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Funny business

Consultant uses improv to teach workers to think on their feet

Wednesday, March 26, 2008 3:17 AM

BY **AMY SAUNDERS**
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The skills that served Karen Hough best during her tech-company career were those learned in a completely different life -- when she was an improv comedian.

Instant problem-solving, creativity and collaboration were required when she was on stage at the Second City in Chicago -- just as when she was in sales meetings and presentations years later.

"I was able to do some things better than people assumed I could," said Hough, who had no experience in network engineering when she entered the field. "Improv changes the way you live your life, the way you interact with people everywhere."

Now, Hough is combining both settings with her Columbus-based business, ImprovEdge, which applies improvisational techniques to business situations in workshops for companies and organizations across the country.

In a recent seminar held for local nonprofit organization BioOhio, Hough had about 60 bioscience professionals and others laughing, playing make-believe and reacting to scenarios they didn't see coming.

Like tackling questions on -- of all things -- carrot farming, as management consultants April Callis and Dion Charles had to do after volunteering to become a "two-headed expert" in one of the session's three interactive exercises.

The co-workers linked arms and took turns answering audience questions -- one word at a time -- on the topic someone had wickedly suggested.

"How do you know when the seeds are mature?" came the first question.

Their back-and-forth response, composed without hesitation: "You. Need. To. Look. At. The. Package."

Such answers might have lacked information, but they were witty enough to



JEFF HINCKLEY | DISPATCH PHOTOS

ImprovEdge founder Karen Hough says the skills she learned as a member of the Second City troupe were invaluable to her later sales career.



Robert Dunki-Jacobs, left, and Chris Williams test their observation skills as they try to detect differences each made in his appearance at an ImprovEdge session.

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make the audience laugh -- and convincing enough to make Hough's point.

That, she told the audience, is how to communicate with your clients: as though you have to respond to their every word, as though your stock answers are unusable in conversation.

After all, Hough gets hired to train employees, not entertain them.

The ImprovEdge exercises are rooted in psychological research and tested on focus groups. Hough and her associates then meet with new clients to create an individualized workshop based on issues they want to explore.

For JPMorgan Chase, it was the company's new brand and mission after it merged with Bank One.

For the U.S. Army, ImprovEdge developed a workshop on professionalism for aspiring civilian executives.

Other workshops have addressed teamwork, communication, negotiation, cultural and generational differences, and training for new hires, all designed to be more engaging than your typical employee handbook.

Companies are trying unconventional methods of training as a time-crunched world makes it more difficult to capture employees' attention, said Larry Inks, a professor of management and human resources at Ohio State University.

In the past decade or so, he's heard of companies taking field trips to art museums for exercises in creativity, or retreats to the battlefields of Gettysburg to learn about strategic decisions. And ImprovEdge has a number of competitors with similar ideas.

"Everyone's so busy that the last thing people want to do is sit around a U-shaped table for training," Inks said. "If there's a buzz about a program (like ImprovEdge) and you get comments that it's a great use of time, that's a hit."

Hough does not disclose financial figures for ImprovEdge but said that its revenue tripled last year. The average fee for a workshop is \$8,000 to \$10,000, with yearlong engagements, such as one the company is doing for architectural firm NBBJ, costing up to \$150,000.

ImprovEdge was more like a hobby for Hough and her best friend, Frances Barney-Knutson, also a former improv comedian working in the New York business world, when they started playing with the idea in 1998. They tested their exercises on University of Pennsylvania business students and used vacation days to host their first seminars.

It became Hough's full-time job in 2000, when she followed her husband to Columbus and launched the company primarily on credit cards. Cold calls made from Hough's basement eventually landed her a couple of big clients, including Worthington Industries and Victoria's Secret.

Since then, ImprovEdge has grown from a seven- to 20-employee company, with program leaders in six cities. The company holds as many as 30 workshops per month, with much of the business coming from word-of-mouth recommendations.

Knowing that ImprovEdge had worked with other biotech businesses, BioOhio hired the company to put on last week's workshop on communication skills and building relationships with clients.

"It's what all of us probably know we should do, but it's learning it in a different way," spokesman Matt Schutte said of the seminar's lessons. "Right or wrong, there is a stereotype about scientists and techies that they may be more introverted."

That was true of workshop participant Matthew Huddleston, whose shy

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demeanor was exposed in an exercise that had him chatting with Hough at an imaginary conference.

Huddleston had to explain to his potential client that he works in contract engineering and manufacturing for medical devices, but in a quick and catchy way that would pique Hough's interest before she got off the elevator.

Three times in a row, that failed to happen. As Hough bid him farewell, Huddleston was laughing nervously, admitting he felt a little sick to his stomach every time the crucial conversation moment rested on him.

"Going out and selling myself is not something I was taught," he explained after the workshop. "It's just not my personality to go out and do things like that. But when she makes you feel uncomfortable, that's when you really start to learn."

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