

# TRENDS



By Jennifer J. Salopek

## Improvisation

When most of us think of *improvisation*, the term brings to mind stand-up comedy and TV shows like “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” Although comedians do use improvisation, it’s not strictly their purview. It can be put to use for more serious pursuits, and those who use it for training find it extremely effective.

Alain Rostain discovered improvisation in 1991, while working as a consultant for PricewaterhouseCoopers. He immediately recognized its implications for business and began taking classes to become more adept. In 1993, he left to form Creative Advantage, a New York-based consultancy. Early on, he used improvisation as a tool for creativity and brainstorming; now, CA offers a full suite of innovation services. Rostain emphasizes that improvisation is a tool: “Our clients don’t buy improv; they buy solutions.”

Some of those clients include Kraft, Starbucks, GE, R.J. Reynolds, and Blockbuster, which hire CA to work on projects ranging from reducing costs in a product category to training new managers in conducting difficult conversations.

“Improv in business is exploding. It is a powerful tool that had to overcome the idea that it’s some kind of metaphor, or that it’s frivolous. Improvisation is about real people doing stuff in the moment,” Rostain explains.

Effective improvisation embraces several basic concepts:

- Pay attention and be present.
- Make your partner look good.
- Don’t censor yourself.
- Say, “Yes, and...” instead of “Yes, but...”
- Listen generously.
- Take risks and embrace failure.
- Say the obvious thing—in other

words, the first thing that comes to mind. There are no wrong answers.

Many of those concepts are the same ones that govern productive brainstorming. But why is improvisation so effective in training?

“The most fundamental skill in improv is listening,” says Rostain. “People are pretty poor at it in general. Improv forces you to focus on what the other person is saying. It makes people very present.”

One enthusiastic convert is Janet Bezmen, associate executive director of psychiatric nursing at Elmhurst Hospital Center in Elmhurst, New York. She took an improv workshop at New York-based Performance of A Lifetime several years ago: “It was a life-altering experience; it was amazing,” she says. She has since sent staff to train-the-trainer courses and has worked with POAL to help her staff find more creative approaches to patient care.

◀ [www.performanceofalifetime.com](http://www.performanceofalifetime.com)

Performance of A Lifetime president and CEO, Cathy Salit, originally founded the company as a personal-growth center and school. She entered the corporate training arena when her students began begging her to tailor programs for their workplaces.

“At first, I really thought it was too out there,” she says. “And my colleagues and I were purists; we were reluctant to take our work and fit it into the mold of what companies wanted people to get better at. I thought it would corrupt the experience if we were trying to serve very specific outcomes.”

Salit’s first incursion into corporate training was a teambuilding program for Thomson Financial Services. Since then, she says, “Our clients have met us halfway and have become our strategic

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partners. We leave room for unexpected learnings.”

That suits Salit just fine. A junior-high dropout, she describes herself as someone who has “always sought out alternative forms of education and learning.” She pursued a successful career as a professional actor and singer before forming POAL in 1996.

When beginning a client engagement, Salit doesn’t perform a classic needs assessment. She meets with stakeholders to try to understand their language and their issues, then she and her staff create customized scenarios for the improv exercises. However, she’s careful always to use a different industry or business type in the scenarios. “Participants need to work on their skills without being overwhelmed with the technicalities of their own situation,” she says. In other words, if scenarios were too close to real life, participants might start talking about last week’s meeting or next week’s product launch and veer away from the issues at hand.

Rostain takes a similar approach. When working on the topic of difficult conversation with new managers recently, he had participants suggest situations that presented challenges for them. “We don’t use a preplanned case study,” he says. “We model situations live. It’s more than a role play; it’s a real play, made up on the fly.” Using improv to teach improv also provides valuable lessons: “We model making mistakes. The learning takes best when people are willing to take risks and make mistakes.”

Rostain reports that improvisation techniques are now being used in training around corporate values and ethics. Improv’s emphasis on participation and storytelling means that “participants internalize those values; they’re not meaningless,” he says.

Salit has used improvisation to provide training on many common workplace issues, such as teamwork, creativity, diver-

sity, corporate culture, and leadership development. She believes improv is effective in those areas because “they’re all about using language.

“Improv is something that we are all able to do,” she continues. “We are all performers. We try to show people that they have more choices. Everything participants put into a scene is accepted in creating something together. It is not transactional or competitive.”

That acceptance of all offered ideas is crucial. The concept of “Yes, and…” is one that anyone could use to make training sessions more effective. Salit explains further: “By saying *yes, and...*, you accept what the other person has said, then add a little bit. You are building a conversation instead of just adding information.

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People often think that what’s most important is that you say what you have to say, regardless of whether anyone is listening—then you can check it off your list. But improv—and training generally—is a how-to process.”

Improvisation in business is quickly gaining ground and credibility. Performance of A Lifetime partners with Duke Corporation Education (recently named the number 1 program in the United States by *Business Week* and *Financial Times*) to design its experiential learning offerings. Scholars at such prestigious institutions as the Richard Ivey School of Business in Toronto, are

doing research on improve, as well as using it in their own teaching.

Mary Crossan, a professor at Ivey, writes: *We extended our research in organizational learning and strategic renewal in order to investigate what it takes to improvise and how it differs from more traditional approaches. We studied improvisation, working with [The] Second City [Improvisational Company, of Chicago] to understand more about the craft. Soon the Ivey Business School and Second City were working together to provide the skills of improvisation to Ivey students and the business community.*

*We discovered that not only does improvisation provide a way to understand what it takes to be spontaneous and innovative, but also that exercises used by*

*actors to develop their skill can be adopted by business as a means to experience and enhance individual and organizational capacity to be innovative and responsive.*

Elmhurst Hospital’s Bezmen is a living example of the truth of those words: She says that learning improv radically changed her management style. “I was very into knowing and control. Now, I feel as though I can give people options and build on what they’re saying to me. The learning opportunity was a gift. I feel much closer to my staff.”

Improvisation is also gaining credibility in the business world by organizing itself. Rostain is one of the founding

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members of the Association for the Advancement of Improvisation in Business, a group designed to share best practices and document how improv is creating value. In his vision statement for the organization, he wrote, "Until very recently, only a few people were applying improv to business. In the past year, however, most training, leadership, and learning conferences have included improv presentations. I've also noticed a growing number of improv practitioners at these events. But we have yet to come together as a large community... I need to be with people who do what I do. If we don't share it, we won't grow."

<👉[www.improvinbiz.org](http://www.improvinbiz.org)

For trainers who are interested in incorporating improv techniques in their own work, Rostain notes that most of the exercises are in the public domain. The AAIB Website offers a wealth of articles on everything from theory to activities and exercises. Creative Advantage sells a card deck called "Juicers" that shows you how to conduct 36 activities. Rostain also recommends *58-1/2 Ways to Improve in Training: Improvisation Games and Activities for Workshops, Courses, and Team Meetings*, by Paul Z. Jackson. And, of course, you can attend AAIB's annual conference, to be held October 13-16, 2004, in San Francisco.

"There's a real need for new approaches, and it's growing by the hour," concludes Salit. "People are experiencing death by PowerPoint. They're open to improvisation, but we have to educate them, articulating learning objectives and so forth. We're teaching as opposed to selling."

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