

Improv For Effective Collaborative Innovation?

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Abstract

There is no script. There is no exhaustive planning or research done in advance, no predetermined staging or direction. There is no pre-show discussion of strategy. But the result, for practiced improvisational theater actors, is an innovative, organic, and more often than not entertaining performance which often makes audiences ask themselves, “How the heck can they create a great sketch out of thin air, with only a word or phrase suggestion from the audience”?

As an actor in a sketch comedy group, I had a great personal interest in learning the art of improv, so I bought some books and joined an introductory improv class at Comedyworx in Raleigh, NC to learn improv techniques and improve my stage presence. But what I quickly found was that the ideas behind how improv works were easily extendable to the crusade of the Enterprise Networking and Transformation Solutions (ENTS) Grow Innovation Focus Team (GIFT), of which I am a member. Our mission is to encourage and promote an innovative internal culture and aid a volunteer army of “Innovation Advocates” in mining new ideas for increasing productivity and growing revenue from members of our organization.

Aside from the more obvious aspects of how improv techniques can help fuel creativity and spontaneous thinking, seeding a group of employees with a problem or concept before a discussion is similar to an audience member seeding an improvisational theater troupe with a suggestion before a performance. In both cases, each member of the team has limited information about what the other members think of the suggestion. To effectively work together to create the best solution or an outstanding performance, the team members must have an implicit agreement to listen to each other, to not stifle forward movement of the discussion, and to be honest with and trust teammates. By abiding this agreement discussions can be more productive and solutions can often be found more quickly, with greater ease and less conflict.

This paper will discuss the various games and concepts that translate well from the improv theater world to the technical world, both for seeding creativity and for learning how to work efficiently and effectively as a team.

Not surprisingly, I am not the first person to independently discover the benefits of using improv techniques in the workplace; having exposure to the craft through my acting hobby was serendipitous in that it has lead me discover entire networks dedicated to “applied improv”, or improv for the workplace. This awareness will however arm our Innovation Advocates with more practical information on how we can better mine our teams for the next great idea, as well

as aid in building a foundation for more productive collaborative discussions on any subject with any team.

All The World's A Stage...Including Your Workplace

Shakespeare may not have known it at the time, but in his "Seven Ages of Man" monologue from "As You Like It", he more than adequately described a truism not just for general human behavior; but also for the evolution of career and interactions with other individuals encountered in that duration:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts..."

We are constantly performing; indeed we are even evaluated on that performance! Yet not one of us has been given a script for how to execute every facet of every role you will play everyday; no one knows upon entry to every meeting what each of the team member's motivations, feelings, and contributions will be; no one knows upon exit of each meeting all the external factors that will tomorrow affect what you discuss today.

In this, you - quite possibly without knowing it - are improvising every day. You are already an agent, an actor, a director, producer, and an audience. You have many audiences you play to and you adjust your message naturally for each one. Every meeting, discussion, or interaction at the water cooler or the lunch line is a chance to be organic, creative, and to discover more about your workplace - or beyond that, your world. So, go ahead and pat yourself on the back, and add the word "improviser" to your resume (or PBC results) somewhere. Good work!

But wait! You will need more information, (and preferably some training and stage time!) before you abandon your company and run off to Hollywood or Second City with headshot in hand. Know that even though improvisation is something that you do naturally on the job, there are many ideas, tools and techniques you can learn to have more productive collaboration with your peers, and to shape innovative ideas that come out of these collaborations. If you decide after reading on or taking some classes like I did, that you are a better network performance analyst or accountant or manager than onstage improv performer, so be it. The principles behind improv can help you in any of your roles - and besides, not everyone can be Mike Myers.

As a disclaimer to my assumption about everyone naturally working on the same global improvisation, I have to say if you HAVE actually been given a script, let me know so I can talk to my manager about why I didn't get my pages!

I'm Gonna Be the Star!...or How to Quickly Lose Friends and Alienate People

In America, we love our celebrities. I'll be the first to admit that I myself love a juicy tabloid magazine as a guilty pleasure, as evidenced by the US Weekly and Star magazines occasionally strewn about my house. Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan have spent so much time on the front page of cnn.com that I barely need to make a case that celebrity-infatuation is indeed alive and well, and that we find it even more compelling when those celebrities are behaving scandalously. I have got to believe that the stars about which we hear the greatest amount of negative press must not be communicating and collaborating too effectively with their families, publicists and

entourages, and are pursuing their own agenda to win them fame and notoriety without really achieving anything meaningful. At the very least, they are alienating influential individuals in their industry in such a way that their careers may possibly suffer.

Performers would not last long on an improv stage with this kind of attitude and behavior. There is no “star” of an improv performance; rather the entire team spontaneously works together to craft the scene on the stage; and the entire team is responsible for providing the audience with information. They help each other to avoid missing opportunities to contribute. They all use their individual and unique talents, combined with some ground rules, to start, progress, and end a performance. There is a profound commitment by all members to promote themselves as well as others to reach their ultimate goal of providing a satisfying and entertaining piece of art for their audience. One person does not dominate a scene, rather there is a delicate dance of giving and taking focus.

In fact - the means by which the performers communicate during a scene is actually called giving and taking focus. Both verbal and nonverbal cues can be used to facilitate shift in focus between actors. For example, you might take focus by dashing onto the scene as a new character, or you might give focus by using eye contact or even simply by calling a character out by name. Each member of the team knows how to recognize these cues as “offers”, or opportunities to further the scene.

Do all the teams to which you belong in your workplace (or life, for that matter!) function in this seamlessly beautiful and fluid way? Or do certain individuals tend to take the focus, while unwittingly refusing to give focus to others? Do those new to an area within a company have the courage to take the focus if it is not adequately being given to them? Are the meetings you attend and discussions you have inclusive of all unique points of view; does everyone in attendance contribute?

Leadership is a big deal and a core competency—and the case I am making is not that there should be no leader, but that on the ideal team - as with the best improv troupes—every participant is a leader. What each individual can contribute is of course relative—a senior member of a team will most likely have more overall responsibility, but a junior member’s contribution in terms of learning investment for the future and unique point of view is also extremely valuable. After all, the senior member will probably not work forever. Sometimes the best contribution that one can make is to just observe and listen and wait for an opening, or use the observation as a gateway to increased knowledge and future involvement. Every member on this ideal team has something of worth to contribute, regardless of experience, and will take and yield focus in a way that will constructively forward a project or discussion toward a common goal. Otherwise, what is the point of being a member of a team?

That’s My Idea—All Mine!...or How Not Sharing Can Waste Time and Energy

Nothing is more frustrating while performing as a member of an improv ensemble than when an individual refuses to let go of a preconceived plot rather than follow the story as it builds itself naturally amongst the actors. The performance becomes repetitive and tedious to the actors, even if the repetitions appear funny on the surface to the audience. A performer who does this is essentially blocking action from moving forward. He or she is refusing to see things from

multiple perspectives, and is resisting acceptance of the contributions of the other actors. This actor is saying “I have the best idea, no matter what the rest of you think.”

This is not leadership in the improv world. This is bad form, extremely irritating, and a good reason to send this person back to Improv 101. Yet many of us in our jobs are guilty of both perpetrating this crime and turning a blind eye to it. The following scenario is a prime example of how this behavior could adversely affect your job and your status with your peers:

Say you have a great idea for a product that will revolutionize the way that your industry does its business. It will save millions of dollars in labor and give customers more of the function they desire. Not to mention, it will surely bring you fame and fortune. You decide to go off on your own and implement this next greatest thingamajig without discussing it with your peers because you are so incredibly certain that it is going to be a success, and you don’t want Joe or Sue on your team to take all the credit for your idea. After all, you thought it up, and they are already snooping around trying to figure out what you are working on!

Months later, having worked yourself double-time to prototype the amazing Thingamajig-XGen, as you are now calling it, you have your big shot to unveil this marvelous invention to the powers that be. Throughout the presentation, your audience is silent—which you of course take to mean that they are so impressed that have been rendered speechless.

You arrive at the designated time for questions. Joe tentatively raises his hand to comment—that darn Joe! He’s always trying to steal your show. Reluctantly you call upon him, and he clears his throat nervously and says, “Didn’t the UberNanoTech division do this last year?”. Oh no, that can’t be right, can it? It was YOUR idea, nobody else could possibly have thought of it, right? Now Sue chimes in, “Yeah, I helped work on the specs for their version—in fact we came up with an even better way of using several of the functions. Why didn’t you talk to me about it?”

Obviously this is an extreme example of what can happen when you do not share ideas or are not willing to share the spotlight. You can really end up being the one in the dark, with potentially devastating consequences.

In improv, you must be willing to accept the contribution of others, even if at the onset you do not agree with what they are saying or you really do feel that you have the best idea. The basic tenet, and one of the first things you will learn, is the concept of “Yes, and...”.

The idea behind “Yes, and...” is that each individual performer must take what the last person said, acknowledge that this is what the last person believes (this being the “Yes” part), and build on it (this being the “And” part). There are no “nos”, even if you do not like the path your previous comrade chose. The word “no” is a block to forward action, and a negative reaction will waste the time and energy of the entire group while they try to argue to resolve the conflict. All the members need to agree to follow that path and discover where it takes the rest of you. You need to trust in your team member that this trail needs to be explored, and ensure that the contributions you make lead to worthwhile discussion and exploration. In this way, the scene does not backtrack, it always moves forward, and you are replacing a possible conflict with agreement and respect.

Taking Risks.... Or How to Have Courage To Possibly Look Foolish

Improv can be scary, even if you and your team members know all the rules and follow them religiously. Your scene may end up not being funny; or it may be so ridiculous you absolutely cannot hold back your own laughter and you break character, derailing the performance altogether. Audiences tend to think this is funny—but it is not funny in the way you wanted them to think you are funny, which means you did not reach your goal. They may laugh, but you are not fulfilling their expectations.

I am not a motivational speaker, and I do not have the prescription to get over the fear of failure, or fear of looking foolish. There is no doubt that it takes courage to move into unknown territories, and these are human emotions that most of us experience from time to time—some of us more than others. The advice that my improv course instructor gave me was that you should only take focus when you have a contribution in which you truly believe, and rely on the trust your team has in you to seek out to where that path leads. Return that trust when a team member that puts an idea out there that may seem a little crazy. Do not judge each other, rather make a commitment to really understand where an idea can go. Enforce a culture where it is safe to voice your opinion, and one where all individuals are encouraged to see any facet of the job as a possibility or opportunity.

Without knowing at the time that we enforcing an improv theater concept, the ENTS GIFT Team pulled together a campaign to help to encourage potential innovators to have the courage to pipe up with their ideas in the unknown face of those who might reject them. This campaign included a five minute video that was shown to our entire product area that humorously drew attention to how you can easily stifle innovation through negativity or passivity without even being aware that you are doing it at the time. We called these folks who stifle innovation “zappers” and followed the video presentation with an anti-zapping poster campaign. The effects of this campaign have been positive—not only has it created an awareness in the zappers themselves to think twice before they zap, but now by having a term to identify the feeling associated with the rejection of their ideas, it has also empowered those who are being or have been zapped to fight back when they feel they are being zapped in the future.

If knowing that your company supports this kind of risk-taking does not help you take ideas forward more easily, remember that when you are collaborating, if everyone is doing something that they believe in that initially looks foolish, at least you all look foolish together. This is the only explanation I can come up with for the popularity of the Macarena!

Assert yourself, don't ask questions.

Show, Don't Tell...or Don't Bore the Masses

Another of the rules in improv is the idea of “show, don't tell”. It is much more interesting for your audience to see you driving your car off a cliff or taking a nap than for you to simply tell them that is what you are doing. And the bigger you can make that action, the bigger the response you will get from your audience for the energy you put into it.

In the same way, it is much more interesting for you to show someone how use a new tool or demo your latest greatest idea for your next teambuilding event, than to just state the facts of your plans to them. Be engaged with your audience, and be interested in what you are talking

about. Be energetic and expressive! If what you are speaking about is not important enough to you to be excited, why should anyone else care what you have to say about it?

Storytelling is never as exciting and interesting as presentation and theater—so when you can, you want to take the latter and more active choice, both in improv and in the office. You will likely find that you are less nervous and enjoy your role as presenter, and the audience will more likely pay attention and retain the information better if they can visualize what you are speaking about. They will also be more apt to provide feedback and ask questions if you keep them actively involved in the action, and if you come across as being mindful of their feelings about what you present.

FastTrack Solution-Finding... or Why Teamwork Makes a Difference

An important skill for improvisers to master is how to quickly adapt their characters or situations to the information which other performers contribute. At the beginning of the scene the only information they will likely have is a word or phrase, which is not much to work with at all. Because improvisers cannot know all the facts in advance, they need to constantly be changing their actions and strategies as they discover more about what is happening in the world they are creating. They must also help each other to navigate around seeming “mistakes” by either providing justification for the mistake or creating offers to use the incident as an opportunity to follow another path, without negating the work of the actor who created the situation.

Sound familiar? Improv actors build a scene the same way a team might build a new product or solution from scratch. You continuously learn and discover more from your team, other teams, and your customers as you work to provide them with quality. You must be willing follow promising leads and use constructive action to satisfy requirements. You need to adapt quickly and recover from unexpected changes. When you do not have all the facts, you need to try to use what you do have in innovative ways. To work best as a team to deliver any new product, every member needs to be open and willing to venture into unknown areas proposed by team members, and also individually each must be one who wades into the deep sea of up-and-coming technology and champions what he or she thinks will best accommodate your plans.

On an improv stage, all performers are privy to all available information about environment and characters. Imagine if all the teams of which you are a member could and would share information this freely, how much more quickly solutions could be found! Wikis, forums, databases help to this end, but even more choices are becoming available with the focus on the importance of collaboration. The trick, which is another subject for another paper, is to get everyone to go to the same place consistently.

Finally, “Yes, and” also comes in quite handy in avoiding conflict in the quest to find a solution in a collaborative setting. On this utopian team I have been describing, it is inevitable that two people will have strong and sound ideas which compete with each other. If this is the case, carefully weigh the pros and cons of both ideas by following them through discussion to wherever they might lead, recognize the validity of both, and democratically move on quickly with the one that best fits the company’s strategy for the product.

Be In the Moment...or Wake Up, Someone's Talking!

At the heart of the matter, what most people think of when they consider improv theater is that it is all about thinking on your feet, a skill that also translates well to the corporate world. Thinking on your feet is not something that comes naturally to everyone, but it is something that can be learned if one is willing. Imagine, if your entire team could spontaneously think and speak fluidly and effectively how much time could be saved?

The main secret to thinking well on your feet is the marriage of being in the moment, or “mindfully present”, and having the willingness to take initiative. Be in tune with what is happening right now in front of you, and choose to focus on the present. Do not make judgments on what you believe SHOULD be happening. Do not be thinking about what you ate for breakfast this morning or what you want to do after work, just be engaged with where the current action lays. Use the information you have about the group and situation that you are dealing with to guide you to the confidence to jump into the fray as appropriate.

Another guideline for being in the moment when you speak during a discussion is to make sure that what you are saying affects the entire team. If it does not, perhaps this is just not the right forum for your comments; it is not the moment to speak up. Eventually, if you train yourself to stay in the present you will find that you will not need to work so hard to come up with ideas to contribute, and you will be calmer about voicing your opinion under pressure.

Finally, you are not “mindfully present” or fully collaborating to your potential if you are checking notes or the score of the big game during meetings, even if you are physically present and you are a master multi-tasker. Pay attention, stay focused, and contribute on some level—or re-evaluate if you actually need to be present at all. Always remember, the entire dynamic of the team is influenced by what you are doing when you meet.

Be In The Know...or What You Don't Know Might Byte You

Even if you do not know what will happen during a scene, there are several pieces of information that you actually can know in advance to optimize the quality of an improv performance. First of all, cultural relevance is often a key to humor, so it is important to be aware of current events. Beyond that, you need to be aware of individual wants and needs of cast members, and that your actions may affect different people in different ways. As the scene progresses and you create your environment carefully out of thin air, observe how your partners are shaping it, and be mindful of how the introduction of new characters or objects into the scene will affect the plot. You need to be a keen observer of the play world around you with a sharp awareness where the details exist; otherwise you will find yourself plowing through the coffee table that another actor put on the middle of the stage. Trust me; the audience will remember it was there.

Likewise, in your job it pays to be up on the latest news and technology related to your field, both from an individual and a collaborative standpoint. The greater the technical vitality is of your team, the more chance for success in an innovative undertaking. Knowing the motivations of your team members, and how to interact with them in a way that does not cause conflict or annoyance is also a useful tool. Finally, you should also pay attention to and recognize the work of others on your team to ensure that you do not waste time duplicating it; or worse, compromising it in some way, the equivalent of walking through their make-believe coffee table.

Seeding Creativity In Your Team...or Collabovation?

I was very excited about dreaming up the term “collabovation” the other day to describe the marriage of innovation and collaboration, and surely wish I could take credit for coining it, but a quick google search shows that even if it has not yet hit the mainstream vernacular, someone beat me to the punch. Sadly, “Innoberation” just does not sound good at all, even though does not yet seem to be taken.

Improv theater meets the criteria of the spirit of collabovation, being an art form that completely relies on full participatory collaboration to create a completely innovative and novel performance every time. And thanks to Viola Spolin, author of Improvisation for the Theater (considered the “improv bible” in many circles) amongst others, we have a large number of activities or games that you can try with your teams to both inspire them to work better together and hone some of the skills improv can help you with in all your roles.

You can also consider bringing to your team a workshop taught by professional improv trainers, specifically targeted to the corporate environment. Many improv theater companies now have these programs - the most famous being Second City which has provided training to a diverse mix of companies for years through its Second City Communications division. Smaller local outfits, like Comedyworx in Raleigh where I attended my improv training are also emerging as leaders in providing quality training applied to corporate settings, so look around!

The following game examples, taken from Improvisation in the Theater, will focus on the topics which were showcased in this paper, but there are many, many other facets to improv which may interest you, or other games you can play that I will not list. If you want or need more, I would highly recommend picking up a copy of this excellent book.

Giving and Taking Focus—Give and Take Warm-Up

Players stand in a circle. One (any) player may take; start a movement, and when any player takes, all others must give; hold their own movement, waiting to move. Any other player can take (move) at any time, in the space of the circle, but must hold if another player starts a motion. Sounds may be considered taking.

Problem Solving—Involvement in Threes or More

Three or more players agree on an object which cannot be used without involving all of them. They are to participate in a joint action in which all move the same thing. For example, pulling a fishnet, tugging a boat, portaging a canoe, or pushing a stalled car. The players must work together to find a way for them all to contribute to using the object.

Encouraging Participation—Part of a Whole Activity

One player goes on stage and becomes part of a large animate or inanimate moving object. As soon as the nature of the object becomes clear to another, that player joins the player on stage and becomes another part of the whole. This continues until all the audience have participated and are working together to form the complete object. Players may assume any movement, sound, or position to help complete the whole. Examples include machines, abstract mechanisms, and constellations in the universe. Others are statue groupings, a body cell, a flower, or an animal.

Awareness—Observation Game

A dozen or more real objects are placed in a tray, which is set in the center of the circle of players. After ten or fifteen seconds, the tray is covered or removed. The players then write individual lists of the names of as many of the objects as they can remember. The lists are then compared to the tray of objects.

Other Areas Besides Collaboration In Which Improv Techniques Help

There are other areas of your day-to-day business aside from collaboration in which improv training can be hugely beneficial. These include, but are not limited to:

- Presentation skills
- Confidence, and the ability to be more comfortable in front of others
- General leadership skills
- More courage to take initiative

Summary

As much as we know we must be increasingly more collaborative and innovative as we face the future, it is not always easy to navigate through all the varying personalities, cultures, and technologies that are constantly emerging in and out of our focus. All of the improv techniques games and techniques listed above are purposefully designed to aid in finding solutions to dealing with the challenging problems of how to get people to work together in the most organized and efficient manner possible to solve difficult problems, given a variety of constraints. Even though the original intent of the medium was for the theater, these goals are clearly shared by both the theater and the corporations of today.

Both companies and improv networks are recognizing the value of their cooperation. More and more companies are bringing in specially designed improv courses that have business applications, as cited by articles in media such as the Harvard Management Communication Letter and the Wall Street Journal. Conversely, improv ensembles are developing more material for this audience, and new communities of practices are arising, including the Applied Improv Network, and Improv at Work, which are referenced below. I would highly recommend, if you are able, to have such a course for your teams as you will surely learn how to better collaborate and to hone all the skills I have described in this paper, and have fun while doing it.

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