

FUNDAMENTALS

Improv-Based Training

It's not just fun and games.

By Tom Yorton

This is the final in a two-part series about using improv-based training.

In the current business climate, success increasingly goes to organizations that can cope with change and turn on a dime with new ideas and solutions. In other words, they know how to improvise.

The good news is that it's possible to get comfortable with unpredictability and to navigate change. The methods found in improv-based training provide

a solid conceptual and practical framework to help you and your organization improvise better.

Last month, we introduced improv-based training, which has been used for more than 70 years to teach actors. We explored how improv uses both the left and right sides of the brain, emphasizes participation rather than passive listening, and develops group processes as well as strengthens individual contributions.

This conclusion takes a closer look at

the central concepts of improv and how you can put them to work in training settings at your company.

Seek agreement.

Agreement is perhaps the central building block of improvisation. In the context of improv theatre, it occurs when one person offers an idea or a piece of information and the other person accepts that idea and adds to it. For example, Person A says to Person B, “Boy it’s a nice day.” Person B could say something like, “Yes, it’s a nice day, a lot better than yesterday.” By comparing days, Person B has given the scene somewhere to go, and Person A can build upon it. If Person B would have ignored or disagreed with Person A’s statement, the scene would’ve ended.

That type of exchange helps actors create scenes, stories, relationships, and characters out of nothing. Ideas are offered, explored, and heightened, often taking brilliant and hysterically funny twists and turns along the way.

The business world often gets caught up in a pattern of “no” and “yes, but,” as people seek to guard turf, demonstrate superiority, or control outcomes. As a result, ideas and exchanges are killed before they can bear fruit, relationships fail to reach their potential, innovation is stifled, and morale is impaired. It isn’t fun to hear “no” constantly. But it is fun to find common ground and collaborate on new ideas.

People can and should disagree in business, but the manner in which ideas are offered and received is important in building trust, demonstrating respect, and creating new possibilities. For trainers, the ability to seek agreement is essential to building rapport with groups of strangers.

Bring a brick, not a cathedral.

Think about the impact of a team leader who can’t delegate, who demands the spotlight, who is convinced that his or her ideas are always best. Strong leaders should

have strong voices and opinions, but they must also recognize the impact of selfish behavior on team members and the task at hand. For training professionals, there’s value in understanding the limits of what you can achieve within a training session, overall curriculum development, and your organization at large. In other words, you don’t need to solve world hunger in a given training session. Rather, stay focused on what you can achieve and deliver with full conviction. Your contribution, however small, is valuable.

Make accidents work.

In improvisation, there are no accidents or mistakes—unless that’s how the actors see them. Often, unintended slips or

tent: Someone sets out to invent something. Discovery implies that people observe and improve on what presents itself. True discovery in business is hard to do because people seldom allow creative space for innovation; it appears too haphazard. But the rewards of discovery can be great. For example, you’re stuck at the airport with your new boss and you have no choice but to get to know her. You discover your common interests and ideas for the future, which lead to a new way to organize your group or new product ideas. You develop a far richer bond than would’ve been possible had you set out to have a meeting on the same topics.

Improvisation works as a training approach because it reflects the reality of

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botched words bring new energy and direction to a struggling scene. The same is true in business. Post-it Notes were created accidentally when 3M engineers discovered a new use for an adhesive that was too weak for its original purpose. By suspending judgment and allowing for new possibilities, teams and companies can redirect energy to productive ends instead of lamenting and assigning blame when something doesn’t go according to plan.

There are a number of occurrences that can derail a workshop or session. Good trainers have the ability to go with the flow and turn unexpected events into learning opportunities.

Don’t invent, discover.

Invention implies action with specific in-

business: Stuff happens; only so much can be anticipated. How your organization is set up to respond and adapt is key. Improv-based training works in business settings because it’s fun and gets us closer to our authentic selves—a proven formula for effectiveness and greater productivity. The next time you’re looking for ways to improve your organization, try to improv it first. You’ll like the results.

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