



How improv's "Yes, and" leads to fun ... and professional development.

Applying Improv's Theater Skills to the Workplace

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From "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?" to "Wild 'N Out," improv comedy has had a footprint in popular culture and entertainment for quite some time. An art form defined by its unscripted nature, improv poses the question: "How can these performers be making everything up on the spot and yet still be so engaging?"

Telling a story through improv requires hyper-focus and listening as performers rely on their ability to hear, receive, and act on their scene partners' offers (something someone says or does in a scene that offers direction or options to move the scene forward). Once a performer receives an offer, performers can apply what most people consider to be the first rule of improv: "Yes, and."

Saying "Yes, and" to an idea is a cornerstone of performing improv theater. This means accepting the

offers provided by scene partners ("Yes"), but it's even more important to expound on them ("And"). In improv, this idea of "Yes, and" is the bedrock enabling performers to communicate on stage while creating a new scene without preparation and rehearsal. It's a mindset that helps foster acceptance and collaboration, allowing the performance to appear from seemingly nowhere like a magic trick.

Listening, accepting, and collaborating are all key skills that determine the success of improv scenes. Not surprisingly, these skills that help improvisers are the same skills people yearn for in professional and interpersonal relationships. How often do we spend time wishing someone had listened more carefully and heard what we had to say? Or do we wish

we could remember something that was said recently? Or could we spend more time agreeing rather than not?

The truth is we would all benefit from investing more time in the workplace to create a culture of collaboration based on listening and support. Improv teaches you to think quickly, identify patterns, generate ideas, and communicate succinctly. In the workplace, this innovative thinking is highly valued, and improv provides a unique and fun way to develop it. In this article, we will explore the key benefits of practicing improv for individuals, teams, and leaders looking to develop skills that will help them personally and professionally. Along the way, we'll highlight some fun improv-based games that you can use to foster a collaborative spirit in your workplace.

Individual

Improv allows individuals to develop essential skills that benefit them on and off the stage. Key benefits to an individual's professional development include the ability to actively listen, increase creativity, and become more open-minded. At the same time, learning about improv takes a great deal of personal responsibility — first by just showing up with an open mind. You are responsible for really listening to what people are saying on stage. You are responsible for making offers, despite not knowing how they will be received. All the while, you must trust those around you to accept and “Yes, and” your offer, thus making you a better team member.

“The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.” This famous quote by Stephen Covey is supported by research, citing that only 25 percent of what we hear when listening is retained.¹ But how much more effective would we be if we could develop the skill of active listening? Active listening, or listening and responding to another person in a way that improves mutual understanding, is foundational to improv comedy. The practice of active listening requires us to remain in the present and focus on what others are saying. In improv, this skill allows you to understand what your scene partner is trying to convey with their offer. Failing to listen can derail whole scenes. Thus, ensuring you are listening to your scene partner is critical.

Active listening is a considerable asset outside of improv as well. We often ignore what people are saying and think about how we will respond. This habit is as harmful on the improv stage as in the workplace.

It leads to missing critical information, misunderstanding intent and nuance, and inhibits building on ideas. By practicing improv, you can become more aware of when you are or are not listening. How much better would our work be if we all heard and supported each other?

As adults, we rarely get the space to play, but improv provides an avenue to do so and reminds us how playing can foster creativity. In a recent study, improv participants were more likely to demonstrate increased creativity via divergent thinking — the ability to form multiple, novel solutions to problems — than participants not trained in improv comedy.² This

may be because improv teaches us to become comfortable with failure and allows us to use our imagination. Ask any improv performer, and they will tell you failure is a crucial part of improv. Everyone has met some type of failure in improv. We quickly become comfortable with failing, understanding there is learning, and often hilarity in doing so.

Failure is an important learning mechanism in both improv and business. Once we've accepted the inevitability of failure, we can create with less fear. Great improv scenes begin with two seemingly incongruent ideas being forced together, requiring performers to make it work, ultimately creating fun and

Improv Games:

1 ZIP, ZAP, ZOP Everyone stands in a circle. One person quickly claps and points at another while saying “zip.” The person who received the “zip” then claps and points at another, while saying “zap.” That person then claps and points to someone while saying “zop.” The pattern continues: “zip, zap, zop, zip, zap, zop....” The goal is to pass the words and energy around as quickly as possible, which is harder than it seems! Eventually, someone will say the wrong word or not say anything for a noticeable amount of time. When this happens, celebrate the “failure” by clapping as a group. One of the key lessons in Zip, Zap, Zop is you will fail, celebrate it, and keep on playing. Proceed to play again with the person who missed the cue starting a new round. Repeat.

2 YES, LET'S Pick a group activity, like throwing a party or organizing a picnic. One player starts, saying, “Let's ...,” filling in what she wants to do. Then she begins doing what she said she wanted to do. A second player jumps in, saying, “Let's ...” do something else to advance the group activity. Both players say, “Yes, let's do that,” and start doing whatever was suggested. The third player jumps in, suggests what to do, and again all players loudly agree to do it and do it. Continue till everyone has suggested something.

IMPROV FOR

Teams

surprising scenarios. Over time, as individuals become able to navigate potential failure, they become more willing to take chances and learn from their mistakes. Similarly, individuals would benefit from learning how to accept the risk of failure in the workplace. Of course, failure needs to be manageable and understood to be a risk from the start. However, when individuals become comfortable with the risk of failure, they can think more creatively to solve problems.

At the core of an improv performance is supporting others' ideas. If you enter a scene and your scene partner gives the offer that you are a gardener named Tom, who is scared of bugs, you better scream when another scene partner enters as a beetle! As performers, we must listen to offers presented to us to accept them. Improv teaches you to stay in the moment and build upon what is shown. Because of this, improv allows us to become more willing and able to remain open-minded. Research supports the claim that improv increases the ability to remain open-minded, as improv participants increased their uncertainty tolerance and acceptance more than those who didn't participate in improv.³ In turn, in the workplace, we become more accepting of divergent ideas, ready to entertain them, and ultimately support them by transforming them into something even better. This is the essence of collaboration, bringing us to our next topic: Improv for teams.

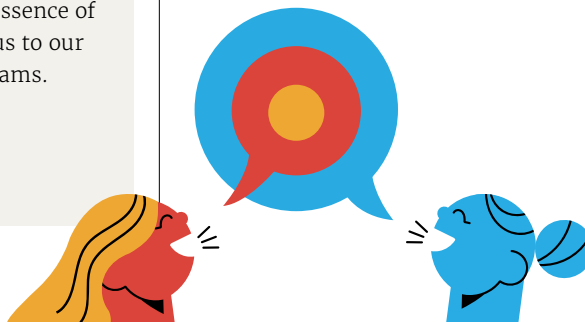
In business, we talk a lot about teams and teamwork. We often focus on defining roles and responsibilities and designing organizational structures with clear reporting lines to achieve our goals. We rely on the assumption that if we have the right teams and employees, we can't help but succeed. However, many teams fail to meet their goals despite their best efforts and intentions.

At its most basic, improv is a performance where two or more players are on stage to tell a story, make people laugh, and accomplish a goal. Relationships are at the heart of every good improv performance. What traditional organizational design and operating models often forget is that we are not interchangeable parts. As analytical and data-driven as we strive to be, we are human beings driven by emotion and wired with an attunement to relationships with others and how we work together. It's how humans

have survived ice ages, plagues, and other calamities. And it's no different now. Improv is an incredible tool for helping us recognize our role on a team, support others, and work towards a common goal.

Ever watched Monday Night Football? Two people in expensive suits explain to viewers watching at home how very well-paid men are running around on the field and crashing into each other. Monday Night Football is an improv performance. The commentators have no idea what will happen and must observe, process, and respond live and on air in a smooth, cohesive presentation. How do they do that? They use "yes, and" and know the roles they play on the team while supporting each other. One provides the play-by-play, describing the action, while the other provides the color commentary, filling in the gaps to provide context. It's no different on stage or at the office. In comedy,

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Improv Game:

1 WORD AT A TIME STORY This is an exercise to train group narrative. All players form a circle. We are going to tell a story one word at a time. Each player provides one word of a sentence. These stories will show the participants how truly collaborating can lead to unique and unexpected results.

we have different frameworks for performing, such as the classic “funny” vs. “straight” performer (e.g., Laurel and Hardy or Lewis and Martin). Regardless of the framework, performing improv requires you to figure out the roles you and your teammates play on the team, and you have to do it fast! The key is understanding that there is a role for everyone to play on stage and that each role, no matter how seemingly small, must contribute to the scene’s goal.

One of the most important roles we can play on stage is to support others in their role. You will never see a scene die faster than when the performers on stage aren’t helping each other. The classic “Yes, and” becomes “No, but” as each performer tries to drive ahead with their ideas about where the scene should go. We also see this happen with workplace teams: individuals trying to drive their agenda for various reasons while the group’s stated goal is pushed aside for less important, personal ones. You can tell when a scene is going well because it seems natural and effortless when all the players support each other.

In all our agonizing about having the right team, we often forget about teamwork and working toward a common goal. Some of the best improv games that help teach this are narrative-focused. The improvised narrative is like any other type of storytelling in that we have characters, beginnings, middles, and ends. The big difference is that we are making them up on the spot. For example, in Word at a Time Stories (see sidebar), each participant stands in a circle and adds a “single” word to whatever has been said. The next person in the circle then adds another “single” word. Pretty soon, we’re forming ideas and complete sentences. As you can imagine, at worst, the group makes up nonsense.

On the other hand, something magical can happen, and the group can tell a complete story. Often, it’s quite funny too! So, how does this happen? Well, we have to work together. Part of the trick is we have to understand our common goal, and in this case, it is to tell a coherent story. But that isn’t enough. First, we all have to understand how to tell a story. That means we all must have a common perspective on what every good story needs. We’ve already alluded to some of the pieces: character, beginnings, middles, and ends. But we also need to know story elements like inciting moments, dramatic tension, and moral lessons.

Knowing our team wants to tell a story and what makes a good story is just the start. Then, we must tell the story. How do we, as a team, who all have different ideas about how we might tell the story, align on a single story to tell? You may

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IMPROV FOR THE

Leader

have guessed it already: we support each other. When the story starts, we'll slowly start to see parts of the story develop, and we'll have new ideas about how the story might continue that we might like to introduce when it's our turn. But our overriding principle is to support what has already been said so that the story continues, which means sometimes throwing out our own, perhaps great, ideas. A simple, coherent story is always preferable to a jumbled mess of potentially amazing ideas. It's also important to remember that because we can contribute only a single word until the circle comes back around to us, we may have the opportunity to insert only supporting words like "and," or "the," or "when." It is important to remember these words are also 100 percent essential and provide the bridge to keep the story going and allow another teammate to insert into it. The only unhelpful words are the ones that don't make sense or contribute to the story.

We do the same thing with real-world teams though not in quite such an artificial manner. As team members, we have many ideas we'd like to contribute to the team about how we should work and what direction to go. The important thing to remember, though, is listening to our teammates, hearing what they have to say, and then contributing in a way that helps the team get to where it wants to go collectively. It feels much more satisfying to participate in a high-functioning team where everyone supports each other, and the team meets its goals, rather than one that doesn't.

As we've discussed, improv promotes critical skills that empower individuals and teams to collaborate more successfully. Similarly, improv also benefits leaders. Actively listening and supporting others is a vital skill for a leader. Leaders are tasked to facilitate the best ideas our teams have to offer and push teams to achieve more than they could on their own. This is enabled by a culture of collaboration and supported by active listening, shared language, and empowering others. Team leaders must also ensure that their teams achieve their stated goals. While we can do this by providing directives from the top down, the better route is to make sure our teams feel heard, supported, and empowered, and that we, as leaders, simply step into course-correct from time to time.

To help get more from our teams, we, as leaders, are called upon to set direction and provide inspiration. Think of it as a compelling argument for us to move forward together. Through improv, leaders deepen their ability to use narratives and storytelling to accomplish this as improv teaches leaders the mechanics of story building. The ability to tell stories is important because we, as humans, are instinctively drawn to stories and narratives. Evidence shows that better leadership performance is positively correlated with a leader's ability to invoke storytelling to motivate teams.⁴ Similar to how teams rely on relationships to drive success, we as leaders benefit from understanding and incorporating narratives to motivate and inspire outcomes. Improv teaches the core fundamentals that enable leaders

to tell better stories that motivate others to take action. We've already touched upon the components of narrative and how it can support teams, but it's important for the leader as well to consider the following:

1 WHAT What is the primary purpose of our story? What do we want to happen?

2 WHO Who are our characters, and what is their relationship to each other?

3 WHY Why do our characters behave as they do?

4 HOW How do we connect the dots between all these story elements to achieve the ending/outcome we desire?

You are probably already understanding how this directly applies to our teams. We must consider our teams, their motivations, and the steps required to achieve the desired goal. Understanding and crafting stories allow leaders to inspire and motivate their teams. With this information in mind, we can tell a better story and thus make a more compelling argument for support. This ability helps them craft better messages and inspire groups of people.

Improv also helps leaders by teaching them to understand their audience by "reading the room" and relying on feedback. In business, we see intended messages and communications that struggle to resonate because they were written

IMPROV FOR THE LEADER:

in a vacuum without consideration of the needs of the audience. Sadly, this is often due to authors not understanding their audience. The key to improvising and crafting effective messages is understanding your audience, what they want, and what will resonate with them. Failing to do this can have dire consequences on stage and off. The goal of improv is to get laughs from the crowd. Hearing a laughing crowd is a good sign that a joke landed, and silence indicates the joke didn't resonate. The best improvisers can adjust to the crowd's response to give more of what's working and less of what is not. Similarly, leaders benefit from

this skill by gauging their team's responses to communications and conversations. As leaders engage with their teams, they will become more adept at understanding their teams' reactions and using them to craft more compelling directives to drive outcomes.

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Dad's Garage Improv Workshops:

As a leader, you can help your teams learn how to apply improv skills at work. One way to kick-start this is by hosting one of the many Dad's Garage Workshops in your office or virtually! Dad's Garage is a world-renowned improv theater company based in Atlanta, Georgia. Sample workshops include:

1 TEAM BUILDING I

This workshop uses improv games and exercises to get your team thinking about how they communicate and interact. It helps your group build trust and cohesion.

2 TEAM BUILDING II

This workshop builds on the Level I workshop to foster trust, group mind, listening, impulse, and idea generation in a collaborative, supporting way.

3 CHANGE MANAGEMENT

We all know change is scary to people. Fear of the unknown or of a loss of control can lead to anxiety and negative attitudes toward new ideas. Improvisers are forced to say yes to change, accept it, and roll with it to find success. The exercises in this workshop are how we train ourselves to say yes to constant change, with the "and" being a tool to shape the possibilities that come after.

CONCLUSION

Whether at the individual, team, or leadership level, we are expected to perform and achieve stated goals. And while improv is often thought of in the context of a stage performance, we can see how well it applies to workplace performance. Skills such as creativity, active listening, supporting others, acceptance of failure, and the use of storytelling to drive action are all skills that can help improve workplace performance. By developing these skills, we can better achieve organizational goals.

Improv is an intrinsically fun activity that pushes people outside their comfort zones. By having this shared goal, performers are able to practice and hone key skills that increase their workplace performance. All too often, people leave an improv show saying, “I could never do that because I am not witty, quick, or funny.” However, notice

above that we didn’t mention any of those attributes. The incorporation of skills and techniques we practice every day makes for a good performance, such as actively listening to both understand and hear what someone is saying to you; understanding that you will fail, and, rather than shying away from that, accepting the possibility of failing forward; supporting others and remaining open-minded to others’ offers and ideas; using storytelling techniques to hone messages and feedback to improve and craft communications.

In the end, these are all skills you are likely already using and practicing in your workplace. Improv provides a new, fun, and engaging way to develop them further. Don’t fall prey to the misconception that improv isn’t for you. Take a chance and say, “Yes, and...where can I sign up?” 🍷

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