

"The spirit of generosity makes the relationships between actors onstage more fruitful, creating stories that are infinitely more intriguing and satisfying for both players and audience."

Improv Culture: Using Practices from Improv Theater to Help Organizations Evolve Successfully Over Time

By Julie Sheldon Huffaker, Brad Robertson, Gary Hirsch and Rob Poynton

"In the long history of humankind (and animalkind too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed." — Charles Darwin

TAKE A MOMENT and picture something you've been involved with for a while, something that has been both compelling and satisfying over time. It could be a client or work team, but it could also be a particular relationship, your family, growing orchids or playing squash. Whatever this is, it probably doesn't look exactly the same as when you first got involved. Most likely, others have contributed things of value you never could have anticipated. But thinking back, are there places of value you've missed? Changes that were tough to accommodate? Instances when it was difficult to balance your own needs with what was happening in the moment?

Having conversations, playing sports, running meetings, accessing markets—we're all improvising all the time. The question is, do we do it consciously and well? What skills can we build to increase success and longevity in areas of our lives that are important to us? How might we do this in the organizations we seek to build and evolve over time?

Powerful practices for propelling change. The methods and practices of improvisational theater give us new practices for propelling successful change over time. Improvisers are masters of evolution: They balance strategy and spontaneity in the

face of uncertainty, working collectively to create a sustained, engaging story that works. They often work without the benefit of specific planning, must incorporate unexpected inputs thrown in from left field, and have to adapt rapidly to new contexts.

Improvisers manifest sustainability through a core set of powerful practices, including maintaining generative relationships, cultivating flexibility, perpetuating experimentation, and exercising extended and acute awareness to sense the future as it unfolds. Improv offers a best practice for dynamic systems, useful wherever people come together in groups—especially in organizations.

CONFERENCE CONNECTION



Julie Sheldon Huffaker, Gary Hirsch and Brad Robertson are presenters at the 2003 OD Network Annual Conference in Portland at the following session:

FP5A110 Improv Culture: Helping Organizations Evolve Successfully in an Uncertain World

1 Day: Friday pm - Saturday noon

A working definition of sustainability. When we talk about sustainability in this context, we're not referring to the specifically environmental kind—although improv practices certainly can be used to good effect in propelling environmental initiatives. Instead, we're talking holistically about successful evolution over time. This includes the means and processes for maintaining the health of a system, like facilitating a steady diet of new inputs alongside thoughtful use of stimuli that already exist. Crucial, as well, is the ability to thrive under extreme conditions and when things change, both internally and externally. As we think about practices that enable sustainability, we're thinking more about the how than the what—more about a way of being than the specifics of what a system does or produces.

SO, WHAT EXACTLY IS IMPROV?

Simply said, improv is a theatre form that is unscripted. Improv actors create stories using lots of unplanned and uncontrollable elements: (1) input from their audience ("Can we get a location where we'll start?" "A barn!" someone in the audience yells); (2) the "offers" they make to each other on stage ("Joe, have you milked a cow before?"), and; (3) a knack for saying "yes, and" to those offers ("You bet, I grew up on a farm. I'll start here with Bessie.")

Improvisers combine these uncontrollable elements with simple rules about how to build effective narrative, along with methods for interacting that enable success in the face of uncertainty. Together, these practices support improvisers to build satisfying and engaging—and completely unexpected—stories for their audiences.

MAINTAINING GENERATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Improv: a co-creative art. When in doubt, improvisers attend to the other people in the scene. Rather than going for a big laugh for themselves, the best improvisers will try and set up their co-players. It's an "I-shine-by-making-you-shine" approach. This tendency toward generosity only increases the possibilities in a scene, and encourages collaboration and best possible use of a range of ideas. Individually going for the limelight—because it focuses and constrains action, as well as shifting the goal away from serving the story and toward serving the actor—has a tendency to diminish the creative possibilities. The spirit of generosity makes the relationships between actors onstage more fruitful, creating stories that are infinitely more intriguing and satisfying for both players and audience. Organizationally, this ethic translates to more options and stronger teams.

Working with "offers" to connect people and ideas. Technically, the players connect by recognizing and accepting each other's offers. "Offer" is a piece of language that means

anything you can do something with; offers can be physical or verbal. A key to having generative relationships is knowing how to skillfully accept offers. For improvisers, presenters, leaders and teams, this is a carefully honed, highly powerful skill.

Accepting offers connects people. For example, Gary brings a rotten apple back to a grocery store, so Daryl agrees to be the grocer that sold it to him. Daryl might be a sycophantic, rude or flatulent grocer, but he is a grocer. If he chose to be an alien or a mutant ninja turtle, he wouldn't be creating connection with Gary and the two would have a hard time finding something to do with the apple that would move the story forward productively.

Besides—and this is important in an organization context—

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if you're in the audience, what do you want to see? The vast majority of you want to see Daryl respond with something in the realm of grocer. It's pleasing to see the players connect to each other, and connect offers (e.g. the rotten apple, the grocery store).

There is some latitude here; an alien grocer might work. But one way or another, to be satisfied by the story, the audience needs to see Gary and his rotten apple connected to Daryl and the grocery store. Maybe the apple is rotten because Daryl-

On the way to Seattle, the improvisers themselves had wondered about the appropriateness of doing anything humorous. Would that be what the audience needed? When they arrived and saw what was happening, they decided to respectfully take the audience's difficult emotional state as an offer. The players began by recognizing it, then talking about how improvisation as a form connects people to each other, and how from that process of connection, order, meaning and even healing can emerge. The players then went on to demonstrate scenes

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the-alien-grocer has to bring fruit five light years across hyperspace and his warp-drive refrigeration unit broke down. Maybe the audience will tolerate this. Either way, the audience will be most satisfied if connection happens and is used as a platform to show us what happens—what is the grocer going to do about the rotten apple? This is what tells us about who these characters really are in a way that we can connect to emotionally. In an organization, having the players connect to offers and to each other contributes to sustainability because it is an efficient use of resources, and enables the scene to move forward cohesively.

No less important: real-time connection to audience.

The mechanical device of getting suggestions is the least important part of this. The real connection comes during the process of creation. The audience is part of this creation process because whether they laugh or gasp or go silent, real-time gives the players feedback that in turn affects how the story develops.

Sobering, but powerful, is an example of this that came from some improv work the Friday after September 11th, 2001. Improv consultancy, On Your Feet was engaged to do a presentation at a Human Resources Conference in Seattle that day. Like many events that week, it was nearly cancelled. And, in fact, when the improv players and facilitators arrived, the event organizer's worst fears were in the process of being realized. A stand-up comedian had just finished his slot; probably not envisioning an alternative, he had persisted with his normal act, which included jokes about violence, terrorism and blowing up buildings. He seemed to have failed to take the audience's state of mind into effect. At such short distance from the tragic events earlier that week, the audience was still in a state of shock—and certainly unable to laugh about such things. As a result of the comedy act, some people were in tears, and many were just plain angry. The organizers got onstage to apologize, but didn't know what to do to next.

and techniques, explaining underlying practices and how they related to communication, relationships, and the way to make those happen productively with others, in an organizational context.

Making this connection—to the audience and where they were in the moment, as well as to the content of the presentation—allowed the audience to see and experience the connections as they unfolded on stage. And although this wasn't the goal, connecting in this way even allowed them to laugh, which many afterwards described as healing and fulfilling. The point of this story is not to decry comedy, but rather to illuminate the power of "yes, and"—recognizing something that is real and present in the environment, with colleagues or with customers, and building on it.

CULTIVATING FLEXIBILITY

The very nature of the forms—audience input, shifting casts, every-changing content—force improv performers to be in the moment and avoid pre-planning. To exist in this state and still pull off a scene, improvisers must be flexible and find points of flexibility within a scene.

Consider a scene where one person starts on stage alone. She begins to set the context for a scene, creating for the audience what appears to be a bakery. She mimes kneading bread on a table, sniffing an oven where something is baking, dusting flour off her hands.

Then, suddenly, another actor strides in. "Is the submarine ready to go to the surface?" he asks. Oops. This looks like a mistake—two seemingly contradictory realities. Sitting in the audience, you see no way the first actor can save the scene but to adopt a new place and role.

Now, beginning improvisers will often succumb to this typical human reaction, and try to block the offer that's just come

in from outside so they can maintain a connection to where they thought they were. (In fact, there's some old stage wisdom that says, "Faced with a challenge on stage, the beginner will either ignore it, kill it or throw up on it.") This, in fact, detracts from the scene and its possibility, at worse causing conflict and a bit of chaos onstage. For the skilled improviser, however, time slows down (rather like in *The Matrix*). They see a palette of possibilities in front of them and make instant connections, using what they have. "Warmer torpedoes move faster through the water," the experienced actor responds, reaching to take a torpedo out of the oven.

Organizations face similar choices when confronted with apparently contradictory inputs. Should we block and try to stay the same? In the short run, this seems easier. But there is far greater possibility in staying flexible and finding the connection between offers, and in seeing the possibility of those torpedoes in the oven. Business is full of countless examples of apparently contradictory offers that turned into goldmines! For example, 3M's famed sandpaper and Post-It™ notes; Lexus's reinforced service message through their approach to an auto recall; organizations who have found that applying environmental consciousness to transportation and logistics processes for manufacturing actually results in significant cost savings.

PERPETUATING EXPERIMENTATION

Creativity to an improviser is not about making something new. In fact, for improvisers, there really isn't anything new—there are only things that exist but have yet to be discovered. An improviser's job is to see as much as they can, then connect the stimulus in new combinations. Again, we'll use beginning improvisers as a source of learning. Finding himself on stage with a bunny, a bowl, and the sound of an airplane, the beginner might panic, trying to figure out how to be clever and funny. He'll grasp widely for something he thinks the audience will find "interesting." He might chew off his own leg, put it in the bowl, feed the rabbit and then limp on to the plane. An experienced improviser, on the other hand, will do something much simpler; he'll see what's in front of him, make connections, and find a story in the process. For example, he might put the bowl on top of the rabbit to hide it from the view of the airplane.

While the first alternative may seem more complex and rewarding, it gives us fewer places to go. The rabbit's fed, the bowl's done with and he's on the plane. An experienced improviser, on the other hand, simply uses what he has and keeps doors open for a while as the story develops. In this case, for example, he's created motivation that can be used to advance the story (e.g., there's some impetus to keep the rabbit hidden from the airplane). And what might happen next? We don't know, but we certainly want to hang in there with him and find out. He perpetuates experimentation by combining the offers he has, and also by leaving room for more. He's confident he'll

find them somewhere, and confident he can use them to take the story to new, satisfying places.

Organizations often create their own difficult-to-move-on hell. They may:

(1) feel they have to be clever, or do something splashy or wacky or "new" in order to keep the attention of their people and their customers; (2) pile up offers but not use what they have; and (3) panic and feel pressure to commit to "the answer," rather than leaving things open to leverage new opportunities as they develop. All of these patterns burn up unnecessary resources, and discourage sustained innovation.

EXERCISING EXTENDED AND ACUTE AWARENESS TO SENSE THE FUTURE AS IT UNFOLDS

This sounds great, doesn't it—who wouldn't like to be able to do that? But what does it mean, really, "to sense the future as it unfolds?" We're not exactly sure, but we'll take a crack at it. We see this happen regularly on the improv stage, and we see it in the best organizations. Perhaps it's the confluence of two discrete but related skills.

Holding simultaneous awareness of both the vessel and its contents. This is a skill that characterizes great improvisers, facilitators, therapists and marketers: the ability to simultaneously hold the overarching needs of a group, person or organization in mind while attending to the minute detail of the present. Executed skillfully, it enables an individual or organization to respond to in-the-minute stimuli in a way that supports overarching goals or direction.

Improvisers do this by keeping the natural laws of narrative in mind—what makes a story engaging for an audience—along with the rules or guidelines of a particular form. At the same time, they are extraordinarily present, attending real-time to their fellow players, the offers already on the table, and their own idea-producing brains.

Business history is full of great minds and companies who pulled this off through successful, simultaneous balancing of the overarching and the minute. Collins and Porras' book, *Built to Last*, talks at length about "preserving the core and stimulating progress" as a hallmark of enduringly great companies. What that means is that the long view does not change, although the tactics might.

From its inception Boeing wanted to be the leader in flight. In 1965 that desire translated itself into the launch of the 747, although success was anything but certain. In fact, Boeing endured layoffs totaling 60 percent of its workforce between 1969 and 1971. The company was able to keep a balanced perspective, however, looking to the long-term and dealing with the immediate setbacks (balancing the overarching and the minute). The 747 ultimately emerged as the flagship jumbo jet of the industry. This doesn't mean Boeing's strategy will be to always construct the largest aircraft so that they will continue to

Perhaps the second skill is something that those involved in the science of decision-making talk about: a human's ability to respond to patterns that they sense, but which haven't yet surfaced into cognition. Typically, if asked, the player wouldn't be able to articulate where precisely the scene is going. However, step-by-step, the experienced improviser "finds what needs to happen" with certainty and confidence, fulfilling the requirements of good narrative through skillful weaving of existing and in-the-moment offers.

be a leader in flight. The manifestations of that will shift, the ideology will not.

"The test of a first rate mind is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." — F. Scott Fitzgerald

Responding to intuition: pattern-sensing. Perhaps the second skill is something that those involved in the science of decision-making talk about: a human's ability to respond to patterns that they sense, but which haven't yet surfaced into cognition. Typically, if asked, the player wouldn't be able to articulate where precisely the scene is going. However, step-by-step, the experienced improviser "finds what needs to happen" with certainty and confidence, fulfilling the requirements of good narrative through skillful weaving of existing and in-the-moment offers. Onstage, this looks like magic. In actuality, this sounds a lot like the phenomenon Guy Claxton discusses in *Hare Brain, Tortoise Mind*. Claxton offers a compelling argument that an important wisdom arises when we trust our unconscious, or "undermind."

We see evidence of this "undermind" in business markets, internal initiatives and teamwork. There is a moment, just before chaos coalesces into cohesive pattern, that frontrunners seem to click into. In fact, you might well call them *harbingers* instead of *frontrunners*, indicating as they do the coming of a future instead of just getting there first. These folks are part of the chaos, and yet seem to be able to sniff the future direction before anyone else can, and then begin to act. They are not just

creating the future through sheer force of will, the way a market leader can. Again, like a skilled improviser, an organizational harbinger seems to sense the future as it unfolds, and be an active part of it, all at once.

Does the harbinger have greater awareness of the elements in chaos, and therefore greater ability to sense a pattern from them? Are they more attuned to their pattern-sensing intelligence? Are they more apt to trust and go with it? We don't know. But we can isolate this phenomenon on the stage; we watch skilled improvisers do it again and again. Through cultivating awareness and practicing, we may be able to strengthen and cultivate these muscles for use in other organization contexts.

A BIGGER PRIZE

Perhaps the most exciting thing about using improvisational practices to promote sustainability in an organization is that it's not just about getting the prize you think you're after. The rewards can be far greater. This concept begins with what Kevin Kelly describes in *Out of Control* as the "...chief psychological chore of the 21st century—learning to let go with dignity." Being willing to let go, and having the skills improvisers have to work effectively with what arises, is essential to evolving successfully over time. ■

Sincere appreciation to our colleague and mentor, Shawn Kinley of the Loose Moose Theater, for his inspiring and completely fun work with us around the concept of I shine – You shine.