



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!

The problem with presentations trainings (and what to do about it)

I spent years managing large projects as a consultant and I had a lot of trainings.

During that time there was one thing that fascinated me: how **all those trainings were consistently terrible**.

And the weird thing is that I didn't realise it until a few years later.

Here's how the story goes.

When I moved to Berlin I took up **improvised theatre**. Improv, for the ones who aren't familiar with it, means being on stage with someone else, getting a suggestion from the audience and creating an entire show – writing it, acting it and directing it on the spot.



To be entertaining, the show needs to be engaging for the audience – and improvisers train quite a lot to understand what builds that engagement. In other words, a massive part of the training they go through focuses on how to create a story that their audience will want to hear, that they will resonate and empathize with.

One day, I was sent off to the European Commission to give an important presentation about a project we just finished, and when I started preparing it, something happened.

I froze.

The improviser in me and the consultant in me were clashing, badly.

The **improviser** was thinking "*Who are these people? What do they want to hear? How can I make them empathize with my story?*"

The **consultant**, instead, was just mentioning stuff like "*How can I look professional? What jargon will make me sound serious? What suit will I wear? How will I structure my slides? With what font?*"

And in that difference in attitude is precisely the reason those trainings were awful: the consultant was only able to think one thing, himself.

Well here's a secret: **nobody cares about you.**

We all have our lives, emails to answer, family time, cat videos on Facebook... All things that are much more interesting than whatever the guy on stage is talking about.

So the question is: **how do we make somebody care?**

The consultant is a lost cause in that sense, but the improviser, working with all those theatre techniques, has maybe something to work with.



The Mirror Game



There is a game we play, in which two people stand in front of each other, one needs to move and the needs to follow the other's movements as close as possible – just like a reflection in a mirror.

Usually, the one leading movements will start to go crazy (jump around, move quickly...) and the one following them will be struggling to keep up – and as a result there will be a delay in repeating movements, much unlike a mirror reflection.

I like this exercise because it's a good metaphor of what happens on stage.

When you present, you are delivering your train of thought and people in the audience are listening – and **the only thing that matters is whether the audience is able to follow the train of thought that you are leading.**

Just like in the game your follower will manage to keep up only if you use simple and clear movements, your audience will only be able to follow if you present your message clearly and in simple steps.



This means that **the full responsibility on whether your audience follows your speech is on you!**

If instead you want to have fun in the mirror game and do sudden movements and jump around, your follower will never keep up.

You are in your head, thinking about your own fun and gain, behaving just like the consultant. And by the same token, if you're in your head while presenting, thinking only about what will come next in your train of thought but unaware of what's happening in front of you, **you will lose people because they won't be able to follow.**

In other words: **unless you focus on the audience your message won't go through – which is the only important thing in a presentation!**

Focusing on the audience just means observing them: some people are nodding their head, some people are shaking it, some are leaning forward or are on their phones... those are all signals that tell you how you are doing.

Your conversation with the audience

So, if the audience gives us those signals, it means that they are also communicating with us... non-verbally, granted, but **they are telling us something.**

If this is true, it means that the communication between us goes two ways, it's not a monologue, **it's a dialogue...** and this makes a world of a difference!

Let's take an example.

You know how sometimes you start talking with a friend and get carried away in the conversation? Hours pass without you noticing, and at the end you feel great about having shared that much and having enjoyed such a lovely time.



When that happens, you don't dissect it and think about how you handled the status play, or what obscure NLP technique you managed to manipulate your friend! You just had a conversation with someone else and it was awesome.

So if it is true that a presentation is a dialogue, a conversation, and if it is true that people connect this deeply when they engage in a one-to-one conversation, **why don't we connect that deeply in a one-to-many conversation, a presentation?**

It looks almost as if we forget that audiences are actually made of people, and that makes it impossible for us to connect with them.

An audience strangely becomes impersonal, a strange "blur" that is in front of us. And **if you don't see the person in front of you, it's automatic to go in your head and make no effort to connect.**

So, the question is: **is it possible to get this type of connection when you present**, to get this sort of personal exchange in a presentation, and if so how?

Here's how I see it.

If I have a conversation with a friend I will automatically use a specific language, intonation and choice of words. I would use different ones speaking with my mother, with someone I don't know, or with my boss – because **the way I speak is an expression of the relationship I have with the person in front of me.**

I speak that way because I know what relationship I'm basing the conversation on: having a relationship helps me behave in a way I know the person in front of me will like.

Don't act like it's weird, it's something we all do, constantly, **including you.**

So how about doing THAT in a presentation?



Whenever I step on stage I like to establish a relationship beforehand. Basically **I decide who the crowd is going to be to me and who I am going to be to the crowd.**

Last time I went on stage I established that I was going to speak with a specific friend: a very smart and business-savvy entrepreneur that sometimes gets too caught up work and doesn't focus enough on human connections.

And because I decided to address him, my language register and behaviour adapted automatically to how they would have been if I were speaking directly with him.

So now **not only I have a message, but I already have established a relationship with the audience.**

And this has another effect.

If I know what relationship I have with the audience, I will be different. I will not be a cold, aseptic professional delivering a message on stage. I will merely be a human being speaking and connecting with you.

And it's so much easier for an audience to be connected with a PERSON on stage. We are all humans, we all relate to each other.



Bringing it all together



Often, in improv we can feel the effect of an audience on our show: a friendly or unfriendly audience can really make a difference.

It's up to you to make the first move. It's up to you to care for your audience, it's up to you to speak in a language that they can understand and make sure that they can follow.

And if you want them to open up to you, to establish a relationship, start by opening up yourself, Start by behaving and talking about your topic as if you were their friend, mother, daughter, or little sister. Whatever you choose, provided it's real and personal, will get you this human component in no time.

We have a rule in improv that is common to many different schools, which is: **make the other person look good.** They say that whenever you go on stage as an improviser, 100% of your job is to make your scene partner look good.



In improv, this means accepting every idea that comes, not contradicting, not making him look like a fool and treating him like a genius.

If I'm presenting on my own and I'm alone on stage, **there is only one person I can make look good: the person in the audience.**

That means making him feel able to follow effortlessly, making him feel considered and honoured because of all the effort I've put in for him, making him feel welcome in the conversation, because I seem friendly and wanting to genuinely connect.

So **I assure you one thing.** If you manage to get this part down: if your greatest priorities in presentations become thinking about your audience first and making them person look good... well, **you're done with 60% of the work.** The rest 40% is content, and you are already great at that!



I trained 4 TEDx speakers – here are 5 things I learned

So, TEDx Kreuzberg happened, and I couldn't possibly be more proud of the four speakers that stepped on that stage and gave it their best.

I couldn't be more proud because they rocked it, each one in their own way, and I'm happy to know that I had a part in their success as I trained them to give their best.

And if you think that getting someone – anyone – from wherever they start to a TED-like level of public speaking is hard, you are most certainly right!

I've been doing this for a while and I like to think I'm humble enough to know there's always something else to learn – and I so did this time around... so here I am to share what I learned with you!

TED^x
Kreuzberg
x = independently organized TED event



Have someone else



As good as you are, skilled to borderline arrogant with your quality as a trainer, you will never be as amazing by yourself as you would be with a partner in crime (or in training). I was lucky enough to meet Phoebe Blackburn for this project, and I find our collaboration to have been... interesting to say the least!

See, I work with improvised theatre techniques, and I'm bringing everything I can to the table (successfully so far!), whereas Phoebe comes from a wholly different world.

And precisely because we were so different, even at a personal level (don't get me wrong, she's a lovely person), the techniques and exercises we brought to the table not only worked on their own, but gave our trainees a whole different range of tools they could use. What's more, if you put two people that are equally passionate and skilled in the same room, you can expect them to build on each other's knowledge, and that's exactly what we did.

I guess the old impro saying of "I bring a brick, and you bring a brick and together we build a house" is a good description of how Phoebe and I managed to work.

Jump and scream like a maniac at the back

This came out natural, but it may not be the case for everyone – and this is very much personal to me.

It starts with something simple: you meet someone who has an idea they want to explain to the world.

Then you work with them, you get to know them, you understand where they come from and what is personal to them.

The more their talk develops, the better you understand them, and the more effort you both put into it, the more their talk shines and comes to life. You are in this together.



And then, the event hits.

All of a sudden, you're not the only ones in it. They are not just talking to you on stage, but also to a bunch of people they've never seen before, listening, observing and judging.

And that's when it hit me.

All you can do at this point is be there for them, and that's what you need to do. I'm pretty sure nobody needed it (they all rocked their talk), but I did go up to every single speaker and told them that I'd be in the crowd, that they'd see me, and if anything goes south, they could look at me and talk to me.

Long story short, I wanted them to know that they had a friend in the crowd that they could talk to one-to-one. I know that if I were in their position I would have appreciated it, and I think your job as a trainer does not end the moment they get on stage, but the moment they get off – cheering and supporting and being a friendly face in the crowd is a big part of the deal.

Be a group

Whenever I look at TED videos online, they are just – of course – a speech given by one person.

In this sense, then, talks are fragmented. It's one person doing a one-man-show.

While this is true during their talk, though, it isn't during everything else that comes before and after that.

In impro we have this ritual we do before going on stage. We all hug and tell each other "I've got your back". That simple, that powerful.



The four amazing speakers that went on stage that night were not four individuals, they were a group. What I wanted was for everyone to know that everyone else was there for them – and that's why I insisted on having group rehearsals, on doing group games and on having them say to each other that they had each other's back.

Bottom line? Not only did they have a friend jumping up and down at the back of the crowd that they could talk to. They had three more in the first row that were rooting for them with all they had. If that's not a powerful feeling to have when you're way out of your comfort zone, I don't know what is!

Be individuals

Before you ask: no, it's not a contradiction to the previous point.

You see TED talks, you see how speakers act and talk, and you see a pattern: everyone has a similar pace, and a similar attitude – with minor differences once they get on stage.

What is absurdly different, though (and that's what you don't see it in the videos) is how everyone gets to that point. The four people Phoebe and I trained came from different countries, backgrounds, philosophies... and that is fine, but as a trainer you need to take that into account.

Yes, the final result will be an amazing talk, but it's up to you to get them there in their own way and pace. I entered this task a bit naively – thinking I could just use the same approach with everyone, and was I wrong! Each person's speech is deeply, deeply personal – and the only way to get their personal story to shine is to connect with who they are and how they want to work.

You probably guessed it, there's only one way to do it: listen; listen; listen.

You may have your ideas on what works and what doesn't but be prepared to let everything go and take a completely different path so that it works with that person. Your job is not to work with the best techniques



and tools available, it's to use whatever works for the person that's in front of you.

Speak with the audience (not at it)

This is perhaps the biggest mindset switch you will need to pass on – and one of my most firm convictions.

I've been working in bigger companies and received trainings there before I became a trainer myself – and 100% of the presentation and public speaking trainings that I received had a fatal flaw. Everything was focused on YOU: how you look like, how you speak, how your body language is and so on.

And that's rubbish, I honestly don't even know why people bother listening to that.

In public speaking there is one thing that matters, and one alone: how much your audience understands and follows you. Nothing else.

That's where your focus should be: your audience. You are not speaking at a screen or at a camera, you are speaking with people, and as such your presentation is not a monologue, it's a dialogue.

Think of it this way: if you have a conversation with a friend and all you care about is yourself, how you look like and so on, you wouldn't be much of a conversation partner, would you? Why then do it when the conversation is between you and a number of people?

You might argue that they don't answer back and therefore it's not really a dialogue... but I will argue back that they will give you lots of cues, and trust me: you'll read them.

If your main concern is yourself on stage is just yourself, though, those cues will fly right over your head. And if your audience is bored, uninterested, or cannot follow, you'll be none the wiser.



Your job as a trainer, then, is to make sure that the people you work with are able to read these cues. Actually, we all are, but we need to understand that they are there, that the audience is not a vague notion of a group that you can't see because of the lights, but it's made of people that are eager to listen to you and to talk back.

Nail this, and 50% of your job is done.



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.

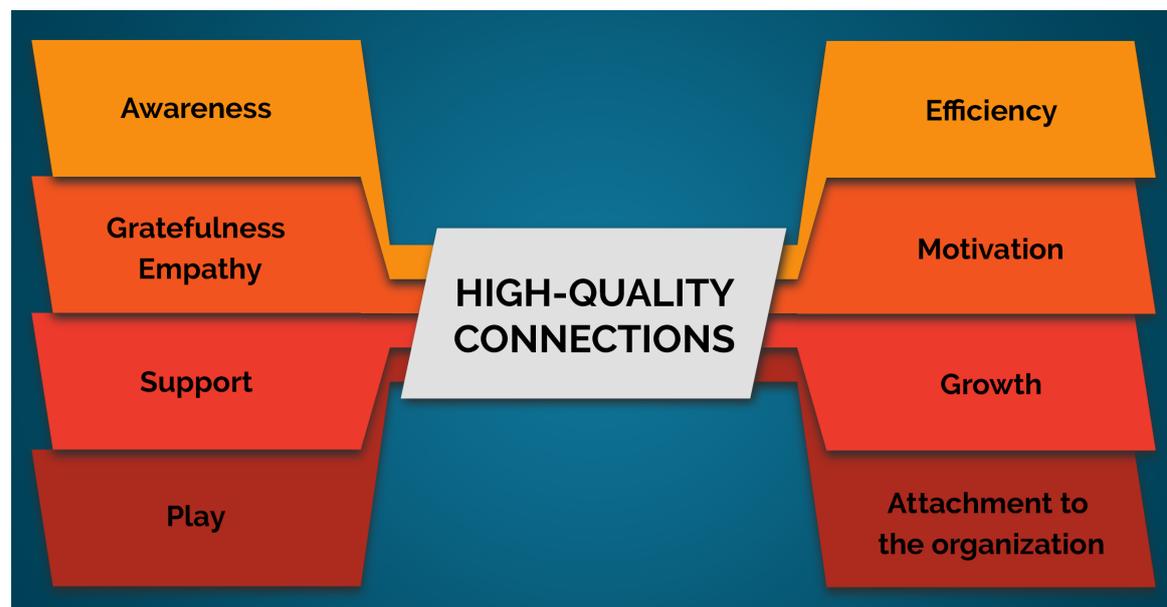


Awareness is nothing more than having an unbiased look on reality. If you don't like your colleague, but he's brilliant at work, your opinion of him does not change how good he is – that's reality.

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.

Each game has a title, 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.

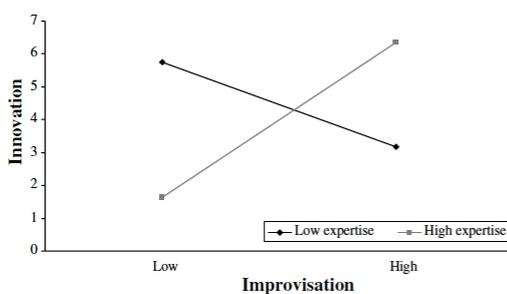
If you want applied improvisation to boost innovation for your company, then your company needs to have four conditions in place:

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

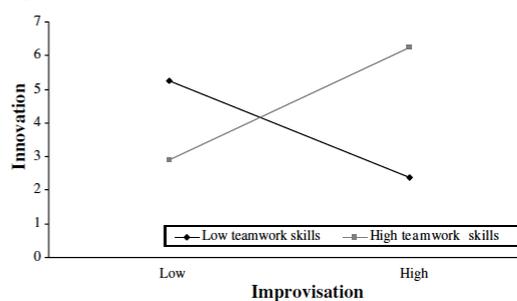
If those four conditions are in place, then Improvisation Training can generate a positive effect on innovation (Vera and Crossan, 2005). If they are not in place, the effect of applied improvisation on innovation may be even reversed.

Take a look:

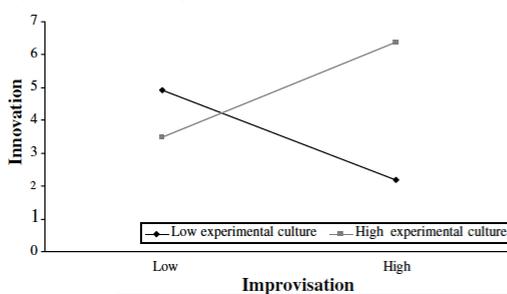
Improvisation × Expertise



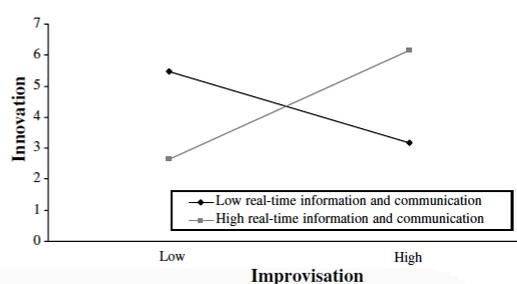
Improvisation × Teamwork skills



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 meet, talk and discuss. 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 unaccessible 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.