DevOps is Improv: How Improv Made Me a Better Sysadmin

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For these slides and additional information, please visit:
http://devopsisimprov.info
Improv Basics

- Like DevOps, Improv is generally based on teams.
- An improv show usually consists of a series of improvised scenes.
- Each scene is built collaboratively by all members of the team using the principle of “Yes And”.
- “Yes And” means accepting what your partners have contributed and adding to it.
- In order to contribute to the scene, you must listen to what your teammates are saying, rather than trying to think of what you will say next.
- The best scenes come out of taking risks and making choices that may not be the obvious one.
- All members of the team share responsibility for success or failure on stage.
- Improvisers learn to accept and embrace failure.
- Rather than deny a misspoken word or awkward phrasing, treat it as a “gift” and incorporate it into the scene.
- The core of every scene is the relationship between the characters on stage, not what they are doing.
“Yes And”

On Stage

- An improv scene can only move forward by saying “yes and”.
- This does not always mean literally saying the word "yes", but accepting what your teammates have contributed and adding more information.
- Not accepting their contributions is “denial”, and negates what has already been created.
- Denial causes you to need to invent new things rather than using what has already been created.
- Denial makes your teammates believe that you do not value their contributions.

In DevOps

- Technology constantly changes, and in DevOps, we must stay up to date on current trends and learn to embrace change.
- It is easy to say “no” and resist change, but by saying “yes”, you may discover new ways of working and new solutions to your problems.
- Saying “yes and” lets you be an agent of change, and add your contribution to the success of your organization.
- When you receive a request that you can’t fulfill, rather than just saying “no”, you can use “yes and” to acknowledge the requestor’s need, and offer alternative solutions.
Listening

On Stage

- In order to “yes and” what your teammates have contributed to the scene, you must listen carefully to what they are saying.
- If you are thinking about what your next line should be, you are not listening, and may miss information that you can “yes and”.
- If you are not listening, your teammates may feel that you do not value their contributions, and they may become less willing to contribute in the future.
- You must listen to your teammates in order to truly “And” what they are saying and move the scene forward.

In DevOps

- Listening is a vital skill for system administrators, whether you are dealing with users, peers, management, or anyone else.
- Rather than dismiss a person’s problem or request, listen to what they are saying.
- If people do not feel that they are being listened to, they may not feel comfortable bringing future problems or ideas to your attention.
- Even if you have to decline a request or suggestion, by listening and giving it a fair assessment, people will feel that you value their input and will be more likely to accept your response.
Taking Risks and Supporting Your Team

On Stage

- In a scene, it is easy to go for a quick joke or say the obvious thing that would be said in a situation.
- The best scenes are ones in which you take a risk and send the scene in an unexpected direction.
- When your teammates take risks, you must be ready to support whatever they have contributed.
- It is much easier to have the confidence to take risks when you know that your team “has your back” and will support whatever choices you make.

In DevOps

- Many organizations tend to have a large amount of legacy systems or policies because they “just work” or “we’ve always done it this way”.
- IT is a constantly changing field, and we must learn to take risks and try new ways of working in order to provide better services and solutions to problems.
- If someone on your team has an idea to incorporate new technology or change the way things are done, do not immediately shoot them down.
- While not every idea will be feasible, an organization where new ideas are encouraged will be more successful in the long term.
Embracing Mistakes and Shared Success

On Stage

- Mistakes will happen on stage – you may misspeak, say the wrong word, or phrase something awkwardly.
- Improvisers learn to embrace mistakes and incorporate them into a scene as “gifts”.
- These mistakes can become a highlight of the show.
- Calling out a mistake does not make you look good, and it hurts the “group mind” that a successful team needs to develop.
- On stage, you are not an individual improviser, but part of a team.
- The team will either succeed or fail together.

In DevOps

- Mistakes will happen in DevOps – you may delete a file, let a certificate expire, or have a server crash.
- Rather than play the “blame game”, you can learn from your mistakes so you can avoid them in the future.
- Some mistakes can lead to better solutions to a problem, or a greater understanding of the underlying system.
- Rather than have “Dev” vs. “Ops”, a successful organization will have “DevOps”.
- For any given project, the Dev and Ops teams involved will succeed or fail together as a group.