

Become An Improv-Master

Leveraging Improvisational Techniques in Toastmasters and Life

Improv: An act of spontaneous invention;
That which is improvised. Impromptu.
Theatrical techniques borne of the stage.

Despite our best laid plans, practice and preparations, much of what we do in Toastmasters — and in life — is improvised.

The ability to improvise in life helps us in job interviews and business meetings, at networking events and town hall meetings, as well as any time we encounter strangers, get lost or receive unexpected phone calls.

Every time a flight is delayed, a key employee calls in sick, a road is closed, we tear a piece of clothing irreparably while dressing, a piece of equipment fails or the boss changes his or her mind, we improvise! And if we don't, we often suffer the consequences. Our ability to improvise...what a valuable skill to possess!

And in the process of any improvising, we develop flexibility, sharpen problem-solving abilities, heighten self-awareness of skills and capabilities, develop our creativity, foster collaborative skills, deepen trust with others, and more.

Improv Foments Discovery

Did you realize improvisation often leads to innovation and invention, new partnerships, improved processes and other exciting outcomes in our work, play and family life?

Presence, Acceptance and Trust

Whether you attend an improvisational theater performance, watch the TV show “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” or participate in improv activities in your club meeting, it isn’t just fun and games! Improv may appear to be sanctioned anarchy, absent of any rules. Yet there is process, a simple structure and basic rules of engagement at play in improvisation.

“The basic skills are presence, acceptance and trust!” states Izzy Gesell, MS Ed, Head Honcho of IzzyG & Company. Gesell, a Certified Speaking Professional, explains: “Presence means that improvisers are able to stay in the moment; Acceptance refers to the ability to deal with what is, rather than what they’d like it to be — in life you have to deal with what is...even if you don’t believe in it. And Trust — improvisers trust process, which means they’re able to suspend judgment in the moment.” What valuable skills to possess!

Be Spontaneous

For Toastmasters it may seem counter-intuitive to not prepare in advance to participate in improvisational activities. Yet the key is to be “in the moment” and fully present, as we do in Table Topics,

without pre-planned statements, stories or speeches. Being open to whatever comes, receptive to whatever your partner or the audience suggests, is of paramount importance. In Improv, you want to take your cues from the moment.

Accept the Offer!

One of the central concepts in Improv is accepting the offer. It's almost reflexive.

Life is full of offers: someone knocks on our door, the phone rings, we find a letter in our mailbox. Each is an "offer" we can accept or block.

Socially, whenever another person makes a request of us by asking us a question or giving us something, they too are making us an offer. We then are "at choice." We can accept the offer or decline it. We can receive or reject it.

When we, at a club meeting, stand to respond to a Table Topic, we're accepting the offer as a speaker.

When we answer the call to lead a meeting, take on an officer role in our club or assume a district duty, we are accepting the offer as a leader.

And these are both good things! Success in improv and life, often stems from accepting others' offers, sometimes literally in the moment.

To Build or To Block: The concept of “Yes, AND...”

When a request is made of us, some reflexively respond by saying “no,” or conditionally, “yes, but...”

Improv teaches us to respond with “Yes, AND...” to any offer made to us, instead of “Yes, BUT...,” which qualifies or otherwise diminishes it.

The concept of Yes, And... suggests we accept all offers, appending an “AND” to it and building upon their offer with our own ideas, concepts or preferences.

Imagine your meeting’s Topic Master calling up two participants in tandem to respond to the topic. Their only guidelines: Whatever the first person says, the second person “accepts” and “builds upon” by saying “Yes, *and*...” before appending their own response. Alternating sentences, together they respond in the moment by listening to the other, accepting and building upon the preceding idea, in 1-2 minutes, to fashion their response:

Topic Master: “Why should strangers join our club?”

Respondent #1: It’s a great way to start off the morning.

Respondent #2: **Yes! And** it’s a supportive group of people to wake up with at 7am!

Respondent #1: **Yes! And**, you leave at 8am with a head start on the rest of the world that’s just waking up!

Respondent #2: **Yes! And** our club is full of a blend of veterans, those earning their ACs and ALs and brand new members, for variety.

The “Yes, and...” is a technique used in brainstorming to generate many ideas and explore new possibilities. The key to its success: Accept (by saying “yes”) and build upon it (by appending “and” before inserting your own idea, statement or offer.) Suspend judgment and don’t block your partner’s offers.

Make Your Partner Look Good

Another central concept in improvisation is that of “helping your partner look good.” It’s a form of teamwork. If you focus on helping your partner (such as by accepting their offer), and your partner focuses on helping you look good (accepting yours), together you will succeed.

We see this concept in many team sports, where one player will apply her skills to set up a teammate to succeed for the sake of the entire team. A batter bunts over the runner, making an out to advance his teammate into scoring position. Similarly, the way a volleyball player “sets up” her teammate for a winning spike or a playmaking guard passes the basketball ahead to a more wide-open teammate for an easier shot, all for the sake of the team.

People are often self-conscious and concerned with either looking good, or not looking bad, foolish or silly. Yet in improv when you focus on helping your partner look good, and they do likewise, everyone shines. As central as this skill is in Improv,

it's invaluable in business too where team successes trump individual triumphs, which may occur at the expense of others. When the team wins, we all win. (See "Vogue" in sidebar for an Improv game that achieves this concept.)

There is an Eye in Team...Improv!

"Improv is such a valuable tool for everybody regardless of what your career aspirations are" according to Kenn Adams, author of *How to Improvise a Full Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater*. He explains, "At the end of the day it boils down into 'Do you work well with other people and can you collaborate with them?'" Improv gives you and others on your team practice with both. And with success, comes trust, confidence and a desire to take on new challenges!

The Progressive Story

One way to involve every member of the club in Table Topics is to facilitate a "progressive story" as the Topic master. Explain the basic rules: You will announce a topic, ask all participants to stand, begin the story and then, before sitting down or stepping back, pass it off to someone else who, in turn, forwards the action based on your antecedents. After a few words or sentences (perhaps 10-20 seconds per person), they then "pass control" of the story to someone else who is still standing, before they sit down. Nobody knows where the story will go or how it will end. And that's what makes it exciting...a true collaboration.

Each person, listening to the story as it develops, gets their chance to build on it, until the last participant is called upon. They can

end the story or return control to you to end it. Whether you go in order of seating or pass a ball or talking stick to others in random order, the more who participate, the more exciting it becomes.

An activity like this focuses on listening skills, imagination, creativity, teamwork, and also letting go of control by entrusting the story to your colleagues after you've made your contributions.

Here are several themes for your progressive story during a Table Topics session:

- ❖ Once upon a time your club decided to circle the globe...
- ❖ What your club will look like 6 months or a year from now
- ❖ If Toastmasters ruled the world...
- ❖ The little district that could...

The world is full of Improv games, books, classes and troupes to sharpen improvisational skills. Some clubs introduce Improv into Table Topics or use Improv activities for an ice-breaker at meetings or even in place of a speech. District conferences and Toastmasters Leadership Institutes periodically use Improv programs to get people having fun, discovering things about themselves and others and tasting success. Many games give participants practice exercising verbal and non-verbal skills, emphasize the power of observation and listening, and reward good team play.

REACT! The Next Move Is Yours

To learn more about Improvisation as an art form, tool for business or pleasure, consider the following resources:

- ❖ Keith Johnstone's books: *Theatre Sports* and *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*;
- ❖ Viola Spolin's book: *Improvisation for the Theatre*
- ❖ Taking an Improv class at a local college, recreation center or theater.
- ❖ Browsing or downloading the ever-expanding *Improv Encyclopedia* from improvencyclopedia.org/
- ❖ Experiment with Improv games in Table Topics, at your Toastmasters Leadership Institutes and District Conferences.
- ❖ Use games as ice-breakers for contests and regular club meetings.
- ❖ Employ the "Yes, and..." game for brainstorming sessions to generate ideas and induce creative thinking.
- ❖ Attend an Improv Festival in your region.
- ❖ Attend a live Jazz concert. Appreciate the basic structure of songs and the improvisational solos that ensue. That's the essence of Improv!

Ready, Set, Improvise!

It's your turn: take a risk, experiment, get beyond your comfort zone and focus on helping your partners succeed instead of yourself and you will all become Improv-Masters!

An Assortment of Improv Games for Toastmasters

The Collective Story (AKA The Progressive Story): Each participant contributes a bit to the story. There's no right or wrong. Listen and add to it! Listen carefully to build it as a team.

Conversation from A to Z: Pairs of people converse on a topic, alternating sentences. The first person's sentence begins with A. Their partner's sentence begins with B. The originator's next sentence begins with C. Try to get to Z!

Accepting the Offer: Converse with a partner on a topic of your choice. Whatever your partner says, you accept, by saying "Yes, and..." before appending your own idea. To which they respond "Yes, and..." See how well you develop an idea, story or concept. (The alternative is to have the same conversation but each response begins "Yes, BUT..." Notice the difference when one's offer is blocked instead of accepted!

Tell a Story...A Word At A Time. Pairs of people tell a story a word at a time. Try to set your partner up, not stymie them!

The Conversation *within* the Conversation. Two people engage in a conversation. Two other people, standing behind the people in conversation, represent what each person is thinking! They verbalize the fears and dreams of the conversational partners, for all to hear.

Gibberish: A great way to warm up. Instead of responding to a Table Topic in English or French or Swahili or Spanish,

respond entirely in Gibberish — a nonsensical language. Emphasize vocal variety, facial expressions and gestures to get your point across.

The Change Game. Begin to tell a story. At some point, your partner or leader will say “Change” and whatever you just said, you must now change. For example, if you were describing going on a vacation to Alaska, when you hear “Change” you must alter the location from Alaska to a new place of your choice. Each time “change” is called out, whatever you just said (person, place, thing, action, feeling, etc.) must be changed, and then you continue the story with a new variable inserted.

The Gift! A variation on the concept of accepting the offer, pairs of people present each other invisible gifts. As the recipient opens his or hers, the recipient (not the gift-giver) declares what was received, something always wanted! Gifts can be tangible, esoteric, symbolic or silly. No use complaining since *you* declare it is something you always wanted!

VOGUE! (AKA The Physical Offer and Accept Game). Form a circle. One person leaps into the circle and strikes a big pose. Immediately, another player jumps in and makes the first player look good by striking a pose that somehow compliments the first player’s pose. The first player says, “Thank you” and exits the circle, leaving the second player holding her pose. Immediately, another player leaps out and makes the second player look good by striking a new pose that complements the second player’s pose. Continue until all players have posed in the circle.