Improve Your Team With Improv

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Please give us feedback at:


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Introduction

Thank you for attending this session and taking the risk of putting down your computers, iPads, and jailbroken iPhones to spend three hours on your feet getting outside of your comfort zone. Our sincere hope is that this session opened your eyes to some of the possibilities that applied improv can make in your company and in your own development as a person, an employee and a team member. It was incredibly gratifying to see the group change from a collection of strangers to a group of people with shared experiences over the course of the afternoon. You are all rock stars.

The following notes capture what we did in the workshop. If you have any follow-up questions, wish to discuss any concepts of applied improv in more detail, or just want to chat, please don’t hesitate to contact us. We are passionate about helping businesses succeed through the power of saying “YES!”

Purpose of the Session

The purpose of this session was to teach applied improv techniques that you can use in your own company. Some of these you might wish to apply yourself. In other cases you may want to hire an improv company to come in and design a session for you. The three specific sections of the session were:

1. Teambuilding and icebreaking exercises for fun and group unity
2. Improv-based techniques around listening and status
3. Practice in brainstorming, ideation and getting to yes

Typically, we would not tackle all three of these in a single workshop designed for a company, but in this case we wanted to present a survey overview of some of the areas where improv can apply to business. We did not spend much time on presentation and speaking skills, but that’s another area where improv training can have tremendous results.

It was our general hope that the “proof is in the pudding.” By the end of the workshop, we genuinely wanted the attendees to feel like they were more of a team and knew each other better (chin wave!). Conferences such as OSCON can be very impersonal. We wanted to put everyone in the room on the same page.
Our Agreement

Before the session began, we all made the following agreement:

1. To give 100%, pushing outside our comfort zones and leaving our judgements (of ourselves and others) at the door. As instructors, we pledged that we would not push your into areas that were truly uncomfortable.

2. To commit fully and work as a team.

3. To allow anyone to sit out any part of the session they weren’t comfortable with (whether physically or emotionally), as long as they agreed that while sitting out they would not comment or judge on those who were participating.

Icebreaker and Teambuilding Exercises

These exercises were selected to gently introduce the attendees to one another, get people physically moving in the space and interacting with each other, and develop a sense of unity and community. They were also designed to be fun, acknowledging that play is important in life and business. Don’t ever underestimate the power of laughter. When people laugh together after a shared experience, it creates strong bonds.

Name Circle

We went around the circle and each attendee shared their name, where they were from and where they worked. Different people chose to share the information in different amounts of depth and we didn’t judge. We wanted to immediately show that there were no wrong answers in this workshop.

Cthulhu Name Technique

We taught the “wiggle fingers under the chin” technique that allowed anyone in the session to be reminded of someone’s name with no judgement. This is totally allowable if you run into any of the session attendees at next year’s OSCON.

Clap Circle

We “passed the clap” (giggle) around the circle. This simple exercise begins to get the participants working together on a simple task, encourages eye contact in a non-threatening way and teaches that “mistakes” can easily be fixed by anyone. Once the clap had been mastered, we added in the new rule that the clap could change directions. Once the group had
mastered that, we added in a “Whooo!” sound and motion at the same time. Once we were doing two or three things simultaneously, participants were starting to get their first taste of the improv mantra of “Don’t think, just react.”

Yes Circle

To get us in the “Yes!” frame of mind we stand in a circle. One person points at another and the person who was pointed at says “Yes!” The person who pointed then goes and takes the other person’s spot in the circle. Repeat, trying to go faster and faster, getting everyone in the “Yes!” frame of mind. We then continued the exercise silently, with only pointing, and then with only expressions, nods and eye contact giving permission to move. As we removed the verbal and physical aspect, everyone became better at “listening” to one another. It also helps you work within some mild constraints (“you can’t move until someone says yes”), while also letting you know that the world won’t end if you break the rules - your teammates will help cover you.

10 Minute Lunch

Everyone is asked to walk about the room. At first they are told to avoid eye contact altogether. Then to make fleeting eye contact. Then to make more and more eye contact. Next, they are asked to briefly greet each other. Then greet each other for longer. And finally, to greet each other like a long-lost friend they had not seen in 20 years. We saw a range of different responses, from people tentatively shaking hands to others embracing each other in warm hugs. A definite physical and emotional icebreaker.

Leader of the Pack

The participants spread about the room, with the instructions that only one person may walk at a time. As someone stops, another person has to pick up and start walking. Or if someone starts walking, everyone else must stop. We then up the difficulty by having two or three people walking at once. This is an exercise in observation, making strong choices, seeing what’s needed, and trust. It also puts a focus on the internal constraints that we place upon ourselves, without any external requirement - there were no rules against talking, directing, making a system, etc, yet we assumed many of those. How many other places in your life are similar?

Walk/Stop

People walk around the room when told to walk, then stop when told to stop. Then we reverse those instructions: walk means stop and stop means walk. We add in Name/Jump and Clap/Twist. Eventually all are reversed from their original meaning. This exercise trains us in listening, giving attention and thinking outside the box. It also shows that the fun in the game comes from the little mistakes and failures - a perfectly-executed version of this game would be boring!
Line Up By

We asked people to line up across the room by height, age, day of birth and distance they traveled to OSCON. This exercise gets people interacting verbally as well as helps them learn something about one another. A great icebreaker for any event.

Chair Tag

We set out as many chairs as people, spread about the room. One chair remains empty and one person stands across the room. When we say “Go,” they must slowly make their way to the empty chair, and everyone else must shift seats to try to keep that chair unoccupied. Remember the rule that once your butt leaves the seat, you’ve committed yourself to move! A great exercise in working as a team to develop strategy, while seeing how panic by one person can ripple through an entire organization.

Sun and Moon

Everyone secretly chooses a person to be their “sun” and their “moon.” They then have to position themselves so that they are equidistant between their sun and moon. Like Chair Tag, this exercise shows that when someone panics and moves suddenly, that panic ripples throughout the entire room. Or, if you’re OSCON, you pack into the tightest possible space, such that you impact the local gravity.

Tiger Martian Salesman

Groups of three stand back-to-back, and on the count of three they act as either a tiger, martian or salesman. If all three do the same one, they “win” and cheer wildly. This exercise asks people to try to get a group mind going, and also to wildly celebrate even silly victories. It is strangely satisfying to have everyone do a martian.

Paper Scissors Rock Battle

We returned from break with this energy builder and exercise in positivity. Pair off in twos and play paper-scissors-rock. The winner goes to find another winner. The loser becomes the cheering section for the winner. Within a few rounds, the entire room is screaming and cheering for the last two winners. Engineers always enjoy figuring out the mathematics of how many rounds it will take to find the winner. :)


Listening Exercises

These exercises were used to build skills in true listening (not just “listening politely and waiting for a chance to speak”), which is something that drives nearly every human interaction, both inside and outside of the office.

First Letter, Last Letter

Pair up and hold a conversation where you must start your own sentence with a word that begins with the last letter your partner finished with. This encourages listening and not interrupting. Try this one outside of the class without telling your conversation partner that you’re doing it, and see how it feels!

String of Pearls

One person creates the first line of a story. A second person creates the last line of the story. Then one by one, five more people join in to complete the story, a line at a time, with each person choosing where to fit in. It’s a great exercise in listening for what is needed and dropping preconceived ideas when circumstances change.

Brainstorming and Ideation Exercises

In improv, we practice the rule of saying “Yes” to everything. Improv-based brainstorming encourages everyone to brainstorm ideas without immediately judging their worthiness. Later, it’s appropriate to evaluate and sift through ideas, but freedom to generate ideas without internal or external judgement can yield a wealth of amazing creativity.

Yes-But / Yes-And

A group of six or are asked to come up with an idea for a party. In the first round, they propose ideas with “Yes, but...” In the second round, they propose ideas with “Yes, and...” We see the magic power of “Yes and...” to accept and extend rather than judge and reduce. In the next round, we encourage an even more enthusiastic “YES!” from everyone. Not every idea is brilliant, but more ideas find their way on the table and nobody stops participating for fear of getting shut down.

28

We ask each participant to write an idea on a notecard (in this case “How to make OSCON the even better”). Participants swap cards, then pair up and rate their two cards by distributing seven points between them. Repeat three more times, until each card has four numbers. We
add up the points and see which best ideas have bubbled to the top. This is just one of a half dozen brainstorming and idea generation exercises that we teach to companies. In a larger group, you can go to 35 (or, possibly higher). Non-judgemental brainstorming is a great way to get ideas on the table and empower the quieter voices who may have some of the most meaningful ideas to share.

**Half Life (described, but not played)**

Break into groups of 3-6 people, each in a part of the room with their own section of wall/window. Each person gets a stack of Post-It notes. The moderator will give each group a topic, similar to how 28 worked (or a topic for the room at large). Then, you have about five minutes for each person to individually to write down ideas on Post-Its and slap them up on the wall. No talking with your groupmates, no debating, just get as many ideas out as you can and, if you’re out of ideas, push yourself to write some more. By the time you’re finished, the wall should be covered in ideas.

After the time is up, you will then have a few minutes to winnow the wall of ideas down to your top 16 ideas, via group consensus. Then, you will have a couple of minutes to narrow those 16 down to the best 8. Then a minute to narrow those 8 down to the best 4. Then 30 seconds to narrow those four to the best two. At the end, each group shares the ideas that rose to the top in their group.

This has a couple of important points: The first is that by pushing yourself to keep writing down ideas even when you’re all out, you’ll probably tap into the creative part of your brain and come up with something weird and wonderful. The second is that, much like 28, there’s a power in comparing ideas against each other without ego involved, and (unlike 28), you’ll have to make hard choices between great ideas. It’s not that the 5th ranked idea was bad, it just forces you to be critical in your evaluation (plus you can always pick other ideas up later if needed).

**Wrapping Up**

We ended the session in the circle with the attendees sharing observations or questions.

As session leaders, our observation was that over the course of three hours the group transformed from a tentative, distant collection of strangers to a cohesive team of people who had shared experiences and much more openness to one another. You may have noticed that, at the start of the session, everyone came into the room and took a seat as far away from everyone else as they could (except for the people who worked together). By the end of the session, people were hugging, laughing, and high-fiving. If a group of complete strangers could make this transformation in three hours, we hope this helped everyone to see the possibilities that applied improv could have within your own companies.
Where to Go From Here

If you found this session valuable and are intrigued about bringing applied improv techniques back to your company, there are many available resources. Applied improv can be used for many purposes within a company, including teambuilding, brainstorming and ideation training, and sales or customer support training. A trained applied improv company can tailor a workshop to your specific needs. That's the beauty of improv.

Do it Yourself

You can take any of the exercises from this session and try them within your own company or workgroup. Remember to keep an attitude of openness, positivity and “Yes!” Don’t judge, and remember the agreement that anyone can sit out if they don’t feel comfortable.

It is often more effective to have these workshops facilitated by an outside person or company, and your city should have improv resources that can design training for you.

To find improv training in your city

Search the web for “Applied improv,” “Improv teambuilding,” or “Improv sales training.”

Need help finding a resource?

Contact Andrew or Wade and we can help you find a resource in your city. We know people. We also travel, if you’d like to bring us into your company.

Take an improv class

Improv classes are incredibly fun and may be the single best tool you can put in your toolset for dealing with others, presenting, public speaking and just approaching life with a “Yes!” mindset. Your instructors’ lives were profoundly changed by taking improv classes. A good class will be supportive and take you along gradually. Take a risk that could change your life forever. Take an improv class. Contact us for a recommendation in your city.

And finally

The first step in building a better team with improv is to lead by example. You have the power to take everything you learned in this session and apply it to your own professional and personal life. Try saying “Yes!” instead of “no”. Try reserving judgement of others’ ideas and your own. Try taking risks and talking to someone instead of avoiding eye contact. The power starts with you.
Read a Blog or a Book

Patrick Short and Jill Bernard have written a terrific book on applied improv for business:


Because you took this class, we’ve arranged to make a free PDF version available to you. Contact Andrew at andrew@teamsnap.com if you’d like the free PDF.

Patrick also writes a blog that’s worth adding to your feed reader:

http://appliedimprovthinking.wordpress.com

Convince Your Boss

We know that you’re sold, but how do you get your company to buy in? Here are a few recent articles that talk about how companies using applied improv to succeed:


Thank You SO much!

This was not the typical OSCON session. We can’t thank you enough for coming to our session, laughing, playing, sharing and taking risks. Please don’t hesitate to contact us if there’s anything else you’d like to chat about.

Please give us feedback

Andrew & Wade
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