



BUSINESS IMPRO

A constantly-updated book on what improvisational theatre can do for you and your business. More will be added in time, for now enjoy these bits and pieces!

5 Team Building Games That Work (thanks to improvisation)

Think of your last few team building events.

Did they all work? I guess some did better than others.

See, there's good team building and there's bad team building. For example, bad events could be:

- All going out for a barbecue;
- Going to an outdoor adventure park;
- Laser tag or similar.

That's all fun, don't get me wrong! Who hates laser tag, seriously?



Afterwards, though, do you really feel more bonded with and connected to your colleagues, or does everyone just go back to working and not talking to each other?

Sometimes these events work, and that “sometimes” is precisely the problem. We don't want sometimes – **we want our team to become more solid every time.**

To do that we need to work on making our team members connect in a way that:

- is positive and uplifting;
- makes them feel mutually supported and cared for;
- feels balanced.

People grow from such a mutual connection, they become more efficient, motivated and attached to their organization and communities (Oxford, 2011). This doesn't happen by chance. Two people that don't like each other will not develop a deep bond on their own; you need to be the one channelling this type of connection.

Long story short: **there are ways of creating solid and long-lasting bonds between your team members, and in this article I will show you exactly**



what they are and how you can put them to work. Plus, I'm throwing in 5 team building games for you!

Building High-Quality Connections

If you want your team to really bond and connect, have them work on these four areas:

- awareness,
- gratefulness and empathy,
- support,
- play.

Awareness is nothing more than having an unbiased look on reality. If you don't like your colleague, but he's brilliant at work, your opinion of him does not change how good he is – that's reality.

Gratefulness and **empathy** help us deepen the connection to an emotional state – a heartfelt “thank you”, for example, feels positive and uplifting. Simple as that.

Being **supportive** means being helpful and respectful, no long explanation needed I hope.

Play is a separate framework where everything can happen and where people are more free to connect in otherwise impossible ways. **Play is silly and unprofessional – and being able to play with your colleagues is exactly what we are going for!**



Play is also the key to getting all these factors to work together – so start by structuring your team building event as a playful one!

Here are 5 team building games to help you out.

5 Team Building Games

Let's get down to business. These are 5 team building games you can throw in your next event,

I've included instructions and purpose. They are all taken from the world of improvised theatre: [Applied Improvisation is what I know and what I do](#).

Now, before we dive into each game, a couple of notes:

1. **Be playful!** These team building games are supposed to be fun, so make them fun and keep the energy up! Do go in detail about what their purpose is and how they connect you all, but that stuff is usually boring, so keep it for after you've played each game.



2. These team building games work, but they are not the gospel. Consider how they work with the people you're with and feel free to change and adapt the games to them.

Also: these were not born as team building games, they are exercises used in rehearsals for improvisation. Don't let this throw you off: improvisation has a way of working with our head that switches some powerful triggers and helps us grow and develop. When it comes to team building... well have you ever seen a team of improvisers work together on stage? Project teams have so much to learn from improvisation. Then again, that's what the [Applied Improvisation Network](#) is there for! If you want some scientific proof, take what Applied Improv does for [creativity](#), for example.

Enough about Applied Improvisation – here are the 5 team building games I have promised!

Walk-stop-dash-jump

Trains: awareness

I've done this at a workshop with Brandon Gardner of [UCB](#). It's a good warm-up that forces you to be aware of what is happening around you and to accept it. There are three steps to it.

Step 1: Everyone starts walking around the room, the facilitator can give four commands: Walk, Stop, Dash, Jump. Whenever a command is given, the group obeys it (tell people to be careful when they dash around).

Step 2: Same as above, but it's not the trainer who yells out the commands: anyone at random can shout a command. The goal is to keep the exercise clean and to have people start looking at and listening to each other.

Step 3: Same as step 2, but the commands are not said out loud. Whenever someone makes a move (e.g. we are all walking and one



person stops), that is seen as a command, and everyone must follow it until someone else makes another move.

By going from step 1 to step 3, people start to recognise how their colleagues are an integral part of the environment, how they are all likely to make a contribution to it, what the impact of this contribution can be and what it means to gracefully adapt to it.

The Hot Seat

Trains: support and awareness

I've first done this with [ComedySportz Berlin](#). Everyone stands up in a circle and one person is standing in the center. This person must be always singing a song, the job of everyone outside is to take that person out of his misery by jumping inside the circle and starting to sing. Once they do, the person that was in the middle steps back into the circle and the game keeps on going.

The goal is for everyone to understand you're all on the same boat and you can only keep on going by being there for each other (or by throwing someone under the bus by letting him sing the whole time, but that has never happened as far as I know!).

If you're playing this game, remember to keep the pace up! Nobody should keep singing for more than 30 seconds, so get people to jump in as fast as they can.

Problem and Solution

Trains: support, gratefulness



This exercise (again from [CSz Berlin](#)) is a conversation between two people that always follows the same structure, but where the participants have to fill in the gaps. This is the structure

- A: *"I have a problem:_____ (describe problem)"*
- B: *"Here, I have a _____(a completely random object)"*
- A: *"Great! I can then (do something with the object) to _____ (come up with a solution). Thank you!"*
- A and B high five and then two more people have a go at it.

Now, the solution doesn't even really have to make sense, it can be as random as *"Great, I can then wave the tennis racket to interfere with the nuclear missile's computer throw it off its course and save us from certain death"*. It is more important to stay in the exercise than coming up with anything that makes sense!

You could have two people go on stage and do this, or keep everyone in a circle and the exercise "moves" clockwise around it. If you want to make it easier you can have two buckets ready with a bunch of problems and object that people can pick and use.

The goal is to have two people connect in a supportive and thankful way – especially with the enthusiastic "thank you!" and high-five at the end. Do it right and this game is fun and playful – another thing we're going for!

Anyone like me?

Trains: empathy (feeling), support (standing up), gratefulness (clapping)

I first heard of this game from an interview with Marijn Vissers of [Improphondo](#) on the amazing [Bring a Brick Podcast](#).

This is a splendid warm-up or ice-breaker that will throw your team directly in a series of high-quality connections. Here is how it works:



- You'll need a few chairs in a circle and one in the middle. Everyone is sitting down.
- The person sitting on the chair in the middle stands up and says: "*I'm looking for people who, like me, _____ (it can be anything, see below)*"
- Everyone who recognizes himself as having that characteristic stands up;
- Everyone who is standing up changes chairs and sits back down. Whoever is left in the middle starts again with "*I'm looking for people who, like me, _____ (something else)*" and the game goes on;
- If no one shares the characteristic and stands up, your job as a facilitator is to say: "*Give that person a round of applause because it's very difficult to be unique and stand there alone!*". After the applause he gets to point to someone who takes his place in the middle chair.

You can start it off. If you do, keep it superficial like "*I'm looking for people who, like me, are wearing a black t-shirt*".

The idea is however to go somewhat deeper and have people share more. That should happen automatically. If it doesn't, give it a gentle nudge the next time you are on the spot, for example you're now looking for someone who has once made a gaffe or told a non-funny joke. Also, make sure the applause is loud and enthusiastic in case you call for one – it should be joyful and uplifting!

This game works on support (you are supported by everyone who stands up with you or claps for you), gratefulness (you are grateful for the support) and empathy (if the exercise manages to go deeper into emotions).

Guessing emotions

Trains: awareness and empathy



This team building game is sort of advanced, so don't do it at the beginning or perhaps not even in the first workshops you do. Here's how it works:

- Two people, A and B, stand in front of each other (about a meter, safe distance), they agree on who will start (A in our case).
- A will now embody an emotion and express it nonverbally.
- B will have about a minute to look at A and "read" his emotional state.
- At the end of the minute, B will try to guess what A's emotional state is. A will then say how close B was to guessing.
- A and B switch places and go again.

There's a lot of reasons for which this game is advanced – the number one being that expressing an emotion non-verbally is difficult. Actors train for years to do it so someone who has never been done it before may be unable, or uncomfortable doing it.

A shortcut around this is to ask participants to remember some emotional moment in their past that is still vivid and detailed, and use that as the source of their emotion. "Happiness" is a vague and abstract concept, whereas "ecstasy because you have been accepted for a student exchange program" is specific and real. Have your participants go for the latter. Also, point out that they don't have to share with the others anything they don't want to, just to play it safe.

Sources

- *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, Oxford University Press, 2011.
- *How To Be A Positive Leader Through Building High Quality Connections*, Jane E. Dutton, 2014
- *I've got your back: utilizing improv as a tool to enhance workplace relationships*, Jordana Cole, 2016



You want innovation? Improvise. (I mean it)

- Improvisers produce **20% more product ideas** and **25% more creative ideas** than professional product designers. (Kudrowitz, MIT, 2010)
- **Organizational Improvisation** is able to increase **product innovation**, especially in high-tech projects. (Gao et al, 2016)



Data Source: [Kudrowitz, MIT 2010](#). Own graphics

You read this and thought: *"I want to tap into that. Can I get it for my company?"*.

The short answer is **yes** - and in this article I will show you exactly how.

Improvisation, well taught, can boost innovation in companies but not in all of them. So let's take a look at that first

How Improvisation can boost Innovation

There are certain conditions you need to have in place to get the boost you're looking for. Without them applied improvisation may even damage your innovation potential. So, before anything, check if your company is right for Improvisation Training.

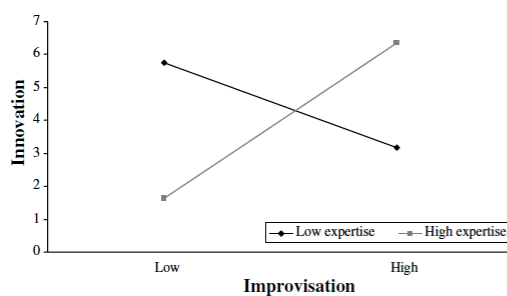
If you want applied improvisation to boost innovation for your company, then your company needs to have four conditions in place:

3. **High Expertise**
4. **High Teamwork Skills**
5. **High Experimental Culture**
6. **High Real-Time Internal Information and Communication**

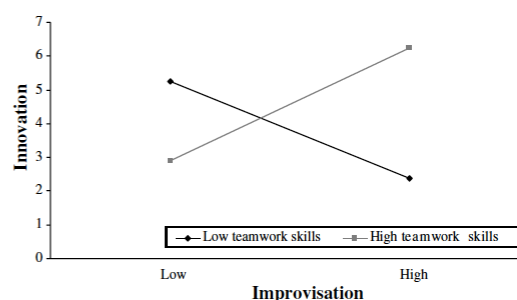
If those four conditions are in place, then Improvisation Training can generate a positive effect on innovation (Vera and Crossan, 2005). If they are not in place, the effect of applied improvisation on innovation may be even reversed.

Take a look:

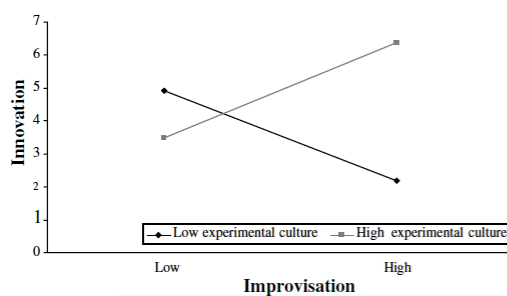
Improvisation × Expertise



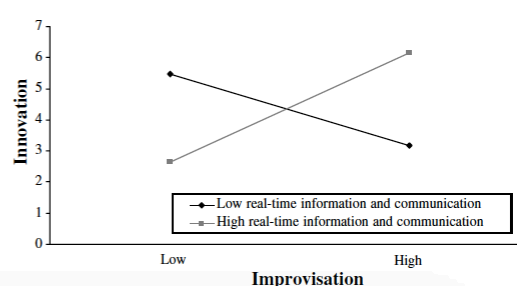
Improvisation × Teamwork skills



Improvisation × Experimental culture



Improvisation × Real-time information and communication



Source: [Improvisation and Innovative Performance in Teams \(Vera, Crossan, 2005\)](#)



Simply put: applied improv will push your innovation potential if you are already innovation-oriented. If instead you are a static and uncommunicative company, applied improvisation training may even work against your innovation efforts.

If you look at the net effects in terms of innovation, though, you are always better off having your four factors established and adding improv to them. In other words you reach your highest innovation potential if you first work on your team's expertise, teamwork, experimental culture and communication, and only then add improv to the mix. The good news is that **impro can train two of those conditions as well: [teamwork](#) and communication.**

What does Improvisation do for Innovation exactly?

If you have an innovative culture already in place, it means you're working with stuff like agile project management, design thinking, lean and so on. This is all great and it works, so where does improv come in?

Improvisation comes in heavy right at the beginning, when you need to generate ideas; and more subtly later, anytime the team meets, talks and discusses. This still sounds very abstract, so **let's take an example.**

At the beginning of a project, you have an idea-generation phase. Call it **brainstorming** if you wish, even though [I have a pet-peeve with that](#). We all know the rules: don't censor anything, don't judge, etc. and we've already used it. So, what would Impro Training do to your team with respect to brainstorming? Answer: a single improv workshop can cause a **37% increase in idea generation and output during brainstorming.** ([Kudrowitz, MIT, 2010](#)).

So, pair that with what I wrote in the beginning. A team trained in improvisation will have:

- **37% more ideas than without training;**
- **20% more product ideas than product designers;**
- **25% better quality for product ideas than product designers.**



This is what Applied Improvisation does for Innovation - *it gives you an advantage right at the start.*

How do I get improvisation in my company?

It's much, much easier than you'd think. The fact that improvisation is applied in big universities and companies makes it look like it's in a sort of inaccessible ivory tower.

Nothing further from the truth: there is abundance of trainers around the world, if you want to find one just look up your choices on the website of the [Applied Improvisation Network](#) (AIN). For example, for **Berlin** you'd find [my AIN profile here](#).

If you find nothing around you on the AIN's website, don't give up. There are a bunch of trainers that aren't registered so feel free to explore around!

How much training do I need?

My take is **the more the better** but I understand you need to draw a line. You can get the basics with a one-day or even half-day training to be honest. The basic concepts are not rocket science - what is difficult is "getting it" and applying it.

Start with a simple training and see what changes in your team dynamics, then decide what to do. It might also be that Improvisation isn't right for your team, it's not the magic wand - but it's definitely worth a try.