

“Many of us plan our time based on a particular agenda only to see meetings get cancelled, leaders fly out town unexpectedly, or a computer crash in the middle of a presentation. What do we do in these situations? We improvise.”

---

# Advancing the Scene

## Using Improv as an Organization Intervention

By Kristy Dominguez,  
Donna Howell-DePew,  
and Patty Walters

“Theater Games are a process applicable to any field, discipline, or subject matter which creates a place where full participation, communication, and transformation can take place.”

—Viola Spolin  
*Improvisation for the Theater*

Organizational life is Improv. Think about it: when you start your workday, do you have a script for everything you are to do and say for the day? Maybe you have an agenda for the day or some talking points for a meeting, but you never know what might happen during the day. Many of us plan our time based on a particular agenda only to see meetings get cancelled, leaders fly out town unexpectedly, or a computer crash in the middle of a presentation. What do we do in these situations? We improvise.

An accepted definition of Improvisation is *performing without a script*. Improvisational theater (Improv) creates situations or scenes where the participants must quickly adapt to what is being offered on stage. Since the dialogue and stage interactions that happen are unpredictable, the improvisers have to adapt quickly in order to create a believable scene. This same adaptability is essential in the workplace, especially when working to solve hot topic issues such as increasing employee engagement, improving the cohesiveness and effectiveness of a team, and encouraging innovation and creativity.

The intention of this article is not to cultivate improvisational superstars, but

rather we aim to pass along the wisdom of the *Four Rules of Improv* and how they can positively effect organizational life. We will review these rules and how they were determined, put the rules into action, and discuss three approaches to organization intervention using Improv. In conclusion we will discuss our future research in establishing Improvisational Theater as a legitimate organization intervention.

### A Short History of Improv

Improvisational theater is an ancient art form. It pre-dates the invention of writing; humans were telling stories by acting them out long before humans became literate. The Commedia Dell'Arte theater troupe improvised for 200 years starting in the mid-1500s. More recently, Viola Spolin, commonly known as the Grandmother of Improv, implemented theater games as a part of the New Deal WPA work projects, realizing the need for theater training that could effectively cross cultural and ethnic barriers (The Spolin Center, n.d.). Keith Johnstone wanted to bring theater to the same audience that Shakespeare had written for in his day—the common man. Separately and spontaneously, both reinvented the craft of Improv as it exists today (The Improv Page, n.d.).

Beginning in the late 1990s, theater has been used in organization training and interventions. Theater interventions in organizations began as scripted plays or scenes in which professional actors would act out organizational problems for the audience. The audience, usually

### CONFERENCE CONNECTION

**Donna Howell-DePew and Patty Walters** are presenters at the 2007 OD Network Annual Conference in Baltimore at the following session:

#### Improv Your OD Practice

Monday, October 22  
2:45 – 4:15 PM

Figure 1: The Rules



participants in a teambuilding event, would debrief about what went wrong and what could have been done better. The audience in this kind of theater intervention is a passive participant (Nissley, et al, 2004) rather than participating directly in the creation of an Improv scene.

In the early twenty-first century, improvisational theater shifted from a passive experience for the audience to engaging the audience as participants in the scenes (Nissley, et al, 2004). Using the concepts from Boal's Forum Theater (1979) Improv companies today are engaging participants in the creation of Improv scenes or teaching Improv games as experiential learning techniques to build skills in the area of teamwork, spontaneity, leadership, creativity, and more. On Your Feet, Second City Communications, and Pacific Playback are examples of companies utilizing improvisational theater as organization interventions.

Today it is common in medical and business schools to find Improv actors in the classroom. Medical schools, for example Yale, have been using actors to create real-life experiences for their medical students to help them learn how to diagnose patient ailments (Kaylin, 2007). The Fuqua School of Business at Duke University uses Improv actors from Second City Communications to teach a course called, "Dynamic Management" where students learn Improv skills to develop teamwork, observation and listening skills, creative thinking, and adaptive problem-solving (Fuqua School of Business, n.d.).

#### Four Rules of Improv

A misconception of improvisation is that

it is completely spontaneous, when in fact there is an underlying structure that allows it to succeed on stage. Improvisation relies on rules and routines that are pre-established and rehearsed.

We have identified four rules as a structure for organizing Improv on stage and communicating in our everyday interactions. The four rules are: **1) "Yes, and. . ."; 2) Be a character; 3) Be in the moment; and 4) Make your teammates look brilliant!**

These four rules provide the underlying structure necessary for individuals to come together as a team and create something greater and more innovative than a single mind might.

There's no definitive authority on a set of rules for Improv, although some principles are common among experts and practitioners. David Alger of Pan Theater in San Francisco uses *10 Rules of Improv* in his work, including don't block what other improvisers offer you in the scene, add new information, and change, change, change (Alger, D., n.d.).

Improv Olympics focuses on "saying yes" and making your partner look good (Kulture Kids, n.d.). Charna Halpern, creator of Chicago's IO Theater, maintains the importance of "always agreeing with what is offered on stage" (IO Theater, n.d.). Viola Spolin emphasizes the

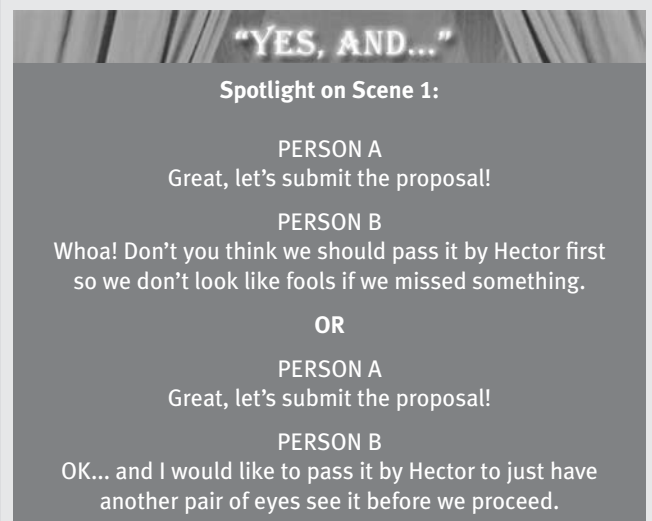
need to be present in the moment (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

In our extensive research and experience with Improv and organizational interactions, we've built upon the wisdom of improvisational experts and synthesized the most important tenets of the art into four rules. We use these rules in our organization interventions and apply them to our everyday interactions.

#### The First Rule: "Yes, and. . ."

The first rule of Improv is about accepting and building. "Yes, and. . ." means accepting whatever someone is saying and validating it while moving the conversation forward instead of stalling it out in a stalemate argument. By thinking or actually saying "Yes, and. . ." where you might feel more like saying "Yeah, but. . .!" a collaborative environment, not one of conflict, makes innovative solutions possible.. "Yes, and. . ." is an effective means of expediting a process and creating resolution in conflict. Saying or implying "Yes, and. . ." doesn't mean *agreement* with what the other person is saying. Without invalidating others' perspectives, "Yes, and. . ." communicates that you heard another's point, and now you will communicate yours, all without confrontations that might quickly deteriorate into all-out conflict (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



## Rule 2: Be a Character

On stage, Improv actors take on multiple physical and emotional traits of a character regardless of their everyday personality. For example, an adult improviser acts like a young child, or a plucky optimist takes on the persona of an angry cab driver. Through their transformations, new characters are created right before our eyes. These spontaneously created characters then interact with other characters, with none of them knowing much of anything about the other.

In situations that might be difficult for an individual such as giving a presentation or speaking in front of a group, creating a character can be a way to overcome anxiety about presenting. Creating a character who enjoys public speaking brings out the part of you who is confident and enjoys presenting.

**“Presentation Person” is still you—just minus the usual doubts and anxiety.**

If you seem to be requesting the same thing and getting unsatisfactory results, maybe it’s time to change your approach. Do you know someone—fictional character, celebrity, or acquaintance—whom you admire for their ability to get results? Ask yourself, *How would that person make this request?* When your “character” makes the request from another state of mind, your body language follows, and so does the chance of a positive response. Success is not guaranteed; progress towards something else is guaranteed. If it works, great! If it doesn’t, try another character until one does work.

Creating a character who excels at the opportunities and accepts what’s been offered can be a powerful tool to invite creativity. Opportunities to communicate and interact with people in a different way than we normally do and get different and hopefully better, resolutions or results is powerful.

The humorous example in *Figure 3* is taken from an actual exercise. While Person B in real life isn’t likely to suddenly do whatever Person A asks of him, this scenario illustrates how a shift in attitude can occur in Person B when Person A

approaches the request from a different “character.”

## Rule 3: Be in the Moment

For any scene to work on stage, the improvisers must be listening carefully to others. We can accept what we are offered and continue to move the scene forward. Our lines are predicated by what our partner gives us, even if what we are given is unexpected!

With so many portable electronics to keep us in touch, we face multiple temptations for distraction—laptops, cell phones, PDAs. . . Being in the moment means staying off the PDA when we are in meetings, listening to the person on the other end of the phone instead of sending an email, and turning off your cell phone when having lunch with a colleague.

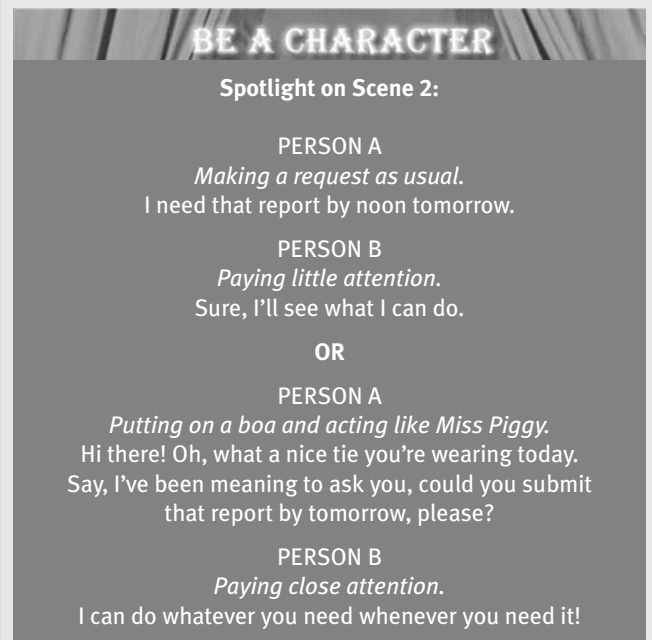
According to Robert Poynton (2005), “Being present can help in various ways... By being less attached to your prior ideas, you become more flexible. This makes it easier to appreciate the contribution of others and means you are less likely to fall into an adversarial relationship with them. You also notice more, which gives you more material to work with.”

## Rule 4: Make Your Team Look Brilliant!

Make your team look brilliant *no matter what!* Successful Improv requires all players to support one another, no matter what happens. The first part of making your team look brilliant is implementing the first three rules. Accept whatever a teammate might say or do—no matter how crazy—and build it into the team effort in order to advance the scene.

The second part of making your team look brilliant is focusing on your teammates rather than yourself. On a team

Figure 3



of six, there are five other people whose job it is to make the sixth look brilliant. The same tenets apply in a corporate setting; it is a highly effective team skill to holistically consider both the individual and the corporation’s goals.

## Freeze Tag: How to Thaw out your Organization

“You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.”

—Plato

To bring the *Four Rules of Improv* to life and illustrate how they apply in organizations, one of the games we play is called “Freeze Tag.” The game is usually played with four to six improvisers. Two improvisers—we’ll call them Dave and Caroline—begin on stage while the other improvisers stand in the background. The background improvisers pay attention to the scene being improvised, yell “freeze” to stop the action when the scene has reached its climax, and enter the frozen scene by replacing one improviser and beginning an entirely new scene. To start the first scene, two suggestions, location and relationship, are requested from the audience. Let’s

say, “on a beach in Maui” is called out as their location, and “patron and female cocktail server” is their relationship. Dave immediately begins the scene by affecting a feminine persona, playing the role of cocktail server. The exchange might go something like this:

**DAVE**

*(Walking up to Caroline)*

Hello, welcome to Concrete Jungle Beach. My name is Tiffany. The gentleman in the lounge to your right would like to treat you to this drink.

**CAROLINE**

*(Lying on the ground, accepts the drink)*

Oh that’s fabulous. It even has one of those paper umbrellas which is very handy since it is pouring down rain right now.

As Dave begins to hand Caroline her drink, another improviser, Leticia, standing in the background yells “Freeze!” and both Dave and Caroline stop immediately and hold their positions. Leticia comes up, taps Dave on the shoulder, and Dave joins the background improvisers while Leticia assumes Dave’s exact physical position—about to hand Caroline something. Leticia begins an entirely new scene.

**LETICIA**

*(Bending over Caroline.)*

Wake up! Wake up, Bob! I refuse to lose you now!

*(Throws bucket of imaginary water over Caroline)*

Leticia has now “offered” Caroline a brand new character.

**CAROLINE**

*(Jumping up from her lying down position.)*

Oh, Sandy, thank you so much for waking me up just in time to see the finale of American Idol. I don’t know what I would’ve done had I missed this show!

So far, so good! Each player has been accepting and building, listening, taking on characters, and making each other look brilliant. But let’s say a few moments of silence go by and Leticia isn’t saying anything. Caroline waits for Leticia to say something, and the silence hangs heavy, and the scene comes to a screeching halt. The scene has become a “dead” or a “dying” scene. Remember there are other improvisers standing in the background who could yell freeze and begin a new scene—no one is doing anything to advance the scene. The improvisers on stage are now not engaging, not creating

anything new. Trust in themselves and each other is crumbling, and they certainly aren’t making anybody look brilliant. Teamwork, which *was* going beautifully, has exited stage left. The safe environment initially established is at risk.

So what does this have to do with life in an organization? Imagine the “scene” is a tense meeting and not an Improv exercise. Senior management is tearing an employee’s proposed project to shreds while the employee’s manager does nothing—or even worse, joins in with the shredding. The meeting’s progress is no longer moving forward, and any innovative ideas are quickly dying along with the employee’s trust. Without trust in her manager, that employee will think twice about being a true team player, instead instinctively protecting herself from future barrages by lying low.

“Dead” or “dying” scenes can also be experienced in organizations when there is a conversation between two people and Person A monopolizes the conversation, cracking bad jokes and generally trying hard to make himself look good at the expense of Person B. Person A is not encouraging trust or making Person B look brilliant, and Person B is reacting in his everyday way instead of choosing to change his behavior. Neither individual is moving the work forward. The choice in any given moment is do we want to be engaged,

Figure 4

**BE IN THE MOMENT**

**Spotlight on Scene 3:**

Lee is in the middle of presenting a proposal, sharing how his innovative process improvements can greatly improve productivity and cut costs significantly. As Lee begins to share the details of his proposal, the VP’s cell phone rings and she steps out of the board room, not returning until the Q&A portion at the end. Oblivious to the clear benefits of thoroughly exploring his proposed solutions, the VP decides the idea is no good and rejects his proposed plan. Lee is confident in his plan, having researched it for months. He realizes as she cuts his rebuttal short that she’s already made up her mind. . . without having heard how his solution would save the company millions of dollars annually.

Figure 5

**MAKE YOUR TEAM LOOK BRILLIANT!**

**Spotlight on Scene 4:**

Sierra hasn’t been pulling her weight on this project. You’re concerned about the project as a whole and how Sierra’s nonperformance will make you and the team look. . . Wait! Where is your attention? It’s on yourself—you’re worried about you and how Sierra might negatively affect you. Making your teammates look brilliant, your attention must shift to what Sierra is doing well and what she might need in order to contribute more positively to the project. When you and your teammates make Sierra look brilliant, you and the whole team look brilliant as well.

creative, trusting, and a part of a brilliant team or participate in 'dead' scenes? (See Figure 5.)

## How We Intervene

While a single intervention is not the ultimate answer in today's workplace, Improv can support and build sustainable team interactions. Using Improv in team-building, leadership development, and training workshops allows participants to see their teammates differently and creates opportunities to interact in new ways.

### Team-Building

The participants are given the rules of Improv with an explanation that there is no script in life. Once the rules are understood, instruction on additional Improv games is given. The Improv games, such as *Freeze Tag*, are selected prior to the event based on the client's desired outcomes. Participants are divided into teams, each including an Improv facilitator. The facilitator instructs the team on the selected games while reinforcing and modeling the *Four Rules of Improv*. After learning how the games work in teams, the group reconvenes and each team performs the games for each other in the format of an Improv show.

"The opposite of play isn't work, it's depression. To play is to act out, and be willful, exultant and committed as if one is assured of one's prospects."

—Brian Sutton-Smith  
Professor of Education (Emeritus)  
University of Pennsylvania

### Leadership Development

Improv enhances leadership development through sketch performances and role play. The sketch is performed by Improv facilitators depicting current "hot topic" issues the participants are facing in their organization. The Improv facilitators perform the sketch all the way through to introduce the issues. Then the sketch is performed again; this time the participants are encouraged to stop the sketch when they think there is a more productive

outcome than what they are seeing in the sketch. The participants can only make suggestions to change the behavior or communication for one of the Improv facilitators' characters for the duration of that sketch.

Participants are broken out into small groups to repeat the exercise through role play. The role plays introduce new skills and allow the participants to practice new responses to real-life difficult situations or conversations. Once all of the members have participated, the group reconvenes

**Minimizing potential conflicts by moving the situation along with "Yes, and. . ." and viewing difficult situations as an opportunity to react in new and more productive ways makes your team look brilliant and sets the stage for a successful scene, whether in the board room with the executive committee or in your office maneuvering rocky interpersonal terrain with an irate coworker.**

with the large group to debrief and discuss what they learned from the session.

### Training Workshops

Introducing Improv works well with most interpersonal skills training programs. Improv has been incorporated into training programs such as *Diversity and Inclusiveness*, *Coaching for Non-Coaches*, and *'Improving Your Relationships'* (University of Houston, n.d.). By adding an Improv game to emphasize a learning objective, you create a meaningful and fun experiential learning opportunity.

"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand."

—Confucius circa 450 BC

### Why and How Do You Measure the Effect of Improv Interventions?

So you might be wondering, *How do you measure the effectiveness of this stuff?* We had that same question and decided we'd like to find out. Research results currently available address only specific aspects

of Improv's affect on business such as innovation and employee engagement. To illustrate the importance of studying Improv's impact on business, results from a twelve-question employee engagement survey by the Gallup Organization indicate that 71% of the U.S. workforce is "somewhat" or "actively" disengaged which translates into an estimated 330 billion dollars lost annually (Gallup Management Journal, 2001). The more we can engage the workforce to work creatively, trust each other, and team effectively, the more

we can affect these dismal statistics. We believe we can do this through Improv-based organization interventions using the *Four Rules of Improv*.

In order to establish the empirical legitimacy of Improv as an organization intervention, we are currently creating a study that will examine the correlation between Improv-based organization interventions and increased trust, teamwork, employee engagement and creativity, things we see as the key factors of sustainable organizational culture.

Our future plans include conducting research that examines the effects of an Improv-based organization intervention using baseline measurements such as customer satisfaction scores, project delivery on time and on budget, issue resolution, employee satisfaction, and turnover rates. We believe the outcomes of the research will indicate that Improv-based interventions result in increased customer satisfaction, more projects being delivered on time and on budget, faster issue resolution, increased employee satisfaction and decreased employee

turnover that might lead to an increase in overall sales and profits.

### “And That’s a Wrap!”

Improv isn’t just for comedians performing in smoky bars. Implementing the *Four Rules of Improv* in your organization contributes to a culture of collaboration, innovation, and trust. Minimizing potential conflicts by moving the situation along with “Yes, and. . .” and viewing difficult situations as an opportunity to react in new and more productive ways makes your team look brilliant and sets the stage for a successful scene, whether in the board room with the executive committee or in your office maneuvering rocky interpersonal terrain with an irate coworker. Sometimes in business. . . you just have to *improvise*.

“If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange apples, then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.”

—George Bernard Shaw

### References

Alger, David (n.d.). The Rules of Improv part I – the first ten. Retrieved May 22, 2007, from <http://www.pantheater.com/Articles/RulesImprovPartI.html>.

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, Inc.

Fuqua School of Business, The (n.d.). Fuqua students learn improvisation Techniques. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from [http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/admin/extaff/news/second\\_city.htm](http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/admin/extaff/news/second_city.htm).

Gallup Management Journal (2001). Gallup study indicates actively disengaged workers cost U.S. hundreds of billions each year. Retrieved May 12, 2007, from <http://gmj.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=466&pg=1>.

IO theater. (n.d.). Retrieved, June 6, 2007, from <http://www.iochicago.net/index.html>.

**Kristy Dominguez, MA**, has been involved in Training and Organization Development since 1998. Her professional mission is to guide individuals and teams to experience their ability to transform and make a difference using skills from Improvisational Theater. Kristy is currently bringing the power of Improv to leaders and teams in various industries including public, manufacturing and educational organizations. She holds a MA in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from California State University at Long Beach. You can contact Kristy at [kristy.dominguez@performwise.com](mailto:kristy.dominguez@performwise.com).

**Donna Howell-DePew** is the Owner of Third Coast Comedy, The Theater of Life. Third Coast coaches life skills through the platform of performing arts. Donna’s ability to create a safe environment and lead people through a team process has enabled her customers to produce results and see possibilities which would not have been visible without her innovative systems. Donna can be reached at [donna@thirdcoastcomedy.com](mailto:donna@thirdcoastcomedy.com).

**Patty Walters** is committed to transforming organizations and individuals by naturally bringing out their best. She currently incorporates Improv into training and coaching programs, focusing on changing environments in a positive and powerful way. Patty has an extensive corporate background in training and development, Change Management, and Project Management. She is a Master Strategic Attraction™ Coach. She can be reached at [patty@connectionsunlimited.biz](mailto:patty@connectionsunlimited.biz).

Kaylin, J. (2007). Simulated cases, real skills. *Yale Medicine*. Spring 2007. Retrieved, June 10, 2007, from [http://yalemedicine.yale.edu/ym\\_sp07/sim.html](http://yalemedicine.yale.edu/ym_sp07/sim.html).

Kulture Kids (n.d.). Retrieved May 22, 2007, from <http://kulturekids.org/improvolympics/provisos.htm>.

Nissley, N., Taylor, S. S., & Houden, L. (2004). The politics of performance in organizational theatre-based training and interventions. *Organization Studies*, 25(5), 817-839.

Pink, Daniel (2005). *A whole new mind*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Spolin Center, The (n.d.). New York giants vs. Chicago bears. Retrieved May 13, from <http://www.spolin.com/ny-vs-chic.html>.

The Improv Page (n.d.). A short history of improvisational theatre. Retrieved May 12, 2007, from <http://www.improvcomedy.org>.

University of Houston (n.d.). Continuing education. Retrieved June 6, 2007, from <http://www.uh.edu/academics/dce/home/home.html>.

Vera, D. Crossan, M. (2005). Improvisation and innovative performance in teams. *Organization Science*, 16(3), 203-224.