

Improvisational theatre:

*free stuff —
gifts everywhere*

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FOUNDER, ON YOUR FEET – IMPROVISATION FOR THE UNCERTAINTIES OF BUSINESS'

This is the second of three articles looking at what people in business organisations can learn from the art of improvisational theatre. Though the two worlds might look very different, improvisers work together, under extreme time pressure, with few resources, to create a satisfying result for a paying customer. So they face similar challenges to people in any organisation, albeit in a more extreme form.

Improvisers have thus developed, to a high degree, capabilities and skills that are highly sought after in business nowadays. They are adept at dealing with changing and unpredictable circumstances. They know how to cope with uncertainty, be flexible, adaptive and creative under intense pressure.

Moreover, since improvisational theatre is based on a number of practices, not on innate talent, it can be studied, learned and applied to situations beyond the stage. The practices are a small set of rules that guide behaviour; simple enough to be easily remembered and general

ABSTRACT: Improvisers practise seeing everything as an “offer”. Such an attitude can enable us to get unstuck, reframe problems, become more comfortable with difficulty and see mistakes as opportunities. Seeing “offers” is intimately connected the other practices of improvisation, such as listening and being present, each giving rise to the other. Not only can it enable you to find “free” stuff everywhere, but since it echoes natural systems, where all waste is used as food, it embodies a wisdom which could help us move towards sustainability.

enough to be widely applicable. In the first article we looked at “being present” and “listening”. This article is about “offers”.

AN “OFFER”: A BROAD DEFINITION. An “offer” to an improviser, is anything that happens which they can take and use. The practice is to regard everything as an offer. What is true for the improvisers is true for you. Anything anyone says or does (whether perceived positively or negatively) can be regarded as an offer, from your partner’s morning greeting to the long face of the financial controller in the monthly sales meeting. “Good morning”, “What’s wrong with Graham?” or “We have 10 000 extra chairs” are all offers, which you could use in some way.

Offers can be physical, as well as verbal. A handshake, a scowl, the system going down or knocking over a cup of coffee are all offers too.

The improviser’s all-encompassing definition of “offers” even includes accidents and mistakes. So if an actor trips and falls on stage, that, too, is an offer – just as it is for you if the meeting room is double-booked. Offers are verbal and physical, intended and accidental, explicit or implicit and can come from anyone – colleagues, consumers, even competitors.

The very breadth of the concept of “offers” is what makes it useful. It is a simple idea which is quickly grasped and endlessly useful. It creates a shift in your perception and moves you into a relentlessly constructive mode, where your primary interest is not “Do I like this?” or “Is this right?”, but “What can I do with this?”

The secret of perceiving offers is in adopting a mindset which is able to transform instantly whatever situation or statement is thrown at it and respond to it accordingly. This implies being able to distance oneself from instinctive emotional reactions, such as anger or fear, and maintain an “open inner space” into which everything is enacted. It is an extreme level of resourcefulness which allows one to regard everything as a potential tool or lever.

Versatility is of the essence, since the meaning of improvisation is precisely the ability to transform things to one’s best advantage and assume whatever role may be necessary in order to achieve the desired outcome.

A BEAUTIFUL ECONOMY. The practice of improvisation can also be expressed as “use what you have”. This phrase reminds you to look anew at obvious things you may be ignoring. What have you got in the archives, who have you got in the team, what is there in the fridge? Do you have a little bacon, someone who was brought up in China or your predecessor’s assessment of the issue you face?

I find “use what you have” particularly useful when I am stuck. For example, I was once asked to run a session

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for 3 000 people. Since I am more accustomed to dealing with 30, I got stuck trying to adapt exercises designed for a few dozen – which really didn’t work. I only got going when I started by asking myself: “If what I have is 3 000 people, how can I use that?” Then all kinds of inventive ideas started to occur – from the Mexican snake (an applied Mexican wave) to mob navigation.

Although “use what you have” is an obvious place to start, it can have dramatic results. It won film director Robert Rodriguez an Oscar. Rodriguez made his name with *El Mariache*, a movie which cost just \$6 000.

“How do you make a cheap movie? Look around you and take stock of what you have,” explained Rodriguez. “If your father owns a liquor store, make a movie about a liquor store. If you have a dog, make a movie about your dog. If your mom works in a nursing home, make a movie about a nursing home. When I did *El Mariache*, I had a turtle, a guitar case and a small town in Mexico. So I decided to make a movie around that.”

There is a beautiful economy to “using what you have”. A turtle, a guitar case and a small town can be enough to launch a career in the most cut-throat of towns – Hollywood. So look around you. What is **your** liquor store, dog or nursing home?

OFFER SOUP. You are surrounded by all kinds of offers. A chance comment, some left-over beetroot, an unexpected phone call, the length of a checkout line, the back of an

envelope, someone's angry response — these can all be regarded as offers.

Unlike stage improvisers, you also have the offer of time, so you can use the practice in a considered way (it does not have to be spontaneous). Take the back of an envelope, for example. Someone at Orange (a telecommunications company) once had the presence of mind to see the back of the envelope that held the payslip as an offer, so they printed something on it: "Thanks." This demonstrated a thoughtfulness that people really

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appreciated. Given how important morale is (and how poorly most large companies fare on staff satisfaction surveys), this was far from trivial.

If you are constantly on the lookout for offers, ideas like this crop up all over the place. All it takes is practice – the discipline of noticing.

You can see the value of the broad definition. It enables you to see offers in failure, mistakes, confusion, misunderstandings. We recently lost a pitch for the partner conference of a major consulting firm, but in designing the proposal we developed capacities we are now using with other clients. When exercises do not work the way I expect, I often make illuminating discoveries. Offers are not always pretty or easy to see, but re-label mistakes and failures as "offers" and new possibilities open up for you.

SIX OF THE BEST. The practice can be helpful to different people in different ways, but to give you an idea what you can get from it, here are six different ways people commonly talk about the benefits:

1. Offers, not problems

It feels very different to be surrounded by offers rather than problems. Problems are something you want to get rid of: they have a negative energy hanging over them and the problem-solving approach that we often adopt tends to be infected by that. Imagine having no more problems, only "offers". Seeing offers is a simple way to adopt a constructive attitude

because it gives you something to do (look for an offer) which is infinitely more helpful than a bland exhortation to "think positively".

2. Abundance, not scarcity

Imagine if I asked you to give me an original title for a story, right now. How easy would you find that? Most people struggle, especially if I ask them in front of a group. However, look for offers and you will find them. To get your title, all you have to do is pause, look around you, notice an offer and use it. If I do that correctly, I get titles like *The Cloudy Fire*, *Aches and Ashes* or *The Yellow Coffee*. Seeing offers catapults you into a world of abundance, where everything is stimuli, which makes it much easier to be confident, with all the attendant virtues that brings.

3. Make less effort

This method can also save you effort. For example, imagine you come home from work, tired, to your young family. There, teeming with energy, is a toddler, eager to play. Mom and Dad, drained by travel and work, feel they have no energy left to be inventive. But how much do you really need?

Why not just work with the offers the child gives you and let them make most of the effort? Let the game emerge, instead of trying to "invent" it. The day I discovered this, I played with my eldest son (who was two then) for an hour with almost zero effort. I was never quite sure of the rules (ie, there was ambiguity and uncertainty), but he was very happy rushing around – and I, equally happily, sat still.

4. Stay centred

According to the adage, there are really only two things of which one can be certain: death and taxes. I humbly suggest, however, that there might be another one: that there is always an offer you can use somehow. When panic sets in, this practice can keep you centred. It gives the mind somewhere to go, other than into a spin. All you have to do is ask: "What can I use?" or "What can I do with this?" Moreover, the practice is self-fulfilling. If you relentlessly adopt the attitude that there is an offer in any situation, then there **will** be – which is indeed a creative act.

5. Find positives in the negatives

Looking for offers does not require you to see the loss of your job, your dog or your grandfather's wrist-watch as a "good" thing – it just asks you to look at the situation which you face, in all its ugly reality, and to ask yourself: "What is there here that I can use?" The question of "good" or "bad" simply does not occur. An offer is neither nice nor nasty, prickly nor cuddly; someone falling asleep in your presentation, a pay rise or a broken leg are all offers in equal measure. The only question is: "What do I want to do with this?"

6. Additive, not adversarial

The default setting for most business conversations is adversarial, and the first reaction to almost any suggestion is to evaluate it. Conversations quickly become debates, with both sides locked into advocacy. Debate tends to keep you at the level of thesis/antithesis; it does not promote the creative step towards synthesis. This has its uses – for example, in Parliament or the courts – but for any creative process (including "creating" relationships or value), there are at least three problems with adversarial conversations.

First, only two possibilities are ever put on the table – yours and mine. In a conversation of this kind, what I want is "my" idea to "win". With this kind of focus, there is little chance that a new, better, transforming idea will occur. Second, if two points of view meet in debate, one has to lose. So this kind of discourse inevitably produces "winners" and "losers", which in turn creates division, resentment and even conflict – and that is a high cost to pay. Third, adversarial conversations are often decided on the basis of power – the most powerful people, not the best ideas, win. This cements the existing hierarchy, prevents a flow of new ideas and energy and reinforces the *status quo*, when often what is required is a change.

By contrast if you adopt the attitude that everything is an offer, you have a different kind of conversation which is additive, not adversarial.

Instead of immediately leaping to judge an idea, one way or the other, you would seek to be with it first, to understand it and the potential it has, to explore it, develop it, extend it or add to it and the other ideas to which it might lead you.

THE IMPROV HOLOGRAM. The practices of improvisation are like holograms – they each seem to contain all the others. For example, looking for offers encourages you to lean forward to meet events around you, which helps you to be present and to actively listen. Conversely, if you are really present and listening, then you will perceive plenty more offers to work with. This means it does not really matter where you start. So although I started in the first article by talking about being present and listening, you can just as easily start here, by looking for "offers".

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A PRACTICE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE? Someone once said to us: "This 'offers' thing means there is free stuff everywhere, if you stop to look for it." It was a neat observation – and, after all, which of us is able to resist something "free"? Nonetheless, my own feeling is that there is something bigger at play, beyond our own personal interests.

In nature, all waste is food. No scrap is too small, no morsel too disgusting to be used. Everything is an offer to some creature happy to ply a living where others are unable (the dung beetle, for example). Thus natural systems achieve overall levels of productivity that should make us salivate. If only we could do so much with so little, all six billion of us could live fabulously well without having to worry about the destruction and depletion of the resources on which we depend. By contrast, current human systems produce colossal amounts of waste along with finished products. Nature cannot afford that – and nor, in the long run, can we.

A discipline like seeing everything as an offer, which echoes the patterns we see in nature and can be woven into our everyday lives, has promise. It is not a "solution", as such, but then sustainability is not a problem, but a complex, interconnected and changing predicament. In such a predicament, a patient, constant, small-scale practice seems a wiser response than a grandiose plan. Especially if it doesn't cost you anything. ■