

# Leaders, Are You Ready To Take The Creative Leap Into The Future?

## | Leadership with Applied Improvisation

 By **Theodore Klein**, Boston Strategy Group

Today's leaders, to a greater degree than perhaps any of their predecessors, are tasked with adapting to a world that is in great flux. Rapidly changing markets, shifts to the service economy, calls for social justice, technological advances, and increasing consumer sophistication are just a few of the challenges that leaders faced – before a global pandemic turned everything on its head. Now, a growing talent shortage exacerbated by the pandemic and an unstoppable trend toward remote work demand innovative leadership.

In years past, strong leaders might have guided their teams with inspiration and tenacity alone. The leaders of today have to adapt and experiment to succeed in highly uncertain times. A novel field, Applied Improvisation has emerged with scientifically proven approaches that can arm today's leaders

with techniques to deal with increasing ambiguity.

### **History of Applied Improvisation**

Improvisation and leadership go hand in hand. Thousands of years before the first written language, humans told stories through improvisation that strengthened leadership bonds. For centuries, improvisation was exclusively a theatrical concept, with its sole purpose being to delight audiences through inventive, spontaneous scenarios. It was not until the mid-20th century that Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin, pioneers of improvisational theater, helped create a seismic shift in the world of improvisation. Their separate but shared vision of improv theatre as a social technique, resulted in the beginnings of Applied Improvisation, which introduced theatrical elements of listening, collaboration, and teamwork into leadership thinking.

### **Distinction Between Applied Improvisation and Comedic Improv**

"The techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating," Viola Spolin wrote. Comedic improv encourages participants to listen to their team members, accept and make "offers" of information to progress a scene, and adapt to the situation unfolding before them. When performed live by The Second City or on shows like *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, the singular purpose of comedic improv is to entertain. But as Viola Spolin was so acutely aware of, the principles of improv have so much more to offer to master collaborators and communicators – and leaders.

### **Enter Applied Improvisation**

– a tool to achieve innovative leadership. When the techniques and principles of improvisation are taught in a business setting, the results can be transformative for customers, employees, and leaders alike.

## What is Applied Improvisation?

Applied Improvisation is an experiential learning process that can enhance individuals and their leadership competency. An academic model developed by Boston Strategy Group establishes three foundational values and nine key principles adapted from theater-based improv for management purposes. Many know the foundational values that include 'active listening', 'say yes', and 'say and'. But improvisational principles are a bit more mysterious to most; and include **Awareness, Connections, Presence, Initiations, Agreement, Vulnerability, Simplicity, Value, and Creation**. These nine principles serve to shape one's executive thinking and ultimately create guidelines that transform management behavior. Assembled, these actionable guidelines can enhance executive capability in a wide range of business scenarios to improve leadership, accelerate innovation, improve trust and communication, and better enable teamwork.

Through workshops, programs, and seminars, participants learn – in real time – how to apply these improvisational principles to everyday business, whether through brainstorming sessions that consider all contributions, or by focusing on a coworker's response instead of using that time to formulate one's own. Not only do leaders learn how to evaluate their unique experiences, they learn how to encourage their

fellow employees to collaborate, communicate, and adapt at the moment. As businesses today often rely on speed and efficiency, learning how to nurture and accelerate forward momentum is crucial to stimulating innovation.

Selected activities and exercises in the hands of an experienced instructor can lead to revelations in personal understanding and enhanced leadership competency.

**"At the end of day, if leadership doesn't understand how to relate, support, encourage, motivate, and create effective interrelationships with people, today's organizations are simply not going to succeed."**

Alan Eisner, Dean of the School of Management at Clark University, which is bringing applied improvisation to its leadership program, said "Our staff are looking forward to bringing this unique experiential learning process to our graduate students. The techniques of improvisation will undoubtedly bring many out of their comfort zones and help them grow as leaders and communicators. We're certain they'll have a transformative learning experience as they add these improvisation principles to their business acumen.

## Science of Applied Improvisation

Unlike theatrical improv, Applied Improvisation is not comedy. Since appearing as an academic field in the 1990s, numerous scientific studies and a great quantity of anecdotal research illustrate how improvisation training can improve key leadership competencies. Many of the world's leading corporations, universities, and healthcare organizations have embraced Applied Improvisation. Google, Proctor & Gamble, McKinsey, Harvard Business School, Boston's Children's Hospital, and Fidelity Investments are just a few examples of large, global institutions leveraging the power of improvisation training.

As a specific example, Peter Felsman, a prominent researcher writing in *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, stated, "We found evidence that improvisational theater training causes increases in divergent thinking, uncertainty tolerance, and affective well-being. This provides the first evidence that improvisation causes increases in uncertainty tolerance and positive affect relative to a social interaction control."

Today, many management theorists are just beginning to build important theoretical bridges between the study of organizational improvisation and individual characteristics. For example, Ivey Business School in Ontario, Canada; Stony Brook University in New York; and Danube University in Krems,



Austria, all have dedicated faculty studying and researching how improvisation training can enhance leadership.

And Francesca Gino, an Associate Professor at Harvard Business School writing in the Harvard Business Review, commented, "In my academic research, I've looked at many different types of teams, at a wide variety of organizations all over the world. The group that communicated best, with everyone contributing and learning, wasn't in a corporate office park; it was in an improv comedy class."

### Value of Applied Improvisation

When delivered with a professional, competent instructor, Applied Improvisation can result in nine measurable leadership benefits in several distinct categories. Programs can lead to enhanced ethics, quality, communications, and marketing effectiveness, as well as personal psychological value, among several other categories. Beyond the individual, these benefits can flow to a wide group of stakeholders. Once relegated to the world of business, a stakeholder is anyone

who has a vested interest in an organization or institution, including employees, vendors, and the community.

For example, some of the benefits— increased understanding, organizational pride, and stakeholder alignment — may be more relevant to a community than to an individual, just as how personal benefits — improved peace of mind, self-worth, and empathy — can be better connected by an individual than by a community. Since improvisation has both personal and interpersonal value, the implementation of such training programs has unique benefits for both employees and the organization.

Danny Balel, one of New England's leading improvisation instructors, says, "I see so many benefits pop up over and over. The first takeaway is always how comfortable people feel with others in a class or workshop. It's so easy to open up and be comfortable being yourself when engaging with these tools. Beyond that, confidence, an ability to thrive in ambiguity, recognizing the importance of relationships, active listening, the list goes on and on."

### In Summary

Keith Johnstone posited that people could be put into two categories based on their reactions to situations, "Those who say 'Yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say 'No' are rewarded by the safety they attain." Faced with

complex challenges that fall well outside their familiar parameters, leaders find themselves at a precipice where they must implement novel tactics.

Applied Improvisation offers to provide these leaders principles, guidelines and innovative strategies needed to excel in today's business world.

At the end of day, if leadership doesn't understand how to relate, support, encourage, motivate, and create effective interrelationships with people, today's organizations are simply not going to succeed.

The only question remaining is how many leaders are brave enough to accept the concept and take the creative leap into the future.



**Theodore Klein** is Managing Partner at Boston Strategy Group. He has 40 years of executive leadership experience at several premier consulting firms, and was CEO of Boston Systems Group, named one of America's 100 leading consulting firms. He has led over 350 engagements for global corporate, university, and government institutions and has served on faculty at Boston University, Boston College, and the University of Massachusetts.



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