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# I've Got Your Back: Utilizing Improv as a Tool to Enhance Workplace Relationships

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# I've Got Your Back: Utilizing Improv as a Tool to Enhance Workplace Relationships

## **Abstract**

As the average American adult spends more time at work than anywhere else, the workplace, and the relationships built therein, plays a key role in overall well-being. With this in mind, many organizations dedicate significant time and resources to improve employee well-being, often in the form of fun, social events. In recent years, improvisational comedy, or improv, has emerged as a popular teambuilding activity due to its foundations in play, spontaneity, and trust. However, improv is more than just fun and laughs. Beyond merely being an energizing teambuilding event, I argue that improv has the ability to generate positive social connections and strengthen workplace relationships by improving communication, collaboration, and interpersonal understanding. Within this paper, I provide a historical overview of improvisation in the theater and applied settings, connecting modern-day improv to organizational well-being via the lens of positive psychology. I then theorize that improv enhances positive, workplace relationships by linking the improv principles of being present, co-creation, and heightening offers to constructs of interpersonal mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding. This paper culminates with recommendations to culturally embed improv into regular work activities and suggestions for further research. An appendix provides easily implementable, short improv exercises that can be used by anyone to develop positive workplace relationships.

## **Keywords**

Improv, Improvisation, Spontaneity, Relationships, Positive Psychology, Positive Organizational Scholarship, Work, Play, Theater, Mindfulness, Active Constructive Responding, Perspective Taking

## **Disciplines**

Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Other Psychology

I've Got Your Back:  
Utilizing Improv as a Tool to Enhance Workplace Relationships  
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University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted  
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Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Dan Tomasulo

August 1, 2016

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## Introduction

An organizational environment that breeds positive relationships as opposed to negative relationships can mean the difference between a dysfunctional organization that is struggling to survive and a flourishing organization that thrives (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Gully, Incalcaterra, Joshi, & Beaubien, 2002). As organizations grow increasingly interdependent and team-based, they are becoming even more reliant on interpersonal relationships in order to function well. Likewise, with Americans increasingly spending the majority of their daily lives at work - averaging more than 47 hours a week (Saad, 2014), the ability to personally and professionally flourish may rely in large part on the quality of interpersonal interactions within the workplace.

As human beings, we are social creatures and spend most of our lives surrounded by other people. The sense of support and trust that we feel varies with each relationship and by situational context. Often, trust is earned, not given, and support is only provided conditionally or in the face of challenge and adversity. Relationships are also tinged with judgment and desires to return to what was or what could be. Work is no exception. While we may feel supported by some close colleagues, we may feel thwarted by others. As well, we may enter the workplace with an automatic, habitual state of perceiving and exuding judgment rather than acceptance, particularly when there is a hierarchy involved. We may believe that we need to avoid failure at all costs or risk retribution, thereby limiting our curiosity and creativity. But, is this the way that it should be? I don't personally think so, and I've found a domain where this is not the norm. As a nine-year veteran of the Washington, D.C. based ComedySportz improv troupe, many of my weekend evenings over the past decade have started from a place of assumed interpersonal support rather than mistrust.

To experience what it is like being part of an improv troupe, picture the following: It's a Saturday night at 7:00pm and I am getting ready backstage, warming up and conversing with my fellow ComedySportz performers, some whom I know well, others whom I have met for the first time earlier in the week. With it nearing show time, the music blares, the colorful lights pulsate, and the audience cheers as the announcer sets the stage for tonight's performance. Nervous energy sets in, my heart pounds, and I'm excited to get going, not knowing what tonight will bring. As an improviser, I cannot predict what will happen on that stage, as no two shows are the same. Everything will be made up on the spot by the six-person ensemble in this room, based on the suggestions provided by the audience. One scene might be a hit, and the next one could be a dud. Yet, I feel safe either way because of the group beside me. Even though I barely know some of them, I am confident that they've got my back regardless of what happens.

In that moment, one of my fellow performers actually moves around the room, taps each person on the back, and states that exact phrase: *I've got your back*. I feel completely supported and supportive, trusted and trusting. No matter what occurs on stage or what the audience throws our way, I know that everyone in that room will be there to create with me, to explore with me, to play with me, and to laugh with me. Yet, this performance isn't about me, it's about this group and the audience we are entertaining. I am merely a small part in driving the success of something bigger than myself: the ensemble. And, as an ensemble, we are collectively committed to having fun, giving our full effort, taking risks, and embracing failure as a launching point for success. I feel invincible and energized as my right foot hits the first step of the stage.

Improv creates a truly unique space of interpersonal connection, trust, and collective presence. Regardless of whether the performance is on a stage or in a conference room for an



audience of one or 1,000, those feelings are the hallmark of improv. Imagine if that sensation went beyond the domain of improv, extending to the modern day work environment. How different would our daily work lives be, if those same feelings of mutual trust, respect, and engagement permeated all of our relationships and interpersonal interactions? The good news is that the elevating feelings of improv are not limited to the domain of professional improvisers. In fact, anyone can learn and practice the core principles of successful improv, as attested by the current abundance of offered improv classes and corporate workshops, and the frequent usage of improv games in organizations as icebreakers or fun, training exercises. While improv's popularity in the corporate space stems from its nature as a fun, novel, and social event, I believe that its value extends far beyond that. Throughout this paper, I will argue that improv's utility is in its ability to develop the positive workplace relationships that help individuals and companies thrive.

In the pages that follow, I will first provide a historical overview of the application of improv in the theater and other domains. The second section of this paper will then connect improv to individual, group, and organizational well-being through the lens of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship. The third section of this paper evaluates the role of positive relationships in organizations and theorizes how core improv principles of presence, co-creation, and heightening offers cultivate positive relationships through the mechanisms of interpersonal mindfulness, perspective-taking, and active constructive responding. This paper culminates with recommendations to culturally embed improv into regular work activities and suggestions for further research. An appendix provides easily implementable, short improv exercises that can be used by managers, coaches, HR professionals, and other organizational leaders to help create and strengthen positive relationships at work.

### **We're All Just Making it Up As We Go Along: The History of Improv**

*"Anyone can improvise. We all do it everyday – none of us goes through our day to day life with a script to tell us what to do." (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994, p. 9)*

As a species, we are adept at improvisation. While definitions may vary, improvisation can be described as spontaneously adapting and creatively innovating under pressure in order to meet goals (Hodge & Ratten, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Throughout our daily professional and personal lives, we are bombarded with events, activities, and decisions that require us to act and respond in the moment (Crossan & Sorrenti, 2002). While we might be natural improvisers, our ability to adapt to our environment and make strong choices varies person to person. Thankfully, these are skills that we can practice and develop through training in improvisational comedy, or improv, techniques.

In recent years, improv has been popularized by television shows like *Whose Line is It Anyway?* (Styles, 1998), well-known theaters like Second City, and improv troupes that pop up at comedy clubs and local theaters across most major cities and college campuses. However, improv is more than a form of entertainment. It is also a tool that can introduce and refine the skills of productive and collaborative improvisation and communication. Improv training teaches individuals to actively listen, work as a cohesive and supportive ensemble, co-create in the present, take productive risks, and embrace failure (Vera & Crossan, 2004). By introducing proficiency-building exercises in an environment of group-oriented play and humor, improv training and practice can contribute to individual and collective well-being (Bermant, 2013; Vera & Crossan, 2005; Crossan & Sorrenti, 2002; Crossan, 1998; Crossan, 1997). For some, the idea of participating in an improv workshop in a workplace can breed anxiety, fear, and uncertainty. Upon introduction of the concept, it is not uncommon to hear objections like *I just can't think*

*that fast, or I can't get up in a roomful of people and tell jokes!* Both of these assumptions are misconceptions about the true nature of improv.

In the simplest terms, improv is a live, interactive, unscripted, collective performance (Johnstone, 1979/2012). Although there is often a loose structure to improv either based on the form or game associated with the performance, the rules of improv are generally limited to just one: agree with and build on whatever your fellow improvisers create. In short, improv can be encapsulated by two words: *yes, and* (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Halpern et al., 1994). Ultimately, successful improv involves mutual engagement and support between the performers in the present moment in order to spontaneously co-create scenes and sometimes, entire plays for audience enjoyment. The audience itself is involved in the co-creation process by providing suggestions that frame the performance. As an unplanned performance, successful improv requires a commitment to collaborative exploration and experimentation. Improvisers are unable to direct the scene solely based on their own ideas. As one piece of a greater ensemble, they need to effortlessly adapt in the moment to changes that are outside of their control, responding effortlessly and adding on to whatever happens in the scene at hand. In other words, the performance organically iterates based on the immediate feedback of fellow improvisers and the audience (Halpern et al., 1994).

Non-improvisers commonly and incorrectly associate improv with joke telling, due to the characteristic humor ingrained in improv comedy. Upon learning that I am an improviser in conversation, many individuals that I meet will erroneously ask me to tell them a joke or say something funny. While jokes or laughter are often a natural output of the improv process, they are not the goal. More accurately, the goal is to create an engaging, entertaining theater experience for and with the audience. In fact, an improviser who seeks to intentionally elicit

laughter or tell jokes can sometimes derail an entire performance in the process. By focusing on his/her own thoughts and goals, s/he will lack the presence needed to notice the nuanced world that his/her fellow improvisers are creating, which drives the skit forward. Most often, the humor of effective improv arises from showcasing the truth in a moment instead of finding a punch line. According to Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994), pinnacle leaders of modern day improv, “the truth is funny...honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention” (p. 15). Thus, the foundations of improv are not based on generating humor. Rather, improv is an art form and technique that is rooted in authentic spontaneity.

### **Spontaneity: The Roots of Improv**

In improv, spontaneity is the natural and desired state of performance. However, this is not a modern day concept. A valued state of spontaneity can be traced back more than 2,500 years to Confucianism and Daoism. In these traditions, virtuous individuals were those who embodied naturalness and spontaneity, or *wu-wei*. While interpretations have varied, *wu-wei* can be defined as a state of not doing or not trying, in the presence of successful and seemingly effortless action. Individuals in a state of *wu-wei* are said to possess *de*, or a charismatic energy that is appealing to and detectable by others (Slingerland, 2014). According to Confucian and Daoist teachings, “success in life was linked to the charisma that one radiates when completely at ease, or the effectiveness that one displays when fully absorbed” (Slingerland, 2014, p. 9). As a desired, optimal state, *wu-wei* is identified as a harmonious integration between mind, body, and action, where one is unconsciously driven to peak effectiveness (Slingerland, 2014). In many ways, *wu-wei* has commonalities with Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) modern day construct of flow, or full, immersive engagement in a task. In flow experiences, individuals can be described as zoned into the present moment while losing all sense of space and time. This state of

unconscious, peak performance arises from the harmonious nexus of an individual's skill and challenge in goal pursuit. This results in a simultaneous state of self-integration and self-differentiation that heightens an individual's skill level and leaves them feeling reinvigorated and self-efficacious.

While wu-wei and flow have similarities, Slingerland (2014) argues that there are also some key differences. Wu-wei is regarded more than just a state of absorption and engagement, as it is entrenched in the values systems of the aforementioned traditions. As well, whereas flow is traditionally observed and discussed in reference to an individual, wu-wei has a social context. A key feature of wu-wei is being in service to something greater than the self, which is part of the reason it can be such a difficult state to enter. Even though wu-wei is inherently social, generating wu-wei in a group setting is only possible if individuals care about the relationships and participants therein. Group wu-wei states require interpersonal connection, trust, relaxation, and exercises that strike the right balance of trying and not trying to achieve the desired state.

While spontaneity has been central to ancient Chinese philosophy, there have been debates amongst philosophers from Confucius to Zhungzai of how to best cultivate wu-wei. These include deliberate practice towards achieving the state, a focus on self-cultivation, polishing natural abilities, or even learning to let go. Regardless of the means of obtaining it, accomplishing the effortless state of wu-wei seems to require some level of conscious effort to get there (Slingerland, 2014). However, too much effort and desire invested in reaching a state of harmonious, social spontaneity will likely keep it out of reach. With that in mind, achieving wu-wei might rely on learning to integrate our two systems of thought: our instinctual, emotional, thinking style alongside our more deliberate, logical, thinking style (Kahneman, 2011).

The arts may be one way to successfully synthesize these two modes of thought, and Slingerland (2014) even states that “the arts are crucial for engendering socially desirable forms of wu-wei” (p. 209). Engagement in the performing arts may create desired spontaneous states in a number of ways. For instance, music can create group flow through performance, singing, or even dancing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Via synchronous movements, musical performers and listeners can create group harmony that transcends the self. In that state, group members may even begin to mirror the desired behaviors seen in others (Haidt, 2012). Improvisation in the arts further provides opportunities to cultivate wu-wei. In jazz improvisation, for example, “a commonly shared goal is to create within a musical and social context, requiring both control and spontaneity” (Montouri, 2003, p. 239). Through deliberate improvisation practice and preparation, jazz musicians learn how to balance their controlled and automatic thoughts to learn how to improvise with their fellow musicians and read an audience, thereby resulting in successful spontaneous performance when the moment arises (Barrett, 1998).

Like jazz, improv also teaches performers how to control and hone their conscious attention in order to act automatically. Similar to the preparation of jazz musicians, practicing improv comedy games and skits fosters an understanding of and cohesion with fellow improvisers, instills the principles of improv, hones attention in the present moment, and teaches improvisers to read and react to the audience. Due to the trusting relationships built amongst the group through collective performance, improv exercises often nourish the conditions listed above that are necessary for group wu-wei states. As improvisers build their improvisational skillset and perform, spontaneous acting can result in a trancelike, wu-wei state where performers learn to let go and allow the scene, and the world they are creating therein, take them where it will. As Johnstone (1979/2012) states, improvisers “...feel as if something else is controlling them. They

'know' what to do, whereas normally they 'choose' what to do. The state is regressive, but they experience no self-consciousness" (p. 148). In essence, improv is a means to integrate the realm of conscious and unconscious thought and action necessary for wu-wei.

### **Spontaneity in the Theater**

While improv can be described as spontaneous theater, and spontaneity itself has been culturally valued for thousands of years, improvisation in the theater has only existed since the 1600s. Moreover, improv comedy in its modern form is still in its infancy. Within the theater community, the birth of spontaneity in the theater is almost universally attributed to the emergence of *commedia del'arte*, a popular theatrical style in 17<sup>th</sup> century Italy (Halpern et al., 1994). Prior to that point in time, theater productions, both in drama and comedy, relied almost entirely on scripts. In *commedia del'arte*, troupes would travel to various cities to perform comedic plays that were improvised by the actors. However, while there was no script, the performances themselves were not fully improvised. Performers portrayed archetypal characters that were presented via a series of masks, with each performer donning a specific mask for the duration of the play. These archetypal characters had standard behaviors, roles, and intentions embedded in common routines. As well, a pre-set scenario was staged for the performance, which the actors would have spent countless hours rehearsing. While the dialogue between characters was unscripted based on the relationships that emerged organically in the performance, the scenes and characters were not (Frost & Yarrow, 2007).

The first performance of fully unscripted theater can be traced back to Jacob Moreno in Vienna in the early 1900s. Responding to what he felt was a stagnant theater scene in a cultural mecca, Moreno developed the Theater of Spontaneity and held what is claimed to be the first, spontaneous, fully unscripted theater performance for a paid audience in 1922 (Moreno, 2014).

Shortly after Moreno's introduction of improvisation to the European theater world, Viola Spolin began developing and experimenting with playful improvisational theater exercises and games in the United States. Spolin saw quick, improvisational play as a potential means to teach acting to children and engage non-performers in the craft (Spolin, 1999). She believed that the joy and excitement that emanates from play would allow for a transcendent experience to encourage risk taking and exploration while teaching individuals to overcome fear. Spolin (1999) states, "play creates freedom of experience which can lead to self-awareness, self-identity, and self-expression" (p. 7). Recent research seems to validate Spolin's claims that play is a valuable mechanism to enhance soft skills, learning, and well-being (Brown, 2009; Ratey & Hagerman, 2008; Dutton, 2003). Today, Spolin is often regarded as the mother of modern day improv, as her techniques and games created a foundation for the craft that are still in use today.

Under her tutelage, disciples of Spolin's teachings founded the first improvisational theater group in the United States in the 1950s, The Compass Theater (Young, 2007). Alumni of that theater company then went on to start Second City, which over the last 40 years has been known as the premier improvisational theater company in the world, spawning a number of comedy superstars including Tina Fey, Alan Alda, Mike Meyers, Steve Carrell, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Sedaris ("The Second City," 2016; Young, 2007). Alongside Spolin, modern day improv can also be traced back to Keith Johnstone. As an actor, director, and writer with the Shakespeare Theatre Company, Johnstone aimed to create a theater experience that would be interesting and entertaining to the layperson. By merging improvisational theater techniques with the popularity of sports, Johnstone founded a competitive version of improv, known as Theatresports. The competitive improv show consisted of short improvisational games, audience



suggestions, points awarded by judges, and constant audience participation and interaction (Johnstone 1979/2012; Young, 2007).

Two central improv structures evolved from Spolin and Johnstone's initial techniques that form the basis for most improv comedy today: short-form and long-form improv. Short-form improv, as popularized by *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (Styles, 1998) and comedy troupes like my own ComedySportz, most closely follow Johnstone's Theatresports model. Improvisers are trained in a series of improvisational games with varied goals and hooks, each lasting approximately 2-5 minutes. The audience provides suggestions to initiate each game, and occasionally participates during the scenes or games themselves. There is no collective thread that connects the games or scenes together (Johnstone, 1979/2012). When the scene ends, the group moves on to something brand new. Long-form improv's structure, on the other hand, is much more cohesive. Long-form improvisers create connecting storylines through separate scenes or a holistic play over the course of a single performance (Halpern et al., 1994). Unlike short-form improv, audience suggestions are generally relegated to the entry point of the performance. The most commonly performed long-form framework is called the Harold, which was invented by Del Close in the 1970s. The Harold is an integrated performance comprising of a monologue, individual scenes, and group games that cohesively tie to each other and to the theme provided by the audience at the onset of the performance (Halpern et al., 1994). Regardless of which form is performed, both practices are completely unscripted, spontaneous, and grounded in audience interaction.

### **Spontaneity Beyond the Stage**

For as long as improvisation has been a part of the theater, it has also been applied beyond the theater. When Moreno formed The Spontaneity Theater and established

improvisational theater, he also was the first to apply improvisational theater exercises as a therapeutic intervention. As the forefather of applied improvisation and a trained psychiatrist, Moreno personally valued how theater could create cathartic experiences. He believed that spontaneous theater could be utilized in therapy, a theatrical setting in its own right, to promote breakthroughs. Dubbing this psychological therapeutic use of improvisational techniques as psychodrama, Moreno began applying improvisation with clinically depressed populations as a means to re-enact traumatic situations. Due to the social nature of creativity and spontaneity, Moreno also saw value in applying this technique beyond clinical populations to all individuals that needed help working through difficulties. He quickly expanded psychodrama to couples and group settings, where it is most widely used today (Moreno, 2014). As a therapeutic technique, psychodrama enables participants to spontaneously and creatively act out real scenarios, past events, future hopes, or inner desires under the guidance of a licensed therapist and then reflect openly on the experience. A meta-analysis of 25 experimental studies on psychodrama concludes that the practice appears to be as or more effective than group therapy in both clinical and non-clinical settings (Kipper & Ritchie, 2003).

Given the popularity and effectiveness of psychodrama under Moreno, Kurt Lewin, a pioneer in social psychology, became interested in the potential uses of improvisational theater in organizational settings (Moreno, 2014). As one of the first individuals to study organizational effectiveness, Lewin launched role-play techniques in businesses in the 1930s and 1940s. Working with the Harwood Pajama Factory, he introduced managers to role-play to help them improvise dialogue in staged conversations to work through common, challenging scenarios with employees (Burnes, 2007). Via this dramatic improvisation, Lewin and participants were able to generate self and other-awareness leading to stronger interpersonal understanding and

communication skills. By improvising authentic conversations outside of the emotionally charged environments of real situations, participants were able to objectively observe behaviors and engage in dialogue that expanded their perspectives and led to behavioral changes (Burnes, 2007). Since Lewin's initial experiment, role-play has become an almost universally accepted method to resolve interpersonal problems in the workplace. Role-play techniques have been widely adopted by corporations and educational institutions alike. Since the 1940s, role-play has been a staple of business school curriculums, management training courses, and human resource practices. It is even a recommended research method practice in the educational field (O'Sullivan, 2013).

While applied improvisation gained widespread acceptance in business settings in the form of role-play, its use was still relatively one-sided. Improvisational techniques were largely focused on serious topics to help individuals fix issues so that they could return to normal functioning. Improvised, spontaneous dialogue was generally dramatic, problem-oriented, and framed in realistic scenarios. The playful side of improvisation that Viola Spolin introduced in the 1930s was largely absent outside of the theater realm until about 15 to 20 years ago. According to Kelly Leonard, Executive Vice President of Second City, co-founder of Second City Theatricals, and co-author of *Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses "No, But" Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration*, there has been a shift in improvisational training in the past 20 years (K. Leonard, personal communication, June 1, 2016).

When Second City first formed its training center in 1988, there were approximately 100-200 students honing their improv comedy skills on the Second City stages, with the hopes to become stronger actors or earn coveted roles on television shows like *Saturday Night Live* (Michaels, 1975). That number has grown tenfold in the last 20 years. There are now more than

3,000 enrolled students in the Second City training program, most of whom are performing for pleasure and/or to enhance social skills without dreams to become a professional improviser or actor. Improv has also exploded in popularity beyond the training center. The business to business arm of Second City, known as Second City Works, is a multi-million dollar, booming industry that partners with corporations to create and deliver improv comedy training and teambuilding workshops globally on topics like talent development, compliance, marketing, and sales effectiveness (K. Leonard, personal communication, June 1, 2016). Second City, while a major player in this space, is one of thousands of theaters, troupes, improvisers, and training professionals offering improv comedy training to help enhance individual skills and organizational effectiveness. The Applied Improv Network, a 14-year-old global community of practitioners applying improvisational techniques beyond the theater, currently has more than 5,000 members (“The AIN,” 2016).

As popularity for applied improv training continues to grow as a means to boost creativity and interpersonal skills such as trust, active listening, and communication, improv has also found a home in educational curricula. Elementary schools, high schools, universities, medical schools, and other professional degree programs have begun to incorporate improv comedy exercises into classes on communication and other topics. Alan Alda, a famous American actor and alumnus of Second City, has even partnered recently with Stony Brook University to create an improvisation program for scientists housed within its Center for Communications Sciences. This program, offered in multiple locations for scientists within and external to the Stony Brook community, helps students learn how to engage spontaneously, communicate their work with more clarity, and better connect with varied audiences through playful and humorous improv comedy exercises (“Improvisation for Scientists,” 2016). While

research is limited in this nascent field, several studies contend that improv comedy curricula like Alda's may improve communication skills, particularly when oriented towards patient care (Watson, 2011; Boesen, Herrier, Apgar, & Jackowski, 2009; Hoffman, Utley, & Ciccarone, 2008). According to Leonard and Yorton (2015), increasing communication skills is a common reason why individuals and companies seek out improv training from Second City and other providers. Other common objectives for soliciting and participating in improv training include: enhancing presentation skills, building trusting, cohesive, and collaborative teams, driving innovation, and becoming more adaptable to change<sup>1</sup>. While ensuring that applied improv comedy is fun and energizing, proficient practitioners also purposefully design, tailor, and execute workshops and trainings to meet these desired outcomes.

As work becomes increasingly more reliant on interdependent teams and the corporate landscape becomes more competitive and unpredictable, it is no surprise that organizations are investing heavily in techniques designed to foster the interpersonal skills and collaboration that they need to succeed. With a focus towards helping clients thrive, applied improv today is aimed at creating optimal performance. Thus, in the last 20 years, applied improv has experienced a positive turn. The predominant use of applied improv has moved from treatment and prevention of dysfunction towards the promotion of behaviors and traits that enable individuals, groups, and organizations to flourish. While a causal relationship is not clear, the timing of this paradigm shift closely aligns with the emergence of the fields of positive psychology and positive organizational scholarship.

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<sup>1</sup> A review of the literature regarding the effects of improv training in organizations is covered on pages 34-41 of this paper.

**Setting the Scene: From Fixing Dysfunction to Cultivating Flourishing Workplaces**

*“The state we generally consider to be ‘normal’ is just a starting point, and not the goal we ought to be setting for ourselves. Our life is worth much more than that! It is possible, little by little, to arrive at the ‘optimal’ way of being.” (Ricard, 2011, p. 276)*

**The History of Positive Psychology: The Science of Well-Being**

The quote above succinctly captures the focus of positive psychology: scientifically studying and measuring what constitutes optimal functioning, or flourishing states, for individuals, groups, and societies (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Although that quote aligns with positive psychology, it is not attributed to a scholar of the discipline but to a Buddhist monk seeking to articulate the teachings of his tradition. Thus, like improv, positive psychology has roots that date back to ancient schools of thought.

For thousands of years, humanities scholars have questioned what constitutes a good life, human flourishing, and well-being. In the Western world, Aristotle was one of the first philosophers to popularize the concept of well-being, describing eudaimonia as the result of achieving a personally defined optimal state of being. He believed that eudaimonia was humanity’s highest goal, something we seek as the ultimate prize “for its own sake” (Melchert, 2002, p. 188). Since Aristotle’s time, there have been a myriad of interpretations of well-being across cultures, religious traditions, and philosophical schools of thought. From Buddhist to Victorian era philosophers and everything in between, well-being definitions have included happiness, alignment with the gods, a life full of meaning, freedom from suffering or worry, and tranquility (Pawelski, 2016a; McMahon, 2013). Although definitions vary across traditions, well-being appears to be cognitively and experientially created through the intentional pursuit of

improving individual and often, collective existence. Thus, as the definition of well-being culturally varies, it is also subjectively applied.

While Aristotle believed that eudaimonia could be achieved through habitual practice, there were no clear, empirically backed methods to cultivate an optimal existence, which was beyond the scope of the humanities (Melchert, 2002). As the social sciences developed in the early 1800s, a new, scientific lens was applied to the human experience. Although fields like psychology began observing human behavior, testing hypotheses, collecting data, and proposing scientifically backed theories to describe and prescribe the human condition, well-being largely fell to the wayside as a topic of study under this new approach. That is not to say that it was ignored completely. Upon psychology's birth as a discipline in the late 1800s, William James, often considered to be the first psychologist, advocated for the creation of a science focused on healthy-mindedness (Pawelski, 2003). Further, missions of psychology in the early 1900s included curing mental illness, helping individuals lead fulfilling lives, and identifying and fostering talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

However, as psychology evolved, its inquiry largely aligned with the medical model of treating mental illnesses and disorders. Particularly since World War II, psychological research and application has primarily been aimed at fixing dysfunction in clinical populations to help individuals return to a normal state. When Martin Seligman, often regarded as the founder of positive psychology, addressed the American Psychological Association as president in 1998, he challenged the field to move beyond the treatment and prevention of dysfunction, which he claimed was only half of the human experience (Fowler, Seligman, & Koocher, 1999). With his own background in working with helplessness in clinically depressed individuals, Seligman noticed that the successful treatment of depression would often result in a sense of emptiness,

rather than fulfillment. He determined that normal functioning should not be the ultimate goal for psychologists, but rather a starting point towards pursuing optimal functioning (Seligman, 2002). Therefore, in his presidential address, Seligman called for a new social science focused on understanding what constitutes a flourishing life for all populations and positive psychology was born as a result (Fowler, Seligman, & Koocher, 1999).

As a field, positive psychology's main topics of inquiry are targeted towards identifying and fostering the collective strengths of the human experience: positive experiences (including emotions and engagement), positive individual traits (such as strengths and values), and positive institutions (both formal and informal) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Furthermore, practitioners of the discipline not only seek to understand the conditions for flourishing, but also aim to create research-backed interventions and tools to increase individual and societal well-being. Seligman, however, was not the first to call for psychology to study the promotion of human potential and fulfillment for all individuals. In the 1950s and 1960s, humanism was founded as a branch of psychology centered on similar modes of inquiry, under the leadership of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Robbins, 2015). Maslow, in particular, famously developed a theory of self-actualization to identify how individuals achieve their optimal selves and studied the role of peak, or elevating experiences in driving happiness and fulfillment (Maslow, 1964/2012).

In conjunction with humanistic psychology, additional schools of psychological thought emerged to understand the holistic human experience. These included existentialism, focusing on the experiential side of humanity, phenomenology to understand the meaning behind human experiences, and personalism as an approach to study the unique qualities of individuals that are not quantifiable (Robbins, 2015). However, positive psychology differs from these branches in



several core ways, namely in utilizing the scientific method, sourcing quantitative data to understand well-being, and acknowledging the role of both the good and bad in contributing to human flourishing. Humanists largely rejected empirical data and the scientific method to understand human behavior, focusing more on qualitative interviews to understand the individual experience (Robbins, 2015; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Thus, prior to the emergence of positive psychology, there were limited aims to utilize rigorous, scientific inquiry to uncover empirical data to define and cultivate flourishing states.

Over the past 20 years, great strides have been made in that pursuit. While still a young discipline, several seminal models of well-being have been developed under the auspices of positive psychology, validated by experimentation and empirical analysis across populations and time. These include Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which indicates that human flourishing arises from a combination of positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment; Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being construct which attributes self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, mastery, purpose, and growth towards well-being; and Diener's (2000) model that addresses how cognitions, affect, goals, and culture play a role in subjective well-being. Studying human flourishing has also led to the emergence of theories around immersive, positive human engagement, like the previously mentioned concept of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Furthermore, applying the scientific method towards human flourishing has led to the discovery that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are key motivational needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As well, via empirical studies in the realm of application, we are now able to show the positive effects of optimism and other *healthy-minded* positive interventions like cultivating one's strengths (Pawelski, 2003). For instance, one meta-analysis of 51 interventions with 4,266 subjects found that varied positive interventions

correlated to increased well-being and decreased depressive symptoms across clinical and non-clinical populations by heightening engagement, meaning, and positive emotions (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009).

As a newer field that has gained mass popularity, positive psychology is not without its share of criticism or potential for misuse. For instance, for better or worse, happiness has become synonymous with positive psychology in the mainstream media, potentially creating a public misinterpretation of the discipline as happiness studies. The danger in misinterpreting positive psychology as the science of constant happiness is that uninformed assumptions can lead to negative outcomes, such as inappropriate risk taking that leads to unhealthy behaviors and unproductive thinking, or avoidance of problems that lead to growth opportunities and enhancement of critical thinking skills (Frederickson, 2009). After all, even positive behaviors that promote flourishing, such as optimism, can be misapplied or overused potentially leading to personal or group harm (Seligman, 2011). Furthermore, given the subjectivity of well-being, individual flourishing can sometimes come at the cost of collective flourishing and vice versa. Additionally, there are also questions regarding the relationship between the positive and negative in promoting well-being, as resilience and post-traumatic growth are long-term well-being constructs that emerge from adversity (Seligman, 2011; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Moreover, consensus is lacking within the discipline itself, as the word *positive* can be defined by an orientation, an area of study, an audience, a process, or a goal (Pawelski, 2016a). Pawelski (2016b) recently utilized a philosophical lens to synthesize frameworks and theories to suggest a definition of the positive as the presence of the preferred or the absence of the non-preferred in a relative manner that is sustainable across individuals, time, effects, groups, and societies. In this approach, he argues that the aim of positive psychology should be to create a

symbiotic flourishing state of the individual, group, and society as a whole. Although one could argue that there are still elements missing from this definition, the act of creating a framework rooted in philosophical approaches and scientific research helps to aim future questions. This prevents a scattered approach towards research and practice that can blur this young field's meaning and purpose.

### **Spontaneity and Well-Being**

As positive psychology has such a rigorous focus on the scientific study of well-being in all its forms, spontaneity has not gone un-noticed. While still rather limited and predominantly based on self-assessment, there is a foundation of empirically-based research that connects spontaneity and well-being. For instance, flow states have been linked to enhanced performance, meaningful and enjoyable work, increased self-efficacy, heightened positive emotions, and motivation for goal attainment (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow, as immersive engagement in the present, is also a core component to promoting flourishing states (Seligman, 2011). Beyond flow, research suggests that general spontaneous action also corresponds with well-being. As an instrument to measure spontaneity, the Revised Spontaneity Assessment Inventory measures six characteristics of positive, spontaneous behavior: novelty, immediacy, appropriateness, effortlessness, engagement, and level of control (Kipper & Shemer, 2006). Scoring highly on this scale has been positive correlated with creativity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, and overall well-being. As well, intensity in spontaneity is negatively correlated with self-reported stress (Kipper, Green, & Prorak, 2010; Davelaar, Araujo, & Kipper, 2008; Kipper & Shemer, 2006).

Further research indicates that being open to unpredictable events can build resilience and positively reframe vulnerability (Luna & Renninger, 2015). Moreover, as spontaneity is unplanned and unpredictable, new experiences often stem from spontaneous actions. Research on novelty indicates that it leads to new skills and capabilities that foster self-efficacy and dedicated practice, which may result in the habituation of positive, behavioral changes (Maddux, 2009). Novel experiences may help us to overcome hedonic adaptation, or the phenomenon whereby the intensity of our positive emotions and responses to an activity decrease over time and with repetition due to adaptation and increased aspirations (Bao & Lyubomirsky, 2014; Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). The novelty of spontaneous moments may even help us to overcome our biases, or tendency to jump to conclusions based on preconceived assumptions (Kahneman, 2011). Luna and Renninger (2015) contend that spontaneous surprises necessitate an explanation to make sense of them, and barring the existence of one, compel us to change our perspectives in order to rationalize the situation.

Play, as a form of spontaneous engagement for leisure or intrinsic enjoyment, also seems to correlate with well-being. Engaging in play may strengthen an individual's vagal tone, which decelerates the stress response and improves the ability to adapt and thrive in the face of challenge (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). Physical aspects of play correlate to the stimulation and accelerated growth of brain cells, improved executive functioning, and mental and physical well-being. In the context of learning, playful activity also relates to boosts in memory, attention, and alertness (Ratey & Hagerman, 2008). Playing in nature may also provide further benefits in sleep regulation, positive mood, and increased resistance to disease. Additionally, storytelling aspects of play may increase empathy, provide insight into how others perceive us, and facilitate imaginative planning (Ratey & Manning, 2014). Similarly, a study of humor and play in the

daily life of college students found that study participants with higher frequencies of laughter also experienced greater positive affect. Moreover, their experiences of playful humor were most frequently generated from social interaction. This would indicate that collective laughter emanating from socially-constructed play may enhance personal well-being (Mannell & McMahon, 1982).

Beyond the individual, research is more limited regarding the role of spontaneity and collective well-being. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) recommends that one way to create an optimal flow state is through others, as it develops compassionate understanding and caring for a partner with the intention to assist them in fulfilling their goals. Moreover, the relatedness generated by engaging in flow with others can enhance relationships, boost emotions, and intensify motivation to continue pursuing goals (Ryan et al., 2008). The sense of enhanced self-efficacy that originates from flow states may even extend to the efficacy of the group (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Luna and Renninger (2015) also infer that spontaneity enhances collective well-being. In their model, they believe that sharing surprises, or spontaneous, unexpected events, with others is the last stage of processing these events. Reminiscing about surprises or engaging in surprises with others creates a sense of meaning and helps to affirm and boost interpersonal connections through shared experiences. It also establishes a social support network that helps build resiliency and feelings of being cared for, while potentially providing insights into the situation. Sharing these experiences may further boost social capital, as listeners of the story may choose to spread it or share the experience with others.

Certainly, there is more work to be done to continue to measure the role of spontaneity in well-being in individual and group settings, particularly in experimental and longitudinal studies. Despite these limitations, it is clear that there is some connection between spontaneity and both

individual and group well-being. Given that organizations are a collective of individuals and teams working towards shared goals, the well-being benefits of spontaneity may extend to organizations themselves. Thus spontaneity interventions, such as improv, may help to nurture thriving organizations.

### **An Overview of Positive Organizational Scholarship**

As positive psychology gained popularity and created an empirical foundation for well-being and human flourishing, other fields, such as education, health, and business, began to take notice and apply similar modes of positive inquiry to their own domains. In viewing organizations as sites of human collective strengths and capability building, positive organizational scholarship emerged in early 2003 as a discipline to study the capabilities and strengths that bring life to and energize organizations (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012). Unlike positive psychology, positive organizational scholarship was not formed in response to a systemic attunement towards fixing dysfunction. Rather, the discipline originated from the acknowledgment that the positive side of organizations was largely ignored in research and application. In addition to studying what gives life to organizations, positive organizational scholars aimed to empirically study extraordinary performance or positive deviance, reinterpret and reframe problems as opportunities to heighten performance, measure positive organizational outcomes beyond profit, and identify the individual and collective traits and experiences that enable organizations to thrive (Cameron & Spreitzer, 2012).

Although a dysfunction-oriented approach towards organizations was not the impetus for the formation of positive organizational scholarship, recent organizational development processes have been biased towards resolving organizational problems (Cooperrider, 2013). Positive organizational scholarship and its interventions differ in approach by focusing on the

desired optimal state of the organization, providing research and empirically-backed tools to help elucidate and cultivate the desired state (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2012). Positive organizational interventions thereby foster organizational growth by creating and enhancing preferred behaviors rather than curing or removing organizational dysfunction (Pawelski, 2016a). Approaches like this flip the traditional deficit bias of weakness fixing that currently plagues organizations and limits potential (Cooperrider, 2013). In fact, positive organizational scholarship highlights that organizational potential is much more limitless when operating from the mindset of strength and possibility. Various Gallup studies indicate that strengths based interventions predict a number of positive business outcomes across industries, such as increased engagement, productivity, and profitability (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003). Additionally, two studies of positive practices in financial and healthcare institutions suggest that these practices have a significant positive correlation with organizational performance in the areas of finances, effectiveness, turnover, culture, and quality (Cameron, Mora, Leutscher, & Calarco, 2011).

While positive organizational interventions may minimize problems as a by-product, it is not the interventions' aim. Rather, the activities' intentions are to promote individual and collective flourishing conditions in order to positively energize organizations. Certainly, this may not be the best method in all organizations, as there may be times when an organization cannot successfully operate without addressing and resolving serious dysfunction. This may be particularly true in emergency or mission critical situations, or when fatal flaws are uncovered. However, in most circumstances, the road to thriving organizations starts with the goal of optimal, rather than normal performance. Thus, positive organizational scholarship suggests that organizations aiming to thrive in an increasingly competitive and unpredictable, global landscape should focus on addressing current problems as the exception rather than the default approach.

**Paying to Play: Humor and Fun at Work**

As organizational leaders aim to create optimal performance, they rely on top talent to help their organizations thrive amidst competition. In today's modern day work environment, fun and playful cultures have emerged as a means to attract and retain top talent, particularly within the millennial generation. *We play hard and work hard* is a common phrase touted on the careers section of corporate websites and in job interviews. As a result of this trend in organizational culture, play and humor are commonly embedded in organizations, both in daily interactions and as specialized teambuilding events, sometimes in the form of improv. While laughter and play at work can provide fun and relaxation, there may be more to it than that. Recent evidence suggests that organizations derive benefits from meaningful humor and play at work that can help them flourish.

Leonard and Yorton (2015) argue that the pillars of great comedy are also the pillars of great organizations: creativity, communication, and collaboration. In the workplace, comedy, or humor appears in a myriad of ways. Martin and others (2003) describe four styles of individual humor: affiliative, self-enhancing, aggressive, and self-defeating humor. Affiliative humor creates social connections and engages others in humor or laughter. Self-enhancing humor is utilized as an individual coping mechanism in times of stress. Aggressive humor, which is often perceived as negative humor, is directed towards others through teasing or ridicule in an attempt to manipulate or seize power. Finally, self-defeating humor arises from self-ridicule with the intention to gain acceptance or amusement from others. While there are various types of organizational humor in the workplace, not all types lead to positive outcomes. Humor can both help or harm social situations in its verbal and non-verbal forms, and can also create states of in groups and out groups (Martineau, 1972).



Positive humor, such as affiliative and self-enhancing humor can create group cohesion, positive reinforcement, stress reduction, and creativity (Lang & Lee, 2010; Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Vitug & Kleiner, 2007; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Results of one study even suggest that humor at work may be more effective in reducing anxiety than physical exercise (Lang & Lee, 2010). As a mechanism to enhance team communication, positive humor can also help to create an open and psychologically safe environment, generate positive emotions that links to stronger listening skills, and establish states of vulnerability and connection that lead to more engaging conversations and presentations (Romero & Pescosolido, 2008; Vitug & Kleiner, 2007; Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Moreover, a meta-analysis of 49 studies that reviewed the relationship between positive humor and organizational effectiveness found that employee humor can lead to increased performance, job satisfaction, team cohesion, employee health, and coping. Positive humor in the workplace also negatively correlated with burnout, stress, and withdrawal from work. Supervisors' usage of humor, specifically, links with employees' performance and job satisfaction, team cohesion, and positive perceptions of the leaders amongst employees (Mesmer-Magnus, Glew, & Viswesvaran, 2012). Furthermore, by utilizing positive self-deprecating humor to express vulnerability, leaders may even be able to reduce hierarchical barriers and create authentic connections that engage and inspire their followers (Hoption, Barling, & Turner, 2013).

In addition to humor, research indicates that meaningful play at work also relates to increased creativity, problem-solving skills, flexibility, competent risk-taking, and open-mindedness (Friedman, 2014). The group cohesion created in play also fosters enhanced collaboration and altruistic tendencies in the quest to continue the game (Brown, 2009). A 2014 study of 254 employees in varied roles found workplace fun to be positively correlated with

organizational citizenship behavior, performance, and engagement (Fluegge-Woolf, 2014).

Additionally, a recent qualitative analysis of four companies in New Zealand also supports these results. Plester & Hutchison's (2016) study indicates that play at work can promote employee engagement, by increasing positive affect and boosting employees' sense of enjoyment both in their individual jobs and in their association with the organization itself. Unfortunately, companies often treat play with lip service by putting a foosball table in the corner and calling it a day. For play to provide true value, research suggests that it needs to move beyond the game room and have actual meaning. Statler, Heracleous, and Jacobs (2011) suggest a construct of *serious play*, whereby play is intentionally utilized in social settings to achieve work-related objectives. Their research indicates that meaningful play, in comparison to play for the sake of play, is more likely to be associated with positive outcomes, such as higher levels of innovation, positive affect, openness to emotional expression, and stronger group communication and interpersonal understanding.

While positive humor and play at work can be associated with beneficial outcomes in the workplace, it is certainly not a guarantee. As well, even well-meaning play and humor can sometimes lead to detrimental outcomes when misapplied. Since it is subjective in nature, sense of humor and approach to humor varies person-to-person, with cultural, gender, and generational influences (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006; Lamm & Meeks, 2009). Humor that is considered to be playful teasing to one might feel aggressive and off-putting to another. As well, the perceptions of the intended audience of humor and play are instrumental in creating value. For instance, perceived aggressive humor can lead to dysfunction and discomfort, and misaligned humor styles can foster negative interactions and emotions (Romero & Cruthirds, 2006). Moreover, too much humor or fun in the wrong context can cause distractions or come across as unprofessional

(Cooper & Sosik, 2012). Additionally, while play associated with work objectives is more likely to drive organizational benefits, it can also lead to employee disengagement and disaffection if not appropriately tied to employees' intrinsic motivations (Statler et al., 2011). When trying too hard to promote enjoyable cultures, organizations run the risk of creating states of imposed and inauthentic fun, which can breed cynicism and disengagement (Cooper & Sosik, 2012; Fleming, 2005).

To strike the right balance of play that simultaneously meets employee and organizational needs, leaders can set the example by modeling appropriate humor and by permitting organic fun in a supportive environment (Cooper & Sosik, 2012). Furthermore, leaders should look to create the conditions that self-perpetuates positive humor and fun. This includes encouraging spontaneous play in connection to objectives, and engraining meaningful play in daily responsibilities (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Leaders may also want to promote socialization, as humor and play appears to provide more value when embedded in social interactions, due to the generative effects of shared laughter and positive connections (Statler et al., 2011). As a spontaneous, social activity, improv has a loose structure that allows for the intentional selection of games and exercises in order to generate specific takeaways and objectives. While the selection of the improv exercises themselves might not be spontaneous, the play that arises from improv is spontaneous in nature. As well, an astute applied improviser will adapt based on the needs of the group. Providing improv training to employees might also provide them with a toolkit of easy to use exercises that can then be spontaneously applied at work beyond the teambuilding event. Thus, as a spontaneous, social intervention that harnesses humor and play in a positive and meaningful manner, improv may help organizations thrive.

### **More Than Fun and Games: Improvisation and Thriving Organizations**

In our increasingly connected, technologically advanced, and changing world, thriving in a competitive marketplace may rely on an organization's ability to adapt. Organizational, like individual behavior, is largely unscripted. Some estimates indicate that upwards of 90 percent of managerial behavior in the workplace is improvised (Mintzberg, 1973). Kanter (2002) argues that companies that thrive amidst increasing competition are those that are successful improvisers. He cites Sun Microsystems and Reuters as exemplars of improvisation, as leaders of both companies were able to help their organizations prosper by pivoting their businesses to adapt to evolving market conditions. Thus, just as spontaneity and improvisation plays a role in individual well-being, it also appears to be a factor in organizational flourishing.

In the fast moving environment of modern day workplaces, organizations employ a diverse array of specialists who need to make quick decisions and innovate while operating interdependently to meet collective goals. With that in mind, organizational improvisation contains many similarities to theatrical improvisation. Vera and Crossan (2005) suggest that both types of improvisation necessitate an atmosphere of spontaneity and creativity in order to promote peak performance. In the case of organizations, performance is more outcome driven, whereas; it is more process driven in the theater. Additionally, both forms of improvisation have a shared goal of satisfying the customer, whether that be entertaining an audience or pleasing a client. According to Barrett (1998), jazz improvisers and managers have more in common than one would think. He states, "Jazz players do what managers find themselves doing, fabricating and inventing novel responses without a prescribed plan and without certainty of outcomes, discovering the future that their action creates as it unfolds" (p. 605).

Likewise, in working with Second City, Crossan (1998) defined six characteristics of strong improvisers that can be applied to create strong managers in an organizational setting, thereby helping organizations flourish. These include: interpreting environments, crafting strategy, cultivating leadership, fostering teamwork, developing individuals skills, and assessing organizational change. Given the need for skills in spontaneity amidst a chaotic context, and the cultural norming of fun, play, and humor in organizations, it is no surprise that improv is gaining popularity as a teambuilding event to help employees connect and adapt. Based on the experiences of Second City's applied improvisation training within organizational settings, Leonard and Yorton (2015) propose that improv training can result in enhanced creativity and innovation, higher quality interpersonal interactions, resilience, productive risk taking, stronger leaders, and quicker responsiveness in challenging situations. Existing research appears to lend some credence to these claims, as there is empirical evidence that improv training can drive optimal organizational performance by increasing team creativity, communication, and team cohesion.

For example, one study that links improv to enhanced creativity engaged 84 participants in an improv workshop prior to initiating a product brainstorming exercise. Attendees in the workshop generated 37 percent more product ideas on average, as compared to the control group. The improvisers' ideas were also generally rated as more creative than the control group. While the workshop itself had nothing to do with product ideation, the results suggest that improv workshops may prime the pump for creativity that extends beyond the events themselves (Kudrowitz, 2010). Another study found that engaging in improv activities correlated with higher divergent thinking scores in the realms of fluency, originality, and flexibility on tasks not specifically associated with the exercises (Lewis & Lovatt, 2013). The results of both of these

studies imply that improv could help individuals move beyond their traditional thinking patterns on unrelated tasks across various domains. Beyond enhancing creativity and innovation, further studies also indicate that improv may foster learning. Berk and Trieber (2009) concluded that embedding improv exercises within existing curricula could create a more engaging learning environment that helps make knowledge stick. Aligning with this hypothesis, undergraduate students in a management course that utilized playful, improv exercises as a component of the class had higher overall test scores than their peers who did not participate in the interactive curriculum (Boggs, Mickel, & Holtom, 2007).

While this research is promising, Vendelo (2009) rightly cautions that further measurement and experimentation is needed to validate the benefit of improvisation on learning. Too much improvisation can thwart learning if not embedded meaningfully in the curriculum. Likewise, promoting ideation can sometimes come at the cost of implementing the most efficient or easiest fix to a problem. Thus, in order to be beneficial in organizational context, improv may need to be calibrated so that it is applied in the right manner to target specific outcomes, with clear instructions and opportunities for de-briefing.

In addition to nurturing creativity and learning, research also suggests that improv interventions can develop communication skills. In one program, improv exercises were intentionally embedded into a communications course for pharmacy students in order to enhance listening skills, observation, and responsiveness. Success for this intervention was measured based on the students' scores in the standardized patient examination, which assesses pharmacists' communication skills with patients. As there was no control group for this study, the researchers compared scores to the previous year's class who did not engage in the improv training. In comparison to the previous class, the mean grade was nine percentage points higher

for the class in year one of the program's implementation and 14 percent higher in year two.<sup>2</sup> As well, over four years, there were 20 times more students who earned perfect scores on the standardized exam. The students' self-reports also confirmed that they believed that the improv practices enhanced their communication skills (Boesen et al., 2009).

Certainly, there may be other factors influencing these results given the lack of control groups, including class demographics year on year. However, similar improv interventions with students in both medical schools and MBA programs have also resulted in self-reports and outcomes that imply that engagement with improv strengthens communication skills (Hoffman et al., 2008; Huffaker & West, 2005). For example, a group of sales students who were trained in improv techniques had stronger sales performance over a four-week period for a project to sell event tickets than their peers who did not participate in the training. On average, this group sold 50 percent more tickets than their counterparts (Watson, 2011).

While stronger communication skills and increased innovation are valuable outcomes for organizations, most companies solicit improv training in order to strengthen interpersonal collaboration and build trust amongst teams. Here too, research appears to positively correlate improv with team cohesion and trust. Improv experiments with both healthcare managers and humanitarian aid workers showcase how improv helps to build collaborative teams, even in cases where a team may be newly formed. Healthcare managers who engaged in an improv teambuilding workshop were rated as more cohesive than a control group based on higher measures of team innovation, safety in participation, task orientation, and a shared vision (Kirsten & Du Perez, 2010). A similar sense of cohesiveness was observed in the humanitarian

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<sup>2</sup> The differences in mean test scores were statistically significant between the pre-improv class and the post-improv classes ( $p < .0001$ ). The increased average grades between the first and second year of the improv curriculum were not found to be statistically significant ( $p > .05$ ).

aid workers, although the measures varied. Based on qualitative observations and interviews with the aid workers, the improv training appeared to increase cohesion and collaboration amongst a diverse group of participants from varied cultures and countries, even amidst the presence of language barriers (Tint, McWaters, & van Driel, 2015). A further study of 175 employees across 25 work teams also suggested that improv could promote team cohesion and collaboration. However, the magnitude of this correlation was moderated by the presence of other environmental factors such as transparency, team expertise, and a culture open to risk-taking (Vera & Crossan, 2004).

Based on findings like these, Vera and Crossan (2005) argue that organizations can learn from the collaborative, team-oriented approach inherent in improv. They state,

Teamwork is important for organizational improvisation because what one person does is determined by what all others are doing. Collective improvisation is more than the sum of individual improvisations; it is the result of close interaction among members of a group. (p. 743)

By bringing teams together through trust and mutual engagement, improv can generate the collaborative, interdependent environment needed for successful goal achievement and organizational success.

One reason that improv may be able to nurture team cohesion is because these playful, spontaneous activities may elicit the aforementioned flow states that augment individual and collective well-being. Improv can trigger the intersection of challenge and skill while honing the group's attention towards a collective goal resulting in total immersion in the present moment (Bermant, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). As individuals come together to help the collective group succeed, they are more likely to showcase their strengths. When colleagues understand



each other's strengths and are able to match challenges to them, the two key conditions for flow, they can help facilitate higher levels of collective engagement and achievement (Peterson, 2006; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Improvisers call this state "the group mind" (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 92), as it is the coming together of the ensemble of improvisers and the "*relationship between the players that makes the scene*" (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 50).

This state of me to we transcendence closely mirrors Haidt's (2012) concept of "flipping the hive switch" (p. 256), which can be triggered by synchronous movement or collective joy. In order to create this hivish state, individuals must transcend their own needs to become a part of and serve something greater than themselves – the group. Similar to group flow states, hive states are immersive experiences directed towards a shared goal. However, they are differentiated by their ability to generate a self-transcendent state through synchrony that brings diverse individuals together as a collective, supra-organism. Whereas flow states have an afterglow of energy and efficacy, hivish states also generate feelings of connection and elevation during and after the experience (Haidt, 2012; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Hivish teams tend to be more productive and collaborative, and studies of hivish companies have linked the behavior to higher levels of social capital, trust, employee engagement, and fun (Haidt, 2012). By engaging participants in spontaneous, imaginative play that can often generate synchronized movement and laughter, I believe that improv's popularity and value as a teambuilding activity may be due to its ability to flip the hive switch. As Del Close states regarding his experiences as an improviser, "it's an absolute thrill, a tremendous surge of confidence, energy, and joy. I've given up searching for happiness, now that I realize joy is very easily achieved" (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 88).

Overall, it appears that improv interventions can help to promote optimal performance in organizations through boosted creativity, communication skills, and team cohesion. Further analysis of the literature also links improv to interpersonal skills in the workplace, effective teamwork, and self-awareness (Ratten & Hodge, 2016). While promising, it is important to note that this research is still rather limited. A recent literature review conducted by Ratten and Hodge (2016) found that while there is much theory surrounding the benefits of applying improv in organizational settings, the research on outcomes is still lacking. They recommend additional quantitative analysis, as most studies are qualitative in nature. While strides are being made in that regard, there is room for improvement. However, current research is promising in relating improv activities to positive business outcomes.

Thus, improv is clearly more than fun, more than games, and more than laughs. Just as jokes are not the goal of theatrical improv, they are not the reason why corporate improv is valued and invested in as a team building activity. Improv is a participatory rather than an observed experience at work, and it is not merely a form of entertainment. Leaders engage their teams in improv activities primarily to enhance skills and create cohesion. Improv activities, when successfully applied, are intentionally leveraged to energize and connect individuals through spontaneous, playful co-creation to become a collective unit. At its most base level, improv fosters playful, positive, and generative interpersonal interactions. In doing so, it helps individuals better understand, connect, trust, and communicate with each other. Hence, improvisation in a corporate setting is more than a fun teambuilding event; it is a vehicle to build positive workplace relationships.

**Yes Anding From Me to We: Improvising to Build Positive Relationships**

*“Other people matter.” (Peterson, 2012, p. 82)*

As new improvisers begin studying and mastering the craft of improv, they are taught that there are three main elements to establish at the beginning of any scene: the relationship between the characters on stage, the environment they are in, and the situational context that distinguishes this scene from other events in the characters' lives. While each of those key elements are important, there is one that trumps all others and is the requisite starting point for any scene: the relationship (Halpern et al., 1994). At its core, every scene is about exploring the relationships between the characters that are portrayed on stage. The best scenes are those that identify and cultivate relationships with a commitment to authenticity.

The act of improv is dependent on relationships as well. The ensemble, or team, is essentially a matrix of interdependent relationships coming together in order to succeed. Improvisers work together in partnership to create individual scenes and entire performances, in varied configurations. While there is a collective ensemble, most scenes generally start with two people with others entering and exiting the scene to add value when needed. The success of the scene thus depends on the improvisers' abilities to positively engage with and support each other. As Halpern, Close, and Johnson (1994) state, “a truly funny scene is not the result of someone trying to steal laughs at the expense of his partner, but of generosity - of trying to make the other person (and his ideas) look as good as possible” (p. 16). Even in the rare cases of a one-person show, the improviser is still in a relationship with the audience. The spontaneous art form of improv cannot progress without the suggestions, feedback, and interactions that arise from a positive connection between the audience and the performers. Capitalizing on this, improv training (whether in the theatrical or corporate space) hones students' abilities to create and build

successful imagined and real world relationships between characters, performers, and the audience.

While relationships are at the heart of improv, research has been quite absent on this topic due to the predominant focus on outcomes. However, I believe that improv's ability to generate positive working relationships may actually mediate these beneficial results. But, how exactly does improv help to create and sustain positive relationships? As research has indicated, improv exercises utilize playful and engaging techniques to help elucidate skills and shift mindsets. Rather than being one-sided lectures, improv training is participatory, providing individuals the opportunity to practice and enhance these techniques, while watching others do the same. These training methods are rooted in the core principles of improv, which include interpersonal presence, co-creation, and heightening others' ideas. I theorize that these three principles align with the empirically backed constructs of interpersonal mindfulness, perspective-taking, and active constructive responding that predict positive relationships and flourishing outcomes. More so, I argue that corporate improv workshops, as active, positive interventions in organizations, can help to hone interpersonal skills associated with these constructs, thereby further enhancing positive workplace relationships.

### **Understanding Positive Relationships at Work**

As average adults spend the majority of their lives at work, the workplace has become a primary location for relationship creation and development. Positive relationships are a recurring theme in human flourishing, appearing as a factor in a number of empirically based, well-respected well-being models, including but not limited to: PERMA, self-determination theory, subjective well-being, and psychological well-being (Seligman, 2011; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Diener, 2000; Ryff, 1984). Haidt (2006) even goes so far to state that "happiness comes from

between” (p. 238), indicating that he believes that relationships are the key ingredient to well-being. Positive relationships have been linked to a number of beneficial outcomes such as increased positive emotions, social skills, resource development, self-efficacy, vitality, resilience in times of stress, self-expansion, and capitalization on positive events (Gable & Gosnell, 2011; Seligman, 2011; Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2011; Segrin & Taylor, 2007; Haidt, 2006). A companionate bond, where partners mutually meet each other’s needs and influence each other’s outcomes, is the hallmark of positive relationships (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). These relationships are based on affection and commitment to those with whom we are interconnected and correlate to increased health, longevity, and well-being (Haidt, 2006). In many ways, the workplace is a breeding ground for strong companionate relationships.

Many of the previously mentioned benefits associated with positive relationships also extend to the workplace. Beyond the individual, positive relationships may also enhance organizational well-being. For instance, a multi-year meta-analysis of Gallup led research on employee engagement highlights that positive relationships, either manifested by having a best friend or a caring supervisor at work, are a strong predictor of employee engagement. These engagement drivers are also associated with organizational outcomes including higher productivity, decreased attrition rates, increased customer satisfaction, and boosts in organizational profitability. At the individual level, employees who self-report these relationships are more likely to find purpose in work, feel valued, provide more praise and recognition, and focus on strength development in themselves and others (Harter et al., 2003). Positive workplace relationships also correlate to improved individual performance, employee growth through learning and development, and organizational attachment (Stephens et al., 2011). Organizational success may be highly tied to positive relationships because interdependent

human behavior, which often occurs in relationships, drives organizations. Positive relationships at work may also be impactful because organizational loyalty is often more rooted in relationships than economics (Ragins & Dutton, 2007).

Within the workplace, relationships are fluid, evolving constructs that exist in many forms. They can be temporary or long lasting, dyadic or group based, virtual or in person, hierarchical or peer based, and internal or external to an organization (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Across these varied relational contexts, there are certain core components to all positive relationships, including trust, engagement, mutuality, and inclusivity (Stephens et al., 2011; Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Ultimately, these relationships are socially constructed and are a delicate interplay between a desire for personal autonomy and a desire for connection with others (Duck, 2007). What most distinguishes positive relationships is a shared positive experience of mutual interconnection and support that creates growth (Ragins & Dutton, 2007). Certainly, not all relationships in the workplace are positive. The workplace can be ripe with conflict, and negative relationships can cause a toxic work environment. Forced, inauthentic relationships can also create a state of disengagement and detachment. Thankfully, there are approaches that individuals and organizations can utilize to develop environments that enable positive relationships to organically originate and thrive.

At the individual level, generating trust and intimacy are key factors to creating and sustaining positive relationships in both good and bad times. However, it should be noted that intimacy and trust may not always be positive, as they can be exploited or make conflict more painful (Kark, 2012). Overall, relationships built on trust are more likely to thrive during adversity, particularly when those involved strive to repair broken trust (Pratt & Dirks, 2007). Managers, specifically, can create trust with their employees through the expression of

sensitivity and respect in times of difficulty, by communicating decisions, and by making special accommodations to employees that may have a perceived cost to them (e.g. offering time off) (Greenberg, 2007). Like trust, intimacy, which is culturally and personally defined, also enhances relationships through vulnerability and risk taking. Intimacy is generated by a willingness of all parties to share personal details in a professional setting in an authentic way (Kark, 2012).

Organizational culture is also an important factor for sustaining positive relationships, as it is instrumental in creating shared language and goals. A strong organizational culture in tandem with positive relationships creates a sense of care and meaning amongst employees and between the organization and employees. There is a cyclical relationship between positive relationships and organizational culture, as cultural symbols generate connection to encourage relationships, which in turn further the evolution of existing symbols and the creation of new ones (Golden-Biddle, GermAnn, Reay, & Procyshen, 2007). In addition to culture, organizational communities can also foster strong workplace relationships through structure and processes. To help make employees feel cared for, appreciated, valued, and seen, leaders should aim to embed four conditions in organizations. These include a surplus of positive emotions and actions (e.g. gratitude, compassion), safety to authentically connect with others, boundaries to clearly define and differentiate the group while maintaining individual autonomy, and positive spirals to mutually create and reinforce positive energy, behaviors, and actions (Kahn, 2007). Leaders themselves can also cultivate a positive relationship environment by modeling behavior that promotes learning and growth through interactions, by viewing employees at all levels as positive resources, and by willingly contributing to the growth and development of others (Fletcher, 2007). Through an analysis of the literature, it is clear that authentic, trusting, and

organically developed positive relationships provide great value and benefit to well-being for employees and organizations as a whole.

### **Improv and High Quality Connections**

One empirically backed method to create positive, workplace relationships is through high quality connections (HQCs). HQCs are short-term, positive interactions between two or more individuals that result in a positive experience for all parties (Stephens et al., 2011; Dutton, 2003). These interactions can be transactional in nature and do not require a pre-existing relationship between the participants. Partaking in HQCs infuses energy and cooperation in a variety of ways. The cognitive mechanisms of HQCs create a willingness to connect with others, emotional mechanisms successfully navigate relationships, and behavioral mechanisms enable tasks and foster respect (Stephens et al., 2011). Rather than analyzing the source of relationship dysfunction in order to remove or fix it, high quality connections aim to develop optimal relationships through the promotion of positive behaviors and emotions.

The signature components of high quality connections are playful interactions, respectful engagement, mutuality, and task enablement. Successful high quality connections enhance energy, and create a positive emotional state between participants marked by a sense of mutuality (Stephens et al., 2011; Dutton, 2003). The increased positive energy, trust, and mutual regard that stems from these activities can help participants feel validated, cared for, and understood - hallmarks to positive relationships (Stephens et al., 2011; Gable & Gosnell, 2011). As well, this heightened state of energy and positive emotional state can extend beyond the individuals engaging in the HQC. Due to the positive energy emanating from the participants, others are likely to gravitate to those individuals resulting in the broadening and building of internal resources (Frederickson, 2009; Dutton, 2003). This effect may create an upward spiral in



positive emotions and behaviors that spreads to others, enhancing creativity, innovation, and collaboration within an organization in the process (Stephens et al., 20011; Sekerka, Vacharkulksemsuk, & Frederickson, 2011). In addition to fostering collaboration and creativity, research indicates that playful HQCs also encourage risk taking, reduce workplace stress, and generate flow states (Stephens et al., 2011).

As an activity, improv can be viewed as a mechanism to create high quality connections in the workplace. By nature, improv exercises are transactional, require no previous relationships, and can generally be conducted between two people. Improv effectively creates HQCs by generating energy, magnifying positive emotions, and instilling relatedness between strangers, acquaintances, and individuals in new and existing relationships alike (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Halpern et al., 1994). Like HQCs, improv exercises foster creativity and collaboration in a playful manner that builds trust and encourages mutual respect. Improv also enables collective tasks, as its output is the generation of an enjoyable scene or the completion of a game. Furthermore, improv promotes desired behaviors rather than removing dysfunctional behaviors. Exercises teach individuals skills such as active listening, spontaneity, co-construction, and other-awareness rooted in spontaneity, laughter, and imaginative play instead of prescriptive, dramatic scenarios (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Spolin, 1999; Johnstone, 1979/2012). Thus, improv can be viewed as an intervention that promotes high quality connections. Just as high quality connections appear to cultivate positive relationships, I believe that improv can as well.

However, improv's ability to promote positive relationships goes deeper than its association with high quality connections. While improv has a loose structure and limited rules due to its foundation in spontaneity, there are essential, shared components to all improv forms.

These include embodying a state of interpersonal presence, co-creation, and heightening others' ideas. By cultivating these mindsets, I will attest that improv trains individuals in interpersonal mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding skills. Furthermore, I believe that it is these elements that lead to the previously cited outcomes of increased interpersonal connection, collaboration, trust, and effective communication.

### **On the Spot: Improv and Interpersonal Mindfulness**

**Improv and presence.** As a playful, spontaneous art form, improv, by nature, requires a state of presence in order to be enacted. As Leonard and Yorton (2015) assert, "To read the room, you have to exist in the moment, and existing in the moment will allow you to better read the room" (p. 182). As improvisers engage in and train in the practice of improv, they are essentially learning to attune to the present moment because that is where improv is created; it is made up on the spot. In the world of unscripted theater, improvisers must cultivate presence, intentionally being in the moment in order to build scenes. While non-improvisers may bristle at the thought of engaging in improv because they *just can't think that fast*, the irony is that great improv rarely comes from thinking. It's more commonly developed from being, observing, and listening in the moment. By being present, improvisers move away from the thoughts in their head to become more aware of their surroundings, gathering full-sensory information that can drive more intentional, rather than automatic, choices and reactions. This heightened presence is similar to other cultivated states of immersive moment-by-moment awareness, otherwise known as mindfulness.

Mindfulness is frequently associated with meditation, and may conjure up images of individuals sitting cross-legged in silence. However, mindfulness can be generated and practiced beyond meditation utilizing both internal and external stimuli, such as one's breath, food, or

nature, to direct attention towards the richness of a present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). At its most base level, mindfulness can be defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). Likewise, Langer (1989/2014) describes the conditions needed to generate mindfulness: attunement and engagement to the present moment, openness to novel experiences, sensitivity to existing context, and a focus on the process rather than the outcome. As improv has been described thus far as spontaneous, playful, generative, and ensemble-based, it can be viewed as meeting those conditions.

However, while improv can create mindfulness, it guides individuals towards a multifaceted state of presence. As mentioned previously, improv is not a solitary endeavor. Thus, an improviser’s sense of presence needs to be highly attuned not only to themselves, but also to others – their fellow improvisers and the audience. By training individuals to become attuned to each other, I believe that improv creates a state of interpersonal mindfulness that enhances relationships. Just as, “together, moment by moment, we create a scene” (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 53) in improv; together, moment-by-moment, we develop relationships with others in life. After all, relationships, whether they are transactional or lasting, rely on interpersonal connection across a series of moments in time. A relationship’s success further depends on the extent to which each person feels understood, cared for, and validated in those moments (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). It can be argued that these conditions in and of themselves necessitate a state of present, interpersonal awareness and engagement. After all, how can one feel understood, cared for, and validated, if their partner seems withdrawn, distant, or disengaged? A successful relationship, therefore, may rely on a state of other-oriented presence, where partners are engaged and attending to each other in the present moment.

**Mindfulness and positive relationships.** Research on mindfulness and relationship satisfaction appears to support this statement. Several studies with couples indicate a connection between mindfulness and both overall and daily relationship satisfaction. These studies further suggest that mindful individuals are more likely to have higher levels of empathic concern and lower levels of interpersonal anger and relationship stress (Wachs & Cordova, 2007; Burpee & Langer, 2005; Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004). In one study, mindfulness even predicted the quality of marriages more so than demographic variables or partners' perceived similarity to each other (Burpee & Langer, 2005). Mindfulness also appears to correlate with enhanced interpersonal well-being in non-intimate relationships. Two experiments that utilized mindfulness interventions with strangers recorded higher rates of reported social connectedness and relationship quality with the experimental groups over control groups. (Haas & Langer, 2014; Cohen & Miller, 2009). In the workplace, specifically, a literature review analyzing workplace mindfulness outcomes suggests a correlation between mindfulness and relationship quality at work and at home. Employee mindfulness may trigger improved communication through active listening techniques, and may reduce workplace conflict while increasing compassion through heightened awareness and pro-social orientation (Good et al., 2015). Mindfulness may even decrease social discomfort and create a buffer when dealing with controlling managers in the workplace (Schultz, Ryan, Niemiec, Legate, & Williams, 2015).

Individuals do not need to have a predisposition towards mindfulness in order to reap its interpersonal well-being benefits. Mindfulness is a skill that can be developed through training and practice (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1994). A number of the aforementioned experiments purposefully engaged individuals in their mindfulness interventions with no prior mindfulness or meditation experience. In one such study, relational well-being effects were

measured both immediately upon completion of the intervention and three months after the experiment, suggesting the potential for longer term benefits arising from mindfulness training (Carson et al., 2004). There are a myriad of approaches to training mindfulness, to help individuals hone in on and fully immerse in the present moment. Both internal and external attentional anchors are utilized to gently return a wandering mind to the present moment or bring awareness to automatic behaviors in an intentional and non-judgmental way. The arts are one method to promote mindfulness, and one study links creation of or engagement in the arts at work, particularly in a playful way, with increased mindfulness (Barry & Meisiek, 2010). The arts may cultivate mindfulness through full sensory immersion in the creation of or interaction with an artwork, which serves as the attentional anchor. Additionally, Langer (2005; 1989/2014) recommends both humor and play as two methods to practice mindfulness due to their ability to promote engagement and novelty. She even recommends encouraging play in the office to promote mindfulness at work.

**Cultivating interpersonal mindfulness through improv.** Improv, which integrates spontaneously created art, humor, and play, may be primed to cultivate mindfulness. Improv training may be further advantageous in this regard because it is a medium, as previously highlighted, that any individual can practice and be trained in with no prior experience needed. Through spontaneous play, improv exercises can generate the beginner's mind that is essential to mindfulness, a mind that is curiously aware and open to new experiences (Tint et al., 2015). Some improv exercises are even reminiscent of common mindfulness practices. For instance, Spolin's (1999) foundational improvisation exercises include an entire category dedicated towards honing sensory awareness towards oneself and one's environment. Her "Feeling Self with Self" (p. 57) exercise instructs participants to focus their attention on different parts of their

bodies in a way that is similar to Kabat-Zinn's (1994) recommended body scan meditation. In this meditation, individuals aim their full attention towards their feet and then slowly move the attention up through their body, experiencing every minute sensation that arises along the way. Outside of this specific exercise, Bermant (2013) suggests that frequently utilized improv games facilitate non-judgmental awareness of one's body in a similar way to those exercises taught in mindfulness based stress reduction courses.

However, where improv differs from many of these mindfulness practices is that it encompasses more than self-orientation. Although there are a number of mindfulness practices that center attention on an external object, the overall practice is traditionally a rather solitary endeavor. For instance, in mindful eating, the individual's savoring experience is internal and unshared (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Even in the aforementioned studies, the mindfulness interventions frequently trained individuals to center attention on their breath and practice non-judgmental awareness of their internal thoughts, rather than training non-judgmental awareness towards and in conjunction with a partner. While some improv exercises, like Spolin's, resemble this solitary practice, they are the exception rather than the norm. Most improv exercises require more than one participant, training individuals to collectively anchor their attention towards each other in the present moment. Since mindfulness is generated in this space between individuals, it can be described as interpersonal.

While there is robust research on mindfulness, that research is almost entirely devoted to traditional practices of intrapersonal mindfulness. Research attention towards interpersonal mindfulness has been quite absent. There is only a small amount of directed research about this form of mindfulness, the mechanisms to foster it, and its potential outcomes. Within the research that does exist, one similar construct of "relational mindfulness" is described as "the process of

practicing mindfulness while interacting with others, integrating words with silence and learning to speak and listen mindfully” (Falb & Pargament, 2012, p. 352). Falb and Pargament (2012) suggest that this form of mindfulness may benefit interpersonal relationships by improving communication and generating compassion. Similarly, Surrey (2005), Kramer, Meleo-Meyer, and Turner (2010) recommend interpersonal mindfulness practices as a component of psychological, therapeutic treatment. These practices can promote trust, connection, and empathy in a therapeutic relationship through shared movement and dialogue. Via the heightened awareness and mutuality that forms, they argue that interpersonal mindfulness can accelerate healing.

One of the most common beginner improv exercises that promotes interpersonal mindfulness is the “Mirror Game” (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Spolin, 1999, p. 61; Halpern et al., 1994). In this game (see Appendix), participants are paired up and one member of the dyad is instructed to begin making spontaneous movements and motions, including facial expressions. Their partner’s aim is to fully mirror these moments. Successfully being able to do so requires non-judgmental, centered attention on one’s partner. When an individual is not practicing interpersonal mindfulness with their partner, they will not notice the nuanced detail that arises from evolving movement. Likewise, if the mover is not mindfully attuned to their partner, they may remain static or change motions too frequently, making it difficult for their partner to fully experience a moment or keep up. After a few minutes of practice, participants switch to take turns leading movements. They are generally then instructed to mirror each other’s movements without a leader, spontaneously creating movements collaboratively with no preconceived agenda.

As this is often one of the first exercises introduced in an improv training, it is astonishing how quickly beginners enter a mindful state. Initial awkwardness, judgmental laughter or behavior, and clunky movements are quickly replaced by connection and presence through concentrated attention towards one another. When de-briefing this exercise, participants commonly discuss how they notice subtle facial expressions or movements that were previously missed, or how they suddenly become aware of the sensation of the air passing by as they move their hands. Not only does this exercise create a mindful state, it also appears to build trust, connection, and understanding in the process. Cohen and Miller (2009) utilized this exercise in their experiment for their interpersonal mindfulness training program and found that participants experienced enhanced connection, emotional intelligence, and well-being. Having personally partaken in this activity many times, it is awe-inspiring and exhilarating to feel that state of coming together with another, creating something in tandem in the present moment that neither of us would create alone. By letting go of judgment and forgoing a desire to attempt to control movement, it is almost as though our bodies know where to go and take us there. We are simultaneously no longer in control and in a state of heightened control. I imagine it must feel similar to *wu-wei*, or the paradoxical state of seemingly effortless behavior amidst the flow of immersive and effortful action, as described by Confucian scholars.

The *Mirror Game* is one of a number of improv exercises that teaches interpersonal mindfulness. All improv exercises have an intention, or hook, which focuses one's attention on the present moment. This intention can be physical, emotional, or verbal. For example, the game of *First Letter, Last Letter* (see Appendix) creates a rule that participants can only construct dialogue utilizing the last letter uttered by their partner in the scene. So, if my partner starts a scene with the statement, *I just won the lottery*, I would have to begin my response with a word



that starts with y, like so: *You should buy me that private island I always wanted.* The dialogue would thusly go back and forth, but must always start with the last letter of the previous sentence. With an ensemble, if a mistake is made, the offending improviser may be swapped out and replaced by another improviser who will fix the statement to meet the rule and advance the scene – always in a good-natured and entertaining way.

This game necessitates active listening, whereby individuals direct full attention towards listening and understanding the content as well as the emotion of what is presented to them (Rogers & Farson, 1987). As we often listen in a distracted manner or only to the point of interruption or response, playing *First Letter, Last Letter* requires individuals to listen to the entire sentence prior to responding. In a playful manner, it indirectly teaches individuals to fully listen with an ear towards understanding, a skill that will improve with continued practice. As individuals become stronger active listeners, they are more likely to make others feel understood, validated, and cared for (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Leonard and Yorton (2015) even describe active listening as a form of mindfulness: “It is a skill that enables you to turn off the judgment part of your brain and allows you to interact with individuals and groups in a seamless way” (p. 198).

Beyond individual games, the nature of improv itself may cultivate mindful states. A literature review conducted by Ratten and Hodge (2016) suggests that improv training interventions may improve workplace interpersonal skills because they teach individuals how to be present. As the practice of improv relies on spontaneous creation, improvisers must learn to let go and be present in order to engage in a scene. As improv training generally consists of series of unrelated scenes and games, improvisers are taught to stay in the moment of the game, as it is fleeting (Crossan, 1998). Both the good and bad are short-lived, as a new game will start

momentarily that requires one's full attention. Dwelling on previous scenes or attempting to plan out the future direction of a scene will generally derail a performance. According to Halpern and others (1994),

If a player is planning ahead and thinking about the direction he wants the action to go to, then he isn't paying attention to what is going on in the moment. Unfortunately for him and his fellow actors, what is going on in the moment is the scene! (p. 71)

Facilitators of improv also help to cultivate mindfulness, as each improv class and workshop is led by a trained improviser who gently coaches and guides students back to non-judgmental presence when distractions occur. Like a bell in a mindfulness meditation class, improv instructors re-direct students back to their partner(s) and the intention, or attentional anchor, of the exercise.

Thus, improv trains individuals to remain present and attuned to their partners. In doing so, it can serve as a vehicle to practice interpersonal mindfulness, fostering interpersonal well-being and positive relationships in the process. However, presence and mindfulness is merely a first step in generating both successful improv and positive relationships. While improvisers must be present to perform, the mindful mindset is merely the environment needed to successfully do so. For improv to truly occur, it requires spontaneous creation, and co-creation at that. An interpersonal mindful state sets the space needed for improvisers to house and nurture their collective creations. However, it is the creation that builds the improv context and content. And, this action of co-creation further promotes positive relationships.

### **The Ensemble: Spontaneous Co-creation and Perspective Taking**

**Improv and co-creation.** As a spontaneous, playful and theatrical performance, improv is created collaboratively between the performers and the audience in a particular moment, which

is why a state of interpersonal mindfulness is essential. As Halpern and others (1994) state, “A good improviser shows us the *now*” (p. 88). Each improv performance is unique: it has never occurred before and will never occur again. Improvisers make their own choices to create complex characters, relationships, and environments that are completely made up on the spot. However, although improvisers may make initial choices, those can change in the spur of the moment based on someone else’s will. Improvisers can be endowed with characters, relationships, or environments based on audience suggestions or fellow performers’ ideas. Going with the flow of the performance, improvisers need to adapt to embody these other-imposed choices with authenticity and commitment. Improvisers don’t just create; they co-create.

This co-creation occurs with both the audience and fellow performers. As audience members provide suggestions to frame games or entire shows, improvisers create narrative based on the audience’s original ideas. They will also pay close attention to the audience throughout the performance, reading the room and applying the immediate feedback from laughter, engagement, or the lack thereof to make future choices and actions (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Halpern et al., 1994). With their fellow performers, improvisers partner with each other to create scenes. Often, this requires abandoning one’s own idea to move forward with another’s, reacting and adding on to wherever a partner takes the scene. In doing so, improvisers learn to understand others’ points of view and accept others’ ideas in a non-judgmental way. They learn that their focus needs to be on others, not only themselves, as others’ ideas have just as much merit as their own. This skill, known as perspective taking, can be instrumental in building positive relationships due to its ability to breed trust, intimacy, and connection (Williams, 2012).

**Perspective taking and its relational benefits.** In the simplest terms, perspective taking is placing oneself in another’s shoes to imagine their point of view, thoughts, and/or feelings in a

particular situation. There are three types of perspective taking: affective, cognitive, and appraisal-related. Affective perspective taking involves imagining another's feelings, whereas cognitive perspective taking considers others' thoughts and motivations. Appraisal-related perspective taking, on the other hand, reflects on how an action or item might help or harm an individual's well-being or goal attainment (Williams, 2012). Perspective taking can also take active or passive forms. Active perspective taking is goal-directed and requires the intentional investment of resources, including attention, from the person aiming to understand another's perspective (Parker, Atkins, & Axtell, 2008). Regardless of the form of perspective taking, understanding others' motivations and viewpoints necessitates and brings forth attention, open-mindedness, and compassionate action (Williams, 2012). Perspective taking also generates a self-other overlap, as individuals start seeing themselves more in the other person and vice versa (Galinsky, Ku, & Wang, 2005).

As perspective taking creates a stronger interpersonal understanding through increased awareness of others' motivations and needs, it is associated with wide-ranging relational benefits (Williams, 2012). A number of empirically-based studies link perspective taking with various interpersonal well-being outcomes, including decreased stereotyping, increased listening comprehension, tailored communication styles, social coordination, conflict resolution, and empathic concern (Galinsky & Schweitzer, 2016; Williams, 2012; Parker et al., 2008; Galinsky et al., 2005). Essentially, these studies suggest that perspective taking leads to stronger social bonds and compassionate behavior. Often, this behavior is proactively applied and adjusted based on others' perceived needs and viewpoints (Williams, 2012). Perspective taking may also link with long-term interpersonal well-being benefits. Williams (2012) contends that appraisal-related perspective taking corresponded to increased interpersonal understanding and fair

behavior 18 months after initial measurement took place. Based on the research of Parker and others (2008), moderators of these correlated effects include a collaborative environment and a focus on others rather than the self.

Perspective taking may be pivotal in an interdependent workplace environment, which requires regular give and take between employees and attunement towards the needs of clients. Given that varied employees have differing needs and motivations, conflict can occur if these viewpoints are misunderstood, underappreciated, or unmet. In the workplace, specifically, research suggests that perspective taking relates to interpersonal and organizational well-being. Perspective taking may facilitate interaction, cooperation, trust, and reciprocity amongst diverse individuals. It thereby links with employee creativity and innovation, as empathy and compassion towards others' perspectives can unlock creative potential through the sharing and creation of new ideas (Grant & Berry, 2011). Compassion at work also appears to have cumulative effects and correlates to both enhanced positive emotions and organizational commitment (Lilius et al., 2008).

Additionally, self-reports of perspective taking seem to connect with employee performance (Parker & Axtell, 2001). One study that encouraged an experimental group to take the perspective of their partner in decision-making activities within a role-play measured higher performance for this group in comparison to a control group who did not receive similar instructions (Hoever, Van Knippenberg, van Ginkel, & Barkema, 2012) Given that perspective taking derives benefit at an individual level, it naturally follows that it would also provide meaningful impact at an organizational level. Further research associates perspective taking with positive business outcomes. Three studies looking at perspective taking in negotiations found that individuals rated higher on perspective taking were more successful in making deals. Similar

results were not captured for those rated highly in empathy alone. Results of this study indicate that perspective taking, more so than empathy, may help to uncover unforeseen potential win-win scenarios in interpersonal negotiations and provide better access to resources in bargaining (Galinsky, Maddux, Gilin, & White, 2008). Thus, perspective taking in the workplace is not only an important skill to nurture in order to build trust and collaborative partnerships, it can also be essential to completing tasks and driving business outcomes. Parker and Axtell (2001) recommend creating opportunities for interaction between employees in order to develop more personal relationships that will enhance perspective taking skills.

While perspective taking may have a slew of benefits in the workplace and beyond, it also has potential risks. As perspective taking creates self-other overlap, individuals may erroneously insert their own perspectives, biases, and stereotypes towards another rather than expanding their own point of view. Additionally, perspective taking could result in an individual being ostracized by others in their social circle, if they take on the perspective of someone who is viewed negatively by their group. Perspective taking may also result in a decision stalemate, if both parties take the other's perspective (Galinsky et al., 2005). Furthermore, perspective taking can be limiting in competitive environments, if tailored behavior is perceived as unequal or unfair by others (Williams, 2012). While these potential risks don't outweigh the potential beneficial impacts of perspective taking, they are important to consider. Therefore, as individuals gain skills in perspective taking, it is imperative that they learn to apply those skills in the right context.

Perspective taking is such an important skill because it reduces our automatic assumptions and expands our views. As humans, we are likely to make judgments based on previous experiences rather than an assessment of all the relevant data. We tend to hone in on

evidence and data that supports, rather than challenges, our existing expectations. This phenomenon, known as the confirmation bias, means that we are prone to validating assumptions rather than questioning them (Kahneman, 2011). By doing so, we strengthen our existing mental shortcuts and make the connections in our brain more automatic. These automatic assumptions are frequently aimed towards making quick judgments about other people. However, by creating a sense of mutual understanding through perspective taking, we may be able to find commonality through shared values and express care for others. This is a first step to re-shaping our beliefs and expanding our groups to include those who we may have previously regarded as different from ourselves (Bloom, 2013).

One of the most effective tools to diminish innate biases towards strangers may be to find commonality with those who are different through personal stories. As emotional beings, we tend to be more sensitive to individuals than to statistics or facts (Bloom, 2014; Haidt, 2012). By imagining a specific person, we are able to understand their reality in more concrete terms by putting ourselves in their shoes, which can reduce fear and enhance compassion through newfound commonality. Narrative and “empathic prods” (Bloom, 2013, p. 214), or situational framing to take a victim’s perspective, are thus effective methods to promote perspective taking skills in order to build connections and enhance relationships. As a mechanism that cues empathic prods and co-creates narrative, improv may effectively induce and train perspective taking behaviors. Improv training can help individuals overcome confirmation bias and cognitive shortcuts by exposing them to new ideas and changing their perceptions of existing ideas (Corsun, Young, McManus, & Erdem, 2006).

**Improv and perspective taking.** Spolin (1999) believed that the goal of theatrical improvisation is to “free each person to feel his or her own true nature, out of which a felt,

experienced, actual love of neighbor will appear” (p. xi). She essentially insinuates that improv cultivates perspective taking and empathy, and scientific studies support this assertion. For instance, research on children’s play suggests that high quality pretend play, such as role-playing, facilitates perspective taking because it forces children to put themselves in others’ shoes (Bergen, 2002). Studies that have utilized improv activities in traditional classrooms have also documented links between improv and perspective taking. One experiment that embedded interactive, improvisational drama into an undergraduate management curriculum captured qualitative data that indicated that the exercises expanded participants’ perspectives by creating an openness to diverse viewpoints (Boggs et al., 2007). Likewise, an improv elective for medical students taught students to be more appreciative of others’ thoughts and to better utilize active listening techniques (Hoffman et al., 2008).

Active listening, or careful and intentional listening to understand what is being communicated with both words and feelings, conveys to the person speaking “that we are seeing things from his point of view” (Rogers & Farsen, 1987, p. 3). According to Leonard & Yorton (2015), “when you improvise, you are putting your best listening into practice; you are actively engaged in empathy” (p. 181). Furthermore, improv, as a form of collaborative play, also generates novelty, spontaneity, and unexpected surprises in a joyful and fun way between performers and the audience. In doing so, it becomes a “balancing of oneness and otherness” (Luna & Renninger, 2015, p. 178). Ultimately, improv enhances and trains perspective taking in several key ways. Improvisers learn to engage in perspective taking through the creation and embodiment of characters and by co-creating with others. Additionally, audience members, as co-creators themselves, may also learn to engage in perspective taking by contributing to, relating to, and making sense of the improv performance.



*Perspective taking through characters.* Improv, as a form of pretend play and spontaneous theater, encompasses narrative developed on the spot within the minds of the performers. As such, the improvisers invent the characters that they play rather than taking direction from a script. In order for these characters to truly resonate with an audience and elicit laughter, they must be authentic. “Audience members laugh at things they can relate to, but they cannot empathize if performers are insincere” (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 23). Committing authentically to a character also requires understanding the character’s thoughts, motivations, feelings, and goals. Essentially, it involves cognitive, affective, and appraisal-related perspective taking. While portraying characters, improvisers learn to react honestly and authentically, developing relatable personas, situations, and relationships. This can sometimes result in an improviser broadening their perspectives or seeing things in new ways. As the character is imagined by the improviser, it is always rooted partially in the performer’s identity and experiences. This self-other overlap may create empathic connections towards those similar and different to us. In one study, inclusion of improvisational theater exercises in a journalism curriculum, where journalism students portrayed news subjects, helped to create a stronger sense of empathy for victims interviewed during traumatic events (Howard & Ferrier, 2009). Furthermore, according to Brown (2012), who conducted research on the use of improvisational role-play with law students,

Simply by portraying a character whose positions differ from the student's own, and by articulating the character's reasons with as much conviction as the student can muster, the process of humanizing can occur...in order to play a role at all, the student must take the character’s perspective. (p. 216)

One of the most common ways to teach new improvisers how to embody diverse characters and learn perspective taking skills is through exercises focused on understanding status. Johnstone (1979/2012) believes that every action we take, through words, sounds, movements, tones, and posture, has an underlying motive that is related to a particular status. He states, “we are all giving status signals, exchanging subliminal challenges all the time” (p. 61). Many improv exercises focus on uncovering and playing with status, or the differing power struggles that emerge between people in varied contexts. Whether individuals are submissive, aggressive, or more subtly giving or taking control in a situation, power exchanges frequently occur in relationships. Status, or how one relates to the power or control in a situation, is often the key to understanding relationships and motivations that progress a scene. To teach status, some exercises create rules where a particular person cannot initiate dialogue, but can only respond when spoken to. Other exercises restrict individuals’ movements or words, by requiring certain dialogue or motions. These types of games prompt varied statuses and justifications, requiring individuals to authentically commit to behaviors that may be unnatural to them. Justifying this behavior can lead to perspective taking through a greater understanding of why a character may behave in a certain way.

One example of a status-inducing improv game is *Sit, Stand, Lying Down* (“Improv Games,” 2016). In this game, three improvisers participate in a scene. At any point in the scene, one improviser must be standing, one must be sitting, and one must be lying down. As one improviser moves, others must move as needed to meet the rule of the game and then justify their postures. These postures often convey status, as someone standing while two other performers are not may be standing because s/he has authority over the other two, such as an athletic coach drilling players. Likewise, the opposite could be true, as a lower-status, standing waiter can be

serving patrons in a fancy restaurant. Sometimes, there could be nuance in the scene by creating surprises with status. For instance, the standing boss, a position that would generally indicate authority and high status, might be physically looking down upon misbehaving subordinates. Even though the boss might have authority through position, she may not have higher status in the relationship. If the employees are being willfully subordinate in the scene knowing that their boss won't do anything about their behavior, they will actually be portraying high status in the scene. To convey this status while sitting or lying down, the tone, language, and body posture of the performers will change. In order to truthfully convey the status, character, and relationship within the scene, improvisers need to take on the perspective of their characters: their thoughts, feelings and motivations.

Since it is so essential for an improviser to authentically embody a character's status in order to create a truthful scene, many basic improv exercises involve having participants practice portraying high and low status characters. As we tend to gravitate towards a natural status style, this can be uncomfortable for individuals to step into the shoes of someone very different than themselves. It can be obvious to an audience when an improviser is not fully committed to a character and faking it. Often, a facilitator may need to coach a performer to move or act in ways that are not automatic for themselves, and the slightest movements can open a new perspective. As Johnstone (1979/2012) explains in reference to coaching an improviser on low status characters,

I asked her to unfold and then tilt her head, and suddenly she was transformed - we wouldn't have recognized her. She became soft and yielding and really seemed to enjoy the feelings that flooded into her, and she acted with feeling and rapport for the first time.  
(p. 56)

With status exercises in a corporate workshop, it can often be very entertaining and insightful to have a leader play a low-status character, both to better take the perspective of front-line level employees or clients and also to create a state of vulnerability through humor. Not only does engaging in low-status play broaden the leader's perspectives, it may also make the leader more relatable and potentially more likeable to employees by showcasing his/her humanity and openness, thereby broadening their perspectives of the leader as well (Hoption et al., 2013).

*Perspective taking through co-creation.* As improv is ensemble based, improvisers don't only embody characters, they co-create characters, status, and relationships. This co-creation also generates perspective taking skills, as the act of co-creation relies on performers' abilities to be present towards others' ideas and accept them in a nonjudgmental manner, taking on these ideas as if they were their own. In short, co-creation requires ensemble members to see the world through others' perspectives. The first perspective that improvisers take is that of the audience, as they are in a constant feedback loop with the audience throughout the duration of the show. As audience members provide suggestions, improvisers are attuned towards what the audience may be interested in seeing, considering ways to entertain and delight the audience. As the show progresses, improvisers continue to focus attention on the audience's feedback through their emotional reactions, and aim to imagine what they are thinking or feeling in order to develop narrative that will prove enjoyable to their paying customers. Due to this immediate feedback loop, they can make immediate changes through the spontaneity of improv by remaining aware of the audience's perspectives (Leonard & Yorton, 2015).

Improvisers also co-create and learn perspective taking with their fellow performers. Once an audience member provides a suggestion, a scene generally starts with two performers immediately jumping onto the stage. Both of these improvisers may have their own idea in mind

for the scene. However, once one of the improvisers initiates the scene, the other's idea will likely be quashed. Rather than continuing to force their original idea, the fellow improviser needs to co-create this imposed idea in order to move the scene forward, regardless of how they feel about the idea (Halpern et al., 1994). I have personally jumped onto a scene with the aim to play a little kid, only to have to immediately change course because I am endowed as my fellow performer's girlfriend (and being a family friendly show, playing this person's girlfriend as a little kid would be nothing short of creepy).

For improvisation to work, Barrett (1998) argues that "players must develop a remarkable degree of empathic competence, a mutual orientation to one another's unfolding" (p. 613). To create quality improv, a constant give and take exists amongst the ensemble, including dialogue, ideas, and action. In order to successfully engage, improvisers must take the perspectives of their partner to anticipate what they might do while simultaneously shaping their own ideas, and flexing both based on what happens in the moment. This adjustment is possible because there are shared goals to succeed and entertain the audience. There's also belief in the competence of one's partners, attunement towards each other's behavior, and appreciation for the diverse perspectives that make up the group and contribute to the scene. By working actively to help fellow performers succeed, individual performers willingly lose a sense of control and generate compassion and understanding in the process (Crossan, 1998). By co-creating in the moment, improv forces quick action and decisions that require group work. It overrides automatic, judgmental behavior directed towards others and instead creates understanding and validation of others' ideas:

When performers truly commit to a scene, they take care of each other. Whenever someone makes what appears to be a mistake on stage, the others will immediately justify

it and weave it into the pattern of the entire work. More often than not, those 'mistakes' become valuable contributions to the piece. (Halpern et al., 1994, p. 38)

In order to cultivate and train perspective taking, introductory improv exercises often include group movement games to build synchrony, like the aforementioned *Mirror Game*. Due to the social contagion of emotion, these exercises can promote perspective taking because collective movement can lead to emotional mimicry that may increase empathy and change behaviors, emotional states, or beliefs (Shenk, 2014; Haidt, 2012). Synchronous behavior may promote compassionate behavior and increase levels of trust and connection, as participants are willing to be more altruistic towards their partner because the shared movements make them feel like they are on the same team (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2011; Wiltermuth & Heath, 2009). Coaching synchrony in playful activities may further promote positive emotional contagion, as play puts us in a good mood that enhances our emotions and makes us more likely to mirror others (Bhullar, 2012). Teaching status through games can also create laughter and build cooperative rather than competitive behaviors (Johnstone, 2012/1979). Since it may be difficult to take the perspectives of those with work styles that we perceive as different than our own (Williams, Parker, & Turner, 2007), playful, synchronous exercises unrelated to work tasks may therefore help to bridge commonality and create unity that generates perspective taking.

Beyond taking perspectives of fellow performers, spontaneous co-creation may also help to shift perspectives on particular situations. Laughter, particularly in awareness and appreciation of a shared truth, may help to remove the emotional charge from challenging situations. In doing so, it can generate awareness of needed changes and foster open-mindedness towards other perspectives (Leonard & Yorton, 2015). Furthermore, by teaching individuals to commit to each other in areas of uncertainty, they might be able to experience what it would be like to work in

similar situations. For instance, improv exercises have been used to translate what it would be like to successfully work in another culture in which an employee has limited exposure (Tint et al., 2015).

***Perspective taking in the audience.*** Improvisers are not the only individuals in a performance who experience perspective taking. The audience, as fellow co-creators and witnesses of this spontaneous performance, also engage in a state of perspective taking. As improv creates a fictional narrative, engaged audience members might find themselves immersed and transported into the story when viewing improv. When transported by narrative, the audience “sees the action of the story unfold around them” (Green, 2007, p. 100) which can lead to a state of flow and an emotional connection with the characters. By relating to characters through stories that feel true to life, audience members might see a shift in their own perspectives, experience more open-mindedness, or even change their beliefs. In some cases, the authenticity of a character could result in an audience member positioning the character as an exemplar of particular behaviors, either to personally model or avoid (Green, 2007). In witnessing the co-creation of others’ stories, audience members may also feel connected to others in realizing that they are not alone in their personal struggles (Fox, 2007).

While the ability to be transported by narrative varies based on an individual’s predisposition to engrossment with a story, most of the research on narrative transportation has been focused on engagement with literature (Green & Carpenter, 2011). Unlike literature readers or even other theater audiences, the improv audience does not consist of passive spectators. As active participants in the co-creation process, audience members may already be primed for engrossment. Improv may be uniquely capable to create narrative transportation as the audience is involved in developing the narrative, and the story is truly unfolding around them as it is

created real-time on the spot. Since the narrative often consists of short scenes, some related, others not, audience members may also find themselves filling in missed gaps and creating further backstory for characters to both make sense of the story and relate fictional situations that spur emotional reactions to their own lives.

In addition to narrative transportation, audience members may also cultivate perspective taking by making sense of the spontaneous performance that they see before their eyes. As audience members provide suggestions and initial ideas for scenes and games, they likely have an expectation as to what will happen based on their suggestion. Often their own ideas wind up being misaligned with the reality that is created in front of them, leading to a state of surprise by the choices made on stage. Since the suggestion was their own, audience members may search for meaning to make sense of the surprise choices. Searching for meaning in surprise can help us take a wider or narrower lens to help explain a situation. Since our minds encourage us to come up with explanations for surprises, a lack of automatic or pre-existing explanations may necessitate a perspective change. Furthermore, surprises in scenes and surprising laughter can even help to showcase contradictions within people, situations, and life as a whole (Luna & Renninger, 2015).

Thus, improv engages both the performers and the audience in a state of perspective taking through the embodiment of characters, the act of co-creation, and through narrative transportation and sense making of a spontaneous performance. Improv may further cultivate skills in perspective taking through exercises that enable students to practice embodying different statuses and accepting others' ideas. In doing so, improv may help individuals to gain interpersonal understanding and open-mindedness that can lead to changing beliefs, trust, collaboration, and innovation. In short, improv can help build and sustain positive relationships



by teaching individuals perspective taking skills through the act of co-creation. However, while co-creation may lead to positive relationships, certain types of co-creation may be more effective than others in cultivating them.

### **Yes, And: Heightening Offers as Active Constructive Responding**

**Revisiting yes, and.** While improv generates a foundation of mindfulness and perspective taking through spontaneous co-creation, not all types of co-creation will lead to successful improv. There are supportive and detrimental ways to co-create, and improv training teaches participants that successful improv arises from accelerating others' ideas by adhering to the aforementioned single rule of improv: *yes, and*. This cardinal rule of improv has been described as “affirming and building,” “exploring and heightening,” or “accepting what is offered and adding to it (regardless of what you may think of it)” (Leonard & Yorton, 2015, p. 85). For the sake of this paper, I will be defining the essence of this rule as *heightening offers*. The word offer is intentionally used. Even in the most basic improv trainings, improvisers are taught that everything that their partners provide on stage is to be taken as an offer, or gift, that should be appreciated and built upon. This is the core tenant of improv. It is drilled into every exercise and at all levels of training, from corporate beginners in a teambuilding session to seasoned professionals alike. In the words of Halpern and others (1994),

‘Yes &...’ is the most important rule in improvisation...whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small. (p. 46)

In some ways, heightening offers is more than a rule or even a code of conduct of improv. Through constant reinforcement and practice, it becomes a trained mindset. Developing

this mindset not only creates engaging improv, it also helps to cultivate positive relationships amongst the improvisers. By setting expectations that partners in a scene will always affirm and heighten each other's ideas, improv generates an unconditional state of agreement, support, and appreciation between individuals. As improv develops a space where participants' ideas are treated with enthusiastic acceptance, improvisers inherently create positive relationships by making each other feel validated, cared for, and understood (Gable & Gosnell, 2011).

In his article linking improv to well-being, Bermant (2013) suggests that the concept of heightening offers shares similarities with unconditional positive regard, a therapeutic approach designed to unconditionally accept a client in order to help them grow. He contends that this link exists due to the nonjudgmental acceptance that improvisers generate through their aforementioned state of interpersonal mindfulness. While I certainly see Bermant's connection, I believe that his argument only speaks to half of the idea behind heightening offers, or merely the *yes of yes, and*. While successful improv originates from accepting another performer's offer or idea, it is the act of building onto that idea that moves a scene forward. As Halpern and others (1994) state, "Active choices forward the scene. Passive choices keep it stagnant" (p. 85). Thus, as a tool to promote positive relationships, I believe that the improv principle of heightening others' offers is more closely associated with active constructive responding than unconditional positive regard.

**Active constructive responding.** Active constructive responding can be described as positively or enthusiastically responding to others' good news (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004). As a construct, it stems from the paradigm of capitalization, or "beneficially interpreting positive events" (Langston, 1994, p. 1112). Capitalization can be either self-generated or other-generated. Capitalization and active constructive responding differ from social support because

good news, rather than traumatic news, is the catalyst for a response. When capitalization occurs through others, the discloser of the event may experience a boost to positive affect beyond the feelings associated with the event itself (Langston, 1994). However, the impact on affect varies based on how the recipient responds to the news, and appears to most frequently occur if the response back to the discloser is considered to be positive and additive in nature.

In sharing positive news, individuals tend to respond in one of four ways: active constructive, passive constructive, active destructive, or passive destructive (Gable, Gonzaga, & Strachman, 2006). In active constructive responses, listeners enthusiastically build off the good news that is shared, asking further questions or generating enthusiastic statements. Passive constructive responders provide understated support that passively celebrates the news without fostering its continuation. On the destructive side, passive destructive responses generally ignore the news by moving onto a different subject. Active destructive responses actually demean the news, or turn positive news into a negative (see Table 1 for an example).

Table 1

*Typical Response Types to Shared Good News.*

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Imagine in the scenario below that an employee shared the news with a close colleague that she has been selected to head up a new project.

	<i>Constructive</i>	<i>Destructive</i>
<i>Active</i>	You've earned it with all of your hard work. What a great opportunity to showcase your leadership skills. What are you most excited about?	Sounds like a lot of pressure. You are probably going to have to work longer hours than you do now. How are you going to handle all that stress?
<i>Passive</i>	That's nice to hear.	I just found out that I was chosen to present at the conference.

Of the four response categories, research indicates that only active constructive responding to good news appears to predict relational well-being.

Studies measuring the perceived response to capitalization attempts (PRCA) find that both responders and disclosers are more likely to experience higher quality relationships when active constructive responding occurs. Active constructive responding appears to fuel intimacy, trust, satisfaction, conflict reduction, and playfulness/enjoyment of the relationship across a multitude of studies with couples, parents and children, and paired strangers (Gable & Reis, 2010; Reis et al., 2010; Gable et al., 2004). Additionally, receiving positive support for shared successes in both new and existing relationships can enhance the accomplishment, increasing interpersonal well-being, intrapersonal well-being, and positive affect in the process (Lambert et al., 2013; Gable & Gosnell, 2011). The act of sharing could broaden and build resources in the relationship, either by creating new ties in one's social support network or by strengthening existing social support (Frederickson, 2009).

One study that aimed to measure the relationship between active constructive responding and the perceived closeness and likeability of strangers compared the results of an experimental group to a control group. This control group interacted via a playful activity that did not promote active constructive behavior. In both groups, there was an average increase in self-reported liking of one's partner after the experiment. However, only the active constructive responding group linked to an elevated level of perceived closeness. This suggests that active constructive responsiveness may create an enhanced sense of communion or bonding beyond that which occurs solely with play (Reis et al., 2010). The genuineness of the response appears to moderate the perceived bonding and the positive emotions that result therein (Conoley, Vasquez, Bello, Oromendia, & Jeske, 2015; Lambert et al., 2013; Reis et al., 2010).

Furthermore, perceived positive responsiveness to good news may have longer term personal and interpersonal well-being effects. In one study, higher assessments of a partner's

perceived active constructive responsiveness were more strongly correlated to individual well-being for male participants and self-reported relationship quality for female participants over a four month period (Donato, Pagani, Parise, Bertoni, & Iafate, 2014). Additionally, a study that measured relationship well-being over a two month period suggests that positive responsiveness to good news is more highly correlated to relational well-being than supportive responses to negative news (Gable et al., 2006). However, it is important to note that increased relationship quality is reported more by women than men, when linked with active constructive responding (Pagani, Donato, & Iafate, 2013). As well, these well-being effects may diminish over a one-year period (Logan & Cobb, 2013). Since these results are correlational rather than causal, though, it is possible that a change in relationship satisfaction could have resulted in lessened sharing or perceptions of one's partner, rather than the other way around. As well, the decrease in relationship satisfaction appears to be less drastic when partners are perceived as active constructive responders to good news even if they are perceived as less supportive in times of crisis. Capitalization of good news may thus serve as a buffer to the effects of negative news, as received support in good times may encourage sharing by reinforcing that a partner may be supportive in bad times as well (Logan & Cobb, 2013).

Well-being effects also extend not just to the discloser of good news, but to the responder as well. A study looking specifically at recipients of good news found that active constructive responders experienced greater positive affect over a four-week period on days that they capitalized on others' good news in comparison to days where they did not (Conoley et al., 2015). This may be because it is not just the act of sharing that impacts relational well-being. The mutuality and interconnection formed from the positive responses may be what makes active constructive responding such a powerful tool in relationships (Gable & Reis, 2010). Reis and

others (2010) hypothesize that active constructive responses create two conditions that promote positive relationships: the responses both validate the perception that the news is important and valued and they build trust and prosocial behaviors between partners. In doing so, the discloser likely feels validated and understood, and both parties feel cared for through the act of sharing personal information in a vulnerable way (Gable & Gosnell, 2011; Gable et al., 2006).

Additionally, active constructive responding appears to create upward spirals of positive behavior and positive emotions (Sekerka et al., 2011). If we perceive that an individual is likely to respond in an active constructive manner, we will be more likely to seek out this person to share more frequent and in depth positive news in the future. This in turn would likely fuel further active constructive responses (Gable et al., 2006). Moreover, the more good news that is shared and positively responded to, the greater the correlated well-being effects (Gable & Reis, 2010; Gable et al., 2004). As we are influenced by past experiences, our future choices to share may depend on past responses from others. Based on those previous responses, we shape the future nature of our relationships by intentionally choosing what and what not to disclose.

Even a single response can have a lasting impact on the direction of a relationship (Gable & Reis, 2010). For example, if you were to share a piece of good news with a close co-worker that was dismissed or demeaned, you would be much less likely to share similar information in the future. By censoring personal, positive news, we can reduce a relationship's closeness or even generate a somewhat hostile relationship in extreme circumstances (Gable & Reis, 2010). In the workplace, if this occurs with a colleague, this could lead to working around this person and limiting shared information. Not only does this have negative impacts on the relationship, it could also lead to detrimental outcomes to the company through inefficiency and lost productivity.

According to Gable and Reis (2010), we share news with others approximately 70 to 80 percent of the time. Imagine the potential, positive implications on relationships, if recipients' default response to good news was more commonly active constructive. With the linked interpersonal well-being effects, it clearly appears that active constructive responding can be an effective relationship tool at work. With that being said, it is important to note that overall research on capitalization of good news and active constructive responding tends to be more focused on close, intimate relationships. While this paper emphasizes positive relationships in the workplace, one study reminds us that only three percent of positive events are shared with coworkers or acquaintances (Gable & Reis, 2010).

However, while employees may not share positive events with acquaintances at work, they may choose to share with those who they consider to be more than co-workers, or friends at work. As well, perhaps it is less common to share good news with colleagues because the expectation is that the response will be apathetic at best or demeaning at worst. Since we are creatures of habit, if our experiences dictate that colleagues and acquaintances respond to our good news actively and constructively, we may be more likely to share. But, how can individuals learn to change their behavior to more frequently respond in this manner, if they do not already naturally do so? By teaching individuals to heighten each other's ideas through the rule of *yes, and*, improv essentially trains individuals to become active constructive responders when working with others.

**Improv and active constructive responding.** Similar to the potential responses to sharing good news, Johnstone (1979/2012) suggests that improvisers can respond in one of four ways when receiving an offer: a statement, emotion, or movement from their partner in a scene. They can overcommit, passively accept the offer, block the offer, or reject the offer. Improvisers who

overcommit enthusiastically accept and add on to the offer, similar to active constructive responding to good news. Passive acceptors merely accept the offer, but do not move the scene forward in any way. In fact, the scene often stalls with passive acceptance. Beyond merely stalling a scene, destructive responses can actually derail it. Individuals who block offers passively avoid what was stated and move on to another idea, often the one that was originally in their head rather than the one their partner created. This resonates with the passive destructive response style. The most destructive response is rejection, where an improviser completely rejects the offer provided by their partner by invalidating it as a reality. Similar to active destructive responding, this can feel demeaning and conveys that an individual's idea was worthless (see Table 2 for an example).

Table 2

*Typical Response Types to Improv Offers Framed in Capitalization Response Types*

In the improv example below, imagine that at the start of a scene an improviser states: "Look at the monkey!"

	<i>Constructive</i>	<i>Destructive</i>
<i>Active</i>	<i>Overcommit (aka Heighten):</i> That's the monkey that stole my wallet last week!	<i>Reject:</i> That's not a monkey. It's a human baby.
<i>Passive</i>	<i>Accept:</i> He's cute.	<i>Block:</i> You still owe me \$10 for concert tickets.

\*This table aligns common response types in an improv exercise with the common response types for sharing good news.

When improv is successfully conducted, each scene is essentially a continuous back and forth of performers giving and receiving positive gifts, or offers. A rejected (active destructive) or blocked (passive destructive) offer signifies to the initiating improviser that their offer, or gift, is a terrible one that should be discarded. In the example above, the improviser who negates the monkey by calling it a human baby outwardly expresses that the initial idea was wrong. While



the blocked offer is not as hostile, it still changes the focus of the scene to a different topic: owed money. In both cases, the responding improviser essentially trashes the offer they were given, breaking the cycle of give and take. Rather than adding on to the gift they were given and handing it back, they force a change in the direction of the scene, ceasing the continued creation of the initial reality and diminishing the contributions of their partner. Essentially, they turn a positive into a negative. A passive acceptance (passive constructive) of the offer takes the gift without actually providing anything back in return. By stating that the monkey is cute in the example above, the responding improviser stalls the scene by not heightening their partner's idea. The gift is positively received, but nothing is added to it. The offer and scene rests in a stalled state, waiting for more. This can put the work back on the initiating improviser to add more to the scene to make it more interesting or take it further, and may make that improviser feel that they are doing all the heavy lifting to create the scene.

In the overcommitting example (active constructive), the responding improviser validates the gift of the monkey as a good idea and adds further detail to support its existence: in this case, expressing that the monkey stole a wallet. In doing so, they give a positive gift back to their partner that strengthens the initial offer and enables continued co-creation. They've given their partner something they can utilize within the established reality, rather than forcing them to withdraw this reality and adapt to a new one (as is the case with rejected and blocked, or destructive offers), or do all the work on their own to continue to build the reality and make the scene interesting (which is the case with accepted, or passive offers). Thus, of the four potential response types to an improv offer, only one leads to effective improv and successful scenes: overcommitment or heightening offers (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Halpern et al., 1994,

Johnstone, 2012/1979). Due to this response type's core features of enthusiastic acceptance of and additions to existing positive offers, I believe it equates to active constructive responding.

Certainly, while improv trains individuals to have a default active constructive response to their scene partners, it can be argued that there is one key difference between improv and traditional active constructive responding. In improv, not all offers provided in an exercise or scene can be considered good news. In fact, sometimes improvisers present conflict that then needs to be heightened for the sake of an enjoyable scene. Although conflict may be interpreted as bad news within traditional conversations, I believe that any offer in improv can be regarded as good news. Since any emotional, behavioral, or verbal offer is regarded as a gift, it can be viewed positively. Even if the content is not positive, the intention and context is. As well, since what is provided is imaginative and playful, negative scenarios in improv are not the same as negative news in real life. An improviser does not share conflict or negative news with a partner in order to solicit comfort. Rather, it is introduced for it to be accepted and built on, or heightened.

For instance, in the example above, the overcommitted, active constructive response might not seem like good news because the improviser adds on to the idea created by her partner - that there's a monkey in this scene - by introducing what could be perceived as a negative statement: said monkey previously stole the improviser's wallet. However, even though the statement's content may be negative, the subtext is positive because the improviser is actually validating the reality that her partner created. Her statement conveys that she affirms that the monkey exists in this scene, and further adds on to her partner's idea, implying that it was a good one. She essentially heightens the offer by insinuating: *yes, the monkey is real; it's a great idea. And, it's a monkey with whom I have a prior relationship.* Because the initial offer was accepted as a gift

and responded to in an active constructive manner, the improvisers are able to explore a relationship with the monkey that did not exist with only the initial statement of “Look at the monkey!” By adding detail and richness, the responding improviser provides an opportunity for her partner to further build on the co-created reality in a way that makes the scene more interesting. Her partner, as a competent improviser, would further heighten the reality, creating a cycle of enthusiastic affirmation and addition, or active constructive responding. Therefore, even negative statements are treated as gifts in improv and the expectation is that they will be responded to in an active and constructive manner.

Just as individuals build trust and want to engage more frequently with colleagues who provide active constructive responses to good news, improvisers want to partner and create with those who heighten their offers. When ideas are validated and advanced by others, improvisers build trust that encourages vulnerability and positive risk-taking. They feel comfortable to make bolder choices in scenes, because they know their partner will be there to support them and further enhance the shared reality that they collaboratively co-create. On the other hand, improvisers don't want to perform with those who block or reject offers, similar to employees who might avoid coworkers who diminish or ignore shared good news. In beginning improv, this is quite common, as newcomers to improv can erroneously believe that the aim of improv is for them to shine or be funny rather than work as an ensemble. When teaching classes like these, I have noticed a tendency for some individuals to avoid voluntarily joining scenes or even signing up for future classes with an individual who chronically behaves in this manner because they feel unsupported. Beyond destructive responses, even those who provide passive commitment might be avoided because the work of the scene is hoisted back upon the initiating improviser. As highlighted earlier, this limits the potential for a successful scene because of stalled progress.

Given how essential heightening offers is to advancing scenes and creating enjoyable improv, every improv exercise includes this lesson as a foundation. From the first improv exercise, facilitators begin teaching performers to respond to each other in an active and constructive manner, always heightening the offer that is provided to them.

One of the most common introductory exercises to teach improvisers, whether in a corporate workshop or in an improv class, is the game of *Yes, And* (Leonard & Yorton, 2015). In this exercise, participants are either paired up or grouped in a circle. The first person provides a statement that the person next to them needs to build upon, by starting their follow up statement with a *yes, and* like so:

*Person 1:* It's a beautiful day outside!

*Person 2:* Yes, and we should go to the pool.

To highlight the difference between accepting and negating an offer, it is common while doing this exercise to also have participants take turns responding with *yes, but* as the entry point, rather than *yes, and*:

*Person 1:* It's a beautiful day outside!

*Person 2:* Yes, but it won't last.

Conducting the exercise in this manner with intentional de-briefing questions about the varied approaches allows participants to hear and feel the difference between heightening and diminishing others' offers. I frequently utilize this exercise in leadership development and other communication workshops. It is amazing the number of aha moments that this simple concept can trigger, potentially because it is so simply profound. Everyone can relate to it because we've all been in circumstances where our ideas were squashed or accelerated by others at work, and we've in turn done the same. In follow-up survey assessments for some of these workshops, this

concept is commonly noted as one of the biggest takeaways. It also seems like even a single experience with this exercise can cause behavioral change, based on follow up conversations I have with participants weeks and months later.

Another commonly utilized improv exercise that promotes active constructive responding behavior by teaching individuals to heighten each other's offers is *Word at a Time Story* ("Improv Games," 2016; Leonard & Yorton, 2015). In this game, participants collectively tell a story by going around in a circle, with each participant only contributing one word at a time. The participants need to embody the concept of heightening offers by co-creating with their fellow performers, adding on to the reality that was created by others prior to their turn. This exercise requires interpersonal mindfulness and perspective taking as well, in order to be successful. If a group member is not present or focuses on pushing their own agenda for the story, the story can become disjointed or stuck. Additionally, this exercise highlights how even the smallest contributions can have a substantial impact on the outcome. A strategically placed *and* in a story could wind up providing more value than more complex words.

Via this and all other improv exercises that focus on heightening offers, the ensemble ultimately creates something much richer collectively than what would have been created individually. As well, this concept doesn't just create entertaining and interesting content. Over the course of a workshop, the group traditionally develops a more cohesive and energized environment namely by regularly exercising the practice of heightening offers. Over time and with enough consistent practice, this behavior of heightening offers, and the active constructive responding therein, can become more automatic.

Thus, through training in improv exercises, individuals learn to hone the skill of active constructive responding by heightening others' offers. Learning this skill also relies on the

foundations of interpersonal mindfulness and perspective taking cultivated by practicing and performing improv. In order to actively constructively respond, individuals must first learn to be presently attuned towards their partners and open to others ideas to effectively co-create. Improv workshops or trainings provide a constant reinforcement of these skills in a playful, energetic, and enjoyable environment, encouraging individuals to practice responding in an active and constructive way when offers or ideas are shared with them. Given the research indicating the beneficial interpersonal outcomes associated with this approach, improv training at work may help to promote positive relationships in the workplace. Via the interconnection and support created in the improv environment, individuals may feel closer to each other through the shared feelings of being cared for, validated, and understood (Gable & Gosnell, 2011). By engaging in improv activities with each other in a workshop, colleagues may become stronger listeners, communicators, and collaborative partners. Not only will such behaviors enhance existing relationships at work, they may even generate new ones, leading to organizational flourishing.

### **Conclusion**

*"Before the Cambodia workshop I felt that 'because I'm the boss, you need to listen to me' and 'I am fully experienced, you should do it this way'. After the workshop I feel this must be changed –*

*let it go, follow the flow, recognize others, build relationships." - Fadli Usman, Support*

*Manager, World Vision Philippines Haiyan Response (Tint et al., 2015, p. 89)*

### **Concluding Thoughts and Limitations**

Throughout this paper, I have argued that improv provides more value than a quick, entertaining, and enjoyable break from the doldrums of office life. Based on the highlighted research, improv clearly correlates a number of positive, organizational benefits, including increasing creativity, collaboration, and communication amongst employees. The

quote above from Tint and others' (2015) work in utilizing applied improv with humanitarian aid workers is a testament to that. While research has been conducted to highlight the benefits of improv, the literature has been lacking in identifying the mechanisms that drive these beneficial results. Within this paper, I have argued that improv's positive outcomes in organizations are related to the art form's ability to promote and train skills that lead to building and sustaining positive, workplace relationships. Specifically, I have maintained that improv exercises train individuals in interpersonal mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding through the core improv principles of presence, co-creation, and heightening others' offers. Through improv training, I contend that individuals learn in a playful and humorous way to be present to each other, and to non-judgmentally co-create by accepting and building on others' ideas. Through this newfound knowledge, they can adapt and assimilate behaviors that breed trust, intimacy, connection, understanding, and collaboration. In doing so, they are able to build and sustain positive relationships in the workplace, thereby driving positive business outcomes.

While this theory is grounded in research, there is still much work that needs to be done to validate its legitimacy. The hypotheses that I have proposed require further study and scrutiny, particular with empirical testing. As interest in improv continues to grow, I recommend that researchers explore both the positive business outcomes that are related to improv, and the mediators of those outcomes. In particular, it would be valuable to measure improv's ability to generate positive relationships as a mechanism to drive business results in flourishing organizations. In studying the connection between improv and positive relationships specifically, it may be beneficial to design experiments that aim to test the links between improv training and the constructs of mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding. While these are the three constructs that I have proposed within this paper, there are also likely other

links between improv and interpersonal and/or organizational well-being concepts that warrant further exploration.

Additionally, while interpersonal mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding all associate with relational well-being, there can certainly be *too much of a good thing*. In exploring these concepts, I caution improv practitioners and students to calibrate the promotion of these skills to ensure that they are applied in the right way within appropriate situational contexts. For instance, in relationships, particularly in the workplace, individuals may sometimes need to eschew mindfulness in order to look towards the past or future in order to address potential risks. As well, perspective taking or active constructive responding of the wrong people or ideas can result in detrimental outcomes for ourselves and others. Moreover, engaging in improv activities at work can come at the cost of productivity, if the activities become addictive or individuals engage in play as a means to avoid tasks. It is essential that those promoting improv exercises at work ensure that there is a business purpose associated with the activities and that the fun-filled play contributes to organizational well-being rather than coming at its expense.

Furthermore, in order for improv to be beneficial to an organization and the employees therein, certain environmental factors may be necessary. Crossan and Sorrenti (2002) propose a recommended framework for organizations to derive benefit from improv activities that includes an existing staff with technical aptitude and strong intuitive insight, positive group dynamics, a team state of interpersonal awareness and understanding, and an organizational culture that promotes individual and collective motivation. Further research also recommends an environment of transparent communication and a culture of experimentation, as cultures that are closed off may punish improvisational behaviors (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Essentially, an



organization interested in utilizing improv needs to promote psychological safety, or an environment of trust where employees feel encouraged to take risks and grow without fear of retribution (Edmondson, 1999). As Spolin (1999) states, “Before we can play, we must be free to do so” (p. 6). Creating a psychologically safe environment that is primed for improv also requires buy-in and role modeling from leadership, who establishes good intentions, authenticity, vulnerability, purpose, and the rules of engagement around humor (Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Cooper & Sosik, 2002).

Correspondingly, it is important for leaders and improv practitioners to recognize that there may be organizational contexts where improv is not best suited for application. As a tool to promote optimal functioning in organizations, improv interventions may be more appropriate for high performing organizations with empowered employees instead of dysfunctional organizations steeped in competitive power struggles (Kamoche, Pina e Cunha, & Vieira da Cunha, 2003). Trying to introduce improv into a dysfunctional organization may come across as forced fun. As improv’s success relies on commitment and acceptance from its participants, mandated play can appear disingenuous and may result in disengagement or hostility. Thus, with an end-goal of increasing interpersonal and organizational well-being, improv may not be suited for all. Instead, it may be better applied when it is the right fit for specific individuals and teams (Schueller, 2014). When applied in the right context with the right group, empirical data suggests that improv interventions can help organizations thrive.

### **Recommendations for Application**

While this paper has highlighted the use of improv workshops and trainings, since they are currently the most common offering of improv in the corporate world, a one-time workshop is not enough to promote and sustain behavioral changes. From the late 1800s to modern times,

psychologists have argued that behavioral changes arise from the creation of new neural pathways that are formed through dedicated attention and habitual practice. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; James, 1892/1984). Anecdotally, this may be true with improv induced behavioral changes as well. Over a two-year period, Second City facilitators worked with the cast of a local opera house via improv workshops encompassing exercises similar to the ones that I have described in this paper. However, the second year's performers seemed much more cohesive as an ensemble than the first year's group, based on feedback from those involved with the theater and the performances. In discussing the differences between the two casts, the facilitators learned that the second cast warmed up with one of their learned improv activities prior to each performance, whereas; the first cast did not. This continued practice and ritualization of the improv activity appeared to further promote the positive effects of the workshop and lead to sustained behavioral changes that brought the cast closer together (A. Libera, personal communication, June 6, 2016).

Thus, in order for improv to truly cultivate skills that lead to sustained changes and stronger relationships longer-term, improv activities may be most beneficial when embedded in daily organizational life. For this reason, I encourage leaders and employees at all level to instill improv exercises into regular organizational activities that require connection and communication between individuals. Namely, I see an opportunity to make improv exercises a meaningfully fun part of regular team meetings and employee-manager check-ins, livening up and providing further utility for a common and often dreaded business practice. In doing so, individuals can hone their interpersonal skills and utilize existing interactions to create high quality connections that will further promote the interconnectedness, mutuality, and playfulness that can help them and their organizations flourish (Dutton, 2003). To aid with this initiative, I have included an Appendix (see Appendix) of five, short improv exercises that any individuals,

even without any previous improv background, can engage in with others at work. These exercises are intentionally selected to develop skills in interpersonal mindfulness, perspective taking, and active constructive responding.

By making improv a part of organizational culture, my hope is that employees will learn and exhibit behaviors that foster and strengthen positive relationships. Through the regular practice of improv exercises like these, employees may gain trust and build connection with their colleagues at all levels, enhancing their sense of interpersonal understanding, support, and cohesion in the process. In a sense, they may feel that they are a part of a greater ensemble: one where they can trust their colleagues to have their back and their colleagues can equally rely on them in order to meet shared goals. In an environment like that, employees might approach the workday not hoping to merely survive, but expecting to thrive.

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### Appendix: Take 5 Exercises

Meetings: sometimes they can feel like the bane of organizational existence. But do they have to be? What if meetings more commonly energized rather than drained their attendees? They can by introducing a bit of spontaneity and play to break through meeting monotony. At the start of your next meeting, rather than immediately diving into the agenda, *Take 5* instead.

The five short *Take 5* games below can be utilized in group meetings or one to one check-ins between managers and employees. They take less than five minutes to play, only require two people (can be played with more, if desired), and can help boost energy and connection at the onset of a meeting through spontaneity and fun. With open-minded and trusting participants, these games can create collaboration, communication, and creativity needed to generate productive and successful meetings. Regular usage of exercises like these in meetings may even help to build stronger interpersonal skills and working relationships over time. All that is needed to get started is a little curiosity and open-mindedness, a cultural and physical environment that is play-friendly, and a willingness to flex your already astute improvisation skills. Remember, “anyone can improvise. We all do it everyday - none of us goes through our day to day life with a script to tell us what to do” (Halpern, Close, & Johnson, 1994, p. 9).

#### **Yes, And**

Goal of the Game: To accept and add on to others’ ideas.

Rules of the Game: In pairs, the person with the shorter hair will initiate the game with a statement. If desired, this statement can be prompted with a suggestion or category (e.g. what is something you would do if you became CEO tomorrow). The other person will reply to the statement, starting their response with *Yes, and...* Participants will go back and forth like this a few times, and will then switch roles, ending the game after two to five minutes.

Game Example:

*Person 1:* If I became CEO tomorrow, I would throw a huge party for all employees.

*Person 2:* **Yes, and** you would fly us all to Maui!

*Person 1:* **Yes, and** we would take hula lessons.

Questions After the Game (either for personal reflection and/or group discussion, as desired):

How did it feel to have someone else add on to your ideas? What new ideas were created by accepting and adding on to someone else's ideas? How, if at all, was this experience different from your normal conversations at work?

**Mirror**

Goal of the Game: To notice and duplicate others' behaviors.

Rules of the Game: Sitting down in pairs across from each other, the person with the longer hair should take the lead and start making short movements, expressions, and/or postures. The person with the shorter hair will then aim to duplicate the exact motions, mirroring them back to their partner. This person should aim to notice and copy all the subtle nuances in movement. After a few minutes, the pair should switch – with the person with the shorter hair leading and the person with the longer hair mirroring movement. After both participants are comfortable mirroring each other's movements, they should then attempt to mirror each other's movements simultaneously without an identified leader, ending the game after a couple minute of practice.

Game Example:

*Person 1:* (moves her arms slowly above her head and raises her eyebrows)

*Person 2:* (copies the exact behavior, moving alongside person 1, as if she were a mirror)

Questions After the Game (either for personal reflection and/or group discussion, as desired):

What was easy and difficult about this game? What did you notice when mirroring your partner's



movements that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise? What happened when no one was the leader?

### **First Letter, Last Letter**

Goal of the Game: To actively listen to your partner's entire statement prior to responding.

Rules of the Game: In pairs, the person with the shorter hair will initiate the game with a statement. The second person will respond, and must use the last letter of their partner's statement as the first letter in their response. Dialogue will continue to go back and forth, and each person must initiate their response with the last letter of the previous person's statement. After a couple of rounds, pairs can start a new conversation, taking turns initiating dialogue. The game should end after about two to three minutes of practice.

### Game Example:

*Person 1:* It's a beautiful day today!

*Person 2:* **Y**es, the sun is shining.

*Person 1:* **G**ood thing we are at the beach.

### Questions After the Game (either for personal reflection and/or group discussion, as desired):

Was this easy or hard to do, and why? What, if any, differences did you notice in the conversation and your own reactions (emotions, thoughts, or behaviors)? Did you notice any moments of silence or pauses in your response? If so, how did you react to that? How often do you traditionally listen to the end of someone's sentence in regular conversation prior to formulating a response or actually responding?

### **New Choice**

Goal of the Game: To eliminate negating words from conversation.

Rules of the Game: This game can be played at the beginning of a meeting or throughout a meeting using normal conversation. During conversation, the following words are not allowed: but, however, unfortunately, don't. Anytime one of those words is uttered, anyone else in the room can state: *New choice*. The person who stated one of the banned words would then need to re-phrase their statement, removing the offending word, in order to continue the conversation.

Game Example:

*Person 1:* That sounds like a good idea, **but** our manager will never approve it.

*Person 2:* New Choice!

*Person 1:* That sounds like a good idea. Have you shared it with our manager?

Questions After the Game (either for personal reflection and/or group discussion, as desired):

How often did you have to make a *new choice*, and is this indicative of how often you normally use these words in conversation? Did the conversation change when those words were removed – if so, in what way? How easy or difficult was it to rephrase a sentence? As the game went on, did you find that you were catching yourself prior to stating the trigger words? What other, unexpected words may be a trigger for you or others you communicate with? What can you do, moving forward, to proactively change your word choice in conversation?

**Small Win, Big Win**

Goal of the Game: To intentionally recognize and heighten small accomplishments.

Rules of the Game: In pairs, the person with the longer hair will briefly share one of their small accomplishments from the past week. The person with the shorter hair will then celebrate that accomplishment like it is the greatest thing they have heard all day. As a cheerleader for the accomplishment, they will make it larger than life. Partners will then switch and the person with the shorter hair will share one of their own small accomplishments. The person with the longer

hair will then magnify their partner's accomplishment. The game can end after about three to four rounds, or whenever feels appropriate.

Game Example:

*Person 1:* I cleaned out my email inbox.

*Person 2:* You got your inbox ALL THE WAY DOWN TO 0! Not a single email is left! E-mails tremble in fear from your typing and organization skills, as you are the e-mail terminator!

Questions After the Game (either for personal reflection and/or group discussion, as desired):

How did it feel to hear someone else celebrate your small accomplishment in a big way? What did it feel like to recognize and magnify someone else's accomplishment? What's something you can do to more regularly acknowledge and celebrate your own and others' small wins on a daily or weekly basis?

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