



Book Improvisation, Inc.

Harnessing Spontaneity to Engage People and Groups

Robert Lowe
Jossey-Bass, 2000

Recommendation

Robert Lowe provides a hands-on guide to using the techniques of improvisational theater to increase spontaneity and creativity in the workplace. He shows how to use these "improv" techniques to improve communication, break down bureaucracy and help people in your organization express their talents. He includes many examples, including guided visualizations, fill-in questions and exercises, along with personal stories and accounts from his workshops. While some of the tips on creativity and visualization will sound familiar to those who know self-help literature, Lowe's background in theater and improv makes his approach fresh. *BooksInShort* recommends this book as a useful guide for top managers and for anyone leading or working with a group or team. Here's why the show must go on.

Take-Aways

- Improvisation - that is, the techniques of improvisational theater, or "improv" - can improve your business environment.
- You can use improv techniques as an exercise or training event.
- Using improvisation can improve people's creativity and help them adjust to change.
- Improvisation's two basic qualities are spontaneity and playfulness.
- Playfulness and spontaneity can help your company avoid rigidity.
- When you improvise, use the tools and resources you have on hand without thinking about the results you expect.
- To use improvisation, you must open the doors to your own creativity.
- You must be completely "in the moment" to improvise.
- To improvise, you must be completely honest with yourself and with at least one other person.
- You must improvise in public, such as when you participate in games or trainings.

Summary

Improvisation: Purposes and Principles

Improvisation uses the activities of theatrical "improv" to improve your business environment. You can use these techniques as an exercise, training event or organizational development tool. They can improve creativity, add to your presentations, help develop spontaneity and increase communication skills. These techniques are useful in training and in promoting learning. They can help you resolve conflicts, solve problems, engage in strategic planning, build teams and reduce stress.

“Play is a necessary element in organizational development. If there is no ‘play’ in the organization, it will be too stiff to work well in a changing environment.”

Improvisation’s two basic qualities are spontaneity and playfulness. Through the many games you play as a child, you develop behaviors that help you work with others, follow rules and solve problems. These qualities also can help develop your organization. If you don’t have enough play in your company, it will be too rigid, and so will the people in it.

“You must learn to become completely honest with at least one other person.”

Play contributes to communication and to developing people. Improv helps introduce, or reintroduce, and enhance playfulness you and others in your organization may have outgrown.

Break Patterns and Promote Change

Normally, life is full of patterns - in nature, the human body and our social structure. Rules and norms shape culture, dictating how we act. Patterns govern business life at every level.

“Playfulness is a powerful element in the communication process. Play and playfulness enhance our organizations and help us to develop into people.”

Improvisation can help break those patterns, or lead people to reexamine them. Though resistance to change is natural, improv can help you and your organization accept change - and confront any resistance to change that erupts due to people’s unfamiliarity, misconceptions, disbelief and fear.

But improvisation techniques also can help you become familiar with new ideas, avoid misconceptions, correct beliefs and get over fear. Improv will help you look for patterns that you can and must challenge, and it provides safe ways to do so without undermining the system as a whole. With this approach, you can handle change effectively in positive ways.

The Nature of Improv

Improvisation involves making use of the tools and resources you have at hand, without reference to the results you expect. You involve yourself in the unforeseen. You participate in an act of creation. It is a skill you can use when your usual plans, tools or resources fail.

“You must put your work out for public view.”

While people often use the words "improvisation," "improv" and "the improv" interchangeably, they are different in that:

- Improvisation uses techniques to generate creativity, communicating, learning, growing, exploring and to teach people "to think quickly and with delight."
- Improv is the method that you use in an improvisation process or exercise or idea.
- The improv is the special state of consciousness that you experience spontaneously when you use an improv technique.

"All who come to the improv can find some insight into living, working, producing and playing more fully, spontaneously, openly, effectively, sweetly and gently, powerfully and completely.

Exploration is an essential component of improvisation. Try the "Word for Word" exploration game, in which you learn to snap your fingers on alternate hands as you speak each word in a question. The purpose of this exercise is to help you refrain from answering

questions automatically. Try doing this with at least three questions. Try to come up with several answers as you do so.

“The improv is a very useful tool for introducing, enhancing or reintroducing playfulness we have outgrown.”

As another exercise, get very relaxed and make a list of seven ways you would like to develop your creativity. Then, pick several areas and ask what you have to do to grow in each one.

Fundamental Principles of Improvisation

Improvisation rests upon four fundamental principles. First, you must be completely in the present moment so you can learn and change. You must open up your own mind and spirit.

“Improvisation provides a mechanism by which we can practice challenging our patterns without breaking the machinery. It provides a system with which we can practice handling change in positive and effective ways.”

In fact, this principle is probably the only absolute requirement. You can regard everything else as merely a guideline, suggestion, idea or technique. First, you must open the door to others to be able to communicate with them, so you need openings to learn or teach anything new. Thus, start by creating an open mind and spirit. Then, strive to become completely aware of the present moment, so you can work and act in present time.

“Opening doors between people is a key to communication. Before we can learn or teach anything new, we must have openings.”

To be in the present, get relaxed. Then, release the past. Think about what has happened to you in the last few moments, in the last 15 minutes, in the last hour or two, of the past day, of the last week, and so on - going back over the last five years, 10 years, to when you were a small child. Next, release the future. Think about what you will do now, then over the next couple of hours, tomorrow, next week, and so on - into the next five years, 10 years and into the next generation. Finally, explore the present by paying more attention to whatever you perceive from all of your senses.

“After creating an open mind and spirit, you must strive to become completely aware of the present moment.”

You must strive to become completely honest with yourself. This means you must recognize your own motives and motivations. You must look at the world with "true eyes," so that you see things you may not want to see - such as information about yourself that you would usually ignore. Open yourself up to the world's wonder, delight, kindness, compassion and other positive, joyful qualities.

“You must strive to become completely honest with yourself.”

You must learn to become completely honest with at least one other person. Although you can't be completely honest with everyone at all times in your life, being honest and open with at least one other person is a way to further your personal development and to correct your errors. Examples of such honesty include the Catholic confessional and 12-step programs. You also can turn to a confidant such as a spouse or best friend. The more people with whom you can be completely honest, the better. This honesty will make you happier - and you will have more to share with others, too.

“Improvisation is more than a free-form, free-for-all. Mental preparation is required. You need to know your audience. You must know what you want to accomplish. There is even planning to do.”

You must put your work out for public view. While improvisation requires thought and personal exploration, you must act in front of others, participating in exercises with the outside world.

Improvisation Techniques

Improvisation is not just a free-form free-for-all. It doesn't mean you make up things as you go along. You must start with mental preparation. Know your audience, and know what you want to accomplish. You must plan and train, so you can make use of the communication, and community, that you evoke.

“Making greater connections with people is a primary product of the improv path - actively exploring the uses of improv techniques, theories, principles, ideas, suggestions, exercises, games and tools.”

Improv also means using all of the senses - seeing, hearing, listening, touching, tasting and smelling. Seeing not only involves what you see around you, but your internal vision (mental pictures, symbols, recognition and memory). Hearing means listening to your internal voice.

Improv also helps activate the senses of touch, smell and taste, and it will attune you more to your surrounding space. It even will help make you more aware of the spiritual sense - the invisible sense of connection that links us together.

To build a good communication environment with a group, have participants mill around, making short statements to one another. First, have everyone respond with, "Yes, but..." Then, try the same process, saying, "Yes, and..." This will help to create a more positive, open environment that promotes listening, cooperation and being in the moment.

Greater Connections

You can apply improv techniques in the workplace in a number of ways, including developing awareness of patterns, exploring fear, and tapping into feelings and emotions. For example:

- Make greater connections with others - Use improv to help solve problems, enhance learning and implement leadership objectives and initiatives.
- Recognize patterns - Improv can help you see how you are all bonded and in this together.
- Explore fear - You can use improv techniques to encourage people to open up about their fears, better face them and put them aside.
- Explore and express your feelings and emotions - Write down your feelings, and how different parts of your body feel in the present moment. Make a list of all the emotions you can name. Practice complete relaxation through balance and stepping exercises.
- Explore the use of language. Looking at both body and verbal language will make you more open and aware, too. Try playing with words, and notice if any differences exist between your internal and external language.
- Use laughter to improve communication - Laughter promotes relaxation and brings people together. Look for things to laugh about.

Applied Improv

When you use improv methods, consider the number of people with whom you work, and the way people form into groups in your organization. The size, shape or spatial configuration of the group plays a part in how people interact. Avoid putting people in physical settings where they are uncomfortable or beyond their level of ability. Yet, when you challenge their comfort and ability within limits, you promote creativity.

In improv games, two-person activities (especially when others observe) will feel most personally risky. However, when you divide people into pairs working together, feelings of risk will diminish. Often, getting people together in a circle will help participants feel safer. But if the circle has six or fewer people, it may feel too intimate to work well. Experiment with groups of different sizes.

"The improv manager must stand up in front of others and engage them in the exercises. This is the core of 'participant-centered training' and of participant-centered change and development." Start with an opening exercise that helps the group warm up and creates rapport. Using physical activities are especially good. Ask people to create paper balls, and toss them or juggle them. Hold a scavenger hunt, where groups look for different items.

Then, use games to promote communication, playfulness and group bonding. In "Word for Word," people take turns answering a question individually, offering a word in sequence to make a sentence. In "Babble," people create sentences or otherwise express different emotions, such as being angry, sad, confused and so on. In the "Four-Square Matrix," participants create a playing space with four distinct areas, and assign an emotion to each area. Then they stand in the squares and have a conversation based on being in the different areas of emotion.

You can use more advanced games like storytelling, "Emotional Blow-Up," "Freeze-Tag," "Headlines" and others in which participants tell stories or act out various situations. These games increase creativity, spontaneity, openness, playfulness and other positive qualities.

About the Author

Robert Lowe is the founder of Improvisation, Inc., an educational consulting firm specializing in the use of improvisational theater techniques for organizational development. His clients include AT&T, Georgia Pacific Corporation, the Government Services Administration and the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. Lowe has been a teacher, director, player and observer for more than 20 years.
