

Principles of Improvisation

BACKGROUND: Improvisation, popularly called Improv, is defined as "a skit or act in which actors improvise a situation, the art or technique of doing an improvisation." It can be a performance (dance, music, theater, speech) given spontaneously by individuals or a group. It is also a large body of work - principles, tools, and practices - created to support spontaneous performance.

Modern improv has very muddy roots. Most accounts of its history attribute the start to Commedia Dell'Arte, a popular form of entertainment in 16th Century Italy. This led to groups of roving comic improv performers that traveled throughout Europe between the 16th and 18th centuries. What made these groups popular was their ability to work "off the cuff;" Instead of relying on a formal script, these masked characters worked within a framework of "scenarios" which served to help them with entrances and exits as well as defining who would play a particular role. Otherwise, they fully improvised their own dialogue and action. In addition to playing farce, their popular performances would satirize the authority figures of the day.

Improv was reawakened in the US in the 1920' and again in the 1950s. Since then it has been adapted to many other uses. Improv is most readily recognized in stand-up comedy, theater, and jazz music. But it has grown in use to dance, medicine, instruction, education, ministry, and business.

Applied Improv puts the principles and techniques of improvisational theater to work in non-theatrical venues such as corporations, organizations, and professional groups and courses to create business value for organizations. It's a process of exploration that leads to unplanned discovery.

Applied Improv is a part of the growing international wave of nontraditional, arts-based educational programs being used to help people

become better at--and happier with--what they do.

In whatever form or function improve has a set of 7 principles at it's core. These principles come from several sources but the base comes from Jacquie Lowell in an article at the Applied Improvisation Network.

"**Yes, and**" is a concept and attitude that players accept new ideas from a standpoint of exploring the possibilities it has to offer. It is saying **Yes** to what you said **and** try this on for size. Another variation that we've seen to this principle is "**Yes, but**".

Co-Creativity The realization that great ideas can emerge from the engagement of people and how diversity and difference can greatly strengthen a team's ability to develop effectively. Co-Creativity strengthens the Yes, and concept with permission for others to engage and carry their part in new directions.

Attentive listening is a critical skill to the improvisers. One can hardly play off of others in the moment is they are not present with the other players hearing their words, inflections, gestures, and meaning.

Suspend critical judgment, temporarily while you are co-creating. Can the urge to crap on others ideas just because they distract from yours. Give the team the chance to explore the moment and connect.

Openness is an attitude of relaxed playfulness around new ideas. Diverging out from the obvious into the far reaches of what might be imaginable. "What if ___?"

Possibilities is the reframing of situations to explore the creative aspects of what is going on. Shifting perspective, focus, and often position.

The last two are absolutely critical to successful improv.

Take Chances is the principle of the safe risk taker. It is knowing that you risk appearing

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foolish and going for it knowing that others will, enjoy, forgive, and play off of what you risked.

Trial and Error are at the heart of improv. Where there are choices there is no absolute right or wrong, though each may turn out to be more or less productive in a given situation.

In addition to the Principles there are three basic keys that must be considered:

Simplicity is one of the keys to good improvisation. The easiest way to explain this is to state that the pieces of an improv are more than the sum of their parts. They are an aggregation of many simple ideas that then take on a life of their own, that are transformed by the alchemy of group creativity.

Simplicity helps us in this process. If we communicate simple ideas both fellow players and the audience easily understand them. Simple ideas are communicated more efficiently and more easily built upon than complicated or obscure concepts.

Exploration, not invention. In improvisation we're looking to explore in a collaborative process. When working with others, there is a temptation to impose your ideas-your inventions-on them. It might be as unwieldy as trying to act out a gag that's in your head (but not in your partners'), or it might be relatively innocuous, such as "Get me a glass of lemonade, please."

Preparation, Discipline and Organization are foundational keys to improvisation - be it jazz, medicine, athletics, theater and the arts, business or ministry. Contrary to popular belief, improv is not about thinking quickly, being funny or acting without rules. It is essentially the manifestation of paradox. Improv teaches that...there is no freedom without structure, you become spontaneous by practicing spontaneity, and you can feel in control of a situation by giving up control of that situation.

APPLICATION

Improvisational skills have direct relevance to the skills that make all teams successful. These include listening, agreement, acceptance of what one is given, partnering, helping others succeed, letting go of the need to know the outcome in advance, letting go of the drive for personal recognition, trust, spontaneity, believing in oneself, dealing with fear and going ahead anyway, knowing you don't have to do it all by yourself.

Facilitators that use improvisation techniques with a group do so to help them learn more creative problem solving, create group trust and communicate more effectively. Along the way group members will be laughing from start to finish, creating a shared experience that is powerful, highly effective, and memorable.

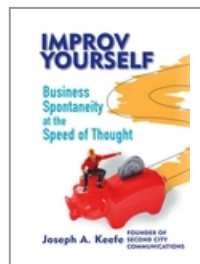
RESOURCES

History of Improv:

<http://www.creativity-engineering.com/history.html>

Applied Improvisation Network:

http://www.appliedimprov.net/whats_improv.htm



Improv Yourself: Business Spontaneity at the Speed of Thought

Joseph A. Keefe, Wiley & Son Publishing, ISBN: 0-471-21638-0

Article on the Trends in Improv

<http://www.appliedimprov.net/ASTD%20Workpl ace%20Trends.pdf>

Transactors Improv Co.

<http://www.transactors.org/AppliedImprov.html>

Improv Resources List

<http://www.nydi.org/improv.htm>