

TCM 129 - Shannon Hughes: Building Brave Spaces with Improv Mindset

Mitch Simon: Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere, where CEOs, leaders and experts at building teams,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: companies,

Mitch Simon: organizations,

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: and amazing cultures, share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the East Coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

Mitch Simon: And I'm your co-host on the West Coast, Mitch Simon, and we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

What we've learned more than anything about building virtual and hybrid companies is that we must build what Shannon Hughes, founder of Enliven Studios calls a brave space. And one of the best ways to create a brave space is through an improv mindset and through improv practices. Listen closely to how Shannon helps companies build an energetic space where teams are invited to be brave.

Hello, and welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host, Mitch Simon on the West coast and on the East Coast, we have our amazing co-host, Dr. Virginia Bianco-Mathis. How are you, Ginny?

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I am really great. I may need some more coffee since it's a Monday. So I'm looking forward to this podcast to energize us all.

Mitch Simon: That is right. We are all about energizing teams, anywhere. So today on the podcast, we're delighted, super delighted to have Shannon Hughes, founder of Enliven Studios. Shannon, consults and facilitates companies that are committed to growing their companies through creating enliven cultures. Shannon's teachings are rooted in key communication practices that are inspired by the key tenets of improv theater. Woo-hoo. We can't wait to do this podcast. So Shannon, welcome to the podcast.

Shannon Hughes: Thank you. Thank you. The energy is palpable. This is a great way to start a Monday. It is great.

Mitch Simon: Yes. And as many of you know, I have been doing improv on theater at the National Comedy Theater in San Diego, California for I think seven or eight years. And hopefully I'm getting better.

Shannon, as someone who I'm sure spent a majority of your time in front of people before this thing happened in 2020. What has surprised you the most about the way businesses have responded to creating great cultures in the hybrid and virtual world?

Shannon Hughes: What has surprised me the most? Well, I think just in general, there's been such a beautiful shift, and this is not true of all organizations obviously, but there really seems to be a genuine shift with leadership, understanding the value of employee wellbeing, the value of team connection. Some of the more, I would say progressive or conscious air quotes, I suppose conscious leaders out there are really doing the work of understanding the skillsets that kind of go along with emotional intelligence.

What does it mean to listen? What does it mean to ask good questions without imbuing people with your own advice when it's not needed or requested? Right? So I think it was just a real, a really nice kind of collective shift across leadership. Again, not of all organizations, but the ones that we love, right.

And really spending the intention and the energy in understanding how to build those skills and to express those skills, whether you are virtual or in person or like you said, hybrid, which, you know, kind of asks leaders and people to kinda use both sides of their mind and really be intentional for how they're gonna hold that space.

Mitch Simon: Wonderful. A lot about connections, building connections.

So a personal question. Let's see, personal question is what has surprised you the most about you? How have you adapted to this new world?

Shannon Hughes: Hmm, I love it. Well, I know I'm not alone in what I'm about to say, but it's true for me for sure. Is, you know, 2020 came along and the very first thing that happened is my amygdala shot into high speed. And I thought, well, I provide connection my entire company and everything I do in my vision and my own personal company culture is about connection. And how in the

world am I gonna do that when we're separated like we are and people are being asked to isolate from one another?

And you know, like many of the folks that you've had on your show, and I'm sure for you too, we kind of all went into hyperdrive of how are we gonna hold space and really make sure that we're expressing some of those emotional intelligence skills through a screen or over Zoom, or what have you.

So I think what surprised me, well, let's see. I'm fairly adaptable just by nature. I think part of that comes with my love of improv and the lessons that are taught there. So I'm fairly adaptable, or adaptive I should say. But given the amount of kind of fear and uncertainty that I had with my business and my ability to do this virtually, I think I surprised myself with how quick I was to—

Not just learn the technology and how to pull the right levers, because that of course is necessary too. But how to really hold energetic space in a way that allows people that I'm interacting with or allows teams that I'm, whether it be a training or a workshop or a creative, you know, connective kind of more personal development workshop that I might do.

I think I've surprised myself in building that skill of creating what I call brave space. It's not necessarily safe space, right? Because safe is very objective. Who's to say that my safe is your safe? So I like to use the word brave space and that ability to really make people feel like they're invited into a conversation where vulnerability can happen fairly quickly.

whether it's through the use of breakout rooms or the like. But even men, it's not about the technology. It's about really kind of holding that space and allowing people to be invited into something that's shared so that we can kind of co-create together. So I think I surprised myself in being able to do that because at first it was like, I couldn't get over that whole thing of, well, you're in that room halfway around the world and I'm over here, and how in the world are we gonna feel some sense of connection when we're not two bodies in a room together?

And the answer is that it is possible. It just needs to really be authentic and intentional. And obviously, architecting my workshops and my trainings and my meetings in a way that establishes that brave space in the beginning so that we can build up together and kind of work together to build psychological safety throughout at the top of that kind of crux.

You know, get what we came for in terms of what we're trying to build around. And then land the plane in a way that makes people feel like they got what we came for, and the objectives are met and everyone feels really satisfied.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Shannon, something I love what you said is you, yourself were amazed that you, you know, you jumped in. You worked through the fear and you made it happen. So now multiply that by maybe a thousand for some of the CEOs out there.

Because hearing you talk, you see how vulnerable it makes you. And you said you create the space and now these leaders are gone. Well, wait a minute. I created this aura already. Now I got to recreate something else. And I'm scared. How do you get a leader past that fear?

Shannon Hughes: A lot of that comes down to building authentic rapport, reminding leaders of their own humanity and the humanity of the folks that they're collecting and gathering with. I can't say enough about the value of the check-in. right? Which is of course equally as important in person as it is online, but when you're online, it almost is doubly more so, right?

I mean, like you can see what's behind me. You don't know, right? I could have, my husband could be in the kitchen and my family's over there, especially when we were all learning from home and there were all sorts of dynamics, and even just, this is vulnerable.

So, I bring up the check-in because I think that's a really beautiful way for leaders to enter into connection with their teammates, in a way that they're almost modeling their own vulnerability just by asking how someone else is doing.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Totally.

Shannon Hughes: Reciprocity is queen, right? So if I ask you. How are you doing today? Or how can I be of service to you? I'm gonna venture to guess that you're probably gonna ask me the same. And so now we're in this environment together where we're sharing information about one another that we might not otherwise do. And it doesn't always have to be, oh, woe is mean.

My life is this and that. I am up to here with project work and something, something's gotta give like my plate [inaudible]. And then the leader now has an opportunity to say, wow. okay. I didn't realize you were so overloaded. What can we do to kind of shift gears and share some of that wealth with the other

members of your team? So yeah, it's definitely multifaceted, but that's top of mind for me.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: No. Yes. That's great. Thank you.

Mitch Simon: I love how you shared this phrase, brave space, which needs to be your next book. I dunno if you have a first book. Your next book, Brave Space. And I wanna go to one thing that you shared, which was you shared, you know, you need to be authentic and intentional.

And then you said, you know, that you make sure that people get what they came here for. The question I want to ask you was, what is it when you set out a meeting, What is it that you are thinking that you need to get what they came here for? Because I think that's the real distinction, because it used to be when we were all together, you know, what we're coming here for is to get, you know, get the stuff done in a hybrid space, or even in an office space.

What do you see now as so important, over the last three years? What is it that we're coming here to get done that's different?

Shannon Hughes: I mean, words like connection and engagement are definitely overplayed, so I had to use them. But it's hard to find an alternative right on here off the top. So I'm just gonna use the word connection 'cause it's critical. And I also think that this virtual hybrid environment that we're now working in is also an opportunity to rethink meetings in general.

Oftentimes when I'm doing my training, I remind people when they come together for a meeting or a training to start that meeting off with a check-in B to really level set on why we're here, right? And C, especially in the, when I work with nonprofits, it's a great tool to, for two minutes, three minutes read.

It could be reading out loud, right? Your vision and your mission so that everybody remembers what is our North star, what are we here to do? So that, it may at on its face seem like it's another Monday meeting, but if you start it off intentionally with those things, those check-ins, and to say remember the mission of our organization is to X, Y, Z, and the mission of our specific team, let's say maybe even this month, this quarter, this year is A, B, C, then everyone sort of has a north star to go.

Right? That's why we're here. That's why this matters. And then I guess the fourth thing I said, there was only three. But the fourth thing is to be mindful of

time. Like we don't need to force a meeting into an hour if it doesn't need to be an hour.

So how can we design our gatherings in our meetings. I just used the word gatherings, but how do we design this space that we're holding together in a way that doesn't make people feel like it's wasted? So, to your point, Mitch so we get what we came for, and if we can get what we came for in 25 minutes, fabulous. Let's get off and do our work.

But we don't need to continue to force new agenda items into something that's unnecessary just for the sake of being together. Unless that being together is about connection. I have a client, for example, an architecture firm on the East coast and about three, about two months ago, they established on Fridays.

So, they work from home Mondays and Fridays and Tuesday, Wednesday they're together in the office. Fridays from nine to 11, I believe. They have a virtual co-working and they're, strongly encouraged, but not required to keep their selves off mute. Somebody every week, somebody new brings a playlist to stream in the background quietly.

Unless people really in deep focus mode. And they're off mute so that they can in real time as they're working, as they're doing things, say, oh, by the way, Ginny, I meant to ask you bababababa, and everybody in the room benefits from hearing these kind of water cooler style chit chats.

There's also a breakout room that's reserved if Ginny and I need to go and have a conversation in the proverbial hallway. So, that's another example of being together for the sake of connection, that they are still getting what they came for. Just to kind of give a nod back to what I'd said earlier because they're getting their work done and they're in concert with each other in a way that's very kind of co-creative and unique.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: Of all the people who, we always ask this type of question, you know, what does it look like in a virtual? I loved how you explain when they're all on together, and then we could go walk out into the proverbial hallway or walk into the breakout room. You really made it visual for us. Fabulous.

One little thing I also found, I love what you said about starting the meeting off, reading the vision or mission or the North Star. I witnessed last week, a CEO who also ended the same way. Then he said, how did our discussions today get us closer to the North Star?

Shannon Hughes: Oh, it's beautiful.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: I know. I just love that.

Mitch Simon: That's great. You specialize in culture work and experiential facilitation. What are those things? How do you define those and what's the typical client experience for each?

Shannon Hughes: Yeah. They're kind of two different arms of my business, but they are very integrated as I'm sure you can imagine that they have a lot of overlap. So the culture work is, I work with teams, and ideally with CEOs and leadership because it's important in my view to have those folks very much a part of this work at the beginning so that everything trickles down and everything kind of goes across right.

And my work kind of comes in a few different phases when it comes to culture work. , but depending on the objective of my client, they could enter in at different phases. But essentially it's at the start. Let's kind of determine what our own personal core values are and then share as a group what our shared values are with one another, and then allow that understanding to sort of bubble up to the company value set.

So in my work, I see a real value in the understanding that we are a team, obviously, which is a group of people, but we are each individuals coming to that group to comprise it, right? So we all have our backgrounds. We each have our own individual story. We each have our own individual belief system.

Value system, way of being, way of working. So to hurry too much and assume that the entire company is built around a value set that may not be true of the individual, I think is an oversight. This is not always possible for huge companies, right? I mean, if I'm hired into Google tomorrow, I'm not gonna be asked to, to slow down and wait for, you know, to articulate my own values and expect that Google's gonna change theirs.

But for smaller, more nimble and that kind of companies that are a little bit more startup to scale up. It's a beautiful opportunity to really bear witness to one another and understanding those values and then use that information to comprise the company values. So, starting with values is kind of that's the place I start.

Then we talk through to where are these values being operationalized and behavioralized? When you think about the employee life cycle from awareness

all the way through to exit interview, right? You've got onboarding and training, you've got feedback, you've got reviews. You've had CEO touchpoints, got lunches and meetings and rituals.

How are your behaviors, how are those values being behavioralized through every single one of those steps? And if they're not, how can we kind of dial up and dial down and kind of make some shifts and changes. So that they are. So for this firm that I was just mentioning a minute ago, we did that work the first couple of phases and now we are literally like rewriting their onboarding program.

We are putting together what it looks like, what does their incentive and their feedback loop look like in consideration of their values. So there's obviously a lot of facilitation. That's where the overlap comes in 'cause there's a lot of work shopping and some really open discussion. We pull up neuro boards and we co-create, design together.

So there's lots of intersection there, but the output is, kind of this little bit more of consultancy at the start. And then really, I'm not one of those consultants that just gives you a big stack of papers and wishes you luck. I see the work all the way through so that we can really see those changes over time.

And then facilitation comes in there, but it also comes into sales kickoffs and retreats and strategic planning meetings. And that's really where I start to borrow from my improv mindset teachings.

Mitch Simon: Can we reach the improv as soon as we possibly can? 'Cause I can't wait anymore. But I do wanna know, given the culture, experiential facilitation, very hard to say. What actual skillsets are teams developing from working with you? And then how does it impact their ability to be more effective, be more efficient in the workplace?

Shannon Hughes: So, I think we're getting into improv sooner than, or whether we like it or not, but I talk a lot about the improv mindset because the reason that I mention it that way, or talk about it that way is, there are so many direct touch points between how we perform as improvisers on stage and the structure and the practices that we use to do that and business and being a human.

I'll just do this by way of example. I did a sales kickoff not too long ago, a half-day session. That was the beginning kind of the, it was the, the kickoff of the kickoff.

They had three days that they were gonna be together, and the first four hours was me in a room with them. And we had, you know, kind of gamified learning. People are on their feet, sharing stories, creating teams. There was music, there was a microphone. It was very vibrant and lively. And what we really practiced was how do we share stories with one another in a way that feels accessible, a little bit vulnerable, but still accessible and playful.

How do we practice this idea of a yes and mindset? So we're so wired to say *no but*, how do we practice and teach the idea of *yes and*, which of course lends itself to collaboration, ideation, leaning into one another's ideas, with openness and kindness versus, you know, the readiness to shut each other down.

So in this kickoff that I'm mentioning, we had people in the room. We had about 60 people. A lot of people from the sales team, direct sales. We had some people from the sales enablement team, and we had some folks from the engineering team, and none of these folks, I'm using my hands to kind of miss the cross section of each other.

They were being hired from their living room. They'd only spoken on the phone a couple of times, and yet they're making demands of each other to close business. And it worked sometimes and not in others. To get them in a room together, my client still tells me that we're talking again about doing another one this year.

How invaluable it was for those folks to meet in a room with one another. And you can easily do this virtually. This event was in person, but you could easily do this virtually. And I've done it plenty of times. But the engineering folks and the sales folks shared information that was, you know, personal and business information about one another in a way that now they.

Now they've had that kind of initial connection that they can always pull back and in line to when it comes to getting things done for the client, when it comes to ideating for the business. So again, back to that connection, that's an example of kind of the output and the results in that context.

Other ways are just improving communication. And another example is getting a CEO that I've worked with recently to realize how important it is to pull up a chair once a quarter with nothing but a box of donuts and a cup of coffee, and just talk about the state of the business in a way that appeases the folks who are working for him so that they understand why they're there doing the work they're doing from a business perspective and a human perspective.

And I don't think he would've done that if it hadn't been kind of through some of the work that we do about inspiring good question asking and listening skills.

That's great. So let us get into improv. What was your experience with improv? And how did you know it'd be so impactful with your work?

So, I've been a performer all my life. Stage is my happy place. When I was in high school, I did a bunch of improv. When I went to college and my early adult career and all that, I sort of left all that behind and kind of forgot that was important to my livelihood.

I got a little caught up in the corporate mumbo jumbo and being a mom and everything else that went along with that. And in 2017, I don't even know what moment it was, but I had this moment of I've gotta go back and do improv. I missed it. I just missed it with this like, visceral sense of missing something.

And I went back to Bats Bay Area Theater Sports in San Francisco and I started to take classes just thinking that I'd like to be on stage and it would be a fun thing to do. And, you know, coming at improv later in my life again.

Having had, you know, 20 plus years of experience in business, it was so immediate when we were starting to kind of go back to these principles, like, make your partner look good and, you know, fail early, fail often, and all the practices around being present in spontaneous and agile and all the listening skills that you have to employ when you're doing improv.

It was just so obvious to me. You'll laugh at this Mitch. Cause I was like, I could create a business around this and I'm probably the only person who's ever thought about this.

Until I realized that there's a, you know, a global network of people doing this work in all different capacities called the Applied Improv Network. And people use this work, this borrowing from improv. I mean, it's so inspiring, whether it's business or, you know, therapy or people are using improv in an example that I've read about in a book in terms of case studies is getting like inner city youth or underserved communities, I should say and police departments to communicate better with each other and using improv to do that.

So I just kind of kept peeling back the onion, I guess, and meeting people and asking, you know, asking for conversations and really starting to understand how this work was being used and putting my own pieces together to design Enliven studios.

Mitch Simon: That's great. And so what changes are you seeing now through the use of improv with your clients?

Shannon Hughes: Oh. I think it's that openness that I had mentioned. And a willingness to have some of the perceived uncomfortable conversations. , the ways that some of my clients, for example, are implementing reviews, employee reviews.

Is being done in a much far kind of evolved and revolutionary way, given what they were doing before. This whole once a year, we're supposed to look back and remember all the accolades and all the things we've done, you know, back in January is archaic and doesn't work.

So how can we this idea of just instilling real time feedback by having more of a quote-unquote open door, and I'm using my body to kind of almost like an open heart and an open mind all the time. So I guess, yeah, I think I would just say this openness and understanding that the perception that someone is well is just a perception. So that checking in at a level that is meaningful and authentic, I think is a great example of that, I suppose. And if I'm being too vague, you can poke.

Mitch Simon: So, how does improv help someone have a difficult conversation?

Shannon Hughes: Improv helps someone have a difficult conversation because if you think about being in a scene, you come on stage and you have no idea what you're going to get, right? If you're about to create something that's never been done before, will never be done again. And there can be fear associated with that.

And there can be uncertainty. And what if somebody says something that you're not prepared for, or they name something that you're not ready for, you don't know anything about. And so improv practices you to stay agile and to be welcoming for anything, right? Start anywhere. Start with what you have, okay?

You've been in a scene, you've been probably, hopefully given a name, a character trait. Maybe you've been given a location or an objective in your scene. How are you gonna work with that in order to co-create together and move the scene forward? Similarly in conflicts and tough conversations, in discussions that might be uncomfortable,

how do you stay in that moment? Stay in the moment and be able to practice self-awareness to have that agility. And sometimes it means not to say anything at all, right? To pause and reflect before you speak. In improv, you know, some of the most powerful scenes I've ever seen is when are, when no words are exchanged, but the body is just used.

So you know, in, practicing, sharing space together, spontaneity and agility, listening to both verbal and nonverbal cues. Knowing when to, when to speak and when to lean in, when to lean out right? So those are, I know I'm kinda layering lots of skills on there, but it is highly nuanced and you can just see how invaluable some of these concepts are when you put them into practice in real life.

Ginny Bianco-Mathis: And what I would like to highlight, I see it as almost now a mandatory skill to use. With now, the virtual and the hybrid. Because of that fear, and Mitch knows this. I use this example a lot where they ask clients ask me, all right, I'm gonna do check-ins. What do I say? And they want the 1, 2, 3, 4, as opposed to, no go with the experience of it.

Yeah. And if they have enough of these improv practices, they gain confidence that, oh, that's okay. It will work out. I love it guys.

Mitch Simon: We do too. So, we know you're in the Bay Area. Where can we find you on the internet?

Shannon Hughes: Yeah, thank you. My website is enlivenedstudios.com.

I'm also on LinkedIn, Shannon Hughes. I'm under my name not my company name. Although I do have a page there somewhere. And I have a download for your listeners if, if that would be interesting. It is called Five Tips to Inspire a People First Culture. And these five tips are, were designed with low budget, not a lot of time.

Like the busy executive who just wants the easy way to start. And that can be found at enlivenedstudios.com/peoplefirst.

Mitch Simon: Great. All right, Shannon. Well thank you so much. It's great to have another improviser. On the podcast. Thank you, Ginny. Thank you to our listeners and yeah, definitely check out enlivenedstudios.com.

Shannon's been just a pleasure to talk to today. Share this episode with your friends, your colleagues, your family, your pets. We'll see you next time on our next episode of Team Anywhere.