

improv(e)

your leadership team

how to use improvisation to energize and enhance your group's dynamics

presented by Patrick Maurer

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For four years I often performed during the weekends in a local family-friendly improvisational comedy troupe called Comedy Sportz (www.comedysportz.com). It's one of the best teams with whom I've ever worked. Each week we gathered together, practiced our technique, and basically continued to strengthen the communication between us and build our level of trust. We relied on each other to come up with new ideas in a split second, to save each other if we draw a blank, and to set each other up for the line or action that is going to make the audience scream with laughter.

Many aspects of improvisation can be applied to team-building within leadership. Consider occasionally taking some time and practicing some improvisation with your class officers or student leaders on campus. While it may stir up some nerves initially, I normally see students quickly transitioning to smiles, laughter, and reflection on how they work with one another. Consider it as an energizer with a purpose.

There are a number of books on the market with improvisation games and warm-up activities. Here are just a few of my favorite warm-up activities that are relatively easy to teach and take only a moment to play:

Zip-Zap-Zop

- Point & make eye contact with people in circle as people say "Zip, Zap, Zop"
- Must go as quickly as you possibly can. NO delay

Zig-Zag-Zorg

- Point & make eye contact with people in circle as people say "Zig, Zag, Zorg"
- Must Clap & point on "Zorg"
- Do NOT clap on "Zig" or "Zag"

Categories (Version 1.0)

- Person A comes up with a general category (i.e. "Things you find in a kitchen," "Things that begin with the letter 'R,'" "Cartoon Characters," etc.)
- Person B quickly comes with something in that category. Person C does the same as does Person D, until it goes around the circle and Person A finally says something in their own category.
- Person B then comes up with a new category. People continue to share until Person B is the last person to share in their own category. And so on and so forth.
- Focus on being quick rather than clever. First thing that pops into head. Try not to mention anything already listed, but okay if that happens.

Categories (Version 2.0)

- Person A leaves the circle so that he/she cannot hear the group.
- The group quickly comes up with a general category (i.e. "State Capitols," "Things you'd find in 7-11," "Famous Villains," etc.)
- Person A returns to circle and person standing to Person A's left, mentions something in that category.
- Everyone in the group provides a suggestion going clockwise. Person A provides the final suggestion and then guesses the general category.
- Person A now remains in the circle and the process repeats with Person B, then Person C, etc.

Important Principles

- The goal of these activities is to go as quickly as possible.
- Mistakes SHOULD happen (at least every 10-20 seconds)
- Mistakes should be "celebrated"
- Energy should be high. Again, speed is of the essence (but shouting is not necessary)
- Simple is better. Spend time with one activity and gradually build in the others.

Electric Company

- Start a simple snap (go slow at first and gradually speed up as group becomes more successful)
- On the downbeat (snap) person A says 1st part of a word/phrase
- On the VERY NEXT downbeat (snap) person B says the 2nd part of the word/phrase
- On the VERY NEXT downbeat (snap), the whole group says the word/phrase (even if it isn't real) and then sings "Do Do Do"
- On the VERY NEXT downbeat, the PERSON B says the 1st part of the word and repeats the process with the person standing on the other side (i.e. the "word" will gradually travel around the circle).
- Purpose is to say something and set up the person standing next to you for the next
- *Note: do NOT skip beats. It's more important to say something and keep rhythm, than to mess up the rhythm and be "correct."*

Variations

- Reverse Way. Person A says 2nd part of the word/phrase. On next downbeat person B says 1st part of a word/phrase.
- Random Order. Rather than going around in a circle, pass it to the next person with eye contact and a gradually point with the snap.

Debriefing Improv

Playing these warm-up activities can be a lot of fun and debriefing them can really enhance your leadership team.

- You can use a standard DIGA debrief:
 - ▶ **Describe:** What happened?
 - ▶ **Interpret:** Why did that occur?
 - ▶ **Generalize:** Where else does that occur?
 - ▶ **Apply:** How can we use this?
- Using a debrief, you can address a variety of topics (depending on which observations come up). Some topics may include:
 - ▶ **Taking Risks**—Where can we take positive risks within our team? What new things could we try?
 - ▶ **Communication**—(eye contact during these activities) How effective was our communication? How can we use this when doing our actual activities.
 - ▶ **Teamwork**—How does the group react to failure? How do they support one another when that takes place?
 - ▶ **Benefits of Anticipation**—What happened when we anticipated? How can we anticipate with our activities?
 - ▶ **Risk of Assumptions**—What happened when we assumed? What assumptions are we still making about our campus?

If you play these enough with your group you will actually see an improvement in the speed of the group. A perfect example of practice makes perfect.

Story-time

- Sit in a circle and select a title of a story.
- Begin to tell the story gradually increasing the # of words you can say and then decreasing back down to one (for most groups beginning with 1 word, increasing to 4 words and back down to 1 works best).
- Stay on the same page (i.e. watch out for too many tangents) and work together.
- Story should have plot, characters, and a conclusion.

Whoosh/Bong

- “energy ball” always crosses body
- “Whoosh” (single arm brush across body)—can pass left or right (but must continue in direction it is heading)
- “Bong” (judgment fist hammered down)—acts as a wall. Energy ball stops and goes opposite direction
- “Tron” (two arms pointing) —sends energy ball across circle to wherever person points
- “Bumper” (arms crossed wonder woman style in front of body) —sends “Tron” back to person who said it
- “Ramp” (slanted arm in front of body—hand needs to be down on side where energy ball is coming from, with elbow raised on opposite side)—skips person

Zoom, Schwartz, Profigliano

- Three Rules: Always begin with a “Zoom,” Can’t “Zoom,” a “Zoom,” Can’t “Zoom” someone standing next to you.
- “Zoom” point to someone across circle
- “Schwartz” sends it back to last person who spoke
- “Profigliano” (must look to left or right) sends it to the person standing immediately to left or right (depending upon direction that person looks)
- “Twizzler” (must look to left or right) sends it in the opposite direction that the person is looking (person behind them)
- “Bork” (must look to left or right) skips person to the left or right of person (depending upon direction person looks)
- “Twizzle-Bork” (must look to left or right) sends it in the opposite direction that the person is looking and skips one person.
- “Ventriloquist” (must point to person) person pointed to acts as your voice. If they turn to their left and say a command it is like you just said that same command and people around you must respond accordingly.

Four-Letter Words (clean ones!)

- Works best if # of people participating is not multiple of four.
- Go around circle each person providing one letter of a four-letter word, after four letters have been said, whole group says the four-letter word (even if it isn’t a real word)
- Focus on speed!

Ah-So-Go (version 1.0)

- Players stand in a circle
- Person A begins with “Ah” and salutes with his/her right hand
- Person B (standing on Person A’s left hand side) says “So” while saluting with his/her left hand around mid-torso
- Person A says “Go” while pointing with right hand to someone else in the circle
- Process repeats itself

Ah-So-Go (version 2.0)

- Person A says “Ah” while holding both hands in a “dive” position above head
- Persons B & C (people standing to immediate left and right of Person A) say “Ah” with hands in “dive” position while leaning toward Person A.
- Person A says “Ah” and points “dive” position to someone else in the circle.

Note: Can mix 1.0 & 2.0. It just depends what Person A & says and does.

Presenter

Patrick Maurer presents speeches, workshops, leadership retreats and team building sessions to schools & organizations across North America.

To get more information about Patrick or to book him to come to your next assembly or event, please visit his website.

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