Improvising management
Lessons from theater and music
Start boring corporate spiel
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Stop boring corporate spiel
Improvising management
Lessons from theater and music
Improvisation

Improvisation is getting on stage and making stuff up as you go along… That’s it.

- Mick Napier, Founder of the Annoyance Theater in Chicago and Director at The Second City
Improvisation

Music created in the moment of performance, without written scores or played for memory.

- Center for Jazz Studies, Columbia University
Improvisation

- Yoga
- Dance
- Neuroscience
- Politics
- Organizational Theory
- Race, Gender, and Democracy
- Poetry and Oral History
- Philosophy
- Spirituality and Theology
Improvisation

Improvisation in the theater is the practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may conduct unscripted dramas without fear.

Samuel Wells, “Improvisation in Ecclesial Ethics”, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*
Improvisation

Improvisation in _____ is the practice through which _____ seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may _____ without fear.
Improvisation

Improvisation in your company is the practice through which your colleagues seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may collaborate without fear.
Improvisation

- Trust in yourself
- Trust in others
- Fearlessly collaborate
Improvisation

• Co-creative
• Unpredictable
• Real-time
• Moment-to-moment decision making
• Recalls past experiences/patterns
• Embraces fear and accepts risk/failure
• Requires listening
“How to get a job at Google”
Thomas Friedman

• Ability to process on the fly
• Willingness to relinquish power
• Create space for others to contribute
• Know how to learn from failure

“these are the qualities of an improvisor”

Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton, Yes, And
Improvisation

- Co-creation
- Fear
- Listening
Co-creation

- Creative inputs
  - Personal experience
  - Collective experience
  - Non-overlapping experiences/relationships
- Process of combination

Ingram and Duggan, “Improvisation in Management”, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*
Co-creation

- Groups are biased toward shared information
- Reinforces commonalities and builds cohesion
- More willing to share (non-common) ideas if there is trust
  - Emotional trust / direct relationship
  - Trust they will do their jobs
  - Reputation
  - Shared identity
- Arousal kills creative combination

Ingram and Duggan, “Improvisation in Management”, *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*
Co-creation

[This structure] suggests, for example, that the creative combination would be best in a jazz combo with members who possess diverse playing experiences but also who trust in each other.

Ingram and Duggan, “Improvisation in Management”, The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies
Co-creation

The esthetics of jazz demand that a musician play with complete originality, with an assertion of his own musical individuality… At the same time jazz requires that musicians be able to merge their unique voices in totalizing, collective improvisations…

… maximum individualism within the framework of spontaneous egalitarian interaction.

John Szwed, quoted in “Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies”, The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies
Co-creation

• Creative inputs
  • Personal
  • Collective
  • Non-overlapping experiences/relationships

• Process of combination
  • Strong group ties; trust
  • Weak and non-overlapping ties outside the group
  • Calm

• Strategic intuition

Ingram and Duggan, “Improvisation in Management”, The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies
Co-creation

If a [jazz solo] appears to be … an inner flash of inspiration, it is only because we are influenced and seduced by the religious picture…

In face, a solo is never an isolated event; it recalls (and may draw upon) previous solos as a vehicle or point of departure…

Co-creation

Probably no one has faced exactly the same situation, but there are countless examples from history that can fit different pieces of the problem.

You improvise a new combination to suit the problem at hand.

William Duggan, *Strategic Intuition*
Co-creation

- Expand your own experiences
- Connect to others with different experiences
- Build trust
- Stay calm
- Become more intuitive
Fear

Improvisation is ineluctably tied to \textit{fear}: fear of the unmarked space, of the unknown and the unforeseen, and fear of nothingness – that is, that nothing (interesting or original) will take place...

... it is the the possibility of failure that marks improvisation.

Fear

• Fear is the enemy of improvisation and creativity
• Fear prevents us from taking risks that “might” result in failure
• Fear prevents us from trusting ourselves and others
• Fear prevents us from challenging the obviously flawed perspective of upper management
• For the most part, we spend relatively little time addressing this elephant in the room
Fear: your brain changes

Every time you learn to be unafraid, your brain changes. [Improvisation is] the quickest way to get to the neural pathway change, because it puts people in a situation where they are facing their fears.

Mark Pfeffer, Director of the Panic/Anxiety Recover Center in Chicago, interviewed in Kelley Leonard and Tom Yorton, Yes, And
Fear: six ways to fail

- Fail in public
- Fail together
- Fail fast
- Fail free of judgment
- Fail with confidence
- Fail incrementally

Leonard and Yorton, *Yes, And*
Listening

• Listening helps us know the other and build trust
• Listening helps us pay attention
• Listening helps us be in the moment
• Listening helps us understand problems/issues/perspectives
Listening

- How could you possibly contribute to your ensemble, if you are not listening to what everyone else is playing?
- How can you develop a good product, if you are not paying attention to your customers?
- It is not about your idea, but about discovering the idea – and this is almost never isolated solo at.
The advice I’d gotten from every source, if I wanted to arrive at a similar apotheosis, was listen. Listen at every level—to the words, the emotions, the intent of the other or others. Be completely open to them, bring nothing preconceived or prepared to the moment. Listen and then speak only to what you’ve heard. Do that, and you can’t go wrong.

Improvisation is not just a means to entertain, it’s also a process that is an end in itself, a way of knowing, of grasping the nature of another, the reality of the other’s existence, an aspect of the truth of the matter under discussion which you thought you knew but didn’t until this moment.

Leonard and Yorton, *Yes And*
Listening

Hadn’t Father Joe twenty or more years ago said an almost identical thing? The only way to know God, the only way to know the other, is to listen. Listening is reaching out into that unknown other self, surmounting your walls and theirs.

Leonard and Yorton, Yes And
Listening

• Listen at your office and your meetings. Really listen. Find out what’s going on. Building trust is not about you or your ideas.

• When you have a conversation with someone after this presentation, shut up for a second and listen to what they have to say… ask questions.

• When you go out to dinner with your fiance, leave your phone at home.
Improvisation

Improvisation in your company is the practice through which your colleagues seek to develop trust in themselves and one another in order that they may collaborate without fear.

- Co-creation
- Fear
- Listening
Some benefits…

- Rapid idea generation
- Real-time problem solving and execution
- Flexible/efficient organization
- Thinking on the fly
- Public speaking skills
- Better dialogue with customers/employees
- Learned failing
- Fun!
Resources

- *Yes, And* by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton (2015)
- *Scene from the Inside Out* by Mick Napier (2015)
- *Getting to Yes, And* by Bob Kulhan (2017)