

IMPROVISATION

A Rad-ic-al New Way to Train

By Karen Hough



Odds are, you are already an improv expert, and you don't even know it. Sharpen your skills the way troupes do, and transform the effectiveness of your teams.



“You learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation.” —Plato

The economic downturn. Increased competition. Twitter. There has never been a more important time for you to be able to manage risk, deal with change, and think on your feet. The social events and technological advancements of our time demand that we change and grow ourselves and our organizations at light speed. And in the meantime, our people need ways to learn that engage and challenge them.

Feel overwhelmed? Well, I have a secret to share: The art and practice of improvisation is one of the most promising and untapped techniques for effective training today. 



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Arts-based training is not new. There are many such options for corporate training and development. You can paint a canvas or conduct an orchestra as part of your development plan. And the art of improvisation also is finally moving into a more respected and understood sphere of use.

By learning and using the concepts of improvisation, leaders and teams can save time and money, engage clients and employees, collaborate radically, and manage change. There are many timely reasons to consider improv as a training format:

- **The economy.** Improvisational philosophy makes a huge amount of sense to organizations in the midst of change. Consider the fact that improvisers arrive onstage with none of the common tools of theater: no makeup, costumes, props, or scripts. Yet they create and perform extremely well in high-risk situations because they collaborate on a radical level. Now that we all have smaller budgets, fewer resources, and fewer people, we need improvisational skills to assess risk and do more with less.
- **Younger workers.** A generational shift is occurring, and the lecture-based learning style of the Baby Boomers is no longer the standard. More and more, employees want to

be engaged, surprised, and challenged in their learning. Those workers are embracing the experimental, challenging nature of improvisational training, which can be facilitated both live and virtually.

- **Social media.** Interactions within social media are highly improvisational, and trainers and educators need to start thinking about how to change their own behavior to get in there and play along, too.

The use of yes is about acknowledging that we might accept new ideas, and that ideas and individuals have the right to be heard.

Everybody improvises

By definition, improvisation is an art form that allows performers to create in the moment, without script, score, or plan. When an improv comedy troupe takes the stage, or a jazz musician starts riffing, no one really knows what will happen next.

Most people believe that improvisational skill is something you are either born with or not. But guess what? You *do* improvise. Every single day. When

your boss calls you into her office and asks you to work on a project about which you know nothing and that sounds completely scary, and you say, “Sure, I’d be happy to work on that,” you’re improvising.

It’s true that a quick wit and sense of humor can help professional improvisers enormously. But the pros don’t have a collection of arcane skills that no one else can learn. In fact, as with any profession, improvisation has a process, a set of skills, and guidelines for success. And those guidelines have allowed my company to provide transformational, meaningful training for more than 12 years.

There are four main principles that allow improvisers to do their work so well. These principles translate directly to behaviors that improve performance and collaboration in the workplace:

- yes space
- building blocks
- team equity
- oops to eureka!

Yes space

The reason that improvisers can create a scene, a game, or even a one-act play on the fly is because of yes space. They have all agreed to say yes. As an improviser, I could walk onstage and say anything; for example, “I am a stalk of celery,” because I knew that my

Activity 1 | T.A.G. (The Acronym Game)

Get your team engaged and out of their normal work frame of mind. Let individuals discover how critical it is to use their own strengths to help their team. This activity moves participants from relying solely on themselves to relying on their team. Words fly back and forth, the challenge becomes more difficult, and their teams realize they can’t go it alone.

Get Ready

Arrange your group into two or more teams. Give each group a paper and a pencil, and ask them to nominate a scribe. Have the group choose a three-letter word. For example, “dog.”

Get Set

Each team has two minutes to come up with as many different phrases or sentences following the letters in the word. For

example: “Denise owns gardens. Dragons only growl. Don’t over grow.” Repeat words are not allowed. For example: “Dragons only growl. Dragons only grow. Dragons only grump.” Only one of those sentences counts. And the phrases have to make sense.

Go

Let the teams work for two minutes, then count their phrases to determine the winner of the first round. In the second round, use a five-letter word. And in the third round, use an unexpectedly long word, such as your company name. Especially if it’s Nationally Recognized Engineers.

You’ll find that people can work alone on the short words. As they get longer, the whole team pitches in, trying to build cohesive sentences in two minutes. Greater challenge demands greater involvement. When the going gets tough, you need your team.

entire troupe would agree with me. They would literally say, “Yes, you are a stalk of celery,” and work from that assumption for as long as the scene lasted. That may sound simple, but the use of yes is a highly effective training behavior.

Yes space allows people to be heard and validated, which in turn makes them more apt to contribute and become engaged in their work. Our adult propensity is to immediately look for what is wrong in an unusual suggestion—to use our “critical thinking.” Yes space demands that we allow ideas to be validated. We are not promising that we will use them—it’s not about blind acceptance. The use of yes is about acknowledging that we might accept them, and that ideas and individuals have the right to be heard.

Case study: *In the architecture industry, charrettes are forums in which designers show their work for commentary and education. At one global architecture firm, one of the leaders noticed that after their charrettes, designers were returning with utterly revised designs that did not maintain the strengths of their initial efforts. He realized that it was because the designers were hearing only negative feedback in the charrettes.*

So the leader instituted a period of yes space at the opening of every charrette, during which attendees were only allowed to comment positively and ask exploratory questions of the designer. Not only did designer engagement skyrocket, but designs moved forward much more quickly and efficiently. The firm was able to save significant time, money, and effort through a small behavioral change—by acting like improvisers.

Building blocks

After saying yes, an improviser also has to say “and.” That little word is one of the riskiest aspects of improv because when you say “and,” you have to contribute as well. Onstage, my troupe members can’t just say, “Yes, you’re a stalk of celery,” and stand there while I create a scene all by myself. They have to step up. They have to decide to be a carrot, or a farmer, or introduce a conflict—they have to share the risk of creating the performance.



You know that awful, sinking feeling when you mess up? Brilliant improv occurs when a troupe takes a “train wreck” and uses it as fodder for a really memorable scene.

“And” is about being willing to get in there, too, and that’s one of the most noticeable attributes of high-performing work teams. You have to get your skin in the game, join the scene, and stay in, whether you fail or succeed.

Case study: *A global professional services firm known for high customer satisfaction ratings found that its internal satisfaction ratings took an unexplained dip one year. The firm discovered that its own internal service people were feeling disconnected from the company’s mission. Because these associates never interacted with the end client, they had a hard time embracing a service-oriented mentality. But if these administrators, mailroom staff, and other support personnel didn’t perform highly, neither could the professionals on the front line.*

A program using the concept of building blocks was rolled out nationally, which clearly showed how critical

each person’s contribution was to the success of the firm. Day-to-day, foundational activities were traced to high-profile successes, so that everyone could understand how their role contributed to the final goal. Satisfaction, discretionary effort, and team outcomes all improved once everyone understood how they were a part of the puzzle.

Team equity

Improvisers want to put on the best show possible. Everything else—ego, career, preference—must be shelved for the good of the show. Even one weak show can mean the end of a troupe’s right to perform. Letting a bad singer belt out a song in the name of “being fair” can mean the end of your contract with a theater.

High-performing work teams also understand the critical nature of a shared vision and having the right



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Activity 2 | Connection!

Teams and people perform on a higher level when they feel connected, comfortable, and understood. This simple exercise helps people find unexpected commonalities with other team members and allows them to share interesting, non-work-related details about themselves. Remember, it works not only for newly formed teams, but for long-term teams, too. Group members will be delighted to learn that their quiet colleague plays electric guitar on the weekend. Conversations begin, stories are told, and suddenly, we are more connected.

Get Ready

Create a list of statements that are non-work-related, and also nonthreatening and apolitical. Generate approximately 10 statements. For example: “I can play an instrument.” “I have traveled to a foreign country.” “There’s a recipe I cook better than anyone else I know.”

people in the right places. Team equity is not about everyone getting a fair and equal shot at everything. It’s about leveraging the individual strengths of the team for the best outcome.

Case study: *The sales team at a large financial organization had a philosophy that gave everyone a chance to do everything, based on regional proximity. Unfortunately, this culture of equality in the field was not serving them well. For example, a big client pitch for mortgages came up in the Atlantic region. Although John had never pitched to a client, since he worked right there he presented at the meeting. The client got a terrible presentation from a novice, and the company lost the business because John didn’t have the experience to close the deal.*

By using the concept of team equity, the company changed its culture for better outcomes. The team identified each member’s specific strengths so that everyone nationwide knew who to turn to for the best in each area. Now, a project or pitch is assessed, and the company assembles a team that will offer the greatest strength, complement each other’s talents, and get the deal done.

Oops to eureka!

When things go wrong on the improvisational stage, everybody knows it—the audience, the performers, everybody. If improvisers ignore it or cover it up, it never works! The audience disengages, and it’s tough to

win them back. Brilliant improv occurs when a troupe takes a “train wreck” and uses it as fodder for a really memorable scene.

You know that awful, sinking feeling when you mess up? Or that surprise and uncertainty you feel when the unexpected occurs? It’s what you do next that makes the difference. The first step in moving from the moment of “oops” to an inspired “eureka!” is having the courage to see it and say it. You’ve got to recognize the situation, be willing to make it public, and move on.

One regional insurance firm leaned on the techniques of oops to eureka to get itself through a tough situation. The company discovered that one of its leaders had been engaging in fraudulent practices. The firm faced possible litigation, loss of clientele, and embarrassment. Many counseled the remaining leaders to stick with a “no comment” mentality and hope the scandal would blow over.

Instead, they decided get out in front of it. By admitting and dealing with the issue head on, they were able to separate the company from the individual, clearly and effectively. In addition, their interim leader proved to be brilliant, and was kept on. She remembers, “I was terrified and didn’t think I was remotely ready for this. But it became the biggest ‘eureka’ in my career. I was catapulted to my position, and have outdone even my own expectations.” The same was true for the company at large.

Get Set

Let your team know that you’ll be engaging in a stand up–sit down exercise. After you’ve read a statement, ask everyone for whom it is true to stand, look at each other, and say, “Connection!”

Go

Read the statements, and see what you learn about your colleagues or friends. Allow enough times to enjoy the exercise and ask for full stories: “So you used to be a high school teacher? What made you decide to change careers?”

As you move into the scheduled part of your meeting, thank the team for participating and connecting.

Source: Excerpted from the *Yes! Deck*, by Karen Hough, copyright 2009, www.ImprovEdge.com

C’mon. Get unstuck.

Thinking on your feet and turning the unexpected to your advantage is second nature to improvisers, and it can be for you and your learners, too. The concepts presented here translate to, and support, so many important learning initiatives already in place around leadership, appreciative inquiry, teamwork, coaching, and more. And better yet, improv allows both instructors and learners to get out of their heads, out of their comfort zones, and into higher performance.

Simple exercises for immediate use

In the sidebars, you’ll find simple improv exercises outlined. Try these ideas for yourself or in your next instructional design. By taking this risk, you will already be engaging in improvisational behaviors. How? Because improv insists that you *do* first. The intellectual understanding and realization—the thinking—always follows.

Karen Hough is founder and CEO of *ImprovEdge* and the author of *The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work* (Berrett-Koehler, 2011). She is the recipient of the Athena Powerlink award for outstanding female-owned business; www.ImprovEdge.com.

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