



BUILDING WINNING TEAMS THROUGH IMPROVISATION

Neil Curran, Improv Expert and Corporate Trainer | Advant-edge

The world doesn't move in straight lines anymore. Any journey between A and Z inevitably includes a stop off at C while calculating how far it will take your friends to travel from M to meet you at B so you can all have enough time to make it for dinner at D.

It's all very complicated. The world requires the mind to constantly be moving, to make new calculations at every step, and to work with others to bring a plan to fruition.

The challenge for managers and leaders is that their minds still do work in (relatively) straight lines. They generally expect effect to follow cause, and for it do so consistently. Many managers still believe they could fully control every process if they just had the time to plan it out correctly.

When removed from the front-lines they can become disconnected with the work, seeing theory when their employees are experiencing reality. Or they become too involved in the minutiae of their team members' everyday tasks, not elevating themselves above the fray.

This can lead to managers micro-managing, constantly correcting mistakes as they come about and generally not carrying out their core role – managing people.

The stage and the boardroom

This is an experience Neil Curran, corporate trainer and IMI Advant-edge speaker, was all too familiar with. For him, the solution lay in an unusual place; improv comedy.

'In one of my early roles I got promoted to become a supervisor. I got the role because I was good at my job, but I soon found myself spending most of my time covering employee mistakes and doing the work for them' said Neil at the outset of his IMI session. 'This was fine when I was managing 7 people, but soon I found myself with 22 in my team – too much for me to handle in that managerial style.'

Neil had taken it upon himself to go on management training programmes, but they only took him so far, before he went on an improv comedy retreat and had an epiphany.



Most corporate team-building activities are competitive - although most organisations want to create a collaborative culture

Comedy is a serious business

When people talk of improv, 'comedy' is usually the next word to pass their lips. From classic comedy TV series like 'Whose Line is it Anyway?' to the local comedy troupe, improv is a staple in our culture.

In the professional world, the abilities required on the improv stage (agile thinking, empathetic responses, clear communication, working collaboratively etc.) are increasingly at the top of the list of requirements for leaders and managers.

'The academic work had given me the frameworks, but I found the skills from improv were proving more practical in their application in the workplace' said Neil.

On stage he was being challenged to co-create with another person, actively listen and react to them with empathy, work towards a common goal (making people laugh) collaboratively push each other's ideas.

While managing scarce resources, Neil was able to apply the techniques he learnt in improv to bring his large team

together, building stronger relationships and bonds between himself and the people around him.

These improv skills worked well then on an individual level, but how could it be applied organisation wide, or even to building a high-performance team?

Collaborative, not competitive

While improv techniques will improve individual managers, its real power may lay in how it can be applied to building winning teams. This can be exemplified even in one-off occasions.

When it comes to team building days, for example, they are generally based around competitive activities. Whether it's archery or race days at the track, employees are usually pitted against each other.

For a multitude of reasons, this type of team-building day can alienate large portions of a workforce.

An improv workshop ploughs the collaborative route. Each activity is set-up so people must work together as a group



Improv, scary from the outside, actually provides a safe environment for all personality types

(and not against other groups), and the activities themselves are based around mutual trust. For the introverts in the group, it gives them a safe environment to experiment, and the extroverts are forced to actively listen to others and act empathetically.

Research shows that improv as a team building tool will build confidence in individuals, creates a climate for supportive risk-taking, and helps form close bonds between people.

The environment, and the facilitator, is key. When someone is terrible at archery and keeps missing the target, the comments from the crowd will inevitably feel disheartening, no matter how good-natured they are meant to be.

With improv, failure is almost encouraged. Indeed, it's where a lot of the comedy will come from. This allows two people go on stage, fail miserably, and still return to their seats laughing with each other, and have the crowd laughing with them, not at them.

Crooked lines

In a world of crooked lines, leaders need to build disorder into the system. When leaders are trying to tease out greater performance in an individual, the skills of an on-stage improviser are more than just useful, they are fundamental. Beyond the individual level, when leaders set about building collaborative teams, they should use collaborative techniques to get there. Improv is one such powerful technique.

When leaders are trying to figure out how to get from A to Z, they might want to stop thinking about how long the journey is and just rearrange the alphabet instead.

It's what an improviser would do.