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By Christopher Mason

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Does one of the secrets to success in the corporate world lie on the stages of theatres and comedy clubs? An increasing number of people in business education circles seem to think so.

The likes of UCLA's Anderson School of Management, Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, MIT's Sloan School of Management and Columbia Business School have offered business students teachings on improvisation and its application to the world of business.

Each has chosen their own way of exploring improvisation. Columbia, among other offerings, takes students in their senior executives programme to a Harlem jazz club, where seasoned musicians talk about how they work together, keep an open mind and choose their playing partners while improvising on stage.

Academics say that elements of stage improvisation - know your audience, acknowledge [don't ignore] negative feedback, think on your feet, be likeable and leave your audience wanting more - also have resonance in the corporate boardroom.

Maziar Raz, a former corporate consultant, is focusing his PhD studies on the links between improvisational theatre and the business world, at the University of Western Ontario's Ivey School of Business.

"It's about stepping outside the routines that have been bolted into our personalities," he says.

The potential benefits of improvisation outside the theatre have led academics to look at both theatre and jazz improvisation for models that help corporate organisations break free from traditional, structured thinking.

And to some extent the global downturn has opened the world of business education to ideas and approaches that had been lingering on the sidelines when the reliable methods seemed to be working.

"It really is a systemic response on our part to realise that what we had been doing 10 years ago, while maybe providing great technical training, was just not enough to prepare leaders and strategists for the problems they were solving," comments Paul Ingram, a professor of business at Columbia and faculty director of the Columbia Senior Executive Program.

In describing the benefits of improvisation, Prof Ingram likes to quote a jazz musician who says his job is "having a thinking body and a dancing mind".

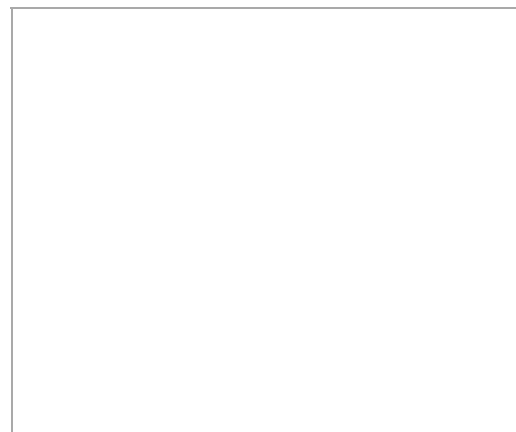
Mary Crossan, director of the Leading Cross-Enterprise Research Centre at Ivey says some companies resist trying to build links between improvisation and business and see theatre sessions as useful team-building exercises, but not necessarily the facilitator of structural corporate change.

"When organisations get into this they find it interesting, intriguing and fun. But to really engage ... it takes some fundamental revisiting of what you do and how you do it," she says.

Prof Crossan works with the Second City comedy club in course offerings at Ivey. One of the challenges she finds is convincing companies that improvisation is not about being funny or entertaining. Rather, it is learning the tools needed on stage and applying them to the boardroom.

Academics see their ideas taken up when businesses feel they are out of options, as many did during the worst of the recession. They must now convince companies that improvisational thinking can benefit a successful company just as much, if not more, than a struggling organisation. "There is still the notion that improvisation is about flying by the seat of your pants rather than a set of skills that need to be fine-tuned for you to function at the peak of your intelligence," says Bob Kulhan, chief executive of Business Improvisations, who, with Craig Fox, professor of policy at UCLA Anderson, established improvisation offerings at Fuqua.

But, Mr Kulhan adds, "in the past year and a half the global meltdown has increased the need



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to find strong alternatives for education."

He has taught improvisation to managers from Proctor & Gamble, Pepsi and Capital One, as well as software companies and the military.

The introduction of improvisation skills into corporate circles expanded in the 1990s. Now its proponents are studying its application in other fields, such as conflict resolution in legal circles, to see how to gain traction in the business world. "Improvisation is new in that it hasn't realised its full potential," Mr Raz says.

Supporters of improvisation say there is no question whether it belongs in the mainstream, but rather how best to get it there.

"It's things that cut to the core of who you are and what you're about," Prof Crossen says.

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