

Improvisation Power



by Pamela Meyer

WHILE THE economy seems uncertain, business goals remain the same: improve profitability, efficiency, and market share. Such an environment demands new approaches. Analysis and planning rarely work well when people and organizations need to respond quickly to opportunities and threats.

We need to cultivate competence in improvisation—the ability to use time and resources to advantage in response to the unexpected and unplanned. An event can be unexpected (as when an aircraft loses cabin pressure), but not unplanned for (oxygen masks drop down). When events are both unexpected and unplanned for (as are most daily activities), executives must improvise.

Improvisers in theatre, jazz and dance do not rehearse, because, of course, there is nothing to "re-hear". They do get together to "workout" or to "jam". These sessions combine game-playing to improve responsiveness and sessions where players review their performance and improve their collaboration, just like football players engage in rigorous practice even though they can't anticipate what will happen on game day.

Seven Competencies

In their workouts, responsive executives hone seven competencies:

1. Flexibility. Beyond cutting costs, streamlining operations, and increasing efficiency, working "smart" means looking for ways to improve responsiveness and flexibility.

2. Awareness. Teams that avert disaster or respond effectively (firefighters and emergency crews) pay attention to "weak signals" that often come in the form of information that doesn't fit the plan. Responsive individuals take unexpected information seriously.

3. Bricolage. Responsive organizations use all

available resources; this is bricolage. Bricoleurs respond in the moment using the information, tools, and resources at hand. In the workplace, scarce resources are often blamed for lack of creativity and responsiveness when, in fact, this is often the most fertile condition for responsive action.

4. Surprise-ability. Responsive managers withhold judgments, evaluations, and criticisms. Often, there is time to explore possibilities before implementing ideas. But thinking about the viability, practicality, or cost-effectiveness of each idea along the way invites everyone's censor. Improvisers enthusiastically accept whatever is before them and build on it until the most interesting possibility emerges.

5. Agreement. Stage improvisers have no time for power struggles or petty differences. Before they ever set foot on stage, each player agrees to accept whatever the audience gives them, and build on it. In turn, they accept whatever choice or discovery their fellow players make, and build on it. The players all agree to accept whatever game rules are imposed, and play within them. Then, no matter how unexpected the events, all can be confident of their teammates' support and trust—the foundation for the success of responsive work teams.

6. Humility. Improvisers cannot create unexpected, delightful, and engaging theater if they step on stage to grab the spotlight and shine as individuals. They will soon meet their demise, both through flat, predictable scenes, and by losing the support and respect of their teammates. Responsive people work to make everyone else look good, and for the good of the team. When all agree to play by these rules, *everyone* looks good.

7. Communication. Information hoarding is one way individuals try to maintain and gain power and control. This tactic severely inhibits co-workers' ability to respond quickly and accurately in the moment using all available resources. No one wants to play with a self-serving improviser.



No one can be so well trained, educated, and experienced that they are prepared for all events, but individual success in improvisation is greatly enhanced through these competencies.

The Improvising Organization

Here are six critical success factors:

1. Improvisational culture. Culture is given both credit and blame for performance. An experimental culture promotes the values, beliefs, and norms of action and experimentation. Don't expect your organization to respond quickly to change if reflection and planning regularly trump action.

2. Minimal structure. Organizations that identify outcomes for their teams, but leave room for individual execution strategies reap the benefits of improvisation. While some practices need to be highly regimented, overuse of control kills individual ownership and responsibility (response-ability).

3. Transformational leadership. Leaders can either encourage or stifle improvisation. An improvisation-friendly leader supports collaboration, without heavy-handed controls. Transformational leaders confront their own integrity gaps and lead by positive example. Many leaders talk about collaboration, creativity, and risk-taking, but they don't model these behaviors. This misalignment sends the message: It is not safe to improvise here.

4. Talent, training, and teamwork. Creative people take their ideas seriously. Talent, persistence, vision, skill, and knowledge, coupled with training, all support improvisation. Group diversity helps foster a dynamic environment.

5. Knowledge sharing. Information flow also contributes to improvisation. An environment rich in current "stimuli" will foster responsiveness.

6. Physical environment. The environment is a major factor in attracting and retaining top talent. Innovation and productivity often follow investing in an office design that encourages collaboration, communication and flexibility.

When these six conditions are present, there is a greater chance of successful improvisation. Although it takes some thought and planning to become a responsive organization, the returns are well worth the investment.

ACTION: Conduct "workout" sessions.

Managing Improvisation

You can manage improvisation by providing the climate and process-support. Here are six best practices:

1. Cultivate communities of practice. These informal groups may form around a shared interest, a practice area, a project, or any hot topic. These forums may meet on-line or in person. They support the free-flow of information.

2. Hold "workout" sessions. You can't improvise well without regular jam sessions to develop competence and build trust. These sessions may be topic-specific, or unplanned; facilitated or not. Above all, they should focus on the process, not the product or outcome.

3. Take an improv class. Many teams and companies report the benefits of taking improvisation classes to learn creative collaboration.

4. Harness your technology. Few organizations harness the power of technology to support collaboration. Be sure your electronic environment reflects the culture of collaboration.

5. Appreciate talent. Collaboration success often includes recognition, appreciation, or acknowledgement for improvised solutions. Often appreciation by a superior, colleague or customer for an outstanding effort has the most impact. To reinforce responsiveness, you need to appreciate it when you see it!

6. Share success stories. Create forums for sharing successes. Take time to celebrate and share stories. From positive experiences, you can learn lessons that benefit everyone.

In a fluid world, organizations need to adapt. Managers must foster a climate of communication, collaboration, and innovation. They must enact this new culture through their own behavior and vision. This may mean not only doing different things, but also doing things differently. This means cultivating the ability to respond.

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