Improvisation in Action

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Abstract

It has often been proposed, or assumed, that improvisation is a useful metaphor to provide insight into managing and organizing. However, improvisation is more than a metaphor. It is an orientation and a technique to enhance the strategic renewal of an organization. The bridge between theory and practice is made through exercises used to develop the capacity to improvise, borrowed from theatre improvisation. This paper describes a typical improvisation workshop in developing six key areas that link improvisation exercises to the practice of management: interpreting the environment; crafting strategy; cultivating leadership; fostering teamwork; developing individual skills; and assessing organizational culture.

Introduction

The seeds that prompted my interest in improvisation were sown several years ago at a conference. Consider the situation someone posed during a presentation my colleagues and I were making on organizational learning and strategic renewal. Essentially, the comment was as follows: *you seem to make the assumption that organizations have an unlimited capacity to learn and renew— perhaps organizations are more like theatrical plays that have a limited run and then close down.* This thought-provoking statement did exactly that. We began to think about the relationships between traditional theatre and management. And the parallels are quite striking.

In traditional theatre there is a script that guides the action, much like strategy in the management domain. A producer/director, like the CEO, oversees the production. Sets and props, like the assets of an organization, set the context in which the action occurs. The relationship between actors, particularly selected for their roles, is defined by the script, not unlike the specialized roles individuals play within the context of organizational structures. In traditional theatre, there is limited, if any, audience input, with the exception of applause. Similarly, many organizations seek to dominate and dictate the terms under which they offer products and services, struggling with the concept of customer and supplier involvement. Unfortunately, even the best plays have a limited run. The assets and actors disperse, likely to be employed in other plays. Organizations that operate in this kind of fashion, with little flexibility, will find they have a limited run as well (Makridakis 1991).

If many organizations share the characteristics of theatrical plays, is there another theatrical form unlike the traditional play? We concluded that improvisation is the counterpoint to traditional theatre. In improvisational theatre, there is no script, no sets, minimal if any props, no predetermined roles, and a very different role for the director/producer. Action is taken in a spontaneous and intuitive fashion. We have focused on spontaneity and intuition as two critical dimensions of improvisation (Crossan and Sorrenti 1996). Weick's paper in this issue characterizes our work accurately when he notes that we view intuition as the rapid processing of experienced information. However, as Weick notes, it may be necessary to further unpack the intuitive dimension to ensure that we do not lose sight of the discipline, practice and experience on which intuition is based. If we lose sight of the fact that improvisation is an extension of more traditional and fundamental skills, we not only cut ourselves off from understanding an essential facet of improvisation, but we also lose the ability to build on, and extend current theory and practice.

To learn more about improvisation my colleagues and I began working with the world-renowned Second City Improvisation Company to understand the characteristics of individuals, groups, and organizations that support good improvisation. We read what little there was on improvisation, attended improv workshops, and worked with Second City facilitators to design workshops for managers. In the process, we discovered there were significant applications from improvisation in theatre where improvisation is the core business, to the management domain where it is not. The development of theory here is closely aligned to the process Weick describes elsewhere in this volume—we have "acted our way into understanding." We discovered that improvisation reveals a set of principals and characteristics. And these principals

and characteristics can be translated to the management domain through exercises that were originally designed to develop the improvisational capability of actors. Theory and practice are bridged through improvisation workshops.

Many of the insights derived from improvisation in theatre are supported by what we see in jazz (Crossan et al. 1996). Both reinforce the view that good improvisation is built upon traditional skills in a particular domain. Unfortunately, this very premise has obscured the view that improvisation is more than a metaphor. The skills to engage in jazz improvisation are unavailable to many people and hence improvisation has been perceived as too distant to apply directly to organizations. Whereas the skills of listening, communication, and story-telling are available to everyone, making improvisation in theatrical terms more than a metaphor. Individuals can engage in improvisation exercises to develop their capacity to improvise. The following sections describe a typical improvisation workshop, and some of the exercises and key principals as they apply to the management domain.

Improvisation Workshop: Bridging Theory and Practice

A typical improvisation workshop begins with a brief overview of the importance of improvisation to motivate individual investment of time and energy in the process. Individuals then work in small groups (10 to 20 individuals) with an experienced improvisation facilitator who takes them through a series of progressively more challenging improvisation exercises for about two-and-a-half hours. The facilitators provide coaching on some of the important principles of improvisation as the exercises unfold. More concrete links to the practice of management are made once the individuals have had a chance to experience improvisation. On occasion, the workshop is closed with a performance by the facilitators.

For those who have not experienced theatre improvisation, the following is the dialogue from the first in a series of improv sets, conducted with Second City improvisors as they demonstrated their craft to our students at the end of an improvisation workshop. The improv exercise being demonstrated is called "Make A Story." In the following set, the audience was asked to provide a name for a story, and someone shouted out, *"Look What The Cat Dragged In."* The audience was then asked for the style of writing, and someone responded, *"a murder mystery."* Four Second City actors were positioned across the stage with one standing in front randomly selecting each actor to take a turn and continue the dialogue. There is no script. There is no planning. Everything happens in

real-time and is totally spontaneous. Where you see a different person telling the story, they have been directed to pick up the story and continue. The following dialogue unfolded.

Person 3: Nancy Drew was sitting in her room—sitting at her desk. The oil of the lamp was burning away.

Person 1: Burning right through the desk, in fact. The oil was dripping onto the carpet, and Nancy realized . . .

Person 4: . . . that her house was now on fire. Flames engulfed her whole place. Screaming, she ran . . .

Person 2: . . . down the stairs, out the door, into the street, and into Tony's arms.

Person 1: Tony, Tony, the pizza delivery boy. How she had longed to feel his . . .

Person 3: . . . leg against hers. She longed for Tony ever . . .

Person 4: . . . since she was a small pizza eater. But now she was a woman, full fledged.

Person 2: "Tony! Tony! The candle! It wasn't my candle—someone placed that . . .

Person 3: . . . candle on my desk. I think it was the Hardy Boys. They've been jealous of me ever since . . .

Person 1: . . . I took their Hardy jackets." "Yes," Tony nodded . . .

Person 4: . . . knowingly. "Yes, . . . a candle you say."

Person 2: "Yes, a candle. I lit it. It sparked. The wax dripped—my face was on-on-on . . .

Person 3: "on-on-on fire!"

Person 1: Tony took out a gun. Nancy . . .

Person 4: screamed! "Aaah!"

Person 2: "You're still going to have to pay for this pizza."

What you see here is the dialogue that is strung together in a very spontaneous and intuitive fashion. What you do not see or feel is the drama, intonation, expression, and pauses for effect that bring the dialogue to life. However, the dialogue gives you a flavour for what happens in theatre improvisation. It provides a point of departure to explore what characteristics of the individual, group, and organization support good improvisation. It is important to note that before characteristics of good improvisation are discussed in an improvisation workshop, the participants would have engaged in the exercises. The critical piece that is missing here is your experience to interpret this text. Some simple improvisation exercises are described that you might try with your spouse, friend, or colleague to help you understand what this is all about.

Quality of Improvisation

Before launching into the characteristics that support good improvisation, we need to consider what determines the "quality" of improvisational activity. Perhaps the most important factor is the structure in which the improvisation takes place, since the structure imposes the grammar through which the actions are interpreted. In the case of theatre improvisation, the structure that the audience imposes is an important component in assessing the quality. The most obvious structure the audience imposes is the structure of language. At the most basic level, we can see that in the example provided, the actors are communicating in English and the phrases make sense. A second structure is the existence of plausible storylines. In North America, the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys reference to the children's mystery books makes sense, whereas in other contexts it would not. And the structure is not uniform across the audience. Everyone uses a different frame of reference to interpret the actions.

While the audience provides a gauge on the quality of the improvisational output, the actors themselves provide a gauge on the quality of the improvisational process. It is this quality of process that we will focus on here. Ultimately, there is greater likelihood of a good outcome when there is a good process supporting it.

The following sections describe six key interrelated areas in which improvisation applies to the management context: (1) Interpreting the Environment; (2) Crafting Strategy; (3) Cultivating Leadership; (4) Fostering Teamwork; (5) Developing Individual Skills; and (6) Assessing Organizational Culture (Figure 1). Figure 1 elaborates on the traditional view of Strategy as the linchpin between the Organization and its Environment to include Teamwork, Leadership, and Individual Skills as important elements of the Organization.

Interpreting the Environment

One of the obvious characteristics of improvisation is the spontaneity of action. Individuals must respond in the moment to stimuli provided by either the audience or fellow actors. Spontaneity is not just a characteristic of theatre improvisation; Mintzberg (1973) documented the extraordinary amount of managerial activity that was spontaneous in nature. And as the cycle time for innovation is shortening, time-based competition has become an important consideration for management (Stalk 1988). Furthermore, Stacey's work in chaos theory (1991) reminds us that beyond a certain point, increased knowledge of complex, dynamic systems does little to improve our ability to extend the horizon of predictability of those systems. We can know, but we cannot predict. Hence, having the capacity to respond in a spontaneous fashion is critical.

A principle of improvisation is that the environment will teach you if you let it, rather than trying to control it. Learning from the environment often requires that individuals break out of their traditional frames of reference to see the environment in its full richness and complexity. Doing so requires the application of intuition. One of the principles of improvisation is that you can free-up intuition by carrying out contradictory actions. An improvisation exercise designed to develop more intuitive, right brain thinking is called "Nonsense Naming." In this exercise, individuals quickly walk around the room and give the wrong name to the objects they point at. The exercises demonstrate that it is difficult to break out of familiar patterns of seeing things. Even when individuals find another name for a chair, for example, it is often another item of furniture like a table or desk.
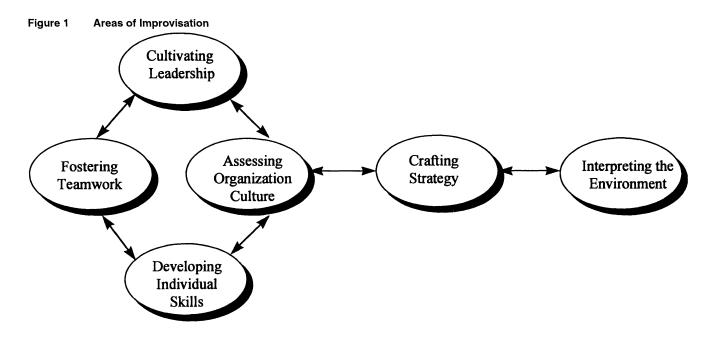
A very tragic situation we unearthed while researching improvisation underscores the repercussions of not being able to break out of traditional mindsets. We interviewed individuals who were likely to be exposed to crisis situations where improvisation is paramount given the scarce resource of time. A lifeguard relayed a story of a woman who, while swimming in the deep end of a pool, caught her foot in the drain. Several lifeguards frantically tried to loosen the woman's foot. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful and the woman drowned. Afterward, the lifeguards realized that they were not able to break out of the traditional lifesaving mindset which is to rescue people by bringing them to safety. They discovered that there were many ways that they could have brought air to the woman to sustain her underwater. However, they could not break out of their pattern of thinking to avail themselves of these solutions.

Interpreting the environment, seeing it in its full richness and complexity, is one of the critical challenges facing organizations. Organizations are often plagued by the inability of their members to break out of familiar patterns of interpreting customer needs, or competitive responses. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is often a competitor from outside an industry who changes the nature of competition within the industry.

Expanding individual and organizational ability to perceive opportunities and threats to the environment is only valuable, however, if that new understanding is reflected in the pattern of actions of the organization: its strategy.

Crafting Strategy

Mintzberg's (1988) depiction of realized strategy as a blend between intended and emergent, illustrates the relationship between strategy and improvisation. Whereas intended strategy is more analytical, planned, controlled,

Figure 1   Areas of Improvisation

future-oriented, top-down and episodic—emergent strategy is more intuitive, action-oriented, spontaneous, in-the-moment, bottom-up and ongoing. The perspective, tools, and techniques that are the hallmark of business education cultivate skills to support the development of intended strategies. Improvisation builds on those skills to offer a perspective, tools and techniques to support the development of emergent strategies.

The storyline in improvisation is equivalent to the strategy in organizations. In improvisation there are a number of principles that help to develop good storylines. Good storylines are plausible, cohesive and anticipate customer or audience needs. It is critical to build on what others have offered, and to offer something in return. The stories are rich and vivid as shown by the "murder mystery" dialogue. One of the key challenges in improvisation is to recognize when the story is losing effect, and redirect it. Improvisers say there is no formula for this—their intuition guides their judgement on when redirection is required. The "Tony took out a gun" line is an example of redirection. After the line about the Hardy boy jackets, there were two or three lines that started to fade and so one actor chose to redirect things slightly to reenergize the scene. Similarly, organizations face challenges in choosing when to redirect strategies.

It is interesting to note that the actors deviated entirely from the title of the book that was provided: *Look What The Cat Dragged In*. Although the initial actor provided a line that could support the title, the actor that followed made a quick judgement to follow his intuition rather than

force the situation to fit the title. In the case of theatre improvisation, the audience is more likely to value an interesting story than care about the title of the book, so the trade-off works. However, organizations need to understand what their customers value to determine what deviations in strategy are appropriate.

Cultivating Leadership

A key characteristic of improvisation is that individuals take different leads at different times. One of the exercises that demonstrates this quite well is called "Switch." Two individuals begin to play out a scene, and at any moment another person can freeze the scene, replace and assume the pose of one of the people, and then unfreeze the scene by taking it in a new direction. Individuals must be alert to the opportunities presented by the situation, and what they have to offer to move the scene forward. When a new person enters, the person who remains must be ready to support the new direction.

Improvisation highlights the need for individuals to expand their set of competencies in order to take on a variety of roles. There is no defined leadership role. Individuals must make their own judgments about when to get involved, what to offer, and when to redirect the scene. Being able to take on different leadership roles at different times is heavily dependent upon the ability of the group to work as a team.

Fostering Teamwork

Improvisers would say that the principle of "yes-anding" is at the heart of improvisation. It means that individuals

accept the offer made to them and build on it. It is a simple concept, but challenging to implement. It means that jokes are not made at the expense of other people, individuals do not impose themselves on the scene in a controlling fashion; individuals do not just survive in the scene, they work actively to build it; and individuals do not put, or leave, one another out on a limb. Individuals in many organizations would find it difficult to live up to this concept of teamwork.

I am reminded of a premise that one organization tried to follow as they implemented dramatic strategic change. They decided that the answer to any question posed by anyone in the organization would be "yes," and if they could not say "yes," they would answer "maybe." They felt this was critical to ensure they did not shut down the dialogue. They also felt it was necessary to develop and sustain the momentum required to carry them through some difficult changes. Judging from the reaction of managers outside this organization to this premise, just saying "yes" is difficult, let alone building on "yes" by saying "yes and."

Having a common goal is critical for improvisation to work, as demonstrated by the "Imaginary Tug of War" exercise. In the "Imaginary Tug of War" two teams participate in a tug of war with an imaginary rope. Often teams pull as if they are pulling the other team over the line. Naturally, when both teams do this at the same time, it is not very realistic, as the imaginary rope must either have broken or stretched to accommodate the two teams. When the teams discover that what they are after is realism, they undertake the exercise in an entirely new way with a lot of give and take, and coordination of action. It is not difficult for managers to relate to the difficulties they experience when Marketing has a goal of market share, Production is trying to reduce costs, and Finance is looking to achieve a particular return on investment. To operate as part of a team, take different leads at different times, and interpret the environment in new and different ways to support emergent strategy, individuals need to develop the attitude and skills to effectively improvise.

Developing Individual Skills

Claxton (1984) pointed out that to learn, individuals needed to be able to risk the four Cs: the desire to be consistent, comfortable, confident and competent. Improvisation puts the four Cs at risk. Much the same way that activities like Outward Bound stretch individuals through a sense of physical risk, improvisation stretches individuals as they undertake psychological risk. For many, the psychological risk arises from the spontaneity of the situation, which means they do not know what to expect.

Not being in control makes many individuals quite uncomfortable. Some situations require individuals to stretch their competency base and take on new behaviors. And individuals must rely on, and support, others to carry out the scene.

The spontaneous nature of improvisation taxes more fully the fundamental skills of listening and communication. It demands that individuals give their full concentration and attention to the moment, rather than being preoccupied by what happened, or what could happen. The "Make a Story" exercise described above is usually preceded by a more simple exercise called "One Word Story" in which pairs of individuals create a story, each providing one word at a time. It is quite obvious in this exercise when individuals are simply transacting the story by adding words like "he—went—to—the—store", as opposed to using, what improvisors call, "million dollar words" that create sentences like "David—exploded—with—rage". Building a story, using million dollar words, in a spontaneous fashion requires both the creative, and quick sub-conscious processing that characterizes intuition.

Improvisation demonstrates that you need to be committed and engaged to be convincing. Even when a scene is in trouble, the audience will continue to be supportive as long as the actors themselves are engaged. Of course, all of this must occur within an organizational context or culture which supports the activity.

Assessing Organizational Culture

Similar to any organization, the Second City Company has tangible assets like buildings, desks, chairs, offices and office layouts that contribute to an organizational culture. However, what the actors experience is the stage, where there are few assets to support, or impede what they do. They must rely on themselves and each other. But there is an intangible quality of trust and kinship to the culture of the stage. The trust and kinship is the grease that enables individuals to put themselves at risk, operate as a team, and take different leads at different times. Living up to the principles of improvisation, such as "yes-anding" helps to build the culture of trust.

The business of Second City is to make people laugh, whereas in organizations, a by-product of learning how to improvise is that people laugh, and they laugh a lot. This is not an insignificant point. These are tough times for many organizations, and few managers would say they are having fun. It is not uncommon to hear participants say that they have never laughed so hard with one another, providing a good foundation for the development of trust and kinship.

However, the culture and, perhaps more importantly, the environment, need to be able to tolerate mishaps for improvisation to work. Some improv sets are disastrous.

Even groups like the Second City will have a planned set that they know works, around which they build their spontaneous sets. The "planned" set often arises from a previously successful improvised set. Fortunately, audiences of improvisation are tolerant of some mishaps. Other environments, where there is no tolerance for error, such as a jetliner on take-off, may not be conducive to improvisation. However, even these types of contexts require the skills of improvisation in crisis as aptly demonstrated by the Apollo 13 mission when the team of astronauts and ground crew had to devise an innovative solution to filter the carbon dioxide out of the space module. Their lives were dependent upon their ability to improvise.

How to Get from Here to There

Workshops are a very practical means to introduce and experience improvisation. However, effectively bridging the art of improvisation with the practice of management, requires the expertise of improvisors to facilitate the exercises, and the expertise of management theorists who are able to interpret the experience in a managerial context. Given that both types of expertise are scarce, we have decided to capture that expertise on a video that is designed to support a self-facilitating workshop on improvisation.

While the workshops have been an effective method for introducing individuals and organizations to improvisation, there are alternative ways for researchers to analyze and understand improvisation, and for practitioners to develop the skill. In addition to the agenda for research in improvisation described in Crossan and Sorrenti (1996), it is instructive to examine improvisation through cascading levels of analysis. Beginning with the individual level, improvisation suggests a base level of skill required to improvise, which is perhaps more obvious in the jazz context. Improvisation suggests three areas of skill development that could become the focus of research and practice: process skills such as listening and communication; context specific skills and knowledge; and a perspective or orientation that enables one to risk the four "Cs." Improvisation suggests that in order to risk the four Cs individuals need to develop their own individual and organizational safety nets that enable them to take risks.

At the group level, improvisation suggests that individuals can extend their improvisational capability to the group by applying the principle of "yes-anding" which means acknowledging what they have been offered, adding value to that offer, and reciprocating. Understanding that leadership is about taking different leads at different times, individuals can assess when and how they should move in and out of a leadership role. Improvisation suggests that a climate of trust and kinship will support the group's capacity to improvise.

There is much work to be done at the organizational level to understand the improvisational context. Understanding the appropriate blend of intended and emergent strategies, and the organizational form to support the mix is a key challenge for any organization. It is important to understand the structure or context in which individuals operate to understand when the environment will accept improvisation. Critical to this analysis is understanding the tolerance for error. Mintzberg (1994) reported on a study which showed that "the analytical approach to problem solving produced the precise answer more often, but its distribution of errors was quite wide. Intuition, in contrast, was less frequently precise but more consistently close" (p. 327). Improvisation requires some tolerance for error. Different structures provide different tolerances. And we need to think about structure and context at several levels. At the organization level, we can assess the tolerance for error, and acceptance of different strategies. But we also need to be aware that business units, functional areas, departments, or activities within an organization may show significant variance around the structure in which improvisation occurs.

The value of improvisation is in the potential it holds to enhance the quality of spontaneous action. The rich tradition of improvisation in the arts has provided a foundation for theory development, and the exercises arising from that tradition have provided a bridge from theory to practice. Improvisation is more than a metaphor. Improvisation is one of the few concepts and tools we have to develop the capacity to be innovative in the moment—a key requirement of organizations today and in the twenty-first century.

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