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## Three Ways You Can Hone Your Leadership Skills With Improv

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Improv training for business development is not a new concept. It's been used by MBA students and creative departments and has real connections to making leaders stronger. My company is tasked with improving leadership in new and existing leaders, both through improv classes and individual coaching. We've seen major improvements in three main areas and all of our leaders are stronger because of it.

Here are three simple ways you can use improv to create stronger leaders:

### **Find Comfort In Uncomfortable Situations**

I've witnessed far too many leaders avoid confrontation and less-than-ideal situations. While allowing individuals to "work things out on their own" has merit, a leader is often needed to intervene or at least moderate a conversation.

One of my latest clients was so uncomfortable with a situation between two people that worked for him, he kept telling them to "handle it like adults" — never stepping in, never moderating. The result? The employee that *wasn't* causing the drama in the organization quit.

Improv is all about those uncomfortable moments on the spot — it's how confidence is built! The difference between improv class and real life is in class, everyone is uncomfortable and you work through the discomfort together. Maybe you talk about why the conversation was uncomfortable or didn't work. Maybe you learn how to speak up and moderate. Maybe you get comfortable in situations that cause greater discomfort. I always associate improv to a heightened reality: If you are comfortable being silly in front of strangers, you can moderate a conversation between bickering employees.

### **Learn To Communicate And Listen**

We are terrible listeners. Even if you consider yourself a great listener, you could stand to improve. Leaders have to be amazing listeners to lead effectively.

During a workshop, a business owner asked me about difficult employees who didn't seem to listen to his advice on how to advance at work. After much back and forth, it turns out that he was entering every situation with a stigma about these individuals and it was hurting how he listened and communicated with them. Instead of affirming that he understood their problem and wanted to help, which he genuinely did, he was using words like "can't" and "but." In a heated situation, it's like dousing gasoline on a fire.

The improv idea of "yes" is probably one of the most mainstream principles that really does amazing things in communication when put into practice. You want to affirm the request of the person you are listening to, then add information.

Using the example from above, the employee might have said, "I need to make more money." Instead of responding with, "We can't pay you more" or "But you don't work enough," the owner could have replied with, "Yes, I hear that you need to make more money and I want to help you do this. Do you have any ideas?" or "Yes, I hear that you need to make more money. Right now, we don't have the funds for that. Let's talk about how we can make it happen."

Both of these examples affirm what's been said and voice the concern of the owner. "Yes" isn't about agreeing; many people confuse it with saying yes to everything or never saying no. What it does is simply remove dismissive words to open up a conversation.

### **Start To Take Initiative**

Leaders need to be doers. So often, my company is tasked with coaching a leader on action-orientated thinking. This doesn't just happen with new leaders; many times its leaders who are having a hard time making change happen. They aren't lazy or unmotivated. They simply have a hard time making strong choices, because it could be wrong or it could be a mistake. The problem with that: If you are constantly trying not to fail, you never succeed.

In improv, you absolutely need to make a choice. It's actually one of the most immediate success/fail models I've seen. If you make a choice, things happen. If you don't, the product is awkward and boring. By being forced to make choices, you'll inevitably have one that fails. When that failure only causes minor and momentary discomfort, the stigma of failure is slowly reworked. Taking chances is no longer this high-risk event — it's a way of life.

Aside from these three leadership skills, with improv, you're just about guaranteed to laugh and stop taking yourself so seriously. Because in the end, good leaders are authentically themselves, flaws and all.