



BOSTON STRATEGY GROUP

Media Examples of Applied Improvisation in Business



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PRODUCTIVITY

Using Improv to Unite Your Team

by Francesca Gino
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Over the last couple of decades, work has increasingly been done **by teams** rather than by lone individuals. Surveys **suggest that teams are central to engaging employees**. Yet we know from years of psychology and management research, including pioneering studies by psychologist **J. Richard Hackman**, that teams often don't improve employee engagement or productivity. Among the biggest reasons: Leaders tend to dominate the conversation; they don't listen and shut down others' ideas. Consequently, team members are often too afraid, or simply too bored and disengaged, to contribute their own thoughts.



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.

Strategy as Improvisational Theater

Magazine: Winter 2002 • Research Feature • January 15, 2002 • Reading Time: 19 min

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

New technologies pose uncertainties for businesses, including the possibility of radical change. Some companies seize the opportunity to outpace competitors while others fall behind, as history clearly demonstrates. That in itself is unremarkable; the important question is, What distinguishes the pacesetters from the laggards?

In my research on how established companies have incorporated the Internet into their businesses, I found that laggard companies tended to be less open to new ideas, less willing to permit employee initiative, and more likely to wait for top management decisions. They appeared paralyzed in the face of uncertainty. Many laggards ignored the Internet at first and then spent heavily to catch up. They often spent more but reaped less, as their efforts were frequently isolated and disconnected from the mainstream business.

By contrast, pacesetter companies tended to act before they had a complete plan, to empower innovators to run experiments and prototype projects, to adjust rapidly to user or customer reactions and to connect projects to ongoing businesses. Pacesetters got more members of the organization involved, used their technology more effectively and creatively, and emerged from the experimentation period with a clear model indicating how the technology could help the company. They did not wait to act until they had a perfectly conceived plan; instead, they created the plan by acting. In short, they improvised.



Why Improv Training Is Great Business Training



Forbes Leadership Forum Contributor

Leadership

News, Commentary, and Advice About Leadership

This article is by Jesse Scinto, a lecturer in Columbia University's Strategic Communications programs.

“If you’re not funny, there’s no real-life consequence,” Rick Andrews tells students in his improv comedy class. “People just don’t think you’re funny. That is not a big deal.” Then he exclaims, “Okay, let’s get two people up there!” The next scene begins.

An instructor at New York’s Magnet Theater, Andrews has taught not only nearly 700 three-hour improv sessions there but also dozens of corporate training courses for companies like [Google](#) GOOGL +0%, [PepsiCo](#) PEP +0%, [MetLife](#) MET +0%, and McKinsey. Since improv training centers began popping up in the 1990s, businesses have increasingly turned to them for help with team building and communication. It’s not uncommon for improv troupes to descend on corporate offsites or for bosses to recommend improv to reticent employees.

How does improv training improve communication?

The premise is simple. Improv performers don’t know what will happen onstage until they’re up there. Each scene begins with a suggestion from the audience. The performers start with that prompt, making up the story as they go along. Although they improvise, the process draws on time-honored principles—the first among them being “yes, and.” Simply put, “yes, and” means performers accept whatever

Leadership Agility: Using Improv to Build Critical Skills



UNC
KENAN-FLAGLER
BUSINESS SCHOOL

By: Kip Kelly
Director of Marketing & Business Development
UNC Executive Development

01-13-16 | THE FUTURE OF WORK

Why Top Companies And MBA Programs Are Teaching Improv

Executive MBA programs at Duke, MIT, UCLA, and Stanford have realized that leaders need training in how to fail.



[PHOTO: FLICKR USER R. NIAL BRADSHAW]



BY VIVIAN GIANG 3 MINUTE READ

It's the standard business school storyline: A manager decides to get an executive MBA degree and starts classes with a bit of a chip on her shoulder.

"You may have reached that point in your career where you're middle management, you've done many things right, you've had some failures that you've learned from, [and] you could be molded into thinking you've figured some things out," says [Michael Desiderio](#), executive director of the [Executive MBA Council](#), a nonprofit association that works with more than 200 universities and colleges that offer executive MBA programs.



Clay Drinko, Ph.D.
Play Your Way Sane

A Novel Finding: Improv and the Great Unknown

First study to show causal link between improvisation and uncertainty tolerance.

Posted Feb 05, 2020



Source: Photo by Kevin Mueller on Unsplash

There's a lot of anecdotal evidence that improvisation helps people deal better with uncertainty, but Peter Felsman, Sanuri Gunawardena, and Colleen M. Seifert have just [published the findings](#) from the first study to ever show a causal link between improvisation and uncertainty tolerance.

It makes sense that improvising would help people deal with the unknown. I mean, you jump up on stage without a script and make things up with people. You don't know how the scene will end. You don't even know how it will start. It makes sense that practicing that skill over time might lead to a

better relationship between you and uncertainty.

But the team's findings are even more revealing.

The Studies

In the first of two studies, Felsman, Gunawardena, and Seifert randomly grouped participants into one of two groups. One group participated in twenty minutes of improv exercises and games. The other did twenty minutes of similar activities but without improvising. For example, in one activity the improv group pretended to see a made-up film and had to collaboratively describe it, while the other group individually described an actual film they had seen.

How an improv class can help develop essential business skills

Improvistional theatre is moving into business schools and boardrooms. Discover how it can help finance professionals develop soft skills and more.

By **Samantha White**

31 January 2018

People and leadership skills, Soft skills, Professional skills



Chicago's famed Second City improv troupe, shown here, has expanded into providing training for corporate clients.

Improvistional theatre, the art of creating scenes and stories out of given suggestions, is a long-standing form of entertainment. Silly, surreal, scriptless scenes on stage have made the art form popular, showcased on programmes such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* in the UK and US.

Improv has long been considered one of the essential elements of many an actor's toolkit. Increasingly, professionals in other industries are getting in on the act, finding improv to be a valuable skill to promote entrepreneurship, nurture creativity, and build leadership skills. Finance professionals are making improv classes part of their own personal development plan, with listening skills, and the ability to read body language and to think on your feet among the benefits.

Business

Aug 24th 2019 edition >

Funny business

What companies can learn from comedians

A fair bit, they seem to think



Aug 22nd 2019
CHICAGO

THE SECOND CITY is the La Scala of laughs. In its 60-year history the vast comedy club on Chicago's North Side has, by night, hosted acts by Joan Rivers, John Candy, Bill Murray and other giants of the genre. By day it offers wannabe funny folk workshops on how to make others giggle. Contemporary greats like Steve Carrell and Tina Fey are alumni. So, increasingly, are managers, marketers and a host of other corporate types.



Firms have used comedy as a way to hone their employees' soft skills for some time. Their number is growing, reports Kelly Leonard, the club's boss of "applied improvisation". Its comics have worked with Twitter, Google and Facebook to find ways for brainy but tongue-tied software engineers to interact more easily with less tech-minded colleagues in sales or strategy. Companies from Motorola and McDonald's to Nike and Nissan believe that sending executives to comedy classes can help them get better at their day jobs. In response to clients'

Nov 26, 2020, 06:25am EST | 676 views

How Enlightened Leaders Are Borrowing From Improv Comedy To Boost Team Creativity

Why did the chicken cross the road? Because the chicken behind it didn't know how to socially distance properly. During this long pandemic, even the faintest smile has been welcome. However, despite the long-awaited news of imminent vaccines, many are still anxious. Three-quarters of [employees report](#) they're worried about the effect of Coronavirus on their personal freedom and job security.

Fear poses a serious challenge for any leader. Research shows anxiety shuts down our prefrontal cortex where we do our higher-order thinking. This extinguishes any possibility of creativity: the human spark which precedes all innovation. There's a growing body of evidence to show a sense of humor reignites this part of our brain. I've [written](#) about how leaders can use jokes to build a more resilient team. Here, I'll focus on how hilarity sparks creativity. In particular, how improv comedy tools can generate more - and better - ideas.

When you're in a good mood your mind and body relax, and your imagination fires up. A team lead by the psychologist Karuna Subramaniam [studied](#) two groups watching different movies. The first group watched a Robin Williams comedy, while the second viewed *The Shining*, a notoriously scary horror movie. When both groups tackled the same word association puzzle, the comedy viewers were way more creative.

Improvisation – a key skill for the 21st century leader

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.