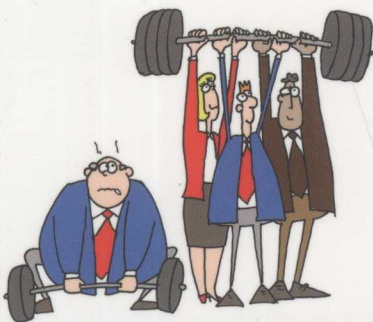


**Experiential Learning Exercises  
to Train Employees to Handle  
Every Situation with Success**



# **BUSINESS IMPROV**



**Build and  
Create Diverse  
Teams**



**Enhance  
Creative  
Thinking**



**Cultivate  
Leaders at  
Every Level**

**VAL GEE AND SARAH GEE**

# BUSINESS IMPROV

Experiential Learning Exercises  
to Train Employees to Handle  
Every Situation with Success

VAL GEE AND SARAH GEE



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To our amazing family and friends, especially Armando, Syona, and Zane,  
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## Introduction

# Business Improv: The Creative Engine behind Productivity

### Use Business Improv to Improve Organizational Development and Leadership

There is a popular story about how Sir Isaac Newton sat under an apple tree, when an apple fell on his head and gave him the idea of the universal law of gravity. Business improv doesn't wait for the apple to fall. It inspires people to get up, shake the tree, and eat the apple on the way to the mountainside. In other words, business improv provides the tools and skills that enable people to produce their own chance events.

Organizations thrive by tapping into the creative talents of their employees. Innovation and creativity enhance product quality, accelerate market response capabilities, increase operating system efficiencies, and help sustain the competitive advantage. Companies cannot be innovative without being creative, and improvisation is by its nature creative. Not only is it fun but it also ignites and sustains passion, and it encourages individual choices, exploration, and risk taking.

The culture of business improv instills a safe place for creative change-makers to energize, collaborate, and produce innovations in a meaningful and permanent way for themselves, their team, and the larger organization. In order to do that, it's imperative that leaders work on themselves. People learn by observing behaviors, and so leaders must develop their emotional intelligence; they must understand how they express themselves, relate with others, and cope with the daily demands and pressures. Only then can they build an innovative atmosphere where others can grow and accelerate. Improvisational leaders are able to integrate ideas quickly while balancing reactions to a situation in a thoughtful manner. They discover inner thoughts and behaviors that are effective in a fun, supportive, nonthreatening way.

Another critical component of leadership is relationship management. Improvisation encourages productivity and creativity by increasing the quantity and quality of authentic relationships. In promoting synergy, teams also utilize diversity, face obstacles, empower people, and develop confidence. By fostering dialogue that aligns the goals of all parties involved, people will actually celebrate each other's achievements, which in turn breeds success. Improvisation also creates a less stressful environment and encourages a playful

atmosphere. It has been assumed in business that happy people are more productive people. A new study suggests that people who keep busy are more likely to be happy than those who are idle.

In a study published in *Psychological Science*, researchers asked college students to take multiple surveys about their school. After completing the first survey, students could either drop it off right outside the room they were in and then wait idly until the next survey was administered, or they could keep busy by dropping off the survey at a location that was about 15 minutes away. Either way, they were told they'd receive a candy bar when they turned in the survey. Not surprisingly, more students chose the closer location. However, students who kept busy by walking to the farther location reported feeling happier afterward than did the students who remained idle. Business improv is about igniting that flame of energy and enthusiasm that helps people to keep busy and thus be able to:

- Generate ideas
- Build innovative teams
- Leverage the talents of others
- Share and sell ideas
- Solve problems
- Manage emotions
- Gain system support
- Recognize success
- Foster support
- Respond and adapt to change

## You Don't Have to Be Funny

We often ask people what they think of when they hear the word *improvisation*. We hear all kinds of things like “spontaneous,” “winging it,” “creative,” and inevitably “hilarious.” All of these are true, but *improvisation* and *comedy* are not synonymous. Comedy is just one of the many byproducts and benefits of improvisation. Mostly, improv is a device for expanding comfort zones, learning new competencies, and actively looking for and creating opportunities. The great news is that you do not have to be a funny person to improvise. Anyone can improvise. In fact, you are already doing it in your daily life—when you pick up the phone and talk to someone or when you go to a meeting. In fact, every single interaction you have with a human being is spontaneous improvisation, and like great improvisers, we must train and practice to grow and learn more.

## Handle the Unpredictable and Potential Problems and Move Forward

Managing an unpredictable environment is tough because most people are not well equipped for it. There's no normal or abnormal way of reacting to problems. In a business

environment that changes instantly with new technology and increasing diversity, business improv provides the tools and skills to help people adapt successfully.

Improvisation helps participants manage change by supporting them through the process. With improvisation skills, they can enter into the unknown equipped with tools to help them deal with the denial, anger, frustration, and apathy that happen in the phases of change. The competencies that improvisation builds on help an organization's support systems create productive environments and encourage curiosity and commitment.

Improvisation has been described as “an intuitive, coordinated, and spontaneous response to a dynamic environment.” As such, adaptability, a positive outlook, and communication are vital. Improvisers can smoothly handle multiple simultaneous demands and shifting priorities, and they can adapt their responses and tactics to fit fluid circumstances. They are persistent in pursuing goals despite obstacles and setbacks. Business improv helps employees view challenges as opportunities that encourage success as the operating philosophy.

## Discover and Remove Barriers That Keep Organizations Stuck

It's one thing to know what's coming, and another to be able to adjust to it. Improvisation lends itself to productivity and innovation no matter what's going on. It helps remove barriers to teamwork, collaboration, and advancement by:

- Celebrating and recognizing success
- Storytelling
- Building ownership through inclusion
- Soliciting feedback and reviewing suggestions
- Creating a safe place for bold ideas to emerge

## The Rules of Business Improv

These tools make us successful improvisers onstage ... they will in business too!

- “Yes, and”
- Support and celebrate others
- Suspend judgments
- Take risks and participate energetically

“Yes, and” is the very core of improvisation. It is the springboard from which all other improvisation competencies jump off. It is the first building block—it moves action forward, builds trust, creates acceptance, promotes healthy communication, and supports productive relationships. “Yes, and” provides the framework of innovation, collaboration, and diversity. Teams can't advance without understanding and employing the simple yet wise concept of “yes, and.”

Leave all judgments at the door. You can pick them back up when you are finished. I promise they will still be there. Most of us are our own worst critic. This is the biggest challenge that most participants must overcome. “What will my boss think?” “What if I look stupid?” Their inner voice goes into overdrive telling them all sorts of things like they’re too old, too young, too serious, too experienced, too educated, too whatever. . . . Let it go! In improvisation, these thoughts will keep you stuck. Get out of your head, and get into the supportive nonjudgmental world of improv.

No one cares about what you are doing or saying anyway because the people around you are too worried about what they’re doing and saying. People are too busy judging their own level of involvement to worry about yours. So go ahead and contribute, and when you begin speaking, trust that it’s right and the appropriate thing will come out of your mouth.

A great way to suspend judgment is tell participants to jump in as fast as possible and be the first ones to volunteer. That way they will stop talking to themselves about all of their judgments! It’s always harder to think about doing something than it is to just do it. Always! Plus, it’s a team effort. So the team shouldn’t rely on a couple of people to do all of the heavy lifting while everyone stands around and watches. It’s about sharing the load and contributing even if you don’t want to, even if you’re scared. Improvisation is one for all and all for one.

As the facilitator, you must set the energy for everyone else. If your energy is low, you’re giving everyone permission to do the same. I know that sometimes at certain times of the day your energy can drop, but make it your goal to be the “cheerleader” and encourage yourself and others. It’s about practicing the art of energy manipulation. Force enthusiasm and see what happens. Experiment by making yourself go for it. There’s nothing to lose and only insights to gain. If your participants need a little energy manipulation, ask them on a scale of 1 to 10 how enthusiastic they were to their team members’ offerings. If their answer is low, ask them to commit more.

Support and celebrate those around you. When you encourage people to go for it, the payoff is huge; people become more willing to collaborate and work with you. Improvisation is about making your partner look good. We’re taught that our scene partner is God: treat him or her accordingly. That means celebrating each other’s offers, ideas, and perspectives. It’s about encouraging team members instead of competing with them. Improvisation is inclusive, not exclusive. No one is isolated. There are no silos. Supporting each other’s creativity is fundamental.

It is imperative that you as the facilitator support, encourage, and celebrate the participants in every exercise both verbally and nonverbally. Some of the activities will push them out of their comfort zone. You are essentially asking them do things they might perceive as difficult, hard, not appropriate, or not beneficial to the business world. It’s your job to generate unconditional support and create an atmosphere of nonjudgmental learning and fun. Every time participants perform any activity, thank them and encourage them with applause and cheers. This will set the tone for all activities to follow, and it will enable them to communicate effectively with people from every walk of life—no exceptions. It’s that powerful.

## The Steps to Follow

You can modify or change the steps as you feel appropriate. Leave steps out or repeat steps as necessary if they are helping your group reach their potential. The key is to have fun and experience the energy of acceptance, open-mindedness, and encouragement.

## The Debriefings

Learning takes place in experiencing the activities, and connecting the competencies of improvisation to their work life and it takes place in the debrief. The questions you ask after every activity are critical to the applicability for the participants.

## Business Improv

Business improv is a proven, hands-on training process on how to communicate effectively with people from every walk of life—no exceptions. Today people from every part of the world are communicating with each other face-to-face, via e-mail, and in countless other social networks. Business improv is the one tool that helps people understand how to get the message across in a constructive way that ensures a win-win situation for everyone involved. How we put our ideas across to other people and how we listen can make the difference between a department's being fully functional, productive, and profitable and its breaking down with frontline employees' focusing on what is wrong and what isn't working and senior executives' watching a decreasing bottom line losing ground day by day.

When people learn communication methods in which they can discuss issues, conflicts, and challenging situations as they arise, they become adept at finding solutions and ways to move forward in the moment. When problems of communication between internal and external customers are not solved immediately, they can fester and become so big that managers and department heads may eventually have to intervene. This creates lost time, diminished focus, reduced productivity, and lost revenues. By focusing on specific improv techniques, everyone is heard, everyone has a voice, and everyone takes responsibility for collaborating with everyone else in the moment. Instead of taking days or weeks and sometimes even months to solve a problem, people move forward and get on with doing their jobs in a productive and cohesive manner.

Working with coworkers and customers from different cultures, backgrounds, and belief structures can sometimes create an unpredictable and unplanned framework in which people communicate from a base of fear, anxiety, and worry. This causes people to take things personally and to create rigid and uncooperative triangulation patterns within departments—all of which adversely affect interactions with customers. Business improv provides a proven process with specific rules and characteristics that enable people to explore how to communicate with creativity and spontaneity without fear or apprehension. It opens up possibilities instead of constraints, and it builds an environment in which people enjoy turning up for work and being involved in creating loyal and satisfied customers—both internal and external.

From an employee perspective, one of the reasons for the outstanding results and productive environment provided by business improv is that it is fun, exciting, and innovative. People want to learn, and they are passionate about using their new tools back on the job. Everyone who participates in business improv walks away inspired to communicate and collaborate with coworkers, colleagues, and customers alike. It is similar to learning an exciting new sport: people immediately want to put what they've learned into action. Business improv is the new and exciting communication sport of the century. It is insightful and meaningful, and it provides people with exceptional tools to get their message across no matter what the message, the messenger, or the recipient. Gone forever are the stuffy meetings that take up so much of people's time and a corporation's resources. With business improvisation, people get to the point fast because they are able to think on their feet, take charge of their ideas, and communicate in a language that everyone understands. Business improv is the creation of a universal language that breaks down barriers, builds understanding, and focuses on immediate results.

Managers, supervisors, and business leaders have described business improv as the "communication process of champions." It's not just that people enjoy learning about how to interact with each other and provide their best performance. It is a mechanism that literally lightens up the communication process. As a result, people look forward to collaborating with each other. People are on the same page, communicating within a framework of preestablished rules designed to expand dialogue and encourage feedback. Within the framework of business improv, pushback and shutdown become things of the past because the very rules prohibit inferior dialogue.

## Collaboration: The Way Forward to Right Action

One of the reasons that business improv works so well is that it gets people interested and involved. The thousands of people who have learned business improv are always excited to learn new techniques and get involved with the games and exercises. Business improv is fun, interesting, and challenging. People do not have to sit through a day of being lectured at, watching PowerPoints, or even sitting down in groups and going through made-up role-play scenarios that do not reflect real-life situations. Individuals who learn business improv skills become the creators, directors, and actors of their own scenes. They use their own work experiences to create the situations that they come across on a daily basis for which they have had no real tools to utilize. Participants in a business improv class don't just learn about the importance of being spontaneous. They are spontaneous. No longer do they have to try and be creative. They are creative. By the very nature and structure of what we call *resourceful engineering*, people become self-directed and autonomous, which are key principles of adult learning.

People learn by experience. There is no better way to learn how to effectively communicate with other people than to dialogue with other people in unrehearsed

and unedited situations. One of the reasons for the outstanding results and productive environments provided by business improv is that it is fun, exciting, and innovative—people want to learn, and they are passionate about using their new tools back on the job. Every business improv exercise is designed to give the learner one key element. It could be, for example, the “yes, and” exercise, which is a key component in creating a profitable discussion with another person. A *profitable discussion* is one in which both parties feel they have been heard and are empowered to move forward with a project instead of coming to a roadblock in which managers, and even department heads, have to get involved.

The entire workforce benefits from business improv because once the rules are learned, they cannot be unlearned. Once people experience and develop the mechanical skills of business improv, it is impossible for them not to use them; being difficult, unreasonable, or uncollaborative no longer works. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that the rules make sense: they speak to that part within each of us that instinctively *knows* the right and wrong ways to talk to people.

The problem for many people is that even if they know at some level that they are creating a communication breakdown and that they may be right in the middle of a dialogue disaster, they don't know how to stop. Without the skills of business improv, people literally cannot get off the bus that leads to communication collapse. And while a communication problem sounds like a simple thing, it can create such an upheaval that the company can lose thousands of dollars in people-hours trying to find solutions. The best way out of this problem is to give people the skills and knowledge not to get on that bus in the first place.

## Self-Directed Practices for Effective Communication

Since respect, support, and collaboration are an intrinsic part of business improv, every participant is treated as an important element within the learning process, and every person walks away from business improv empowered to the best communicator he or she can be.

Adults are autonomous and self-directed, and they need to be free to direct themselves and learn what they need and want to learn. Business improv is founded on a self-directed form of communication. Participants assume responsibility for their part in the communication whether it's listening, responding, or talking. Business improv helps participants use their accumulated knowledge and life experience to enhance communication and build a process in which they can relate to the theories and concepts provided.

Goals and course objectives are clearly defined elements of business improv. Early on participants are encouraged to see how the practical aspects of business improv will enhance every aspect of their life, at home and at work. The wealth of experience that adults bring to the classroom provides a foundation in which all of the participants are treated as equals and are allowed to voice their opinions freely in class.

## The Four Critical Elements of Learning

Business improv solves the four critical elements that every manager, frontline supervisor, and facilitator faces: motivation, reinforcement, retention, and transference. Within business improv, there are at least six factors that provide motivation for adult learners:

1. *Social relationships*: Make new friends.
2. *External expectations*: Comply with instructions.
3. *Social welfare*: Improve ability to be of service.
4. *Personal advancement*: Achieve higher job status.
5. *Stimulation*: Provide a break from routine.
6. *Cognitive interest*: Seek knowledge for its own sake.

If adults do not see the benefit of learning, they will not be motivated to learn. People also need sufficient tension and difficulty to challenge them but not so much that they become frustrated by information overload. Right off the bat, business improv motivates people to learn: it is a fun, experiential process that challenges people to communicate in real time, unedited and in a friendly, open atmosphere that creates personal advancement and satisfies an inquiring mind.

Reinforcement is also a very necessary part of the learning process because it encourages correct ways to behave and perform in the workplace. Because of the nature of business improv as an unedited, immediate, and interactive process, positive reinforcement is inherent in the process, and participants are encouraged to continue doing what works best for them. As a result, participants feel encouraged to use the principles back on the job.

Learning concepts are normally retained through practice; the concepts learned during business improv are retained by most participants because the ongoing practice reinforces and supports the learning. Likewise, transference of learning—that is, the ability to use the information taught in the course—is extremely high because participants integrate the new information with what they already know.





## Activity 1

# “Yes, and”

*There was really only one rule I was taught about improv. That was, “yes-and.” In this case, “yes-and” is a verb. To “yes-and.” I yes-and, you yes-and, he, she, or it yes-ands. And “yes-anding” means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what’s going to happen, maybe with someone you’ve never met before...*

—Stephen Colbert, host of *The Colbert Report*, a satirical news show

### Level of Risk

Low

### Background and Purpose

If you are familiar with improvisational theater, you are probably familiar with “yes, and.” “Yes, and” is one of the fundamental ground rules of improv. It’s a general philosophy by which you agree with your partner and then add additional information. It is the best way to gain trust, acceptance, and mutual discovery and to collaborate.

In improv, “yes, and” is about accepting what’s given to you and then adding another offer to move the conversation, idea, or action along. By acknowledging one piece of information and adding another, you and your partner work together to advance the communication. It’s a process familiar to creative problem solving: you start with a few pieces of key information and spend the rest of the time working toward a solution and defining the various details along the way.

Saying “yes, and” does not necessarily mean that you agree with what the other person is saying. It is simply a way of ensuring collaboration and moving an idea along. Agreeing to disagree is still “yes, anding” as long as the intention for both parties is to move forward.

The “yes, and” rule allows people to pick up the ball and run with it. It infuses energy, it’s fun and exhilarating, and most of all it creates an environment in which people feel empowered to pitch their ideas and thoughts. “Yes, and” is an affirmation that the person is listening and the offering is being accepted and heard. “Yes, and” does not mean you agree with or even like the offering. Rather, it means that you are simply validating that the offering has occurred.