

FUNDAMENTALS

Improv-Based Training

It's not just fun and games.

By Tom Yorton

This is the first of a two-part series about using improv-based training.

Corporate life is either a comedy or a tragedy, depending on your experience. Look at your daily newspaper's comic pages and *Dilbert* will show you that we're all actors in a farce. While you may not know whether to laugh or cry, this much is certain: Business isn't neatly scripted. It's an unpredictable and unwieldy act of improvisation.

These days, the most successful businesspeople can forge strong relationships among employees and clients, react quickly to changing circumstances, and solve problems fast. As a result, a growing number of companies are realizing that they need to know how to improvise better.

Enter improv-based training, an experiential learning methodology grounded in the creative and connective powers of play. More and more

companies are embracing improv as a way to achieve important business and organizational goals. Even major league baseball is in on the act and uses improv-based training to help rookies assimilate into the Bigs.

Improv-based training applies most effectively to basic communications skills—listening, sizing up a room, and thinking on your feet. It teaches how to build team trust and influence instead of command. It also helps generate ideas and find harmony among different points of view. Improv opens the door to honest and open communication, and helps overcome people's fear.

Improvisation is most commonly known in the context of comedy, such as in the popular TV show, *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* But the approach tends to generate more *aha!* moments than laughter among corporate devotees.

Whole brain v. left brain

By its nature, improvisation taps into the whole person. In most corporate work and training, people are allowed, and even encouraged, to operate from their left brains, where they can analyze, judge, and act methodically. Certainly there are good reasons for that, and businesspeople who don't analyze and discriminate don't have long careers. The fact is, we're built with a two-sided brain and moveable parts for a reason. By connecting the entire brain and the physical self, improv training engages the complete person, and complete people tend to contribute more to their activities. During classes, participants are forced to suspend judgment and to react instead of sitting and thinking. They're required to set aside their business personas and get to a more natural, authentic state. One exercise, Gibberish, illustrates the point. In Gibberish, people carry on an entire conversation, perhaps cocktail party banter, using nonsensical language. Gibberish gets people out of their 9-to-5

mindsets and helps them see the importance of nonverbal cues in communicating with each other.

Becoming engaged

Trainers know that it's up to them to supply most of the energy to get a session off the ground. In a typical classroom setting, participants usually sit, observe, and process what they hear. Improv-based training classes often begin with this directive: Everyone, on your feet! Most classes are taught in open rooms to allow freedom of movement. In improvisation, people are *doing* more than they are *processing*—and everyone must contribute in order for the class to be compelling. For that to happen, everyone must be on their feet,

someone nodding off in the back of an improv room. Last, by experiencing breakthroughs as a team, people connect in powerful, genuine ways that sustain them when they return to the workplace.

An exercise called One Word Story demonstrates the power of an ensemble. In this exercise, participants must create an original story but with a catch: Each person can contribute only one word at a time, in sequence. Because of that, participants are forced to listen and build on the contributions of others. What's more, no single person can control the outcome of the story. If you try the exercise, you'll find it's often frustrating but illuminating to corporate participants because many are more comfortable when they can control an outcome.

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engaged, and in play. By experiencing the lessons instead of observing them, participants tend to acquire and retain learning better.

Group work

With improvisation, learning is accomplished in a group—or an ensemble—of about 15 people. People usually work in pairs, and the exercises vary depending on the nature of the workshop. That's important for a few reasons. One, people learn that they must look out for their partners and make others in the ensemble look good. Additionally, people tend to stay engaged when they're involved in a group or with a partner; you'll never see

Just plain fun

Let's be honest, the word *fun* doesn't always spring to mind when people think of training. But in improv-based training, participants get to play and communicate more informally than in the business world. Walk by an improv class and you'll witness spontaneous outbursts of laughter, a fair amount of ruckus, and people leaving energized and smiling. Even the mundane can be exciting in improv.

In the fun icebreaker exercise, Snap, learners stand in a circle and snap their fingers in rhythm. One person says his name, looking at another person. That person, in turn, says her name while looking at a third person and so on, all the

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while keeping the rhythmic snaps going. Let's just say it's easier said than done, and it's also a great way for new team members to remember each other's names.

Now that you've learned how improv-based training compares to conventional training styles, it's easy to understand how it takes off and gets people engaged in powerful new ways. Next month's conclusion will show how core improv theory is applied to common business situations.

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