

The value of Applied Improvisation for organizational and personal development and change

What is Improvisation?

In life, improvisation is the art of making something up, of creating something, of making do – usually with limited time and other resources. The art of making things up – spontaneously, on-the-spot – lies at the heart of improvisation and applied improvisation. This doesn't often come naturally.

Improvisation (or "Improv") has become popular through the TV programmes "Whose line is it anyway?" or in which top comedians perform competitive games (known in the Improv world as "Theatre sports").

How Applied Improvisation differs from Improv

"Applied Improvisation" is the practice of applying games and exercises to the world of business, personal development and social change. It differs from the TV version in several important ways:

- It's not a "performance". Participants play the games themselves, in pairs, small groups or as a whole group. There is no audience. We are our own audience.
- It's not about having to be funny, making people laugh. While applied improv sessions usually DO involve a lot of laughing this often comes from people doing obvious things, being themselves. The laughing comes often from the *interaction* between two or more people.
- It's not about entertainment. It's about using games to *generate learning* about ourselves and others – to help us in our work, in our personal lives and in our roles in the community.
- It's not scary, but it IS designed to help people move outside their comfort zone – in a safe space. Facilitators design events which match the perspective, experience and needs of the group.
- While Improv involves making up stuff about made-up scenarios and characters, the "applied" part of AI is where real life comes in. We might start with fictitious scenarios and characters, and go on to reinvent about real characters and real scenarios. This is where the real learning, development and change occurs in an AI intervention. The extent to which AI delves into real life depends on the practitioner, the group, and the context.

Why is Applied Improvisation great for work, great for life?

- Because the world is chaotic, so better we get used to the unexpected.
- Because learning happens when we stretch ourselves outside our comfort zone.
- Because failure is a great teacher – and where better to practice than in a game?
- Because it helps us experience letting go, being out of control – but outside of the office, away from critical situations.
- Because life is not about "me", it's about "us". The more we *really* listen to others, and be aware of what's going on *inside of us*, the more we will *all* be OK.
- No-one can know everything. The more we become comfortable with "being in the unknowing" the better.
- Because improv's core principles are great for life.

"When nothing is sure, everything is possible".

Margaret Drabble

Core principles of Improv – what's not to like?

The core principles of improvisation are part of the key to what happens when we apply improvisation in the workplace, at home, or in our community.

- “Yes, And...” – make offers to others; accept and build on offers that others make to us.
- Make the other person look good – it's not about me, it's about us.
- Be in the moment, be present.
- Celebrate failure.
- Acknowledge, accept, turn off the internal critic.

How Applied Improvisation can help us at work and in our personal lives.

Applied Improv uses games and exercises which serve three basic purposes:

- Brings a shift in energy and the dynamics of a group. It wakes people up, requires them to physically move, speak, participate
- “Allows” people to play, gives them permission
- Gives them a physical experience of a feeling or situation that is under discussion. Gets them out of their “heads” and helps them start to perceive things differently.

When we play a game, or complete an exercise, wonderful things happen which might not happen just with talking... These include:

- Breaking barriers: helping people get to know each other and value others' contributions.
- Surfacing issues that wouldn't otherwise be mentioned – in a non-threatening way.
- Helping people modify their inter-personal behaviour to enhance how people see them.
- Helping teams make better use of the collective creativity of all team members.
- Providing high-energy activities during large meetings and conferences (during introductions, or closing) which also achieve other objectives.
- Helping people be more aware of others in the team, of strategy, and of better communication and synergy.
- Building people's confidence to speak in public, make presentations.
- Help people get used to being more spontaneous, letting go.
- Helping people see the other person's perspective, give better feedback, be more open to receiving feedback from others.
- Bringing playfulness into inter-personal communication.

Find out more: try it out

Applied improvisation is likely to bring huge benefits to organizations uncertainty is high, inter-personal relationships are weak, where silo working is preferred to cross-function collaboration, and where the culture of leadership is command and control with limited delegation.

In these contexts, trying something new might seem a bit risky. For senior leaders in these contexts a first step would be to try it out for yourself:

Improv

- ☺ Go watch an improv performance
- ☺ Sign up to an improv class or workshop

Applied Improv

- ☺ Attend a regular AIN event
- ☺ Attend an AIN conference
- ☺ Attend an AI training workshop
- ☺ Talk to us to explore how AI might help you.