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# Acting Out: Improv Exercises Cultivate Team Building

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Jim Cahoy recalls the day he received a box of horned-tooth toads from a co-worker. His colleague handed over the box during a [team-building](#) exercise at Thomson West, a publisher of legal books based in suburban Minneapolis. Cahoy, a product manager, had never seen a horned-tooth toad before. Nevertheless, he thanked his colleague for the gift and quickly came up with a use for it.

"My pet snake will love these," he said. Then he passed a box of dirty socks to the person standing beside him.

"Thanks," she said. "I'll stuff a pillow with these for overnight guests I don't like."

Cahoy didn't bring a box of dirty socks to work, and he has no pet snake; the box of horned-tooth toads didn't exist either.

So, have the lunatics taken over the asylum? No. Cahoy and his co-workers were participating in an exercise borrowed from the world of improvisational theater.

In the past decade or so, many theater [professionals](#) have realized that the very rules improv is founded

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matter how crazy--are critical skills in business as well. That's why classes that give corporate employees a groundwork in basic improv techniques are making the leap from the stage to the conference room.

### The Business Case For Improvisation

In today's fast-paced business climate, success follows organizations that can cope with change and adapt quickly with new ideas and solutions. This business world version of improvising helps companies compete, says Tom Yorton, president of Second City Communications in Chicago, the consulting arm of the famous improvisational group Second City.

The 47-year-old organization established its corporate-class side about 15 years ago, a natural extension for the improv-training ground that launched the careers of comedians like John Belushi, Mike Myers and Amy Sedaris. When improv actors give a tweak to the techniques they use to break down barriers between themselves and the audience, they offer business professionals a host of tools transferable to the workplace, Yorton says.

Improv-training classes can now meet the needs of companies large and small, in any number of ways from building communication skills to facilitating teamwork to inspiring employees or brainstorming product launches. Improvisational theaters with corporate-training arms have done all these things, says Patrick Short, who leads the ComedySportz improv troupe in Portland, Ore.

"We get called by people all the time who say, 'We want to get along better, communicate better or just have fun together,'" Short says. "We can do that, but we can also tailor our courses to other needs, like customer service."

Recently, managers at Beaverton, Ore.-based Nike Inc. asked Short to help prepare engineers for a unique month-long assignment. They would spend four weeks watching kids play in schools and recreation centers and then use what they learned to design new Nike shoe products. Short's assignment? Find ways to help the product engineers see the kids' activities with eyes untainted by memories of their own childhood games.

Short first met with managers to understand their needs. Next, he and fellow ComedySportz players reached into

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Word ball got Nike employees to instantly lead without thinking, to trust their instincts, to be unafraid to look foolish. It loosened them up for the games ahead. Short uses word ball to other ends as well.

News releases for this client are distributed by Business Wire...  
"We were asked by Intel to get warring departments to stop fighting," says Short, himself a former Intel employee.

"They fought the Arizona people? Perri Dr. Bon for the Cayland National Survey 46 fighting over e-mail and not getting work done."

John, "sorry" seems to be the hardest word. But...  
Word ball worked for that knotty challenge, too. It helped the co-workers respect each other's ideas and even got them playing off those ideas. Those are skills they could take back to the office.

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Leading Employees To Enlightenment

Like most improv comedians who do corporate training, Short divides groups into teams of seven or eight employees each team led by one of his troupe members. But the instructors don't just lead the games and leave. Short follows the generally half-day classes with a carefully crafted bull session.

### Corporate team building

Courses anywhere, anytime, anyplace for busy professionals like you.  
"I lead the discussion by saying "What do you think that game was about?" " Short says. "They'll start talking, and I guide them if they're not getting it. People are very bright if you give them a chance. The illumination that people bring to the game themselves is amazing. I could never lead them to the discoveries in the same way they lead themselves."

"I like to err on the side of not sledgehammering them with the lessons," Short adds. "Generally, they find them easily enough on their own."

But how long do those lessons stick? Do employees really take what they've learned and apply it every day? Perri Williams, an Intel marketing manager, says they do.

Seeing the success the group had with Intel's teamwork problems, Williams called on Short's group to help Intel employees hammer out issues around change management. Intel's change managers and the troupe met during a March team-building weekend that is held annually to make the group more cohesive.

"Some of these people you've never met face to face copy you came out of them feeling the love and hugging," Williams says of the improv-training session. "We're having a phenomenal year in terms of meeting all our goals and it has a lot to do with our experience with Patrick Spotts. This was the first time the training was part of the annual retreat."

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Making Training Stick

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Maggie Judge, knowledge sharing manager at Thomson Corporation, the training and development rights reserved. Thomson Corp., a maker of business information services based in Stamford, Conn., and/or distribute the copy in whole or in part without the written permission of the copyright holder. Sweeney heads the Brave New Workshop, a Minneapolis-based sketch-and improv-comedy theater. He also runs the theater's corporate-training side.

Judge originally called upon Sweeney's troupe to work with 12 Thomson leaders from various departments as participants' leadership and innovation skills. Improv training was a perfect fit, Judge says because improv, after



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One of those workshops included the exercise Jim Cahoy played called "What's in the Box?" where the first person in a line hands over an imaginary box filled with any kind of nonsensical item he or she can dream up. Each recipient must thank the giver and immediately come up with a positive use for what's in the box.

The exercise encourages creative thinking and innovating and bolsters confidence when throwing out ideas during brainstorming sessions. Even the wildest box items, like dirty socks, meet positive reaction, Sweeney says.

"We treat every idea as a gift," he says.

Cahoy was hesitant to take part at first but immediately warmed to the improv games.

"They were so much fun and interactive," he says. "That session really stayed with me longer than another death-by-PowerPoint would have."

JEAN THILMANY IS A FREELANCE WRITER BASED IN ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA.

#### Online Resources

For additional information about theater-based training, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/07January](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/07January). There you will find links to:

- \* An HR Magazine article about training.
- \* An SHRM white paper on incorporating learning styles in training design.
- \* An SHRM white paper on matching group needs to training methods.
- \* The American Society for Training & Development.
- \* Second City Communications.
- \* ComedySportz.
- \* Brave New Workshop corporate services.



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