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A Ropes Course for the Mind: Building Teams & Communication One Improv Game at a Time

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Why improv?

Improvisation theater games are wonderful resources because they call for participants to respond to an experience as it happens. This moment of involvement and spontaneity sparks discovery, creative expression, shared laughter and behavior change. Improv is exciting, scary, challenging, immensely enjoyable and paradoxical. In my experience, very few people are indifferent to the idea of participating in an improv structure.

The skills that make improvisational theater participants successful 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.

The games offer participants new activities, new ways of inviting participation, new ways of learning and new ways of understanding their relationships and themselves. The improv experience helps players understand how important skill areas are strengthened. For example, trust is enhanced when others believe you have their interests at heart; creative skills are strengthened both by not having a pre-determined agenda and being able to act on other people's visions; communication skills are sharpened by listening without interrupting, acknowledging what others say and by speaking from a place of emotional truth.

In improv, players create reality through individual action and honest emotion while at the same time they develop a shared vision with other players. Improv players gain confidence to allow their own spontaneity to flow without self-censorship, poise to allow the spontaneity of others to flow without criticism, and re-affirm their belief in their ability to solve problems.

During improv activities, the learning comes in the playing, debriefing, discussion and review sections. In practice, behavior change stems from the self-awareness participants experience about their own conduct and their newly recognized ability to change the way they "always did it" while recognizing their own responsibility for the way things turn out.

Risk factors

The hazard in using playing these games lies in the fact that no one can know how an improv game is going to turn out. Therefore, when using these games, we can't plan ahead; we can only step into the uncertainty with confidence in ourselves and our ability to make use of whatever comes up. In other words, we have to experience trust, vulnerability, spontaneity, eagerness and an openness to being uncomfortable in public. Why do it then? What's in it for us? There are certainly safer ways to make a point.

The greatest fear of "working without a net" is looking foolish, incompetent or wackier than others. When you experience the games from the same perspective and emotional level as your participants, your words and ideas carry more weight because you've shared their struggles. You have established rapport. You're now in a great position to help your clients overcome the usual obstacles to success: self - doubt, fear of looking foolish, thinking too much about what to do, and being resistant to change. One facilitator uses improv because "it puts people in the right frame of mind to achieve breakthroughs in thought." Because improv games are tools, their real value lies in what they create for the people we work with- the ability to balance spontaneity and control.

Play with your friends

As powerful as these games are, I caution you to use them in your work only after you've played the games as often as possible outside of your facilitation sessions. In other words, play the games with your friends, family, colleagues, and neighbors. Become comfortable with the surprise each game brings. Pay attention to the myriad of results that arise during the games. Let go of the need to know the outcome in advance. Honor the times you feel a discomfort. Explore that discomfoting area. It will make you a more confident performer and is the simplest way to bring improv into your repertoire. Remember that you can never know exactly how it will turn out. You must become comfortable with process while staying unconcerned about outcome. You discover magical things about improv. A colleague of mine realized that "improv was not about working without a net. It's about working with a net of confidence and creativity."

What you see is who they are

Improv is helpful because people don't often take the time to analyze their interactions and processes. I've found that the way a person behaves during an improv game is an insight into how they will behave in other stressful situations. Their thinking is also indicative of what they believe in those situations. So by asking certain basic questions we illuminate what's going on for the players and enable them to intuitively understand how they're own thinking affects their outcomes. Through improv we're able to see how a specific behavior or thought pattern leads to a result. It's like looking into the workings of the mind!

During the games, players will inevitably show some emotion. Common examples include saying, “oh, no,” stepping back from the action, or apologizing for something they said. This emotion is your signal to stop the action and ask a basic question such as “why did you do that?” or “what were you thinking when you did that.” I call these stoppages “instructional moments.”

The opportunity in the “instructional moment” for us is always in investigating WHY the game does or doesn’t work and what QUALITIES are present or absent. I always try to keep a participant playing a game until they have a successful experience. That gives everyone, audience included, a complete, participatory encounter and illuminates the workings of the interactions. I’ve found it most effective to let players continue a game until they’ve had a “successful” experience. This allows them (and the audience) to truly experience transformational change.

Eureka! We’ve got it!

The following questions can be used to debrief almost any improv game: “Did the game work as planned?” “Why/Why not?” “How were you feeling when it worked and when it didn’t work.” “What were the differences between the successful tries and the unsuccessful ones?” “What states did you go through to achieve the experience?” “How did what you were thinking (your BELIEF) affect the result (the OUTCOME)” “Where is the opportunity to change in this game?”

Contrary to popular belief, improv is not about thinking quickly, being funny or acting without rules. It is essentially the manifestation of paradox. It teaches 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.