

The background of the slide features a low-angle shot of two dancers on a wooden floor. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong red glow on the left and a warm, golden light from the right, creating long, dark shadows of the dancers' legs and feet. The dancers are in motion, with one leg extended forward and the other back, suggesting a fluid, improvisational style.

The Improvisational Organization

Practical Wisdom for Turbulent Times

Published by



Applied
Improvisation
Network

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, **nor the most intelligent.**

It is the one that is **the most adaptable to change.**" -CHARLES DARWIN

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The Improvisational Organization

Introduction

You are a dynamic leader. Everything you do contributes to the environment of your team.

The better you respond to the changes going on around you, the more successful and collaborative your organization will be.

Whether times are tough or fruitful, they are likely to be fast-moving, which means it is vital to always stay connected to current circumstances.

Conditions for organizations are not only turbulent, they are complex. As a leader, you deal with ambiguity and uncertainty.

This book is produced by organizational consultants who are not only experienced in business, but also in the world of improvisation. We have all been on stage faced with making up scenes on the spot in order to keep an audience enthralled.

Those are conditions of extreme ambiguity and uncertainty, in which you have to collectively come up with answers, responding to the scene as it emerges moment by changing moment. In short, you have to produce something of value immediately.

What's more, we've been teaching people how to develop and apply those improvisation skills to make progress on their own, to collaborate more effectively as teams, and to thrive as organizations.

Many leaders recognise a shift – in schools, workplaces and other institutions – from stability that allowed control, to a turbulence that allows more sophisticated and flexible forms of influence.

This book shows you how to tap powerfully into these new possibilities, to embrace uncertainty and to flourish as a leader.

Every leader is already a skilled improviser. Every day is a mostly unscripted performance. It makes sense to enhance your skills by delving into the principles and practices of successful theatrical improvisers.

We feel our secrets are wasted if kept only on the stage. Here are your first steps to incorporating them into your work and life, and building stronger teams with more powerful outcomes.

MAKING THE MOST OF THE BOOK

The book offers answers to nine questions we've heard from many leaders.

You

The first three questions are about leaders' personal challenges, dealing for example with insecurity, crisis and the desire to make a better impression.

YOUR TEAM

Your peers and those you manage are the focus of the next section, with tips on dealing with difficult people and making meetings more effective.

YOUR ORGANIZATION

The final section tackles strategic, organization-level issues, such as staff motivation and developing your brand.

You'll find case examples, stories, quotations and practical activities scattered through the text.

At the end, you can read more about the authors and see how to contact us about making the most from your resources – the art of the improvisational organization.

**“IMPROVISATION IS
PROBABLY ONE OF THE TWO
OR THREE CARDINAL SKILLS
FOR BUSINESSES TO LEARN
FOR THE FUTURE.”**

-JOHN KAO, HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

You

How do I make a positive impression on the people above me?

STORYTELLING

People higher up on the corporate ladder like to have stories from 'down below'. A good flow of material from their report-tos gives them material to talk to each other about what's going on. So you can impress the people above you by offering them success stories. The best stories offer insights about your teams and projects that allow you to improve how the brand is perceived.



NON-VERBAL INTERACTION: STATUS

In every interaction with your boss you can observe and interpret status. Status means the vocal and non-verbal cues that convey authority or approachability. By understanding and matching your boss' status you demonstrate that you're coming from the same tribe and talking across rather than down the totem pole. You can change your status by varying your body language – leaning forwards to signal determination for example, and by holding eye contact to show confidence.

SUPPORT

One of the best ways of looking good is to make your partner look good. That may sound counter-intuitive, but it means you are helping to create a story of success, and there's every chance over time that your contribution will be appreciated both by the boss and by anyone else who investigates the situation. How do you make your boss look good? That's about nurturing your listening skills and conveying to the speaker that you're listening, so that you can contribute to your boss's story, growing your own reputation of being someone worth working with.

COMMUNICATE

For example, when your boss wants a quarterly performance report, stay on that topic for as long as it takes, even if you're itching to discuss your resource allocation issue. Go beyond just nodding and listening, and add

ACTIVITY

Share something real about yourself near the start of a meeting or presentation. People have trust if they get the sense that you are authentic. It's OK, for example, to say you are nervous or that you weren't sure how to proceed when you began your work on today's topic.

When you are playing an expert role, it can be useful to reverse this and ask, "What do *you* think?"

some value by building on your boss' ideas. You can deal with the resource issue later when the boss is open to listening and ready to act. This is more likely to happen once you've impressed them and built up your relationship.

EGO ISSUES

Even if you feel your boss is negative, you could try the bold move of helping the boss experience success. Perhaps you can find a way to help the boss look better in front of the next person they are scheduled to meet. When your ego wants to find more time in the spotlight for you, it may be tough to take it out of the equation. Our experience suggests you'll have your favour returned.

BE POSITIVE

If there's something you really don't want to do, then say so. First acknowledge what your boss needs from you, and then explain why the project is not appropriate for you. Alternatively, look for what you like in the proposal and see if you are willing to take some part of it, perhaps eventually taking it in another direction. For example: they want you to take the lead on an IT project, and you might say, "What I like about your proposal is that I enjoy taking a lead". Then build on that, "And I'd like to look for an equally useful project that expresses my skills".

You

How do I deal with a crisis in my own confidence?

YOUR GIFTS

It's normal to have occasional crises in confidence. Working in a demanding environment can be a lot like playing in the dark, with you are entering unknown territory: it often turns out to be safer than you first imagined. This is the experience of improvising, going onto a stage with no idea of what scene is about to take place. Start acting like you're feeling bold and courageous, and after a while it will be true. Going through such experiences helps to reveal resources you may not have known you had. You find you can do more than you thought, accessing your creativity and problem solving gifts, and become more trusting in yourself and those around you.

HAPPY ACCIDENTS

Another good tactic is to treat unexpected events as happy mistakes or happy accidents. For example, if you are making a presentation to a client and the projector breaks, treat it lightly. Remember, how you respond is already demonstrating to the client how you'll deal with them and



the project you are proposing. If you treat the interruption as simply what is happening now, then you're demonstrating your agility, resilience and humanity - thus cultivating more connection between you and your client.

BE AVERAGE

Improvisation guru and author Keith Johnstone says, "Be average". This reduces the stress of aiming for perfection. You can't will yourself to be better than you are, and perfectionism can destroy your confidence each time you fall

short. Small mistakes become an opportunity to connect and recognise our interdependence. It's OK to lose your poker face and reduce the stress of everyone present.

EXPECTATIONS

A good place to practice this kind of skill is a workshop in which you step into a safe environment, allowing experiments, hearing immediate feedback, and getting the chance to feel good about new behaviour. What can hinder us at work is tying our confidence to how we perform against the expectations of others. When we practice setting our expectations against our previous efforts, we can grow and develop.

ON CONFIDENCE

There is vitality, a life force,
an energy, a quickening
that is translated through you into action,
and because there is only one of you in all time,
this expression is unique.

And if you block it, it will never exist
through any other medium
and will be lost.
The world will not have it.

It is not your business to determine how good it is,
nor how valuable it is,
nor how it compares with other expressions.

It is your business to keep it yours clearly and directly,
to keep the channel open.

-MARTHA GRAHAM

You

How do I know what to do when I get stuck?

THE ILLUSION OF CERTAINTY

This is a common feeling among managers, although it's not something that many are willing to admit. We assume that our organizations want certainty – even when circumstances ensure that certainty is an illusion. Assuming you have a complex problem, it will be no surprise that you do not know the whole road ahead in detail. Sometimes you just have to start, then work with the knowledge you gain during the trip.

WHAT THEY DO IN HOLLAND...

In Holland, the Directorate General for Public Works and Water Management say that if they had to have all the details in advance they would never build a road or a bridge. They embrace improvisation in the sense that they work with emergent knowledge. Improvisers talk about building the bridge as you cross it. Scrum and Agile are software engineering methodologies that use these principles. They depend on constant feedback from clients or colleagues.



You simply need to start and be open to what's happening in the here and now – responding as things emerge.

NO WIMPING

It's about doing *something* rather than 'wimping out' or being paralysed. When you engage you find solutions. It's practice rather than theory. And if you face many choices of what to do, you could perhaps use the improvisation principle of picking the most obvious – something will then

change and you'll know what to do next. Step by step.

SIMULATION AND STORIES

You could think of improvisation as 'plan, do, check' all at once – a intense and fast cycle of learning in action.

When improvisers are on stage creating a story, they are in trouble if they go too far in advance, getting ahead of the current action. So they look at just the next step, even just the next word. You don't yet need to know what happens next. We've facilitated projects for entrepreneurs encouraging them to start talking with possible clients before writing a full business plan.

If you do have time to spend on solving a complex problem, it's worth simulating a selection of possible solutions and outcomes. You could use a series of stories - of how you did it in the past, how you do it now, and how you may do it in the future. You could tell stories with different outcomes, to provide valuable information about possible next steps.

In summary, it's usually better to do something, than to freeze. More action gives you up-to-date feedback. And it helps to have a presumption that you will do something valuable.

“Those who **say Yes** are rewarded by the *adventures* they have, and those who **say No** are rewarded by the *safety* they attain.”

-KEITH JOHNSTONE

Your Team

How do I deal with difficult people?

SAYING 'YES'

You may find yourself in an uphill struggle with people who keep whining about how tough things are for them. Whether you meet them in business, on stage or in daily life, these people are probably feeling unheard.

You can help any of your team members in this situation by listening with a sympathetic ear. You can do this by acknowledging them and showing you have understood - perhaps by summarizing or repeating what they've said. In terms of improvisational theater, this is saying "yes" to people. Note that this doesn't necessarily mean you're agreeing with them, but that you see that they matter. You can then connect something from their tone or their comments to what you as a leader need them to do.

THE LIFE OF BRIAN

Brian, your deputy, says, "No one else is pulling their weight on this report!" You've heard this complaint from



Brian before. This time you pick one of his concerns that connects with your leadership plan, responding, "You sound really passionate about everyone taking their share of the responsibility for getting this report done on time. That's great. I'll take that into account when dealing with the team. Now, which piece would you like to start on?"

TAKING TURNS

Another approach is to consider more carefully what one means by 'a difficult person'. Perhaps someone is strugg-

gling to express themselves, such as a quiet person in a boisterous environment. Here 'status' work can empower your teams by offering an experience of what different people need and the impacts they have on each other when they're not given enough space and time to express themselves. One pointer is the improvisation idea of short turn-taking, where everyone is invited to speak.

Being 'a difficult person' might mean being negative towards others, in which case it's useful to recognise intentional and unintentional 'blocks'. For example, a person who say 'yes' is actually blocking the dialogue if they continue by saying 'but'. Helping each of your team members to recognise their own power in the group empowers them to choose how to respond in the moment.

SPOT THE GENIUS

How about assuming that everyone in your team is a genius! If someone raises an objection, hand over your power by asking open questions. For example, "Could you tell me more about that? How might we start to solve your challenge? What response might help us here?". When people are empowered, they have less time to judge, and you can start to draw their attention to solutions.

Their challenge is your hidden treasure, even though you may label it as 'whining'. Your challenge is to stretch

yourself and enter the conversation looking for the gold. It's like an improvisation scene, in which everyone on stage has equal rights to enter. This open invitation to influence the scene means that there's no hiding from or sniping each other. You can choose to change your environment by being a more active part of it.

WHAT MATTERS TO PEOPLE

For example, we worked with a sales team that was just not playing ball. They kept asking why they couldn't have better phones, cars and other equipment. The boss listened and got the team to collectively define what was important to them and within budget. The team choose to eliminate phones and cars from their list. Everyone's needs were addressed and the process generated a sense of shared responsibility and satisfaction.

A good player makes the best out of the cards she's been dealt. So reframe in your mind that your team is the 'perfect' team, and that here and now is the perfect time to act. If you can't manage what you've been dealt, (for example, if you're continually judging and preparing to off-load your day with your spouse later), then you need to recognise that you're no longer helping the team move forward and you're stuck in a rut. So don't ruin it for everyone, find a way to exit the 'scene' with as little disturbance as possible.

Your Team

How can I have shorter, more effective meetings?

CHALLENGE CONVENTION

We've noticed in many organizations that people at meetings stay the whole time. This is a convention worth challenging. Not everybody has to be in every meeting, so only invite the people who really need to be there. And perhaps they only need to be at part of the meeting – if so, let them go for the rest of the time.

The best reason for a meeting is for inspiration or to prompt action. So hold them in a place where people want to go and make them an event they would *want* to be part of. Making meetings voluntary not compulsory means they will likely be more enthusiastic, active and feel a greater sense of ownership over their tasks.

This reflects the practice of an improvisation team in a theater. The team has a squad of players and they don't all appear in every scene. Participating in the scene is voluntary and players appear when inspired.



WALK AND TALK

Often people associate meetings with sitting for long periods of time and just talking, which many find tedious and unproductive. Consider introducing more embodied elements to make it more effective and fun. Invite people to standing meetings – or walk while talking. You can also find creative and playful ways to process content, such as storytelling, getting people to draw, sculpt, or roleplay. By teaching your team the skills of effective cooperation and by building on each others' ideas, you can ensure everybody gets heard and the group can achieve something together that could not have been achieved independently – again making the meeting worthwhile.

LETTING IDEAS BREATHE

One useful tip from improvisational theater is 'Yes... And-ing'. This means encouraging people to find something of value, something to say yes to, about every idea and then to find ways to build upon that idea, usually resulting in the discovery & creation of mutually beneficial possibilities. This is generally more productive than disagreeing, 'blocking' and value-judging which often lead to stuckness, frustration and disagreement. No fun at all.

ZEN COUNTING

Often in meetings people are keen to share their ideas without listening to others, leading to useful ideas going unheard and even conflicts that waste valuable time. To help people to gain more insights into taking turns and listening for the 'right moment' to share try this exercise at the beginning of a meeting.

Instructions – the group stands in a circle and counts from 1 to 10 in random order. If anyone speaks at the same time, the counting starts over -no judgments, just start again. Achieving the goal (reaching number 10) often requires most people staying quiet. This exercise encourages people to speak out only when needed. Experiment with eyes open or closed, looking at each other or at floor, etc.

CHALLENGE CONVENTION

This is how a typical traditional meeting might look:

Person A: Hey guys, could it go like this?

B: Actually I have read a lot about that and instead I'd try.....

C: I have worked here for 20 years and those things have never worked well...

D: (being the newcomer, decides to stay silent)

Now contrast this with a meeting where “yes, anding”... is at work:

Persona A: Hey guys, could it go like this?

B: Hey yeah, and in one of my books there's an article that I could add to your idea...

C: Wow, 15 years ago there was a similar case, there might be something useful there...

D: I just had this idea, I'm not sure if it's useful but...

Your Team

How do I support diverse, multicultural teams?

A SAFE PLAYGROUND

Working with multicultural teams in organizations offers us playful possibilities of making the most of different perspectives. We say 'playful' because playfulness bridges differences. Every culture and organization contains people whose status and place in the hierarchy will vary – and you can explore differences by experimenting with different statuses.

You could try this, for example, with a multicultural team: Invite people to tell stories about marriage and courtship in their difference cultures. These are universal throughout cultures and provide insights into themes that define those cultures, which can prompt rich discussions. If you are feeling more adventurous, ask people to describe (or even play) their childhood games – here you'll find interesting similarities and differences across cultures, including aspects of music and rhythm.



In organizations with a diverse community you have the opportunity to bring out the richness that can help you to break free from crusty assumptions; instead you can leverage these different perspectives to prompt innovation. You could access this richer mix of ideas simply by discussing how meetings vary from culture to culture.

Being comfortable with diversity also has the potential to open up new markets, following insights into other cultures, groups or countries. Even closer to home, you

can treat mergers between organizations in the same way, as providing a good source of new learning and changed practices.

So, there are two main concepts here:

1. Be honest with each other about the challenges of difference and find commonality in a safe environment.
2. Leverage the differences to access new markets, innovate from new perspectives and to break free from previous limitations.

In short, it's a great test of your skills of leadership flexibility!

"I know there is strength in the differences between us. I know there is comfort, where we overlap."

-ANI DEFranco

Your Organization

How do I keep everyone going in the same direction?

THE POWER OF SHARING INFORMATION

Leaders often find it hugely challenging to keep people motivated and moving consistently towards the organization's overall mission. It can be especially tricky to keep an entire team aligned or on the same page.

For one reason or another, many organizations have a culture in which information is hoarded rather than shared. Perhaps it's fear of competition, perhaps it's because information is seen as a source of power.

Yet this lack of information can be experienced by employees as confusing – we don't really know what we are trying to do. Or demotivating – "Do they not consider me important enough to share the info?"

TRANSPARENCY

What can you do as a leader to ensure that staff have explanations for your requests and access to answers to their questions? To what extent can you make the organi-



zation strategy transparent and share key information with your staff? The benefits of engagement and productivity are likely to far outweigh the potential risks.

Improvisation performers are well aware of the importance of clear and actionable communication. When a scene is being made up on the spot, the only information that the performers have about that scene are the signals that they exchange with each other – the lines they speak and the moves they make. That's all there is, and successful

improvisers soon learn how to name what needs to be named, so their fellow performers can join in with what's going on.

Organization goals are often clear too; for example, you might want to be number 1 in the market. It's easy in the organization to state what that entails and to get everyone aligned with that.

The more people who are involved in *creating goals together*, the less work the leader has to do to get people aligned -people are already on board, contributing, having their say and getting engaged.

SIMPLY ASK

So, how do you get people on the same page? Ask them. Yes, it can be that simple. And ask them what persuaded them to join your organization, go into that career, learn those skills, and what it is that they enjoy about working here.

The power
of sharing
information

&

Transparency

Your Organization

How can you lead in turbulent times of change?

"Without a vision, the people will perish."

-Proverbs 29:18

"The surest way to be disappointed is to have a set goal...."

-Finnish Saying

A SENSE OF DIRECTION

At core this involves being flexible and adaptable while still having an inspired sense of direction. That means developing the same skills that an experienced improviser uses to create an interesting story. You need a sense of direction for what a scene needs to be complete, yet remain adaptive and responsive to the moment and all the offers that are happening around you. If leaders can develop similar skills, they will actually enjoy the process and see their organizations flourish in these times of change.



These are relatively accessible skills, and it is easier to gain experience of these situations than one might imagine. A good Applied Improvisation training can help you to experience and understand these dynamic situations, helping you to build tolerance of risk, so that you are better equipped to deal with uncertainty or even chaos.

WELCOME AMBIGUITY

Sometimes things are so uncertain that it is impossible to have much sense of direction. Then it's paramount to be

comfortable with (or even welcome) ambiguity and uncertainty. The reality is nobody really can know what the future is going to be, which means you cannot really be certain where you are going, or how to get there. It's an illusion of leadership which you can afford to relinquish. By being adaptable you can at least find the way to the next step.

SUFFICIENT SHARED PURPOSE

In turbulent times, remember that people don't join organizations because they all want exactly the same thing at the same time. You are held together by a sufficient shared purpose, and that shared purpose is open to renegotiation as circumstances change. In an improvisation scene, the players know they have to deliver a quality scene to the audience, yet the scene will be created by many people with divergent purposes. They need only observe some shared reality, and then progress is possible. Learning how to work together and be comfortable, even thrive, in an ambiguous place, is a key skill a leader needs to develop in themselves and foster in others.

CONNECT & ADAPT TO SURVIVE

In times of change and uncertainty, one can find safety from good (trusting; respectful; appreciative) relationships with colleagues, even if the strategy is emergent. While having a specific goal is helpful, as it provides direction and motivation, unknown variables will arise, therefore it's

important to also not hold one's goal (or the strategy for getting there) too tightly. Holding onto what one thinks reality "should be" is unhelpful and frustrating. Similar to evolution, "mutations" are happening randomly that require the organism to adapt to the new reality.

As Charles Darwin put it "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent... It is the one that is the most adaptable to change."

"A Māori proverb says you spend your life walking backwards because you can see the past but not the future."

Your Organization

How do I make my organization look good?

SHARING STORIES OF SUCCESS

It's vital to have a good reputation in business. It's your most effective way of attracting and keeping staff, as well as gaining and retaining customers.

This is something that performers and improvisers know a great deal about, as much of their expertise is in this area. They know, for example, about:

- Using space effectively to reach an audience
- Speaking clearly
- Keeping messages consistent

In fact, as a leader you can learn the art of storytelling from performers, in particular how to put across a story of success. In Nordstrom, they tell the story of the customer who came into the shop to return a set of snow tires. The clerk explained (correctly) that Nordstrom didn't sell snow tyres. The customer insisted, even though he had no receipt. The clerk decided to accept the tires and give them



THREE TIPS FOR STORYTELLING:

1. Use details (what the senses notice - sight, touch, taste, sound, smell)
2. Evoke emotion (who felt what?)
3. Would you like to know the third one?...
Use mystery, suspense and create tension.

credit. The story now illustrates the values of Nordstrom and how they will go to extraordinary lengths to delight their customers. As a story, it's easily repeatable and gets shared inside and outside the company.

YOUR MEMORABLE BULLET POINTS?

After we coach leaders on how to make better presentations, we hear that people often come up to them afterwards to talk about their memorable stories. Listeners rarely ever mention a memorable list of bullet points.

Encourage people to share success stories in your organization. Make it your business to capture, document and share them.

RARE QUALITIES

Of course, the ultimate in being an improvisational organization is for you and all your colleagues to learn how to:

- adapt
- be agile
- listen better
- be responsive to emergent circumstances

Build your reputation on that. Those qualities are rare in organizations and will be the hallmarks of your success as a leader in turbulent times.

PROMOTING YOUR PARTNER

Split your group into pairs, who then interview each other. Each introduces their partner with the instruction to 'sell them' to the group. It's much easier (and more effective) to boost the other person and their reputation than your own. You can also allow time for each person to correct or add information afterwards if they feel misrepresented.

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About f-act training & coaching

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