



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

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Why Improv?

As our distant mentor Charles Darwin said, “In the long history of humankind (and animalkind too) those who learned to collaborate and improvise most effectively have prevailed.”

Professional improvisers have specific strategies that help them deal skillfully and effectively with ever-changing environments. Indeed, improv is a best practice for dealing with change. Through applied work with improv, participants can experience these practices and connect them to specific business and organizational challenges.

Sustainability in an Improv Context

Our working definition of sustainability is not specifically environmental, we view sustainability to mean: “successful evolution over time.” Improvisers have a split focus that simultaneously evolves the larger story or scene (in business terms, this could be the life of the organization) while paying attention to the multiple sub-stories that exist in the moment (relationship with customer base; new product launch; etc.). Successful evolution requires (1) a deep understanding of the pulse of narrative, and (2) cultivation of the working methods that enable coherent, cooperative “story development.”

The Structure of a Story

The dynamics of narrative are the ingredients of a successful story, and give rhythm and pace to how a system moves forward through change. Stories are a primary currency of improvisation, and a simple formula drives them forward:

- A platform is established. The platform is the foundation or context for action. On the improv stage, we often focus on establishing CROW (Character, Relationship, Objective, Where) to set the platform.
- A tilt occurs. The tilt is an unexpected twist, and changes reality as the characters understand it. This tilt often comes in the form of new information (about individuals, from a changing environment, etc.).
- A main character is changed. Forced to respond to the unexpected tilt, this (and perhaps other) character(s) is affected and perhaps eventually transformed.

- Finally, there is resolution resulting from the change. This often involves the reincorporation of old information, and itself becomes a new platform for the next evolution.

Specific Improv Practices—Tactics You Can Adopt

The intentional practices of improvisation enable a group to work together and create a story—i.e., respond organically, appropriately and successfully—together, real-time.

1. Maintain generative relationships—find Connections, propel action

- Improvisers attend to their teammates, listening deeply and focusing on cooperating with and inspiring others.
- They connect people and ideas using “offers” (an offer is anything you can do something with, and can include individual styles or attitudes, market information, a new product idea, or a mistake).
- Improvisers recognize and respond to their audience; in an organizational context, this means maintaining a heightened awareness of what’s happening in the marketplace and customer contexts.

Real-life examples: Leaders of a national executive compensation consultancy shift into high gear by agreeing to handle “information dumps” and updating via email, using meeting time for engaged problem-solving and decision-making that moves initiatives forward at radical speed. A national beer label sees they’ve got a new fringe following, tailors programs to their specific needs, and revitalizes both brand and sales.

2. Cultivate Flexibility—be willing to change

- Improvisers attempt to “be present” in the moment which means they can listen acutely to the moment and pay acute attention to their environments.
- Improvisers are willing to change as the scene requires; they stay open, aware of their own individual agendas and willing to embrace an alternative agenda if it helps the story move forward more skillfully.

Real-life example: A leading international credit card and investment company began life as a regional freight shipping company. When in 1892 its president traveled to Europe and had trouble redeeming his letters of credit into cash, he decided to create the travelers’ check. If this leader—and his company—had been unwilling to look outside their traditional business, they wouldn’t have capitalized on this opportunity.

3. Perpetuate Experimentation—try new things

- Evolution requires an ongoing flow of fresh inputs.
- Improvisers are not only adept at watching for inputs from their environment (audience and co-players), but they are particularly skilled at using what they have—putting existing things together in new combinations. This is supremely efficient, and often results in satisfying and popular marketplace solutions.

Real-life example: 3M’S devotion to experimentation continues to yield many new and successful products; the 3M Post-It note you are sure to mark this page with is one such

result. Organizationally, 3M uses compensation policies to encourage employees to continually generate “fresh material.” Taking it one step further, the marriage of Post-It note and facilitator’s flip chart pads is a good example of using what you have to create a successful product line extension.

4. Sense the future as it unfolds—stay present, hold larger goals in mind, and respond intuitively

- Improvisers work consciously to be exceedingly present to the moment while holding a broad understanding of the overarching goal (on stage, the need to drive narrative forward) in mind.
- They also cultivate the practice of accessing their own intuition, real-time. Humans often sense patterns well before they can articulate them consciously; being available to the part of the brain that offers an unexpected, unplanned but coherent and often brilliant next move is key to contributing rapidly and successfully.

Real-life example: A leading espresso machine importer is keenly aware of shifting marketplace demands for more automated but still superb-quality solutions. In the midst of exploring in-house manufacturing possibilities, an unknown supplier from another industry steps forward. Unsure how the two might work together, the manufacturer is nonetheless inspired by the others’ expertise and capabilities. Together, they craft a new machine profile that leapfrogs existing solutions and transforms the marketplace.

For more information: On Your Feet is a consultancy that uses ideas and strategies from improv theatre to help organizations and individuals evolve. For those people who attended our session (and those who didn’t as well) we are happy to provide more detailed session notes and case examples. Please contact us at www.oyf.com if you would like more information.