red Ladder Theatre Company, an improvisational outreach group sponsored by the San Jose Repertory Theatre (San Jose Rep), to crash the December meeting.

Even Anders, who is president of the San Jose Rep Board, did not know what would happen during an interactive demonstration designed to show how thinking on your feet can be a valuable business skill.

"The rules of improv are the rules I live by every day in leading and dealing with other people," said Anders. "You accept what you're given by saying 'yes and' rather than 'yes but' to add to the conversation. To be successful relating to others, you have to be totally present and in the moment."

For KPMG Silicon Valley professional **Maria Walker**, the improv exercises were a welcome departure from the ordinary.

"When you think about it there were a lot of serious things to discuss given the current economy," said Walker. "The improv group added some levity as well as meaning to the overall meeting."

Walker was among a handful of volunteers who were called up to the stage to participate in an activity designed to build communications skills—acting out clues the first letter of which combined to spell out KPMG acronyms like KICS (the firm's independence compliance system). The Silicon Valley Audit senior manager demonstrated the word "understanding"—the final hint for BABU (the Bay Area Business Unit)—by looking perplexed as an improv group member tried to teach her something until she finally got it.



KPMG's Silicon Valley Office Managing Partner Stan Anders and Red Ladder Director Karen Altree Piemme



The Red Ladder actors (from left to right): Carlos Aguirre, Keith Pinto, Melissa Navarro, Darcie Lee Grover

“One of the takeaways from the whole thing was that you need to step out of your shell a little and be flexible,” said Walker. “Our people are frequently put into situations where they don’t know what will happen next.”

Just as the current economic climate is challenging businesses to take new approaches, the Town Hall setting was a first for the Red Ladder group, which has been presenting similar sessions for disadvantaged teens, teachers, and other groups for more than a decade. Red Ladder Director **Karen Altree Piemme** credits recent conversations with Anders with contributing to the group’s decision to add corporate trainings to its repertoire.



Red Ladder Director Karen Altree Piemme

“I think a lot of people are hungry to gain fresh perspectives,” she said. “Once they have an opportunity to lose themselves in the process they can ultimately find a creative spark that they haven’t tapped into in a long time.”

Like many nonprofit organizations, Red Ladder and the San Jose Rep have been looking for new ways to raise funds. Anders suggested that they extend their existing strength—educational improv workshops—into something that could generate money while providing corporate donors with a return on their investment via training for their employees.

Creativity, Piemme added, can be especially important in the Silicon Valley, where many companies have been founded by people who have become successful by thinking differently from the crowd.

The idea of corporate improv training has also sparked the interest of the local community. After reading a *San Jose Mercury News* article on Red Ladder’s appearance at KPMG’s Silicon Valley Town Hall, the president of a KPMG target company wrote Anders to say he’s considering holding a similar session for his company.

“By participating in this exercise, we have sent a strong signal to both our KPMG professionals and to the outside world that we are an innovative organization that embraces, and even thrives, on change,” Anders said. “I can’t wait to see how we’ll use our new skills in the coming year!”