

AT THE EDGE PODCAST



SEASON 1, EPISODE 7

COONOOR BEHAL – IMPROV WITH ELEPHANTS AND GENERALS

Interviewed by Michael Lee

Coonoor Behal honed her creative problem-solving skills during her years as a strategy and innovation consultant at Deloitte Consulting LLP. For part of her time there, she worked in the firm’s Global Innovation Network, spearheading and managing open innovation challenges across more than one hundred member firms. With years of experience as an improv comedian and teacher, Coonoor brings levity, adaptability, and composure to every experience and is an expert in using improv techniques to enhance collaboration and ideation. Prior to her creative business career, Coonoor worked in non-profit international development. She was trained in Product Design at the Wharton School of Business, is a graduate of Adaptive Path’s User Experience (UX) Intensive, received her BA from New York University (summa cum laude) and her MA from The University of Chicago. She was awarded the prestigious GovLab Innovation Fellowship at Deloitte Consulting, is certified in “Creative Facilitation and Design” by Retreats That Work, and is a regular guest lecturer on “Improv Mindsets for Leadership” at The George Washington University School of Business. She recently published her first book, *I Quit! The Life Affirming Joy of Giving Up*.

In this episode, Coonoor shares with us the secrets of using improv in corporations and shows us a few specific improv techniques. She also talks about the time she taught improv at the Pentagon, and tells us how a pet elephant can improve our situation at work.

Michael Lee

Today we're here with Coonoor Behal. Coonoor is a bit of an unusual guest for At the Edge. She is the Founder and CEO of Mindhatch, which I think is a great name for a company dealing with innovation. She's also the author of a very new book called I Quit! The Life Affirming Joy of Giving Up. And why I say she's an usual guest is she's also an improv comedy performer, and a specialist in using performance as the instigator in innovation. She coaches organizations in creativity and innovation. And I think I'll leave the rest for Coonoor to tell us about. Coonoor, welcome, and thank you for being here.

Coonoor Behal

Thank you. Thanks for having me. I'm thrilled.

Michael Lee

Just briefly, if you could let people know what we should know about you. So that we understand better where you're coming from?

Coonoor Behal

So professionally, what I think you should know about me is that I have been a career shapeshifter. Up until the point I found innovation and creativity, actually. So I started my career in non-profit international development, then went to Big Four management consulting, where I thankfully got to work a lot in corporate innovation and found my love and passion for methods like Design Thinking and bringing improv into the workplace. And then left that seven and a half years ago to found Mindhatch. And so Mindhatch, as you've already alluded to, is all about helping companies and organizations create the conditions for innovation and creativity to thrive. And so we do that by using Design Thinking, organizational improv, facilitation, and diversity and inclusion work.

Michael Lee

Tell us about how you use improv in corporations.

Coonoor Behal

As you mentioned, I've been an improv comedy performer for about ten years. So I started doing improv just as a hobby and something to do for fun after hours and while I was working at Deloitte, consulting. Actually all credit due to my colleagues there, because they said hey, Coonoor's doing this improv after work. And it was they who came to me and said, hey, we've been reading in HBR and in Forbes and Fast Company that improv is really helpful to the business world, please come and do an improv session for my client team.

So it was really my colleagues who showed me that there was an application to what I was learning after hours at nights to my work. And so that's really where I started doing applied improv in the workplace and started designing sessions for teams on everything from collaboration to innovation and creativity to kicking off ideation sessions, to get people in the right frame of mind.

And so when I left Deloitte, it was a real obvious kind of add to Mindhatch's portfolio of services and methods. And so, with Mindhatch, it's very similar. We use improv activities, behaviors, mindsets, and skills as the teaching and learning methodology for professional skills like leadership, communication, collaboration, customer service even. And so it's really a great thing to bring into the workplace because it's not a lecture, it's not a webinar, it's not people passively receiving information, they're actually experiencing and embodying these new ways of thinking and these new ways of working, and having fun just comes along with it, and so they have good rewiring of their brain, hopefully to want to continue using those tools in their work.

In every workplace I've been in as a full time employee, I've always been that weirdo creative one, like when I said to the person I was doing improv. And then in my creative pursuits, such as on my improv teams, I've always been the business minded one, the person who was good at producing shows and marketing shows and all of the business side of creativity.

Why improv really helps is because it can very easily converge both worlds. Improv achieves so much for companies when they want to engage employees. One, it's just outright engaging for the things that I mentioned earlier, because it's not a passive reception of information. It's not like you're telling someone on a 2D PowerPoint to do something. You can't expect too much behavior change from that.

When you put people in a collaborative setting where they are encouraged to be themselves, and to be vulnerable, and to have empathy for one another, and they also get to have fun while they're doing it, that gives people the confidence to think differently, because they've been given the opportunity to try that new thing on for size. So confidence, but then also desire. They're going to want to continue to think and work in those ways, because they've just had fun by doing it. It goes beyond team building. I always say that we go beyond the fun and games and we can get to the heart of skills development, we can get to the heart of organizational culture.

Michael Lee

Let's see how it works. Let's do an improv. Go ahead and throw it at me and let's see how it goes.

Coonoor Behal

Okay, great. Well, actually, I just got done facilitating a virtual Design Thinking session with a client not 30 minutes ago. So let's do an improv mindset activity that I did with them. This is called an object brainstorm. So what I'm going to do is I'll just choose a random object next to me, this happens to be a coaster, a tile coaster. What we want to do is come up with as many unique alternative uses for this coaster. So if I were to start with this, I'd say okay, I'm gonna make this this coaster a Frisbee.

Michael Lee

You literally took my first answer, I was going to say a Frisbee.

Coonoor Behal

Yep, you've got to think.

Michael Lee

So for those of you that aren't seeing this, it's a ceramic coaster with a beautiful pattern, very geometric, and I'm obviously vamping so I have time to think. And I would say it could very easily be used to fool somebody into thinking they're looking through a kaleidoscope.

Coonoor Behal

Oh, I like that. Kind of like an eye game Okay, this could be something that someone bites down on, maybe when they're getting an injury fixed.

Michael Lee

I was thinking you could use it to balance machines by the spin, need to like check their balance, you could put it on top right in the center, because it's got that blue dot. And you could then use that to spin on the machines.

Coonoor Behal

Okay, I'm gonna say this is a good paperweight. It's really heavy.

Michael Lee

A hat.

Coonoor Behal

A hat! Nice. I like that. I like that. I'm gonna say, it has really straight edges. I can use it as a ruler.

Michael Lee

You know, given the straight edges, you could also use it as a throwing object like in martial arts.

Coonoor Behal

Like a ninja star. Yeah, perfect. You did a great "Yes And." You literally just "Yes Anded" my previous idea by being inspired and riffing on what I said. And that's really a core tenet of improv. Of course, everyone knows "Yes And," and so what we just did was we inspired each other. We weren't just working in our silos to come up with ideas, but we were riffing and engaging with each other and letting each other's creativity inspire us.

Michael Lee

It's great that you also Yes Anded my Yes And into a new topic, which is a great topic. I think everybody does know that people know the principle of Yes And, and yet actually executing that in a roomful of executives is probably not as easy as it sounds.

Coonoor Behal

Yes. In fact, I have an article on my blog that I wrote that has a very snarky title but it says "You're Doing Yes And Wrong." It was very much informed by my experiences that you just said. What I think is wonderful is that improv and the concept of Yes And has really become

known, right? It's almost a cliché by this point, but that being said, I do encounter a lot of people who think they're doing Yes And right, but they might have the Yes part down, but they're not really nailing the And part.

I was facilitating an innovation gathering for a group of executives from an association. And one of the champions was just so in love with improv and she would actually say the words, she would say to Yes And that, which is wonderful, it's a really good practice to say the words. But inevitably she would say to Yes And that, but she would not really in spirit Yes And, right? It was like saying the language but not following the spirit, and I encounter that a lot where I need to gently educate people okay, you're Yessing, but you're not Anding.

It's all well and good to have a workshop, right? Where you get people to be in that spirit. But how do you institute into the culture of a company a Yes And attitude?

You can't do just one two-hour workshop and get a whole sea change of improvement. Just like with a lot of organizational culture, it's about rituals. So much about what your culture is, is embodied in what rituals you invest in. And so I think that making improv a part of the fabric of how you all work is what's going to achieve that. And that can look like a bunch of different things. It can look like having someone like me and Mindhatch come do a session with your teams once a quarter. You can achieve repeatability and rituals in that way. It can also look like hey, we're gonna start every one of our meetings on our own with an improv mindset activity, and you don't have to pay a consultant for it.

Michael Lee

Other than Yes And, what would you say some of the principles are that a company should be paying attention to that would help them be a more innovative company?

Coonoor Behal

In addition to my colleagues at Deloitte asking me to come and do improv sessions for them, when I was at Deloitte, even earlier than that, I happened to start taking my first improv class in the same month that I started working in my first innovation role at the company. And it was uncanny how similar the things I was learning during the day matched up with what I was learning in my improv class at night, right down to the same terminology, like, Okay, what makes a good collaboration in a workshop?

So a lot of the tenets are very, very similar. Improv is definitely a practice that helps you have the confidence to act in the absence of complete information. But I think a lot of reasons why companies get stuck or are reluctant to innovate is because they're not comfortable with uncertainty or ambiguity.

I think improv can really instill that courage and bravery that a lot of companies and institutions are missing. Improv is also wonderful when it comes to collaborative teamwork. Yes And of course is a part of that. And this spirit of collaboration rather than competition - competition within companies can really quell innovation. There's a lot to be said for improv in terms of how it encourages and rewards spontaneity and bringing your authentic, true self

and your vulnerability to the work that you do. Vulnerability is so important in innovation work, because you have to be humble enough to say, Hey, I don't know the answer to that, let's find out what the answer is, as opposed to puffing out your chest and pretending to have all the answers. And I think that circles back to that discomfort with uncertainty. When you're pursuing innovation, you're inherently pursuing uncertainty,

Michael Lee

There's also an element of listening. That's so important, both in improv and in innovation.

Coonoor Behal

Yes, I can't believe I left that off. Active listening is very much are you listening for good ideas? And then once you hear ideas, are you an automatic "No" person? Or are you an automatic "Yes" person? Because how you respond and react and listen to what people are bringing to you is going to impact whether they ever bring things to you again. A large part of leadership's responsibility when it comes to innovation is knowing how to accept all offers. Improv is accepting offers as gifts, and even that mistakes are gifts, and opportunities, rather than failures.

Michael Lee

Imagine if everybody went to work every day seeing their job as offering and receiving gifts.

Coonoor Behal

Yes! You really have to adjust how you are incentivizing your people. If you're gonna make a huge announcement about "Everyone think creatively, there's no risk, there's no failures," and yet something as important as how people are being assessed or their performance does not reflect that, your competency models have not changed, the things they're meant to be answering in their self-assessments are not changed, you're not going to have any change, right? Because people need to feel safe. They need to feel like they are going to be rewarded by doing the things you're asking them to do.

So if you have even one person who embraces this new way of thinking, and yet at the year-end performance review, they have no ability to showcase that, or they're going to be penalized for taking a risk that didn't work out, you're lost before you've even started as a company. You can't ignore the already embedded processes and systems and structures you have in place. You need to also take a hard look at those and see how those things are incentivizing the behaviors you want, or disincentivizing the behaviors you don't want.

Michael Lee

I'm gonna ask you to do one more improv with me before we get to the last part of this.

Coonoor Behal

Okay, okay, now I have to improv my improv, what do I want to do with you? Okay, I have within arm's reach an improv card game that I made. This is a game called Five Things. It's really just a listing game. I'm going to ask you to list five things based on the prompt that I give you and I will celebrate you and count you up to five. So let's start. Ready. Give me five ill-advised names for a car. And speed is the name of the game.

Michael Lee

Lemon.

Coonoor Behal

Lemon. One

Michael Lee

Junk Heap.

Coonoor Behal

Two.

Michael Lee

Dent Machine.

Coonoor Behal

Three.

Michael Lee

Slowpoke.

Coonoor Behal

Four.

Michael Lee

And...Nightmare.

Coonoor Behal

Five! These are Five Things! Great. So you can see this is kind of like a speak-off, think off the tip of your tongue. You don't self-censor. Anything you say is a great idea. And the intention

behind that prompt is that it forces you to combine two things that you wouldn't expect. I didn't just ask you to list five items of clothing you're wearing right now. There's not much creative thinking involved in that.

Michael Lee

Okay, give me five names for a company that would seem to be a bad name for a company that wants to be innovative.

Coonoor Behal

This is great. Seems like it's bad, but it's actually good. Okay. The Frazzle.

Michael Lee

One.

Coonoor Behal

The Slowpokes.

Michael Lee

Number two, Slowpokes!

Coonoor Behal

The Neverlanders.

Michael Lee

Number three, the Neverlanders! And I hope that you're listening to this podcast, you're going even faster than us with your names that you're playing with. Number four, go!,

Coonoor Behal

The Broken Teeth.

Michael Lee

The Broken Teeth, number four!

Coonoor Behal

The Lapel Squad.

Michael Lee

Number five.

Coonoor Behal

Number five. These are five things!

Michael Lee

These are five things. So this is a game that you got for free. If you're listening this podcast, you can play this, please tell us a couple of stories about either or both a really great experience you had with training a company with innovation, and perhaps a not so great experience, something that didn't go so well.

Coonoor Behal

I did a couple of sessions, improv sessions at the Pentagon a few years back. And in those sessions, there were literally soldiers in fatigues and generals or future generals, and I was honestly nervous, Oh my gosh, are they gonna do this? Or are they going to be really resistant? And I can't tell you how surprised I was at how quickly they were into having fun and releasing. It's always the people you least expect, who need it the most. So that was a really positive experience, because I had my own assumptions totally dashed, and I'm always really tickled when that happens.

I'd say one poor experience, it actually inspired another article that I wrote. I did have a CEO one time in the session, who just wasn't a great collaborator and made the session all about themselves, and didn't really embrace the role and the power they had to make the room a safe space for everyone to show up as themselves.

Michael Lee

For leaders listening to this right now, what advice would you give them to have, a company that's innovative, relaxed, fun, engaged?

Coonoor Behal

For a leader who wants to have a role in making the company more innovative and more collaborative, I think definitely, you can lead by example. And that is a huge umbrella under which there's a lot of things such as you can be the person who's championing innovative and unique opportunities for your team, such as an improv session. You can be the person who is openly demonstrating humility and vulnerability by saying things like, I don't have all the answers right now, what do you think? Or I don't know that, but I'm gonna find out.

There's a lot of opportunity for you to demonstrate the behaviors that you want to see in others. There a whole breadth of touch points in a company experience where you can imbue with innovation and collaborative thinking. You can rethink everything from, How are we running our meetings? How are we running the rituals that we have every week or every day?

All the way up to, How are we developing our products? What is the process behind everything that we do? They can really identify opportunities, and where there can be little tweaks that can set that line in the sand of, this is how we're going to be doing things from now on.

Michael Lee

What would you say people should focus on? What should people take away from this that you want them to remember?

Coonoor Behal

I would want people to take away from this podcast, the spirit of experimentation. So many things that we are fearful of within companies and institutions are a result of worst-case scenario thinking. I would just encourage you to think about productive risks and think about risks that are gonna encourage you to learn something. More often than not, the sky will not fall. They should be intentional, well-designed experiments, for sure.

When I talk about failure with my innovation clients and Design Thinking clients, if you think about it, there is no definition for success without a definition of failure. Whether you call it experimentation, or you call it mistakes, or you call it failure, it's all the stones that pave your path towards success and towards innovation. What makes a good risk, a good failure, a good mistake, a good experiment is, if even if it doesn't work, you will learn something from that, that is then going to propel you more quickly towards success.

Michael Lee

When we talk about Innovation at the Edge, that's really exactly what we're talking about, is the idea that just the process of innovating, just the process of working together and looking for new solutions brings benefits and results regardless of whether the thing you're working on works out.

Coonoor Behal

You're totally right that it is one very important benefit, and I think that's why everything that Mindhatch does, like I mentioned earlier, is about creating conditions. It's very similar to what you said. It's about the process, about the journey, so I think if you create the right conditions for your people, and for your process, and for your company, you're going to reap the rewards. You'll reap the rewards, I guarantee you, when it comes to culture and engagement and retention. But all three of those things also lead into success in innovation in your products and services and experiences as well.

Michael Lee

Let's close with one last improv.

Coonoor Behal

Oh my gosh, okay. One last improv, okay.

Michael Lee

Maybe this. I can give you a problem. And you come back with a way that an improv could solve it so people can see how that would work. Now I have to improv a problem. So let's say I have a great idea. But management is not listening to me. So we've come together into a forum. And there are you know, all the people are there. How would we handle it?

Coonoor Behal

Okay, I love this and I have just the activity for this. So this activity is called - with a larger group, I would call it Solution Circle. So what we're going to do, so you just provided me with your challenge, with your problem. What I'm going to do as the next person in line is I'm going to suggest a completely out there, random, absurd solution to your problem. Okay. And then I'll tell you what we're gonna do next. Okay, so your problem - just repeat it back to me in one sentence, what your problem is?

Michael Lee

Sure, I've got a fantastic idea to solve things in our company, and management just won't listen to me.

Coonoor Behal

Got it. Okay. Well I think what would really solve your problem is if you got a pet elephant. So what I did was completely absurd, not even on topic of what your problem is. Now, in this activity, what we would do is the next person who would be you would come up with a reason why you getting a pet elephant is the perfect solution to your problem. But we can do this together, because there's only two of us. So let's talk about why you getting a pet elephant is the perfect solution to leadership not listening to you.

Michael Lee

So elephants are extremely intelligent and very loyal.

Coonoor Behal

Yeah.

Michael Lee

It's even said that elephants can recognize the call of a dead elephant and recognize that it's dead. And there have been cases where they played calls back to elephants -

Coonoor Behal

They mourn, yeh.

Michael Lee

And the elephants freaked out because it was a dead elephant. My point is that my pet elephant would be very loyal to me. And I would bring it to work. And I think they would have to pay attention.

Coonoor Behal

Amazing. Yeah, I think you nailed it. I think you nailed it. I think you don't even need me to contribute, why that's the perfect solution. I think you did. So that's an improv game called Solution Circle. What I love about that game is especially when you do it with a group of people, there's no doubt going to be a couple of ideas that once you rationalize them, you're like, wait, that could actually work, that's not actually that absurd. And so it just goes to show you that what we might think is totally implausible or unfeasible, again, that can be that worst-case scenario thinking, if we don't give an idea, you'll just never know,

Michael Lee

The metaphor of an elephant would actually be a good idea. Like, what could I do to get their attention in a way that's just over the top and unstoppable?

Coonoor Behal

Exactly. It's not about the literal elephant, but it's about the purpose of that elephant, right? And then you can think of a never-ending number of reasonable things that could accomplish that for you.

Michael Lee

That's a great way to end this, I think, is give the input to people out there that what you need to do is get a pet elephant.

Coonoor Behal

Yes, please.

Michael Lee

Metaphorically.

Coonoor Behal

Metaphorically. What's your elephant metaphor?

Michael Lee

Coonoor, thank you very much for being a great guest and for having fun with us. I hope that it's been useful to you.

Coonoor Behal

Absolutely.

Michael Lee

Thank you greatly.

Coonoor Behal

Thank you. And this is wonderful. I'm so glad we got to do some improv together. Thanks for being game.

Michael Lee

So Connor's book is recently out. It's called I Quit! She's the CEO and founder of Mindhatch, which you can also reach out to her about. Anything else you would like to add before we go?

Coonoor Behal

No, just thank you so much. Please feel free to follow me on LinkedIn, and also on Instagram.

Michael Lee

Thank you very much, Coonoor. We'll see everybody next time.