

COLLABORATION

3 Improv Exercises That Can Change the Way Your Team Works

by Tom Yorton

March 09, 2015



What can leaders learn from improv comedians?

For five decades, The Second City comedy theatre and school of improvisation has been a launch pad for the leading comic performers of our times, from Alan Arkin to John Belushi, Gilda Radner to Tina Fey, and Steve Carell to Stephen Colbert, and many more. In a reference to our talent development prowess, we've been called the Harvard of Comedy (which is great, except that we think Harvard is the Second City of higher education).

We've been quite intentional about creating training curricula to reliably fill our pipeline, and as we've honed our methods, we've seen that improv principles are highly applicable to the corporate world. Drawing on lessons

we've learned, my group, Second City Works, now counsels leaders during 400 engagements a year, about half with Fortune 1000 companies. Of all the lessons we share, these three are perhaps the most important:

Embrace the ensemble

There's an important axiom in improvisation: Always take care of your partner. Even the most talented comedians need support when they're up on that stage. The same is true of leaders: you need a great ensemble, working in concert around you, to succeed. We use the word "ensemble" because we think "team" is too loaded – often equated with lousy teambuilding experiences or associated with competition, where one group wins and another loses. Ensemble, by contrast, implies cooperation, collaboration, and unconditional support. For those who view success as a zero-sum game, believing that when you help others, you detract from your own success, we have dozens of counterexamples. Some of our most successful alums – including Fey, Colbert, Eugene Levy, Steve Carell – all achieved stardom while learning from and boosting their ensembles.

Exercise: Gather five to 10 people in a circle and create a new story one word at a time. Go around a dozen times, then stop to check in. Participants quickly learn that they have to balance their own ideas and expectations with those of the ensemble. No one can control the outcome. And words like "the" or "and" are just as important as "tortoise" or "hare." Seemingly small contributions matter greatly to the whole.

Take responsible risk

In an improv theatre, failure is ever present; even Second City's scenes don't work a lot of the time. But our actors' material works often enough that they've learned to accept little failures on the way to larger successes. Business leaders need to embrace risk in the same way. This can be difficult since most organizations reward prudence, planning, and the elimination of variables that can cause problems. But most decisions have to be made

with imperfect information anyway. To navigate those grey zones, we advocate risk sharing – using your ensemble to help you solve vexing problems and support you when things go wrong.

Exercise: Two people engage in a conversation about anything, but have to begin every sentence with the words, “thank you.” This underscores a key idea in improv: everything your colleagues offer is a gift about which you should feel grateful. When comedians, or leaders, create an environment that welcomes and values contributions, people are willing to give bolder, more honest comments and take more risks.

Follow the follower

When our actors perform, it’s often impossible to know who is “leading” any given scene. Our people learn to do whatever is needed to entertain the audience. You may initiate an idea, then support someone else as he takes it in a different direction. The goal is to not be or even follow the leader, but to “follow the follower”. Effective leaders are equally comfortable ceding control to others, playing a more supportive role and filling gaps. Heck, I’m a CEO, but in our company, that doesn’t mean I’m always leading the conversation and my “rank” has little to do with the contribution I make.

Exercise: A group makes a circle; one person stands in the middle, eyes closed. Everyone else silently chooses one member of the circle to be the leader, then begins to mimic any body movements he or she makes. The person in the middle opens his or her eyes and tries to determine who the leader is. We use this exercise to reinforce the idea that high-functioning improv ensembles find their leaders by looking for the right person at the right time, not formal titles.

Improvisation – and the improv toolkit – offers great grounding for leaders challenged to thrive in a business climate that demands agility, resilience, quick thinking, and ease with ambiguity. Counterintuitive as it might seem, business is often an act of improvisation, not planning. So we say “lights up” on the era of leader as improviser.