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The Big Idea Series / Engaging Employees

Using Improv to Unite Your Team

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Over the last couple of decades, work has increasingly been done by teams rather than by lone individuals. Surveys suggest that teams are central to engaging employees. Yet we know from years of psychology and management research, including pioneering studies by psychologist J. Richard Hackman, that teams often

don't improve employee engagement or productivity. Among the biggest reasons: Leaders tend to dominate the conversation; they don't listen and shut down others' ideas. Consequently, team members are often too afraid, or simply too bored and disengaged, to contribute their own thoughts.

In my academic research, I've looked at many different types of teams, at a wide variety of organizations all over the world. The group that communicated best, with everyone contributing and learning, wasn't in a corporate office park; it was in an improv comedy class. I'd signed my husband and myself up for a 10-week course to break out of the usual dinner-and-a-movie date nights. To my surprise, this weekly escape offered tools for improving the humdrum work of the teams I'd been observing.

In improv comedy, whether people are building a scene or telling a story, everyone has a chance to talk. Members' contributions are welcomed and valued, and participants collaborate and support one another as they work toward a common goal. Getting everyone involved in this way is important: When we discuss each other's ideas and perspectives, we learn from them and our decisions improve. Plus, the more we feel that others value our contributions, the more likely we are to share our ideas.

Comedians aren't eager to share center stage, so how do they manage to achieve such an egalitarian atmosphere? By setting ground rules and using techniques that deliberately foster collaboration. Business leaders can follow suit by tailoring this approach to a corporate setting. The following three improv techniques can be particularly helpful to leaders interested in engaging their teams.

1. Instead of getting ready to talk, listen.

Think about your last team meeting. As others were talking, were you actually listening, or were you getting ready to speak? My research suggests that, all too often, the answer is the latter.

Paying careful attention to what others are saying — listening fully to them and not speaking until they are finished — is a core principle of improv. That's because your goal isn't to plan what you'll say next; it's to respond in the moment to what your partner says. And that is possible only if you are listening attentively and are attuned to the emotions and rhythm your partner sets for the scene. Having to wait until someone has finished speaking helps us be fully present and absorb what they're saying.

There are many improv games that can help performers become better listeners. One that our class played often is called "Last Word Response," which requires you to respond to your partner by using the last word they said. If your partner said, "I had a dream last night where a mouse became best friends with five cats," you would need to come up with a sentence that starts with "cats." The game teaches people to listen fully instead of jumping in or silently planning their response before their partner is done speaking.

Leaders might try a version of this game during team meetings: After someone finishes speaking, the next person should begin his response with that person's final word, or at least the person's last idea. And leaders should make sure to follow the rules like everyone else.

Listening also involves giving others a chance to speak and not taking up too much airtime. That means people must convey their thoughts briefly and clearly rather than dominating the discussion. My husband and I practiced this skill in an improv game called "One-Word Story." The goal is for each group member to contribute one word at a time to a story that is supposed to be coherent, as if a single narrator were speaking at a normal pace. The teacher would give us the title of the story and then choose someone to say the first word. The person to their left would say the next word, and so on, continuing around the circle. Given the

title "A Furry Dog Sits on a Stove," we began: "A — dog — named — Hot — enjoyed — sitting — on — a — red — and — yellow — stove…" The game showed us that all individuals, regardless of their status or title, can play a role in group decision making. Not everyone is going to be in a position to add an exciting word, but their contribution to the larger story matters.

The same principle can be helpful in teams, as members consider different plans or ideas. Those present should speak their minds even when they don't think their ideas are fully baked; they may inspire others to complete their thoughts. By explicitly stating at the start of a discussion that there are no bad ideas, leaders can encourage everyone to contribute. They can also do so by sharing half-baked ideas themselves.

2. Don't assume you have all the answers.

Because we're all attached to our ideas, we often have difficulty staying open-minded when others take the conversation or the team's work in a new direction. In fact, my colleagues and I found in our research that once people have decided on a course of action, moving away from it is challenging, even when evidence suggests the initial decision was wrong. And the more we feel like an expert on a topic, the more challenging it is for us to change our minds.

In one scene we worked on during improv class, my classmate Eric sat down on a brown leather chair, his hands extended as if he were gripping a steering wheel. As I sat down next to him, he said: "Welcome to the *Enterprise*. Did you hear about the new uniform-making machine?" Everyone else in the room understood that Eric was playing Captain Kirk from *Star Trek*. I did not, so my response took the scene in a different direction: "Yeah, I was disappointed when I heard about it. After our last meeting, I was hoping that we would focus on another product to launch our business. Didn't we think striped underpants would be the next big thing?" Eric received my words with an open mind. He quickly understood that, whether intentionally or not, I had missed where he wanted to take the scene. Despite the surprising turn, Eric kept going, now driving a car rather than commanding a starship.

In improv, the currency you're trading with is *unpredictability*. You never know what your partners will say next, what reactions you'll inspire, or even when and how the scene will end. That's part of the beauty of improv: You're always reacting purely in the moment.

This same type of openness can benefit the work that happens in teams. Leaders should invite it by telling their employees at the start of the meeting how important acceptance is and asking "Why," "How," and "What if" types of questions to show curiosity. As I wrote in a previous HBR article, curiosity can open up communication, reduce conflict, and improve engagement.

Before we took our improv class, neither my husband nor I thought we were very good at being funny on the spot. And while we don't fool ourselves into thinking we're ready for *Saturday Night Live*, we now know that we can laugh at ourselves and roll with it when things don't go as expected. It takes practice, but members of a team can learn to feel the same way.

3. Help everyone feel safe enough to contribute.

Group conversations would be more effective if we approached them with curiosity. All of us are too quick to judge others' ideas, and this urge becomes even stronger for those with some degree of power over others. For one study, my colleagues and I had people work in teams to solve problems. In some of the groups, we induced team leaders to feel powerful; in others, we did not. Leaders who felt powerful dominated their discussions, causing others to contribute less. As a result, their teams performed worse than the groups whose leaders did not feel powerful, and team members had less fun as well. In other research, I found that when we receive disappointing feedback, we not only disregard it; we avoid those who provided it, and our performance suffers.

Power differences aren't as obvious in improv, but players who are more talented or confident could easily take over a scene. After all, there's no hierarchy or script to follow; everyone goes with the flow. Improv tempers this risk through a core principle: "Yes, and…" That is, even when you aren't excited about the direction someone has chosen, you accept the terms of the scene and then add to them rather than contradicting them.

Let's say the first player in a scene offers you something: "Here, have an apple." Your reply shouldn't be, "This isn't an apple. It's very small watermelon." That response might buy you a laugh, but it would kill the scene. A better response would be, "Yes, and we can fill it with poison before we give it to the queen." The "Yes, and…" rule requires players to accept all "offers," or premises, and make their partner look good by building on the scene he started.

Leaders can rely on the same principle to ensure team members stay engaged. In business settings, this technique is known as "plussing": building on someone's idea and saying "Yes, and…" rather than "Yes, but…" Animation studio Pixar uses plussing to get the benefits of criticism during its production meetings. By communicating curiosity rather than judgment, plussing softens criticism — making it easier to hear and use.

Whether on a stage or in a work team, an open atmosphere fosters confidence, spontaneity, and trust. In my research, I've found that employees feel much more comfortable offering ideas when their leader has demonstrated that she is open to them. In doing so, a leader shows that she respects her employees and gives them the confidence and sense of safety needed to speak their minds.

By applying these improv techniques in their teams, leaders can help everyone have more fun and encourage more creative ideas. Everyone will feel heard — and believe that working on a team is better than going it alone. | **THE BIG IDEA**
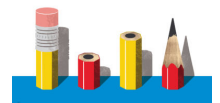
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