

Improv to Improve: Use of Improvisational Theater to Increase Organizational Effectiveness

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"Active concrete experiential methods tend to work best for learning social and emotional competencies. Development activities that engage all the senses and that are dramatic and powerful can be especially effective." (Daniel Goleman, Working with Emotional Intelligence)

INTRODUCTION

Whose Line Is It Anyway?, a popular and entertaining television show, has brought into public awareness an art form called improvisational theater, or "improv", as it is more commonly known. Improv has been around the entertainment world for years, yet it has recently taken off as one of the hottest training and organizational improvement concepts in use today (Newsday, Oct 29, 2000, Kitchen). A review of the literature, personal experience using improv in training, and an in-depth interview with a corporate organizational development professional (with extensive improv experience) shows the immediate and lasting benefits from the effective, knowledgeable and sustained incorporation of improv into organizational improvement efforts.

Today's work environment is a constant bombardment of change for organizational members. The most successful leaders/managers of organizations today seek innovative and creative approaches to help people and their organizations. It is this search that has pulled improv into the limelight and aided in its transition from the entertainment theater to the organizational theater. Several useful definitions of improvisation should prove beneficial to those unsure about this creative organizational improvement technique, and to those even less sure about incorporating improv into their own organizational improvement strategies.

DEFINITIONS

Crossan and Sorrenti (1997) define improvisation as "intuition guiding action in a spontaneous way." Their definition delineates two dimensions of improvisation – intuition and spontaneity – which the authors use to differentiate improvising from other strategic activities (e.g., planning, visioning, and transacting). Solomon (1986) includes the notion that intuition incorporates creation and execution at the same time, while Chase (1988) notes improv is "imagination guiding action in an unplanned way". Weick (1993) hints that improv gives organizations the ability to "make do" with available resources. But, improvisation is by no means "a haphazard process; it should not be viewed as "anything goes" or "winging it". Instead, it should be accepted as a process governed both by freedom and form. "The emphasis is on action and continuous experimentation, not on obsessive planning" (Perry, 1991). Simplifying, improv is a safe, fun and productive way to develop some of the individual, team and corporate skills vital to modern enterprises (Jackson, 1995).

The traditional theater uses a script to guide the performance, with sets, costumes and props to enhance the story lines. Actors are selected for their likeness to the particular characters portrayed, and a director provides the leadership to ensure that all elements support one another. The audience has no input into the performance. With improvisational theater, there are no sets, costumes, props or script, and the actors play a variety of roles. The audience participates in the performance by providing input into the story line. Rather than directing the performance in the traditional sense, the director helps the actors reflect on the performance.

Improvisation provides a way to understand what it takes to be spontaneous and innovative. Improv exercises used by actors to develop their skill can be adopted by organizational members as a means to enhance individual and organizational capacity to be innovative and responsive. The only sustainable competitive advantage for companies is their ability to learn faster than their competitors – to be better, smarter, cheaper! However, these desired results will only come with faster cycle times and more innovative solutions. These dual requirements – increased speed, higher degree of innovation – create a need for organizations and their members to operate more spontaneously, with more creativity and intuition applied to actions. Improv offers just such a solution.

Improv is an outstanding example of “thinking outside the box”. It is based on the following key concepts:

1. Improv is a TEAM performance.
2. The team’s goal is to collaborate to create a work of art, which emerges from the complementary skills each player brings to the work.
3. This creative act takes place in “real time”.
4. Far from consisting of “stream of consciousness” or “anything goes”, improv is built upon rules and structures which the “players” implicitly agree to observe as they interact to create the performance.

APPLICATION TO ORGANIZATIONS

These concepts can also be applied to an organizational environment:

1. Organization members, more and more out of competitive necessity, work on collaborative teams.
2. Team members bring their individual and diverse skills to the table for the purposes of creating results – work is to be seen as a creative act and not simply a job.
3. These results are generated by a series of “real time”, unscripted improvisations. We all improvise in our daily lives – every day, every second.
4. For the team to create a successful result, the team members must observe a common set of behavioral rules and work within certain structures (i.e., constraints, such as time and resources). As in improv, it is within the bounds of those structures that some of the most creative work can be accomplished.

In order to develop the skills to help the organization perform better, faster, smarter and more cheaply, organizational members (i.e., the “players” or “actors”) can use structured activities and games derived from the improv toolkit in order to:

1. Become more aware of themselves and their fellow players,
2. Become comfortable with taking risks and performing “without a net”,
3. Give up the (futile) quest to anticipate and control all situations and instead deal with what’s presented to them at any given moment, and

4. Creatively deal with ambiguous and constantly changing situations.

In this age of “permanent whitewater,” are these not the organizational improvement skills that our organizations’ members must develop? Could organizations adopt and adapt the methods used for developing improv players to help develop these improv skills in our own organization’s “players”? Not only can we, we must...and many organizations are.

As mentioned earlier, improv is all about developing outside-the-lines thinking capabilities in order to enhance innovation, generate creative solution development, increase team effectiveness and hunt for new ways of looking at old issues. Perhaps it would be useful to share an example of how improv methods can improve an organization’s effectiveness.

Consider one of the staple improv games “YES, AND” in which the players act as members of a product development team trying to create ideas for a “crazy” product such as drinking glasses with no bottoms. The game requires each player to agree with and build upon any ideas offered by the other players, no matter how outlandish the ideas get (e.g., “Let’s develop drinking glasses with no bottoms!” “YES, AND we could also market them to bars who want to keep selling drinks to intoxicated customers.”). The goal is to use an extreme method to shake people out of the common tendency to criticize and contend when presented with new ideas and to help them find the potential benefits of ideas that seem a bit bizarre at first view. Continuing with this example, a “bottomless beer glass” could be used in an anti-drunk driving campaign with the tag line “If you have to pour another one, pour it into this!” This spotlights how such an accepting, playful attitude toward ideas could benefit a real product team trying to create breakthrough products – or a functional group trying to find creative ways to improve their work processes.

Izzy Gesell, one of the leading proponents supporting the infusion of improv techniques into the workplace, summarizes nicely how improv can help improve, in his book *Playing Along: Group Learning Activities Borrowed from Improvisational Theater*. Gesell states:

The successful improv “player’s” bag of tricks includes listening to others without prejudice, accepting what is offered by others, trusting that the group will solve a problem, and letting go of one’s own needs to control situations or predetermine outcomes. These capabilities are all developed through improv. Improv players gain confidence to allow their own spontaneity to flow without self-censorship, poise to allow the spontaneity of others to flow without criticism and belief in their ability to solve problems. This is why salespeople, trainers, factory workers, managers, nurses, teachers, and homemakers can all benefit from experiencing improv (1997).

THE INTERVIEW

The following interview with an improv expert/corporate Organizational Development director of a large company in the USA’s Midwest sheds light on practical, experience-based, application oriented details of how one can use improv to improve.

Q: Why is the time right for Improvisation in business/organizational life?

A: All the trends in business organizations point toward an acknowledgment of the central role of Improvisation as a model for individual and organizational behavior. In the simpler, slower-paced world of the past, organizations primarily valued efficiency, rational analysis, and finding solutions to problems “so they stayed solved.” The role of managers and leaders was clear: Make the decisions for the entire organization. Leaders could rely on a more predictable, orderly world that could be dealt with by high-level, long-range strategic planning. Their role resembled that of playwrights and directors, with the plans and procedures they produced and oversaw constituting the “script” for the organization.

But the warp-speed pace of life, coupled with the expanded capabilities and expectations of the workforce, has forced the diffusion and decentralization of problem-recognition and problem-solving to *everybody* in the organization. Employees must swiftly recognize and act on problems and opportunities, drawing on ever-emerging and ever-changing networks of individuals who collaborate to provide their particular perspectives and expertise. While there is still the need for a “script,” its role is less that of a prescription for behavior and more that of a framework for continual improvising by individuals, teams, and networks. This, of course, requires improvisational skills: risk-taking, flexible and creative thinking, “anticipation of surprise,” mutual supportiveness, making sudden shifts to adapt to the discoveries of the moment, reliance on intuition, and an entry into challenges with a spirit of playfulness.

Q: What is/are the overall acceptance/perception(s) of Improvisation by the general workforce?

A: In my experience, when you first mention “improvisation” to a member of a business organization, that person’s reaction is usually one of the following, either more or less explicitly: (1) “I’m no comedian”; (2) “I don’t want to be put in the spotlight”; (3) “Sounds like fun, but I’ve got a job to do.” Occasionally, you get a reaction like (4) “This sounds intriguing – I’d like to find out more.”

Q: From the vantage point of a senior decision-maker/leader, how does one answer their question “What’s in improv for us?”

A: I would ask in return, “Do you want your employees – and your entire organization – to act more flexibly and creatively, to take risks, to think out of the box, to collaborate more effectively, to support each other, to learn from mistakes rather than search for scapegoats, and to create a more vibrant workplace? Then here is a well-developed body of knowledge called Improvisation that can help them learn to do that!”

Q: How does one begin the involvement/infusion/incorporation of improv into the training/development of their people?

A: Here are some ways:

- Gradually introduce improv activities into existing training programs as interactive exercises to illustrate a particular learning;
- Organize a series of informal workshops (e.g., Brown Bag lunches) to give employees the opportunity to participate in improv activities;
- Develop a class in one of the following topics that particularly lend themselves to the incorporation of improv activities: creative thinking, teamwork, leadership, meeting facilitation, risk-taking, negotiation;
- Use improv in teambuilding sessions;
- Demonstrate how a work group can regularly use improv activities as meeting-openers or “refreshers” to reinforce good teamworking behavior;

- Use a “Yes And” type of game as a lead-in to an idea-generation session, to put people in the proper frame of mind for brainstorming;
- Bring in an outside consultant or acting troupe that uses improv in a corporate setting to conduct a training session;
- Take a workgroup on a fun outing to a performance that uses improv (such as a Murder Mystery Dinner Theater), and incorporate some workplace learnings into the show;
- Write an article on improv’s application to business for an internal newsletter or e-letter;
- Leverage an existing program such as FISH by incorporating improv activities into it;
- If your organization has embraced the use of outdoor experiential training (“ropes courses”), use that acceptance and understanding as a bridge to improv, since both forms of training share many of the same philosophies (e.g., learn by doing, take graduated risks, collaborate to succeed).

Q: Is there ANY way to somehow quantify/measure the value of Improv to an org?

A: Here are measures that might be used;

- Speed of decision-making;
- Speed with which teams progress through the phases of team development (Form-Storm-Norm-Perform);
- Degree of collaboration, cooperation, and supportiveness within teams;
- Rapidity with which the organization adapts to external changes in its environment;
- Speed with which ideas move from generation to commercialization.

Q: What is the best training ground for improv facilitators/trainers?

A: Most large cities and many college towns have groups that offer improv workshops. Most of these workshops welcome people who are not primarily interested in doing public improv performances but are looking for personal and professional development.

Q: How can improv be used for leadership/management development?

A: Here are just a few of the learnings that can be realized from incorporating improv activities into leadership/management development programs:

- *Give up the need for control:* Learn to be less controlling and directive as to how to proceed and what to do, more collaborative and inclusive in making things happen through others in the organization. Improv training includes games that teach one how to give up the compulsion to control the outcome and instead trust that the group, working through the process, will find the right answer together.
- *Alternate giving and taking leadership:* Learn when to be more assertive and direct in moving things along, and when to hold back and let others drive the action. Improv training includes games that teach people to strike a balance between actively moving things in a chosen direction and adapting to a choice of direction that another person has made.
- *Deal with ambiguity:* Learn how to be flexible and authentic in choosing courses of action in the midst of uncertainty. Improv training includes games that put people in chaotic environments and teach them to keep their focus and make choices based on instinct.
- *Create plans in the face of constant change:* Learn how to adapt to changes in the external environment and adjust one’s plans accordingly. Improv training includes games that train one not to get married to initial plans and concepts and to learn to shift direction quickly as the external environment changes.
- (For more examples of the use of improv to train business leaders, see:

- http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/admin/extaff/news/second_city.html

Q: To date, what are your personal and/or professional “lessons learned” from the use of improv?

- In introducing improv to an organization, improv activities need to be part of an overall learning experience that includes other training & development methods. So, rather than saying “We’re going to teach you some improv activities and show you how they can relate to the workplace,” it’s better to say “We’re going to teach you how to [be more creative, work together better as a team, be a better leader], and as part of that we’re going to include some activities drawn from the world of improvisational theater.”
- People have different levels of comfort with being put “in the spotlight.” As much as possible, improv activities should be structured in a way that respects this variation in comfort level. Have people try out the activities in small groups in order to keep them from feeling like the whole group is watching them perform. Let people take “baby steps” at first, gaining comfort with taking small risks, and let them progressively work up to more challenging activities.
- Having participated in improv workshops and performances for the last two years, I can vouch for the benefits that can be realized from improv. I feel as if I trust my instincts much better, have learned to deal with adversity and change better, and have increased my mental flexibility. I think this has made me a better internal consultant, a function which places a premium on the ability to roll with the changes.

Q: What else does a reader of an article on Improv to Improve really want/need to know?

A: To clear up a common misconception: Improv training is *not* about turning employees into comedians. Instead, improv focuses primarily on teaching people to trust their instincts and to be supportive of other team members. The goal of improv – both in the theater and in the business world – is to have people be honest and authentic in their reactions, not to try to be clever. As one of the basic tenets of improv goes: “The truth is funnier!”

CLOSING THOUGHTS: THE IMPROV TRUTHS

The following are some of the basic tenets that guide improv performers. These all apply to working and interacting in a business environment as well. (Many of these are derived from the book *Truth in Comedy*, by Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson.)

- The team is the star. You must support your fellow players and engender trust.
- Justify “mistakes” by weaving them into the larger pattern. If your partner trips, join him on the floor and say “Smart move ducking behind these rocks!”
- Say “**Yes, and...**” rather than “Yes, but...” Build on each others’ ideas. Agreement is inviolate!
- Stay in the moment! That’s where the scene is happening.
- Develop a Group Mind. In a Group Mind, one member operating separately will act in a connected way - almost like ESP.
- Use economy in speech.
- Show what’s happening - don’t talk about it.
- Trust your instincts.
- Don’t rehearse what you’re going to say – you’re playing ping-pong, not chess.
- Many of the laws of physics are similar to the laws of improv (order out of chaos, anything can happen, cycles and patterns, development of a Group Mind).
- Fall, then decide what you’re going to do on the way down.

Improv is a planned approach to fostering creativity and innovation in a work world replete with constant change. The improvisational theater techniques have tremendous potential and value if effectively incorporated and designed into an organization's training and development plan. Listen, evaluate, attempt, fail, succeed, grow...try.

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