

C-SUITE ADVISORY

Retaining Employees Through Applied Improvisation

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The employment dream is changing. Professionals are resigning in droves, causing many unfilled positions and organizational stress. But executive leaders can adapt.

Pushed to the brink by a healthcare catastrophe that has brought the country to its knees, under-appreciated and under-respected professionals across the United States are arriving at a consensus: the new “dream job” doesn’t necessarily have to be at a prestigious organization or come with a considerable salary. No, the new dream is to perform meaningful work at a firm where growth opportunities are attainable, competencies are enhanced, and collaborative contributions are recognized. Simply put, professionals want the opportunity to grow and develop their management skills to face new challenges.

And professional staff – and not just at the menial level – are finding that this dream is both attainable and worth departing a firm to pursue.

Enter “The Great Resignation.” Professionals, managers, and even executives are abandoning their positions at record rates, with businesses experiencing a historic voluntary termination rate of 3.4%¹. Resignations are widespread, affecting thousands of professional employees. The problem might even be more prevalent than many thought, as a 2021 study conducted by Monster found that 95% of U.S. employees are considering changing jobs, and 92% of them are willing to switch industries to make that happen.

McKinsey & Company appreciates the shift: “[Staff] want a renewed and revised sense of purpose in their work. They want social and interpersonal connections with their colleagues and managers. They want to feel a sense of shared identity. Yes, they want pay, benefits, and perks, but more than that, they want to feel valued by their organizations and managers. They want meaningful—though not necessarily in-person—interactions, not just transactions.”

So, what are senior business executives responsible for running major organizations supposed to do?

Old, tired, traditional HR solutions no longer work, and senior executives need to innovate. What about an approach that improves collaboration skills, increases communication effectiveness, builds trust and reduces harmful information silos? Visa, Schwab, United Health Group, Sun Life, Verizon, Astra Zeneca, Bayer, GSK, Google, Facebook, Twitter, Proctor & Gamble, among countless other organizations, have discovered first-hand that Applied Improvisation (AIM) programs – techniques for improvising in a professional, business setting – is precisely suited to help professional staff embrace the unknown, react appropriately in the moment, and enhance leadership skills. When experts teach AIM techniques, it can stem the tide of staff resignations.

“Gone are the days of workers punching in and out day after day, year after year in jobs that don’t interest or excite them,” said Laura Lindenfeld, executive director of the Alan Alda Center for Communicative Science and the Dean, School of Communication & Journalism at Stony Brook University in New York. “Today, workers expect – even demand – feelings of strong connection to their work and their colleagues. Applied improvisation can build strong teams by allowing individuals the opportunity to connect to each other, and to their professional interests and ambitions, in a way that is safe, engaging, and fun. It’s one more tool – one that I find to be extraordinarily effective – in building and retaining strong teams of highly motivated individuals who love what they do.”

What is Applied Improvisation (AIM)?

AIM is a new, robust, scientifically-proven approach to address a wide range of organizational issues. In the past 20 years, academic studies have dramatically demonstrated AIM's relevance in dealing with business situations related to ambiguity, collaboration, communication, and creativity. The experiential learning process has strong theatrical and comedic roots, and for good reason, as noted by Francesca Gino, an Associate Professor at Harvard Business School, when she stated, "In my academic research, I've looked at many different types of teams, at a wider 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."

However, unlike theatrical improv, AIM is not comedy. Since appearing as an academic field in the 1990s, numerous research papers and a significant quantity of anecdotal research illustrate how AIM programs can improve key leadership competencies. Our recent study has established three base values and nine critical principles of AIM, which connect improvisational techniques with leadership theory. Many know these base values, which include 'active listening,' 'say yes,' and 'say and.' But improvisational principles are a bit more mysterious to most. They include Awareness, Connections, Presence, Initiation, Agreement, Vulnerability, Simplicity, Value, and Creation. These serve to influence one's thinking and ultimately create practices that transform management behavior.

Among AIM's numerous benefits are:

- Improve Leadership and Management Skills,
- Build Team Camaraderie and Trust,
- Boost Professional Staff Confidence and Self Esteem,
- Reduce Personal Stress,
- Diminish Organizational Silo Mentality,
- Improve Remote Work Effectiveness, and
- Identify Strategies for Dealing with Ambiguity.

AIM Improves Leadership & Management Skills

A solution to "The Great Resignation" is to usher in an era of "The Great Retention," where companies make a concerted effort to retain exemplary staff. Easily incorporated into day-to-day interactions, AIM programs teach skills for enhancing management behavior that keeps professional staff feeling relevant, engaged, and valued.

All levels of management can leverage AIM for different results. Executives learn techniques for improving their leadership, listening, and team-building skills and empowering those they lead; middle managers hone their communication and problem-solving skills through improvisational techniques that allow them to act in the moment; and professional staff learn how to cooperate, communicate, and trust in their own, and each other's abilities. Improving leadership has benefits for both individuals and the organization, and a smoothly-run organization that is effectively innovating is one that both management and staff will be less likely to leave in search of other opportunities.

Builds Camaraderie and Trust

An invested manager understands a firm's goals and believes that their role is vital to the company's success or failure. AIM's core principle is that collaboration is of paramount importance, which means that the silo mentality and wariness that runs rampant in organizations have no value or purpose. In teaching leaders how to promote the sharing of information, AIM can enhance an organization by increasing productivity, improving interpersonal relationships, and fostering the development of fresh and creative ideas through improved collaboration.

Louis Petrovic, Chairman of the Action Innovation Network and Former Vice Chancellor of Research and Development at the University of Massachusetts says, "In today's highly competitive workplace, there can be a growing wariness across employees and the organization. Collaboration, open communications and trust is required to keep the organization focused and achieve its goals. Professional staff want to be part of this achievement and applied improvisation programs enable this in an new, inspiring, and innovative way."

And initiating this change can mean actual cost savings for an organization. Reducing employee turnover expenses – thousands of dollars for unnecessary recruiting and a staggering 213% of a C-suite employee's salary – can provide a vital profitability boost in a competitive environment. By removing silos and having leaders make a genuine effort to recognize valuable contributions, an organization will operate with greater effectiveness while retaining those directly contributing to the organization's mission.

Boosts Professional Staff Confidence and Self Esteem

When organizational leaders make professional staff feel emboldened, confident and empowered to productively contribute, the culture of intimidation that dominates many organizations diminishes. This effect goes well beyond simply putting a suggestion box in the front of the office and asking employees for their opinions. AIM programs achieve improved collaboration by instructing staff at all levels on how to create, enhance, and maintain an environment where all feel that the ideas and

opinions with real potential are being considered. The improvisation principle of “saying yes” does not mean implementing bad ideas for the sake of inclusion; instead, it means actively listening, being receptive, and acknowledging another person’s position without being dismissive.

Since fear and lack of trust in management are common reasons for staff to quit, reducing friction in the workplace is a crucial incentive for professionals to remain committed to their work and the company. The famous phrase “people quit people, not companies” has never been more relevant than it is today; thus, an organization’s best defense against losing staff is to have its leaders drop their defenses and be vulnerable. Leaders who learn the art of active listening benefit from receiving more information, but they make their staff feel heard and integral to the organization, which is an essential motivator for a team to remain committed.

Reduces Personal Stress

Stress in the workplace has far-reaching effects for both the staff member – increased risk of depression, anxiety, burnout, cardiovascular disease, and substance abuse – and the organization – decreased productivity and increased healthcare costs. AIM programs can help executives boost staff productivity by alleviating psychosocial stress through effective team building. A 2021 study conducted by Indeed found that 52% of workers are experiencing burnout, which is up 9% from the same survey undertaken before Covid-19. Though this increase can be attributed to pandemic-specific factors – increased workloads to compensate for lost employees, apprehension about getting ill, and grieving for lost loved ones – the fact that more than two out of five employees were burned out before the pandemic shows that significant change is needed. Reducing workplace stress leads to healthier managers and staff who are productive and committed to developing their skills within the organization.

Improves Remote Work Competency

As virtual reality becomes more sophisticated over time, the idea that remote work is merely a fad cannot be reasonably entertained. Despite remote work providing clear value to employers – improved employee retention, workplace savings, and increased applicants – video conferencing presents its own set of challenges involving communication, inconsistent technology, and management techniques. Remote work is the new normal. However, as anecdotal evidence shows, and as The Psychiatric Times notes: “millisecond delays in virtual verbal responses negatively affect our interpersonal perceptions.”

Utilizing Zoom and similar platforms to establish interpersonal relationships so vital in business and commerce has a host of problems that cannot be solved, only dealt with. AIM programs held

infrequently but in person can ameliorate these issues by building trust among professional staff, enhancing collaboration, and refining communication skills to improve the experience and alleviate some of the remote platform's challenges.

In addition to addressing the many psychological issues associated with remote work, an AIM curriculum instructs executives on how to hold more effective and productive virtual meetings through the facilitation of creative ideas, encouraging participation, and establishing task-oriented leadership. By emphasizing the importance of listening and being present, executives can succeed in better motivating management and staff – and perhaps even show some of the immensely valuable collegiality of the office – regardless of the limitations of the digital platform. A pillar of AIM is that participants must learn how to react in the moment to the situation presented instead of the desired one. Additionally, embracing remote work's momentum will make remote communications more effective and encourage professional staff to pursue an upward trajectory within an organization.

Conclusion

In these troubling, ambiguous, and rapidly changing times, firms must innovate. As creative approaches are paramount to solving modern problems, AIM's ability to enhance leadership, improve emotional intelligence, strengthen communication skills, and promote effective collaboration makes it a unique solution for retaining valued staff. Companies offering sign-on bonuses to attract new talent, and material goods to keep valuable workers, are missing the point.

For companies ready to adopt new methods to combat the Great Resignation, the solution is neither expensive nor prohibitive. All it takes is saying that initial yes to improving.



Theodore Klein 

Theodore Klein is Managing Partner at the [Boston Strategy Group \(BSG\)](#). Mr. Klein has over 40 years of executive management experience at several premier consulting firms, and was the CEO of Boston Systems Group, named one of America's 100 leading consulting firms. Mr. Klein has led over 350 engagements for global corporate, healthcare, university, and government institutions, across four continents. He has served on the management faculty at Boston University, Boston College, and the University of Massachusetts in Management, Marketing, and Information Technology. He has been an avid improvisation student for the last four years and writes frequently on applied improvisation developments. Mr. Klein holds an MBA from Boston University, and undergraduate degrees in Mathematics and in the Social Sciences. An avid sailor, he crossed the Atlantic in a 62 foot gaff-rigged schooner over a five week period, when he was still young and adventurous.

Theodore Klein is an opinion columnist for the [CEOWORLD Magazine](#). You can follow him on [LinkedIn](#).