

Applied Improvisation Network

<http://appliedimprov.ning.com/>

Performance of a Lifetime—Theater-based executive education

## Communication

### Client need: Handling difficult conversations

When a global accounting firm promotes its senior associates to manager, the transition is a big one. The technical expertise they've honed over the years is no longer enough — now these new managers have to navigate a myriad of relationships, both with clients and throughout the firm. Set against the turbulent backdrop of the accounting industry — emerging government regulations, changing business models and a shifting competitive landscape — the transition to manager can be a pressure cooker.

To bring the new managers up to speed quickly, the firm instituted an intensive, week-long training program. They asked us to create an experiential workshop that would help the new managers deal with the frequently difficult conversations that accompany their new position and that often make or break critical relationships.

### Our method: improvisation-based training.

So we taught the new managers to improvise. We set the context by introducing them to the concept that difficult conversations are actually improvisational “scenes.” As such, they're interactions that can be creatively conceived, performed, and directed.

Our challenge to the new managers was this: Perform every difficult conversation as an improvisational scene, in which you are both a performer and the director. As a performer, you'll make use of the improviser's skills of listening, connecting, collaborating and choice-making. As the director, you'll look at both the individual choices made by the "characters," and at the bigger picture (i.e., the relationship). You'll assess how the scene is going, and recognize choices that could impact on the scene's trajectory. In both roles, you'll attend to the activity of building a stronger relationship, as well as to your agenda.

The workshop was an intensive introduction to improvisational performance, creative collaboration, active listening, and directing:

- We began with actors' warm-up exercises to facilitate participants' transition to a creative and experiential learning environment.
- We led the new managers through a series of improv games that exposed the mechanics of conversation and active listening, strengthened their connections to others, and enabled them to embrace the unexpected.
- We gave them a chance to put these new ways of seeing and approaching conversations these new "improv muscles" to work, in a series of improvisational role-plays based on real-life relationship challenges. These include "Working Across Silos," "The Negative Performance Review," and "The Dissatisfied Client."
- We coached the participants through the role-plays as in a theatrical rehearsal, starting and stopping the scene, pointing out choices and giving direction. At the same time we challenged the audience of fellow participants to exercise their directorial eye in giving feedback to the performers.

Everyone performed and gave input. The group was able to see the impact of approaching every conversation or meeting in this new, improvisational and creative way. They saw that they could do more than simply stumble through a hard conversation. They recognized the limitations of their "standard scripts" and began to see the many choices that are actually available. They were able to creatively integrate both the priority of the relationship and the discussion of the "difficult issue" into the scene, and thereby create a strong connection with the human being on the other side of the exchange. They embraced their new roles: as performers, as directors, and most importantly, as new managers.

Performance of a Lifetime has trained over 1200 new managers at this firm since 2002.

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