

Improvisation and Team Dynamics

SUBMITTED BY: WGYP Summer Instructor

SUBJECT(S): Management

GRADE LEVEL(S): 9, 10, 11, 12

≡ OVERVIEW:

In this high-energy lesson, students will be split up into different kinds of teams and situations where they have to stay on their toes and react to unexpected situations. After each game, the teacher should ask the students to brainstorm how they felt about the team's communication and different leadership roles that seemed to emerge in the impromptu games. After a few rounds of playing, the students should have a class discussion about team dynamics and the importance of listening and reacting quickly to changing demands.

≡ NBEA STANDARD(S):

- Management, VI. Human Resource Management

≡ RELATED ARTICLES:

- [“The Art and Skill of Effective Public Speaking”](#)
- [“Teamwork with a Marshmallow on Top”](#)
- [“Storytelling Infuses Your Message with Meaning and Emotion”](#)
- [“Is High School Killing Your Creativity? Rajat Bhageria Has a Remedy for That”](#)
- [“Educator Toolkit: The Power of Storytelling”](#)
- [“Career Spotlight: Motion Capture Is an Industry on the Move”](#)

Core Standards:

Reading Informational Text–RI.9-10.1.; RI.9-10.2.

Speaking and Listening–SL.9-10.1.

Knowledge@Wharton Article: For teacher: [“Can Rabbits Teach Leadership? No? Think Again.”](#)

*This article is primarily for the teacher’s reference to understand some of the games below. It should not be printed as a resource for students.

Activity:

Introduction (5 min)

The teacher should write the word “improvisation” on the board and ask students to define this term. Once they all understand it, the teacher can explain that in the world of business, no matter how much is planned, things can change last minute. It is important for the students to feel confident in uncomfortable situations and be prepared to respond to unexpected demands.

In this class, the students will be playing different kinds of improv games and thinking about team dynamics during the games. Depending on the size of your group, you can either have them work as a big team or break them into separate improvisational groups working on different games. After each game, the teacher should ask the students the following questions and jot down the response on the board. After all the games are played, the class should have a more comprehensive discussion about what was learned through the improv activities.

Questions:

- When you are playing the game (e.g. rabbit game, etc.), how important is it to pay attention to what your team members are doing? What are you paying attention to? Facial expressions? Gestures? Body movements? How is this relevant to a business meeting?
- What happens when you are not paying attention? Give examples from the games. Why is it so important to “stay on your toes” in business and listen as much as you participate?

Rabbit Game (5 min)

Teachers will understand this improv game by reading the suggested K@W article and then replicating it with their students. As the article points out, the game helps drive home the point that “you never know when you might have to become the bunny’s teeth or ears — and to respond quickly, together with others, to a sudden development.”

Rabbit Game: Immediately have the students form a circle. Explain the rules about the Rabbit Game. One student will be assigned (privately by the teacher, and this student must keep it to himself) to hold fingers up like a rabbit’s teeth. The people on each side will hold their hands up to his ears and the group of three will repeatedly yell, “Bunny, Bunny!” The person will then point his/her fingers at someone who will be the next rabbit and the people on each side should respond accordingly. Keep doing this for a few minutes until everyone has a turn.

Ball Game (5 min)

One person pretends to pass an imaginary ball to another. The catch in this exercise is that participants are free to define and redefine what kind of ball it is. Someone might view it as a baseball; another might change it to a football, or golf ball, or even ping-pong ball. To take part in this exercise, participants must **keep their eye on the ball** — literally and metaphorically — a state of mind that has its uses in business.

Storytelling (5 min)

One team member starts telling a story. When the moderator points at another member, however, that person instantly continues the story from the point where the first person left off. Over time, this leads to the narration of very strange tales with unusual twists and turns, and inevitably leads to much laughter. Tell your students that their contribution to the final story must involve at least one sentence and no more than three.

Discussion (15 min)

As a group, discuss what happens in different kinds of teams. In the first two games they are all together and have to watch for more people. In the line-up activity, they may work in different team sizes and on a different task. How did that play out? This discussion can be done out loud.

- What kind of group communication emerges? Is there one person who talks and directs the others? Or more than two people? How do they communicate and negotiate communication?
- Does one person take a leadership role if it’s not made explicit? Or not? Discuss.

- How do the other team members respond to different leadership styles? Some students may physically move others during the line up while others point to where students should go. How does this affect the group's cooperation?
- What skills are helpful for improv or in the heat-of-the-moment situations? What would be less than helpful?

Tying It All Together:

- Amid all the games, an interesting dynamic emerges. Members of some teams visibly support one another; in others, they challenge one another or a veiled one-upmanship develops that undermines their combined efforts. In both cases, the results clearly show, as they do in business situations. Some people have a 'Yes, but..' approach, while others have a 'Yes, and...' approach. You can either be a spoiler or a supporter.
- Second, the ability to practice being innovative and team-oriented through such exercises is important at a time when companies are being forced to become more open and less hierarchical. So, too, is the ability to respond rapidly to unexpected developments — a crucial trait. As many people now believe, the battle today is no longer between Big Business and Small Business, but between Slow Business and Fast Business.
- Perhaps the most crucial reason to use improvisational theater is that it teaches a simple lesson: While preparation is important, spontaneity is even more so. For example, in a jazz combo, all musicians must prepare thoroughly, but once they have mastered their art they riff off one another. It's a balance between structure and chaos.

This balance requires a mindset that rarely comes easily to those trained to manage. Letting go, yielding control, going into free fall, flying blind, trusting instinct — these are scary prospects, but nonetheless crucially important. When people — and companies — lose the ability to improvise, they can no longer innovate. And those who fail to innovate perish.