



Core Elements of Teamwork in Action - Takeaways

Edoardo Binda Zane, June 26th, 2018

Sometimes our team is all we have

In our professional life, there is only one thing that we can expect for certain: change.

With the current pace of innovation and the size of the changes connected to it, we can expect that at a certain point our organisation and way of working will also undergo change – slowly or rapidly, change will come.

And if it is true that change is inevitable, it is also true that our current reference points and frameworks will start to lose in value, and when that happens, **our team is all we have**.

If our team is our only resource, then we need to be able to use it the best way we can, and since a team is made of people, using it at its best means enabling everyone to do their best work.

And here is where problems start: how do we do it?

We are all different, and there is no one-size-fits-all method that we can use to get the best out of each other – we need to look at every single person and give them the best possible support based on what we know about them.

The key, then, is fully understanding each other within a team at all times, especially in changing environments, and to do that, **we need to communicate with each other quickly, precisely and clearly**.

There is a group of people we can learn from that always operates in changing environments and that uses communication as their only tool: **theatre improvisers**.

You can look at an improv team as a group of people that go on stage and put up a funny show – which is true. You can however also look at them as a group of people called to work together that need to develop a product (the show) that the client (the audience) will like and is willing to pay for – and all within 10 seconds and in front of the clients themselves.

Seen like this, an improv team shares quite some similarities with a professional team. If this is true, and if it is true that good improvisers manage to repeatedly succeed in changing environments because of how they work and communicate, then **it must also be true that we can study their way of working and transfer their approach to our professional life**.



In our workshop we have briefly broken down how improvisers communicate in a few steps and worked on them separately at first, and then brought them all together at the end.

Specifically, we have looked at these three phases of communication:

1. Listening
2. Leading and following
3. Communicating constructively

We have focused on these areas separately, however there is one component that always remained constant, which is the main difference that allows improvisers to be so resilient: **making the other person look good.**

This is 100% of an improvisers' job on stage, and if we want to adopt their way of communicating effectively, it is also a component we must include in our everyday interaction with our team.

During our work, we saw how this concept can be applied in all the areas of communication we focused on.

The Workshop

Listening

The first couple of games we played were all about listening. The reason is simple: if we want to have any hope to strengthen our teamwork, **our first duty is being fully aware of the what is happening around us**, and listening is a big part of that.

We always assume we can listen, but when we try to do it for only two minutes with our eyes closed, we see how much resistance our thoughts oppose. We start thinking about other things, about work deadlines, about our private life... all very important topics, but they all just get in our way and distract us from what is actually happening.

We then experienced how different it is to be actively listening when we tried to count to 20 as a group – **our listening was more focused and aware**, and that is exactly the type of attention you need to have the whole time.

If you bring this back to the team, making the other person look good means devoting your full attention to them when you are listening and being aware enough to perceive any stimulus you receive from them and from your environment all together.

Leading and following in communication

In this phase, we played the mirror game and we counted to 3 in pairs (adding choices for clapping, jumping and saying names of famous people to make it more difficult)



In order to perform well in each exercise your attention had to shift from focusing on what you were doing to making sure that the other person could follow your indications. This is another example of **making the other person look good**.

It doesn't matter how brilliant or interesting your choices are (e.g. doing complex and fast movements in the mirror exercise, always taking the hard choice in the counting exercise) – **all that matters is how much the other person can follow**. If that means doing simple and slow movements in the mirror game and always taking the easy choice in the 1-2-3 game, so be it. It may be boring to do, but it enables the other person to perform better with the task at hand.

This is a metaphor of what happens in communication. Provided that our partner is listening well, **it is our job to pass on information to him or her as clearly as possible**. If we choose to use complex terms or jargon, we may sound important, but information doesn't flow. If instead we choose to use simpler terms and go at a speed that our partner can follow, it is highly likely that we'll make our point.

Interestingly, at a certain point we took out the option of making difficult choices – i.e. when in the mirror exercise I requested you to **lead and follow at the same time**. Being in this condition forced you to heighten your awareness, and because you were both so focused on each other, you were able to operate much better and much more in sync than with one person leading the movements and the other one following.

In other words, **working together without a leader provides a better sync between people, when done well** – and the mirror game shows it (Noy et al, 2011).

Communicating constructively

The bottom line of our work is, of course, to enable a level of communication that is conducive to solid teamwork, even in highly changing and flexible environments.

Those environments often require being able to come up quickly with creative and applicable solutions, so in the last part we saw how this way of communicating can help us build on other people's ideas and do precisely that.

First, we looked at the concept of "**Yes, and...**", a staple of improvised comedy, which means listening to what our partner says, agreeing to it and building on it by adding another piece of information. We saw an example of this in action when we created a memory of a holiday we took together just by gradually adding small pieces of information. The result was a brilliant memory that we build together from nothing.

Second, we applied this concept to a brainstorming session for an impossible product. You had 5 minutes to create a whole marketing campaign (Product Name, Slogan, Packaging, Representative, TV Commercial) for something you had never seen before.

In order to do this, you were forced to **listen**, to **communicate clearly**, to **build on other people's ideas** – because you did not have time to do otherwise.

In other words, your only possible choice was to work following the idea of **making the other person look good**. Given that the results were absolutely brilliant, think about what that could mean for your team if you started working this way.



Also, the games we played in this phase had another effect: they took out the possibility of not accepting reality. Often, when things happen that don't match our expectation, our first instinct is to challenge them, which usually just adds another burden on everyone. If instead we decide to **agree** with what is happening from moment one, we can then move on faster to creating a solution.

The Scientific Background

A large part of my work is based on science. I try to make my workshops as entertaining and interactive as possible, but I want to make sure that the scientific basis is respected. The focus of our workshop was to show how and why improvisers are able to work under such uncertainty and pressure and trust that they will always succeed.

If it is true that our world of work is changing, we can also expect that behaviours and dynamics will change with it.

In the previous paragraphs we have looked at how improvisers succeed, as in, what behaviours work and which one don't. **Here we look at why all of this works.**

The starting point is uncertainty, or pressure, which given the pace of innovation will only keep on growing. So the starting point must be – how do we behave under uncertainty and pressure?

Interestingly, under uncertainty we can expect one of **two behaviours**:

The **first one** is to trigger our survival instinct: **we seek safety and want to feel safe.**

We perceive uncertainty as a sort of danger, and when we perceive danger our instincts are programmed to kick in.

And **in a working context**, this means that whenever we find ourselves in an unknown and unfamiliar situation, our first instinct is to revert to using something we know, a tool or a routine that we are experts in, because doing something we are the best at makes us feel safe. (Barthol & Ku, 1959, Weick 1993)

What's more, this instinct is so strong that we may want to obey it even if we consciously understand that whatever we are doing is not working in that situation.

The **second behaviour is exactly the opposite of the first one.**

Whenever we are faced with an unknown and unfamiliar situation, we can decide to fight our first instinct, let go of everything we know and make up something else with what we have.

This behaviour has even a specific name: **Organisational Improvisation**, meaning you don't have time to plan and then execute, but you and your whole team need to draw on available material, cognitive and social resources and "make do" with what you have (Pina e Cunha et al., 1999).

One of the most famous (and firstly studied) cases of organisational improvisation vs. usual patterns is the Mann Gulch fire. Simplifying, when a forest fire started behaving



differently to what was expected, the team of firefighters that was tasked with extinguishing it had to find a way out of a dangerous situation under heavy time pressure.

The ones that decided to stick to their established trainings and routines died, whereas others who decided to abandon his usual patterns (starting a second fire to create an escape route) managed to survive (Weick 1993).

These are of course extreme consequences, but the **behaviours associated with uncertainty are common to all of us, in a team or not.**

If this is true, then it is in our interest to know these behaviours, and know what improvisers do to bypass the negative ones (fight-flight-freeze response) and react effectively as a team.

Research (Gagnon et al 2012) has identified three concepts improvisers use as the basis of their success, here they are, linked to what we did in the workshop:

1. **Environmental awareness** – This means being able to objectively observe, consider and process every stimulus or offer that comes your way – *we worked on this in the listening and mirroring exercises.*
2. **Being in the moment** – This means being able to focus solely on that is happening now, without thinking of consequences, the future or other possibilities of what we are doing – *we did this in every exercise in the leading and following in communication phase – e.g. the mirror game again or “so what you are saying is...”*
3. **Making the other person look good** – On stage this means supporting and working with anything that comes from your scene partner. When it comes to teams it means entering a group of people and having the certainty that everyone else in that group will do everything in their power to make sure that you have full support, that your ideas are built upon, and that you feel trusted – and entering a group with this philosophy is an extremely strong safety net, exactly what you want – *this is the main concept we worked on throughout the workshop.*

And as for the learning itself, I have applied two concepts throughout the workshop:

Firstly, each exercise triggered something called a High-Quality Connection (HQC), HQCs are short-term, positive interactions between two or more individuals that result in a positive experience for all parties (Stephens et al. 2011), and are a proven method to create positive, workplace relationships - **meaning that the value of these exercises is not only in the result they give, but in the consequences of doing the exercise itself.**

Secondly, I aim for the workshops to be interactive and fun, and by helping you associate a strong positive emotion to the workshop and its contents, I can make sure that you will remember more of it, **as emotions are conducive to creating stronger memories** (Cahill et al. 1995).



The bottom line

If there is one thing you need to take away from our work together, let it of course be **make the other person look good**.

You have experienced what it means in a safe environment, now try to first observe it around you and then see how you can apply it in your team.

Try this to get you started: in your work, look at how people around you interact and note the following.

1. **How many times do people make themselves look good instead of others?** Even worse, how many times do people make others look bad? A sure-fire way of identifying way is looking out for the words "**Yes, but...**" – which is effectively a block to any offer.
2. **How do they communicate?** How many times do you see someone not understanding and being blamed for it? We always think that if people don't understand, it's their fault. In improvisation if I tell you something and you don't understand, it's my fault.

Think how you would react in those situations, and think how the situation would be different if you chose to make the other person look good. Once you feel comfortable, try to apply it yourself and see what happens.

If you manage to integrate just this tiny concept in your work, you'll be already miles ahead than the rest, and people will notice!

Bibliography

- Barthol, R. P., and N. D. Ku.: "Regression under stress to first learned behaviour." (1959)
- Cahill L, Babinsky R, Markowitsch HJ, McGaugh JL: "The amygdala and emotional memory" (1995)
- Gagnon, S., Vough, H., Nickerson, R.: "Learning to Lead, Unscripted: Developing Affiliative Leadership Through Improvisational Theatre" (2012)
- Noy, L., Dekel, E. and Alon, U.: "The mirror game as a paradigm for studying the dynamics of two people improvising motion together" (2011)
- Pina e Cunha, M., J. Vieira da Cunha and K. Kamoche. "Organizational improvisation: What, when, how and why." (1999).
- Stephens*, JP, Heaphy, E., Dutton, J: "High Quality Connections" (2011)
- Weick, K. E. "The Mann Gulch Disaster" (1993)



About Me



I have been working in and heading 7-figure business and policy projects at European level for a large part of my career. I have also been improvising at a professional level for 5 years and have studied with several top-level schools (UCB, David Razowsky, ComedySportz).

I exploit contact points between these realities and use them to transfer skills between them.

I am the author of two books:

- *"Effective Decision-Making: how to make better decisions under uncertainty and pressure"*
- *"Writing Proposals: A Handbook of What Makes Your Project Right For Funding"*

Selected References

