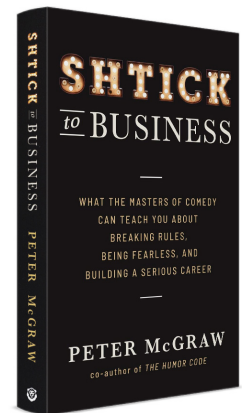


Shtick to Business

What the Masters of Comedy Can Teach
You about Breaking Rules, Being Fearless,
and Building a Serious Career

by **Peter McGraw**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Can the world of comedy teach us something about becoming successful in business? If you ask behavioral scientist and comedy decoder Dr. Peter McGraw, the answer is a resounding ‘yes.’

McGraw is a business school professor, professional speaker, and the founder of the Humor Research Lab (also known as ‘HuRL’). He’s also the author of *Shtick to Business*, an in-depth guide to what comedy can teach us about entrepreneurship, leadership, and success. McGraw draws on cutting-edge research and his own successes and failures in comedy to reveal surprising lessons that can transform your approach to business and life.

If you’re looking to improve your innovation abilities, outsmart competitors and get to the goal line first, make smarter decisions in your everyday life, and market your skills and products more effectively, you’ll find insights to help you get there in *Shtick to Business*.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- What massively successful comedians understand about career management.
- Why Dave Chappelle and Joan Rivers are a blueprint for brand building.
- What comedians and humor can teach you about leadership and teamwork.
- How the rituals of successful comics make them wealthy beyond their wildest dreams.

Introduction

To be perfectly clear, this is not a guide for being humorous in order to get ahead in business. It was once argued that the benefits of humor in the workplace were worth pursuing. However, times change. Many people simply don't believe that being funny is the best solution to most people's professional problems. You may become funnier as you learn the comedic lessons herein, but if you want to be funnier at work, take an improv class. This book is about trying to get you promoted up the ranks, not called down to HR.

Whether you want to launch a company, get a promotion, or fight the AI takeover, emulating the skills of the masters of comedy can revolutionize your work life—and beyond. Remember, it's not about being funny. It's about thinking funny. That is, you need to start thinking differently. Can comedy save the world—or at least the business world? Let's find out.

Reverse It

A good reversal in comedy can reap huge payoffs—better premises, plots, and punchlines. In business, as in comedy, we can only achieve the payoff when we let go of the status quo.

In the world of business and beyond, you might find enacting the reversal to be challenging. You should expect resistance because you are likely thinking differently than others. You don't have to tell people what you are doing in the background. All that matters is the quality of the solutions to your problems. Choose a problem you are facing and start producing an opposing perspective. Now that you're well-versed in reversals, it's time to add a layer.

Act Out: Not One, Not Two, Three

Good things seem to come in threes. There is a completeness to the number three. A three-act structure is the norm in theater and movies. Papers and presentations have three parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. And of course, there's always the helpful reminder to 'stop, drop and roll.'

The same rule applies to business slogans, which tend to have three words or the cadence in a set of three. Psychological studies show that in convincing people, two arguments are too few while four are too many. So the next time you ask for a raise, give three compelling reasons. If you only have two, wait until you have three.

Step Out of the Stream

The world really doesn't want you to step out of the stream. Businesses pay lip service to the idea, but the general sentiment is: don't be difficult.

This is actually an advantage. That said, as a result, stepping out of the stream can be a delicate situation. You don't need to announce it. Pick your spots, be nice, and see how far you can push your boundary-pushing behavior.

Here are some questions to ask yourself as you contemplate how to apply the ideas of stepping out of the stream in your life.

- Am I in a liminal space? Where are the transitions and breaks from the day-to-day that can expose a new way of thinking?
- Where are the written and unwritten rules that I am living with?
- Where the real versus imagine consequences of breaking this or that rule?
- What decisions really scare you? What bigger risks can you seek out?
- When you encounter a constraint, can you say, "Good. This will give us an opportunity to be more creative?" What constraint can you lean into?

Good businesses and entrepreneurs don't get trapped in the norm or give in to the naysayers. Instead, they spin the status quo upside down to recognize the opportunities that are sitting right there in front of them—in front of us all. Stepping out of the stream, then, begins not in action, but in thought.

Act Out: Third Thoughts

Creativity is an appropriate, original solution to the problem. "We need to be more creative," really just means, "We need to solve this problem in a way that no one else has yet." An effective—albeit tedious—way to be creative is through extreme persistence. Most of the time, your first solution is appropriate but not original. And so you must keep trying.

A lack of originality explains what most people in comedy think of as joke stealing. Two comedians tell nearly the same joke. The person who told the joke first accuses the person who told the joke second. A key to truly creative and innovative solutions is to ignore your first thought. Have second thoughts. Third thoughts. Even better, have 100 thoughts!

Create a Chasm

Because of advances in technology, expansion of the economy, and healthy competition in most categories, nowadays it's pretty easy to get high-quality products and services. Especially with mature product lines, all competitors have already made the major improvements in the category. Once brands leveled up from the flat-footed insoles of Chuck Taylors to a legitimate arch-supporting athletic shoe, there wasn't a whole lot more they could do to make it better. Today, all credit cards offer pretty much the same key features: cashback rewards, great introductory rates, fraud protection, and the like.

Especially if the products or services are largely undifferentiated in your category, look for bolder chasm-creating ways to attract customers.

Act Out: An Audience of One

When you're trying to create a chasm, one of the challenges is overcoming the fear of disappointing people or making them angry. But angering and disappointing people is, in fact, a reasonable risk. You want something that your target audience can love, even if that means other people hate it. The radical extension of the notion of creating something that people love is to create something that only one person loves. And that person is you.

Comedians almost always begin their joke-writing process by focusing on things they find funny. Only after that, do they worry about building a bridge to the audience—if at all.

Cooperate to Innovate

Remember, there is no such thing as a lone genius. You need the genius of others, and the act of cooperating to innovate starts at the top. Leaders must gather the right people and support them to be their best. Only then can you truly make something epic.

In the context of your career, listening is difficult. If you hang back and listen first, someone else might get all the glory. And when you've presented a solution, you don't want to hear any naysayers, so you don't listen to feedback. Someone might disagree with you, and you might have to change your mind.

Be honest: how good are your listening skills? What if you planned your listening with the same intention as you planned what you say?

Act Out: Success by 1,000 Cuts

The epitome of the lean startups is Vaudeville. Comedians would test their jokes, dump the ones that didn't work, and improve the ones that did. Modern stand-ups do the same thing. They fail fast. They release their earliest prototypes to their target audience, get feedback, and iterate for improvements.

An agile mindset requires listening to customers early and often. While all this might make perfect sense for the start-up phase, growing businesses often stop embracing innovation and small, calculated failures after they've become well-established. They feel like they have too much to lose. So they play it safe—or so they think.

Write It or Regret It

Writing is hard. Writing is hard. Writing is hard. This might be the most difficult concept for you to implement in your life. Reading is like nutrition and writing is like exercise. It's time to start exercising.

The more you write—to remember, clarify, and communicate—the more you will take control of your ideas. You can architect your reversals, your steps, your chasms, your teams. You can intentionally sequence your actions to have the most impact. And as you'll soon learn, the order of experiences matter.

Act Out: Start Strong, End Stronger

Comedian Phyllis Diller said, "Comedy is like a plane flight. The most important part is taking off and landing." The landing part is obvious. Everyone knows how a good story has a great climax, and how a good joke has a punch line.

Starting with strong material suggests that good quality material is going to follow. A lull after a strong start is okay because the audience knows what you're capable of and will be patient with you.

Starting strong also helps you create an emotional reaction that leads to more emotional reactions. In the case of comedy, this emotion would be amusement, which helps make subsequent moments more amusing because you're already in a good mood.

Businesses create experiences for customers: events with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Retail is a series of experiences, just like customer service is an experience. A customer's experience must be positive in the moment, but maybe even more importantly, they must be positive in hindsight.

Work Hard or Hardly Work

Even if you embrace all the status quo-smashing mindsets of the first five chapters, in order for it to amount to anything you've got to rock the creative trifecta: Protect + Grind + Release. We all have our habits and our blind spots, so pay attention to yours. Get out of default and shift to intention. Intentionally showing up fully present with whatever mode is called for in the moment is vital. A master blacksmith knows how to pick up the hammer, and when to set it down.

Finally—stop having stupid meetings. Schedule them later in the day, rather than letting them take up prime creative time. And before you schedule a meeting at all, ask whether it's truly necessary.

Act Out: Turn Down the Lights

If you've ever been to a good comedy club, you may have noticed that it's set up in a particular way: a dimly lit room, often in a basement with low ceilings. The familiar red brick background, a stool on stage, and a single mic on a stand. Oh yeah, and it's a little chilly.

These are purposeful choices. Comedy club owners engineer their space to maximize laughter. The behavioral sciences back these choices either theoretically or empirically.

The same consideration for context goes into designing the best places for people to work. As design firms like Gensler and OfficeUntitled know, a bad environment can stifle even the best talent. That said, you don't have to be a multinational design firm to refine and improve your environment.

Take a Bigger Stage

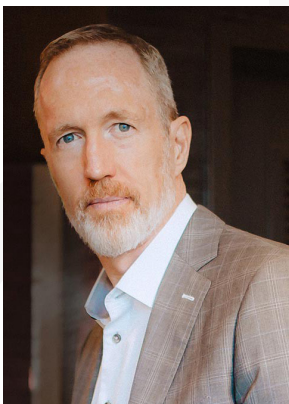
To reach your full potential, you may need to make some changes. Even if you feel you are on the path to your chosen definition of success, don't be afraid to consider what exists outside the lines. Ask others what you need to stop doing or what risks they think you should take. Think bigger. Create a BHAG—Big Hairy Audacious Goal. Hone in on your platform goal—and the path to get there—by asking yourself important questions about where you're headed.

Act Out: Getting from Yes to No

A comedian trying to build a career has an outbound mindset. Hold a spear and hunt for opportunities. You're saying yes to lots and lots of things. To everything! Saying yes is useful—providing exposure and opportunity to develop comedic chops. An outbound mindset absolutely helps facilitate success. But at some point, it also limits you.

Conclusion

Too many of us don't shift. We stay in the outbound mindset and keep throwing spears at every opportunity that comes along. But smart, successful people know how to say no to the things that are not the work they most want to do. They crowd out the small stuff. Stop hunting the small game and seek much, much bigger things.



Peter McGraw is a behavioral economist and global expert in the scientific study of humor. He directs The Humor Research Lab (HuRL), hosts the podcast I'M NOT JOKING, and is the co-author of *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. Peter's work has been covered by the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Harvard Business Review, NPR, and CNN. He's a sought-after speaker and professor who teaches MBA courses at the University of Colorado Boulder, University of California San Diego, and London Business School. A TV show based on his life is currently in development.

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