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# Improvisation – a key skill for the 21st century leader

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Written by **Theodore Klein** on 6 September 2022 in **Features**

**Theodore Klein** looks at innovative techniques to improve management capabilities



Almost every human resource executive today is besieged by the accelerating pace of the work environment. And all levels of management are increasingly burdened with steering their companies through these confusing and uncharted waters following the pandemic storm. Training perspectives, strategies, approaches, and schemes have all been upended. Enhancing leadership and management competency in a new, hybrid, or remote work environment is essential to business success.

A [2020 Gallup study](#) found that effective managers improve profitability by 48%, increase productivity by 22%, and promote 30% higher employee engagement scores overall. The benefits are conclusive, but what do management capabilities look like in 2022, given the movement to a hybrid work environment?

## Today's business environment

In the past, management competency was often a function of broad industry knowledge and measured by years of experience, technical and data skills, professional respect, and managing large numbers of personnel.

Friction between stability and disruption is a constant in business. From the 1930s to the 1960s, manufacturing stability threatened by labour cost disruption caused manufacturing leadership to shift from Europe and the Americas to the Far East and China. Technical disruption caused by information technology innovation dominated the decades that followed. Beginning in the 2000s, new distribution methods, reengineering, and business models led to significant disruption.

Our new era, however, is dominated by epic organisational disruption caused by unprecedented generational change, added multi-national cultural awareness and shifting work models.

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The competency metrics mentioned above were highly influential in judging leadership and management ability in a static environment. Planning was straightforward, goals well defined, and the ability to quickly swivel to address disruption unneeded. But the pace of change has quickened to such an extreme degree that organisational disruption is the new standard and old managing styles are woefully outdated. The managers of tomorrow must confront ambiguity, experiment with innovative ideas, pivot when necessary, and implement successful strategies on the fly. They must be equipped to handle multicultural staff across generations and time zones. They must lead under circumstances never encountered before.

## **Applied improvisation – a new approach**

Humans have been improvising for thousands of years, but the idea of applying the theory and techniques of improvisation is a new approach. The result, applied improvisation (AIM), is an experiential learning process that can enhance individuals and their leadership and management competencies. When applied in a business setting, the improvisational values of active listening, agreeing, and contributing can positively transform management behaviour.

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."

Participants in a professionally-delivered workshop learn how the principles of improvisation – awareness, connections, presence, initiations, agreement, vulnerability, simplicity, value, and creation – are crucial to effective management. These techniques are being taught at leading universities like Harvard and Stanford, and are leveraged by Google, Facebook, Visa, Proctor & Gamble, McKinsey, and countless other significant companies. But what management competencies can improvisation enhance and improve?

### **Leadership**

Born leaders are rare, perhaps best reflected in [a recent poll](#) that found only 11% of HR leaders feel that they have a "strong bench that can take over leadership roles." Thankfully, the skills needed for leaders to embrace complex situations and empower others can be taught. Improvisation study can teach leaders how to adapt to make decisions in the moment, lead in uncomfortable and stressful situations, and establish credibility. AIM strengthens fundamental leadership abilities and helps management broaden their leadership style to accomplish complex goals.

### **Team building**

Constructing an effective team begins with identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, both in terms of a manager and their staff. Improving self-awareness is a core component of improvisation, with participants learning how to improve their skills while simultaneously empowering those around them. The focus on achieving group synergy through the establishment of mutual trust is essential, as are coaching and conflict-resolution techniques that improve team functions. As a team's success or failure is primarily based on cooperation and trust, AIM's lessons for instilling accountability and sharing the spotlight are imperative.

### **Collaboration**

Each member of a successful team performs an essential duty for the organisation. Leaders have a responsibility to not only encourage collaboration among team members but to establish a safe environment for cooperation to occur. This means learning techniques for recognising when to assert oneself or exhibit restraint, and creating a high-value network of strong, trusted work relationships. Plus, even though improvisation is most often taught in person, the lessons learned can enhance remote and hybrid work by strengthening out-of-office relationships that transcend technological limitations.

### **Creativity and innovation**

Leaders need to encourage innovation if a company is to survive in an extraordinarily competitive environment. The need to innovate is nothing new in business. Still, the speed and organisational breadth now required is undoubtedly unique. AIM's ability to teach idea generation and creativity can be a crucial advantage for leaders who instill the lessons. Brainstorming, creative problem solving, recovery from failure, and agile and adaptive development are just a few areas in which AIM can help leaders become the change agents within their organisations.

### **Communication**

Without effective interpersonal communication, there is no innovation. In fact, without communication, there very well might not be a successful enterprise. Successful communication is the bedrock on which leading companies are built, but how non-verbal communication affects understanding is often overlooked. [One study](#) found that body language and tone account for 55% and 38% of effective communication, meaning that 93% of communication is nonverbal. From everyday communication to corporate presentations, powerfully conveying a message requires active listening and responsiveness, respecting interpersonal sensitivity, and harnessing the power of persuasion and influence. All of these areas can be improved through AIM, which prioritise understanding of both an individual's message and the position of their audience.

### **Emotional awareness**

Skill and capability are the two most important things a leader must consider when allocating duties within an organisation. This responsibility must be approached practically and with sensitivity, as teams are a balancing act requiring perfect equilibrium to overcome challenges. As a result, improving emotional awareness is imperative for today's leaders, and AIM helps improve the outcomes of interpersonal situations fraught with emotion. Professional relationships are best when participants recognise diversity to achieve equality, leverage emotions for team gains, and ignite enthusiasm.

### **Conclusion**

Skills in improvisation help leaders improve management capabilities that are indispensable in today's business environment. Principles and techniques learned through an AIM workshop or extended programme apply to a wide range of management duties and give leaders the confidence and courage to overcome the most pressing challenges they face. It would be a fool's errand to attempt to prepare management for every specific change they will face.

The solution is to prepare for change itself.

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