

# Cassidy: Theater company uses improv as a teaching tool

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There's managing partner Stan Anders on stage at the annual employee meeting for the Silicon Valley office of the accounting giant KPMG. He's in front of about 550 KPMGers talking about the four-box strategy and making connections and blah, blah, blah, when a guy in the back row stands up with a question.

The guy says morale needs a boost. "Clothing-optional Friday," he says, "What do you think of something like that?"

Anders, who heads the Silicon Valley office, says, without missing a beat: "We might want to talk to brand and regulatory control about that, because if there are any tattoos on people not wearing their clothes, we have to approve those."

It really happened. It's just that the guy asking the question wasn't really a KPMG employee. He was an actor, part of a troupe that KPMG hired to teach the buttoned-down accountants and others at the yearly meeting how to use improvisational theater to help them in their work lives.

Sound crazy? That's what I thought, too. But hear everybody out. Maybe it's not so crazy after all.

"Groups work better when they understand the principles of improvisation," says Karen Altree Piemme, director of Red Ladder Theatre Company, an outreach program of the San Jose Repertory Theatre. "It's all about risk-taking and having trust in people and communication."

You know improv, right? The actors set a scene, say a day in the life of KPMG. Then audience members throw out elements of the scene rapid-fire. The actors immediately incorporate those notions into a skit — no rehearsals.

It requires people to think on their feet, work together, handle the unexpected, learn from mistakes and follow their gut. Sound like qualities that might be helpful anywhere else?

For 16 years Red Ladder has been using the genre to shore up confidence and self-esteem among all sorts of vulnerable people — criminals in jail, kids in juvenile hall, homeless teenagers, children with autism. Now it's turning its focus to another group in trouble: Silicon Valley corporations.

With the economy in the tank, business leaders, employees, everyone must start looking differently at what they do and how they do it, says Anders, who as a member of the nonprofit Rep's board is something of a ringer.

"We have to think beyond today because we're in such a turbulent time that you can't be myopic about this," he tells me before his stage appearance. "This process of improvisation just opens people up to taking risks."

And so for roughly \$5,000 to \$10,000 Red Ladder will come up with a program that focuses on what you think needs focusing on in your business. Using Improv in corporate training has been around for years, and it is



Stan Anders, Managing Partner at KPMG, an international accounting and consulting firm, speaks about the Red Ladder Theater Company at the annual company meeting at the Santa Clara Convention Center in Santa Clara on December 11, 2008. KPMG is using a corporate Improv session with the Red Ladder theater company to help foster creativity, trust, spontaneity, communication and acceptance. (LiPo Ching)

sometimes offered by for-profit training companies. But Red Ladder officials say they are not aware of another Bay Area theater offering a corporate improv program.

So far the theater has landed only San Jose law firm Hopkins & Carley and KPMG as customers, but Red Ladder backers are hoping to encourage others to try improv.

Yes, employees and even bosses are called up on stage as part of the program.

"It was funny to see how quickly people got into character and sort of came out of their shells," says Maria Walker, a senior manager. She was asked to play charades on stage by helping to silently act out one of KPMG's many office acronyms. The point? To show that what's perfectly clear to one person might not be so clear to another.

Before Walker took the stage, five Red Ladder actors got the crowd started with a hilarious skit inspired by characteristics of KPMG partners, as shouted out by those in the audience. In the course of a few minutes, fancy coffee was spilled, underlings were chewed out, e-mails were misfired, an elevator stalled, a bully boss hit the golf links, a new hire was reduced to tears and one exec downed gallons of Propel. No doubt the suggestions featured some exaggeration. I mean, no one was fired. And everyone had a good laugh.

Which is important, Anders says, but so too are the lessons he's confident the day provides.

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