Improve Your Team With Improv

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Pre-Ramble

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 for the rest of the week.

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.

**Warm-Up 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.

**Name Circle**

We went around the circle and each attendee shared their name, where they worked and an interesting fact about themselves. 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 allowed to apply throughout the entire week of 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 more sounds and motions (the Home Alone “AAAAH!”, an arms-up “Whooo!”). By the time we were doing three things at once, 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 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.

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 and thinking outside the box.

Line Up By

We asked people to line up across the room by 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.

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. 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.

Teambuilding Exercises

The following section of teambuilding exercises were used to get people playing, laughing and working together in teams. Some are easy, some are hard, and all are designed to get people working together on physical or mental challenges. All of them end up in varying degrees of laughter. Don’t ever underestimate the power of laughter. When people laugh together after a shared experience, it creates strong bonds.

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.

Bobsled

We form four person “bobsled” teams, and they walk in unison, hands on shoulders. We gradually add in the following commands: Change (front peels off and becomes the back), Rotate (the entire bobsled changes direction), Switch (#2 and #4 switch places), and Trade (#3 finds a new sled to join). This exercise encourages teamwork, problem solving, incorporating new people into an established process and safe physical contact. (It also encourages mild competition, as some bobsleds try to go faster.)

Whiskey Mixer

Stand in a circle. Send the phrase “Whiskey Mixer” to the left. Send the phrase “Misty Vista” to the right. Use the phrase “Mr. Whiskers” to reverse direction. If anyone laughs, they have to run a lap around the circle. This game is 90% just fun and the reason it came at the end of the first half of the class was to send us to break on a high note and show that by this point we’d reached a place where we felt comfortable laughing safely at each other and at ourselves.

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 and Status Exercises

These exercises were used to build skills in true listening (not just “listening politely and waiting for a chance to speak”) and playing with status, 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.

Hype Man

Form groups of three. One person describes their day. The second person “hypes” it to the third person, elevating it in the most grandiose terms possible. Some participants love the hyping (or being hyped). Some find it uncomfortable. Secretly, this exercise gets people to improvise. :)

Liars Club

Send four people from the room. They return and each tell their version of a story (i.e. “The day we got the new dog”). One is telling the truth; three are lying. Others must guess who is telling the truth. Another exercise that gently introduces improvisation, as well as presentation skills.

Status Cards

Everyone is dealt a playing card that they do not look at. The hold the cards face-out on their foreheads and interact as if at a party, treating others according to the value of the card that they see. At the end of the “party,” they line up in whatever order they believe to be their status. This is a quick introduction to the concept of status, and there are many more exercises around status that companies can use everywhere from management to customer service.

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 eight or so 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.

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We ask each participant to write an idea on a notecard (in this case “How to make OSCON the most awesome conference ever”). Participants swap cards, then pair up and rate their two cards by distributing seven points between them. Repeat five times, until each card has five numbers. We add them up, 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. What did we learn? Giving everyone a million dollars was a great idea, giving everyone a million dollars and a backpack was not.

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 a much better chance of interacting over the course of the remainder of OSCON. 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. 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, Wade or Roxann and we can help you find a resource in your city. We know people.

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. All of 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. (You can also buy it at the link above if you prefer paper.)

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

http://appliedimprovthinking.wordpress.com

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.

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Andrew, Wade & Roxann
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