

# Improv in practice

Practical Exercises For Teams



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# Scene 0 - What is Improv?

# What is Improv?

## Key facts

- Improv is form of theatre, often comedy, in which most or all of what is performed is unplanned or unscripted, created spontaneously by the performers.
- Originated from **Commedia dell'arte** in (16th Century, Italy)
- Modern improv evolved in 20th Century in the USA

## Key Principles of Improv

- **Acceptance:** Embracing and building upon others' ideas
- **Collaboration:** Working together to create something new
- **Spontaneity:** Acting and reacting in the moment without pre-planning
- **Support:** Providing a safe space for creative risks



# Relevance to management and teamwork

## Enhances Communication and Collaboration

Encourages clear, positive, and supportive dialogue among team members

Promotes understanding and cooperation in problem-solving

## Encourages Adaptability and Quick Thinking

Helps managers and teams adapt to changes and unexpected challenges efficiently

Cultivates the ability to think on one's feet and make decisions swiftly

## Fosters Creative Problem-Solving

Stimulates innovative thinking and out-of-the-box solutions

Encourages viewing challenges from different perspectives

## Builds Supportive Team Dynamics

Creates an environment of trust where all ideas are valued

Strengthens team bonds and morale through shared experiences and successes



# Scene 1 - “Yes, and...”

# Yes, and..." - theory

## On stage:

- **Core Rule of Improv:** Accept what another player presents and build upon it.
- **Fosters Creativity and Flow:** Allows for an unscripted, collaborative story to unfold naturally.
- **Builds Support and Trust:** Each player's contribution is valued and expanded, creating a safe space for creativity.

## In Your Team:

- **Encourages Openness and Validation:** Similar to improv, accept team members' ideas and add your own insights.
- **Enhances Collaborative Problem-Solving:** By affirming and building on suggestions, teams can discover innovative solutions.
- **Cultivates a Positive Team Culture:** Embracing this principle can transform team dynamics, promoting a culture where all contributions are welcomed and valued.



# Exercise: "Yes, and..." Storytelling

## Objective:

- To practice accepting ideas and contributing constructively

## Instructions:

- Pair up with a partner
- One person start a story with a proposal of activity sentence (e.g. "Let's go to the theme park on Saturday.").
- The partner adds to the story with a sentence that begins with "Yes, and..." (e.g. "Yes, let's make a picnic to go with us.")
- Alternate turns, building on activities collaboratively



## **Scene 2 - Active listening**

# Active listening - theory

## On stage:

- **Essential for Improv Success:** Listening is crucial to understand and effectively respond to fellow performers.
- **Builds the Scene:** Actors rely on the details provided by others to build a coherent and engaging narrative.
- **Creates Synchrony:** Ensures the team moves together in a unified direction, preventing disjointed scenes.

## In Your Team:

- **Foundation of Effective Communication:** Active listening ensures that all team members feel heard and understood.
- **Facilitates Better Decision-Making:** Understanding all perspectives leads to more informed and comprehensive solutions.
- **Strengthens Relationships:** Shows respect and appreciation for team members, fostering a supportive workplace environment.



# Exercise: “Listen and repeat”

## Objective:

- To practice and reinforce active listening

## Instructions:

- Pair up with a partner
- One person (A) will talk for one minute (“Something that worries me...”), second person (B) listens carefully (not talking too much)
- Now, the second person (B) has one minute to refer what was heard
- A gives feedback and correct anything which was not 100% correct or missed
- Switch roles and repeat the exercise - Person B talk about “Something that I love...”



## Scene 3 - Embracing failure

# Embracing failure - theory

## On stage:

- **Integral Part of Improv:** Mistakes are often unexpected gifts that can lead to new directions and hilarious moments on stage.
- **Learning Opportunities:** Each 'failure' is a chance to learn, adapt, and improve future performances.
- **Supportive Environment:** Co-performers support each other, turning 'mistakes' into positive turns in the storyline.

## In Your Team:

- **Innovation Through Risk:** Encourages taking calculated risks without fear of failure, fostering innovation and creativity.
- **Growth Mindset:** Frames failures as learning opportunities, promoting personal and professional growth.
- **Builds Resilience:** Cultivates a team environment where setbacks are openly discussed and overcome together.



# Exercise: “Failure flip”

## Objective:

- To shift the perspective on failure from negative to positive, encouraging participants to view mistakes as opportunities for growth and innovation

## Instructions:

- Pair Up
- **Share a Failure:** First person shares a recent work-related situation in which they believe they failed or made a significant mistake (max 1 minute).
- **Identify the Learning:** The listening partner asks clarifying questions if needed and aims to 'flip' the failure by identifying as many potential positive outcomes or lessons learned from the situation as possible. This could be new skills acquired, insights into personal resilience, or ideas for preventing similar issues in the future.
- Switch roles and repeat



# Scene 4 - Adaptability and Flexibility

# Adaptability and flexibility - theory

## On stage:

- **Improv Necessity:** Being able to adapt to new, unexpected situations is crucial for a successful performance.
- **Embracing the Unexpected:** Improv actors learn to welcome surprises and changes as part of the show's evolution.
- **Flow with the Scene:** Understanding that the direction can change at any moment and going with the flow creates a dynamic performance.

## In Your Team:

- **Business Reality:** Change is a constant in the business world; adapting quickly is key to survival and growth.
- **Flexibility in Plans:** Encourages openness to altering plans based on new information or outcomes.
- **Responsive Leadership:** Equips managers with the ability to lead teams through uncertainties with confidence.



# Exercise: “Word-by-word story building”

## Objective:

- To enhance communication, listening, and adaptability skills through collaborative storytelling.
- Let’s gather suggestions:
  - Name of the main character
  - Their job
  - Their biggest dream
- (In pairs or in a bigger group) We will be building a story together, one word at a time. The story should somehow relate to the main character's, their job and their biggest dream.
- React quickly and not to overthink their responses to keep the story moving. Listen carefully to each other to maintain the story's coherence.



# **Additional exercises**

# Warm-up: “Ego Shower”

## Objective:

- Warming up, getting into positive vibe.

## Instructions:

- Everybody stands in a circle.
- One of the participants comes inside the circle and shares something they did today - e.g. “Today I woke up at 8 am”.
- The whole group award this statement with a high energy round of applause.
- Next person comes in the circle, does the same things.
- Repeat until everybody has shared something at least once.



# Ice breaker: “Name signals”

## Objective:

- Warming up, allowing participants to share their names.

## Instructions:

- Everybody stands in a circle.
- One of the participants starts the game.
- Each participant, in their turn, has to **say their name outloud** and in addition **perform a gesture or a move**.
- After this is done, **everybody in the group says the name and mimic the gesture**.
- We move on to the next participant, and repeat for each.



# Ice breaker: “Zombie”

## Objective:

- Warming up, allowing participants to learn their names.

## Instructions:

- Everybody stands in a circle.
- One of the participants stand in the middle and become “the Zombie”. He or she moves, zombie-style, arms stretched out in front of her, towards one player.
- Before the zombie reaches that player, the player can look at another person, begging for help. That person can yell the name of another player, and the zombie heads towards that player.
- If the zombie reaches a player before he or she yells another name, that player becomes the zombie.



# Energiser: “Knife throwing”

## Objective:

- Warming up, energising.

## Instructions:

- Everybody stands in a circle.
- One person mimes throwing a knife at another person, who then claps their hands, as if they had grabbed the knife just before it hit them.
- That person then throws the knife at someone else.

Want to make it more difficult? Add “counting”, add “associations”.



# Energiser: “Samurai”

## Objective:

- Warming up, energising.

## Instructions:

- Everybody stands in a circle.
- One player is the Samurai - they starts by lifting her Katana (sword), making a Japanese- sounding grunt.
- They keep the sword up in the air, and her 2 neighbors "cut" her, by swinging their swords into her sides, again grunting enthusiastically and in pseudo-japanese.
- When the neighbors retract their swords, the Samurai lowers her sword; while doing this she makes eye contact with another player, when then becomes Samurai, and everything starts all over again.

Hint: Start slowly, and then increase the tempo.



# Creativity: “Associations cross-circle”

## Objective:

- Creativity, fast-thinking

## Instructions:

Free Association is a very common warm up in improv comedy. A free association is when a player associates meaning to something without judgement, censorship or thought. It is quite hard to do. For example a player may be exposed to the word “dog” they may free associate “cat.”

- Cross Circle is simply a different configuration for how the free associations are cued. Players stand in the circle. Once a player says any word to start.
- The next person in the circle says another word, associated with the previous one.
- The next player does the same and the game follows.

Cross Circle should sound like a series of disconnected words. “mouse”, “trap”, “crab”, “grumpy”, “goofy”, “mouse.” There is no correct answer in free association. Some players will repeat associations, or have long pauses. This is a good opportunity to explore why this is happening. It is a teaching moment where the leader can discuss.



# Creativity: “Associations walk in”

## Objective:

- Creativity, fast-thinking

## Instructions:

- Players stand in the circle.
- One person walks in saying “I’m a .... ” (object, person, etc.)
- The second person steps in, saying another statement (“I’m a ...”), with something not related to the first one.
- The third person steps in, saying something that could combine those 2 previous things (“I am a ...”).
- The person that summed up last round stays in the middle and starts a new round.

Example:

Person A: I am an apple.

Person B: I am a toy.

Person C: I am a new Iphone model for kids.



# Creativity: “Association: mind meld”

## Objective:

- Creativity, fast-thinking

## Instructions:

- Player stand in the circle. Two people raise their hand up nad think about a single word (random word that comes to mind).
- They point at each other and say the word outloud.
- Now, the other players think about the word they would associate with the two previous words. Whoever has it, raise their hand. When two players have a hand raised, they point at other and say the word outloud.
- Continue until two players same the same word at once.



# Teamwork: “Counting to 20”

## Objective:

- Group dynamics, teamwork, concentration

## Instructions:

- Sit or stand in a circle.
- The idea is for the group to count to twenty, one person saying one number at a time.
- Anybody can start the count.
- Then a different person says the next number – but if two or more people happen to speak at the same time, counting must start again from the beginning.
- It is possible to get to twenty if everybody really concentrates – but try and be relaxed as well.

Important: don't try to come up with any system. Just focus, be present and try to “feel the room”.

If you want to make it harder:

1. You can try counting to 30.
2. Play the game with all the players having their eyes closed.



# Accepting: “Goalie”

## Objective:

- Building characters, accepting.

## Instructions:

- 1 player stands in the middle of the room. He or she is the goalie.
- The other players all think of an opening line for a scene, and a character.
- When everyone has their opening line and character, we bombard the goalie with these offers, one at a time. Each player approaches the goalie and says a sentence they came up with e.g. “Boss, we lost 10000\$ this quarter”.
- Goalie needs to react right away to an offer, acknowledging the opening and character, snap into an opposite character and reply to the opening. Immediately after that the next player comes up with his or her offer.

This exercise is good for teaching players to react right away, and to snap into a character almost without thinking.



# Entertainment: “Questions only”

## Objective:

- Competition, fast-thinking

## Instructions:

A classic improv game designed to encourage creative thinking, develop improvisation skills, and energize a group - great to break the ice and generate laughter with minimal set-up!

- Players form two queues. The players in front of the queue will be competing in a questions duel.
- Ask to group to chose a place, where the action happens (e.g. “a park”). Change the place every couple of rounds.
- Two players in the front are acting in a scene. One of the players initiates the game by asking a question. The 2nd person needs to form a logical response, which needs to be a questions as well. It continues until somebody things for too long or respond with a statement which is not a question.
- The “loosing player” goes at the end of the queue. The next player from the queue enters and initiates another scene by asking the first question.
- Continue as long as you wish.



# Other: “1,2,3”

## Objective:

- Warm up, in pairs

## Instructions:

Surprisingly fun game for something so simple. Two people face each other. They count to three, changing who starts the count each time. For instance:

- Brian – 1 → Sarah – 2 → Brian – 3
- → Sarah – 1 → Brian – 2 → Sarah – 3
- → ...

We then repeat where instead of saying 2 they clap their hands, and then also adding in instead of saying 3 they jump in the air:

- Brian – 1 → Sarah – Clap → Brian – Jumps
- → Sarah – 1 → Brian – Clap → Sarah – Jumps
- → ...



# That's it!

For more improv related stuff visit [improvyourlead.com](https://improvyourlead.com)



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