

# Leadership and planning in an ambiguous world

If the world doesn't follow a script  
in a post-COVID world,  
how can a business? Maybe it's  
time for applied improvisation.

BY THEODORE KLEIN



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**I**magine sailing when a significant storm starts to build on the horizon. Within minutes, your pleasant day on the water has turned into a nightmare, with 10-foot waves rendering your boat almost inoperable. The sails are flailing, the sound is deafening and attempting to navigate is entirely useless, especially considering your minimal experience steering through rough seas. What do you do?

After two chaotic years of COVID-related dilemmas, imagining such a “black swan” event now isn’t difficult. COVID has been a radical and profound altering of life and business as we know it, and though many were calling it a once-in-a-century catastrophe, it’s widely accepted that it is likely the new normal. It has brought supply chain disruptions, remote work challenges, overhauled HR policies and the “Great Resignation,” to say nothing of an increasingly polarized political climate, worldwide migrant crises and global disagreement on a scale that is only beginning to emerge. In short, it’s an ambiguous world.

To complicate matters, our boards and senior executives now expect us to anticipate these new calamities so that we’re not caught off guard again. To do so requires novel and creative thinking drawn from a few unusual places. Classic contingency planning methods feel inapplicable, dated and out of touch—especially while on a burning platform.

### **Accelerating the pace**

Fifty years ago, Richard Toffler’s international bestseller *Future Shock* posited that the pace of

business change was accelerating. He defined future shock as “too much change in too short a period,” stressing that the rapid change society was undergoing was overwhelming to the people within it. Toffler coined “information overload” to describe the growing problem of being presented with too much information and too many crises that unnecessarily complicate the planning and decision-making process. In turn, Toffler stated, this problem leads to less-effective leadership and an overall inability to address an unfolding crisis.

The problem is twofold: The pace of business change has increased exponentially in the years since *Future Shock* was published. And two, senior business executives still crave the reassurance provided by stability. So, what happens when stability is a thing of the past? The COVID crisis—and its attendant uncertainty, confusion and ambiguity—was unthinkable before it happened. Similar business crises and the relentless pace by which they may unfold do not afford time for returning to the drawing board to develop formal plans. If the world doesn’t follow a script, how can a business?

**Learn to improvise**

Oscar Wilde wrote: “To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.” The concept is thought-provoking, but what does it mean in practice? How does a business executive prepare for ambiguous situations where what will happen, what will unfold or what will be said is unknown? It might seem absurd, but the answer is to learn how to improvise.

Or, as Isaac Asimov so aptly put it: “To succeed, planning alone is insufficient. One must improvise as well.”

For example, imagine a theatrical improv troupe like Second City or the actors on an unscripted TV show like “What’s My Line.” It’s unplanned and ambiguous. But, if you look closely, you might notice that the performers adhere to critical values and fundamental principles to create an informative, witty and potentially exciting scene or situation. Making it up on the spot is a core component of this activity, and when successful, it unfolds to create an imaginary, seemingly natural environment that is entertaining and enlightening.

The first of three values is “active listening,” a heightened and proactive manner of listening. The second, and most well-known, is “saying yes,” in which participants must agree with an idea. Lastly, participants must accept what was said and add value, or “saying and.” Integrating these three values serve as a foundation to progress the interaction constructively. In each scene or interaction, new information builds momentum and adds value. Participants need to be ready for changes on the fly and embrace them when they arise.

Francesca Gino,  
an associate professor

at Harvard Business School, concludes:

*“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.”*

The critical distinction is that theatrical improv performers have the luxury of adapting to fictional scenarios. In real life, however, there’s no imaginary fire hose that a CEO can grab to put out a business in flames. But the concepts at the core of theatrical improv can be directly applied to business situations to address ambiguity, confusion and crises.

Improvisation in this form is called applied improvisation (AIM). It is a science-based, experiential learning process tuned to the pressing leadership needs of business executives and incorporating the qualities of

TABLE 1

**Theatrical improv to executive action**

Improvisation principle	Applicability to executive action
<b>AWARENESS</b>	The most effective business leaders have a heightened awareness of internal elements (projects, staff resources, budgets) and external market elements (market environment, competition, social change), and of the interrelationships between stakeholders.
<b>CONNECTIVITY</b>	Better business executives are able to efficiently reach out to employees, business associates and customers to establish connections that will strengthen relationships and cooperation.
<b>PRESENCE</b>	Business executives can develop trust among team members by projecting calmness, clear-thinking, authority and credibility.
<b>INITIATION</b>	A business executive’s ability to lead hinges on making decisions and taking decisive action.
<b>VULNERABILITY</b>	Effective business leaders must accept vulnerability by embracing uncertainty and taking a chance on the unknown.
<b>AGREEMENT</b>	Business executives can achieve more cooperation and progress when all those issuing a directive are in agreement.
<b>SIMPLICITY</b>	Occam’s razor applies to all business executives. Be clear and concise.
<b>ADD VALUE</b>	Business executives must ask themselves, “Is what I am proposing adding business value?” They identify available resources and reconfigure them in a way that benefits the business, not personal or political gain.
<b>DISCOVERY</b>	The best business executives are able to more quickly acknowledge and process situations that might be useful and leverage that recognition to provide additional advantages.

Source: Author

emotional aptitude, team development, communications, collaboration and innovation.

Based on the above three values, nine principles drawn from theatrical improv are adopted that directly correlate to executive action (Table 1).

AIM introduces each of these fundamental principles to a business setting to enhance executives' abilities to react in the moment. Skills are intended to be used in everyday business to alleviate inflexibility that holds back executives and the organizations they manage.

### Rethinking leadership

Using improvisational techniques in business situations is no longer an abstract idea. AIM's effectiveness for improving leadership competencies is backed by academic studies from renowned research institutes like the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University in New York; The Department for Knowledge and Communication Management at Danube University Krems, Austria; and the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation at Guelph University in Guelph, Ontario.

In addition to leadership, AIM programs can enhance management capabilities in other key areas. Business executives learn skills to improve emotional aptitude, leverage their emotions and embrace empathy for improved staff motivation. Executives learn verbal and nonverbal communication skills to better speak in the moment, handle difficult conversations, address organizational conflict and settle disagreements. They learn how to strengthen teams and achieve group synergy by building mutual trust and instilling accountability in every team member. Creativity can be amplified, allowing leaders to think outside the box and welcome fresh ideas when they arise, resulting in a more dynamic organization that can better adapt to crises. Lastly, collaboration is enhanced through reinforced working relationships, and a leadership style addressed to both in-person and remote settings.

With scientific evidence showing the benefits of AIM steadily replacing anecdotal evidence, the most significant hurdles that AIM must overcome are the objections from managers that would most benefit. Many leaders bristle at the mere thought of accepting vulnerability, connecting with professional staff or maintaining presence or heightened awareness. Traditional management education emphasizes data and technical literacy when a simple, straightforward,

personal approach is better suited to the crisis.

An excellent example is the superb leadership exhibited this year from Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Ukraine's President, during Russia's massive unprovoked invasion of his country. Zelensky, a trained comedic actor, leveraged his emotive, performative and communications skills during the crisis, dealing with a tragic and complex situation filled with ambiguity, confusion and the unknown. His leadership galvanized his country and made him a national hero. As Politico reported, "a talent for public expression is not just a ticket to name recognition at election time; it's also a potent governing tool."

But the crises that are challenging businesses in 2022 go far beyond the hard skills learned in business school and professional experience. In an unclear, chaotic environment, the soft skills that AIM addresses help fill the gaps of traditional management education and experience. There's a reason why major manufacturers like Proctor & Gamble, Dell Computer, Colgate, Nike, Mercedes-Benz and IBM have all implemented AIM programs for their professional staff in recent years. Large corporations are acknowledging the fact that the leaders of tomorrow will need to adapt in the moment much more efficiently than their predecessors. And AIM-based approaches are highly effective at teaching this.

Dr. Iris Berdrow, a tenured professor of management and MBA director at Bentley University, says:

*"Ambiguity and uncertainty lead managers to respond from places of familiarity—their deeply held set of rules guiding decision making and authority. AIM programs break these rigid schemas allowing managers to respond with attentiveness and creativity. These skills can be learned, can become the new muscle memory, the new rules."*

### Reinventing crisis planning with AIM

In addition to enhancing leadership skills, AIM principles provide a robust framework for corporate crisis planning in a highly-ambiguous, fast-paced, rapidly-evolving business environment. AIM offers an incremental approach where action items are not thoroughly planned out in advance. It's similar to the difference between a scripted play and an improvised theater sketch in that scripted plays are carefully planned and undergo careful editing and

## Learning to improvise

The most critical factor in the success of an applied improvisation (AIM) program is an experienced and competent instructor. They're akin to a football quarterback.

Instructors lead participants, build enthusiasm, confidently assign and oversee activities and adjust on the fly to unforeseen situations. They model what any good business leader does. While a playbook to achieve the program's business objectives is pre-established, should the need arise, audibles are called to change course at a moment's notice. The parallels between AIM and professional sports go even further. Armchair quarterbacks are famous during Monday Night Football, and amateur AIM instructors are similarly typical. It might look easy from the outside, but the reality is always far more nuanced and complicated.

A good AIM program focuses on specific business competencies. It can consist of between one and eight sessions conducted over a multi-day or multi-week period. Sessions are generally between two hours and three hours long and comprise five key components, with an optional "pre-work" element. Figure 1 sequentially illustrates how an AIM session unfolds.

### The workshop begins

As participants are often nervous and uncomfortable before the start of the workshop session, a brief "introduction" puts participants at ease and helps them open up. Instructors take psychological pressure off their audience and create a

safe, judgment-free space. To encourage maximum engagement, it's essential that participants relax, are able to interact comfortably and be self-reflective.

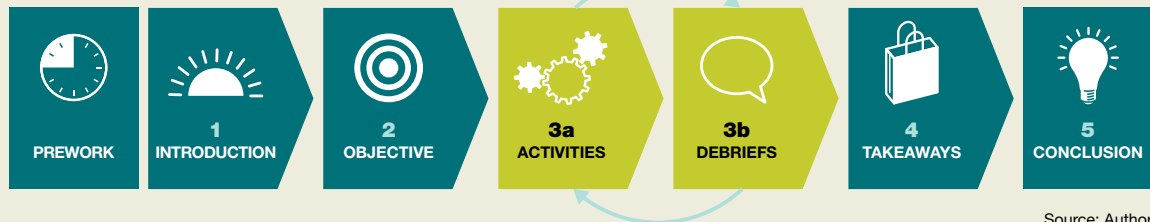
with the instructor selecting new participants to pick up exactly where the last one left off. To be successful, participants must listen intently to what is being said at all times, connect ideas on the fly and accurately read the room. If team building is an objective, participants might be asked to pair up and introduce themselves in a highly-detailed manner, albeit relying entirely on lies and falsehoods. This requires creativity and the ability to initiate; the connections that result promote the strengthening of teams. Activities are aligned with the session's objectives and the nine fundamental principles of improvisation theory.

Each activity is followed by a debrief during which participants are tasked with reflecting on their behavior, their dialog and their inspiration for their specific ideas and words. These discussions are exceptionally revealing as they can identify professional strengths and weaknesses and deep character insights. After all activities and debriefs, participants have a new, clear and better understanding and insight of how they react and behave in a business situation and what individual improvements might be necessary.

During the takeaway component, a good AIM instructor consolidates and summarizes the more significant learning points.

FIGURE 1

### Typical applied improvisation session



Source: Author

safe, judgment-free space. To encourage maximum engagement, it's essential that participants relax, are able to interact comfortably and be self-reflective.

The instructor outlines and reviews the program's objectives. Objectives are tailored to organizational needs based on a client discussion on the six core management competencies: leadership, emotional aptitude, team building, collaboration, innovation, communications and a determination of what emphasis is necessary.

After a quick warm-up exercise to foster cooperation, activities and debriefs comprise the majority and core of an AIM session. Activities are individually designed to reveal, clarify and improve individual behaviors that arise. Activities are specifically chosen to address competency improvement and achieve the desired business objectives. An activity to develop communication skills might involve participants inventing a story on the spot,

Unique standout moments are highlighted and reviewed, often leading to hearty laughs by the participants as they reflect upon their behavior when being put on the spot.

Experienced instructors relate—and participants themselves can quickly reconnect—the activity to real-life situations. A typical participant comment is: "I was so busy thinking about what I was going to say that I wasn't listening." Instructors end the takeaway by reviewing the session's business objectives and the critical improvisation principles that enhance management competency.

What's left is to spend a few minutes concluding the session and discussing what has been learned and what might come next. Instructor and program evaluations are done, and participants do a quick self-assessment to determine if they believe their management views have altered. Then, participants retreat to the bar, where a discussion of what they have observed and learned continues in a friendly, open and productive manner.

significant review. Performers learn and run their lines, then deliver them with the appropriate physicality, blocking and emotion. They learn to listen for and react to cues for their following line and can precisely anticipate what other performers will say. It's a formal, firmly structured, strict process with an extremely high degree of precision and clarity.

On the other hand, theatrical improv emphasizes uncertainty and total unpredictability. One might ask how one achieves objectives under such stressful, confusing circumstances. As is often the case, participants learn and practice special, straightforward techniques to deal with this situation. Much in the same way, business planning has historically emphasized the creation of a carefully written script. While valuable and necessary in many cases, new planning styles can be learned, practiced and adopted to address an unclear, rapidly evolving and ambiguous situation.

Enter AIM to enable planning for an uncertain world. To be clear, AIM is by no means a discontinuation of formal strategic planning. On the contrary, it merely introduces a novel way of addressing unforeseen situations and challenges. Think of it as an extension or a reimagining of the traditional planning cycle, which dramatically shortens the time participants are accustomed to making decisions. It's a tremendous asset for adaptive planning, where agility is baked into an organization to allow for creative solutions, helpful spontaneity, proportionate response and to enable operational flexibility. Uncertainty abounds in business, and plans that used to take weeks or months to implement may now need to be addressed on a daily, hourly or even minute-by-minute basis. AIM principles offer a way to deal with business ambiguity, stress and confusion. By integrating AIM principles in a business planning setting, executives can guide to quicker, incremental and more effective responses.

During an AIM program taught by an experienced facilitator, leaders learn how to respond to situations in the moment through heightened awareness,

robust communications, increased trust and faster decision-making where ego is left at the door. It's an incremental approach that leads to greater flexibility, fit and a higher degree of success. Participants learn the skills for addressing problems in the moment and not relying on back-burner, prepared scripts that no longer match the situation.

Kayleigh Kane, an experienced applied improvisation instructor in Boston says,

*"Improvising is a natural and necessary part of doing business. When I train others in applied improvisation, I'm equipping them with skills that they need to adapt and react productively to any situation—including those they haven't planned for."*

Such an incremental approach to planning has become an essential component of all businesses, and AIM techniques instill executives with the skills and confidence to act without the aid of a script. Leadership needs to be more collaborative than ever, and AIM makes it possible.

### **An innovative approach**

In uncertain times like these, executives must adapt to the increased pace of business change to remain competitive and relevant. Doing so requires an innovative approach to crisis planning leadership; the scientifically-proven benefits of AIM might be just what forward-thinking leaders are seeking.

Theatrical improv's three core values—"active listening," "saying yes" and "saying and"—pave the way for AIM's nine principles—awareness, connectivity, presence, initiation, vulnerability, agreement, simplicity, adding value and discovery—to enhance management competencies. Not only can AIM transform traditional management thinking, but its incremental approach provides a solution for planning in even the most tumultuous, unpredictable scenarios.

AIM excels where traditional planning fails. And with the next "black swan" event presumably looming on the horizon, anticipating the unexpected has never been more consequential. ☺☺