

“All improvisation is a quest,
a process of discovery.”

– Augusto Boal



IMPROVISATION AND INNOVATION

BY KATHLEEN FOREMAN

Leaders understand that they are expected to be 'creative' and that 'creativity leads to innovation'. Improvisation structures and techniques are the methodology that link creativity and innovation. Everyone is expected to improvise – life is an improvisation – but rarely are we taught how to improvise effectively while under pressure to produce. We are never less creative than when someone tells us, "Be creative now!"

Working with emerging leaders, I have discovered that I'm helping them to identify and manage the personal fears that limit their professional choices: fear of the unknown, the unexpected, fear of risk, loss of control, fear of embarrassment, fear of failure. They are restricted by the same fears from which they hope to liberate their teams. If the leader fears the unexpected, how can they promote risk? If they fear loss of control, how can they hope to share responsibility with the team? If they fear failure, how can they encourage others to accept mistakes as valuable steps toward innovation?

Good planning is essential to all team projects and it's the leader's ability to spontaneously respond to unexpected situations that helps keep the team connected to the vision. It is the 'in the moment' response that is the most difficult to prepare leaders to handle because it is, by its nature, the arrival of the unexpected and, "the moment of risk"¹ is at hand. If drama/theatre is the art of human communication then improvisation is the leadership tool that encourages us to, ". . . draw on our own resources . . . If we are open and receptive, we can make discoveries both about ourselves and others."²

Leaders need to be taught how to improvise in a safe, creative environment. The only way to learn about creativity is through experiential practice. Once learned, improvisation can be taught to the team so they can improvise together. Once the team speaks the same creative language, they will be able to apply creative collaboration to solve problems, and meet the challenges of projects requiring innovation.

There are simple rules that nurture creativity and develop improvisation technique. When the leader and the team agree to work creatively and collaboratively, they are agreeing to:

Create First, Edit Later

Keep the generation of ideas and the refinement of ideas separate in the team process. Ideas must be explored before they are rejected.

Risk, Accept, and Extend

Risking, accepting, and exploring all ideas (no matter how silly) allows the team to create without judgment. The leader's willingness to risk ideas and make mistakes models the value of, and the need for, risk-taking in creative problem solving.

Be Generous, Be Brave

The key to creative collaboration is respect and care for each other's ideas in a reciprocal relationship. Foster a positive relationship, and you will get positive results.

The impact of improvisation training for leaders and teams includes developing the collective capacities to:

- concentrate on a problem
- listen to others
- accept ideas
- accept the responsibility for developing ideas
- understand when one is co-operating or when one is dictating
- trust others, and understand that one is trusted
- understand that an improvisation is not repetitive or static
- understand that a situation should never be prejudged.³

With conscious application of improvisation techniques, leaders are able to take risks and face fears in themselves and their teams with greater confidence and success. Realizations that, ". . . the idea of right and wrong has plagued me and caused me to forget the thrill of investigating and experimenting. The result was reduced involvement, lovely and safe."⁴

All leaders improvise; good leaders consciously practice improvisation. Great leaders master it.

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¹ Morgan, N., Saxton, J. (1987) Teaching Drama: A mind of many wonders. London: Hutchinson. pp. 169.

² Hodgson, J., Richards, E. (1966) Improvisation: Discovery and creativity in drama. London: Methuen. pp. 3.

³ James, R., Williams, P. (1980) A Guide to Improvisation: A handbook for teachers. Banbury: Kemble Press. pp. iii.

⁴ Foreman, K., Anonymous workshop comments, Unpublished.