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## Bellingham class teaches how to use improv to succeed in business

DAVE GALLAGHER / THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

No matter what's happening in the economy, business gets done through personal interaction. In Bellingham there's an interesting class that's been helping business owners and Western business students learn the art of creating that connection with a client.

Earlier this month I dropped in on a BizProv class at the Upfront Theatre in downtown Bellingham. Taught by Galen Emanuele, the business skills class I observed was with a group of Western Washington University students in the MBA program. For the past year Emanuele has also been working one-on-one with business leaders, as well as groups of employees, to improve communication through improvisation.

I must admit that at first I didn't see the point of the group exercises. The first part of the class involved a variety of games in a group setting. For example, one exercise involved the group standing in a circle, with one person turning to another and making a sound/hand motion, such as "whoosh," "bang," and "pow," and the person receiving it would have to react and quickly pass along it along to someone else based on a set of rules. There were the expected giggles at first, but as the group got better, the pace of the interactions quickened and soon there was a nice flow to the exercise. Even more interesting is the group reached a point where if someone made a mistake, others would pick it up and the game would continue without missing a beat.

Emanuele pointed out afterwards that this exercise has practical applications in business. When two or more employees are giving a presentation to a potential client, there's an important give-and-take that takes place. We've all seen presentations turn bad - maybe one of the presenters makes a mistake, and the others have trouble picking it up and the energy falls off. Suddenly the pitch to clients has turned into a flat, disjointed performance.

As the class went on I started to see the changes that turned the class into a cohesive unit. Some of the exercises involved non-verbal cues, such as using your eyes or a nod to send a message to another individual. Figuring out what a potential client is saying non-verbally can be crucial in landing a sale; if you are making a presentation and a client's non-verbal messages are not positive, recognizing it and shifting gears is crucial. As the class went on, the entire group seemed to be on the same page while tackling a variety of challenges.

"It is amazing how much is going on with non-verbal communication, and paying attention to that is very important," Emanuele said.

In talking to Emanuele after the class, he said these exercises stress the importance of making others look good. It's important not only in presentation settings, but within a company culture because it encourages people to become confident about offering solutions to improve business.

This class also helps business people improve on accepting ideas. As adults, it seems to be in our nature to say "no" first, then wait to be convinced the idea would work. However, there are plenty of success stories about businesses embracing creativity not only from employees, but from customers.

"Ten-year-olds are great at improv, because they aren't reluctant to accept new ideas," Emanuele said. "That acceptance creates relationships and builds connections with employees and customers. I think every business wants to do that."

Emanuele will continue offering these business skill classes to the community, either to individuals or groups of employees. Details can be found at the Upfront Theatre's website, [theupfront.com](http://theupfront.com), or by calling 360-733-8855.

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