



The
Becoming
Principle

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If you hear a voice within you say,
“You cannot paint”, then by all
means, paint, and that voice will
be silenced. — Vincent Van Gogh

Think back to the first time you sat on a two-wheel bicycle with the training wheels off. You didn't know how to ride it, and there was no instruction manual. You'd seen plenty of big and small people riding bikes, and you could picture yourself doing what they did. Perhaps with somebody holding you steady, you started pedaling; you performed as a bicycle rider before you actually were a bicycle rider. Your performance was probably awkward at first; maybe you fell a couple of times. But soon—maybe that same day—you were riding that bike. By pretending, by performing as a cyclist, you became a cyclist.

This is how a lot of childhood learning takes place. Walking, speaking—even talking on a cell phone—we learned it all through the imitating, pretending, and performing that made up so much of our play as kids.

What an amazing phenomenon this is!

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Among the many psychologists, educators, and researchers who have studied this, Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky’s work in 1920s and ’30s stands out for me. Unlike most of his contemporaries (and many who came later) Vygotsky stressed the social, playful, and performative nature of children’s development and learning. Vygotsky’s discoveries are foundational to the growing field of performative psychology, which has extended his work further, into adulthood.

And adulthood is where it gets really interesting. Because we're not "done" with play, pretending, and performing once we leave childhood. As adults—in the workplace and elsewhere—when we're asked to do something we've never done before, when we need to grow beyond our current capabilities, we can tap into what we naturally did as children, and perform our way to who we're becoming.

For adults, though, play, performance, and pretending can feel anything but natural. We got the message in a myriad of ways as we left toddlerhood: Play is for kids, not for big people. We're supposed to color inside the lines; know the correct answer; understand how to behave and fit in. And there's no denying the importance of that learning—obviously we need to learn how to safely cross the street, say our ABCs, and wake up an iPad. But this need to get it right eventually takes over. We learn what we need to in school and by the time we get into the job market, the support we got to learn developmentally as children is long gone. As an adult, it is embarrassing to not know. There are repercussions if we don't get it right. We feel stupid, and we make others feel stupid if they don't "have it together." Many (most?) of us get stuck being "who we are"—as defined by ourselves and others—whether that's our personality (and the initials that we're assigned by the psychological tools that assess it), what kind of job we do or career we can have, if we're confident or insecure, and more. Without realizing it, we've gotten ourselves in a non-developmental box where there's not much room for new learning, growth, or experimentation.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

Performative psychology teaches us that there's a way out of that box. As adults, we can grow and develop, just like we did when we were small, by using performance and play to be who we are AND who we are not, at the same time.

Say what?

What I mean is that we all can play, perform, and become by doing what actors do when they're on the stage or in front of the camera. Think about it: actors are themselves AND who they are not (think Daniel Day-Lewis and Abraham Lincoln). And the good ones are very talented at it (still thinking of DD-L; a pastime of mine). But, at root, they are able to do what they do not because they're superhuman; on the contrary, it's because they're human. Just like you and me (remember, we all did it in childhood!).

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And when the rest of us humans take that activity (being who we are and who we're not at the same time) off the stage, and bring it into our work and lives, we start to become, to learn, to grow. We don't have to be limited to what we already know. We can perform in new ways, do new things, change "rules," and break out of the habitual scripts that hold us and our organizations back.

I call this The Becoming Principle™, and to help you put it to work I'd like to introduce you to its Five Fundamentals of Performance. These fundamentals and a few introductory exercises will begin to shift your perspective and give you actionable to-do's that will expand and improve your professional performances.

1. Choose to grow

As I mentioned, one of the biggest impediments to growth is our belief that we need to know how to do something before we do it. This is commonly accepted as crucial to success in school, at work, and for life in general. And there's nothing wrong with knowing things—it's critically important when, for example, you want to choose a cut of meat for a barbecue, perform brain surgery, or how to accurately count the votes in a presidential election. (Don't get me started.) But to the extent that our need to know prevents us from continuing to learn and grow, we're missing out.

Here are a couple of exercises to build your skill at growing instead of knowing:

- **Don't know.** Instead of only being a person who “knows the answer” (or wants to know the answer), start performing “not knowing.” Make the choice to be tolerant of ambiguity, open, and even uncertain. Say lines like, “I have no idea!” or “Let’s sit with this for a while,” or “There might not be a clear answer here.” Notice the kind of space this allows for different kinds of thinking, feeling, and action.
- **Do the impossible.** Put yourself in a situation in which you have to do something that might make you say, “I couldn’t possibly do that”—something you don’t know how to do or you’re not good at. Take a stab at a stretch assignment (e.g., volunteer for a project you wouldn’t normally take on). Ask a friend to help you cook an unusual dish. Have a different kind of conversation than you typically have (e.g., give someone difficult feedback, ask for feedback, state a disagreement, or agree for a change).

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2. Build Ensembles Everywhere

Great performances—even solo turns—don’t happen in a vacuum. As a singer, actor and improviser, I’ve had the good fortune of having been part of performing ensembles for most of my life. And as I’ve continued to observe, build, and work with groups of all kinds as a CEO and coach to leaders and teams, I’ve found that the most creative, innovative and effective work environments are when you have ensembles—in particular, ensembles that are made up of people with different skills, experiences, temperaments, and varied points of view.

Working to make use of all of the rich material that a diverse group possesses gives us a reason to listen, to be open to new ideas, to not get frustrated or feel worried about what others think. Together, we are able to accomplish much more, and with greater creativity and collective wisdom.

How to get started with your ensemble-making performance? Try these exercises:

- **First person plural.** Spend a couple of days saying “we” every time you would normally say “I.” Notice how this changes what you say and how you say it. See how it impacts your colleagues.

- **Mix it up.** Bring people together to work on a project who have varied skills, are at different levels, and are different from one another in other ways. Talk about these differences and about your strengths and weaknesses, and work on your project, enthusiastically making use of all of it. Not clear what I mean? Not a problem. Figuring out how to do that together (i.e., deciding together what that means) is part of the ensemble-building process.

3. Listen (It's a Revolutionary Way To Have a Conversation)

Mark Twain once said “Let us make a special effort to stop communicating with each other, so we can have some conversation.” And that was over a century ago! Today, driven by technology and data, much of our communication is transactional, and our relationships suffer for it. On the other hand, conversation is at the heart of your workplace performances, and real conversation depends on real listening. Studies show that most of us listen only about 20% of the time. And much of what passes for listening is really just formulating what we want to say while someone else is speaking.

So what to do? Listen like an improviser—like on *Who's Line Is It Anyway?* When you listen improvisationally, you're explicitly performing as a listener. You listen with intent, and focus not on yourself and what you're going to say next, but on what the other person is saying and doing.

In improv, that's called the "offer." You hear the offer (because you're listening), let it impact you, and then respond given what you have heard. Conversation can be more like jazz—where you're building and creating and riffing off the offers you hear.

Another technique to help you perform as a listener is slowing down, pausing, and letting the other person's words sink in and have their full impact on you before you respond.

So here are your assignments:

- **Put listening first.** Pick two meetings and a one-on-one conversation that are coming up and choose to make listening your priority performance. Try not to listen for anything, and don't assume you know what's coming. Pause longer than you normally would before you respond. Ask questions. Make more eye contact than you usually do. And then let what you hear have an impact on what you say, think, and do.
- **More than words.** Take special notice of body language offers. How someone sits, their facial expressions, their walk, what they're looking at, and more. Take these offers in, and let them impact what you do next.

4. Create with Crap

The break room refrigerator hasn't been cleaned in a month and the smell stops you in your tracks. A colleague responds to you with a nasty email, and replies all. Halfway through a new business pitch you realize the final slide features the logo of the client you pitched the day before. The amazing manager you were about to promote leaves for a job at Google.

Depressed yet? Hold that thought. We all have to deal with a lot of crap—situations and people we find frustrating, disagreeable, or worse. This can make us feel demoralized, off-balance, angry or worse. But counterintuitive as it may seem, we can create with this crap. Even as it makes us want to throw a chair, it can also inspire us to do something new and different.

Think back to the fundamental on listening, and the idea of the “offer.” If we relate to these circumstances as offers and not problems, everything changes. What we call things matters, after all. If the crap is an offer, then by definition you have to build upon it. And what we think of as crap usually isn't some run-of-the-mill offer, either—it has built-in challenges, high stakes, unexpected twists. This can actually be a gift! You have to raise your game and look for new ideas, or approaches in response. So start creating:

- **I said “create,” and I mean it.** The next time something really frustrating or upsetting happens at work, write a poem, draw a cartoon, or make up a song about it. (That’s why they call it the Blues.)
- **The wow factor.** When the crap hits the proverbial fan, say out loud (to yourself or others), “Wow. This might actually be a gift. What’s possible now that wasn’t before?” Maybe instead of firing off your own nasty email, take a breath. Pick up the phone or walk to their office and say, “I’d love to do a ‘take-two’ on our conversation.” Use the crap as an opportunity to help you change your (and others’) performances.
- **Yours stinks, too.** Be on the lookout for the crap you’re giving to others. Since we mostly think we’re right, or that less-than-optimal things we do are justifiably in response to something else (which could very well be), it can be hard to see. But at least on a few occasions, notice your crap and then tell people, “I really did a bunch of crap today. Got any ideas about how to be creative with it?”

“While we may not think of life and work this way, we’re improvising all the time.”

5. Improvise Your Life

While we may not think of life and work this way, we're improvising all the time. The scenes we perform in (arriving at work, running a staff meeting, having dinner with the in-laws) don't have scripts. But we can and do become "scripted" in how we perform them. From little things like the route we take to work, to pretty important issues like our style of leadership, it's as if these performances—which at one time were actually new and fresh (you improvised them at first)—were always there and now they define who we really are.

But if you keep improvising—walk or talk in a new way, ask a question when you would normally say nothing or argue, use different body language, etc.—you can continue to invent who you are, what you do, how you do it, and how you feel, see, and think. You're engaged in growing and learning and doing things before you know how.

So I'm suggesting that you perform every conversation, every interaction as an improvisational scene, in which you are both a performer and a director. When you do that, you get to take advantage of the remarkable benefits that improvisation can have on your relationships, communication, teamwork and more. To get you started, here are my "six tenets of improvisation":

- **Say “Yes, and” (and mean it!).** This is the fundamental rule of improv that connects you with your scene partner and gives you a collaborative path forward. You accept the “offer” you hear, and then add something that builds on it. You never say “yes, but” or “no, but”. Try this in a few conversations over the next week—it’s not necessary to say the words, “yes, and”; it’s the action of accepting the offer and building with it that matters. See how often you catch yourself saying “yes, but,” and work to stamp it out.
- **Make the other person look good.** Improv guru Del Close said, “If we treat each other as if we are geniuses, poets, and artists, we have a better chance of becoming them.” As an improviser in life, when you choose to relate to the words and actions of others as important and valuable, the “scene” (conversation, meeting) you create has a better chance of being important and valuable. Try this: start your response to something you hear by saying “What I like about what you said” or “What’s important about what ____ said is...”

*“Improvise love the unexpected, the unusual, the “weird.”
It sparks creativity onstage, and can do the same at work.*

- **Celebrate mistakes and failures.** Now that you're trying out new performances and doing things before you know how, you're going to make some mistakes. Is that a problem? NO! In a performance, mistakes are a gift that you can improvise upon, learn from, and be creative with. Here's an example: Tell some colleagues about a doozy of a mistake you've made—today, yesterday, this year, in your life. Tell them you'd like them to applaud after they hear your mistake, and then when they do, take a bow. (Yep, you heard me right, take a bow.) Ask them what they think you and the organization might do to learn from your mistake. Come up with real, specific ideas—not generalizations.
- **Follow the follower.** This is an extension of the “yes, and” principle. It means that as you improvise with one or more people, you attend very closely to the response that comes to whatever you just did. And then, in turn, you respond in a way that is connected to that response. On an improv stage, it creates a kind of synchronization that seems magical; in a business setting, it's the best way I know to get and keep people on the same page.
- **Delight in curveballs.** Improvisers love the unexpected, the unusual, the “weird.” It sparks creativity onstage, and can do the same at work. Let's face it, you never really know what's about to happen, so being prepared to accept curveballs as a gift to be created with is a great alternative to being derailed by them. So throw yourself a few curveballs. Make a

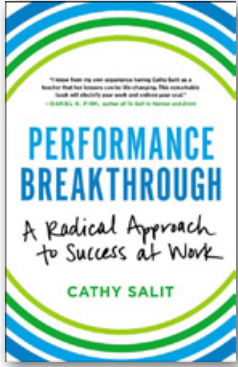
decision without thinking it through carefully and thoroughly. Talk to someone at work you never talk with. Talk to a stranger and get into a philosophical conversation. When someone says or does something at work that throws you off balance, notice it. Smile and breathe. “Yes-and” it.

- **Go into the cave.** Keith Johnstone, a founding pioneer of modern improvisation, wrote, “Those who say YES are rewarded by the adventures they have. Those who say NO are rewarded by the safety they attain.” Eleanor Roosevelt said: “Do one thing every day that scares you.” I say: as you improvise your way through the scenes of your work and life, you’re always faced with options for what to do next. Often, one option is safe and comfortable; the other is unfamiliar, unusual, or frightening. Say YES to the latter. And then be ready to use the other five tenets!

These are just a few of the kind of performance exercises that can help you to become who you are not... yet.

So what will your new performances (of you) be? Who (and how) will you become? 🗣️

Info



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