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# Improvisation and Leadership Development: Understanding Improvisational Theater Arts as Leadership Skills

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The University of San Francisco

IMPROVISATION AND LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT:  
UNDERSTANDING IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER ARTS AS LEADERSHIP  
SKILLS

A Dissertation Presented  
to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
Department of Leadership Studies  
Organization and Leadership Program

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

by  
Jack Skalican  
San Francisco  
May 2018

## **ABSTRACT**

Leadership development is immersed in a philosophical struggle. Past efforts at developing leaders have missed a set of skills important to the role of today's leaders. Since Frederick Taylor invented the practice of scientific management, the study of management and leadership has largely focused on traits, practices, and behaviors that conform to this model such as planning, analysis, control, and monitoring. Missing in this focus, however, are less transactional leadership skills like intuition, improvisation, and creativity. As a result, organizations have begun drawing on improvisational theater skills as one answer to fill this leadership development gap.

This case study focuses on a single cohort group attending an introductory level of training at an improvisational theater. Based on observations and interviews, the relevance of the content is analyzed and compared to selected leadership theories and the pedagogy is evaluated for underlying philosophies and critical curriculum design components. By observing the student experience with this learning, the applicability of improv theater arts to personal and professional lives outside of the theater context is also explored.

Further research should focus on the efficacy of improvisational theater skills in a professional setting and on additional comparisons between the skills taught in an improv curriculum and leadership theories.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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May 8, 2018

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May 8, 2018



## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation and the work behind it is dedicated to my brother, Mark C. Skalican, who died just before its completion. He was already proud of my accomplishment, and my hope is that some of the content may help someone or inspire them to help someone else. He lived his life in that spirit, and I offer this work to the greater body of knowledge and learning in his honor.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

While my name appears on the cover of this work, there are so many people who contributed. First, I want to thank the owners of the theater who allowed me to conduct the research. Their faith and trust in me, and their deep commitment to their theater community, nurtured the learning for this research. I am deeply grateful for their support.

The University of San Francisco community obviously shouldered a large part of this effort. Words cannot express the gratitude and love I hold for my fellow students and the professors. Specifically, Dr. Patricia Mitchell and Dr. Doreen Jones were inspirational guides and mentors in my growth as a scholar. My fellow student, Drew Roberts, was a partner throughout the journey and a reminder that a gentle approach to life serves as its own model of leadership. Dr. Danfeng Koon opened my eyes to the demands of social justice and reminded me how much I love to read.

I also extend deep thanks to my dissertation committee, Dr. Jane Bleasdale and Dr. Desiree Zerquera for their insights and positive support. My committee chairperson, Dr. Genevieve Negron-Gonzalez, who also served as my academic advisor throughout my educational journey, did far more than guide me through the dissertation process. As an advisor, she reassured me that all would be well at exactly the times that I needed it. As a teacher, she re-opened my love for writing and I cannot thank her enough for her enthusiasm, intelligence, and passion to change the world.

Very special thanks are in order to my partner and spouse, Svetlana. She sacrificed time with me and endured my lack of focus for the long duration of this journey. Even more precious to me, she inspired me to enroll in the program in the first place, understanding how important it was for my personal journey even before I did.

For everyone else who contributed to my life and tolerated my shortcomings along this educational journey, thank you. I will carry your investment in me in my heart and use your belief in me as an inspiration to give back to others in every way possible.

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## **CHAPTER I: THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Leadership development is immersed in a philosophical struggle. Past efforts at developing leaders have missed a set of skills important to the role of today's leaders (Bennis, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Friedman, 2016; Hamel, 2007; Hemlin, Allwood, Martin, & Mumford, 2013). Since Frederick Taylor invented the practice of scientific management (Drucker, 2008), the study of management and leadership has largely focused on traits, practices, and behaviors that conform to this model such as planning, analysis, control, and monitoring. Missing in this focus, however, are less transactional leadership skills like intuition, improvisation, and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Among other approaches, organizations have begun drawing on improvisational theater skills as one answer to fill this leadership development gap (Barker, 2016; Checkley, 2015; Robson, Pitt, & Berthon, 2015; Yorton, 2015). There has been little research, though, on the details and efficacy of this content and its instructional methodology.

The industrial age generated a management philosophy that focused on efficiency, productivity, compliance, obedience, and planning (McGregor, 1960; Drucker, 1973; Wren, 2011), which effectively met the demands of the industrial age. The underlying philosophy and belief that places the manager in the role of controller and work designer is still the predominant view over a century later (Brennan, 2011; Locke, 1982; Wren, 2011). An example is the growth of project management in almost all organizations. This discipline calls for lists of tasks, timetables, and frequent meetings, intended to ensure thorough planning and execution (Project Management Institute, 2010). These efforts echo Taylor's belief: The role of effective

management is to eliminate chance and spontaneous events and to enforce a rigid plan that generates predictable results (Wren, 2011).

Scientific management ignores some aspects of leading and managing people and projects. Unexpected events happen, disruptive innovations show up suddenly, and results come in that don't match what was expected. Political figures emerge who change the regulatory landscape. The economy expands suddenly. Unexpected competitors emerge. Leadership in these conditions may require agility, spontaneity, and the ability to improvise. Responding to unexpected events and rapid changes may require something different than planning and analysis (Friedman, 2016; Palmer & Dunford, 2002; Sandelands, 2010).

Other leadership theories indicate that influence, relationships, and the ability to shape but not try to control employees and events will be more effective (Palmer & Dunford, 2002). Play, imagination, and creativity may be essential elements for leaders to develop to meet current and future leadership demands (Sandelands, 2010). This complexity calls for a broader range of leadership development approaches (Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman, 2000) and there is emerging interest in alternative leadership skills that are better matched to a twenty-first century context (Bennis, 1989/2015).

Organizations are responding to this in part by seeking training in improvisational skills and creativity for their leaders (Oelke, 2013). An example of a theater offering such corporate training is that being offered by The Second City, a well-known improvisational theater, who now service clients that include the energy industry and financial sector. The Second City is considered among the top improv theaters, known for producing highly successful comedians such as Tina Fey, Steve Carell, Mike Myers, and Dan Aykroyd. The theater's professional



development courses are labelled under familiar leadership development categories like change management, performance feedback, and team building (Second City, 2017).

Contemporary leaders (those in formal leadership roles and those exerting individual leadership without a formal leader title) need skills missing in traditional leadership development programs. One solution is to embrace artistic models as a way of expanding leadership competencies in those areas, and one specific area – improvisational theater – offers skills well-aligned with 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership needs. A clearer understanding of what is being taught in improvisational workshops, how it is being taught, how learners are applying this content and with what effect, the effectiveness of these skills when used outside of the theater context, and what motivates learners to pursue this content area can help connect improv theater to the leadership development arena.

More broadly, improvisational skills and mindsets can help counter-balance the strong forces of scientific management embedded in leadership and leadership development. Like the wizard in the Wizard of Oz, the curtain has been pulled back and leaders can no longer pretend to be able to turn levers and dials and control every outcome.

### **Background and Need for Study**

Research on effective leadership practices has covered many areas beyond scientific management including authentic leadership (Cooper, Scandura, & Schriesheim, 2005), transformational leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004), and situational leadership (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). In addition, some of the work done by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1996) on flow theory indicated the importance of more humanistic management approaches.

The foundational work on theory X and theory Y leadership (McGregor, 1960) sets the

stage for comparison and debate. Theory X focused on the manager's control of what occurs in the workplace and an inherent assumption that without extrinsic motivation, people will not work to their fullest capacity. Theory Y, in contrast, considered various intrinsic human needs and motivations and called on leaders to inspire and inform rather than control and manipulate. This approach focused on creating conditions where people can accomplish their own goals and required leaders to pay attention to the needs of individuals. Theory Y leaders focused more on facilitation than directing (McGregor, 1960).

Warren Bennis (1989) offered additional alternatives to scientific management, with a focus on the ambiguous and dynamic aspects of leadership. He advocated for self-leadership and for a more flexible, people-focused approach for leaders. He used a similar construct as McGregor, distinguishing between managing and leading.

The ongoing focus on the strategies of scientific management have ignored artistic- and people-focused aspects of leadership. Connecting with people, listening intently, and responding authentically even when facing the unplanned and unexpected are leadership skills that could be enhanced by non-traditional leadership development approaches such as those found in improvisational theater, also known as improv theater or improv (Buble, 2015; Flach, 2014; Gardner, 2013; Geerlof & Beckhoven, 2016; Hmieleski & Corbett, 2008; Locke, 1982; MacDonald, 2013; Newton, 2004; Rankin, Dahlbäck, & Lundberg, 2013; Robson, Pitt, & Berthon, 2015; Tawadros, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Improv theaters offer workshops aimed at working professionals, promising to teach skills that will help them in their working roles. The skills found in improv theater focus on quick thinking and other, more nuanced skills such as accepting offers, listening intently, and embracing the unexpected (Love, 2014; Zaunbrecher, 2011).

These skills support theory Y leadership approaches, authentic leadership, situational leadership, adaptive leadership, and other humanistic leadership models. Existing research into improvisation and leadership have identified some aspects of improvisational jazz as relevant to leadership, including shared leadership and the leader as a primary support for employees (Newton, 2004). Links have also been discovered between team performance and team improvisation skills (Vera & Crossan, 2005).

What is yet to be fully explored are the specific improvisation skills used in improv theater that apply to organizational leadership roles. This study sought to discover the specific skills from improv that transcend performance theater and enhance individual leadership performance. Using a case study methodology that included observations and interviews with a selected improv workshop, the skills being taught and how they were being taught was identified. Interviews with students helped clarify which of those skills they found most useful and how they were applying what they learned.

The analysis of the results sought to identify which of the skills sets from improv theater may appropriately be taught through existing leadership development training mechanisms in organizations (e.g. instructor-led training, online learning, mentorships, coaching) or in leadership and management higher education programs. Improv skills may be an element in enhancing leadership development efforts in ways more relevant to twenty-first century leadership and these skills could help with team interactions, problem-solving, innovation and creativity, conflict resolution, and team participation (Yorton, 2003).

This study was needed to find the relevant learnings from improv theater that applied to leadership and leadership development. A case study of a specific workshop provided a higher level of detail around improvisational skills and teaching methodology that will help determine

which aspects are applicable to effective leadership and leadership development. Current leadership development methodology consists largely of traditional workshop curriculum: lectures, role plays, activities, and some experiential learning. As most of these efforts occur within a corporate environment, learning pedagogy typically takes a more conservative approach, focusing on learning skills, practicing them within the learning space, and trusting that learners will apply the learning on the job. Additionally, online learning is increasingly popular for leadership development. This learning methodology can potentially reach a saturation point with learners, however, and there remains an assumption that learners will apply the learning on the job. One alternative approach that has emerged is known as 70:20:10, indicating that 70% of learning takes place on the job through challenging assignments, 20% through mentoring and relationships, and 10% through formal learning methodologies (Center for Creative Leadership, 2017). Improv theater pedagogy could provide insights on further innovations in leadership development methodology.

It is important to note a few aspects of improvisational theater in the United States that impact who participates in workshops and performances. The typical business model for theaters is to offer workshops that are priced at hundreds of dollars, with multiple workshops required before a participant is ready for live performances. Those performances are usually unpaid, or paid a small portion of ticket sales, and theater locations are often located in urban settings requiring transportation resources. Therefore, performers tend to be reflective of cultural and economic privilege. Additionally, there is a lack of gender and ethnic/racial diversity in many improv groups that in some locations results in minority populations forming their own separate teams of performers. While it is not the purpose of this study to explore this aspect of improv theater, a better understanding of the content, delivery methodology, and application of improv

skills could enable a wider dissemination of these skills to those for whom this content is currently inaccessible.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to determine the relevance to leadership and leadership development of the core skills involved in improvisational theater, by identifying what is taught in introductory improvisational theater workshops, examining the teaching methodology used in those workshops, understanding how those who are exposed to learning these skills use them outside of the theater, and to gain insights as to why people choose to sign up for an improvisational theater workshop.

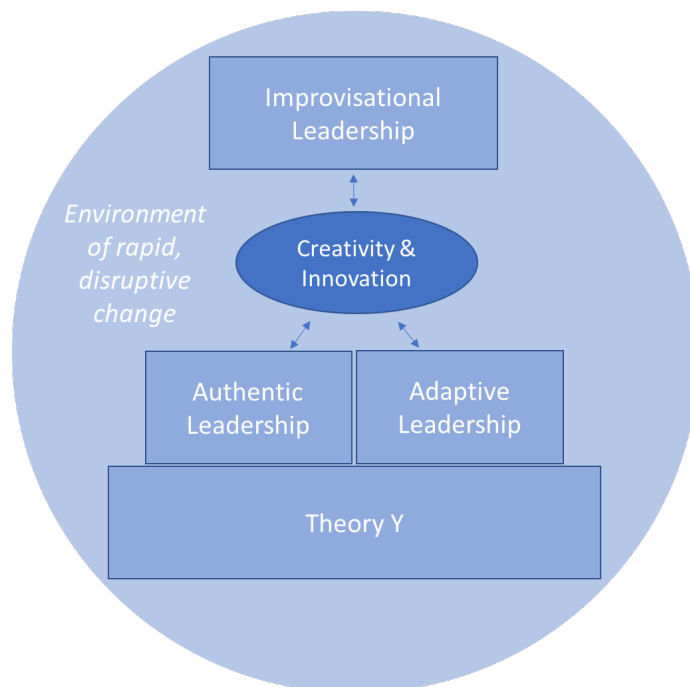
An improv workshop was identified for study and all sessions of the class observed. Participants and instructors in the improv workshops were interviewed to understand which skills they learned, and how these skills were being used outside of the theater context. The principal objective of this study was to fill a gap in understanding improvisational skills and how these have applications for leadership development efforts. Understanding the motivation of participants will help inform leadership development work by illuminating the attraction point for participants; this is critical understanding especially with leaders and organizations who are not focusing on non-traditional leadership philosophies and may even be actively resisting them. By identifying the motivation for people to voluntarily enroll in improv workshops, leadership development professionals can design programs that appeal to similar motivations within their audience.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was built upon four foundational pillars (see Figure 1). As mentioned earlier, when considering these theories, leadership was defined as those in formal leadership roles and

those exerting leadership in any aspect of their life, using the term “contemporary leaders” to capture this concept.

Douglas McGregor’s work on theory Y leadership provided a balancing perspective against more controlling and authoritarian leadership styles by redirecting the focus of leadership to collaboration, authenticity, open communication, and support (McGregor, 1960). The work of Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, et al. (2004) described the essential qualities of authentic leadership and investigates the role of leadership development to enhance these qualities in leaders. Adaptive leadership provided the second piece of the framework, describing the change in external environment that is creating a demand for a different style of leadership and models for appropriate behaviors that leaders can follow to increase their level of adaptability and increase the personal engagement of those around them (DeRue, 2011; Kahn, 1990). The fourth pillar consisted of the use of improvisational theater-based leadership development and the relevance of improvisational skills to organizational leadership (Vera & Crossan, 2004, 2005).



*Figure 1.* Foundations of improvisational leadership.

The broader question centered around the dichotomy between scientific management and more humanistic leadership approaches. While there are many leadership theories in addition to those already mentioned, the predominant approach to management focuses on planning, controlling, and analyzing, currently enhanced with high technology tools. Yet, shifting conditions within organization and society indicate that something different may be needed that will generate higher levels of creativity and innovation and increased employee engagement.

Improvisational skills can be an important part of this new approach to leadership. Improvisation is essentially relational, a common aspect of leadership that supports engagement and creativity. Therefore, development in improv skills can create a shift in leadership practices consistent with the humanistic leadership theories of McGregor, Bennis, Kohn, Avolio, DeRue and others.

### **McGregor and Theory Y**

McGregor offered an alternative theory to scientific management. He labeled command and control leadership behaviors as theory X leadership. His alternative, theory Y, was based on a different understanding of human nature and thus identified different leadership traits and approaches as more effective. (McGregor, 1960).

Theory Y leaders believe that people are intrinsically motivated and engage in work for satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. This theory described the need for direct and open communication between leader and follower with high value placed on the quality of the relationship. Individualized approaches and ideas are encouraged over consistency and uniformity (McGregor, 1960). This study identified how skills taught in improv theater support or contradict theory Y leadership behaviors.

McGregor (1960) also concluded that “leadership is a relationship” (p182), citing the number of factors that influence effective leadership and the required role of the follower for leadership to exist. Improvisational learning, with its foundation on relationships and openness (Spolin, 1983), connects with theory Y concepts such as openness, individual expression, and relationship quality.

### **Authentic Leadership**

Avolio et al. (2004) provided a framework linking authentic leadership to followers’ behaviors and performance. This framework also helped define key aspects of authentic leadership and connected those aspects with personal identification and social identification. These in turn positively impact hope, trust, and positive emotions in followers which are positively related to employee attitudes towards commitment, job satisfaction, meaningfulness, and engagement. These mediate the relationship between authentic leadership and the job performance of followers.

The key traits of authentic leadership identified by Avolio et al. (2004) that related to this study were awareness of context, resiliency, trust, positive emotions, directness, openness, transparency, a willingness to acknowledge personal limitations, the ability to model adaptive responses, and optimism. “[Authentic leaders] are more interested in empowering the people they lead to make a difference and are as guided by the qualities of the heart, passion, and compassion as they are by qualities of the mind” (Avolio, et al., 2004, p. 806).

The behaviors and skills that a leader would need to develop to be an authentic leader are not included in this model, however, and Avolio pointed out the need for additional research in connecting this model to other models and for identifying the elements of leadership development needed to cultivate authentic leaders. This study identified specific skills and



behaviors that are taught in an improvisational theater program and to identify which of those skills these participants found valuable and which they put into practice. These skills and behaviors were then compared to the theoretical components of authentic leadership.

### **Adaptive Leadership**

This theory posited that people engage in work roles much like an actor takes on a theater role, and people can approach that role with different levels of engagement (Kahn, 1990). His research was based on the premise that multiple organizational factors influence an individual's chosen stance on their role and that variability occurs within an individual; the level of engagement is not static (Kahn, pp. 694-695).

These organizational factors may be influenced by leaders adopting improvisational practices. Kahn (1990), in talking about the value of people bringing more of themselves into their work roles, says, "People become physically involved in tasks, whether alone or with others, cognitively vigilant, and empathically connected to others in the service of the work they are doing in ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values" (p.700).

DeRue explored role variability from a leadership perspective in designing a theory of adaptive leadership. His theory is based on the concept that leadership is dependent and defined by followership which is subsequently influenced by the emergent pattern of leadership-followership. Key aspects of this theory are that leadership roles are fluid, not static; that they emerge from interactions between leaders and followers; that they are not dependent on authority, power, or title; and they are fundamentally a social construct (DeRue, 2011).

Improvisational workshops include learning content supportive of these concepts. These workshops are based on a principle of creating safety for participants, so they can freely

participate (Spolin, 1999). Improv performances are dependent upon group dynamics, and perceived leadership roles shift during performances and practices. This study provided data that can help illuminate the connection between improvisational learning content, individual engagement, and the group dynamics of leadership.

### **Skills-based Leadership Development**

Skills-based leadership development is based on the philosophy that leadership skills can be learned and developed and are not part of a package of traits inherent within the individual (Mumford et al., 2000). Social skills can be critical for contemporary leaders, especially the ability to view situations from multiple perspectives and to immediately apply past experiences to novel situations (Mumford et al., 2000).

A different view of leadership was presented with relational leadership theory. According to this school of thought, individual leader skills are not the key focus for leadership or leadership development. Instead, leadership emerges as a social construct. The dynamic between individuals on a team, which often includes a titular leader, is what creates leadership, not the individual skills and actions of a single person (Uhl-bien, 2006). Viewed from this perspective, leadership development would focus on the interaction between team members rather than on the individual leader.

Improvisational theater integrates both points of view. Improv training provides a set of concrete skills, learned experientially, that creates individual success in performances. At the same time, that skill set, and the way success is defined, is based on group dynamics, fluid leadership, and effective interpersonal interactions. Additionally, the learning methodology within improv workshops may provide valuable insights for leadership development efforts.

## **Improvisation and Leadership Development**

Vera and Crossan described the relevance of improvisational theater skills to leadership while acknowledging its limitations. Citing the need for flexibility, responsiveness, and quick action, they identified core improvisational skills that are transferrable from the theater setting to the organizational setting. These included a focus on the process of improvisation rather than its end product; expertise and practice in their craft to draw upon when needed; spontaneous action and decision-making in response to immediate stimuli; the impromptu creation of ideas; the ability to let go of results in the moment; embracing the uncertain and letting go of results; embracing failure as a natural part of the process; maintaining a focus on agreement; and working as a group with a focus on taking care of others (Vera & Crossan, 2004, 2005). They defined improvisation as “the spontaneous and creative process of attempting to achieve an objective in a new way” (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p. 733). Their study provided evidence of six common components of successful improvisation that apply to theater and organizations: expertise; teamwork quality; experimental culture that does not punish mistakes; access to real-time information; strong communication; and training is used to build competency and increase use of improvisational behaviors (Vera & Crossan, 2005, pp. 206-219).

Their work points to the need for additional research that focuses on identifying exactly what improvisation includes and how it applies to organizations (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p. 728), the accessibility of theater-based improvisational skills over, for example, jazz improvisation (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p. 728), and how leaders in organizations can learn this skill and how it can be effective for them (Vera & Crossan, 2005). They also acknowledged the difficulties of introducing improvisational skills into a culture where planning and control predominate leadership thinking and where the lack of planning can be viewed as irresponsible (Vera &

Crossan, 2004, p. 735), and they maintained that improvisation in organizations will operate much like in theater: sometimes it will result in positive outcomes and sometimes it will hurt organizational outcomes (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p. 744).

Improvisational skills are closely aligned with theory Y leadership, authentic leadership, and adaptive leadership. These leadership theories call for skills and behaviors that would be enhanced with improvisational skills, which can then enhance personal creativity and organizational innovation and may play a key role in effective leadership in a volatile external environment. This study furthered an understanding of how these skills are applied outside of the theater context.

### **Research Questions**

As mentioned earlier, there is an over-arching question centered around the dichotomy between scientific management and more humanistic leadership approaches. Using theory Y beliefs, authentic leadership, and adaptive leadership as vehicles for applying improvisational theater skills and pedagogy, this study was designed to explore the connection between improv skills and these leadership theories.

While there are many leadership theories in addition to those already mentioned, the predominant approach to management focuses on planning, controlling, and analyzing, currently enhanced with high technology tools. Yet, shifting conditions within organization and society indicate that something different may be needed that will generate higher levels of creativity and innovation and increased employee engagement. The research study will address a primary question and the sub-questions listed below:

1. Why are participants interested in learning improvisational skills?
2. Which skills are being taught in an entry level improvisation workshop?

3. How are improvisational skills being taught in these workshops?
4. How are the improvisational skills that are learned in the workshops being used by learners outside of the theater context?
5. How are the skills that are being used helpful and effective for participants?

### **Delimitations and Limitations of The Study**

#### **Delimitations**

The study relied on a single improvisational theater workshop and the instructor(s) and participants assigned to it and therefore has limits to its generalizability. Data obtained from interviews is dependent upon self-reporting, with its inherent limitations. While there is a body of literature behind improvisational theater skills, the level of awareness of this literature may vary among those who instruct improv workshops and the workshop and theater selected may use concepts, skills, and pedagogy different than other theaters, and therefore be unique. There may also be unexpected variability in curriculum based on geography or other factors.

This was not a longitudinal study. The focus was on a specific period of early learning in improvisational skills and the immediate or short-term application by learners. Inferential analysis was used based on the collected data only. No process of random sampling was engaged in selecting the population for this study, therefore no statistical analysis was possible. Quantitative and numerical analysis of the data was avoided in order to retain focus on the case study and the qualitative data.

#### **Limitations**

Because the researcher has performed in improvisational theater and taught leadership development in a corporate setting over a length of time, and was the sole data collection instrument, the researcher may have introduced unintended bias into the selection of the

participating theater, and the observations and analyses of the data. Also, participants joined an improvisational class voluntarily and they may have been predisposed to reporting positive outcomes and finding those programs valuable. Finally, the students and instructors may have behaved differently because of the presence of an observer.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research was conducted to expand knowledge of effective leadership development approaches, specifically by learning more about the learning content of improvisational theater. Leadership development is widely used in many organizations, especially within large corporations. Many of the approaches and practices delivered in that context lack evidence-based support (Ketter, 2009).

Concurrent with that, scientific management, first popularized by Frederick Taylor in the early twentieth century, changed the way organizations managed and elevated planning, control systems, and efficiency and became the primary focus areas for managers (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2011). Yet, in an era of rapid change, managers are finding control to be elusive. As a result, fresh and innovative leadership development approaches are being explored and made popular. One of those is content from improvisational theater (Robson et al., 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005).

This study was intended to provide data around the specific skills and approaches that are being taught within improv workshops and to better understand how they are being used in non-theater settings. In so doing, more effective leadership behaviors can be identified which leaders may find valuable in volatile and changing workplaces. This may provide an important counterbalance to the currently popular concepts of analytics and planning. This study was not intended to develop a comprehensive set of leadership competencies.

This study showed how the skills and practices learned in improv workshops are applied by students within and outside of the theater context, with the theory that participants apply the skills in contexts outside of the theater, in ways that could be applied to a leadership role. The study also showed how the pedagogy employed by improv instructors can inform the field of leadership development. Finally, the study showed why students are attracted to improv classes and how they are applying what they learn outside the theater setting.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms are commonly used in the improv community and in the leadership development professional community. The definitions provided here guide an understanding of the study:

Contemporary leader – For the purposes of this study, leader contemporary will encompass any individual who is in a formal organizational leadership role (with people directly reporting to them), and any individual who in the course of their work and personal life, exerts leadership.

Employee engagement – The sense of connection and passion an employee feels toward their work (Gallup, 2017); the degree to which an employee feels psychologically present and feels they are using their full selves (Kahn, 1990).

Group Mind – The sense of connection groups of improv performers feel toward each other.

Often combined with the phrase “follow the follower” to indicate that the goal of improv is to follow the direction of the collective mind rather than the direction of an individual leader.

Improvisation/improv – A theater form where performances are unscripted and based on impromptu suggestions from the audience. Typically performed in groups of 2-8

performers. It is noted for spontaneity, creativity, group cohesion, and group approval of new ideas and patterns (Spolin, 1983).

Improv theater – A performing arts theater that primarily presents improvisational shows. They may also offer other types of shows and public workshops.

Leadership development – Any of a variety of training programs and learning efforts that are designed to improve or change the performance and behaviors of leaders or potential leaders. These programs typically take the form of training classes, online learning, modules, written or video content, and related exercises and activities but development can also occur from experiences, special assignments, mentors, and reflections (Bennis, 1989; Drucker, 2008).

Space/object work – Refers to the imaginary motions that improv performers make to create objects and places on the stage. For example, when using a telephone, good space/object work would be to hold your hands exactly as you would if there were an actual phone in your hand. This can also refer to filling out a scene; for example, taking a sip of an imaginary drink and placing it on an imaginary bar counter will create a bar on the stage for the audience.

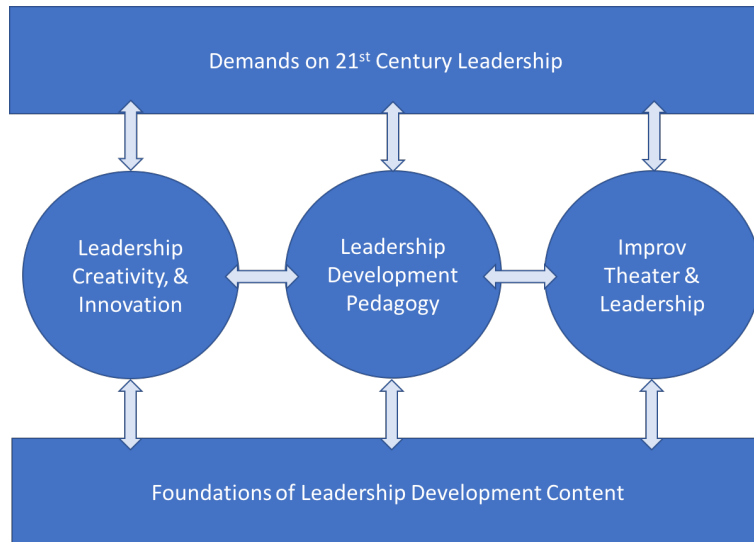
## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

### **Restatement of the Problem**

The demands on leadership are changing and require higher degrees of creativity and adaptability from leaders. Organizations and leaders are seeking new approaches for leadership development efforts and one of those is improvisational theater content. Little study has been done on the efficacy of this type of training, or how improv skills translate to leadership.



To explore the relevance of improvisational skills in the context of leadership and leadership development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, five topics were examined: the demands of twenty-first century leadership, the foundations of current leadership development content, creativity and leadership, the history and elements of improvisational theater, and improvisational leadership (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* Overview of literature review.

There is a foundation of leadership development content that permeates current leadership development efforts, some of which is more aligned with theory Y, and much of which still focuses on a skills-based approach to traditional management functions such as planning, analyzing, and controlling. Exploring alternative approaches to leadership and leadership development uncovers content and instructional methodology that may be more relevant to a 21<sup>st</sup> century context, specifically in the areas of creativity and employee engagement. This review will examine the demands on leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, explore alternative leadership approaches, and outline the application of improvisational skills to leadership and leadership development.

### **Demands of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Leadership**

A common element of leadership theories and leadership development research focuses on current or anticipated changes in the environment within which leaders operate (Bennis, 1989; Buble, 2015; Drucker, 2008; Friedman, 2016). The theme since the latter half of the twentieth century has been that significant changes are occurring, driven by technological innovation, shifting expectations of customers and employees, and a transformation to a global market.

Within this dynamic environment, traditional management approaches that primarily focus on controlling and planning may be outdated (Buble, 2015). An annual report from the Gallup Organization provides data on the impacts of outdated ineffective leadership approaches. The high number of disengaged employees – over 60% over an extended number of years – may illustrate that different approaches to leadership and leadership development are needed (Gallup, 2017). Employee perspective is influenced by leadership style and approach, and expectations of employees and leaders are changing, requiring a more adaptive style from leaders (DeRue, 2011; Kahn, 1990).

This high-change environment has been described as volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) (Casey, Jr., 2017; Friedman, 2016). The current change environment seems to be forcing a shift for leaders from a controlling role to an influencing and shaping role (Palmer & Dunford, 2002). The argument is made that in an environment of rapid and dramatic change, shaping behaviors are more effective in motivating and inspiring people through change. Beliefs about effective leadership behaviors and skills are shifting. The focus of management in the future may include a strong focus on mission and vision, the ability to deal with chaos and ambiguity, wide empowerment, self-management, and dense networks (Buble, 2015). These stand in contrast to the pillars of scientific management: planning, controlling, and monitoring.

## **Foundations of Leadership Development Content**

### **Theory X and Theory Y**

Douglas McGregor (1960) laid the foundation for contemporary leadership development with his seminal work, *The Human Side of Enterprise*. Based on the belief that people can be self-motivated, McGregor saw the manager's role to include creating a work environment that allowed people to find meaning and purpose. He recognized that all managerial actions and decisions are based on some theory, usually shown by the assumptions made by the manager (McGregor, 1960). By changing these assumptions, different leadership approaches would follow. By his theory, these approaches would be based on a belief that people can learn and grow and so leadership development would focus on that learning and growth.

McGregor also argued that authority alone was not enough to motivate performance and could impede performance. Yet, he still based his theory on this managerial belief: "Progress in any profession is associated with the ability to predict and control, and this is true also of industrial management...Successful management depends – not alone, but significantly – upon the ability to predict and control human behavior" (McGregor, 1960, p. 4). His belief in theory Y was still wrapped around an assumption that managerial intent and action is necessary to get organizational results, and that the objective is still to control behavior. The influence of scientific management has been pervasive and difficult to move past. Still, his thinking altered what the assumptions and actions could be for leaders and laid the groundwork for later work around people-focused leadership.

McGregor based his thinking on his perception that organizations were undergoing significant change and would require leaders to adopt practices that responded to those changes in ways that allowed the organization to thrive. As he puts it, "Theory Y is an invitation to

innovation” (McGregor, 1960, p. 57). By shifting the conversation to a different set of assumptions about human behavior and motivation, McGregor opened the social aspects of work and the role of individual engagement in accomplishing larger organizational goals.

This was a significant shift in thinking, since much of the earlier part of the twentieth century had focused leadership study on individual traits and managerial approaches based on Taylor’s theory of scientific management. Frederick Taylor studied industrial operations and work. He determined that breaking a task into its smallest possible components and then establishing the best way to complete that task was the key to effective management. His theory assumes that individuals will not complete work in the most efficient way on their own, and that most workers will not be motivated without strict methods, procedures, and standards backed up by compliance efforts (Taylor, 1919).

McGregor labelled this leadership philosophy “theory X” and his counter-philosophy “theory Y”. Follow up research reveals support for Theory Y leadership beliefs, with results that showed a positive relationship between a theory Y management style and subordinates’ organizational citizenship behaviors, commitment to the organization, and satisfaction with their leader (Gurbuz, Sahin, & Koksall, 2014).

Theory Y assumptions point to leadership behaviors that are more relationship-focused, and more accepting of responsibility for creating a workplace that encourages the full expression of the individual talents of each person, aligned around organizational objectives to which people willingly commit. Leadership development in this context would focus on developing the individual to improve positive interactions with followers.

## Management Theory

One of the most influential management writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was Peter Drucker. His core belief was that an effective manager carries the responsibility to achieve the organization's goals. As a result, the achievement of those goals is the only valid measure of success for a leader. Further, he held that to be successful, contemporary organizations require managers (Drucker, 2008).

Aligned with the thinking of Frederick Taylor, Drucker's belief was that organizational structure had to be task-focused and focused on the needs of the organization – its results. He popularized management by objectives, where organizational objectives determine the responsibility and sole focus of managers and is the only criteria for success of leaders and individuals within the organization. He also argued that managers should have a role in creating the organization's objectives so that these objectives become the foundation of self-control and provide a means for managers to hold themselves accountable.

Drucker did acknowledge that there was greater complexity involved in leadership, however. While he insisted on a performance focus for organizations and managers, he also said, "The better a person is, the more mistakes she will make – for the more new things she will try" (p.281), seeming to at least hint at the value of a performance failure as a vehicle for learning for the leader. He also believed that management decisions must be focused on values and on opportunities, not problems.

In Drucker's view, "...the intellectual's world, unless counterbalanced by the manager, becomes one in which everybody 'does his own thing' but nobody achieves anything. The manager's world, unless counterbalanced by the intellectual, becomes the stultifying bureaucracy of the 'organization man'. But if the two balance each other, there can be creativity and order,

fulfillment and mission” (p. 517). His view of leadership included the notion that leaders inspire followers to higher performance, stretching them beyond their normal limits (p. 288).

Where Drucker falls in the theory X, theory Y continuum is well illustrated with a comparison to classical heroic literature. In Heroic Drucker (2015), Joullie and Spillane compare Drucker’s management theories with the Iliad. They contend that Drucker’s manager is a heroic character in the classic tradition. This model of hero is different from the western interpretation of a hero as someone who individually overcomes challenges and rises to success. The classical definition of hero is someone who dutifully fulfills the role that fate has created for them. Applied to the manager role as described by Drucker, this then is a leader who conforms to expectations and fulfills the obligation to accomplish the organization’s goals. Much like the classical hero who must fight the gods and save the day, Drucker’s manager must conform to traditional expectations, exercise self-discipline, focus on pre-planned goals, and meet quarterly expectations (Joullie & Spillane, 2015). This version of hero is measured by results, is celebrated for individual accomplishments, and favors action over process. Relationships, collaboration, and positive work environments will be addressed to the degree that they are perceived as adding to bottom line metrics.

### **Leadership Theory**

Warren Bennis expanded leadership thinking by building upon principles found in McGregor’s theory Y. His leadership theory is based on qualitative research he conducted and his personal leadership experience. According to his thinking, leaders should focus on knowing themselves and who they are – learning about self as a way of learning about leadership (Bennis, 1989).

From this perspective, leaders should value independence of thought, and individualized leadership styles and leadership development should be customized to the individual. Vision and character are as important as drive and competence. “The first step toward change is to refuse to be deployed by others, and to choose to deploy yourself” (Bennis, 1989, p. 37). He identifies four steps to developing as a leader: becoming self-expressive; listening to the inner voice; learning from the right mentors; and giving oneself over to a guiding vision (Bennis, 1989, p. 34).

Bennis also listed curiosity and daring as key leadership characteristics, encouraging leaders to embrace mistakes. This lies opposite to the relentless pursuit of organizational objectives advocated by Drucker. Bennis dared leaders to explore the inner self. His “four lessons of self-knowledge are:

- One: You are your own best teacher.
- Two: Accept responsibility. Blame no one.
- Three: You can learn anything you want to learn.
- Four: True understanding comes from reflecting on your experience” (Bennis, 1989, p.56).

Bennis’ leader focuses on possibilities, not problems and limitations. As he quotes William James: “Genius...means little more than the faculty of perceiving in an unhabitual way” (as cited by Bennis, 1989, p. 69). Bennis describes a more balanced leader who embraces both the analytic and creative/intuitive side of the brain, combining the administrative and the imaginative (Bennis, 1989, p. 103).

In this model of leadership, leaders embrace “the blessed impulse” (Bennis, 1989, p. 104). “The artistic part of leadership is in a way...not different from art...and like all creative

acts comes out of a certain kind of controlled free association” (p.145). Bennis sees a different possibility for learning: “I think of it as learning from surprise” (p. 146).

Proponents of scientific management argue a different view. The social outcomes of efficiently run organizations and production processes, they argue, benefit everyone, including workers. The resultant prosperity provides communities and nations material benefits and social stability (Zuffo, 2011). Given the advancement of technology and data analysis capability since Taylor first documented his research, scientific management may be more relevant than ever for leaders and managers (Brennan, 2011).

However, in a rapidly changing environment, a different set of skills may be necessary. To encourage creativity and innovation within organizations, Bennis’ beliefs about leadership may be more important. Adaptive leadership, especially as described by DeRue, may more closely match the reality of this volatile environment and needs of the current generation. More static and role-based management approaches were based on organizational models where hierarchy, authority, and power were emphasized. Today’s organizations are more open to flexible approaches and people within those organizations may be less accepting of authority-based leadership (DeRue, 2011).

### **Leadership, Creativity, and Innovation**

The narrative around creativity and innovation flows along a linear path that starts with a description of the change-intense environment within which organizations are operating today. This in turn requires organizations to change which then creates a demand for creativity and innovation to meet the unexpected challenges and opportunities (Andriopoulos, C. 2001; Goodman & Dingli, 2013; Hemlin, et al., 2013). The intent of various research efforts has been



to learn how the creative process works in individuals and organizations, how leadership impacts this process, and how organizations move creative ideas into practical innovations.

In *Business Cycles*, Shumpeter laid the groundwork for the importance of creativity in organizations with this guidance: "...the decisive driving force for an economy undergoing the alternating stages of prosperity, recession, depression and recovery is innovation" (cited in Goodman & Dingli, 2013). The current manifestation of this dynamic centers around the change in the economic relationship between organizations and their customers, described as a change from a seller's market, where products are priced based on an internal analysis by the producer, to a buyer's market where pricing is determined by what the customer is willing to pay (Goodman & Dingli, 2013). This buyer's market now determines which products and services are in demand and how they are delivered (e.g. ride share services).

This dynamic is further expanded by extreme improvements in efficiency, innovation, and production processes that have occurred over the past several decades. Consumer choice is high, and improvements and innovations are executed quickly. There is intense pressure on organizations and their leaders to produce change and innovation to meet changing customer demand and take advantage of advancing technology. Thus, the demand for creativity increases: "Creativity can help managers generate ideas and interventions that are manifestly different from those of the past (mainly seller's markets) but relevant to the challenges provided by buyer's markets" (Goodman & Dingli, p. 27).

Creativity has become a key competitive differentiator, with ideas now viewed as capital within organizations (Dean & Kretschmer, 2007; Goodman & Dingli, 2013). Organizations increasingly demand a level of creative output to support a necessary level of innovation and this has become the new expectation of management and leaders (Hamel, 2007).

Specific leadership traits, behaviors, and approaches have been linked with creativity and innovation. These include more humanistic approaches rather than authoritarian or controlling approaches (Andriopoulos, 2001), ideas formalized by McGregor (1960). Leaders can support creativity and innovation by developing a supportive environment (Andriopoulos, 2001). Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1996) said it this way “It is easier to enhance creativity by changing conditions in the environment than by trying to make people think more creatively” (p. 1). He addresses the concept of entropy, where living organisms tend to conserve energy as a survival mechanism. The role of creativity is to overcome the entropy of the status quo, and if the opportunities for curiosity and creativity are too narrow for individuals and teams, with too many obstacles and constraints, creativity will suffer (p. 11).

Team norms can impact creativity with individuals and teams. People will hold back, or self-edit ideas based on a perception of how well the idea will be received, and perceptions of safety and approval influence individual creativity within teams (Goodman & Dingli, 2013). “Good managers do not attempt to manage creativity, they manage for creativity, by providing a working environment and culture that allows creativity to flourish” (Goodman & Dingli, p. 129). Establishing an environment of trust, safety, and dignity is an essential element of that work environment (Amabile, 1997; Goodman & Dingli, 2013; Spitzbeck, 2011).

There are other components of an environment supportive of creativity and innovation. There is a role for leaders to enhance intrinsic motivation for creativity (Andriopoulos, 2001). A positive work environment is a key element for group and individual creativity. Extrinsic rewards, and the withholding of them, reduce organizational creativity. The two exceptions to this are reward and recognition for creative ideas and feedback useful for making the creative ideas better (Amabile, 1997).

Amabile (1997) also observed that the more interested people are in the work, the higher the levels of creativity, an example of intrinsic motivation supporting creativity. At the same time, her study showed a decline in creativity and productivity during organizational change (in her research case, pending layoffs). It also revealed leadership behaviors that reduced the impact on productivity and creativity during change: when employees "...feel their manager is trustworthy, communicated honestly with them, and listened to their concerns" (p. 51). She also presented her Component Theory of Organizational Creativity and Innovation (p. 43). This model provides that organizational innovation results from individual creativity which is impacted by the work environment. Hemlin et al. (2013) conclude, "...it also appears that creative people will simply stop thinking when the environment is perceived not to be conducive to creative work" (Oldham & Cummings, 1990, cited by Hemlin et al., p. 12). Specific leadership behaviors that may contribute to this non-supportive environment include failing to show support, providing poor communication, micromanagement, and giving non-constructive feedback (Hemlin et al., 2013).

Diversity of perspective and thought tends to enhance creativity in work groups and this diversity can be enhanced with the introduction of trading zones (Hemlin et al., 2013). These are organizational structures, events, and locations that bring different individuals in the organization together. The leader's role is to facilitate these trading zones so that interesting connections are made that can generate unusual and creative ideas.

Additional supportive organizational and leadership practices include introducing multiple stimuli, encouraging the freedom to experiment, keeping a long-term perspective, allowing autonomy, and building ideas collaboratively. Exposure to regular and frequent creative practices, along with a leader's expectation of creative thinking also tend to enhance creativity

and innovation (Andriopoulos, C., 2001; Hemlin et al., 2013). Flexibility, a humorous work environment, and the ability to customize service responses based on individual context are also creativity enhancers. The ability to create these ad hoc solutions generates greater engagement and creativity with employees (Slåtten, Svensson, & Sværi, 2011). Modeling creative behavior themselves provides another avenue of influence for leaders (Hemlin et al., 2013).

The foundational aspects of improv theater link directly to the leadership practices described above. Improv performers focus keenly on the context of the immediate moment and create their response based on that context and verbal and physical offers from other performers. Engaging in a fluid relationship where leadership can be held by any team member, improv performers learn to model consistent behaviors such as accepting offers made by others, paying attention to the immediate moment, and moving scenes into unexpected contexts. These same behaviors applied in an organizational (non-theater) setting would provide an encouraging environment for creativity.

Writers on the topic also call for more analytical processes to support creativity and innovation (Goodman & Dingli, 2013; Hemlin et al., 2013). There is a strong focus on creative problem solving (CPS) and the techniques involved in this are part of standard process improvement methodology. Convergent and divergent thinking, consensus-building, and decision-making are practiced in many organizations in service to more efficient processes that produce higher quality results in less time with less expense. These approaches are also viewed as supportive of creativity and innovation, a way for a leader to focus a team on generating new ideas and helping ensure the implementation of those ideas.

A four-phase model of the innovative process is also offered, consisting of the initial spark, idea evaluation, invention, and external and internal launch. In the first phase, item one is

generation of ideas, which seems to be a fully creative act. The other three phases quickly move into the innovation realm, an evaluation and implementation process (Goodman & Dingli, 2013).

Opposite this analytic approach, play may be useful for encouraging a supportive environment for creativity. The voluntary interaction of groups of people at play, typified by high levels of engagement, point to a vehicle for more effective teamwork and more individual creativity (Sandelands, 2010). Another less linear model is offered by distinguishing types of creativity and innovation under the labels of idea scouts and idea connectors. Scouts are those inside the organization who scan the internet and other external sources for creative ideas and innovative practices. Idea connectors are skilled at networking and connect external ideas with internal resources and internal resources with each other. Both serve the interests of creativity and innovation (Goodman & Dingli, 2013). Similarly, they present an innovation model used in the software design industry, the cathedral and the bazaar. The cathedral represents an internal, more structured and controlled development process, where innovation is made in protected privacy. The bazaar describes the world of open sourcing, a more chaotic and less controlled approach, with higher levels of diverse thinking and greater unpredictability.

The concept of creative leadership provides an over-arching model for leaders challenged with cultivating a creative environment. Built upon previous models of leadership – transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and transcendent leadership – creative leadership requires deep relationships, self-awareness, autonomy, and adaptiveness (Hemlin et al. 2013). As they defined it, creative leadership is “...[t]he ability to deliberately engage one’s imagination to define and guide a group towards a novel goal – a direction that is new for the group. As a consequence of bringing about this creative change, creative leaders have a profoundly positive influence on their context and the individuals in that situation” (p. 302).

## **Insights About Creative People**

While much of the research reviewed here focuses on organizational creativity, there are important insights to be gained from understanding creative individuals. acknowledging the importance of their role. Some of the commonalities of creative individuals include curiosity, wonder and an interest in how things work (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). He described a fluid attention as an integral part of the creative person and adds that complexity seems to be a commonality, with creative individuals displaying paradoxical traits that in others are either/or. They can experience sadness and pain about their work and find joy in it at the same time. Building from his flow theory, he applied this to creativity by arguing that humans are programmed for creativity. His argument centered around the idea that since external conditions change, those who can constantly embrace novelty will be better equipped to handle changing conditions. This can be directly applied to organizations.

Additional traits of highly creative people are “complexity, self-confidence, aesthetic sensitivity, values originality and independence, and rejection of the narrow and the mediocre” (Hemlin et al., 2013, p. 9).

## **Leadership Development Pedagogy in Transition**

One response to the volatile environment is to develop leaders towards more transformational leadership behaviors (Nicolaidis & McCallum, 2013). They called for a different approach to leadership development, described as the triple loop learning model, which includes “unpredictable and uncontrolled learning” (p. 253). Triple loop learning asks learners to be fully present and recognize their vulnerability in not knowing what will come next (p. 254).

Aligned with that, authentic leadership can be viewed as another potentially effective response to a rapidly changing environment. By altering leadership development efforts to focus

on topics such as open- mindedness, empathy, care, and mutuality, leaders create an authentic leadership style, which can be drawn upon under changing conditions and provide a sense of team stability (Berkovich, 2014).

Flow theory also supports more innovative work environments. When employees are challenged around clear goals, provided enough support and feedback, and connected with work that feels meaningful and for which employees are skilled, they will immerse in flow which can result in higher levels of productivity and innovation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

### **Theater-based Leadership Development**

Theater-based Leadership Development (TBLD) has emerged as a potential approach to developing leaders, effective both in content and delivery methodology (Tawadros, 2015).

Consistent with Bennis, he has found that leadership development is largely a self-discovery process. In addition, in a time of rapid change, the ability to respond in the moment and act immediately are key leadership competencies. TBLD and other arts-based learning provide the content and delivery that resonates with contemporary leaders (Tawadros, 2015).

The advantages of using TBLD methodology, according to Tawadros, include:

- Experiential learning that strengthens the connection between learning and real-world leadership challenges; learning mimics the real world and the fluid nature of the leadership role.
- Interactive learning that encourages learning from discussion and interaction with peers that allows emotional learning.
- Learning that provides an opportunity to explore self in relation to others

TBLD provides an example of double-loop learning; participants learn the skill while receiving key insights as to how they are relating to others as they learn. “The techniques, which use

metaphors and practices of drama and theater, appear to foster skills in improvisation and emotional intelligence” (Tawadros, 2015, p. 345).

Improvisational theater has been used as the curriculum for leadership development and team building in non-theater group settings. Those facilitating these workshops focus their efforts on helping learners use their whole mind, not just the analytical functions; use of highly interactive pedagogy; and keeping participants actively engaged through partnering and group activities (Yorton, 2003).

Improvisational theater techniques have been used successfully to enhance group discussions and side-coaching, common in improvisational theater workshops, provides immediate public feedback to learners as they are practicing a skill with each other (Barker, 2016). They report using these concepts to contribute to a common knowledge within the group informed by these public coaching opportunities.

More generally, arts-based methods have been linked with four types of leadership learning: skills development, where skills and broad approaches are directly taught through the use of an arts-based pedagogy; projective technique, where participants are able to express deeper feelings and ideas via the artistic construct being used; illustration of essence, where the core concept or philosophy is revealed through the arts; and making, where participants create or co-create a tangible artistic product as an illustration of what was learned (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). In each of these categories, arts-based curriculum aids in understanding, skill development, and behavior change in a specific way: “While most social science theory makes its claim to truth based on empirical evidence and rigorous testing, art makes its claim to truth based on resonance with the individual...it can connect with a direct, felt sense of knowing” (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p. 59). This sense of knowing can result from an art process, independent of any art product (an artifact



that is the focus of the process). In the case of improvisational leadership skills, this would be included in the skills transfer category. The arts process provides a model for specific skills such as listening and accepting offers from others (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p. 64).

There are some concerns with arts-based methods. One is that participants may limit their participation and engagement if they feel they are not competent in the art form being used. Connecting the skill or insight from the experience may be difficult, as the organizational environment may be very different from the learning environment.

### **History and Elements of Improvisational Theater**

Widely viewed as the source of what we now call improv theater, Viola Spolin advanced the content of improv and a distinct method for instruction. She saw a connection between her version of theater skills and more generalizable communication and leadership skills and described improv as a way of life (Spolin, 1983). She believed in the value of spontaneity to bring forth the truest part of a person and to build relationships. According to Spolin (1999), “Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves” (p. 4).

Aside from the content of her workshops, her pedagogy was founded on a belief in creating safety for participants and moving past a learner focus on approval and disapproval, typically approval from the instructor. “If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach” (Spolin, 1989, p. 3). Based on her understanding of intuition, which she felt was the most certain and reliable form of knowing, Spolin believed that operating at the intuitive level while keenly aware of what is going on externally frees intelligence (Spolin, 1999). This would stand in contrast to Drucker’s model of management focused on objectives and results.

She also based her workshop design around the belief that people can lose their ability to be creative if they are overly concerned with how they are being perceived by others (Spolin, 1999, p. 7). Thus, the goal of the instructor in improv is to ensure that each student is participating freely (Spolin, 1999, p. 10). As part of this, Spolin favored self-organizing systems: “With no outside authority imposing itself upon the players, telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, each player freely chooses self-discipline by accepting the rules of the game” (Spolin, 1999, p. 6). In the music world, jazz improvisers call this taking responsibility (Barrett, 2012); McGregor described the same phenomenon as people committing to the common vision (McGregor, 1960).

The fundamentals of improv theater have been established (Barker, 2016; Checkley, 2015; Johnstone, K. 1999; Love, 2014; Robson, Pitt, & Berthon, 2015; Spolin, 1999; Zaunbrecher, 2011). They include:

- Yes, and. When an offer is made, the obligation of the other player is to accept the offer and add something to it.
- Make an offer and let it go. The idea is to engage in a dialogue, an iterative process from which something not planned by any of the players emerges.
- React to other performers (follow the follower). Rather than try to lead the other plays and guide the scene, improv calls for players to pay keen attention to each other and react on what is observed, heard, and felt. React to help fellow performers, not because you have a clever idea.
- Mistakes are gifts. Improv requires an acceptance of what is occurring in the moment, and from that perspective, there are no mistakes.

## **Improvisational Leadership**

The principles described in improv theater apply to today's dynamic leadership environment. Specifically, the ability to adopt a "yes, and" mindset; viewing mistakes as gifts; focusing on building quick relationships; accepting any challenge as an opportunity; and making those around you successful. As predicted by McGregor and Bennis, organizations are facing tremendous changes, driven by technology and social advancements that continue to move quickly. Consistent with their leadership philosophies that elevated the social aspects of work and leadership, and valued individual discovery, innovation, and the nurturing of talent, improv skills provide a platform that could support each of those values.

The teaching methodology of improv theater can also inform leadership development efforts. Pedagogy that includes experiential learning, immediate public coaching, and an environment where people are participating freely, without constraints of approval/disapproval, would contribute to the learning efforts of today's leaders. Additional applications are found in the areas of conflict resolution and community development (Mandala Center for Change, 2018).

Leaders today require skills beyond analyzing, planning, and monitoring. Strong improv skills are also needed so that leaders notice and respond to a rapidly changing world. McGregor, Bennis, and others noticed that effective leadership involved more than what lies in the scientific and managerial realms and must include learning the less predictable and more dynamic parts of leadership. To engage in the inner work of self-discovery and move from control to intuition, leaders will need input from the arts world. "That which is not yet known comes out of that which is not yet here" (Spolin, 1999, p. xii).

In his book, *Messy*, Tim Harford argues that while we often embrace a tidy-minded approach, there are conditions and situations where an unstructured, messy approach would work

better. He provides several examples, one of which was the Oblique Strategies cards, which provide random directions during creation of an artistic work (music in the case of the inventor of the cards, Brian Eno; he used these during the production of an album with David Bowie). The randomness of pulling a card from a deck that contains directions unrelated to music is the very force that generates a creative idea (Harford, 2015, p. 8).

Harford contends that "...[m]essy disruptions will be most powerful when combined with creative skill" (p. 14). Forcing an artist to break patterns and familiar starting points generates new work, different from past clichés, and therefore original. Distractions of any sort can be creatively positive. Research shows a correlation between distractibility and measurable creativity (Harford, 2015).

Harford points to research that shows that measurably creative people display a tendency and preference to work on multiple projects simultaneously; one reason is that ideas from one project feed fresh ideas on other projects. This pattern is described as a "network of enterprises" (p. 27). Also, the distraction of something different feeds creativity.

Mistakes play a part in creative endeavors. Brian Eno instructs: "Honor thy error as a hidden intention" (as cited by Harford, 2015). As Harford puts it "...sometimes what is achieved by accident may be much more worthy of attention than the original plan" (p. 31), challenging leaders to greater risk-taking and speaking spontaneously, much like in improvisational theater. Fear holds leaders back, the fear of losing control. Pushing past this fear requires letting go of the need to control. What is gained from that is flexibility, economy, creativity, and speed (p. 99).

Harford cites an MRI study of jazz musicians in which patterns emerged in the scans when the musicians were playing improvised music. Parts of the prefrontal cortex shut down and another part of the brain became active. In other words, filters and judgement may shut down to

allow creative activity (p. 101). “A script can seem protective, like a bulletproof vest; sometimes it is more like a straitjacket. Improvising unleashes creativity, it feels fresh and honest and personal. Above all, it turns a monologue into a dialogue” (Harford, p. 111).

Artist voices are emerging around improvisation and leadership. Jazz musician and leadership scholar Frank Barrett applies the principles of improvisational jazz to leadership. He points out the “improv paradox”: jazz artists make up the music as they play, and they are lifelong learners in their art form, pursuing technical excellence as they improvise (Barrett, 2012, p. 7).

Aligned with McGregor and Bennis, Barrett also contends that current times require a change in leadership approach: “The old models of organizations as command-and-control systems are outdated. We need a model of a group of diverse specialists living in a chaotic, turbulent environment...” (p. 6). In his view innovation is required in this kind of environment, which he describes “as being on the brink, embracing risk” (p. 9). Because in today’s environment, it is almost impossible to have all the data required and meet the decision timeframes, and so improvisational skills are needed (p. 13).

He challenges hierarchical leadership belief systems: “It’s often assumed that without singular direction, groups turn chaotic or unruly. What we are learning, though, is that without being guided by an outside entity or prescribed plan, a system can self-organize and produce even more efficient and effective outcomes” (p. 19).

What happens within improvisational jazz is an example of self-organizing behavior. Jazz improvisation is a social construct and players dialogue even while performing solos. The art emerges from the spontaneous relationship among the players (Barrett, 2013, p. 31). Unlike Drucker’s manager, players focus on performance in the immediate context of what is occurring

on stage in the moment, not in the context of static goal achievement. “Jazz improvisers focus on discovery in times of stress” (p. 37), and that discovery may transcend current objectives.

Consistent with TBLD, mistakes are viewed by jazz improvisers as learning opportunities, gifts that create fresh ideas. No judgement surrounds mistakes, only acceptance and the responsibility to keep the performance going.

### **Managerial Hyperopia**

Case study research identified that there may be inherent dangers for organizational leadership that focuses only on the far off rather than the near at hand. Using a metaphor based on ocular science, hyperopia describes a tendency for organizations and their leaders to engage in long-term planning and scenario-based preparation for what may be coming. Leaders may be missing feedback and information from the current environment (Burt, Mackay, & Perchard, 2015).

Especially during periods of rapid and constant change, leaders need to be able to scan and interpret the environment frequently and adjust accordingly (Burt et al., 2015, p. 135). The case study specifically identified that leaders miss important learning opportunities by over-focusing on scenario planning. They observed a hyperopic focus with leaders who engaged in planning based on assumptions that were changing in the moment, causing them to miss changing conditions, employee feedback, and shifting environmental conditions (Burt et al., 2015). This tendency can be tempered with learning and development that increases a leader’s ability to focus more intently on the immediate moment, a skillset found in improv theater.

There is evidence that improvisation is becoming a conscious skill set for leaders, that helps them react effectively during unexpected situations. Examples include improvisation as a tool for ethical decision-making (MacDonald, 2013) and the role of improvisation in emergency

response teams and disaster relief (Gardner, 2013; Rankin, Dahlbäck, & Lundberg, 2013). At the same time, there is evidence that where improvisational practices were implemented across an organization, members experience positive and negative effects. Identified among benefits were increased flexibility, the ability to respond quickly to emergency situations, and the possibility of creative solutions. There were downsides, though: an over-dependence on improvisation that reduced the use of planning and problem-solving, a shorter-term focus, and a tendency to engage quick solutions that may not be effective in the longer-term (Flach, 2014).

In considering improvisation as a leadership skill, misperceptions may be impacting the expectations of the skill. Specifically, the spontaneous aspects of improvisation are emphasized and the attention to preparation and training is overlooked (Vera & Crossan, 2005). They also emphasize their belief that improvisational skills can be learned.

To summarize, leaders are facing volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous situations with increasing rapidity. While traditional management practices, including scientific management, are still important and still widely in use, an environment demanding increased innovation requires additional leadership skills, including improvisational skills. The exploration of these skills as taught in improvisational theater workshops may illuminate which of these skills are most useful and how they can be taught.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

#### **Restatement of the Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to determine the relevance to leadership and leadership development of the core skills involved in improvisational theater, by identifying what is taught in introductory improvisational theater workshops, examining the teaching methodology used in those workshops, understanding how those who are exposed to learning

these skills use them outside of the theater, and to gain insights as to why people choose to sign up for an improvisational theater workshop. These questions guided the research:

1. Why are participants interested in learning improvisational skills?
2. Which skills are being taught in an entry level improvisation workshop?
3. How are improvisational skills being taught in these workshops?
4. How are the improvisational skills that are learned in the workshops being used by learners outside of the theater context?
5. How are the skills that are being used helpful and effective for participants?

### **Research Design**

To better understand the specific components being taught in improvisational theater workshops, a case study research methodology was employed. Because there is a need to deepen our understanding of this content, the rich description provided by a qualitative approach provided the opportunity to discover components of content and instructional methodology that are not well understood. The multiple perspectives of the learning experience also contributed to a broader perspective on improvisational theater skills (Merriam, 2009). The researcher was the primary data collection and analysis instrument and the research focused on rich description and utilized an inductive method for drawing conclusions (Merriam, 2009, p. 39).

The topic lent itself to qualitative research because the improvisational form is inherently a group process, requiring a research approach that can discern the dynamic combination of interactions that build improvisational skill (Merriam, 2009). Successful improv theater is a team event, literally involving the shared creation of a new reality. Accomplishing that involves more than just mastering individual mechanical skills and includes unique group dynamics that emerge during training workshops. Observing and describing that dynamic contributed to a better



understanding of improvisational skills, including advancing a clearer theory of improvisational leadership.

Little research on the efficacy of improvisational theater techniques in leadership contexts has been conducted, and studies that have been completed have been based on commonly known aspects of improv (Yorton, 2003). This research intended to provide a deeper understanding of the content, methodology, setting, and dynamics of an introductory improvisational theater workshop.

This study was best served by a single case study approach because the topic is not clearly understood, the study questions seek to understand how specific skill sets are taught and how these skills are being used by students, it is a contemporary practice rather than historical, and the learning context being studied does not lend itself to an experimental approach (Yin, 2014). The use of improvisational skills in organizational leadership development is growing (Robson et al., 2015; Tawadros, 2015; Yorton, 2003), yet is not fully understood. An in-depth exploration of improv workshops helped in determining the usefulness of improv skills and its teaching methodology for leadership development efforts, and a case study methodology best supported that exploration.

### **Population**

The research design began with the selection of an introductory improv theater workshop targeted for adult learners. There are improvisational theaters in every major city, some with multiple theaters. Introductory contacts with theaters close in geographic proximity to the researcher failed to find a theater willing to allow research observations. One theater, the one where the researcher initially learned about improv theater and attended their full training program, agreed to the research contingent upon all students in the class being willing to

participate. The unwillingness of theaters in the pacific northwest is likely not unique to the area, nor was the willingness of a single theater in another geographic area necessarily an indicator of a cultural difference in the improv community in that area. Improv performers and instructors relocate to different areas, the community is networked via online community groups, and there are several nationally-branded theater franchises in operation (e.g. ComedySportz); each of these factors contribute to a more standardized community culture. Therefore, it seems likely that a similar level of interest could be expected from most improv theaters. Mirroring one of the core principles of improv theater – focus on relationships – an important reason that City Theater considered the study was the pre-existing relationship with the researcher. Additional research is needed to further explore ways to successfully conduct research within this subject area.

The schedule of the eight-week program aligned with the timing needs of the researcher. The theater selected also met the criteria of offering a program aimed at newcomers to improv. This provided data on initial exposure to improvisational skills, which in turn provided insights relevant to a prospective leadership development audience who likely would be experiencing the content for the first time as well. The theater owner is also an instructor and performer, and thus had a comprehensive perspective on the art form and was included in the data gathering process. The research included gathering insights via observations and interviews from the theater owner, along with the instructor and students.

An agreement was established with the theater, and release forms were obtained from the participants. The number of anticipated participants was initially eight (the minimum required for the course), and there were two additional students from different cohorts who attended some sessions as make-up classes. This cohort was observed for all eight sessions of the level one program (the theater offers five levels of training, each of them eight weeks in duration).

Observations focused on the participants and instructor(s) of this workshop, along with the setting and ancillary learning materials. The primary intent was to capture the curriculum, instructional approach, and student learning experience.

### **Data Collection**

Workshop observations occurred during eight consecutive Saturday classes, each class taking place between 1:30 and 4:00pm. An audio recording was utilized as the primary data collection tool, supplemented with handwritten notes by the researcher. Observations recorded verbal communications between instructor and participant; participant verbal responses; descriptions of activities and exercises employed in the workshop and participant reactions to those activities; and participant communications with each other throughout the workshop. This included the activities and scenes played out in the class. A heuristic process was needed, since the environment of the observation was a dynamic theater environment (Yin, 2014), and the observations of the workshops involved a complex interaction of language and behaviors generated by a series of class exercises. Therefore, informal interviews and conversations with students were added, steps were taken to help the researcher blend into the setting and be viewed as part of the group, while protecting the students from influence from the observer as much as possible.

In addition to the weekly observations, interviews with the participants, instructor, and theater owner were conducted. Informal conversations with the students and instructor took place throughout the level one program, aimed at uncovering additional data related to the research questions. A semi-structured interview format was used, and the initial questions were modified based on mid-study decisions made by the researcher. Each of the student interviews included but were not limited to, the following questions. While the initial research plan intended to

conduct multiple interviews, logistics, student preferences, availability, and relevance considerations caused a modification of that plan. The original initial interview was replaced with informal conversations throughout the program, along with the final discussions that took place after each class session which included a review with the students that was focused on what they found valuable from that week's class. The final interview included these questions:

Question 1: What have you learned so far in level one that feels valuable for you?

Question 2: In what ways has the learning been applicable for you outside of the theater context?

Question 3: What have you done differently at work or home because of what you learned?

Question 4: When you apply what you learned, what has been the result?

Question 5: What are your thoughts about the teaching methods used at the theater?

Interviews were not restricted to these questions, however. Based upon responses, additional follow up questions were added to explore the participant experience further (Yin, 2014).

In person interviews were recorded with an audio device only. Based on the preferences of the students, some interviews were conducted via email. All audio recordings, of interviews and class sessions, were transcribed by the researcher. Along with the observations of student and instructor interactions, descriptions of the physical location and setting were captured.

### **Validity**

Effective case study research includes the construction of theories prior to the field studies, in this case the workshop observations and interviews (Yin, 2014, p. 37). Research observations and analysis focused on the research questions and grounded in the theory that the skills and practices learned in improv workshops can be applied by students within and outside

of the theater context, in ways that can be applied to a leadership role. The study was also based on the theory that the innovative instructional methods employed by improv instructors can inform the field of leadership development. Finally, key components of selected leadership theories will be used as the primary analysis tool for understanding observations, interviews, and artifacts.

Construct validity was designed into the study by ensuring objective observational practice and validating interview transcripts and analysis with participants. Interviews were reviewed by interviewees after transcription, and the analysis of these interviews was also shared. Observations were also reviewed and validated with the instructor. Artifacts were collected at the workshop location and from peripheral marketing and instructional materials. The context of the learning was also captured, providing a description of the learning environment, including the physical setting, background visuals, and sounds.

Theory triangulation was used, using multiple theories to interpret the data (see Table 1). It's important to note, however, that the design of this case study was exploratory in nature. While there was a reasonable expectation that aspects of the data will align with these theories, there was a possibility they would not. Any inconsistencies should not be viewed as negatively impacting the validity of the data, but rather as helping further the understanding of the topic under study (Patton, 1999).

Case study documents were protected and the anonymity of the participants in the study and its location were maintained. Electronic copies were securely backed up and hard copies of notes and photographs were printed and stored in a separate and secure location.

### **Reliability**

Each part of the study was carefully documented, including the observations and interviews. A semi-structured interview guide was used as a starting point for the interviews, and observations included the setting, comments from participants, and a summary of the instructions from the workshop instructors. Most of the content from the practice exercises was captured, but the focus was on the reactions of the participants to the practice activity and their interactions with the instructor and each other.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data was done using a coding system for evaluating the interview and observational data. Themes were identified within content and instructional methodology categories. Interviews were reviewed by interviewees after transcription, as well as the analysis of these interviews. Analysis focused on the research questions (the instructor and theater owner interviews excepted), with an expectation that patterns would emerge that helped further the understanding of the application of improvisational skills as leadership skills. These components of the case study were then analyzed using the constant comparison method to guide discovery of patterns and discrete elements that addressed the research questions.

Pattern matching, explanation building, and rival explanations were also incorporated into the analysis. The focus was on qualitative analysis and constructing explanatory concepts, rather than generalizing from a sample. Analytic generalization was engaged to corroborate theoretical concepts provided by the literature review and to generate new theories or concepts (Yin, p.41). Inferences were sought around leadership skills, learning methodology, and leadership development.

Utilizing theory-based coding, instructor and participant interview responses were categorized under specific behaviors or skills identified in McGregor's theory Y, Bennis' leadership theories, adaptive leadership, and authentic leadership (see Table 1). The intent of the methodology was to clarify the learning content and instructional approach of improvisational leadership as it relates to leadership. The results may support using this content to help leaders respond to rapid changes in ways that engage followers and enhance organizational creativity.

Table 1

*Leadership Theory Components for Coding Data*

<b>Leadership Behavior/Skill</b>	<b>Theory Y</b>	<b>Bennis</b>	<b>Adaptive Leadership</b>	<b>Authentic Leadership</b>
Able to operate in a dynamic environment		✓	✓	✓
Awareness of immediate context				✓
Comfort with ambiguity			✓	
Create deep connections with people			✓	✓
Directness				✓
Facilitation	✓		✓	
Focus on the individual and individual ideas	✓	✓		
Immediate adaptive responsiveness			✓	✓
Openness	✓	✓	✓	✓
Relational	✓		✓	
Relinquishing control	✓	✓		
Resiliency				✓
Role flexibility			✓	
Self-awareness		✓		
Self-direction	✓	✓		
Shared leadership			✓	
Transparent		✓	✓	
Trust				✓

## **CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS**

The purpose of this case study was to deepen an understanding of improvisational theater skills in relation to leadership by understanding how the core skills involved in improvisational theater are applied by students outside of the theater context. From this, the study also intended to expand an understanding of how this content and methodology can be incorporated into leadership development curriculum. Additional data was gathered that points to a disruptive potential for improv content and methodology.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research setting and the philosophy and methodology of the theater and its learning programs. The eight-week curriculum and its content were then reviewed, followed by an analysis of the content and student experience as it correlates to the previously identified leadership theory components. The student experience and my own experience with this learning content concludes the chapter. The descriptive nature of the study required agility on the part of the researcher in order to capture the experience as fully as possible without disrupting or altering the student experience. The resulting data provides a mosaic of impressions and descriptions intended to capture the essence of the content and its delivery.

This is a qualitative study of a single case. As such, the results reported here include rich descriptions of the learning setting, the learning activities, and direct quotes from study participants. To protect the anonymity of the study participants, pseudonyms were assigned. Instructors were labelled instructor or substitute instructor, and the theater owner was designated as such. A pseudonym was created for the name of the theater and the city in which it is located.

Each class session was recorded with an audio recording device only. The theater setting presented challenges for recording for several reasons. First, it was important to remain



unobtrusive to participants and thus positioning the recording device close enough to effectively capture audio had to be balanced with not interfering with the students' learning experience.

Also, the nature of the activities and setting resulted in students and instructors moving to different areas of the classroom setting throughout each class. Additionally, the classroom settings presented sound quality challenges since the rooms and theater space are large, with high ceilings, and sound from adjoining classroom spaces could be heard during the class. Finally, the students themselves tended to be soft-spoken especially during debrief conversations. This resulted in some portions of the audio being difficult or even impossible to transcribe. Most of what occurred during the classes, however, was captured and successfully transcribed. Supplemental notes were taken by the researcher while the sessions were being recorded, which included observations about the student experience with the program and informal conversations with participants.

Interviews with the students also provided challenges. The classes were held on Saturdays, in a geographically distant location from the researcher. Time restrictions for the students and the researcher resulted in challenges conducting post-class interviews after each class. Also, most students expressed a preference for emailed interview questions versus phone. Not all students responded to email requests; however, results from formal interviews following the eight-week class for five students were captured. However, informal conversations among students and between students and the researcher did occur throughout the program which supplemented formal interview content. Also, each class session ended with students sharing what they found valuable from each session; this same conversation occurred at the end of the final class encompassing the entire program.

The informal conversations during breaks and after class included questions about recent

class experiences and the application of the content outside of the class setting. This portion of data gathering was largely heuristic but was guided by the interview guide and the research questions. Email and in-person interviews followed the interview guide found in Appendix B. The result was a blend of data that provided sufficient insights into the experience of students.

Interviews were completed with the instructor and the theater owner as well. These were also guided by the interview guide, but also followed a path based on what the interviewees were saying. Follow up questions were added to these interviews to deepen an understanding of the what was being discussed. This included their perceptions about the student experience with improv in general and, in the case of the instructor, the specific experience of this cohort group. These interviews also captured data about curriculum design, instructional strategy, and the philosophy of the program and its content. The notes, transcriptions, audio recordings, and this document were backed up in multiple modalities and the physical artifacts, including the recordings, were stored in a secure location.

The researcher was the sole source of data collection and also completed the transcription of the audio recordings of class sessions and interviews. While this introduced the possibility of missing important data or biased reporting, the research case did not require a team of researchers. In fact, more than one researcher would have compounded the concern of negatively impacting the experience of the participants. The case also did not involve multiple cases or simultaneous events (Yin, p. 79). The advantages of using a single researcher included observational consistency and the ability to flex and adapt the research methodology as needed based on the dynamics of the research environment (Yin, p. 99). To maintain the student experience, some concessions were made about the involvement and participation of the researcher. The instructor and researcher agreed following the first session that it would be

valuable for the researcher to participate in the warmup activities that occurred at the beginning of each session. This was done to establish connection and rapport with the group – an aspect of what is called “group mind” in the theater context – which then reduced the potential impact of having an observer in the classes. The researcher also at times provided suggestions needed by the instructor and students to start a scene. These were typically random words like a location or an object. These decisions were validated during the final debrief, with one student indicating about the researcher that she “liked having you here [since] it felt like we had a real audience.” This indicated that the students were not seeing me as an intrusive scientific observer, but rather as someone who fit in with the overall theater setting. While these concessions may have had a small impact on the learning experience and perceptions of the students, but not a significant one.

Categorizing observations within the components of the identified leadership theories was inherently a subjective task. To mitigate this, frequent cross-checks with the literature were conducted to maintain clarity around the intended descriptions and definitions of the components. Observations were categorized in only one category from leadership theories; those same observations occasionally were also included under methodology curriculum and philosophy categories. An additional category labelled “other” was created to capture elements from the observations that were relevant to leadership but not included in the leadership theory components. All of the items in this category were coded as either involving creativity or imagination.

The process of categorizing consisted of analyzing the observation or transcript for content relevant to the categories. Then, the item was matched to the leadership theory components. Frequent review of the leadership theory component as described by the source

writer was conducted to ensure consistency.

### **Philosophy and Methodology**

City Theater is located in the western portion of the United States and was founded in 1996. The theater is co-owned by a husband and wife team and reflects their knowledge, beliefs, and vision for an improvisational theater. Their performance and learning curriculum approach is largely based on the ideas and formats created by Viola Spolin. What this means is that all choices made by an improviser are considered “right” choices, and that scenes evolve organically and are best when not controlled by an individual actor or director and the overall climate of support and encouragement is maintained throughout the learning program.

The implications of this showed up in the approach to learning taken by City Theater. In the level one class (an instance of which was the focus of this study), a very supportive environment is created. As described by the theater owner:

Everybody is different, everybody brings their own thing. But what happens in level one and level two, everything is what we call fuzzy ducks and happy bunnies, we’re all ‘Yay!!!’ We’re really opening people up...we create a nurturing environment for those first two levels” (Theater Owner, lines 7928-7930).

This was evidenced by the abundance of supportive comments observed in the level one program. Almost every exercise concluded with the instructor saying, “yay!” and applauding, with 83 instances of “yay” observed in the course of exercises and activities, 22 observations of “excellent,” and 162 of either “good” or “great job.” This is an important detail because the nature of improvisation involves removing filters (Spolin, 1999) which can place students in a vulnerable situation. The observations of some students in the case study confirmed this; in classes at the beginning of the program, students were hesitant to volunteer, and for at least two

students, they continued to speak very softly on stage. Nurturing support was essential to advance their learning and likely would be key to applying the improv curriculum to a leadership development context.

The setting and setup of the theater also reflected an eclectic, non-traditional, and fun environment, contributing to a sense of safety for participants. The theater is located in an urban center, in a historic building. Theater posters line the walls and the stairways of the theater, which includes a lobby, the theater space itself with a light and sound booth, and four classrooms. The theater name is based on a nickname for the city in which it is located and all of the décor and many of the naming conventions follow that theme (the specific theme is not revealed here to protect the anonymity of the study participants). The net effect was colorful, playful, informal, and fun.

The instructional methodology for the theater, very different from a typical leadership development curriculum design, was described by the owner (who designed the curriculum): “I deliver the game without ‘this is what you should get out of the game.’ After we deliver the game, I ask, ‘What did you discover about yourself or what did you discover about playing the game?’” (Theater Owner, lines 8108-8111). This was confirmed in the observations. Often, the transition to the next part of the lesson was simply, “Let’s get three up!”, something that opened the experience to voluntary participation and signaled to the students that something new was starting. The format consisted of an activity, game, or exercise (these terms are used interchangeably in this study) followed by a debrief that started with questions from the instructor. The instructor would often add additional points to take from the activity but would not push on the point. Rather than state the learning objectives up front – a more typical

curriculum design for adult learners – the pedagogy was structured as experience, then learning, and then the objectives (which were unique to each learner). As the theater owner described it:

I let them make the bridge. The reason I do it that way is because beliefs cannot be changed, I don't think, by argument. They can only be changed by experience. So, we have them experience the games first, and then we have them start building it out to the pre-frontal cortex, or to their left brain...or whatever you want to call it. They make the connection from their beliefs out to their logic center. Then, I reinforce it with improv and I have them take it to the very front of the pre-frontal cortex (Theater Owner interview, lines 8121-8127).

This “building out” was observed in the participants’ experience as they applied it to during the classes. Often, there was some level of hesitation and sometimes slight confusion about the directions for the activity, what Spolin (1999) would call “the rules of the game” (p. 6). That was then followed with either questions from the students or brief coaching from the instructor and the students would get more comfortable with the activity and display greater confidence. Beyond the class itself, the specific content that was bridged and the way the bridge was built was dependent upon the individual and so was in that sense unique to them. This is a less rigid and controlled model than what would be typical in a corporate training program, which would typically follow a flow from learning objectives, then the learning experience, and then a check for learning that could include tests and measurements. In many ways with the improv curriculum, the instructor had limited visibility to the actual learning that was built with students. This less-controlling, more experience-based pedagogy is consistent with the Spolin roots of this theater (Spolin, 1999).

This also matched the beliefs of the theater owner and instructor as to why and how students arrive at improv training:

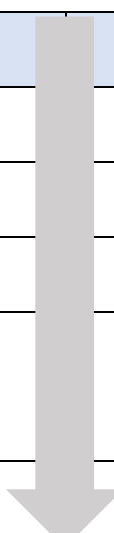
I used to think this improv was magic, improv's great, but after thirty years of it, I just find that it's, it's *them*. The people that are ready to make a change, and they by luck or happenstance or something, they take an improv class, which is just the best thing they can do for themselves. But, *they* sign up for the classes, *they* pay for the classes, *they* apply for the scholarships here, and *they* come every week. And so, it's not me, it's not the improv, it's *them*. The improv gives them a focal point to focus on while they're developing their skills (Theater co-owner, lines 7982-7993).

Further, the instructor said, "I just think the right teacher gets assigned to the right classes" (Instructor, line 7782). This indicates a deep belief in the theater, the curriculum, and in the people who are drawn to enroll in the training programs.

Table 2

*Curriculum Differences*

Typical Leadership Development Curriculum	City Theater's Curriculum
Learning objectives	Experiential activity
Learning content	Side-coaching
Modeling learning content	Debrief conversation
Activity or exercise to reinforce learning	Individual student connection to personal objectives
Assessment of learning	Next activity



A seemingly contradictory detail was observed as part of the theater's methodology. While the performance of improvisational theater, unplanned and unscripted, is spontaneous by design, the instructional design of this theater's courses was highly structured. Instructors used a facilitator's guide that includes the order of activities, the prescribed activity, a description of the activity, and debriefing questions. As described by the director of education during level one, class one:

We like to do four big things at the beginning of every level one class one. We go over the official student handbook, we take a tour of the place, we go over a brief history of improv, and we listen to an audio sketch. I don't know if we'll do it in that order. Yeah, and so why don't we start with the official student handbook (Education Director, lines 22-25).

The intent is for each class in each level to be the same regardless of who is teaching it, knowing that the personalities of the instructor and the students will bring some diversity of classroom experience. As indicated in class, this allowed students to make up classes with a different cohort group at a different time, knowing they will receive the same instruction for the make-up class as what was experienced by their cohort group. It also ensured consistency among different instructors.

Related to this, and possibly what enabled the structured approach to still be creative and unique to each class, was that all instructors are also performers at the theater. The ability to both follow the guide and facilitate the class is dependent upon the instructor's knowledge and experience within the art form, in this case improvisational theater. This deep connection with the art form is essential to creating an emotional connection between the students and the content with arts-based learning content (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009, p. 66).



Another observed piece of the methodology was the creation of a fun environment. Instructors frequently used humor in their delivery and engaged in regular banter and joking with students. The setup of the classrooms created predictable interruptions. For example, access to one classroom required walking through classroom, and getting to restrooms also required passing through classrooms. For the theater space itself, frequently used for classes as well, passing through this space was required to get to two additional classrooms. The result was that other students, performers, and instructors walked through the classroom during the classes throughout the program. Yet, this seemed to have no effect on the students and presented little interruption to the instructor. Additionally, singing and loud rehearsals were heard in the observed classrooms, and the instructor did not acknowledge it or get distracted from it, and the students did not react or seem to notice. The class continued as if none of what might be considered disruptions were occurring. This informality lent to the overall atmosphere of the learning environment as one that was more creative, less traditional, and less formal. Typically, class settings for organizational leadership development are more formal spaces or are held in hotel meeting rooms and conference centers. The focus in these settings is to reduce distractions and maintain a quiet, non-disrupted environment. It is worth considering whether an arts-based curriculum like improv is dependent upon the more compatible environment observed at City Theater.

The instructor was an additional contributing factor to the creative environment, which may be critical to learning and applying improvisational tools. For example:

This is the kind of thing where I ask you to come along on a journey with me. We're going to do stuff that kind of taps into your childhood wonder, where we're dancing and making up feathers. We're just going to explore stuff (Instructor, lines 1311-1313).

She created an environment where imagination felt welcome.

Spolin was an advocate of side-coaching when teaching improv, and The City Theater modeled that practice. An example of that side-coaching, which took place in the middle of activities:

And hold that for just one second, Jean. Fantastic! We're going to change it a little more. Now you're going to send a gibberish sentence to someone in the circle. So not just a single gibberish word. It's a gibberish sentence. And do it, whatever your made-up words are, in normal speech pattern like you would if they were regular words. Make sense? So, you'll pass gibberish sentences back and forth. [students slowly start the exercise, tentative at first. Then it picks up].

Instructor: Good. Use varied tone.

[one student uses an unusual gibberish tone, high-pitched, that makes everyone laugh]

Instructor: Good! End it right there. Give yourselves a hand and stay up here. How did it feel to invent your made-up words?

Student: I attached an emotional feeling to it (lines 2073-2085).

This exchange was typical of side-coaching during the program. It always began with positive reinforcement ("fantastic" in this case), and the tone was consistently calm and matter-of-fact. In the end, the instructor asked a question and let the students draw the connections, consistent with the design described by the theater owner. This aspect of the improv class created no disruption for the students, as evidenced by the fact that in every case, the student continued to perform the exercise, usually with a higher skill level or degree of confidence. No evidence of shutting down

or defensiveness was observed; students and instructor maintained smiles and laughs throughout, a coaching experience that was different than what some people may experience at work.

This use of questions was a consistent feature of the learning methodology. All debriefs began with questions, and included a blend of instructor comments, student comments, and additional questions. The debrief questions most often were “What did you get from that?”; “How was that for you?”; and “Talk to me about that”. These debrief questions were often intermixed with laughter and banter from the students, usually about the scene that had just ended, keeping the debrief segments fun and light-hearted. Questions sometimes were more specific and more targeted toward a specific aspect of the learning. For example, the instructor asked, “Why do we want to show versus tell in an improv scene?” In this example, the instructor had not talked about the reasons for doing that, but rather had engaged the students in activities that required them to show emotion and reactions to each other’s lines. She left it to the students to determine why that works better, and reinforced their comments made in response to her questions. There was not a focus on right and wrong answers, evidenced by this comment from the instructor, “We’ll all explore what everyone thought. It’s really not about right and wrong.”

This level of support and absence of judgement was evident throughout the program. Combined with the fun, artistic environment, supportive, inclusive, and kind comments and behavior came together to help create a safe environment for students. Here are two examples:

Instructor: You guys are a fun group! Level 1, it usually takes to the end before they open up. It’s wonderful to see. You guys clearly enjoy each other and support each other. You guys are one hell of a group of actors! [laughter] Fantastic!

Instructor: ...wonderful, that was wonderful. [students return to theater seats.] In those scenes, what do you think was a “show” versus a “tell”?

Student: The one I got very wrong...

Instructor: You're being way too hard on yourself. Seriously (lines 2223-2225).

As already mentioned, positive affirmations from the instructor were common, and started at week one. "Excellent", "good job", "you nailed it", "great", and "excellent" were frequently engaged. In addition, during the first class, pronoun preferences were shared by each student and the instructor. Finally, the Student Handbook includes information on the theater's commitment to cast shows with graduates from the theater's classes and offers to help students for whom performing is the goal of taking the classes. All of these peripheral factors were important to creating learning within the improv skill set and should be assumed as critical to include if this same content were introduced in more traditional leadership development

### **Curriculum**

The eight-week curriculum for the level one class was structured around eight themes, displayed in Table 3. At least six of these themes appear to have potential relevance to leadership and leadership development: seeing others and creating a space; giving and taking focus, and "yes, and"; stop self-editing; accepting and involvement; and group involvement. While the entire program was analyzed for its relevance to leadership, the titles of these class themes could be used as leadership development themes and bear further research to determine their applicability. For example, seeing others and creating a space could be broadened outside of an improv application to refer to treating each person as an individual, and creating a positive work space that promotes performance excellence. Whether improv curriculum would help develop leaders in the context of such broader applications was not determined by this case study.

Table 3

*Themes of each Weekly Class*

<b>Week</b>	<b>Theme</b>
1	Mind/body connection
2	Seeing others and creating a space
3	Where and gibberish speak
4	Giving and taking focus and “yes, and”
5	Stop self-editing
6	Accepting and involvement
7	Reconnecting mind/body
8	Group involvement

The activities for each week’s class centered around the theme for that week. Following the first session, which began with introductory lectures on the history of the theater, an overview of the program, and a history of improv, each class began with a series of two to three warmup exercises (see Appendix A for sample descriptions of several of these). From week two on, classes also began with two questions: exploring if anyone attended live theater the previous week and what they observed that applied to improv; and reviewing the content from the previous week. Then the theme for that week would be briefly introduced and the instructor would move quickly into the first activity.

The overall pace and tempo of the program followed a consistent pattern over the eight weeks. Approximately six activities per class would be incorporated, each of which would be followed by a debrief which was facilitated around a series of questions from the instructor. Students identified this as the Socratic method, though neither the instructor nor the theater

owner who designed the program used that terminology. As these debriefs also included some additional comments and content instruction from the facilitator, it did not strictly adhere to a questions-only format.

The experience of each of these classes was fun, upbeat, and energetic. Because the activities called on students to engage in small pieces of improvisational theater, humor emerged even though they were novices to the art form. What this meant for the students was that they watched and were entertained by their fellow students when they were not on stage engaged in an activity. In addition, even though they were practicing skill sets in which they were not experienced, the activities were unusual and creative. This all added up to a positive experience where laughter frequently emerged, smiles were observed with students and the instructor, and students described the experience for each class as fun and valuable.

What also was set throughout all eight sessions was a climate of positive reinforcement and support. The instructor praised student efforts in every exercise. In debriefing the Name Game (where students are in a circle passing the turn to each other using each other's names along with an associated motion) the instructor asked a simple question, "What did we get out of the Name Game? She acknowledged that sometimes students made the wrong motion or said the wrong name and when that happens, "It's ok!" This supportive approach was consistently applied in every class. The fun aspect was evident in the amount of laughter and joking that took place in early exercises and continued throughout the program, much of which was inspired by the instructor.

The instructor also adhered to a methodology with the activities where she asked the students to volunteer to participate. Typically, the instructor would end a debrief quickly, no further points would be made about the previous activity and the instructor moved to the next

activity by getting volunteers. She did this in what would become a familiar sentence, “Let’s get 3 more up!” (The number would vary depending on the activity.) This self-selecting component of the methodology and curriculum was consistently followed; rather than selecting participants for an activity, the instructor nearly always asked for volunteers. There were a few students who consistently volunteered to go first, but as the program progressed all students would volunteer for some activities.

This approach to making mistakes – “it’s ok!” – may have been different than what these students would experience with education and work-related learning. Typically, in those settings, there is a right or wrong answer and the learning objectives and content are designed to teach students those answers. Often, there is a test or knowledge check that follows the learning to ensure that students did learn the right answer. The improv level one class modelled something different by indicating that mistakes would not be judged and were an acceptable, normal part of the learning experience. The instructor encouraged students to experiment with minimal direction and to make choices which were then reinforced. The tone, delivery, content, and activities were uniquely tailored to improv and created a distinct feeling tone that was creative and energetic, and set the stage for learners to push their comfort zones.

The vulnerability of students was a factor that had to be considered throughout the study. A small, but informative interaction occurred during week one that highlighted the challenges of observing improv classes for research. The activity was called Snapshot, another activity that focused on physical expression. In groups of four, students were instructed to move around and then to the countdown of “3, 2, 1” they had to come together to pose for a photo, like something you would pose for in a high school yearbook. Each group of four did a series of four to five poses, and laughter permeated the entire exercise. The debrief focused on helping students

discover what they did when posing for a picture, for example not blocking someone behind you and making sure you are visible. The unstated goal was to help them understand the same concept for an improv scene. As the groups practiced this, their “photos” became more coherent with people positioning themselves in more balanced and framed compositions.

Early in this activity, the instructor began to take photos of their poses using her phone, with the intent of providing a record of their poses and possibly offering an opportunity for students to see how the poses looked. The instructor noticed one student was not comfortable with the photos being taken and quickly acknowledged the student’s discomfort and discontinued taking photos. This was a tangible illustration of the privacy concerns and possible vulnerability that students may experience during this type of learning, and further validated the limited participation of the observer in the warmup activities that took place at the beginning of each class.

The classes were most often held in the theater space, which consisted of eight rows of theater seats arranged stadium style, able to accommodate an audience of 70 (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Theater seating area.

The small stage had three movable scene elements, consisting of two window set pieces and one door. There were curtains hanging at the back of the stage, and the theater’s logo was embedded



in the finish of the stage floor. A sound and light booth was at the back of the theater (see Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Theater stage.*

The orientation of the stage was unusual in that the entrance from the lobby led to the front of the theater to the left of the stage.

Classes were also held in Classroom 2, 3, and 4 (pseudonyms, as the classrooms are named consistent with the theme that derives from the actual theater name.) These rooms were similar, consisting of square rooms with high ceilings and about 20 chairs, some of them with the signature pattern for the theater. In each classroom, an open space to serve as the performance area (the stage) was created that took up about half of each room. Posters covered the walls that advertised current or recent shows (see Figure 5). Most of the classrooms and the theater space itself were occupied with classes or rehearsals during each of the eight weeks, and on some weeks every space was occupied.



*Figure 5. Classroom 3.*

The classrooms adjoined in a row on two different floors of the building, and access to classrooms and the restrooms required walking through other classrooms; getting to classroom 3 required going through classrooms 1 and 2, for example. The result was that other students, performers, and instructors regularly walked through the level one classroom during the class. This seemed to have no effect on the students and caused no interruption to the instructor.

The following summaries provide illustrative examples of the curriculum and how it was taught. This provides a detailed description of sections of the classes, with the intent to illustrate the feel and content of these workshops. Specific details are highlighted based on their relevance to leadership and leadership development. The detailed description from the classes is categorized by themes, and some amount of detail and verbatim transcription is included in these descriptions in service to the descriptive detail essential for qualitative research.

***Performance confidence.*** My Space was an early activity that set the tone for how students would be approaching this learning program. Students lined up along either side of the stage and one at a time walked out onto the stage, paused, and said in any way they wanted, using whatever gesture they wanted, “My space!” Each student did the exercise in their own way, and the activity provided experience walking from the side of the stage onto center stage, the first preview of what an improv performance requires. Beyond that, this activity provided a

ritual entrée into the improv community. The instructions for this activity illustrated the underlying supportiveness this program provided to these students:

The way that it works is you're going to run out, and you're going to say, "My space!" in your own style, and after everyone goes you're going to clap, and we're going to clap a lot. So, who is going to go first? Run out and say My Space! Let's do it! (Instructor, line 457).

At the end of this activity, students described their experience as "fun" and "empowering." The instructor ended it with the comment, "This is the last time you'll go on stage and perform by yourself" (Instructor, line 466). Evaluating this activity through the lens of theater performance, it provided an early opportunity for students to step onto the stage, an important part of an improv performance, as players move in and out of scenes. Looking at it through the lens of personal development, this exercise served as a ritual beginning to the start of a journey of self-discovery. It asked students to exhibit enough confidence to complete this simple activity. The positive reinforcement that followed, along with the shared experience of doing this as a group, increased the likelihood they would want to continue the journey.

Another activity designed to instill confidence in students to perform on stage called for the students to experience standing on stage being seen by an audience. The group divided in half and the activity had two parts. Each sub-group of four stood on the stage in front of the remaining participants, the instructor, and the researcher. For the first round, they simply stood there quietly for approximately 20 seconds. For the second round, they were assigned a task; for the first group, it was to count to 25, for the second to recite the alphabet. Following the normal pattern, a debrief led by the instructor followed this simple activity:

Ok, talk to me about that. What was it like to be up there and be stared at? A little weird...did anybody have the reaction, "I love it!" Yeah? Great! Who preferred counting aloud or reciting the alphabet? [Most students expressed that it was easier.] Yeah, when you're up there, it's better to do something than nothing. Even if it's just counting out loud or reciting the alphabet the audience likes to see something. Congratulations! Good job! It's better to do something than nothing at all (Instructor, lines 455-460).

From a leadership development perspective, comments like this one stand out. "It's better to do something than nothing at all" was intended in the improv program to help students understand that just standing on stage doing nothing is uncomfortable and not fun for the audience to watch. It could also be a learning point in a leadership development class on decisiveness. Whether this curriculum could deliver that to a leadership audience will require additional research to determine.

An additional series of activities introduced over several weeks involved the use of gibberish sounds rather than actual words. Gibberish activities, that would be done later in the program with the use of words, included rules at this point that required the player to only use gibberish sounds, while at the same time holding an internal sense of the meaning they were communicating.

From observations of this cohort and the experience of the researcher, the use of gibberish forces the students to focus on the process, rhythm, and flow of the relationship and exchanges with the other players on stage. One activity early in the program asked the students to form an outer circle and an inner circle. In the outer circle, students were individually starting a random sound and motion and then modifying it by repeating it with the intent to morph the sound and motion into something else. Within the inner circle, students were passing their

sound/motion to another player, who then continued to modify it before handing it off. Students moved from outer circle (playing alone) to the inner circle (passing the sound/motion). The sounds and motions themselves were abstract and unusual and thus difficult to describe. They were nonsensical, sing-song sounds not quite fitting into a category like “baby talk” and included various accents or mumbling; the motions were arm- and hand- based and followed no pattern. As one pair morphed and passed, the instructor would have another participant ready to insert into the game, creating a mirroring chain going around the group.

This dynamic itself shifted several minutes into the activity. What had been four individually focused pairs passing sound/motions in the inner circle began to change to a group focus on a single pair. The other players outside of the pair who were passing the sound/motion were continuing to change their individual sounds and motions, awaiting their opportunity to pass it.

During this activity, the instructor began to side coach, an integral part of the curriculum design and one that Spolin (1999) initially designed. These side-coachings were characterized by their immediacy to the activity, a focus on positive feedback, an adjustment for the students to make, and their brief duration. An example:

Make it bigger or smaller [as activity continues]. All right, I’m going to freeze everybody real quick. This is going great. Do take your time...also, after you receive something, just take a minute, whatever it is, just slow it down. ‘Choo-choo-choo’ [modelled very slowly.] Go to the outer circle and take a little time with what you’re given before you pass it. Ok, so, I’m going to go back to my really amazing example of “choo-choo”. So “choo-choo-choo-choo” [modelled very quickly] so it might take me just a few minutes, just slow it down [models choo-choo very slowly] And now it’s turning into something

else, instead of just [models a fast-tempo choo-choo that quickly becomes a fast tempo ha-ha]. See how they're really different? I want it to be fluid and morph. I don't want you to know what it is until you felt it more. Keep going...also, beautiful choices. So, keep going (instructor, lines 745-755).

Students may not have been used to such public coaching, but they received the coaching in this scenario in a way that allowed them to successfully continue the activity.

The use of gibberish onstage did have a theater arts application since it enhanced non-verbal communication skills, an important part of improvisation. Beyond that, based on the initial hesitation that students displayed with this activity that continued over several weeks, performing scenes and interactions and using gibberish-talk pushed students into an unknown and uncomfortable situation. As they grew more comfortable with it, laughter emerged, and there was a visible rise in the confidence of level of the students.

Mirroring was a similar activity that also immersed students into a non-verbal experience. The activity asked students to use abstract sounds and motions that they would then pass to another player, with the receiver initially mirroring the sound and motion that was passed to them, and then modifying it by amplifying it, slowing it down, speeding it up, or making it bigger. All students were up at the same time for this activity. During the debrief, which started with the question, "What was that?!" student comments centered around the unplanned aspects of improvisation. When asked how this activity can apply to improv, they said, "[you] respond to what's given to you" and "feeling something out rather than planning or thinking about it." When asked if anybody said during the activity, "That abstract thing you're doing is too weird," one student responded, "I didn't think it was too weird, but I'm just too used to thinking and planning and I forgot about it, I shut off that side of my brain. It was helpful." This was a clear

indication of a student using the activity as a vehicle for self-reflection, followed by a willingness to adjust what they perceived as their usual way of thinking towards something different and new, in this case using abstract sounds and motions to build on-stage scene relationships. When they described how they usually think, along with how they were able to move past that pattern, the student was describing learning transformation.

***Mind/body connection.*** The notion of mind/body connection was folded in throughout the program. One early exercise was called Moving in Space. This exercise called for the students to walk randomly around the stage space, initially the way they would normally walk. The instructor would then call out instructions that caused them to walk differently:

What does that look like, what does that feel like on your body? How does that affect your legs? Great! Awesome! Now let's imagine it's at thigh level...what does that look like? [participants adjusted] Now up to your waist...what does that do to your arms. What's it like to walk through chest-high water? Feel what that feels like, on every part of your body. Now we're going to make it thicker. What would it be like to walk through lead? [some participants stopped momentarily to think about that direction.] I don't know...let's try it out. You're all walking through lead, it's thick and hard to walk through. What does that look like? Let your body figure it out. I love it! Feel the resistance on your arms and your legs. What is the weight of it? (Instructor, lines 478-486).

This exercise was a foundational piece of the learning content. The alternative to thinking about what to say in a scene, according to this curriculum, is to connect with your body, and this concept was presented early and was revisited throughout the level one class. Student response was typified in this comment: "...it became a little bit of mind over matter...your body adapts."

The instructor's reply to that comment was, "Love it! We're going to do a lot of things around mind/body connection, a lot of things we haven't done before" (Instructor, lines 503-504).

Connecting students with their physical body, where they begin to move in a scene guided by both their physical self and what they are thinking started the process of removing filters. It introduced the idea of quick reactions absent well-formed thoughts. Viewed through a traditional view of management such as Drucker (2008) and even McGregor (1960), asking leaders to act without thinking may be an uncomfortable and even unwelcomed idea for a leader. Yet, it was a foundational concept of improv as presented in this program.

Group dancing was also a part of the program, used in two different classes. In the second iteration, all students were on stage with one assigned the lead role. The other students were positioned across the stage (in the previous version the remaining students lined up behind the leader). The result looked more like a choreographed dance at times than a classroom activity and the debrief from the activity reinforced why:

Instructor: As an audience member, when everybody was doing this [models an arm movement] all at the same time, how did that look? Coordinated, right? And nobody knew today that we were going to make you all dance together.

Students: Improvisational improvisation.

Instructor: You were great examples of group mind. Did we talk about group mind? What does group mind do? When you hear group mind, what do you think that means?

Students:

All one.

Single brain.

You're all aligned, synchronicity.



Instructor: We're all on the same page. Stephanie turned the class a couple of times, and then the last couple of times, she turns and goes like this [models the move that Stephanie made] and we all "clap" because we know that's what comes next. Margaret doing this [models another move] we have a feeling that next is this, right? [models the next move]. So, we're all on the same page and it looks like we're synchronized, on the same wave length. Other ways to define improv is, "hey, we're going to try to be in the same thing." So, if someone is painting something, I might not come in and start baking a cake, because that doesn't seem to be in the same place. But if I come in and start working on sculpting something or I'm also painting, I've seen what you've done and I'm building on it. We have group mind that we're in an art studio.

This focus on the group acting as one is fundamental to improvisation and is referred to as "group mind." This activity reinforced how students had managed to do that in the previous scenes and reinforced why this is important for successful improv scenes.

Group mind may be related to team effectiveness in an organization setting. Exposing students to an activity that focused them on the concept of thinking together and building on each other's ideas would seem to have high potential for improving teamwork and team-based results in an organization setting. At the same time, this concept is introduced after eight weeks of training with an intact cohort. It might be premature to say improv can increase teamwork and team effectiveness; there are improv concepts, though, that may offer that potential and one of them is group mind.

Scene painting was another group activity, where students added physical objects to scenes, with two distinct rounds. The first called on students to add an object to an ongoing scene which remained in the scene after the addition. The second called for them to paint a scene with

several objects that would be found in the assigned setting before the scene began and then for the scene to take place in the setting provided. These activities depended upon the imagination of students, their willingness to jump in with ideas, and the ability of students to maintain the setting with the objects and still continue with a scene and the attendant interaction between characters. Again, the value of individual contributions, recommended by the instructor to be “complementary and unique”, emerged in this exchange:

Instructor: Uh huh! You guys made it through initiation. There’s a lot on the table.

[laughter]. You start making choices, you do this, I can do this...I love it, that’s why I’m here.

Let’s get half of you down. Now there’s ten, and we’ll get five down. Ok, so one of you is going to come out and become an object and everyone else must fill out the environment by filling out the space with all of the objects that fit. Don’t tell us what you are until you start the scene. So, think of [unintelligible]. You’ll all be objects. You’re going to do a scene as the object. If somebody came out and they’re obviously a bowling pin, so you line up with them, that wouldn’t be unique, now, would it? But if you were all bowling pins and you started the scene with, “That was some pretty embarrassing work last Saturday.” [sets up the students one at a time to set up a scene as objects]. Cool, what else might be in this scene?

This focused attention on the difference an individual’s choice and contribution can make to an improv scene, provided a model to guide students in future improv scenes, and reinforced the concept of complementary and unique that the instructor was describing. This activity once again engaged the imagination, and comments from students indicated they thought it was unusual and rare to play an object on stage.

***Leading and following.*** The goal with improv training is to provide students with skills they will need to perform an improvisational scene. Part of that requires an understanding of the role of leader and follower and the inherent problems that can bring to improv. As the theater owner pointed out during his interview, improv suffers if one person tries to control or direct a scene, because they are not listening to offers from others (Instructor interview, lines 7874-7879). The improv class first dealt with that with a mirroring activity. All students were on stage together, paired up. The directions were to mirror each other's movements and facial expressions, and to take turns leading and following. Once they began, the instructor called "switch" periodically to indicate they should change who was leading. She also instructed them to "try to make it [who is leading] invisible" and "try to fool me about who's leading." This led in the debrief of the activity to the concept of "following the follower":

Instructor: How did that feel?

Student: In sync.

Instructor: We call that group mind: following the follower. We want to get to a point in improv where no one is leading (lines 575-578).

This was a different notion of leadership than what is typically considered in academe or workplace leadership development. The whole concept of leader is often framed as a set of skills and behaviors that a leader uses in order to generate some set of results, and more traditional theories of leadership, such as that introduced by Taylor (1919) and Drucker (2008), view the leader as a separate and distinct role requiring specific actions and behaviors designed to manage the organization and its people. The idea of follow the follower is more consistent with DeRue's thinking, where the idea of who is leading and role flexibility emerges within the relationship

and interactions of a team, and the ultimate definition of leadership is a social construct, with the lines between leader and follower blurring.

Another alternative view on leading and following emerged with an activity called Art Gallery. All actors were positioned in front of the first row of seats in the theater, facing the stage. The instructions as delivered by the substitute instructor:

One person will jump up and strike a pose, silently. The rest of you, as you see that, see what the first person did, and you'll jump out and do a pose based on what you saw the first person do. And the third person will come out and do the same as the first two people did ...After three people come up and strike a pose, one of the people on the line will name the picture that they see, whatever they think that picture looks like. At that point, the three people will come off, and the person who named it becomes the first person to come out again.

When you come out and pose, turn to the audience. [demonstrates] like this. Go ahead, someone jump out [a bit of a hesitation from students. Someone does jump out, and the exercise begins to unfold.] Janice, can you turn around a bit? All right...someone name it! (Substitute Instructor, lines 1540-1552).

This primarily non-verbal activity provided an opportunity for various clusters of students to physically pose with each other. The student naming the artwork finalized the scene; their titles included Aye-aye Captain, Plane Crash, and Disneyland Vacation.

The debrief of this activity explored the role of the first person to jump out and start this scene (freedom to choose), the second person who joined the scene (power to modify), and the third person who completed the picture (responsibility). It was one example of the role variability required for successful improv. One student's comment on the activity captured the

key point: “Nobody knows the full picture until the person names it” (Student, line 1688). This concept has potential application for leadership and organization development. For example, using an organizational change initiative, the first leader initiates the change, but subsequent leaders have a great deal of impact on it from a different perspective, by being able to modify and complete the initiative. While there is that potential, application of the learning into non-theater contexts was not identified as such during the improv class. If a student were searching for metaphors and applications from the content, however, they could identify that application from this exercise.

A deeper engagement with shifting roles was provided by the Giving Freeze activity, a continuation of non-verbal activities from the previous week. In this activity, all students participated together, moving fluidly around the stage. When the instructor called “freeze”, all players except for one (pre-identified by the instructor) froze, and that single player then moved around the room in any way they wanted, while the other players were frozen in place. At any time, that player could pass focus to another player, and upon passing focus, freeze themselves while the new player moved around the stage. It is important to notice the dynamic while this unfolds:

Great! Cool! [as they’re beginning to pass focus to each other.] So, try to make it so it’s a seamless transition. Nice! Don’t use words...nice! Walk all you want, you can do characters, walk as yourself, have fun with it [laughter]. [The activity continued for several minutes.] You guys are doing great. See if you can time it so that one person starts, and one person stops. [They began to keep it to only one person who had focus.] Good! (Instructor, lines 2881-2886).

The instructor guided them towards accomplishing the goal of the activity while they were practicing it. The instruction for the activity was first, followed by the activity, and only then was instruction provided on ways they could do the activity that was assigned. Again, this was directly opposite of the design of most corporate training programs, where the skill set is identified first, learning objectives follow, a model or skill set is provided and only then does the student practice and experience the desired behavior.

The reverse activity followed, this time with taking focus. This round, someone who was frozen took focus from the person who was moving. The comments from students indicated more difficulty with taking focus than with giving it. At the end of the final round, the instructor noticed someone hesitate, then jump in and take focus. This conversation followed:

If you're going to take it, take it. Nice. And scene! [applause]

How did you take focus?

Student: It was a little more uncomfortable than giving focus.

Instructor: Who else felt that way? [several hands went up] Why?

Beverly: Because it's being assertive...and I think it's like standing up at work (lines 2949-2966).

She went on to describe specific situations at work where she may feel the same discomfort being assertive as she felt when taking focus in this exercise. This was a key learning moment for this student that also illustrates the intended learning process for this theater. Beverly came into the program with the objective to be more assertive at work. After experiencing the activity, she connected the dots (a phrase used by the theater owner when describing the curriculum approach) to link the learning experience with her own learning objectives, via an activity designed to help performers with improv scenes.

The “yes, and” activity primarily focused on the role of giving and taking and the importance of doing both in a scene. The activity required students to practice on stage in pairs, in three rounds. For the first round, one student could only disagree with whatever was offered – the “no.” For the second round, that same student had to say “yes” to whatever was offered, and only yes. The final round asked both students to respond with a “yes, and” to whatever direction that the scene took and whatever was said by another student. When restricted to only one person making offers, the scene took on a one-sidedness that placed most of the burden on the person talking. The final debrief drew attention to the value of give-and-take and responding with a “yes, and”; one student commented:

“I thought [yes, and] was easier because you didn’t have to just rely on yourself, you could rely on the other person and so you could play upon that. You kept on playing and if you ran out of your subject or whatever the other person took over and you just kept playing on each other (Student, lines 4202-4204).

This is another potentially transferrable improv concept. Considering this student’s comments and applying it to a work team, for example, would result in a profoundly simple concept of teamwork: make contributions and allow others to do the same.

A discussion around “yes, and” emerged in this conversation:

Instructor: If you are in your head, what are some of the ways you can get out of it?

Student: You can repeat what the person just said to you, and then do a “yes, and”.

Instructor: Yes, and! We did that! You can repeat what they just said and then build on that.

Students: You know how you use “um” to give yourself enough time to think about it? If you just repeat the [unintelligible] the first person, it will give you enough time to fill in the rest. You give yourself a little breather without stopping the show...

Instructor: That’s where our “yes, and” does it. If we’re doing a scene, and I say, “Oh, these are beautiful flowers.” And you say, “Those are beautiful flowers and they’re the same flowers my husband gave me” that you can pull out and work with it. Now, if the scene keeps going, “Those are the flowers your husband gave you, and I’m your new husband!” [laughter]...my real thing is ...just to keep going. And adding on to the scene (lines 5556-5576).

The example provided by the instructor here modelled improv for the students and was dependent upon her performance experience. She took the abstract concept of “yes, and” and in very few words provided the students with a model to follow, one that opened up possibilities for the scene. Used as a metaphor for leadership, this activity showed students the value of opening possibilities. It’s important to note the student comment about repeating and using verbal fillers to buy time to think. Experienced improvisers would point out that the key is to stop thinking about it (Johstone, 1999; Spolin, 1999).

Dubbing, which is talked about further in the leadership components section, provided a complex experience with flexible roles. Two actors were assigned to do a silent scene, with space/object work and mouthing lines. These two actors were silent; the other two, standing downstage, were filling in the lines of dialogue for their assigned silent acting partner. The result was that those speaking the words had to react to the motions and actions of the actors, and the actors had to adjust their motions and actions to match the lines of dialogue. This activity required focus in multiple, complex ways. Students had to watch all three other actors in order to



maintain coherence in the scene; at the same time, they were asked to respond quickly, in the moment. While this feels contradictory, that an activity that requires focus and attention works against responding quickly, the belief in improv training is the opposite. The instructor repeated several times that the intent was to “get you into your head so you can get out of your head”. The observations supported their concept. The more complicated the activity, the less it was possible to keep up with thinking about everything, and therefore, it placed students in a position where they had to respond instinctively since their analytical brain could not keep up. This was demonstrated by the fact that as the students got deeper into a scene, they would start to respond more quickly, with less hesitation. The role of leader and follower within the scenes in this activity shifted frequently, and which actor was playing which role was often not visible to an observer.

***Moving past approval/disapproval.*** A standard and well-known improvisational game, What Are You Doing, an exercise used on several occasions, illustrates the way focus is addressed in improv. Played in pairs, one player starts the game by acting out a motion for a common task or activity. The second player then asks, “what are you doing?” and the first player must say something other than what they are doing. When the player was making the motion of chopping wood, for example, the answer to what they were doing was “folding laundry.” The second player must then act out the task that was just named (folding laundry in the example), and the game continues that way until someone makes a mistake or pauses too long.

The game’s difficulty is increased in subsequent rounds by adding a required letter. The answer to “what are you doing” must start with that letter. In the final rounds, two letters were added, requiring a two-word answer to the question, each word sequentially starting with the two

letters. Greater hesitation became evident in these later rounds as the students paused frequently to sort out their answers before speaking.

The mechanics of the game seem to force the students playing it to think about their answers. Yet, the rules of the game also require players to answer quickly. This surfaces the approval/disapproval filters in students, the block identified by Spolin (1999). The filters were still in place with this game when it was first introduced, and students were thinking before acting in this activity when it was first introduced. According to Spolin the hesitation is less about a student trying to think of a response within the game, and more about the student evaluating the ideas before they willing to speak it out loud. Improv asked the students in the cohort to move past the filter of self-evaluation and simply react to what is offered by other players.

Beginning with week five, activities advanced in degree of difficulty and their similarity to partial improvisation themes. Directions from the instructor revealed a change in the intensity of the class:

Instructor: All these things that were maybe hiccups for you to get into improv class in the first place, today we are going to set you up where we're going to throw it all at you, and we want you to keep going. Today is intended to get you out of your head and into your body by forcing you to get into your head and then forcing you to get back into your body. Ok? Some people love it and find it very freeing, some people will [models a scream] (lines 4349-4372).

She set expectations for the day:

We're going to push it so you have to trust yourself. And for those who might be more critical of yourself, today we're going to try to push you over that hurdle. By trusting

what you're going to say next is going to be ok. Can we all agree, together, because that is the objective that we will be supportive?

This was a seminal moment in the curriculum, the first time that the instructor laid out the intent of the class so directly. The transition she described, of pushing students beyond thinking about their responses to where they just respond is a critical one for improvisers. It is also one that immersed students in their own self-awareness as they wrestled with their own internal traits that might impede this transition. Students started to notice their own internal barriers.

An example of an activity from this portion of the class was Do Run Run, which presented a different kind of exercise than had been done so far in the class. It was the first singing activity, based on the 1963 song “Do Run Run” by the Crystals, and it required spontaneous rhyming from the students while maintaining the structure of the song. Whichever name was provided for the first line (e.g. “I met him on a Monday and his name was Bill”) the last word of every line after that had to rhyme with Bill. Actors were snapping their fingers in beat with the song, and the rhythm was captured in this example from the class. After every line, the students on stage were singing “da do run run run, da do run run” and the name provided by the instructor was Bob:

And we ran...a mob.

And I ran right there with Rob.

We went and bought a corn of cob

He wasn't there so I started to sob

And then I kinda nod

And on the other side of the door was Todd.

And I thought I was gonna sob? (Students, lines 4458-4465)

The tempo during this activity was slow at first and some students hesitated longer than others, but overall, by the end of it, people were laughing and joking with each other. During the debrief, the class talked about how they had to move past self-editing, something that is talked about again later in this paper:

You had no choice...you needed one word that rhymes, at the end. I don't know how it fits, but it was all in my head.

You knew it was coming. It's not like you can stall and just think about it. It's gonna' be here, so...do it (Students, line 4488-4492).

Later in the activity, the instructor pushed them to go faster and asked about that:

Instructor: So, what was that like going faster?

Student: It made it easier.

Instructor: Did it really make it easier?

Student: Yeah, I think so.

Instructor: Why?

Student: You couldn't really think.

The conversation that followed focused on moving past “right” and “wrong” and removing the self-edit that caused students to hesitate. This was also examined in this case study when analyzing the class content across components of relevant leadership theories. What the students described is the very thing the Spolin designed her theater activities to overcome: the approval/disapproval mechanism (Spolin, 1999).

Similar to the singing activity, without the melody, was Conducted Story. Five players were on stage and one of them was the conductor who pointed to different players for different lengths of time. When a player was pointed to, they added to the story and stopped as soon as the

point from the conductor moved to another player, even if they were mid-sentence or mid-word. That new player then had to pick up the story right there, even if it meant finishing a sentence or word. Again, some players paused longer than others. Here are their thoughts about what it took to do the exercise well:

Instructor: How do you listen?

Student: Intensely. If you're not listening to the story, you might miss something.

Instructor: Yeah. You didn't always get to finish your thoughts. Could you tell when a story was a little bit disjointed and everybody took the story in their own direction? Talk to me about the importance of having it be a cohesive story?

Students:

It just flows better. Otherwise, it changes too quick, and we just got there.

You want to have it where the audience can follow it.

It's more fun if things get folded back in and it builds. If the story is disjointed, then it doesn't build. Right, so you want to have it so you feel like there's something happening.

It came to a climax.

I also noticed how I had to listen...I was listening different for [where] I had to join the story versus [thinking about] where can this go. Active listening, kind of listening and participating to be prepared (lines 4853-4874).

These comments indicate that the students were evaluating the group performance rather than their own individual contribution to it, which can be viewed as moving past their own self-consciousness. As the instructor summarized: "That's what happens when a group of people is collaborative. We achieve something that we wouldn't have been able to achieve on your own. I love it!" (Instructor, lines 4939-40). This focus on being in the moment was presented as a tool

to overcome internal filters, and it could be relevant in many areas, such as coaching and listening skills, making this relevant content in those areas. However, those content areas would require focus on something different than the context within which this activity was utilized; for this program, the activities were primarily focused on encouraging students to react without pre-planning or thinking about it.

The desire to pause and think about responses became evident again with The Alphabet Game, where students carried on a scene with each other, with the requirement that the first letter of the first word of their dialogue had to start with the next letter of the alphabet. This dialogue and description shows the playfulness and also records the difficulty students were experiencing:

Beverly: I have trouble with the alphabet...I have to go all the way through the alphabet song.

Instructor: We'll watch you say the whole alphabet song to yourself! Because it'll be normal. Even if we're doing the game on stage, [models someone struggling to think of which letter comes next. She gets a location for them, which is a gas station in Reno. They start with the letter "r".]

Player A: Rhino, why is there a rhino here, in this desert.

Player B: Somebody must have let it loose.

A: Teeth! It has teeth!

B: Unlikely it would be a normal rhino, I think.

A: Volcano, it came from a volcano.

B: What?!

A: Xylophones? I hear xylophones. Where is that coming from? I'm going to go check it out.

B: I'm trying to think of a letter that starts with "z" but I can't think of any...

Instructor: You're on "y".

B: Oh! That's right. You said something once about xylophones, I believe.

A: [unintelligible] Zebra [unintelligible]

Instructor: Try to start the line with "zebra," ok?

A: Zebras as well! That's part of my whole philosophy.

B: Actually, I think you're right, it was zebras and xylophones and barbarians.

A: Crud! I forgot my barbarian outfit for our weekend in Reno.

B: Death, it looks like death!

Instructor: Good.

A: Entirely possible that I left my outfit...

B: Fire!

A: Great! [unintelligible]

B: Impossible to get another one of those on such short notice.

A: Jeff, use Jeff. He can definitely find one of those in Reno.

B: Kudos! That's a great idea.

A: Look upon them, they give us gold.

B: My, my, you are such an amazing source of knowledge about Reno.

A: Nanny, my nanny, taught me about Reno, because she's from here, actually she's moved here from Spain.

B: Only you would have a nanny from Spain.

A: Perhaps. Ok, I guess I'm going to go to the store and buy myself a new barbarian outfit that maybe is not flammable.

B: Quickly! (lines 6125-6197)

The students began to understand that even a single word, spoken quickly, can be effective in this activity. They caught themselves struggling to remember the letter, and occasional coaching from the instructor guided them through the activity. Watching this activity was a reminder of how difficult a simple exercise can be; players paused frequently to think about the word they needed to continue the scene even though it simply required following the letters of the alphabet sequentially and attaching a word – any word – that started with that letter. In other words, even though the goal of the session was to get students out of their heads (to stop thinking about responses before they spoke them), there was ample evidence that it was difficult for students to do.

***Theater arts.*** A significant part of the level one program provided the students with skills that are required to create a robust, and ideally, an entertaining performance. One of those skills was introduced early in the program and reinforced throughout every class: space/object work. This is the physical depiction of imaginary tasks and motions. For example, holding an imaginary martini glass by the stem would require the student to position their hands in the same way as if the glass were really there. The intent of good space/object work is to help create an imaginary space and setting in which the improv scene can take place. Done well, it paints an imaginary physical setting for audience that draws them into the performance.

Students were also provided activities and directions on how to work with other students to create an imaginary space on stage. Activities to help with this started early in the program, and asked students, practicing in groups, to interact with imaginary objects on the stage. The objects were initially suggested by the instructor and included imaginary hula hoops, car cranks,



tooth brushes, and water bottles. The primary direction given from the instructor was, “Keep it going until your body recognizes what that feels like.”

Another activity designed to enrich performance possibilities was The Where Game. The instructor provided a location and the exercise was to use space/object work to add details to the physical setting. This activity was the first time the students displayed hesitation when asked to volunteer, which resulted in this advice from the instructor:

The way it works is, I’ll start out by giving you a location and you’ll fill it in with all of the objects that would be in that location, in that space. I’m not going to make it easy, you might have to be a ... well we’ll find out. Who wants to go first?

[students hesitate] If you’re nervous, go first! (Instructor, lines 835-840).

She repeated that direction several times throughout the program.

This activity reinforced the role of physicality – what the theater would call “mind/body connection” – by asking actors to become part of the physical space. When the suggestion offered was park, actors became trees, bushes, a person meditating, and a dog. No dialogue was included, only the physical position of the person or object they were playing. For desktop, actors became a stapler, a computer monitor, and two lamps. When they discovered at the end that two of them chose to be lamps, it resulted in laughter and joking among the entire group on the stage. Even though the activity began with some hesitation, by the end all students seemed to be having fun. The instructor played an important role in getting to that outcome:

Good! Terry, thanks, never get comfortable [he had volunteered to go first] Let’s say I said, “Park” and you were going to be an object in the park. Don’t tell us what you are, be that object. [stands, with arms outstretched] Great! So, somebody join him in the park and be another object [another student comes to the front and strikes a pose] Great! Let’s

fill out the space. What else does a park need? [another student poses, squatting with arms forward forming a circle] Perfect. What's another object that can fit, that goes in a park? Everyone is going to have to do it, so...[another pose]. Excellent, good job! Cool, what else? Sweet! [all eight students pose around the stage space in different poses, in relatively close proximity to each other. Then, the instructor asks each person to identify what object they were. Answers: tree, also a tree, a statue, meditative person, trash can, a dog, a dog walker, a picnic table, and a shrubbery. Each response was met with a positive affirmation.] Yay! [applause].

We're going to do a few of those. One at a time you're just going out and you're whatever fits in that space. I love this next one, because it's weird. Show me a desk, a desktop. What goes on a desktop? [A similar process follows, with each person following the other and striking a standing, sitting, squatting, or crouching pose in close proximity to each other.] Great! What else? (instructor, lines 843-862).

Friendly and fun support was woven into the entire exercise. Even though the students were being asked to do something unusual, they quickly began to laugh, applaud, and joke with each other throughout the activity. The role of the instructor was key here, and it was important that she was an experienced performer who could provide references to her own experience, knew how to guide students toward greater comfort with improv, and understood the activity in the larger context of a performance, rather than just going through an exercise.

During a debrief conversation following one of these exercises, the instructor asked: "What did you do that was complementary and unique?" (instructor, line 905). That generated these responses from students: "I observed the scene for a while to see what was still missing" and "You kind of balance each other...you stay in view of each other, so you can actually see

(line 916-917).” These are key improvisational skills aligned with the roots of improv (Spolin 1999; Johnstone, 1999).

The group nature of improv also began to emerge in conversations about these activities. When asked to identify some of the things they had to do in order to become an object or fill out the space, one student responded, “Watching what other people are doing, so you’re not doing something similar (line 876)”. The instructor also prompted similar responses with the question: “What did you do to be seen by everybody else, to take care of your scene partners? (Instructor, lines 890-891)”. Taking care of fellow team members was a consistent theme in the class frequently reinforced by the instructor.

Filling out the space was added later in the program. This series of activities required students to create an imaginary place on the stage. There were a series of variations, that started when one student selected a profession to enact, and several more students joined the setting and add something additional to that setting. These were non-verbal activities that required the sub-groups to work together without planning or talking during the activity. Similar to the Art Gallery activity, students had to figure out how to fill out the scene using space/object work. This required paying attention to what was already offered and making a quick choice to add something additional. As one student described it, “I declared and then yielded. I had what I did and then yielded when I saw something I had to adapt to” (Student, lines 1992-1993). This give and take described by the student demonstrated he understood role flexibility within the improv activity. While there was no evidence from the study that this learning was transferred to a non-theater context, role flexibility would be a relevant concept to include in a leadership development program, supported in a later discussion about the connection of the curriculum to the selected leadership theories.

A standard direction for improvisation is to not ask questions, and a simple exercise was used to reinforce this learning called No Questions. The exercise was simple: students enacted simple two-person scenes, and the only restriction was that they could not ask questions. As the instructor explained it, in improv, a question tends to be unhelpful in advancing a scene since it does not provide any information about the character, the location, or the relationship. The direction and side-coaching that was provided asked students to answer the question to themselves, and then say that rather than asking the question.

Students frequently asked a question during this activity, but after being prompted a few times by the instructor to “flip it” (meaning turn the question into a statement) they began to catch themselves and correct it without coaching. Students reported after the activity that it was difficult to not ask questions, prompting this discussion which revealed why statements are better than questions in improv:

Instructor: Do we ask questions in everyday conversations? What do statements do for a scene?

Student: Adds value.

Instructor: What are some of the questions you wanted to ask?

Student: Are you from Philadelphia?

Instructor: What happens when you say “you’re from Philadelphia” versus asking Terry’s character if he’s from Philadelphia?

Students: The character knows he’s from Philadelphia.

Instructor: Yes! Is that a gift to you, to know you’re from Philadelphia? Or is it more work for you, to answer whether you’re from Philadelphia...so we make a statement.

Now you know you're from Philadelphia, everyone knows you're from Philadelphia and we can move on to the next thing (lines 5041-5071).

This specific aspect of improv may only be applicable to the performance of improv as asking effective questions is typically a useful leadership skill, especially in the area of coaching.

Another exercise that was focused on a performance aspect of improv was called Entrances and Exits. Four players at a time were on stage, and the instructor provided each of them a different word. They reviewed the words several times so that all actors knew each other words. The game required that anytime someone used the word attached to a player, that player would leave the stage if they were out in the scene or enter the stage if they were not. Upon entering or exiting, the actor was required to justify their entrance or exit as part of the ongoing scene. An important part of the direction was the importance of leaving space for the person to enter or exit once their word has been said.

Actors in the first round of this activity struggled at first to sort out the directions and how to manage it within the scene. Their words were jam, dragon, Advil, and jar and the setting was a farmer's market:

So, what brings you to the Farmer's Market today?

What I need is a jar for all my Advil and I want to be very [unintelligible].

[Derrick hesitates to move on "jar" and then figures it out, saying aloud, "Ah, I get it!"]

Instructor: Yes! That's ok! So, go ahead [gesturing him to go on stage]

Jean: So, then do I leave?

Instructor: Uh-huh! [gesturing and noticing the confusion some of the players are experiencing] If your word is said, if you're on stage then you leave. [various comments

at the same time from students, clarifying the directions] You said your word [pointing to student], and you said your word twice (lines 5651-5672).

Student: I said his word twice. [players sort out the rules of the game].

The instructor also provided coaching on avoiding questions and instead turning those into statements. Several rounds of this followed and the students grew more comfortable with the rules of the game and the scenes began to flow. The biggest gap was the failure to leave space for someone to justify their entrance or exit.

The dialogue was less important with this activity than was the physical activity. The comedy of this game can be the frequency of entrances and exits falling in rapid succession, and the students did discover this. There is comedy as well in the creative justification of an exit or entrance and the students did not integrate assigned to the other actors, the coherence and quality of the scene suffered.

The instructor helped students manage the complexity with in-the-moment coaching and conversations about the scene, followed by additional rounds of practice:

Instructor: What happens in the entrancing and the exiting sometimes?

Students:

You had to think of a way, when you heard your name or your word, why should I be leaving? Sometimes it was coming really fast.

There was a lot to pay attention to. Leaving was easier, I thought. But coming in, was like, “I’m here but I don’t know what to say.” Justifying your entrance was harder for me to gather your response. I didn’t even think about it, I just walked in with no...

Instructor: As a player, if you say someone’s word, and they’re about to enter – or if your other scene partner said that word – to leave space for them to justify their entrance. So, a

lot of times, you will be, “Oh, somebody said my word. But they’re still talking and so I don’t want to interrupt them. But I’m supposed to be entering right now.” There’s a lot of rules, and you will be thinking, “I don’t know how to juggle this.” ...it’s easy to kind of get stuck in the “do I enter, do I exit.” It can be really fun if you know other people’s words and you [say]... “I’d really like a jar of dragon berry jam.” So, he would say, “There’s some in the back, I’ll go get it.” And then I’d say, “And while you’re back there I’d love a jar of honey” and now he has to come back and do a “We’re out of honey.” “Who ya’ callin’ honey?” [laughter] ... but, you know what I’m saying. You can play.

That being said, let’s play it again. Let’s get four people up, let’s mix up the group. And play this scene really slowly so that if someone’s word is said, that they have time to enter. [gets new words for each person. The location is circus] Let’s get two people on stage. Great! Action! (lines 5754-5782).

By modeling what a good scene in this game would look like, the instructor provided a template for students to apply for the remaining rounds of the activity. On the surface, this activity provides early training on entering and exiting scenes, something that new players typically find difficult. The skills required to do that, however, have wider application outside of the theater context: listening, focus, decisiveness, and attention to others. Those are complex skills to practice in any setting, and the difficulty of integrating these into the exercise was evident. One could expect similar difficulty for a student in a leadership development context, attempting to learn the same skills.

Adding complexity was introduced with the improv technique of “bending the space” (Instructor, line 6825). The instructor introduced the idea that any kind of setting is possible on stage. With the rules of this game, a fuller engagement of imagination began to unfold from the

students. An example of this was a scene where one actor was across a river on the opposite bank. It required to students to be able to differentiate between a stage shout and a stage whisper, to create the illusion of space, height, or distance, opening up additional stage setting possibilities. Imagination was the primary focus of this activity.

Stage Whispers and Stage Shouts was played in groups of three students who played scenes where two of the characters were separated by imaginary distance from the third so that yelling was needed to communicate with them (across a river in the first round). The two actors near each other could then carry on a quieter conversation in such a way that the third character could not hear them. This was a difficult activity, different from previous exercises, and offered another way to enrich a scene on stage.

Coaching for the activity focused on the directions (speaking more loudly or softly) and also on noticing what characters said:

Instructor: Think about what you just said. What did you just say?

Terry: The part about coming down or that I'm not the best belay person.

Instructor: She said one other thing.

Student: He's so selfish?

Instructor: Great! So, start being that. Start being selfish. Keep going (lines 6738-6751).

The question "what did you just say?" was a critical question in that it focused the students more clearly on noticing what was being said around them and what they themselves were saying. The kind of detail pointed out above (being selfish) can become a theme around which the character is built, and the scene is shaped. Putting aside that specific application, the instructor was pointing toward more than a skill. Being in the moment is reflective of focus, defined by Spolin (1999) as "directing and concentrating attention" (p. 360). This focused attention may be the



most fundamental improv skill, even more important than “yes, and”. In order to give and take, make a unique and complementary contribution, or say “yes, and”, you have to notice what is happening right now. Focus is “the anchor (the static) which makes movement possible” (Spolin, 1999, p. 360).

Scenes in Inclement Weather was a similar activity. Students were assigned a weather condition in a location (for example, stuck with a broken-down car in the desert) and had to engage in a scene where they showed the weather condition but did not talk about it. The performance of the space/object work needed to create the setting was done well and the students seemed to execute this activity easily; again, however, the instructor had to coach around not talking about the weather or the location and instead focusing on the interaction and relationship between the characters. Imagination and physically manifesting an imaginary condition were the intended skill focus.

Another new activity was called Move Closer or Move Farther. A two-person activity, the instructor provided the setting and the relationship between the characters. This game required players to first move closer or farther away from the other character before delivering their line. Students had initial difficulty with this, but most caught on as it was modelled and practiced. This activity slowed the scene down and forced the actors to absorb what was said before responding. Moving also signaled something to the other actor which provided additional emotional value to the scene. The tendency for the actors was to rush through and immediately respond to what was said either without moving or while moving. The instructor had to frequently coach students to move first, pause, and then respond.

The debrief provided these insights:

Instructor: Yay! What did you guys think of this exercise? What happens when you move?

Students:

It made it more dynamic.

It amplified the emotional information being given.

It forces people to move and not respond.

It made everything more organic, rather than just blurting it out.

Instructor: Is that surprising?

Students: [positive affirmations]

Instructor: Of course, we want you in your body, we don't want you pre-planning. It does inform the relationship a little bit, and it ... I think really what it is, it gives you time to absorb what your body feels about your relationship (Class observations, lines 7166-7183).

The last comment from the instructor is important. She reminds students that the intent was not to pre-plan, and while this last technique, if used during a performance, would allow a little more time to think, she points out that the purpose was to allow your body to feel what was just said. This is different than thinking about your reaction and asked students to reflect not on the emotions they felt, but rather what their body was feeling. Based on my own experience with developing leaders this would be unusual content for students in an organizational setting. Yet, the fact that is different may help leaders notice the value more easily.

This group of activities provided practice for future scenes and started to foreshadow future training. Less about self-discovery, activities like these introduced the skills students

would need to perform improv on stage, and expanded what students considered possible in an improv scene.

Additional activities focused on physical movement and pausing, one of them called *Catching What Was Said with Your Body*. Again, the actors had to pause, this time to physically “catch” the line that was offered, allowing the line to absorb into their body and then move themselves accordingly. Only then were they supposed to respond with another line. The instructor had to remind them several times to pause before responding. This series of more physically focused activities was summarized well with the instructor’s comment, “You have to accept it fully...sometimes you can accept the gift but you’re not really, fully – you’re only taking a little piece of it. In this way, you have to commit to taking it completely” (Instructor, lines 7369-7370). She also described how choosing emotions changes the dynamics of a scene:

Sometimes you don’t know [what’s coming from inside you]. They’ll say something and [she gasps and draws back] and even in that moment you can choose what your reaction might be. I was watching a set and the person was folding something, and another character came up behind her and flipped her hair. And she was annoyed. And I thought, “That’s perfectly normal. People get annoyed.” But, what happens if you choose to be enticed by that? Or any other emotion, right? What if you start crying and you say, “men love it when you start crying and they don’t know why?” [laughter] You start having this other theme that you weren’t really anticipating. [She models a back and forth exchange like kids being annoyed with each other] We get caught in this back and forth versus, “Oooo. My turn to smell you!” (Instructor, lines 7381-7390).

This is gentle guidance, to help students understand that they can choose from a range of emotions, followed by a funny line that draws on the performance experience of the instructor.

She provides an alternative path that students can take by choosing a different emotion. In improv scenes, anger or frustration or annoyance are very common emotional choices characters make; the instructor was helping these students understand that there are many other emotional choices that could make the scene more interesting. This is similar to a familiar concept within leadership development curriculum: choosing your emotional reaction to difficult situations as a way to increase your personal effectiveness in that situation. Simply explained, the concept taught is that positive thoughts are more likely to generate possibilities than negative, complaining thoughts. It is an interesting parallel that something similar is true in improv, as described by this instructor. Choosing anger and frustration can feel easy to new improvisers but can produce uninteresting scenes. Choosing an unexpected reaction can create a more interesting scene on stage, and a different set of results in a professional setting.

The final class session introduced activities that required students to integrate skills learned up to that point. One was called Beauty and the Beast, where students were asked to fill out the physical space of a scene by once again becoming an inanimate object only this time the object could speak. Again, this was a stretch beyond what students had been asked to do up to this point. Students had to practice this a few rounds to get used to the idea of bringing an inanimate object to life for a scene and commented on the strangeness of that during the debrief. A key concept emerged during that discussion, along with a reinforcement of the concept of “yes, and”:

Instructor: Right [laughter]. The focus became the objects, right? In scenes, talk about the relationship. Anyway, that was really fun. What do you think the takeaway was? What were some of the takeaways for you?

Student: Just let it flow.

Instructor: Right?! You're a human in a playground scene where it was spiders talking to you and the trees, you're going to cut a branch off a tree and take it home...we're in support of you so we'll have to let you go. You have to go with the flow, right, because if you [say] "I'm sorry, I'm not doing a scene with you where [unintelligible] can talk."

What's the fun in that?

The idea of "letting it flow", mentioned in a previous chapter, is a required ability for improv and the activity pushed students into that experience, strange as it may have felt. As one student said during the scene, illustrating the strangeness of free-flowing imagination, "I shouldn't be arguing with my sprinkler in front of you." This is consistent with the value of enhancing creativity as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1996).

A game from short-form improv was also included in the final class session, one that required students to quickly respond to a suggestion with what would be called a "one liner" in stand-up comedy. The World's Worst game starts with a suggestion, typically a profession, and students came to the front of the stage in rapid suggestion with something that described a worst version of that profession. Sometimes, the suggestion was a location or product, and the students delivered the worst version of a slogan for that location or product. The perspective shift suggested by the instructor during the debrief of this activity captured a philosophical underpinning of improv:

I think our fear when we're doing an improv scene is like, "Oh, doctor, I'm dying." And you [think], I don't know how to play a doctor, I'm an accountant. So why not play the world's worst doctor? If you don't know how to play something or if you do, sometimes the fun thing to see is not how much you know, but how much you don't know  
(Instructor, lines 8421-8424).

That final comment from the instructor was representative of the perspective shift required for successful improvisation. The ability to willingly embrace the unknown with a sense of joy was an underlying principle of the entire curriculum.

### **Leadership Theory Components**

The analysis of the study's observations and interviews compared to the previously identified leadership theories appears in Table 4. Some aspect of each component was revealed in the curriculum and class experiences. Among the components most frequently observed, all four theories are involved, with adaptive leadership most common.

Table 4

*Leadership Theory Components Compared to Class Observations*

<b>Leadership Behavior/Skill</b>	<b>Observed in improv class/ curriculum</b>	<b>Theory Y</b>	<b>Bennis</b>	<b>Adaptive Leadership</b>	<b>Authentic Leadership</b>
Able to operate in a dynamic environment	✓		✓	✓	✓
Awareness of immediate context	✓				✓
Comfort with ambiguity	✓			✓	
Create deep connections with people	✓			✓	✓
Directness	✓				✓
Facilitation	✓	✓		✓	
Focus on the individual and individual ideas	✓	✓	✓		
Immediate adaptive responsiveness	✓			✓	✓
Openness		✓	✓	✓	✓
Relational	✓	✓		✓	
Relinquishing control	✓	✓	✓		
Resiliency	✓				✓
Role flexibility	✓			✓	
Self-awareness	✓		✓		
Self-direction	✓	✓	✓		
Shared leadership	✓			✓	
Transparent	✓		✓	✓	
Trust	✓				✓

The highest number of observations connected to these components fell in the categories of self-awareness, relational, immediate adaptive response, and role flexibility. These were observed in the class with the most frequency. Relinquishing control, focus on the individual and individual ideas, and able to operate in a dynamic environment were in the second tier of

frequency. Directness, and create deep connections with people were in the next most frequent grouping. The other components were only observed infrequently and openness, the only component that crossed all categories of leadership theories, was observed the least frequently.

**Self-awareness.** The most prevalent component observed was self-awareness. This is a core dimension of Bennis' depiction of leadership. Benning dared leaders to explore the inner self through his "four lessons of self-knowledge:

- One: You are your own best teacher.
- Two: Accept responsibility. Blame no one.
- Three: You can learn anything you want to learn.
- Four: True understanding comes from reflecting on your experience" (Bennis, 1989, p.56).

City Theater challenges students to examine their own self-editing, their ability to trust and support each other, and their willingness to have fun. There were multiple moments during debriefings and end-of-class summaries where students shared their experience of self-awareness that they were applying beyond the walls of the theater, evidenced by these two comments from two different students at different times in the class:

Jean: I have this really boring job, I work in a bank with financials. I feel like there's different parts going off in my brain. It just feels really different. It just feels psychologically different. I hope that's a good thing. I feel connected with a lot of enthusiastic parts of myself. I know what to expect [in my life], it's been the same way for too many years. This is so cool!

Student: There are two thoughts...the first one was when you struggle and that will happen, you realize it's a play game. Nothing happens to you, so you keep going. You



learn that it's ok. All this self-editing is you have a fear of how you're perceived...and every time, you're ok. And so, it's ok, you don't have to self-edit, you're in an accepting group and you're on stage and they're all gifts and it's all ok. I think it's nice.

The interview with the instructor revealed her perception of changes within students as their perceptions of how they can interact shifted. Speaking about one of the students, who she described as "...in his work...an introvert and a critical thinker. He's taking an improv class to be more able to be on the spot" (Instructor interview, line 7728-7732). She remarked about this same student in the final class noting how she had "seen him blossom" during the eight weeks. In another instance, a student celebrated the connection with a different side of themselves:

What I liked about today was, I liked the scenes, it was fun to pull things from real life. And interact with other people. I really liked being the parolee, because in real life I'm the goody-two-shoes, I never went to the principal's office. I got to do something different (Jean, lines 4296-4298).

The theater owner had similar impressions. After describing that he had "file folders filled with thank you notes" from graduates of the classes, he talked about individual self-discovery:

I used to think this improv was magic, improv's great, but after thirty years of it, I just find that it's, it's *them*. The people that are ready to make a change, and they by luck or happenstance or something, they take an improv class, which is just the best thing they can do for themselves. But, *they* sign up for the classes, *they* pay for the classes, *they* apply for the scholarships here, and *they* come every week. And so, it's not me, it's not the improv, it's *them*. The improv gives them a focal point to focus on while they're developing their skills (Theater Owner interview, lines 8022-8028).

The learning objectives of the improv class curriculum are designed at City Theater to be brought to the class by the participants. The resulting self-awareness is unique to the individual, more a result of answering their own agenda than following that provided by the theater. The observed conversations led by the instructor often included the question, “How was that for *you*?” [emphasis added]. Based on the observed curriculum, facilitation, and student experience, this entry level improv workshop had a strong emphasis on self-awareness.

**Relational.** Another frequently observed component was relational, an aspect of adaptive leadership and theory Y, which describes the need for direct and open communication between leader and follower with high value placed on the quality of the relationship. As previously mentioned, adaptive leadership includes the idea that leadership roles only emerge as part of a social interaction, with an exchange between follower and leader (DeRue, 2011).

The content of the improv workshop captured the essence of relationship with the frequent question from the instructor, begun during class one, “How did you take care of each other?” This applied to silent scenes where students were posing for a photo to gibberish scenes. The focus on others was also revealed in the interviews with the instructor and theater owner as they described their supportive philosophy. Students understood this, evidenced during the translation scenes, with this student comment about what made the translation more funny and interesting: “When everyone was in on the game...when we added to each other” (Student, line 2745). This was explored further:

Instructor: What are some of the challenges of being the translator?

Students:

Space...between talking.

Giving you time after each sentence.

Instructor: Why is it hard as the actor in the scene to leave that space?

Student: Because you want to react to the other player. If she was going to try to open the combination, I wanted to help instead of focusing on the translator.

Instructor: That's it! There's the two of you and you almost know what to say and they know what to say and you forget to leave space to actually hear what's being translated (lines 3341-3357).

This captures the essence of improv relationships and the relational component of leadership.

Rather than approaching a relationship with a pre-planned agenda that follows a predictable pattern, the actual interaction is allowed to shape the relationship and a priority is placed on paying attention and noticing each other's contributions. That last phrase is transferrable as is to any leadership development workshop about building effective teams: pay attention and notice each other. By itself, however, without the context of improv theater, the message may not be as powerful.

The improv concept of "show don't tell" is supportive of the emergent notion of leadership stated by DeRue (2011). While DeRue would point toward emergent roles, the improv curriculum points toward emergent relationships that are allowed to evolve:

Instructor: So, it goes back to the premise of better to show the story not to tell it. Show don't tell or show the story don't tell the story. What does that mean?

Student: Go beyond the words.

Instructor: Yeah. What are the ways we show instead of tell?

Students:

Motion

Gestures

Tone

Inflection

Instructor: What's the other thing we talked about a little bit? Emotion. So those are all things...you could [say], "I'm really mad at you!" or [shows anger with her face and tone without saying anything] (lines 3631-3648).

Again, a focus on non-verbal communication appeared, specific to the performance context. The concept could be transferrable to leadership development, but as delivered in this workshop it was purely performance-related.

Also related to socially constructed roles, fluid roles were examined in this improv class, which changed the relation between the characters in the scene and between the actors who played those characters:

Instructor: What happens when someone is an unequal participant in the scene?

Student: When you're the other person, you have to make up for it...it can die.

This exchange required the student to examine the imaginary scene just played and their own and their fellow actor's preferences and choices in relation to each other. This self-examination is designed to raise their awareness of what is going on around them and their own reactions to it, something that increased their self-awareness and improved stage relationships. Such self-examination within a leadership context would be equally relevant.

The focus on relationships was a persistent theme that emerged in the program. There is a tendency with new improvisers to talk about whatever task is being done on the stage, and this was evident in the observed cohort. For example, if the two actors are in a kitchen and providing space/object work to support that setting – for example, chopping, opening a refrigerator, or cooking food – they will then start talking about cooking or something kitchen-related. To move

past this tendency, the improv instruction focused students on relationships.

Here is an example of a relationship-based reaction in a scene during week six that was reinforced by the instructor:

Character A: Get out of here!...hit the road. We're gonna' get killed.

Character B: I'm not afraid of lions.

A: Just because you're not afraid doesn't mean we won't get killed.

B: [long pause] Kenya, I lived there for 10 years, I can tame lions.

A: Lions are not your friends, no matter where you lived.

B: Maybe there's a lot you don't know about me.

Instructor: Good!

The scene then shifted to become about what character A did not know about character B, rather than about lions. Who the characters were and their relationship between each other became the focus, not their location. Focusing relationships was a key leadership component identified in the literature and multiple sections of the improv workshop aligned with that component. Another scene, where the characters were car shopping at a dealership, provided another example:

Derrick: Right call, let's not forget about that. If we have a baby on the way, we're going to need the extra room. [laughter...Belinda has reacted with a face that says, "no baby".]

Instructor: Look at her and absorb that

Belinda: ...Tommy I thought we discussed this earlier. I don't do kids. That's why I was thinking more of the SUV so we can spend more time outdoors.

Derrick: Terrific! I don't want kids either.

Belinda: Uhhh...what a relief. Who knew that car buying would bring us so much closer together? (lines 6262-6273).

The instructor's direction to "look at her and absorb that" shifted the scene from transactional conversation about car-buying to the deepening relationship between the characters. Such focus on others is key in improv and in leadership. This was reinforced within the theater context during a debriefing conversation:

Substitute Instructor: Why would we focus on relationships? Or do we focus on relationships?

Student: If you have relationships, you can build other things around those relationships.

Substitute Instructor: Interesting thought. Other thoughts?

Student: It's kind of human nature, we want to see interaction.

Adhering to a Socratic method, the instructor encouraged the insight around relationship.

Following the activities observed in the class, a similar approach around this component could be applied within a leadership development context. While it would be likely that students in that context would reach the same insights as described here, there would be no predictable guarantee. This might result in a more directed post-activity discussion, where the instructor would point out the key role that relationships play, along with ways to build that relationship. This different approach might negatively impact the emotional energy of the insight displayed by the students in this workshop.

**Immediate adaptive response.** This leadership theory component was also observed frequently in the class. This component is identified with adaptive leadership, specifically described by Kahn (1990) as "cognitively vigilant, and empathically connected to others in the service of the work they are doing in ways that display what they think and feel, their creativity, their beliefs and values" (p.700). It is also aligned with authentic leadership, defined by Avolio et

al. (2004) as connecting with personal and social identification between leader and follower and to include the ability to model adaptive responses.

DeRue (2011) sees leadership roles as fluid and a social construct, brought to life in the improv practice of “yes, and.” What emerges in an improv scene mirrors the dynamic of socially created leadership roles. An example from the study:

Student: The audience provided the scene or the setting. And we worked with each other, and added to each other...there’s a “yes, and” collaboration...and nobody knew where it was going (Student, lines 2520-22).

This willingness to allow roles (and in the case of a theater performance, characters) to emerge allowed the space for collaboration to occur. Defined this way, the improv content could be readily adapted to leadership development, as collaboration is a common competency within organizations and frequently is an expectation of contemporary leaders.

The dubbing exercise in week six was another example of emerging relationships based on responding to things as they occur. With two students acting out the scene physically while another two provided the dialogue created an unusual pattern of relationships on stage that transcended any one actor’s ability to control or plan out the scene. Eye contact shifted frequently among all four players, and those physically acting out the scene had to make adjustments based on the dialogue that was being done for them. Conversely, the dubbers who were supplying the dialogue made adjustments to their choices based on the actions of the two who were physically acting. The dynamics of the game pushed students to adapt their responses immediately, in the moment, without the opportunity to plan ahead.

Pushing students to go faster in various exercises also helped to create a similar dynamic, as illustrated in this exchange:

Instructor: So, what was that like going faster?

Students: It made it easier.

Instructor: Did it really make it easier?

Student: Yeah, I think so.

Instructor: Why?

Students: You couldn't really think.

Instructor: Because there's no time to think, right? (lines 4530-4551).

Creating speed in activities throughout the program was a common strategy, intentionally not allowing time to think. The instructor explored with the students the role of thinking in these two debriefing conversations:

Instructor: So why do you think in this game?

Students: What???

Instructor: Why do you think?

Students:

You want to win.

[It's] strategic.

You think because it's hard to support the rest of the cast. If you just sit there like a lump of clay, you're not receiving the gift and passing it on.

Instructor: Yup. When you're sitting there thinking about your words, is it possible to miss out on what other people are doing? [5]

This exchange captured the essence of improvisation: performing theater without a script. The self-development that this type of activity inspired showed up in student comments, discussed later in this chapter. A similar idea was described by Bennis (1989), when he talks about "the



blessed impulse” that great leaders know how to follow.

Later in the class, the role of being right or wrong is examined:

Instructor: What are the results of thinking?

Students:

You just sit.

Instructor: Great! What are good and bad things that come from thinking...?

Students: Bad thing would be just slowing down. Thinking instead of acting, of doing.

Instructor: Great.

Students: We’re focused on “oh man, I messed up” instead of rolling with it.

Instructor: What do you think is more important: getting the right word, or keeping the rhythm? (line 4593-4640).

The phenomenon of judging what you are going to say before you say it was labelled “self-editing in week five of the class. The theme for that week was “stop self-editing” with the label “getting stuck in your head” as the phrase used to diagnose the condition. This exchange between instructor and students captures the adaptive response phenomenon:

Instructor: What happens when you try to be right or worry about the rhyme?

Student: It kills the flow.

Instructor: It does, right? You’re doing the scene, you have your thing, and you saw it go [makes whooshing noise]. [laughter] What happens when you trust yourself?

Students:

...It’s easier

It flows

Everybody going along

Thinking fast

More enjoyable

Instructor: When someone is taking longer, did you just, every time you guys got there, you found something, you solved the puzzle, you found something that would work.

Students: [Agreeing and nodding]

Instructor: How do you think we use this exercise to stop self-editing?

Students:

There's only so many things you can do in the moment, you just come up with a word and don't worry about what people are thinking.

Trusting yourself

Instructor: You're trusting yourself! You open your mouth and you keep going and look at your team mate and your partner and what you're doing and you'll like the antelope better, killing bears for hats different than your current hat you have [referring to parts of the scenes; response was laughter across the group] (lines 5237-5273).

Overall, the content of the curriculum in this program provided multiple skill- and behavioral-based tools connected with this leadership theory component, one already identified as relevant within both the improv and leadership contexts.

**Role flexibility.** This component is also a part of the adaptive leadership model described by Avolio et al. It was observed in the class with the creation of fluid leadership roles and throughout the program. In addition, a model for contributing from different roles in an improv scene was described in class that could be applied to leadership roles:

From the first day, when you got the brief history of improv, they talk about Johnstone, Keith Johnstone. He had the principle that talked about the circle of expectations. You

guys hit on it as you talked about the first, the second, and the third person. The first person has the freedom to set the tone, to use your words, Kristie. The second person then has the power to adapt, to modify. And like you were talking about, Janice, the third person has the responsibility to bring it all together...If I had a whiteboard [gesturing as if there were a whiteboard on stage]. The first person has the freedom, the second person has the power to adjust it, and the third person draws a circle around that and has the responsibility to bring it all together. So, if you destroy, if the third person goes way off and is not complimentary, to build on what's created, it crumbles, making it hard for whoever is watching it to name it, really, for it to come together (Substitute Instructor, lines 1699-1712).

This shifting of roles among several possibilities was also reinforced in the final week of the class, with the Hotel Lobby activity. In that, students tried on leading a scene and playing various support roles. During the debrief, students were called to reflect on their preferences and the value of each role. The point about improv scenes was that students will be called upon to play a role that is different than their preferences, but one that the scene needs to advance. Applied to leadership, the learning could be that leadership roles will have multiple facets and that leaders are also called upon to be followers.

**Relinquishing control, able to operate in a dynamic environment, and focus on the individual/individual ideas.** These three components were the next most common found in the study's observations. An important concept of improv surrounds leading and following. As they describe it, "We call that group mind: following the follower. We want to get to a point in improv where no one is leading" (Instructor, lines 577-578). There were frequent references to this concept, with descriptions of the negative impact on one person trying to dominate and lead

a scene. Combined with the unplanned and unscripted core aspects of improvisation, this leads to a condition that embraces relinquishing control.

The instructor also made it fun and easy to relinquish control. In the story symphony, where players were randomly picked to add to the story and the story emerged from the combined effort, she had this to say: “So, I’d like to report that none of you said, ‘I wasn’t done! [laughter] Point back at me, because I have something very smart to share! You are ruining this story by passing it off!’ You have to let go of what you had hoped you were going to say, or what was passed to you.” This presents a picture of relinquishing control as something positive, or even a relief.

Give and take was another concept given a strong focus. Several activities involved giving and taking focus. “Today’s theme was appropriate giving and taking. You can kind of think of it like a ping pong tournament, like we want to be giving and taking. Sometimes it’s appropriate to take, it feels weird to take focus for some. For others, it’s a lot easier for them to take it, be ready to relinquish it. Be aware of that” (Instructor, lines 4243-4246). The class discussion encouraged individual exploration around where students’ preferences and comfort level lay.

The activity called “What Are You Doing” provided an illustration of operating in a dynamic environment. Virtually all content of improv involves an element of unpredictability, and successfully performing in this art form requires the ability to navigate what emerges. At one point, when the directions provided by the instructor called for the letters “C” and “E” be used in the answer to the question, one player said, “Creating evocation.” Obviously, there is no known motion to represent this non-existent action and the actor receiving that paused momentarily and then started making a motion. The instructor jumped right in and said, “Yes, that’s what it looks

like!” (Instructor, line 1440-1441).

Focus on the individual and individual ideas was observed frequently as well. The instructor in the level one class would frequently guide students to “listen to what she said” or “absorb that before you respond.” Theory Y and Bennis each believed a focus on individuals and individual ideas was important for leadership.

McGregor (1960) believed a focus on individual talents and motivations was critical for leadership. Individualized approaches and ideas are encouraged over consistency and uniformity. Similarly, the idea of give-and-take presented early in the improv class requires actors to apply focused attention to individual offers. For example:

Instructor: So, the dubber is what you hear. And you’re hoping that, we’re watching to see it backed up. As the actor, you are kind of at the mercy of the dubber, because that’s what they said. If you’re acting something and the dubber doesn’t pick up on what you’re doing, then how does that feel? [gives an example]

Student: Not seen

The instructor provided basic advice on noticing individual ideas: “It’s harder to pick up on something when you don’t know what it is. Right? You have to really pay attention to pick it up” (Instructor, lines 784-786). Students commented on several occasions about the need to pay attention. This intense focus on what an individual is saying and doing embody this leadership component.

**The third tier of leadership theory components.** These three components were observed at a moderate level during the study.

***Directness.*** One of the key traits of authentic leadership identified by Avolio et al. (2004) that relate to this study is directness. “[Authentic leaders] are as guided by the qualities of the

heart, passion, and compassion as they are by qualities of the mind” (Avolio, et al., 2004, p. 806). This open directness was evident within the improv class as well:

Instructor: We’re starting to pile all these things together. At this point in the curriculum, we get to a point where we think, “Oh my goodness, I have to do object work, I have to create a space, I have to have a relationship with this person. That’s a lot to have going on. Today, it’s about stop self-editing. What do you think we mean by “stop self-editing”?”

Students”

Stop thinking about your self

Don’t hold back

Instructor: Don’t hold back! Yes!!! What else?

Students:

Don’t overthink it.

Commit.

Instructor: Yes, so all these things that were maybe hiccups for you to get into improv class in the first place, today we are going to set you up where we’re going to throw it all at you, and we want you to keep going.

There was an aspect of openness implied in this exchange as well, but the focus of the activities, debriefings, and side-coaching was on speed and directness. For example, the emphasis on not talking about the surroundings or the activity but instead getting right into the details – and problems – of the relationship spoke to creating direct responses from players during a scene.

***Create deep connections with people.*** “It’s ok to stumble, support each other, just keep going, make sure that we’re all contributing and accepting gifts” (Student, lines 5219-5220). This

was illustrative of connections created during the level one class. The supportiveness of the theater owners, the instructors, and the curriculum design has already been established. There were also observed instances where students showed supportiveness of each other, such as this:

Particularly for improv, if we're in a scene, if there's other people, we take care of the other players, we help follow them by paying attention to what we can see. We break the line to try and see...and if we're looking to see if they're following then we should be good, right? If there's someone behind you watching you and someone in front of you watching you, how do you take care of them? Big motions, big hands, repetitive. We don't want our improv to be predictable, that's not what I'm saying. How do we take care of the mind/body connection and do the follow the follower? If I'm doing something that the person behind me can do, and the person behind them can do, then we're all doing it together. Which is just group mind (Instructor, lines 1144-1151).

Whether in class or in a performance, group mind is the understood goal with a group of individuals on stage. Even in these early stages of improv learning, these students experienced and demonstrated the deep connection required to create group mind. This was resonant with adaptive leadership as described by Avolio et al. (2004).

***Remaining components.*** The remaining components of relevant leadership theories each had at least some observed instances. Self-direction and awareness of immediate context fell in the fourth tier of frequency, and resiliency, facilitation, shared leadership, transparent, and trust had very few. There were few observations categorized as openness.

## **Student Experience**

There were eight core students in the level one cohort, with two additional students attending individual class sessions as make-ups. One instructor facilitated seven of the eight class

sessions, with one substitute instructor filling in for class session three. Three different class settings within the theater were used, with the theater space itself the common class setting used.

Conducting research in this arena required a nuanced and informed approach. The first experience with improvisation places many participants in a vulnerable position, pushing them to interact without a normal level of pre-thought and planning. Exploring the students' experience without interrupting or spoiling that experience required balance and a less direct approach. The information about their experience came from direct interviews, email interviews, and informal conversations with individual students throughout the program. Five of the participants were successfully interviewed about their experience with the program; comments about the program and its impact were informally collected from all participants.

The reasons why participants decided to enroll in improv training seemed aligned with the description that both the instructor and theater owner voiced: students are called to this training at a time that is right for them. Expressed reasons for attending the workshop varied, with one participant specifically interested in performing improv in the future. Another attended because she had been named the new education director for the theater and wanted a direct experience of the theater's workshop, and a third because he recommends the workshop to some of his clients and he also wanted to have a direct experience of it for that reason. The others shared a common theme of self-improvement and personal development as their reason for pursuing improv training. The themes identified in this category were increased self-confidence expressed as speaking up and being heard; increased flexibility; reconnecting with a sense of humor; and increased patience.

The overall experience for the students seemed to be positive. Examining the transcripts of the sessions, the word "fun" was used 218 times, and it feels safe to conclude that the students



had fun. Laughter and applause permeated the classes and the students participated in all activities willingly and made positive comments throughout the debriefing discussions. Several students commented on how much they enjoyed the theater setting, including the fact that they could hear the other classrooms where classes and rehearsals were taking place at the same time as the level one program. While there were some negative comments about the curriculum and teaching approach, positive comments about the instructor herself were common and frequent.

Comments about the impact of the training revealed the positive impact made on students. While not all students were interviewed successfully, all but one of those who did provide direct feedback about their experience reported a positive impact. Self-awareness and self-improvement was the most common reason, which included these comments:

Belinda: I think [the improv program] is really good for just personal development. I can get too much into a tunnel, and to be able to break out and maintain my sense of humor is good...I was being repressed so much in my professional environment that I lost myself...

Janice: The most valuable thing of all was proving to myself that I can do improv. That I can be on stage and with some instruction was able to do way more than I ever imagined...I think I've been more light-hearted and have been having more fun in general. I used to get really frustrated that people around me didn't want to have fun or joke around. Now I get that out of my system on Saturdays and am less frustrated with my less-than-fun co-workers.

The positive impact of the training for participants was reflected in comments categorized as enhanced life enjoyment/satisfaction:

I felt a definite increase in my happiness and confidence. I also began passionately evangelizing improv as a means to help people I know both professionally and personally.

[What I have learned that is valuable is that] life that is unrehearsed is fun and enjoyable...not to take myself so serious[ly]...and to not be afraid of the unexpected...I feel more relaxed and confident.

I felt a definite increase in my happiness and confidence. I also began passionately evangelizing improv as a means to help people I know both professionally and personally.

The perception of the positive impact of the level one class was further confirmed by the number of these students who would be continuing on to the level two class, which began the week after the final class of level two. All but two were choosing to continue the learning.

Specific to leadership, Yvonne described this benefit from the improv training:

Personally, I often find myself leading but my personal preference is to provide the scaffolding for others to lead rather than leading myself. Level one has shown me some new strategies for encouraging cooperative social interactions that allow multiple people to scaffold into leading and turn-taking, which is more fun (Yvonne, lines

This was a clear example of on-the-job application of the learning within a leadership context.

The concept of “yes, and” was also described by several participants as valuable in their life outside of the theater context. One interview comment was illustrative: “I tend to evaluate and judge first, enjoy second or often last! So, I have begun pivoting my interactions into “yes, and” statements and questions, which is challenging and fun and gets me out of my habitual ways of perceiving and interacting.”

**Student Profiles**

Specific details on participants, including their actual names, is withheld here to maintain confidentiality. An outline of the participants and observed aspects of their experience with the improv classes is included in Figure 5.

Table 5

*Student Profiles*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Known details about occupation</b>	<b>Observed experience</b>
Janice	HR recruiter	Visible increase in confidence with improv activities. Reported positive effects from class, centered around showing up as more calm and relaxed at work: "This serves as an emotional release for me. I can get it out here."
Sylvia	Theater education director	Taking position with the theater and seemed very attached to the improv community. Appeared comfortable with improv activities.
Terry	Life coach	<p>Confident from the start. Attended class as part of his professional working coaching men. He refers people to improv training and wanted to have a direct experience of the training and did not have a personal development goal in advance of attending.</p> <p>Yet, there were times when he indicated that he was taking valuable learning from the classes. For example: "I just liked trying to get into dialogue. Because I don't talk too much, so it was really good for me to try and verbalize (Student, lines 4257-4258)".</p>
Beverly	OD internal consultant	Commented that she is using some of the activities in her work. Participated enthusiastically in the activities, with confidence. Applied side-coaching quickly.
Yvonne	Scientist	Various comments and interview remarks that indicate she is applying the learning at work. Thoughtful participant; at times offered a different opinion than instructor during debriefs, as a way to process the information. Enthusiastically participated in activities and applied side-coaching quickly.
Kristie	Warehouse worker	Signed up for classes after attending an introductory workshop. Has clear interest in performing in the future. Confident performer who often delivered lines that made the class laugh. Applied improv performing techniques readily.
Derrick	Accountant	Quiet and soft-spoken at the start of the class. Gradually became more confident with the activities. Indicated that the program provided a welcome counter-balance to his job in accounting. Sometimes struggled with exercises, but responded to guidance from the instructor and stayed in the scenes to figure it

Pseudonym	Known details about occupation	Observed experience
		out. Became quicker inside of scenes and activities in later weeks of the program.
Belinda	IT professional	Had previous experience with improv training in a different city. Wanted to attend the class as a way to build confidence and be heard more at work, and also wanted to expand her ability to use humor appropriately at work. Missed several classes due to work conflicts, but intends to continue with the training. Quiet as a student, and on stage opened up. One of the students who embraced scene work quickly (likely, in part, due to previous improv training). Often delivered quick lines that made the class laugh.
Jean	Loan officer	Toward the end of her current work career and took the class as a way of opening up parts of her personality that in her view had been hidden. Frequently expressed enjoying the activities, and while she sometimes struggled to master some exercises, she participated whole-heartedly. Her most common answer to the instructor's asking how the activity was: "fun!" Expressed that the class had made a big difference for her by opening up the idea that unplanned can be fun: "A life that is unrehearsed can be fun and enjoyable."
Bill*	Veterinarian	Participated in three of the eight classes. His interest in improv was to help him in his work by enabling him to more effectively use humor. Sometimes struggled with the directions of activities, but accepted side-coaching quickly and he participated with fun and enthusiasm. He felt that the class was valuable and fun.
Lucy*	unknown	No specific observations and was not interviewed.

*\*Students who were members of a different level one cohort, attending a limited number of classes to make up for missed classes with their usual cohort.*

### **My Personal Improv Experience**

It is important to add to report my own experience of this level one class, since I was a graduate of all five levels of training at City Theater. Revisiting this training provided more than just an observation opportunity for research; it also provided a comprehensive review of my foundational learning in improv at the theater where I was first introduced to the art form.

As a researcher, I was able to maintain an objective view of the student's experience and the curriculum. I did at times note when students were performing a scene or activity a different choice that was possible for them to make that might have worked better for improv. At no time did I vocalize those kinds of observations.

I also felt an emotional connection to the theater, the theater owner, the instructor and the students. As an improv performer and as someone who utilizes improvisational content in leadership development work, I noted activities and debriefing points that felt helpful in both arenas. Observing all eight sessions seemed to lock in my affection for this art form. Watching some students pass through the early stages of improv learning, viewed from the perspective of someone who had been in the same space twelve years ago, validated my own experience of improv training.

The training I received at City Theater, combined with eleven years of performing, had a positive impact on my work and personal life. My comfort level with unexpected and unplanned situations increased, my ability to use humor at work increased, and my overall stress levels went down. Improv training at City Theater opened the doors on the spontaneous aspects of life, allowed me to more readily recognize how often the unexpected happens, and provided me skills to deal more effectively with those types of situations. Finally, connecting what was initially a purely personal interest with my professional life, I continue to explore the connections between improv theater and effective leadership.

## **Summary**

The philosophy and methodology of City Theater is primarily based on the teaching of Viola Spolin. The theater owners have created a fun, creative space that focuses on nurturing students and performers. The early levels of the program focus on support and encouragement

for students. The curriculum is designed to expose students to an experience first, a debrief based on the Socratic method next, and then to connect that to their own personal learning objectives for the program. With the observed program, exercises and activities, typically short, were an integral piece, woven with high frequency into the program's curriculum. It was designed as a process of discovery rather than instruction.

Aspects of all of the selected leadership theory components were found throughout the program, with these seven the most frequently observed: self-awareness, relational, immediate adaptive response, role flexibility/variability, relinquishing control, able to operate in a dynamic environment, and focus on the individual/individual ideas. Some students reported specifically applying concepts from the program into formal organizational roles.

The experience of the students varied and that was somewhat based on the intention and purpose in joining the program. Those intentions included personal development goals and for some a desire to perform improv within the theater context. Overall, the students appeared to have a positive, fun experience with the program.

## **CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter will begin with a review of the purpose of this study. Drawing from the data included in chapter four, the findings will be summarized, and conclusions will be drawn based on those findings. The research questions will be addressed and the implications for the practice of leadership development will be explored. The limitations of using the content from improv theater in leadership development will also be discussed. The chapter will conclude with final remarks about the learning from this case study.

### **Restatement of Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to determine the relevance to leadership of the core skills involved in improvisational theater, by identifying what is taught in introductory improvisational theater workshops, examining the teaching methodology used in those workshops, understanding how those who are exposed to learning these skills use them outside of the theater, and to gain insights as to why people choose to sign up for an improvisational theater workshop. These five research questions guided the research:

1. Why are participants interested in learning improvisational skills?
2. Which skills are being taught in an entry level improvisation workshop?
3. How are improvisational skills being taught in these workshops?
4. How are the improvisational skills that are learned in the workshops being used by learners outside of the theater context?
5. How are the skills that are being used helpful and effective for participants?

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The findings are organized under four categories: school philosophy and methodology, curriculum design and content, the student experience, leadership theory components, and the



experience of the researcher. Answers to each individual research question will draw data from all of the categories. The approach will be to explore the individual questions and then to draw conclusions around the impact and relevance of the observed program to the practice of leadership development.

It is important to review the context within which leaders and leadership development are operating. The environment is one of constant change where leaders are being challenged to respond to increasingly frequent unexpected situations, placing demands on them to be agile, flexible, and change adept (Casey, Jr., (2017); Friedman, (2016); Hemlin, Allwood, Martin, & Mumford, (2013); Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, & Fleishman; Palmer & Dunford, 2002). Creativity and innovation are required, yet traditional leadership development content may not be focusing enough attention on the leadership skills and behaviors that would create the environment where these are encouraged.

As a result, leaders will require fresh approaches to leadership development to meet the challenges of the current and expected future environment. Leadership development professionals are searching for those approaches, and one approach that is gaining in interest is improvisational skills, specifically those taught in improv theater. This study was designed to provide greater insight around the content, delivery, and student experience with those skills as they are delivered in the theater setting.

### **Question 1: Why are participants interested in learning improvisational skills?**

Two different perspectives emerged from the case study. From the student perspective, the most common reason was some form of self-development, including a desire for greater self-confidence and achieving a greater comfort with speaking with groups or speaking up in professional settings. The latter motivation is less about skills-based learning and more aligned

with self-actualization, a concept directly aligned with Bennis' four lessons of self-knowledge (1989, p.56).

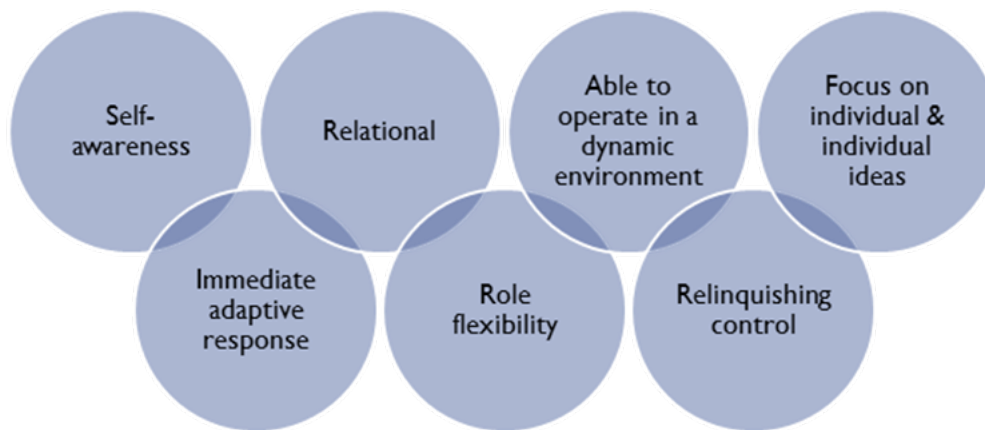
For two other students, their motivation was related more to enhancing their knowledge of improv so that they could guide others with improv training. For each student, their personal motivation drew them to voluntarily enroll in this introductory improv class, at their own expense, on their personal time. This level and type of student motivation could be a critical factor in advancing learning in improv skills.

Related to the motivation factor, the second perspective on this research question surfaced from the interviews with the theater co-owner and the instructor. Their belief is that students are drawn to these classes at a time that is right for them and that the collection of students in a class often feels purposeful. Both of these perspectives could be described as being centered around the notion of "calling," where students are called to this content from some inner drive that appears at a time that works for their own personal development, a phenomenon also described by Bennis as "the blessed impulse". Following the path of this belief, the learning would be effective for those students who were called to the class, as they would be most open to the learning presented.

This view of a purposeful gathering of student and teacher could have important implications for transferring improv learning out of the theater and into the leadership development arena. The non-theater context may not be as conducive to the transformative student experiences observed in this class and reported by the instructor and theater owner since it may lack the personal motivation that students brought to classes at City Theater.

**Question 2: Which skills are being taught in an entry level improvisation workshop?**

To simplify the analysis, skills identified in this case study were sorted based on skills solely related to the performance of improvisational theater and those that could have relevance to leadership and leadership development. The latter were categorized under the identified leadership theory components and the frequency of observations among the components was tallied and the theater skills were ignored if they related solely to learning successful improv performance techniques. Based on that, the relevant areas of content emerged as self-awareness, relational, able to operate in a dynamic environment, focus on the individual and individual ideas, immediate adaptive response, role flexibility, and relinquishing control (see Figure 7). Each previously identified leadership theory component had at least one observation categorized under it, while these seven had the highest number of observations.



*Figure 6.* Leadership theory components most prominent in introductory improv curriculum.

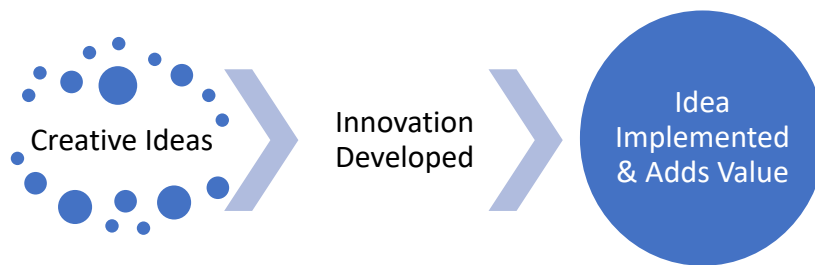
It is plausible to suggest that these leadership theory components could be recombined into a new leadership theory guided by them. Figure 7 would then be labelled “Key Components of Improvisational Leadership”. Further research is needed to determine if leaders who exhibit

strength in these areas are more effective and within which contexts leaders who apply these components are successful.

In addition to this data that emerged from observations, the theater owner who designed the curriculum specifically addressed his view on the connections between improv and leadership. He has created curriculum specifically for organizational leadership teams and events, and in his design model he has identified five key components of improvisational leadership: listening; presenting, which includes being clear and using humor, and delivering presentations; creativity or imagination; sales; and teamwork. In his view the skills involved in improv training can help students who are looking to improve or add skills in these areas.

His design is based on lengthy experience, and the training he provides for leaders is in high demand. The components identified and the impact of delivering this training within the leadership development context are areas where future research would be beneficial. Based on the observations from this case study, there was evidence of skill-building in listening, using humor, and presentation delivery. There was also very strong content and practice in the use of creativity and imagination, enough that an additional category of observations was added to the study (labelled “other”) in addition to those identified from leadership theories, and each observation placed in that category was categorized as being related to creativity or imagination.

This is an interesting area of exploration that is broader than the use of improv skills in leadership. Nurturing an environment of creativity is critical to innovation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Goodman & Dingli, 2013). According to Csikszentmihalyi, an idea must be implemented in order to be considered a creative idea (see Figure 8).



*Figure 7. Creativity process model.*

What is important to note about in Figure 8 is that the first step in the process of generating innovation: creative ideas. In order for an idea to be implemented, it has to be created in the first place. In the literature, little content is provided for this step; most of the focus is on successful implementation of promising creative ideas (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Goodman & Dingli, 2013). Without the creative ideas in the first place, however, there is nothing to implement, no substance or content for innovation. With its strong focus on creativity and imagination, improv training could be an engine to feed imagination and creative ideas in organizations, something not included in many leadership theories and leadership competency lists.

Putting aside leadership theory and leadership development curriculum, based on observations of the program, students were presented with learning opportunities in focus and attention, teamwork, agreement, and imagination. Learning in these areas would readily apply to any professional setting and role; the last one, imagination, would often be the least familiar in an organizational setting. However, while perhaps unfamiliar, this may be a critical skill set in a 21<sup>st</sup> century environment.

**Question 3: How are improvisational skills being taught in these workshops?**

This is one of the significant findings from this study. Aside from the content, the curriculum design and instructional methodology were different than what is employed for leadership development programs and may be a critical factor in learning this content.

The overall philosophy of the program was one of discovery and support. Instructors followed the curriculum design and structure, and also engaged in spontaneous play and openness when delivering the program. While there was an instructor's manual to which the instructors conformed, that structure provided a space for students to make their own discoveries and build their own connections to the learning, and for the instructors to create a fun experience.

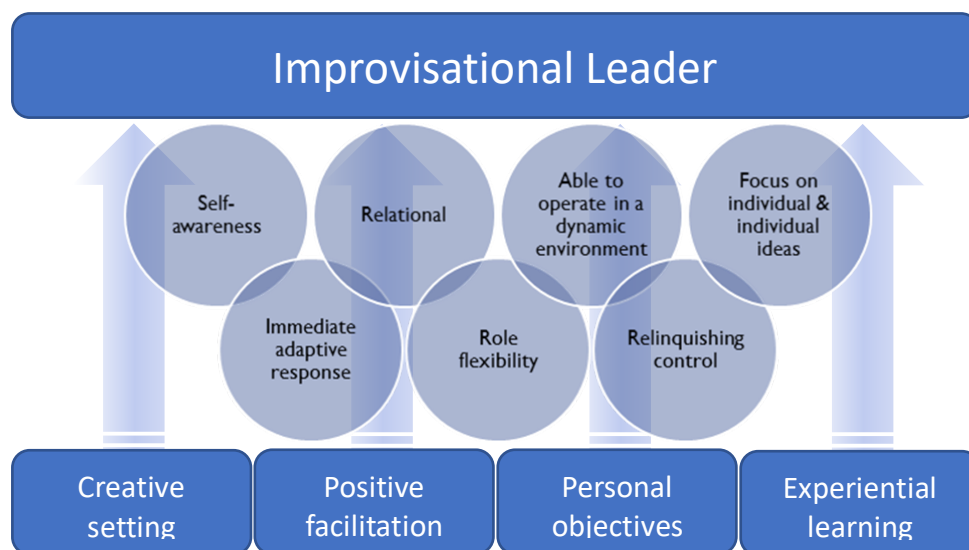
Throughout the program, the overall model described by the theater co-owner guided the learning. Students learned the over-arching theme for the class (see Table 3) and then they would be exposed to series of experiences that were designed to immerse the student in an improv game. Following each activity, an informal debrief discussion was held, guided by open-ended questions from the instructor, who would also suggest additional insights based on her own observations. Questions like, "What did you get from that?" and "How was that?" asked the students to reflect on their own experience. How the students applied the learning was unique to them; only the application within the theater activity was visible during the class, and even that was coached lightly. The instructor was receptive to all remarks from students, without correcting or amending their responses to conform with a correct answer.

As already mentioned, the setting itself played a key role in the delivery of the program. A different atmosphere is created within a theater setting than one finds in a corporate or academic classroom setting, and City Theater in particular, was unusual because of its location in an historic building, its floorplan, and its decor. More research is needed to explore the role that

design and environmental factors play in delivering improv curriculum, and other leadership development curriculum, in a way that creates transformative learning.

As has already been mentioned, the heavy focus on positive feedback and support distinguished the instructional methodology at City Theater. Frequent positive comments, feedback that stressed what was being done right, and encouragement was part of the fabric of the level one program. The theater owner indicated that it was designed to be that way, especially for the early learning levels.

If these factors are combined with the key leadership components identified earlier, a model for successful delivery of improv skills for leaders is created (see Figure 9).



*Figure 8.* Leadership development model for training improvisational leaders.

This model provides the key content areas and the underlying conditions needed to successfully train improv skills that would be connected to effective leadership. A creative setting is essential, with facilitation that is encouraging and supportive, using experiential activities similar to those observed at City Theater's level one program. Perhaps most important, the learner must bring to the learning experience their own personal objectives that align with improv content. Not indicated in the model, it should be noted that the level one program spanned eight weeks

totaling 20 hours; the full program at City Theater includes five levels, totaling 100 hours of training. An adaptation of this content within a leadership development context may require a similar time investment.

This study provided some evidence that students did apply leadership-related concepts from the improv class to their personal and professional lives. What the above model does not mean to suggest, however, is that this would always occur. Nor was there direct evidence from this study that indicated that the application of these skills would necessarily result in more effective leadership. At the same time, the concepts found within this improv content did align with recognized successful leadership practices and these connections are worth further study.

After observing eight weeks of this improv program, one observation has not yet been made: improv is a theater art. While the online description of the level one class states that students will “learn skills to navigate any situation, on stage and off” (Bovine Metropolis Theater), the class itself was an onstage experience. The exercises and coaching were done with a cohort group and most of the classes were held in the theater space.

Improv as observed in this case study transformed students into unusual characters interacting in imaginary worlds where anything was possible, and any object could be conjured and brought to the stage. Students reported feeling in touch with parts of themselves about which they had forgotten, and that they looked forward to coming to the theater every Saturday. However students applied it, the content itself was created for performance art and the exercises required acting and imagination. Such an art form, while showing strong potential to be able to add value to leadership development content, may lose its power when stripped of its artistic intent and placed into a corporate or academic environment.



**Question 4: How are the improvisational skills that are learned in the workshops being used by learners outside of the theater context?**

The study provided limited insight into this question, but there were indications that in some cases these skills were being applied, in specific ways. Interviews revealed that some students did apply concepts such as “yes, and”. In addition, beyond the learning of skills, the class provided an experience for students that generated positive results for several of them, discussed in the next section.

The “yes, and” concept offered the clearest example of applied skills. Several students reported that they were applying the concept in their professional and personal lives. Yvonne provided the clearest example of the application of improv within a leadership context:

Personally, I often find myself leading but my personal preference is to provide the scaffolding for others to lead rather than leading myself. Level one has shown me some new strategies for encouraging cooperative social interactions that allow multiple people to scaffold into leading and turn-taking, which is more fun (Yvonne, lines 8738-8741).

This feedback indicates that there are specific improvisational skills that people in formal leadership roles can apply. In her case, her brief description displayed an integration of the concepts she had been learning, especially around give and take and role flexibility. Whether these same connections could have been made by her through a different learning methodology is a question that needs additional research.

More generally, students reported feeling more comfortable with themselves because of the program, connected to the mind/body content throughout the program. One student indicated that she had enrolled in a Pilates program as a result of the mind/body content in the class. A study focused more specifically on the ways students and performers apply improv skills in non-

theater settings would expand knowledge in this area. An indication that improv holds potential for improving students' lives outside of the theater context showed in this student comment: "I felt a definite increase in my happiness and confidence" (Janice, lines 8797-8798).

**Question 5: How are the skills that are being used helpful and effective for participants?**

As it is contingent upon answers to question four, there is limited data from this case study around this question. However, there was an indication that for those who were applying the learning outside of the theater context, they were seeing positive results. This was most pronounced with Janice, who reported:

I think I've been more light-hearted and have been having more fun in general. I used to get really frustrated that people around me didn't want to have fun or joke around. Now I get that out of my system on Saturdays and I'm less frustrated with my less-than-fun co-workers.

This feedback was repeated by her during informal interactions throughout the program. For her, the application was not centered around specific improvisational content; instead, it was the weekly experience of the class itself that was providing her with indirect benefits for her professional life.

The instructor provided observations of another student transformation:

It's my favorite thing about classes...to watch [the transition.] In this class alone, watching Derrick week one and Derrick week five, to watch people come out of their shell and trust themselves in a new way. I have a peer, [another] instructor here [who says] because of improv [he] went from a worker to a manager to a director because it changed [his] confidence level and it changed [his] interaction with people. So, he's had a lot of success in the workplace (Instructor, lines 7754-7758).

Based on interviews and comments by both the instructor and theater owner, this type of experience is common with students in their programs.

While the focus of this research is on leadership and leadership development, it is important to note here that students also displayed learning in the improv art form itself. As each week progressed, students were generating pieces of improv performance that were increasingly entertaining to watch. There were memorable moments that emerged within the exercises that were fun and memorable, for the students and the researcher:

- The students were practicing the art of placing objects within the scene, and they were restricted to using only gibberish. Early in one scene, it was clear that the three students on stage were in a tanning salon, with one in a tanning bed. As other students came into the scene, they saw something different, and the tanning bed became a casket. The students all aligned around that and finished the scene as if it were a funeral. That scene became known in the class after that as The Tanning Bed Funeral Scene.
- In a two-person scene, the students were in an apartment cleaning up after a big party. As they were digging through the trash, looking for their keys, Kristie said, “I don’t even live here, but I think I signed a lease last night.”
- Already mentioned, a scene where the students had to portray inanimate objects, and the home owner and his sprinkler were arguing about when to water the grass. A neighbor walked into the yard in the middle of their argument and a few moments later, Derrick said, “I shouldn’t be arguing with my sprinkler in front of you.”

These were moments of comedy in the middle of a workshop, demonstrating that the students were learning and also demonstrating that improv comedy seems to immediately connect something familiar between performer and whoever is watching, independent of the experience level of the performer.

### **Implications for the Practice of Leadership Development**

The over-arching question being explored with this case study was how this content can apply to leadership and leadership development. The analysis of the data using identified leadership theory components as categories revealed a connection between the content of the level one workshop and leadership theory (see Table 4). It is important to consider which parts of the experience were most critical in creating that connection.

The observations made during this case studied showed various factors involved in creating the overall learning experience. The philosophy of the theater, the teaching methodology, the content, the role of the facilitator, and the interaction of the students themselves contributed to the student experience of the class. Therefore, while an analysis of the curriculum content and delivery may suggest their relevance to leadership and leadership development, the other contributing factors may be essential for the desired learning experience to occur.

It is important to emphasize the uniqueness of the setting described in chapter four. The building itself is historic and unique, the space inside has multiple floors connected by unusual stairways. The walls are filled with theater posters and photographs of performers and performances, and a performance theater is the centerpiece of the space. Classrooms had little sound insulation and only semi-privacy which resulted in people walking through and around other practicing groups and classes. This created an environment very different from the

corporate environment. This difference may help students with the self-discovery process they described by placing students in a colorful and unfamiliar environment, which combined with and supported their self-discovery motivation. It may be difficult to create a similar space outside of a theater. She created an environment where imagination felt welcome. This practice was consistent with that described by Goodman & Dingli (2013), where they describe that “good managers do not attempt to manage creativity, they manage for creativity, by providing a working environment and culture that allows creativity to flourish” (p. 129). This is a deeper and more authentic approach than the check-the-box mentality that can permeate required corporate training.

The instructor was also consistently positive in her observations and coaching of the students and incorporated humor and improvisational comedy into her class facilitation. These were essential contributions for arts-based learning, dependent upon the performance experience of the instructor (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). These factors suggest that adopting the content alone from improv theater may be insufficient; the setting and delivery seem to be critical elements.

Even after considering these potential limitations to the application of improv skills in a leadership context, however, there were distinct parts of the improv curriculum in the observed cohort that invited that application. The content was rich with metaphors that could apply to leadership and unusual exercises that could inform leadership development. Here are several concepts that emerged from the findings of this study that have application to leadership and leadership development:

**Follow the follower.** A series of activities that started during week one with the mirroring activity called for the students to engage in the activity while rotating the leader role. The instructions were to make the leadership role invisible to the instructor. The point of the

activity in an improv performance is to ensure that the scene evolves based on the interaction of the characters, not because one person is leading the scene in a particular direction (Spolin, 1999). The result in the class was that various performers could take the lead in a performance and then relinquish that role as the scene progressed.

In a leadership context, dynamic organizations often require many people to assume leadership roles and for formal leaders to sometimes assume the role of follower; skills in handling role flexibility would be valuable for leaders in those settings. What might be a more dramatic step for organizational leaders is reflected in the instructor's comment during week one: "We want to get to a point in improv where no one is leading" (Instructor, line 578). Whether organizations are willing to embrace that approach to leadership is an open question. There are still strong adherents to theory X behaviors (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2011) for whom sharing the leadership role would be anathema.

This brings the consideration of improv skills as part of leadership development back to 1960, where two theories diverged: theory X and theory Y (McGregor, 1960). The skills observed in this program were aligned with theory Y beliefs about people: facilitation over directing, team-focus over individual-focus, flexibility over control. Improv as taught at City Theater believes in allowing performances to emerge from a group of connected performers, who have been grounded in a common philosophy and set of skills. To effectively apply this content to leadership, in an organizational setting, will require a similar commitment to non-authoritarian leadership, teamwork, and imagination.

**Mind/body connection.** "Remind your brain that your body can lead" (Instructor, line 639). The mind/body connection was explored in this program as a way to move the performer and the scene forward. Sometimes, when an actor froze, simply engaging in some kind of

movement was helpful. This could be applied in numerous ways to leadership behavior. For example, leading a conversation with a smile can be a way to start even when the leader is searching for words, or walking up on the stage with confidence can lead to a successful presentation. The physicality of the skill and its learning would seem to make this an easily replicable activity in other, non-theater contexts.

**Complementary and unique.** Starting with week two, this guidance for players was offered to help them enter a scene and make an addition to that scene. The directions were to make choices that add to the scene (complementary) and that also add something new and different to the scene (unique). It also could serve as guidance for leaders and team members in any organization: make a contribution that complements the current direction and goals, and also adds something of value unique to you as an individual.

Within the improv context, based on the observations of the class, students frequently had imaginative ideas to add to the scene. What tended to be forgotten was the complementary component of this skill set, and so students would not add to whatever was going on in the scene. This discontinuity disrupted the flow of the exercise, and in a performance would disrupt the scene. In an organizational context, this same tendency may exist. Leaders, especially new leaders, may focus on solving problems and initiating their own ideas while ignoring what is currently going and thus failing to add to that. Just like in improv, the flow of the work may be disrupted by failing to build on what already exists.

Therein lies the allure of improv theater skills as leadership development tools. Many of the simple foundational concepts of improv – in this case, bring something complementary and unique – seem promising and relevant to leadership. Yet, it may be a mistake to separate them from the theater context within which they work, in service to comedy and art. Applied to

something different like leadership development, what seemed relevant may be ineffective in an organizational or academic setting.

Thus, the analysis may have to reverse direction. The organizational and academic learning community should examine the unique aspects of improv curriculum and learning strategies that emerged in this study as a potential source of innovation. In order to instill the leadership skills inherent in improv (and other artistic fields), organizations may have to adjust their learning strategies to incorporate the creative environments found in theaters such as City Theater. Leadership development may need to draw on the artistic community for their next wave of instructors.

**Group mind.** This is the ultimate goal of any improv team and the concept and practice was introduced in level one training. Through warmup exercises, class activities, and their own willingness, the members of the cohort in the case study began to trust each other and began to interact more comfortably, drawing on the common experience of doing improv together. Teambuilding work inside organizations could borrow from this concept as a way of increasing team effectiveness and cohesion, approaching it obliquely, via improv activities that participants would then be invited to apply to other contexts.

Group mind is a radically different model for effective team work than theories such as Drucker's (2008), where the manager role is carved out as separate, requiring a different perspective than team member or follower. In more traditional views of management such as his, the responsibility of the leader is to generate results through other people. Leadership development, then, becomes a vehicle for teaching skills, behaviors, and tools that make a person more effective in those skills sets (Center for Creative Leadership, 2017; Hersey & Blanchard, 1993; Ketter, 2009).



Group mind, on the other hand, leads to unexpected ideas such as follow the follower and is based on deep connections between people, operating at conscious and unconscious levels, that depends upon intuition and physical instinct as much as reasoning (Love, 2014; Vera & Crossan, 2005). The concept of group dynamics was pushed forward decades ago by Kurt Lewin. Described simplistically as the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, Lewin's research points to better results for teams that focus on individuals as part of a group and who individually have a higher sensitivity toward others and a responsibility to the group (Lewin, 1944). The observed improv training program developed both.

The best known skill from improv – “yes, and” – is a key part of creating group mind, and it is the vehicle for follow the follower. By accepting every idea, suggestion, and scene component that is presented by the team, the ultimate outcome is determined by everyone collectively and no one individually (Johnstone, 1999). Frederick Taylor created scientific management during the peak of the industrial age, in service to a capitalist ideology centered around individual achievement. The communal nature of group mind runs counter to a deep cultural bedrock in American business where leaders are selected and rewarded individually, based on their ability to generate results.

Viewed from this perspective, the philosophy of improv is more than just a fresh way to develop leaders; it represents a cultural shift towards collective performance and achievement. Speaking about “yes, and” and group activities, Keith Johnstone said:

Some seemingly cooperative but ‘clever’ students wreck the game every time. They intend to unite the group, but their ‘clever’ suggestions are out of step, and suddenly they’re alone. This rather shocking feedback trains them to be obvious, rather than ‘clever’ (p. 35).

The clever improviser he describes is analagous to Drucker's manager (2008), the more talented player seemingly responsible for group success. Johnstone points to being "obvious"; another way to describe it might be "transparent." A leader embracing the principles of improvisation would be transparent with their team and flexible in the way they practice leadership.

**The power of individuals and their ideas.** In week three, during three-person scenes, the instructor spoke to the power within different roles. In these scenes, one person started a camera pose, a second person added something, and the third person brought it all together. As previously mentioned in chapter four, the instructor highlighted the important role of each individual:

You guys hit on it as you talked about the first, the second, and the third person. The first person has the freedom to set the tone, to use your words, Kristie. The second person then has the power to adapt, to modify. And like you were talking about, Janice, the third person has the responsibility to bring it all together (Instructor, lines 1701-1704).

Applied to leadership, this concept highlights the importance of role flexibility and the importance of individual contributions. How and when a student entered a scene changed the choices they made in the class. This may be true outside of the theater; a leader's choices are shaped by context and timing which requires a more flexible approach to the leadership role, one not dependent upon being in charge, and serving as the sole decision-maker.

This runs counter to the Drucker-inspired neoliberal leadership model, where the manager analyzes problems and executes strategies to generate higher levels of human performance. In a manager's world, standardization is the goal, and individuals are judged by their ability to conform to those standards. Talent is reduced to a list of competencies. Improv calls for an ongoing series of individual decisions, fed by imagination, validated and supported

by the team. The individuals in the study did not adjust their behaviors to conform to a leadership model; they discovered leadership within themselves.

**Give and take.** Nearly all of the exercises in the program involved interaction between characters. The rhythm that was established was one of making an offer (making a choice is also used) and then allowing other players to react and add their offer. The theme for one week was accepting and involvement, with the focus on allowing others to contribute to the scene and involving others in the scene. Giving and taking, accepting and involvement, and saying “yes, and” could also serve as models for leaders to follow, expanding their perception of the leadership role to include allowing others to lead.

This is a concept not common within leadership theory or leadership development curriculum. While delegation has been a popular concept for leadership for a long time, the notion of relinquishing the power of leadership at times to allow someone else to take it over is qualitatively different than assigning a task to a subordinate.

**Stop self-editing.** This was the theme for week five of the program, a concept with roots in the improv philosophy of Viola Spolin. She described the dynamic as a focus on approval and disapproval and she designed learning activities to help students overcome this (Spolin, 1999, p. 6). Within the leadership context, learning and discovery around this concept could increase leader self-confidence and their ability to voice their own ideas:

We’re going to push...so you have to trust yourself. And for those who might be more critical of yourself, today we’re going to try to push you over that hurdle. By trusting [that]what you’re going to say next is going to be ok (Instructor, lines 4375-4377).

The instructor provided a powerful idea within a compact phrase, in a way that applied to the improv exercise and could also apply to the personal or professional lives of the students: Trust

that what you're going to say is acceptable. The challenge within an improv context for the students was to trust themselves enough to simply react to whatever was going on around them during exercises. That same ability to trust in themselves, however, could be applied to personal and professional situations.

Self-confidence is often identified as an important competency for leaders, and specifically creative confidence is linked to organizational creativity and innovation (Houghton, 2010). The focus on self-editing in this program, first by drawing attention to the dynamic and then giving students an experience of moving past it, was aligned with building creative self-confidence.

It is more than that, however. Most leadership development programs tend to design curriculum around a discreet set of skills and behaviors. The self-awareness of the filters that caused students to hesitate when practicing improv was a visceral experience more than a skills-based concept. This may enhance the students' ability to apply the learning to other aspects of their life and should be considered an essential element of any curriculum designed around improv content.

**Comfort with the unplanned and unexpected.** Participating in an introductory improv class involved stepping into unfamiliar experiences for students, experiences that pushed them to trust themselves with the unplanned and unexpected. Within those experiences, students were invited to examine their own reactions while being asked to respond quickly: "Did anybody find that they just started a sentence and just hoped that the word would come? Yay!!! That would be the best scenario" (Instructor, lines 4501-4502). The mindset behind that comment -- "that would be the best scenario" -- described a sense of joy and fun about the unexpected. To begin speaking

without yet knowing where your thoughts are directing what you are saying required self-confidence and trust in the rest of the team.

That same mindset and skillset would be useful for leaders operating in a VUCA environment (Casey, Jr., 2017; Friedman, 2016). The inherently unplanned nature of improv may make its body of knowledge and skills uniquely relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders, partly because the curriculum includes questions like this: “What are good and bad things that come from thinking?” (Instructor, line 4627). In a rapidly changing environment, the ability to effectively react without excessive planning so that the response can be more immediate and faster is valuable for leaders and improv training may be the vehicle to help build this skill in leaders.

This concept could run counter to popular management approaches, such as project management (Project Management Institute (2010). Even with a strong project plan, the unexpected occurs and training leaders to be comfortable and effective with the unplanned is also an important competency for a contemporary leader.

**Fun.** Putting aside leadership competencies, the value of improv training may in part be to introduce a fun series of activities that could contribute to better team effectiveness. It may also be applicable to celebrations and stress-reduction efforts. As the instructor explained this aspect of improv training, “Part of it is that it’s just fun. There’s something about the regular act of laughing that is medicinal and therapeutic and keeps us young and changes our outlook on work and life and family” (Instructor, lines 7765-7767).

Beyond these types of benefits, caution should be taken to make sure that connections with other pieces of improv content are made based on an objective analysis of leadership learning needs rather than the appeal of improv theater. Improv is fun to watch, improv training fun to attend, and the content is rich with metaphors that apply to leadership. Based on these

appeals, it can be easy for leadership development professionals to draw connections between improv and leadership that may only be metaphorical and not skill-based or transformative. The fun aspect of the art form can override the need for stronger evidence that this content will help leaders be more effective.

The case study revealed that in some limited instances, students applied their learning outside of the theater. What was demonstrated throughout the level one program more frequently and more intensely was students and instructors having fun and laughing. The evidence of that outcome may be reason by itself to incorporate this theater art into leadership development programs.

Beyond these specific leadership-related concepts, there may be other less obvious applications for improvisation to contribute to leadership efforts. For example, the Mandala Center for Change in the Pacific Northwest used improv as a vehicle to initiate a community discussion around race and gun rights (Mandala Center for Change, 2018). The New York City Police Department has worked with an improv ensemble for several years as a vehicle to create empathy and increase communication between police and the community in a program called, “To Protect, Serve, and Understand” (Schulman, 2016). These two examples indicate there may be a wider application for improvisation-based learning beyond leadership development.

### **Limitations of Improvisation**

Those involved in leadership development need to be aware of the environment and facilitation that was needed to teach this content effectively, as has already been discussed. They should also be aware of the risks involved in improvisation. Encouraging people to reduce self-editing and speak spontaneously can result in topics, behaviors, and language that may not be appropriate for all settings. This happened several times at City Theater, even with the directive

given at the start of the program to “play smart from the heart”. At the same time, putting too many boundaries up ahead of time would create additional self-editing filters, defeating one of the objectives of improv training. Accepting that spontaneity sometimes results in something inappropriate emerging is one of the conditions of teaching and performing improv.

Another concern for those practicing leadership development is the historic reputation that improv theater has for its lack of diversity, an art form largely favored by Caucasian males, typically from a middle income or higher socioeconomic background. There are a variety of causal factors that created this cultural narrowness which results in exclusion. Even today, it is not uncommon for women to form women’s only improv teams and for people of color to do the same. This mirrors current organizational cultures, where leadership is dominated by white, gentrified leadership. The privileged environment of the boardroom exists alongside the privileged population of many improv theater communities, and to the extent they are similar and support the same social construct, improv will not address the social changes needed to diversity leadership.

City Theater is half-owned and operated by a Latina woman, and has worked to attract diversity from the time it was founded. They currently engage in outreach programs to local schools, communities, and theaters to attract diverse players onto their stage and into their classes. Their belief is that by doing so, a more diverse audience will be attracted which in turn attracts more diversity into their learning programs and performances (Theater Owner interview). Their model could be part of a broader solution for the improv community and further research into diversity within artistic communities would be valuable. If adopted widely, the approach taken by the two owners of City Theater could help eliminate future concerns about diversity within the improv community. For now, the cultural perception and reality of improv theater

should be considered a potential limitation to its application in a corporate or academic environment as participants may have a less favorable impression of the improv theater community, which would then impact their reception of the training.

A final concern about incorporating improv content into leadership development efforts is the importance of student motivation. While improvisation and its related skills may be a remedy for the leadership gaps that exist today, what this study suggests is that a person must be called to improvisation first. When this cohort group arrived, they were exposed to a series of experiences, which only became understood after the experience, as part of a facilitated group process. This understanding then was linked to the personal objectives that initially called the students to an improv program. This is the opposite of what would be typical for corporate leadership development programs, where participants may or may not fully choose to be attending the facilitated group process. Once there, the objectives are outlined first, then factual content is delivered that might include practice or an experiential activity. At the end, a review or assessment is given to measure the effectiveness of the training, shown in Table 3. Those pre-determined outcomes may not meet any individual need for calling and purpose and may impede the application of improv skills as a result. Again, this focus on individual exploration and self-awareness aligns with Bennis' model of leadership and runs counter to the standardization models of neo-liberal corporations.

### **Additional Research Needed**

Several ideas for future research have already been mentioned. To summarize those areas where additional research is needed:

- Comparison of the skills taught in improv workshops with additional leadership theories.



- Leadership content found in other artistic media.
- Study of the role of the classroom environment in teaching improv skills.
- Empirical study of the application of improv skills.
- Development of an assessment tool to determine an individual's current improvisational tendencies and strengths.
- Quantitative study of the efficacy of using improv-related skills in the workplace.
- The implications of arts-based content models for existing leadership development structures.
- The implications of gender and racial access and preference differences in improv and comedy, and how that may limit the applicability of improv to leadership development.

There is currently a high level of interest and some use of improv training as part of leadership development programs. However, there still needs to be a better understanding of which parts of improv content is applicable to leadership development and how it would best be delivered. To advance thinking and practice around the value of practicing improvisational skills, additional study in the above areas is critically needed.

### **Closing Remarks**

In a volatile, uncertain, chaotic, and ambiguous environment, rapid change has become the normal condition within which 21<sup>st</sup> leaders operate (Casey, Jr., 2017; Friedman, 2016; Houghton, 2010). Because of this rapid change, the demand is high for leaders to inspire creativity and innovation and to be innovative themselves. As a result, more frequent unplanned and unexpected situations occur, and leaders will need the appropriate skill set to deal with those situations.

Given the nature of improvisational theater – theater without a script – there seems a high likelihood that some of those skills can be found within improv learning curriculum. This study confirms that there are clear possibilities for leaders to derive needed skills from improv content, and that several significant areas of content align closely with accepted leadership theories related to an engaged and creative workforce.

The study also reveals, however, unique aspects of the student experience of improv training that are important to consider before concluding that the skills are transferrable to a leadership development context. The theater setting is the first layer to consider, due to the uniquely creative environment that creates. The role of the theater setting, however, may be part of a deeper need that is being met by improv training. This deeper individual need is largely being ignored in organizations and the role of improv and other arts-based learning programs may be to radically transform the way leaders are developed and the expectations for leaders themselves. For those who are attracted to improv as part of a personal development path, the unusual class location at a theater is playing a part in distinguishing this learning as different from their normal work lives. Students in this cohort expressed that they loved coming to the theater because it was something very different for them; this was my experience over a decade ago as well.

Self-awareness was a large focus area for the level one class, starting with being aware of your mind and your body. Those who voluntarily enroll in this training are pre-disposed to a willingness to explore their own reactions to improv, motivated by their initial reason to enroll in the class in the first place. This pre-disposed willingness may be a critical factor in order for students to experience the learning, practice it in a theater context, and then apply it (if they do) to their lives outside of the theater.

Two students in the cohort talked about discovering parts of themselves from which they had become disconnected or had forgotten. Art can serve as an avenue for self-discovery (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) and it may be the artistic aspect of improv theater that attracts people like these – financial and accounting experts in their professional lives – to step onto a stage and engage with unscripted theater. By offering the same learning as part of a normal organization's leadership development curriculum, it could be stripped of its artistic core and could become another casualty of neo-liberal commercialization. What seemed so appealing and valuable when learned within the theater becomes less powerful delivered in the corporate setting to students with varying degrees of knowledge about the content and possibly low interest in its possibilities.

It would be easy to conclude based on these cautions that perhaps improv content is not transferrable. Yet, viewed as a philosophy of life, improvisation may be exactly what leaders need. We are in turbulent times with changes happening politically, socially, economically, and environmentally. Daily occurrences of the unexpected create fatigue and anxiety. The philosophy of improv would show leaders that they can easily handle the unexpected, with grace, collaboration, and humor. Acceptance of the current situation would be followed by confidence in their reaction to transform the difficult into the amusing, and sometimes, the inspiring.

What improv has to offer is best described by the owner of City Theater: "What we're looking for is what we call in improv 'the acceptance of the unknown gracefully.' That is what we want you to learn: to accept and build on the unknown gracefully."

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## Appendix A

### Sample List of Games Used in the Level One Class

Name	Description	Application
The Name Game	<p>Players call each other’s names around a circle. One person starts by pointing at or making eye contact with another player in the circle. This passes the turn to them, who then select another player to receive the pass, calls their name, and the game continues indefinitely. The game usually lasts 2-3 minutes.</p> <p>Variation: can add an alliterative descriptive word in front of the name, e.g. Jumping Jane</p>	<p>Allows players to learn each other’s names.</p> <p>Creates fun and connection within a group.</p>
Funny Bunny	<p>Complex layering game. Round 1: people use their index and middle fingers to point at their eyes, left hand’s fingers to left eye, and vice versa. One person starts and says, “Funny Bunny”, fingers turned in, pointing at themselves. Then, they repeat it with fingers now pointing out to one specific person with whom they make eye contact. That person receives it by saying “funny bunny” pointing at themselves, then passing it to another. This goes randomly around the circle.</p>	<p>Provides learning in focused listening and forces participants to react with their body rather than thinking about it.</p>

Name	Description	Application
	<p>Round two adds this layer: when someone receives the funny bunny the people to either side of the them turn towards that person and while they are saying funny bunny, the people to the side are waving their arms saying, “Tikki Tokki”. Game continues.</p> <p>Round 3 adds this layer to the previous layers: The people to either side of those going “Tikki Tokki” spin in place while saying “wooooo”.</p>	
What Are You Doing	Two-person game. The object is to be physically doing an imaginary task, and when asked the question by the other player “What are you doing?” you must answer with something other than the actual task that you’re doing. That player then has to make motions consistent with that task and it repeats until someone takes too long to answer the question.	Good warm-up game. Also, pushes boundaries of rational, linear thinking.
Snap Shot	Three players one at a time come to stage and pose as if for a photo. Fourth person then names the photo.	Good for awareness of others on the stage. Builds connections between players.
Mirroring	Typically done in pairs, task is to switch leader role and make who is leading invisible. One player mirrors the movements and facial expression of the other.	Demonstrates need for focused attention and provides experience around “follow the follower”
Zip Zap Zup	Same process as Name Game, only you use the words zip, zap, zup in that order as you pass it. If it was passed to you with zip, you would pass it saying, “zap”, and the next person would say “zup”, and so on.	Creates group connection, warms up and loosens players
Dagger	Similar process, only the turn is passed by throwing a dagger, and the person receiving the pass acts out being struck with a flying dagger. They pull the imaginary dagger out of their body, and throw it to the next person, and so on.	Creates group connection and physically loosens players

## Appendix B

### Semi-structured Interview Questions

Question 1: What have you learned so far in level one that feels valuable for you?

Question 2: In what ways has the learning been applicable for you outside of the theater context?

Question 3: What have you done differently at work or home because of what you learned?

Question 4: When you apply what you learned, what has been the result?

Question 5: What are your thoughts about the teaching methods used at the theater?