



## Sustaining Teams

An Adventure in Improvisational Comedy

April 25, 2015

Have you ever been to a restaurant that offers mini portions of their most popular desserts? They're just enough to be satisfying without leaving you stuffed. And they're usually a fraction of the full price.

Think of this document as a dessert sampler. It includes three tastes of how BossaNova applies the best practices of improv comedy to day-to-day business life: Perspectives, Skills, and Practices. Try a little of each. Best of all, this dessert won't cost you a dime.

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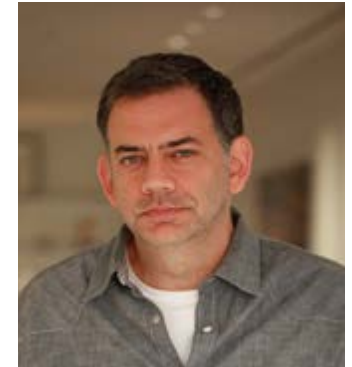
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I. Perspective

A LEADERSHIP MANTRA FOR MODERN TIMES: "I FAILED!"

Written by Shawn Westfall, The Get Real Project's Improv Guru

Somewhere around class three or four of the beginner's Improv class I teach at the DC Improv, I make the entire class stand up, raise their hands, and yell, as loud as they can "I FAILED! I FAILED AT IMPROV! I FAILED AT MAKING CRAP UP! HOORAY!"

Because, I tell them, they will. Failure is built into this medium. Not everything is perfect the first time out. Even seasoned veterans have bad shows. The now syndicated show "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?" airs for 22 minutes. But how long are the shows from which the producer and directors cherry-pick those segments? Hours. Why? Because not everything works. People who have shared the stage for decades sometimes have miscues, moments where in-the-moment choices don't always result in brilliance and magic. It's the nature of the beast. The trick is to get back on the horse and try again. And again, and again.

Then I find out who the baseball fans are in the room, and ask if any of them know who was the last person to hit .400 for a season was? The answer is of course Ted Williams. I'm no good at math (M.A., English Literature), but I'm almost certain that what that means is that out of every ten at bats, Ted Williams managed to hit safely only four of them. The other six times he failed in his endeavor to get on base. But he'd step up to the plate and try

again. And again. And the result was that amazing season. If Williams had stopped playing baseball after that annus mirabilis, he'd be in the Baseball Hall of Fame for that feat alone.

## Stop Predicting, Start Experimenting

Let's shift gears for a moment with a quick quiz: What do the following have in common?

- Those Andy Samberg/"The Lonely Island" digital shorts featured on "Saturday Night Live"
- A young woman's decision to spend a year cooking every single recipe in Julia Child's "The Art of French Cooking" and blog about the results, a blog that became a book, and then later a movie starring Meryl Streep ("Julie and Julia")
- The annual music/art/culture festival held in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, known as Burning Man
- "The Real World," now in its 21st season
- Morgan Spurlock's decision to spend a month eating every meal at McDonald's, which later resulted in the book and movie "Super-Size Me"
- "Web 2.0"
- Fantasy Football

The answer is that all of these phenomena originated as humble, low-level, low-overhead, low-entry, low-maintenance, unambitious experiments. Experiments with no guarantee of success, experiments that could have just as easily failed. Experiments that began by asking the question "what if," but resulted in large-scale cultural reception and reverberation. It's a phenomenon Grant McCracken describes as "Culturematics," the title of his most recent book of the same name<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>CULTUREMATIC: HOW REALITY TV, JOHN CHEEVER, A PIE LAB, JULIA CHILD, FANTASY FOOTBALL . . . WILL HELP YOU CREATE AND EXECUTE BREAKTHROUGH IDEAS, GRANT MCCRACKEN, HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW PRESS (2012)

## The Next Big Idea ... Isn't

What is a Culturematic, and how do you identify one? "A Culturematic," McCracken says, "is a little machine for making culture. It is designed to do three things: test the world, discover meaning, and unleash value."

Why are Culturematics important? The problem, as McCracken sees it, is that our various corporate, entrepreneurial and artistic institutions have an "all-or-nothing" approach when it comes finding the next "edge," a "one-thing-and-take-it-or-leave-it" mentality when it comes the next big idea, service, product, or campaign. And, more importantly, they want these big ideas to be foolproof, to come accompanied with guarantee of success—and as well they should, since these organizations spend a lot of time and money vetting them to ensure success.

**The trick is to get back on the horse and try again. And again, and again.**

And yet, McCracken says, despite our efforts to know the future and how we should respond to it, we are in essence flying blind. Our world is now so culturally un-centered and inscrutable, with so much of the technology and the media channels they house vying for attention, that locating a central "culture" from which we can accurately predict "the next big thing" is nearly impossible.

## The Courage to Lead Begins with a Choice

Improv scenes work the same way: operating from a center informed by training, experience, and talent, we step forward and make a choice to begin, hoping for successful scenes. But there's no guarantee they will be. There never is.

But that doesn't stop all of us—improvisors, artists, entrepreneurs, organizations and businesses—from operating in a winner-take-all mentality when it comes to the next big thing. We think in campaigns, grand gestures, large, wholesale efforts for products or services or works of art. And yet too often that isn't the way we operate at all: ironically, we often arrive at

these “big ideas” by throwing a lot of micro-Culturematics at brainstorming sessions we’re trying to solve a challenge, just to see what fits. The result is that we’ll ignore or even throw away a lot of good “small ideas” because they don’t seem to fit. In our efforts to build mansions, we tear down a lot of them because we don’t have enough furniture to fill the rooms.

**In our efforts to build mansions, we tear down a lot of them because we don’t have enough furniture to fill the rooms.**

To echo the “Culturematic” model: What if we kept the furniture? And what if mansions resulted from it? The world isn’t behaving like those legacy cultural institutions, organizations and companies (nor the cottage industries bent on predicting how it will be behave) want it to.

**In improv scenes, in work, and in life: never stop trying.**

McCracken’s answer is for those industries and institutions to instead behave like the world: “Don’t look for big ideas. Seek small ideas that can grow.” And if and when these small ideas fail, “fail fast. Fail often.”

In improv scenes, in work, and in life: never stop trying.

[Find out more about Shawn.](#)

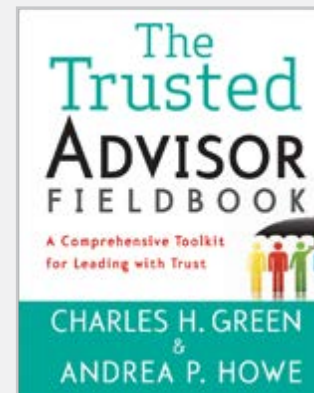
## II. Skill

### HOW MOMENTS OF TRUTH BECOME MOMENTS OF MASTERY: AN EXCERPT FROM *THE TRUSTED ADVISOR FIELDBOOK*

Brought to you by [Andrea Howe](#), BossaNova’s President and Founder.



Things do not always go as planned. There is no escaping those moments of truth that we all face when the unexpected occurs. Ironically, these unpredictable and stressful moments are some of your best opportunities to dramatically increase your trustworthiness—provided you are adept at thinking on your feet and allowing your best self to shine through.



Abstracted from [The Trusted Advisor Fieldbook: A Comprehensive Toolkit for Leading with Trust](#), by Charles H. Green and Andrea P. Howe. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. © 2012 by Charles H. Green and Andrea P. Howe. All rights reserved.



Anyone in business has encountered numerous unexpected and tricky situations. Those uncomfortable, awkward moments seem to occur at the worst possible times.

### Examples of the unexpected moments:

- A prospective client asks you point blank, “What experience do you have in XYZ industry?” Even though you saw that question coming, you did not think it would be quite so direct. The honest answer is none—only you are afraid to say so because you think it would be a deal-breaker. How do you let them know about your other relevant experience that they will surely want to hear about before summarily dismissing you?
- You thought the draft report you turned in yesterday was pretty good until you got an e-mail from your supervisor saying she is disappointed in the product and is seriously reconsidering your participation in the next and biggest phase of the project. How do you respond?

**Q: Faced with a moment of truth, what do you do?**

**A: Improvise.**

- You walk into a client meeting with a very senior leader, to discuss how to expand the successful work you are doing together. But an hour earlier you accidentally overheard him in the lunchroom speaking with colleagues about dumping your organization and hiring a competitor instead. Now what do you do?

We call these moments of truth—when something happens, and suddenly it feels like you are alone on a sinking ship with no life preserver in sight, and you would rather be anywhere but where you are.

Q. Faced with a moment of truth, what do you do?

A. Improvise.

### Know the Science behind Moments of Truth

Daniel Goleman, author of the best-seller *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, helps us understand the science behind our reaction in a moment of truth. He used the phrase “amygdala hijack” to describe how the well-functioning thinking brain (the neocortex) gets completely overruled by the reptilian brain—the part that manages your survival. Then your amygdala-threatened-self does something untrustworthy like spin a great story of how you don’t exactly have direct experience in XYZ industry but blah blah blah. Or subtly (and maybe overtly) you blame your colleague for the subpar work product. Or you completely sidestep an awkward interaction in favor of maintaining the pretense that everything is okay.

In other words: You are in fight or flight mode, and often both at once. The result? A moment of truth can lead you to tell something less than the truth. You improvise, think on your feet—only not with a positive result. Improvisation doesn’t have to go that way.

**Being effective in a moment of truth requires more than mastering a few behavioral tricks—it demands a new way of thinking and being.**

### Rehearse Principles, Not Lines

Improvising means to invent, compose, or perform with little or no preparation. Improvisation is exactly what is called for in a moment of truth: the ability to deal immediately with something unexpected.

Practicing improvisation may sound like an oxymoron—how do you rehearse something that is supposed to be spontaneous? While it sounds odd, practice is exactly how professional improvisational comedy performers become so skilled at their craft. There are many techniques you can learn from improv performers, such as:



- Being quick to respond instead of overthinking.
- Providing “Yes, and ...” responses to build on what has already been said, instead of contradicting or denying what someone else has offered.
- Subordinating your own ego to support what the collective is creating instead of stealing a scene by hogging the spotlight.
- Giving up being clever and witty and funny and instead getting real.

**While it sounds odd, practice is exactly how professional improvisational comedy performers become so skilled at their craft.**

Improvisational performers make up scenes over and over, always with new scenarios and relationships that are completely invented on the spot. And then when it’s show time and the curtain goes up, they still have no idea what they are going to create together because every new scene is based on audience suggestions. What they do know is that they are fully rehearsed at being responsive, collaborative, and authentic. In other words, they may not have rehearsed lines, but they have rehearsed principles. And they are able to lead with trust as a result.

### INSIGHT: FOUR KEY SKILLS OF IMPROV<sup>1</sup>

1. Being open to new ideas. Developing comfort with accepting ideas of others, building on them, and taking them to the next level.
2. Listening. Being attentive, sensitive, tuned in.
3. Being in the moment. Dealing masterfully with the unexpected. Demonstrating agility and flexibility.

<sup>1</sup> Cary Paul, “[Laughter Is the Best Corporate Medicine,](#)” Blog, July 14, 2010.



4. Underthinking. Walt Disney said it best: “The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.”

### Role-Play Your Way to Mastery

In a business setting, role-playing with prewritten cases sometimes feels uncomfortable and contrived. A common refrain during debriefs in our programs is this: “If only I’d known more about the situation I could have handled it better.”

Consider this: How many times have you prepped for hours, even days for a meeting, only to learn just as the meeting begins that your senior leader just returned from another meeting in which a major decision was made that completely alters (1) your agenda for this meeting and (2) your entire set of recommendations for the engagement?

In a moment of truth, having background, history, and facts does not matter because your reptilian brain does not care—it is focused exclusively on the immediate emotions. Your amygdala has been hijacked. It has neither the time nor the inclination to process anything else. Role-playing helps tremendously by making it possible for you to interrupt or, at the very least, redirect the amygdala hijack.

### Try These Role-Play Workouts Anyone Can Do

Try this: Get together with a colleague or two. Brainstorm a list of things your clients or colleagues have said or could say that are likely to put your reptilian brain on alert. Here are some examples to get you started:

- “I’m very disappointed in your work product.”
- “We’d like to find someone else to lead the workshop for us. There are concerns about your style.”
- “What experience do you have in XYZ industry?”
- “Why are you so much more expensive?”
- “I’m not sure I really see the point, this is all just common sense.”
- “We’re giving the account to someone else.”

## FIVE WAYS TO THINK OUT LOUD IN A MOMENT OF TRUTH

Practice identifying your immediate response in these moments of truth. What is the first thing that comes out of your mouth without thinking? Is it defensive? Explanatory? That would make sense—that is a survival tactic. Or is your response authentic in a positive and productive way? That would be your thinking brain at work.

Practice until you can reliably respond with your thinking brain. Use your colleagues as objective observers and ask them to be tough with their feedback—it is the best way to improve quickly.

### Think Out Loud with Your Thinking Brain

The practice of “Thinking out loud,” first introduced in [“Trust-Based Selling,”](#) achieves two things:

1. Frees you up to be a better listener. If you listen first, then think out loud, it is possible to separate the two activities, which makes it possible for you to really focus on listening. (For specific ways to improve your listening skills, see Chapter 6, “Listen.”)
2. Trains you to be collaborative. When you share the very formation of your thoughts in a transparent way, you are demonstrating your partnering skills. (For specific ways to improve your partnering skills, see Chapter 7, “Partner.”)

Thinking out loud is a great way to hone your improvisational skills. The key is to get good at thinking out loud with your thinking brain, rather than your reptilian brain. We are not suggesting you unleash your uncensored self on your colleagues—that would be your reptilian brain talking. We are suggesting you bring a little more candor, vulnerability, and humility to your interactions.



When someone says:	You might be thinking:	Avoid saying:	Instead, think out loud by saying:
“What experience do you have in XYZ industry?”	“Uh oh.”	“Only a few years in the industry, but I do have blah blah blah ...”	“I have two years in the industry. Is that a concern?”
“Why are you so much more expensive?”	“Because we’re worth it! The other guys are cons!”	“Our prices are higher because blah blah blah...”	“I hear you on ‘too expensive.’ There could be a number of reasons for a disconnect here. Would you help me understand what you mean by that?”
“I’m very disappointed in your product.”	“What? Huh? How can that be?”	“We feel it’s a quality product and stand behind it.”	“I’m not sure what to say – that’s not at all what I was expecting to hear. It’s certainly not what I want to hear. Can you tell me more?”
“We’re giving the account to someone else.”	“%@#*!”	“Well, I guess we’re finished here. Thanks for your time.”	“Well, shoot. That’s a real disappointment. I’m sorry to hear it. I’d like to hear more about what’s behind that, if you’re willing to share it.”
“Do you have any other people who could lead the workshop for us? There are concerns about your style.”	“Ummmm ... what’s wrong with me?”	“We have many global clients who like my style.”	“Oh, no, ouch! I may need a moment to pick my ego up off the floor. In all seriousness, we do have others, and I’d be glad to work with you to find the best fit. Can you tell me more about what qualities are important to you? I won’t take it personally—well, only a little!”



## USING “YES, AND...” TO THINK OUT LOUD

Of course the words have to be your own, reflecting your own style and personality. The *Five Ways to Think Out Loud in a Moment of Truth* are meant to give you general ideas about retraining your brain—and your mouth—to be more effective in a moment of truth.

You will note there is a little humor included in our examples. Humor is optional, and highly recommended. Those who don’t take themselves too seriously are the ones who seem to know how to bring levity to awkward conversations.

**Humor is optional, and highly recommended. Those who don’t take themselves too seriously seem to know how to bring levity to awkward conversations.**

### The Power of “Yes, and ...”

The *Five Ways to Think Out Loud in a Moment of Truth* all have something in common: they are “Yes, and ...” responses, figuratively speaking. “Yes, and ...” is a core technique used by professional improvisers to foster collaboration and teamwork. By responding with words that imply “yes,” you accept what is happening in the moment and acknowledge what your partner has said. By then adding words that imply “and,” you build on that acknowledgment and advance the relationship or the action. Using “Yes, and...” to Think Out Loud parses out the “Yes, and ...” elements of these statements.

“Yes”	“and...”
“I have two years in the industry.”	“Is that a concern?”
“I hear you on ‘too expensive.’”	“There could be a number of reasons for a disconnect here. Would you help me understand what you mean by that?”
“I’m not sure what to say – that’s not at all what I was expecting to hear.”	“It’s certainly not what I want to hear. Can you tell me more?”
“Well, shoot. That’s a real disappointment. I’m sorry to hear it.”	“I’d like to hear more about what’s behind that, if you’re willing to share it.”
“Oh, no, ouch! I may need a moment to pick my ego up off the floor!”	“In all seriousness, we do have others, and I’d be glad to work with you to find the best fit. Can you tell me more about what qualities are important to you? I won’t take it personally—well, only a little!”



The next time you are in a meeting, notice how many times your replies embody the spirit of “Yes, and ...” and how many times your contribution is more of a “Yes, but ...” Make a concerted effort to bring more “Yes, and ...” to the conversation and you will notice a marked improvement in your results.

### III. Practice

#### WHEN THEY SAY, “DON’T TRY THIS AT HOME,” TRY IT AT THE OFFICE INSTEAD



Shared by [Cary Paul](#), The Get Real Project's Chief Improv Officer

Plato once said, “You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.” While he probably wasn’t referring to creating a more engaged and productive work team in the 21st century, it still applies. Improv is completely usable in your workplace—even without the supervision of a professional comedian.

We’ve documented five practices from various improv workshops to make it easy for you to plug and play. Try them! What’s the worst that can happen, more laughter, right? Choose thoughtfully, and follow some basic rules:

- Leverage the two warm-up exercises, Tiger-Martian-Consultant and Zip-Zap-Zop. They each set the stage for something fun and productive before introducing Emotional Symphony, Emotional Party or Mr. So & So.
- If you have persistent teamwork issues, Emotional Symphony is well suited to that situation.
- If you want to gain a fresh perspective on the unconscious/informal roles we play, and how those help and hinder our success, try Mr. So & So.
- We suggest doing one warm up and one of the more advanced exercises at a time. See how those go. Then try out the other two.



## BE NIMBLE WITH TIGER-MARTIAN-CONSULTANT

Improviculty: super duper easy

### Why It Matters

Tiger-Martian-Consultant gets people off their feet, and helps them realize they are in an environment that's fun and safe to take risks. It warms them up to the coming activities, and starts the creative engine.

### How to Do It

With the group standing, invite all participants to both verbally and physically emulate a Tiger (hands up in claws, and “grrrr”), then Martian (fingers pointed up at sides of head, “beep-beep”), and then Consultant (hand extended for a cheesy handshake, “hi there”). Randomly rotate through the three call and response actions, gaining speed throughout the exercise, until an appropriate end (about 12-15 call-outs.) Have everyone freeze on a final “Tiger” or “Martian”—ask participants to look around the room at each other, and make the following observation: “I promise at no time during this meeting will anyone look sillier than this” or “Now, see, this is a group that can have a good laugh together.”

### What to Expect

- Hierarchical lines fade away
- People start the meeting, session, conference, etc with a smile and an expectation that their work can and will be enjoyable

## ZIP-ZAP-ZOP YOUR CARES AWAY

Improviculty: super easy

### Why It Matters

Zip-Zap-Zop, and its variations, creates energy and connectedness amongst the group. Plus it allows the team to find out more about each other and what's top of mind about the company and the team.

### How to Do It

The team stands in a circle. One person starts by pointing to—and making eye contact with—someone else in the circle and says “Zip.” That person (the one on the receiving end of “Zip”) points to someone else, making eye contact, and says “Zap.” That person points to someone else, making eye contact, and says “Zop.” This continues around the circle for a couple of minutes. Encourage people to go faster and faster.

Now take it up a notch: Change Zip-Zap-Zop to colors, so each person points to someone, making eye contact, and says a color. (Note: the blander the better; the point is not to be clever, but to be fast.) Then change colors to food. Finally change food to the company or team, so each person points to someone, making eye contact, and says the first thing that comes to mind about the company or team.

### What to Expect

- Understanding of team relationships and communication
- The opportunity to observe and experience how we tend to overthink instead of being in the moment
- People start the meeting, session, conference, etc with a smile and an expectation that their work can and will be enjoyable

\*This practice was originally shared on the Blog as the [March 2012 Improv Tip of the Month](#). Special thanks to Barry Edwards for your contribution.



## CONDUCT AN EMOTIONAL SYMPHONY THAT'S RIGHT ON KEY

Improviculty: pretty easy

### Why It Matters

Teamwork is a critical component of business and often a cause of robust challenges. When things are off, a cacophony ensues. When the right balance is achieved, beautiful music is made. An “Emotional Symphony” gives participants a chance to explore a range of emotions, from anxiety to elation, and everything along the way. While the exercise is fun and engaging, it is also powerful metaphorically for how teams work (or sometimes don't work) well together.

### How to Do It

#### 1. Set it up.

- Identify the 15 minutes you will reserve for this module. It can be during a staff meeting, an offsite, or just end of the day shop-talk. It needs to be scheduled, and well-attended.
- Agree on which teamwork issues to address. Examples include:
  - Our team has difficulty communicating
  - People seem to bring all their troubles to work
  - The staff isn't gelling
- Steel yourself for what you are about to bring to the team (as their leader, their teammate, or their OD consultant) because some of them might be uncomfortable. Yes ... and remember, a little discomfort is good for growth.
- Get the right people in the room.

#### 2. Introduce it.

- Solicit volunteers. You'll need five for this exercise. Don't just choose the eccentric extrovert in the front row, dig a little deeper for the hidden gems on your team. Look for the folks who are more likely to lean back and let others lead. To entice people, bring up the musical theme of this exercise—let them know that anyone who sings, who has ever played an instrument, or who watches American Idol will easily relate to this one.
- Set the stage by sharing the goal of this exercise, why improv will help, and what results you will achieve (see “Why it Matters” and “What to Expect”).
- Warm up with Zip-Zap-Zop or Tiger-Martian-Consultant.

#### 3. Run it.

**Involve the audience.** Ask the audience to shout out items you'd commonly find around your office. For example, they might offer up “laptop!” and “printer!” as well as “stapler!” and “copier!” Assign one item to each volunteer. Then, ask the audience to shout out emotion, and assign one emotion to each item/volunteer. For example, perhaps the laptop is confused, the printer is passionate, the stapler is anxious. Each volunteer has an “emotional” office item.

**Finish setting the stage.** Explain that each that each “musician,” when directed to do so by the conductor (you), is to wax poetic about their office item, in the tone of their emotion. For instance, if you have a confused laptop she might say, “Ever since I upgraded to Windows 8 I just haven't felt like myself! My apps don't fit right, and I seem to have lost that intimate connection to my aircard. It's all very confusing and I feel so lost!” Note: the example provided here is just for you; your volunteers will amaze you with what they create in the moment without any examples—in fact, it's better if you don't constrain them.



**Conduct your symphony.** Now, the “musicians” are ready. Begin by conducting them with simple hand motions. With the upward wave of your imaginary baton, invite the first musician to “play.” After a few moments, bring the baton down and move to the second musician. Continue until the end of the row. Then, return to each musician at random and explore changes in volume and pace: crescendo (louder) ... allegro (faster) ... pianissimo (softer). Now, play with musical combinations. Create a small ensemble—a duet or trio. Mix it up in short intervals. At the end, invite all five musicians to play full out, all at the same time. Silence them, and end with one lone musician in a brief and final solo. Finally, lead your volunteers in a well-deserved bow.

**4. Run it again.** Run the exercise a second time, with a different set of volunteers. For the second run, tie directly to the team’s issue. Ask the audience to suggest emotions that are aligned with the actual emotions in the workplace about this issue (such as anxious, doubting, optimistic, etc.).

**5. Debrief it.** Debrief the exercise immediately after both rounds are complete, so participants can easily recall the outcomes and their experience. Debriefing questions might include:

- Volunteers: What was it like to be one of the musicians?
- Audience: What did you observe about the participants, the exercise itself, the content?
- All: How did anxiety transform into energy?
- All: How does the emotional state of one musician affect the group?
- All: What aspects of real life were given voice in the symphony?
- All: How might emotions best be expressed and channeled on our team?
- All: What actions might there be to take now that we didn’t see before?

**6. Celebrate!** You took a risk and made progress on a persistent issue using an unconventional approach. Nicely done!

### What to Expect

It’s not uncommon for groups to dig deep with this exercise and discover meaningful insights into their own dynamics. Sometimes, group members will point out that there is at least a little bit of truth in even the most “over-the-top” performances. If they don’t land there, guide them to it. Not only is it almost always true, but discussing it in a thoughtful and constructive way can be very helpful in breaking through some tough topics.

Not only will the team see their teamwork through a new lens, they will also benefit from:

- The transformational nature of laughter
- The opportunity to see other team members in a new light
- The opportunity to express the emotions of an experience



## HOST AN EMOTIONAL PARTY TO ADDRESS THOSE OLD, NAGGING ISSUES

Improvuculty: pretty easy

### Why It Matters

Use this exercise when you need to lead a team through a challenging situation, event, or problem that seems to come back time and again. Through the use of a classic improv exercise called “The Emotional Party,” the team will experience the positive effects of changing perspectives and opinions, while learning how to stay focused in the process. Participants (and the audience through them vicariously) will explore a full range of emotions on a particular issue. This presents all involved the opportunity to experience the dynamic power of new ideas influencing others around us.

### How to Do It

#### 1. Set it up.

- Identify the 15 minutes you will reserve for this module. It can be during a staff meeting, an offsite, or just end of the day shop-talk. It needs to be scheduled, and well-attended.
- Agree on which Old, Nagging Issue to address. Examples include:
  - Our team has difficulty communicating
  - Our clients are upset because they aren't getting the response times they expect
  - We are stuck in a do-loop and have lost all creativity and inventiveness
- Steel yourself for what you are about to bring to the team (as their leader, their teammate, or their OD consultant) because some of them will be uncomfortable. Yes ... and remember, a little discomfort is good for growth.
- Get the right people in the room.

#### 2. Introduce it.

- Set the stage by sharing the goal of this exercise, why improv will help, and what results you will achieve (see “Why it Matters” and “What to Expect”).
- Warm up with Zip-Zap-Zop or Tiger-Martian-Consultant.

**3. Run it.** Introduce the primary exercise: Emotional Party. Ask for four volunteers. Explain that a host participant is throwing a party—any kind of party (based on audience suggestion). Have the audience help you assign an emotion to each participant. The host begins, in the “theme” of their emotion, speaking about the party. One-at-a-time, three different guests will “arrive”—about 2 minutes apart—portraying the assigned emotion. With each new arrival, the current guests all take on the new emotion and continue the party scene in this new emotional state. Once all three guests have arrived, they then begin to depart in reverse order—about 1 minute apart. The last to arrive is the first to depart. As each guest departs, the remaining guests return to portraying the emotion of the next guest to depart.

For example:

- Host is “forgetful” and speaking about the party.
- About 2 minutes later, Guest #1 arrives “elated.” Host and Guest #1 are both elated.
- About 2 minutes later, Guest #2 arrives “depressed.” Host and Guests #1 and #2 continue the scene depressed.
- About 2 minutes later, Guest #3 arrives “anxious.” Host and Guests #1, #2, and #3 continue the scene anxious.
- About 2 minutes later, Guest #3 departs. Host and Guests #1 and #2 continue the scene depressed.
- About 1 minutes later, Guest #2 departs. Host and Guest #1 continue the scene elated.
- About 1 minute later, Guest #1 departs. Host continues scene forgetful, for 30 seconds.



**4.Run it again.** Run the exercise a second time, with a different set of four volunteers. For the second run, tie directly to the team’s Old, Nagging Issue. The party will “Celebrate overcoming the old, nagging issue of \_\_\_\_\_.” Ask the audience to suggest emotions that are aligned with the actual emotions in the workplace about this old, nagging issue (such as anxious, doubting, optimistic, etc.).

**5.Debrief it.** Debrief the exercise immediately after both rounds are complete, so participants can easily recall the outcomes and their experience. Debriefing questions might include:

- Volunteers: What was your experience of doing this exercise?
- Volunteers: In what ways did you find yourself being innovative? Was it difficult to keep focused on the issue, the emotion or both?
- Audience: What did you observe about the participants, the exercise itself, the content?
- All: How did anxiety transform into energy?
- All: What new perspectives do you now have on this old issue?
- All: What actions might there be to take now that we didn’t see before?

**6. Celebrate!** You took a risk and made progress on a persistent issue using an unconventional approach. Nicely done!

## What to Expect

Not only will the team see those Old, Nagging Issues through a new lens, they will also benefit from:

- The transformational nature of laughter
- The opportunity to see other team members in a new light
- Experiencing the viral effect of how they “show up” to a situation. Their emotions impact others, positively or negatively.
- The opportunity to experience and observe how people can morph from reactivity (their reaction to an issue or situation) to adaptability (how they get off their own “script” and see the issue or situation from another perspective.)



## MR. SO & SO SHEDS LIGHT ON OUR INVISIBLE NAME TAGS

Improviculty: a wee bit more challenging

### Why It Matters

This practice involves a slightly more complex exercise know as “Mr. So & So,” which reinforces the importance of self-awareness, self-confidence, and empathy at work. Mr. So & So helps you take a close look at how you act, react, behave at work, what your ideas and attitudes are about the job, the culture, the clients, and your colleagues. Use it when you need a dose of honesty and understanding to fortify your team.

It’s a fun game to play, primarily because it does something so many of us wish we could do in real life: spot the invisible nametags people often wear.

### How to Do It

#### 1. Set it up.

- Identify the 15 minutes you will reserve for this module. It can be during a staff meeting, an offsite, or just end of the day shop-talk. It needs to be scheduled, and well-attended.
- Steel yourself for what you are about to bring to the team (as their leader, their teammate, or their OD consultant) because some of them will be uncomfortable. Yes ... and remember, a little discomfort is good for growth.
- Get the right people in the room.

#### 2. Introduce it.

- Get four volunteers up in front of the group. If possible, get a mix of personalities...people with extreme confidence, people who are shy, etc.

- Set the stage by sharing the goal of this exercise, why improv will help, and what results you will achieve (see “Why it Matters” and “What to Expect”).

- Warm up with Zip-Zap-Zop or Tiger-Martian-Consultant.

### 3. Run it.

Ask the audience to suggest a bunch of personality quirks or annoying character traits or habits, and then assign them to the improvisational actors. The quirkier, more annoying, more challenging, or more outrageous the better.

Some examples are:

- Mr. Guy-Who-Talks-Only-In-Sports-Metaphors
- Ms. Gal-Who-Speaks-in-Rhyme
- Mr. Guy-Who-Can’t-Get-Over-His-Ex
- Ms. Gal-Who-Talks-To-Everyone-As-If-They’re-Children
- Mr. Guy-Who-Plays-Air-Guitar-All-The-Time
- Ms. Gal-Who’s-Weirdly-Obsessed-with-George-Clooney

Once their quirks or traits have been established, the actors begin a scene of your choosing (something simple, like two plumbers fixing a leaky pipe), seeing the world and every action in the scene through the unique perspective they’ve been assigned. Two actors might start the scene, but they’ll soon begin cueing other actors on stage: “Oh, look, if it isn’t Ms. Gal-Who-Always-Thinks-She’s-In-A-Beauty-Pageant.” Soon all the actors are in the scene, each processing his or her experience through their respective character’s lens.

Once all four volunteers have been brought into the scene, and together they have “solved the issue” (i.e. fixed pipe) or reached a humorous stalemate, the scene is over.





**4. Run it again.** Run the exercise a second time, with a different set of volunteers. For the second run, have the audience assign traits or habits (both constructive and prohibiting) that are typical around the office. For example:

- Guy-Who-Shoots-Down-Every-Idea
- Gal-Who-Cheers-On-Colleagues'-Successes
- Guy-With-The-Endless-Supply-Of-Great-Ideas
- Gal-Who-Always-Complains-About-The-Client(s)

Now, generate a list of challenges the group is actually facing—for example, someone needs to give the boss bad news, or we don't have the executive sponsorship we need, or our competitors are spreading rumors about us. Then choose one, and tie the scene directly to it.

The scene is complete when the problem is solved or, at least, better understood by all volunteers.

**5. Debrief it.** Debrief the exercise immediately after both rounds are complete, so participants can easily recall the outcomes and their experience. Debriefing questions might include:

- Volunteers: What was your experience of doing this exercise?
- Volunteers: What did you learn about yourself and your own invisible name tags?
- Volunteers: What did you learn about others?
- Audience: What did you observe about the participants, the exercise itself, and the content?
- All: What new perspectives do you now have on your team challenges?

- All: How might you personally contribute more fully/productively to the team?

**6. Celebrate!** You took a risk and made progress on a new issue using an unconventional approach. Nicely done!

### What to Expect

Not only will the team see creative ways to tackle a team challenges, they will also benefit from:

- The transformational nature of laughter
- The opportunity to “try on” different traits (good and bad) that offer different perspectives and results
- A chance to see yourself and others in a new light

\*This practice was originally shared on the Blog as the [March 2013 Improv Tip of the Month](#). Special thanks to [Shawn Westfall](#) for your contribution.

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[Find out more about Cary.](#)



## About The Get Real Project

[The Get Real Project](#)—an evolution of BossaNova Consulting Group—is a collection of people and resources dedicated to kicking conventional business wisdom to the curb and transforming how people work together as a result. (We even have a [manifesto](#) to prove it.)

### WE LOVE WHAT WE DO

The Get Real team is committed to:

- Providing a suite of products and services that help client-facing professionals master the soft stuff. This includes our signature programs on [Being a Trusted Advisor](#), [Trust-Based Selling](#), and [Improv-ing Relationships](#) that so many already know and love.
- Creating a community of like-minded people who can learn from each other and benefit from the value of shared experiences.
- Inspiring a movement to [redefine the conventional wisdom of client relationships](#) that has shaped how we work and live for far too long.

### SIGNATURE PROGRAMS

It's the soft stuff that's the hard stuff. Our signature programs help you strengthen your business by getting client relationships right. Thanks to our special partnership with [Trusted Advisor Associates](#), we've delivered hundreds of programs to thousands of people in client-facing roles: external consultants, internal consultants, financial advisors, bankers, engineers, scientists, and salespeople. We've traveled (and telecommuted) to audiences in various parts of the world, including the U.S. and Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Europe, Russia, and the Asia Pacific region.

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# Improv!

## what we do

**T**he Get Real Project combines professional comedy talent with training and consulting expertise to create learning programs that will never be forgotten.

Tell us your business challenge: leadership, innovation, client relationships, training, customer service, morale. Whether you can spare an hour, a day, or a month, we've got a program that fits. And if we don't, we'll improvise with you to create one.

You'll be laughing while advancing your business goals. What could be better?

**“I knew we'd had a great session when the participants started discussing their next steps long before the session ended. We've had performing arts organizations work with our company before, but they only juxtaposed the funny. The Get Real Project integrated the funny into our practical work.”—Jennifer Hentz, Learning and Development, Booz | Allen | Hamilton**

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