

# Leadership Agility: Using Improv to Build Critical Skills



UNC  
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## Introduction

Look around you; everything is changing. The global economy, medicine, technology, the environment, geo-politics...you name it and chances are, it is undergoing dramatic change. Of course, this has always been the case – but the rate of change is increasing. These changes can have dramatic and unexpected consequences for your organization. Just keeping up with the rate of change can be a significant challenge, much less anticipating and staying ahead of the curve. Companies that want to thrive in this constantly evolving business environment need the ability to change quickly – and they need agile business leaders who can learn, develop and adapt quickly.

How can you develop agile business leaders in your organization? While knowledge and experience remain critical, it is becoming increasingly important to develop leaders with the ability to deal with ambiguity and change, to lead and foster innovation and creativity, and to make and implement decisions quickly. Organizations require leaders who can adapt, think on their feet and lead with confidence through the shifting business landscape —all skills and behaviors that can be a challenge for talent managers to develop. Developing these unique capabilities requires a different approach, encouraging some talent management professionals to embrace unconventional methods. In the following pages, we will explore one of these non-traditional methods – using improv to develop more agile business leaders.

This white paper:

- Defines what improv is (and isn't)
- Outlines the rules of improv and discusses how these rules apply to your organization
- Examines how improv can be used to develop specific skills and behaviors and build agile business leaders
- Offers examples of how organizations are using improv to effectively develop talent
- Provides practical ways you can introduce improv in your organization

## What Is Improv?

In essence, improv, short for improvisation, is performing without a script; it is spontaneous invention (in the form of acting, singing, playing musical instruments, etc.) that is often needed to create something entirely new and unique. Improvisation is often thought of as "off the cuff" activity, with little or no preparation or forethought – but this can be misleading. Giving an impromptu, extemporaneous speech or presentation requires skill and confidence that one can acquire through improv – but it's not improv. Real improv requires preparation, and often practice, to develop the ability to act and react in the moment. Some of the basic skills improvisation requires are the ability to listen and be aware of the others, to have clarity in communication, and to possess the confidence to find choices instinctively and spontaneously. Improvisation can take place as a solo performance or in collaboration with other performers. It can be dramatic or comedic – and the popularity of improv comedy continues to grow. Many people had their first exposure to improv comedy through the British (and subsequent American) television show, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, a popular improvisational comedy show that featured the short-form style of improvisation.

There is no doubt that improv can be funny—think Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell, Bill Murray, Wayne Brady, Tina Fey or Amy Poehler. But being funny is not necessarily the goal, according to Greg Hohn, a member of Transactors Improv group since 1989, its executive and artistic director since 1996, and the teacher for UNC's *Applied Improvisation for Communication* course at UNC Kenan-Flagler. Improv is performing without a script, notes Hohn. It's about working off the top of your head, being mindful and reacting to what's around you and being entirely in the moment—not the past or the future, but the now. "Improv is about realizing that everything you need is in the moment. If you are aware of it, you can act on it." explains Hohn.

### About Improv

"Some people misunderstand improv....It seems that improv is all about being funny. But it is not. Improv is about being spontaneous. It is about being imaginative. It is about taking the unexpected and then doing something unexpected with it....The key is to be open to crazy ideas and building on them. And funnily enough, this is exactly what is needed if we are going to make our enterprises more creative and agile."

– Paul Sloane  
*The Leaders Guide to Lateral Thinking Skills*  
(in Gotts and Cremer, n.d.).

Bob Kulhan, CEO of Business Improvisations in Chicago/New York/Los Angeles, adds honesty to what defines improv. “Improv teaches people how to react, adapt and communicate honestly with each other. Honesty is a key to improv,” notes Kulhan, who has worked with the top business schools and companies in the world. “The focus, concentration and honesty required in improv readily apply to the communication skills required in business,” says Kulhan.

### Improv Company Spotlight: Business Improvisations

Business Improvisations ([www.businessimprov.com](http://www.businessimprov.com)) offers hands-on, custom programs to organizations,



based on interviews and meetings with clients. Executive leadership classes encourage creativity, team building, effective communication, conflict management, change management, and more. Program length is determined by the client and can run anywhere from a half day to a week. Business Improvisations, with offices in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, has offered customized programs to a host of organizations, including Capital One, Ford, Hewitt and Raytheon.

## Improv “Rules”

Improv may imitate life in that it is unpredictable and totally unscripted, but that doesn’t mean that it is without “rules”. These rules may vary depending on whom you ask, but they serve as guidelines for the performers. While these rules appear simple on the surface, following them can be a little more challenging in practice. A master of improv, Tina Fey, writer, actor, and alumni of Chicago’s famed Second City and *Saturday Night Live*, discussed her rules for improv in her book, *Bossypants* (see call-out). Her rules apply equally well to the workplace.

Tina Fey’s rules for improv:

- **Rule #1:** Agree and say “yes”.
- **Rule #2:** Not only say “yes”, say “yes AND”.
- **Rule #3:** Make statements.
- **Rule #4:** There are no mistakes, only opportunities.

These 4 rules can also be applied towards building better leaders in the workplace.

## Rule #1: Agree and say “yes”

“Yes” is such a simple word, and in improv it is a governing philosophy. “Yes” is the acceptance of new ideas and perspectives, and it establishes recognition and respect for the person speaking. It ultimately sets the stage for positive communication and real dialogue. In today’s struggling workplaces, it is often easy to be negative and cynical—attitudes that will quickly erode employee morale, engagement and satisfaction. Negativity stifles creativity and innovation. Saying “yes” is about being open to new possibilities. It is positive, affirmative, confident and optimistic. Saying “yes” is the first step in turning around a negative organizational culture. Saying “yes” can spur creativity, innovation, collaboration and teamwork. Creativity and innovation, incidentally, are talents that several studies identified as being critical skills business leaders will need in the near future (in Theleman, 2011).

## Rule #2: Not only say “yes”, say “yes, AND”

“Yes” establishes openness and acceptance. “Yes, and” takes that openness and acceptance one step further by building on what another person has said. This is the heart of teamwork and collaboration – when two or more people are working toward a common goal. “Yes, and” is co-creation. As many in the improv industry say, “yes, and” means to accept the gift the other person has offered and then add to it. It is the social lubricant that keeps creativity flowing and communication open.

“Yes, and” can be a very powerful tool in the workplace. “Yes, and” allows employees to take ideas and build on them to create something altogether new. Information is increasingly fragmented throughout an organization - disaggregated into different business units and divisions. “Yes, and” encourages everyone to bring their ideas to the table in order to collaborate and co-create. “Yes, and” can be a useful framework for brainstorming, ideation and innovation, problem solving, and conflict resolutions. “Yes, and” can help to foster cooperation among employees because it requires active listening, acceptance of different points of view, and contribution; it serves to build rather than tear down, which can allow for more honest and effective interactions.

## Rule #3: Make statements

As Fey writes in *Bossypants*, whatever the problem, be part of the solution. People who constantly ask questions put pressure on others to find solutions or to make suggestions. We have all worked with those people. They have the power to slow progress, sometimes causing the organization to grind to a halt. Organizations need problem solvers, or people who make statements; they need solutions. There’s no shortage of hard questions and challenges to overcome, and while it’s important that you ask tough questions, organizations need leaders who can bring solutions to the table. Making statements in improv sets a direction that everyone can follow. It provides a roadmap, not a final

destination but a direction. Making statements in improv is leadership – and everyone takes the lead - helping to create a path and setting down that road together.

### Rule #4: There are no mistakes, only opportunities

If you follow the other rules of improv, then the possibilities are limitless – and there are no mistakes. You listen, react and create something new, and this simple act can lead to something novel and unexpected. While there are definitely mistakes to be made in business, this fourth and final rule of improv is about accepting and moving on. Improv is about moving forward and exploring new, uncharted territory – not looking backward or placing blame. Organizations and business leaders can waste a lot of time pouring over past mistakes and casting blame, which can lead to an overly cautious culture where everyone is afraid to make mistakes and no one takes chances. Good leaders take responsibility, learn from mistakes and move on. To be successful now and in the future, companies need to be free to try new things, take risks, experiment and innovate. The real failure is not learning from past mistakes.

Popsicles and penicillin, Slinkies and stainless steel, Play-doh and Post-it notes, they were all “happy accidents.” The inventors of all these innovations regarded their “mistakes” as opportunities and enriched (and in some cases, actually saved) lives.

## How Improv Builds Better Leaders

Talent development professionals are tasked with a huge challenge—to create business leaders who have the knowledge and experience to be effective, and the ability to adapt when that knowledge and experience is insufficient. No amount of work experience can fully prepare senior business leaders for the challenges they will face in the complex and constantly changing global economy. How do you prepare individuals for the unexpected, when the challenges they will face depend less on what they know and more on how they think? Talent management professionals must find ways to help their leaders transcend knowledge and experience to become more dynamic and agile. Business leaders need to be outstanding communicators, innovators, decision makers, change agents, critical thinkers, not to mention be

## Tina Fey's Rules for Improv

*"The first rule of improvisation is **AGREE**. Always agree and SAY YES. When you're improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we're improvising and I say, "Freeze, I have a gun," and you say, "That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me," our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say, "Freeze, I have a gun!" and you say, "The gun I gave you for Christmas! You bastard!" then we have started a scene because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun.*

Now, obviously in real life you're not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to "respect what your partner has created" and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that takes you.

As an improviser, I always find it jarring when I meet someone in real life whose first answer is no. "No, we can't do that." "No, that's not in the budget." "No, I will not hold your hand for a dollar." What kind of way is that to live?

*The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but **YES, AND**. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you just say, "Yeah..." we're kind of at a standstill. But if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say "What did you expect? We're in hell." Or if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here" and you say, "Yes, this can't be good for the wax figures." Or if I say, "I can't believe it's so hot in here," and you say, "I told you we shouldn't have crawled into this dog's mouth," now we're getting somewhere.*

To me YES, AND means don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile.

*The next rule is **MAKE STATEMENTS**. This is a positive way of saying, "Don't ask questions all the time." If we're in a scene and I say, "Who are you? Where are we? What are we doing here? What's in that box?" I'm putting pressure on you to come up with all the answers. (Continued...)*

### Tina Fey's Rules for Improv (...continued)

In other words: Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles. We've all worked with that person. That person is a drag. It's usually the same person around the office who says things like "There's no calories in it if you eat it standing up!" and "I felt menaced when Terry raised her voice."

**MAKE STATEMENTS** also applies to us women: Speak in statements instead of apologetic questions. No one wants to go to a doctor who says, "I'm going to be your surgeon? I'm here to talk to you about your procedure? I was first in my class at Johns Hopkins, so?" Make statements with your actions and your voice.

Instead of saying "Where are we?" Make a statement like "Here we are in Spain, Dracula." Okay, "Here we are in Spain, Dracula" may seem like a terrible start to a scene, but this leads us to the best rule:

**THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities.** If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what? Now I'm a hamster in a hamster wheel. I'm not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I'll end up being a police hamster who's been on "hamster wheel" duty because I'm "too much of a loose cannon" in the field. In improv there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world's greatest discoveries have been by accident. I mean, look at the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, or Botox."

Source: Fey, 2011.

able to handle ambiguity, promote teamwork and collaboration, and to be the best coach and mentor they can be. It is a tall order indeed. Developing these leadership abilities that are so critical to organizational success will force many leaders outside of their comfort zones.

Talent management professionals should view improv as a powerful resource in the development of these skills. In many ways, the tools and techniques of improv are uniquely suited to help business leaders develop these critical skills and behaviors. According to Sara Finch, director of learning at Second City Communications in Chicago, the core elements of improv—support, trust and embracing the ideas of others—align well with these much-needed skills. Improv, she says, can help employees better manage uncomfortable conversations (such as conversations about work performance,



feedback, etc.); improve listening skills; and create a supportive and nonjudgmental atmosphere (Hastings, 2009).

The rapid-fire nature of improv also improves the ability to think on one's feet, a skill that applies well in leadership and negotiation situations (Tutton, 2010). "Improv allows organizations to be more nimble, flexible and open to change. It teaches people and organizations that they can adapt without making it a huge emotional crisis," says Greg Hohn, a seasoned improvisational artist, senior lecturer at UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School, and program manager for the soft skills and leadership training company, FIZ. There is also evidence, according to Gary Golden, associate professor of business at Muskingum University in New Concord, Ohio, that improv skills can remove some rigidity and structure that can impede organizational growth (Golden, 2011).

Improv techniques can be particularly effective in developing future leaders from the "Net Generation"—those recent college graduates and current students poised to enter the workplace in the next few years. This generation likes to learn by doing (e.g., learn by inductive discovery), are visual communicators, enjoy social interaction, are collaborative, and are emotionally more open than previous generations. These characteristics align well with the rules and results of improv (Berk & Trieber, 2009).

### Improv Company Spotlight: FIZ



FIZ ([www.thefiz.biz](http://www.thefiz.biz))

offers leadership

development experiences designed for soft skills such as thinking on one's feet, creativity and coaching. It puts the principles and techniques of improv theater to work in non-theatrical venues such as corporations, academic institutions, organizations, and professional groups. FIZ programs are experiential and focus on discussion rather than lecture. Their length is tailored to the client's needs and can range anywhere from 30-minute interactive presentations to in-depth seminars, retreats, and courses that can last from two hours to two weeks or even a semester. FIZ clients include Burt's Bees, Manpower, Inc., and Microsoft.

# How Talent Management Professionals Can Use Improv

Using improv for the development of business leaders is particularly appealing because it can be applied immediately and can be continually reinforced. Improv activities and exercises are easy to implement, and they provide tools, tricks and techniques that individuals can practice and refine. Applied learning that can be easily reinforced can provide real sustainable change in an organization.

Cathy Salit, CEO of organizational change firm Performance of a Lifetime

and accomplished singer, actress, director and improvisational comic, agrees that real organizational change through improv is possible. “We develop people and organizations through the art of improvisational performance,” she says. “We use improvisation to establish an environment in which we can move executives out of their comfort zones and support them in taking risks, embracing their mistakes and exercising their creativity. Their abilities, mind-sets and behavioral repertoires expand and the process of professional and personal transformation begin.”

To help sustain that change, Performance of a Lifetime engages executives in improv-based “performance coaching groups.” “Executives experience their capacity to make different kinds of behavioral choices,” says Salit. “In our language, they begin to see and experience themselves and others as performers, as producers of their own conversations, and as creators of new, more varied social relationships. The performance coaching groups provide a rehearsal environment for real-time direction and support for navigating leadership and communication challenges. We support executives by encouraging them to continue developing their improv ‘muscles’ through these performance coaching groups. We feel that it is vital to ongoing development—and to change that sticks.”

## Improv Company Spotlight: Performance of a Lifetime

Performance of a Lifetime



([www.performanceofalifetime.com](http://www.performanceofalifetime.com)) is a global organizational change company headquartered in New York that develops people and organizations through the art of performance. It designs and delivers customized programs to develop leadership, enhance collaboration and communication, and to drive culture change. Performance of a Lifetime clients include American Express, Credit Suisse, TripAdvisor, Marathon Petroleum, Johns Hopkins Hospital, and PwC.

## Next Steps: Applying Improv in Your Organization

Improv can be a very effective method to develop the critical skills required for today's business leaders in a hands-on, energizing way. Improv is increasingly finding its way into leadership development programs. Pepsi, McDonald's and the United Way have all used improv in their corporate training programs (Glazer, 2008). U.S. Cellular has used improv to improve diversity awareness in their organization, and Nike used improv to help managers design new shoes (Hastings, 2009; Thilmany, 2007). Alain Rostain, founder of the New York-based consulting firm Creative Advantage, has used improv with such clients as Kraft, Starbucks, GE and R.J. Reynolds to improve creativity and brainstorming (Golden, 2011).

Improv can develop a wide range of skills and behaviors, but it does have limitations and may not be the best solution for every talent development challenge you face. As you consider whether improv would be effective in your organization, you should:

- Reflect on the qualifications and competencies that your leaders will require.
  - How well do they align with the skills you can develop with improv?
- Consider the individual business leaders and whether they would benefit from this type of experience.
  - Are there specific leaders, teams, divisions or business units that would be appropriate or others that might resist this non-traditional approach?
- Evaluate other leadership development activities that may already be in place to develop these skills and whether they would be more or less effective than improv.

“Improvisation provides a set of tools for developing authentic leadership skills, and just like other leadership techniques, it is not right for every occasion,” says Bob Kulhan of Business Improvisations. “How and when you use these tools must depend on the leader, the team and the specific situation.”

If you think improv may benefit your organization and your leadership development efforts, then there are a number of resources available to you. There are a number of excellent companies focused exclusively on bringing improv to the workplace for leadership development. In addition, if your organization works with an academic partner they may have established relationships with reputable improv companies that focus on leadership development. In some cases, academic partners may have improvisation experts on their faculty. Improvisation courses are part of the curriculum in the business schools at UNC Kenan-Flagler, Duke University, UCLA, Columbia University, MIT, the University of Virginia, Carnegie Mellon, and Babson College (Glazer, 2008; Golden, 2011). If you choose to employ improv in your organization, it is strongly recommended that you work with a highly trained professional, well-versed in improv and how it applies to leadership development.

## Conclusion

Implemented properly, improv can help build trust, increase collaboration and team building, improve communication skills, promote innovation and creativity, improve tolerance to ambiguity and change, and help leaders feel more self-confident, open, and less afraid to take risks. It can help you and your organization develop the skills and behaviors that are critical to lead in the modern global economy.

## About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning to ensure that all individuals gain relevant new skills that they can easily implement within their own organizations. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

### Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. We are dedicated to following-up with our clients and individual participants to ensure that their learning experiences have been meaningful and impactful. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

### Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind, and we are focused on successfully meeting our clients' business and academic expectations. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

### Contact Us

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