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## The Case for Applied Improvisation

*(Also Called “Business Improv” or “Organizational Improv”)*

### Articles & Papers

Facebook, Google, Uber and even the United Nations have used business improv to help people and companies improve their performance. Duke, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, UCLA and other esteemed institutions have also invested in business improv training. The skills used in improv are rooted in teamwork, engagement, and innovation. These skills build stronger leaders (and sometimes everyone is a leader) and teams to increase your bottom line.

Here are just some of the articles and studies about how the mindsets and tools of improvisation help people become inspired to get back in the game and drive home better performance. **Click** on the article to read it in its entirety.

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# How Business Improv Helps Companies

## [Improv experience promotes divergent thinking, uncertainty tolerance, and affective well-being](#)

Study published on Science Direct, March 2020 Peter Felsman, Sanuri Gunawardena, Colleen M. Seifert

### Highlights

- Doing improv promotes divergent thinking, tolerance of uncertainty, and affective well-being.
- Improv produces benefits beyond other types of social interactions.
- Two studies provide the largest sample sizes to date for a randomized experiment on improv.
- Co-creativity and unpredictability can distinguish improv from other social interactions.

### Background

Training in improvisational theater is a widely available, popular and entertaining activity. It also is linked to a variety of psychological benefits, such as reductions in anxiety and depression in adult psychiatric patients (Krueger et al., 2017) and in social anxiety among adolescent public-school students (Felsman et al., 2019). However, research on its benefits has generally lacked the rigor of randomized experiments.

### Results

This paper replicates the prior finding that improvisational theater training can improve divergent thinking (e.g., Lewis & Lovatt, 2013; Sowden et al., 2015), and provides new findings that improv can boost positive affect and increase uncertainty tolerance relative to other social interactions.

### Conclusions

As a means to enhance psychological health, improvisational theater training offers benefits without the negative stigma and difficulties in access surrounding other therapeutic interventions. These results support its popular use beyond the theater to improve social and personal interactions in a variety of settings (e.g., Tint & Froerer, 2014).

## [Fast Company Article: Why Top Companies and MBA Programs Are Teaching Improv](#)

“If you’re going to cultivate exceptional leaders, you’re going to need some innovative training. Enter improvisational classes, which may not be the first thing that comes to mind when putting together an executive MBA curriculum, but Desiderio says can be **very effective in helping leaders identify—and admit—their deficiencies**. So much so that dozens of mega companies, like Google, PepsiCo, and McKinsey have included improv sessions in their own corporate training. The underlying axiom is that curveballs don’t just happen on stage at improv classes; they also happen in the ever-changing business world.”

## [Forbes Magazine: Why Improv Training is Great Business Training](#)

“How does improv training improve communication? Studying improvisation helps business professionals **develop careful listening**, contributing freely, and being present in the moment. These skills are vital to workplaces that rely on adaptability, especially in the business world. Improv classes can also enhance presentation skills, as well as critical thinking.”

### [Bloomberg Article: Improv Training Is Making Management Throw Away the Script](#)

“Being relentlessly present is a survival mechanism for life, but people don’t remember it,” Hirsch says. “They don’t think about it, and they spend a lot of time preparing for things that don’t happen and being freaked out by things that do.” Improv’s promise is that being present will mean noticing more and listening better, which in turn will lead to **richer communication** and, ultimately, better collaboration and more creativity. That’s the trifecta.”

### [Huffington Post Article - It's No Joke: Business Lessons from Improvisational Theatre](#)

“Improv training can improve the way your team communicates. Leaders, managers and executives learn to react in the moment, exploiting change as an opportunity. Learning improv is one way to increase your competitive edge. When an unexpected situation occurs, you’ll have better skills to “stand up” and manage the unpredictable more effectively. Knowledge and experience have always been at the core of leadership, but improvisational skills are also necessary to confidently navigate change in the modern business world.”

### [Society of Corporate Compliance & Ethics \(SCCE\) Guest Blog: Compliance Culture, Lessons from an Improv Comedy Institution](#)

“Here’s what we know: Ethics and compliance professionals are trying to mitigate risk. They do this by creating and enforcing rules, raising awareness about the importance of the subject matter, educating around these issues, and parsing vital nuances in/around compliance requirements, so that employees can successfully do their jobs in a way that plays within the rules. Ideally the goal is to change behaviors. Here’s what we also know: People get bored. They are busy and they don’t always listen or pay attention, unless you really give them a reason to do so. What’s more, people don’t engage unless – well – what you’re offering is engaging.”

### [A Novel Finding: Improv and the Great Unknown](#)

First study to show causal link between improvisation and uncertainty tolerance. Improv offers a safe, playful space where you know people will go along with your ideas and everyone’s idea will be heard. That’s the kind of unpredictability that makes people more comfortable with uncertainty and more likely to take risks and speak up. Now for the first time, we have causal evidence to prove it.

### [Why We Need Play](#)

“The opposite of play is not work — it is depression.” – Brian Sutton-Smith

BeWell spoke with [Dr. Stuart Brown](#), founder and president of the [National Institute For Play](#), about how play lights up your brain, improves your mood and connects you to the world. Play is a survival drive that is necessary for adaptation, flexibility and social learning. Play helps us belong in the community, develop the ability to suppress unwanted urges, and regulate our emotions.

# How *ImprovTalk* Has Helped Companies

## [Daily Herald Article: How businesses use improv techniques to improve staff, bottom line](#)

“When Ben Niernberg became senior vice president of MNJ Technologies in Buffalo Grove a couple of years ago, he came into a company that had become stagnant after several years of steady growth. A major part of that stagnation had come from how the company's culture had evolved. “We knew we needed to improve on the way we were communicating with each other and **the way we were treating each other**,” he said. Niernberg knew Mecir through social circles and, at Mecir's suggestion, hired ImprovTalk to provide team building and communications training to the company's 120 employees.”

## [Business Ledger Article: Funny Business; How improv comedy is finding it's way into the board room](#)

A Pitch to Improve - Jim Mecir and Ellen Schnur come from diversely different backgrounds, but their combined talents have helped businesses improve productivity through employee training programs.”

## [CRN Magazine Article: Restarting Growth: MNJ Looks Outside The Box, And Outside The Company](#)

“MNJ Technologies implemented a program called *Being the Difference*. As part of *Being the Difference*, MNJ knew it needed to improve the ability of its employees to better communicate with each other and with clients.”

# How Business Improv Helps Build Collaborative Teams

## [Harvard Business Review: Using Improv to Unite Your Team](#)

“Over the last couple of decades, work has increasingly been done by teams rather than by lone individuals. Surveys suggest that **teams are central to engaging employees**. Yet we know from years of psychology and management research, including pioneering studies by psychologist J. Richard Hackman, that teams often don't improve employee engagement or productivity. Among the biggest reasons: Leaders tend to dominate the conversation; they don't listen and shut down others' ideas. Consequently, team members are often too afraid, or simply too bored and disengaged, to contribute their own thoughts.”

## [University of Pennsylvania: I've Got Your Back: Utilizing Improv as a Tool to Enhance Workplace Relationships](#)

“Improv has the ability to generate positive social connections and strengthen workplace relationships by **improving communication, collaboration, and interpersonal understanding**. This paper provides a historical overview of improvisation in the theater and applied settings, connecting modern-day improv to organizational well-being via the lens of positive psychology.”

An organizational environment that breeds positive relationships as opposed to negative relationships can mean the difference between a dysfunctional organization that is struggling to survive and a flourishing organization that thrives (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien, 2002). As organizations grow increasingly interdependent and team-based, they are becoming even more reliant on interpersonal relationships in order to function well. Likewise, with Americans increasingly spending the majority of their daily lives at work - averaging more than 47 hours a week (Saad, 2014), the ability to personally and professionally flourish may rely in large part on the quality of interpersonal interactions within the workplace.

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[MIT Sloan Article: Workplace negativity? Difficult conversations? Turn to improv](#)

Improv is becoming essential course curriculum at business schools, including MIT Sloan School of Management, where Giardella teaches an improvisational leadership class. Improvising means cultivating the ability to **react with agility, creativity, and flexibility**. It also means developing a mindset that includes curiosity, high-stakes listening, and resilience.

[Entrepreneur Magazine Article: I Took an Improv Training Course -- and It Changed How I Brainstorm](#)

“The session drove home that how we react to one another is a choice. We can choose to zone out or shoot down someone’s ideas just as we can choose to be positive and **listen intently**. These reactions are in our control.”

[Harvard Business Review Article: Improv Exercises That Can Change the Way Your Team Works](#)

“There’s an important axiom in improvisation: Always take care of your partner. Even the most talented comedians need support when they’re up on that stage. The same is true of leaders: **you need a great ensemble**, working in concert around you, to succeed.”

[Chicago Tribune Article: ‘Yes, and’: Second City behavioral science group studies how improv can create better communication](#)

“The better you are at improv, it seems the better you are at interacting with people.”

[Entrepreneur Magazine Article: I Took an Improv Training Course -- and It Changed How I Brainstorm](#)

“The session drove home that how we react to one another is a choice. We can choose to zone out or shoot down someone’s ideas just as we can choose to be positive and listen intently. These reactions are in our control.”

## How Business Improv Helps Leaders

[Inc. Magazine Article: 8 Ways Improvisation Can Make You Into a Better Leader](#)

“Improvisation--the theatrical form where dialogue and action are made up on the spot--is suddenly all the rage. It seemed like many of my colleagues and clients lately are taking improv classes. So, I got curious. I wanted to know what improvisation offers to those of us who work in offices and board rooms rather than on stage. To my surprise, I discovered that **improv does indeed have quite a bit to teach us.**”

[The University of Chicago Law School Article: Learning Leadership, One Improv Game at a Time](#)

“Today’s clients look to their lawyers for much more than legal advice,” said Zarfes, “they also want **results-focused solutions** to complex business problems. Young lawyers are finding it difficult, with the way legal services are currently structured, to get the experiences that allow them to become the leaders that clients need.”

[Wall Street Journal Article: Want to Run a Good Meeting? First, Take a Comedy Class](#)

” In most meetings, leaders tend to dominate the conversation, with subordinates often too afraid or too disengaged to contribute. By contrast, everyone is talking in improv, and everyone’s contribution is welcomed and valued. How do comedians manage to achieve such an egalitarian atmosphere? And how can leaders create the same **collaborative atmosphere and run more effective meetings?**

### [Practica Learning Research Paper: What Executives can learn from Improvisation Professionals](#)

“The business world is constantly searching for ways to expand the skills of its leaders. “Business Improvisation”, performance under pressure combined with the creative process, is becoming increasingly popular as a strategy to **resolve unexpected leadership challenges**. Business Improvisation workshops offer that most rare of events in business—the chance to practice real skills in an active environment where executives can see what works and what does not. Business Improvisation is poised to be the next “killer app” for organizational growth and performance. It is a **highly valuable tool designed to enhance the skills and productivity** of an organization’s most valuable asset- its people. Investing in the performance of the moment, during crisis and under pressure, is the next frontier for maximizing ROI. Learning the skills of business improvisation and employing them in the market place will enhance a leader’s success in navigating through the unexpected and achieving results in an uncertain world.”

### [Clinical Leader Article: What Improv Comedy Can Teach Us About Communication in Clinical Trials](#)

” In improvisational theater or comedy, most or all of what is performed is unplanned or unscripted. It’s a no-brainer, then, that the techniques should apply in our daily worlds at work (who has ever had a day that went as planned?) and, in medicine, where few, if any, patients ever follow a scripted path or planned approach, sequence and timeline to getting ill or having an injury. Thus, for many, it's only natural that improv is working its way out of the performing arts arena and into our professional lives. On top of that, we are all faced with constant **change that appears to be happening at an even more rapid pace, and improv is perfectly suited to these situations.**”

## How Business Improv Helps Specific Industries

### [Scientific American Article: Want to Be a Better Scientist? Take an Improv Class](#)

“Active listening and a **sense of humor** offer benefits for both communication and research.

### [Society of Corporate Compliance & Ethics \(SCCE\) Guest Blog: Compliance Culture, Lessons from an Improv Comedy Institution](#)

“Here’s what we know: Ethics and compliance professionals are trying to mitigate risk. They do this by creating and enforcing rules, raising awareness about the importance of the subject matter, educating around these issues, and parsing vital nuances in/around compliance requirements, so that employees can successfully do their jobs in a way that plays within the rules. **Ideally the goal is to change behaviors.** Here’s what we also know: People get bored. They are busy and they don’t always listen or pay attention, unless you really give them a reason to do so. What’s more, people don’t engage unless – well – what you’re offering is engaging.”

### [Institute for Healthcare Improvement: The Role of Improv in Health Professional Learning](#)

Medical improv is a unique learning modality involving improvisational exercises adapted to health professional learning. Medical improv can promote the acquisition of skills relevant to most CanMEDS roles. Optimal instructional design features include having facilitators with dual expertise, creating low stakes environments, and employing the process of debrief. Potential applications in health professions education

may include areas such as remediation, inter and intra-professional team development, leadership training, and wellness and resiliency

[Financial Management Magazine: How an improv class can help develop essential business skills](#)

“Improvitational theatre is moving into business schools and boardrooms. Discover how it can **help finance professionals develop soft skills** and more. Finance professionals are making improv classes’ part of their own personal development plan, with listening skills, and the ability to read body language and to think on your feet among the benefits.”

[American Dental Association Article: Business school, improv training part of UIC's pediatric dentistry program](#)

“Medical improvising, or "medprov," is just one part of the leadership training program that aims to **help future pediatric dentists develop leadership skills** such as team-building, communication strategies, conflict resolution and emotional intelligence.”

[Improvisation within the Project Management of Change: Some Observations from UK Financial Services](#)

“This study was designed to address issues relating to the interface of implementation, projects, and change, the importance of socio-behavioral, cultural, and political issues within that interface, and **the use of improvisation within the project-managed implementation** process. The main finding of this study is that, notwithstanding the dominant project management paradigm of ‘plan, then implement’, improvisational working practices are embraced enthusiastically, and used extensively, by almost all interview respondents, who spanned a wide range of project-based roles within the organization.”

[Wall Street Journal Article: ‘Oh, My God, Where Is This Going?’ When Computer-Science Majors Take Improv](#)

“Many computer-science types say they would rather work at a screen than chat face to face. Others hate drawing attention to themselves. In the improv class, “The Eloquent Presenter,” computer-science majors not only cozy up with peers, but work in groups and take turns in the spotlight. The course requires public speaking, lecturing on such nontechnical topics as family recipes. The class is a way to “robot-proof” computer-science majors, helping them sharpen uniquely human skills, said Joseph E. Aoun, the university president. Empathy, creativity and teamwork help students exercise their competitive advantage over machines in the era of artificial intelligence, according to Mr. Aoun, who wrote a book about it.”

## Universities Using Business Improv

[Stanford University Course: Building Communication Skills through Improvisation](#)

“Focus on building a range of English communication skills through improvisation activities. Participants explore theatrical techniques that teach collaboration, spontaneity, team building, **storytelling, and confident public speaking** with connections to academic, professional, and personal situations. Course is co-taught by an improvisation expert and an ESL instructor. No previous improvisation or theater experience necessary.”

[Harvard Graduate School News Article: Improv for Educators](#)

“During J-Term, master's candidate Mona Thompson offered the HGSE community an interactive opportunity to **hone the listening and quick-reaction skills** that are necessary in the classroom — and on stage.”

[Harvard Gazette Article: For more than just laughs](#)

“Improv can boost social and professional skills, students find. “The whole [improv] thing functions as a metaphor for other things you encounter in your life,” Thompson said. “It’s really fun to be in this playful and generous space where you can try out ideas and think as you step out of it about what you can carry forward and how you can take it into your life and your [work].”

[William & Mary’s Mason School’s Center for Corporate Education: Improv and Business: How Improvisation and Business Meet](#)

“William & Mary’s Mason School’s Center for Corporate Education offers improv classes for corporations. Through classes like this, teams learn to think on their feet, **trust one another**, and build teamwork habits. Improv has been used for corporate teams of all shapes and sizes to come learn how to work together, and to practice creative thinking to bring back to the business realm.”

[Indiana University: Improv for Inclusive Schools: Professional learning opportunities for Indiana educators](#)

“This VSA program is provided in 2018-2019 under a contract with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Indiana school districts may apply to host a one-day professional learning workshop around using improv to **strengthen academic and social/emotional learning** for students with disabilities. Improv is the art of spontaneous theater, where plot, setting, and character are created during the moment of performance. Improv games offer flexible, low-cost strategies to integrate arts, academic, social, and emotional learning.”

[Drexel University Thesis: Theatrical & Improvisational Techniques For The Corporate World: How The Performing Arts Are Helping Create A More Adaptable Workforce For The 21st Century](#)

“Performing arts organizations are helping create a more adaptable and innovative workforce by providing the business sector with corporate workshops that utilize theatrical and improvisational techniques that build leadership skills and promote teambuilding. This paper aims to help performing arts organizations see the mutually beneficial practice of offering corporate training workshops. These programs not only help businesses explore the ways in which they can remain relevant and innovative in today’s competitive global market, but in doing so, they also create sustainability for the arts organization itself.”

## Related Articles and Papers

[Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams](#)

Author(s): Amy Edmondson, Source: Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Jun., 1999)

This paper presents a model of team learning and tests it in a multimethod field study. It introduces the construct of team psychological safety—a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking—and models the effects of team psychological safety and team efficacy together on learning and performance in organizational work teams. Results of a study of 51 work teams in a manufacturing company, measuring antecedent, process, and outcome variables, show that team psychological safety is associated with learning behavior, but team efficacy is not, when controlling for team

psychological safety. As predicted, learning behavior mediates between team psychological safety and team performance. The results support an integrative perspective in which both team structures, such as context support and team leader coaching, and shared beliefs shape team outcomes.