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Integrating the Arts into Organization Development: Using Improvisational Theatre to Enhance Personal and Interpersonal Effectiveness at Work

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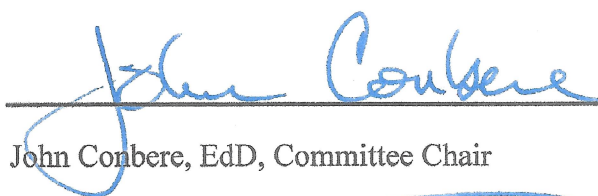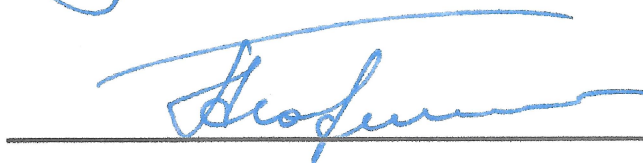University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Doctor of Education and hereby approve the dissertation.

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NOVEMBER 14, 2016

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Abstract

The use of an experiential, arts-based curriculum that is centered around theatrical improvisation (or "improv"), when utilized for corporate employee training and development purposes, has the potential to have a transformational effect on individuals and organizations if planned and implemented in a thoughtful and purposeful manner. This interpretive case study explored the use of an improv-based training program for employee development purposes in order to understand the experiences of the study's ten participants relative to the perceived impact and effectiveness of this training methodology, at both the individual and group levels. Five major themes arose from the findings, including: (1) learning at the individual level was more pronounced than at the group level, (2) potential gaps were identified in the ability of the participants to apply the training back at work, (3) the opportunity for long-term sustainability of the training method, in this particular case, was tenuous, (4) the world-view of the participants may have contributed to their inability to apply certain of the training principles, and (5) the potential that this training approach has relative to the ability to transformation behaviors and beliefs, at both the individual and the organizational levels. The findings also indicated that organizational leaders play an important role in the adoption and infusion of the improv mindset into the long-term culture of the organization, and that these improv tools must be supported, encouraged, and reinforced in the workplace by management consistently, over a long period of time in order for them to become integrated into the fabric of the organization.

KEYWORDS: Experiential Learning, Improv, Transformational Learning, Leadership and Culture, Arts and Experiential Learning.

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CHAPTER 1

Background

On its surface, the competitive, cold, cut-throat world of business, and the abstract,

sensitive, interpretive world of the performing arts probably do not appear, to many people, to

have much in common. Oftentimes, perceptions are that the business world reflects a system of

structured hierarchies, endless, mind-numbing meetings, machine-like processes, rigid policies

and procedures, irritating coworkers, deadlines, time-clocks, thankless hours, and demanding

bosses—in short, a high stress environment, with burnout, unhappy workers, and ultimately, a

workplace that is less productive than it has the potential to be. In a 2012 article, *Forbes*

magazine reported that in a study by the national employment firm Manpower Staffing, nearly

two-thirds of employees surveyed were not happy at work (Adams, 2012). Adams also cited

another, more extensive survey of some 30,000 employees worldwide by the consulting firm

Mercer, which stated that 32% of U.S. employees wanted to find new work. Further, a 2010

article in *U.S. News and World Report* stated that disengaged employees had cost U.S. firms an

estimated $416 billion in lost productivity during 2009 (Silverblatt, 2010). If these surveys are in

any way representative of the U.S. workforce, some might conclude that this is a rather bleak

picture of life at work today.

In a major Gallop survey report on employee engagement for the period from 2010 to

2012 entitled "The State of the American Workplace: Employee Insights for U.S. Business

Leaders" (Gallup, Inc., 2013), it was found that 70% of American workers were either

disengaged or actively disengaged from their jobs (p. 12). For purposes of their study, Gallop

defined engagement as "those who are involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their

work and contribute to their organization in a positive manner" (p. 12). Gallop estimated that this

level of disengagement by U.S. employees costs businesses between $450 billion and $550

billion each year in lost productivity. In their recently released figures for 2014, the percentage

of disengaged or actively disengaged employees fell to 68.5%, the lowest percentage since the

year 2000 (Adkins, 2015). While this decrease of one and one half percentage points from the

2012 figure is good news, it still means that greater than two thirds of U.S. workers are not

engaged (that is, disengaged or actively disengaged) in their work.

The World of the Arts and the Artist

In another seemingly separate universe, there exists the world of the arts and the artist.

This world is oftentimes perceived by many as unstructured, fantasy, flamboyant, extravagant,

playful, sometimes weird, oftentimes misunderstood, and perhaps even to some, unnecessary—

the seeming antithesis of the business world. Within the realm of the performing arts, many

would say, for example, that classical orchestral music is boring, while opera is virtually

unintelligible; theatre is too avant-garde, and dance (particularly ballet) is just a bunch of people

jumping around in tights and tutus. In addition, some would even say that the arts today add little

to no value to society. Those individuals see little to no purpose to the arts, particularly if it is not

generating a financial return.

These are perhaps extreme characterizations of the two worlds, exaggerated somewhat to

demonstrate the point that the worlds of business and art do not oftentimes intersect, and

seemingly have little in common with one another. What could free-spirited, free-thinking,

carefree artists and performers have to do with conservative, hard-driving, profit-driven, nine-to-

five business people? Could there possibly be anything that might link these two worlds together

in some way? If so, what might this intersection look like?

Why the Arts?

So what are some of the characteristics that one might typically associate with artists that seem to set them apart from those in business? First, artists do not punch a time clock. They do not have nine-to-five, forty hour a week jobs. By their very nature, artists are creative, innovative, passionate, and think of themselves as free-thinkers, able to perceive and interpret the world in new and unique ways. And because their inspirations are drawn from the world around them, they envelope themselves in their work, twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, with no time clocks. Artists oftentimes see things in the world that are not there, or that are not readily apparent to the rest of us and, in turn, create something meaningful that did not previously exist. It is a way of looking at the world—with curiosity and question, keenly observing everything around them, using these bits and pieces they have accumulated ultimately, to create and communicate something new to us. While this way of life and this approach may seem very unstructured, there is oftentimes a great deal of structure and discipline that goes on in the *process* of practicing, developing and creating an artistic product.

Consider an ensemble of artists, for example, actors in a play, working effectively together as one, listening to and watching one another, truly communicating among themselves and with their audience, not only with their voices, but with their bodies, their attitudes, their movements and their eye contact. Each contributing, to create something new, unique, and special. Look next to the symphony orchestra; a collaborative ensemble, sometimes with numbers approaching one hundred musicians. These individuals come together, committing to listening to one another, and putting the needs of the group before the needs of the individual musician. They trust not only one another, but also the conductor, the leader whom they all have

agreed to follow unconditionally. These examples of artistic collaboration represent the epitome of teamwork at its finest.

Corporate Training Today

Corporate training is a thriving industry in business today. According to the *Forbes* website, businesses in the U.S. spent over $70 billion on employee training in 2013, while spending on corporate training worldwide exceeded $130 billion (Bersin, 2014). Businesses typically employ a number of different training modalities, by far the most popular continuing to be what is referred to as the in-person "stand and deliver" technique. According to *Training Magazine*, just under half (47%) of all corporate training in 2014 was delivered via in-person instructors (2014 Training Industry Report). Another 30% of all training was delivered electronically, via virtual classrooms, webcasts, learning management systems, simulations, mobile devices, and podcasts. The remainder of the training was delivered in some type of combined or blended fashion. Another type of electronic delivery that is gaining momentum is Massive Open On-line Courses, or MOOCs. These are branded courses developed by universities that allow open access for thousands of students to enroll and participate in a single college course.

It seems evident that on-line delivery systems are only going to continue to gain in popularity for business training, given the cost-effective nature and ease of availability and distribution of the product. Electronic training can be developed with a single investment in content, and then pushed out to literally thousands of employees throughout the organization. This approach has two potentially significant shortcomings however. First, is the inability of the presenter to easily customize or tailor the content for specific needs and audiences, as training is not always a one-size-fits-all solution. Second, on-line delivery methods lack the potential for an

interactive or experiential learning component for participants, including direct instructor feedback, something that will be discussed further in the Literature Review chapter, below. In addition, while aggregated data are not available as to the specific nature, techniques and topics of in-person training, it is fair to assume that not a large percentage of those trainers are utilizing a purely arts-based curriculum in their sessions.

Overview of the Problem

Training methodologies. It seems clear that employee engagement in U.S. businesses today could use a shot in the arm. One possible approach to enhance the way that employees engage in the workplace is through a more creative, interactive, experiential training delivery method based in the arts. By breaking away from the traditional stand and deliver models of lecture delivery, a more experientially-based approach, grounded in the arts, might help employees to increase their interest and attentiveness in the training, and therefore their engagement and effectiveness at work, at the personal, professional, and interpersonal levels.

For example, traditional training methods (in-person or electronic) could present compelling information on the importance of effective listening skills at work, even giving the participant tips on how to go about developing these skills. However, without actually experiencing what it feels like to truly be an effective listener, and understand how difficult this skill really is to apply day-to-day, the chances of the participant being able to successfully master this skill, much less sustain it, are low.

Alternatively, if the participant were able to actually get the opportunity to experience and practice what it feels like to listen intently, in a fun, interactive, and energetic group training session, there is a greater chance that he or she will be able to remember that feeling outside of class, recreate it, and therefore continue to use and develop those skills once back at work. I

believe that corporate training approaches today are missing an opportunity to take advantage of creative and engaging techniques and methods used by artists, to develop enhanced personal, interpersonal, and team skills.

Gap in existing research. As will be discussed further in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, there exists a gap in the existing research literature relative to the effectiveness, or even the use of arts-based training, and more specifically, theatrical improvisation, as a corporate employee development tool, at the individual level. The literature review uncovered studies on the use and application of improvisational mindsets, conceptually, at an organizational level, which researchers refer to as "organizational improvisation." The literature review also uncovered a number of non-empirically-based articles on the use of the arts as a metaphor for business. However, little to no published empirical studies were uncovered that address the use, or related effectiveness of theatrical improvisation as an employee training and development tool at the individual, team or group levels.

Problem Statement. According to data presented above, 70% of American workers were either disengaged or actively disengaged from their jobs between 2010 and 2012 (Gallup, Inc., 2013, p. 12), and that this lack of engagement cost American businesses in excess $416 billion in lost productivity during 2009 (Silverblatt, 2010). In other words, well over two thirds of American workers, because of a lack of engagement in their work, are costing U.S. businesses nearly half a trillion dollars per year in lost productivity. Were companies to begin to address the sources and causes of these losses, the economic gains recouped as the result of increased employee engagement and the related organizational effectiveness could be redirected to other, more productive economic purposes, including reinvestments in the businesses, additional capital being returned to the owners, the sharing of the gains with employees, and the lowing of prices

to consumers. All of these options would serve to strengthen the underlying economy of the U.S. in terms of increased capital available for reinvestment, or in increases in disposable income to investors, workers and consumers.

Purpose of This Study

One place that employers could look to begin to address the issue of lack of employee engagement is in new, more creative and engaging training opportunities for employees, which could, in-turn, help to enhance the meaning and enjoyment of their work, leading then to increased organizational effectiveness and profitability. So, what if it were possible, through non-traditional, creative, experiential training methods, to superimpose the mindset of the performing artist onto individual workers, teams, and leaders in the business world? What if artists were able to help those in the business world to learn to think more spontaneously and creatively; to be able to look at the world differently than they do currently, and to see what now may not be readily apparent to them? What if artists were able to help business people to listen as acutely as a symphony orchestra musician does? What would this world look like? How might the artist go about facilitating this transformation, and more importantly, would there be any perceived value in this intersection of beliefs and behaviors between the arts and business? It is this potential link between the arts and business that is at the core of this study. The purpose of this inquiry therefore, is to examine whether the juxtaposition of these two seemingly unrelated disciplines can lead to heightened employee engagement, personal and professional effectiveness, and organizational wellbeing.

Overview Of The Study

This study is an interpretive case study of a single, self-contained work unit within an organization. The organization contracted with a professional improvisational theatre company

to deliver a series of three experiential training sessions to its employees over a three-month period. Using the concepts of theatrical improvisation (improv) games and exercises that are typically utilized by theatres to train their performers, the organization's hope was that some key performance traits and skills of the actors could be adapted by their employees in order to enhance both individual and organizational effectiveness. Examples of these skills include enhanced listening and concentration, heightened creativity, increased spontaneity and quick-thinking, and a greater level of comfort in front of groups of people.

The employee training consisted of three, three-hour sessions, facilitated by professionally trained theatrical improvisers, to a group of twelve corporate employee participants over a three-month period. At each session, the participants were led through a series of group warm-up exercises, then moving into a number of individual and group exercises that focused on some aspect of skills development (listening, creative thinking, etc.). After each exercise, the facilitators walked the participants through a de-brief of what they had just experienced, in order to help identify the purpose and possible outcomes of the exercise, as well as to reinforce the learnings.

The primary data collection source for the study came from individual interviews a few weeks after each training session, with those participants who agreed to be a part of the study. I conducted these one-on-one interviews in order to attempt to gain an understanding of the participants' experience with this type of training method, both during and subsequent to the sessions. A total of 26 interviews were undertaken over the course of the three months of training (not all twelve employees participated in the interviews). In addition, since the company was already holding these training sessions for its employees, I asked if I could observe each of the sessions. This request was not made to assess or in any way critique any individual participant,

the facilitators, or their training methods. Rather, this request was made solely in an attempt to understand the sessions' general tone, structure, flow, and content. I felt these observations would help to provide me with some added context and points of reference when interviewing the participants.

Research Question

The principal area of interest in this study was the experience of the participants who went through this improv training. My interest included their experience not only during the training sessions themselves, but also their thoughts, observations and experiences subsequent to the sessions back at the workplace. Therefore, my formal research question for this study was:

What is the perceived impact of interactive, experiential theatrical improvisational training on individual participants and their related work groups when this training is used for employee development purposes?

With this question, I sought a deep understanding of the experiences and perceptions of the participants as they related to this specific experiential improvisation training methodology, including the appropriateness, effectiveness, and sustainability of this type of non-traditional employee training. I also hoped to gain an understanding of how the company's departmental leadership perceived this specific program's appropriateness, effectiveness, and sustainability, in terms of value to the organization.

Relevance of This Study

This study was based on the underlying foundation of individual learning styles and the effectiveness of these styles in relation to their application and sustainability in the workplace. More specifically, the study focused on experiential learning, and individuals' responses to this alternative learning style for corporate employee development purposes. Traditional corporate

training and development has typically been delivered in large part via presentations and lectures. In the future, it is hoped that by utilizing experiential learning concepts, participants in corporate training environments will learn better by doing, thus increasing the potential for both retention of the material, as well as the ability to apply the learned concepts in the workplace, on an ongoing basis.

Additionally, many of the professional facilitators who deliver this type of arts-based employee development training to organizations are professionally-trained performing artists, who have seen and created an opportunity to apply their skills, knowledge and artistry to organizational training and development. By and large however, these professional artists have not been formally trained in the field of organization development (OD), but rather have developed their practices as a result of needs they have identified in the marketplace based on their skillsets. Therefore, it is through the prism of OD that this dissertation study was conducted. An attempt has been made within this study to identify relevant artistic, organizational, and OD concepts, weaving a thread throughout the material in order to better understand how the disciplines of the arts, business, and OD may be integrated, and if so, to what end.

The hope with this study is to help inform OD practitioners about possible new and innovative ways to have a positive impact on their clients' organizational effectiveness, as well as to contribute to a heightened understanding of individual and group behaviors and learning methods. This may manifest itself in the form of OD practitioners that may wish to develop these facilitation skills for themselves, or just to better understand this method in order to effectively advise their clients as to the availability of this alternative employee development vehicle.

Definition of Terms

In order to facilitate the reader's understanding of concepts presented in this dissertation, the following definitions will be used throughout.

Applied improvisation. The concept of improvisation has typically been applied to the performing arts, most specifically in jazz and theatrical performance. The concept of applied improvisation refers to the application of artistic improvisational techniques and methods outside of the traditional performance space. Applied improvisation refers to the utilization of improvisational techniques outside of the traditional realm of theatrical or artistic performance. This could include for example, the use of improvisation in an organizational training environment for employee development purposes, or in workshops for the development of personal or life skills, rather than for artistic performance.

Art. While art means many different things, to many different people, the following operational definition of art will be used in this study. The *Oxford Dictionary Online* defined art as "the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power" (Art, n.d.).

Case study. The case study is a methodology for studying a phenomenon of interest within a bounded system within its real-life context. The goal of a case study is to understand the perspectives and experiences of the members of a system that are involved with the phenomenon (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). Case studies can be either interpretive or positivistic in nature, depending on the nature of the research question and the epistemological approach.

Client group. The client group referred to in this study is the organizational unit that represents the case being studied. This client group represents a single, self-contained research department fellowship program within a major Midwestern tier-one research university.

Comfort zone. An individual's comfort zone is a mindset or situation in which the individual feels safe and free from threats. This zone is an internal mechanism that protects the individual from possible harm as the result of some perceived risky behavior or activity. In the workplace, these perceived risks could include possible embarrassment, humiliation, and looking stupid in front of others as the result of some unknown task or activity that makes the individual uncomfortable. Not wanting to leave one's comfort zone is oftentimes rooted in some aspect of fear or uncertainty, based on incomplete or inaccurate information, or from past negative experiences.

Double-loop learning. Argyris (1990) characterized double-loop learning as the identification of the true underlying causes of problems that individuals or groups are attempting to solve. He believed that by identifying and eliminating these true underlying causes of problems, rather than addressing only the surface-level manifestation of the problems (known as single-loop learning, described below), the problems would then not recur. Argyris believed that long-term changes within organizations can only occur once these deep, underlying organizational beliefs and assumptions are identified and challenged. It is in this additional, or second step of addressing problems (the double-loop state) that true learning can occur.

Experiential learning. As its name implies, experiential learning represents "learning by doing." Kolb (2015) defined experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49).

Facilitator group (or, the facilitators, individually). The facilitator group represents a professional improvisational theatre group that provides improv and sketch comedy performances, improv education, and corporate improv training services throughout the United States. This group provided the training workshops for the client group in this study. The individuals who actually provided the training for the client group will be referred to throughout this study as "the facilitators."

Flow. Flow is a state of both body and mind working harmoniously together as one. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) defined flow as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (p. 36). In a subsequent work, he characterized the feeling of flow as "being carried away by an outside force, of moving effortlessly with a current of energy, at the moments of highest enjoyment" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 39).

Improvisation or improv. Bergren, Cox, and Detmar (2002) defined improvisation as "the process in which something new and exciting is created in a moment of spontaneity – a flash of discovery ignited by a spark of inspiration" (p. 7). A more informal characterization of improvisation, that still captures the spirit of Bergren, et al. is, to make something up—to create an idea on-the-spot where none previously existed. The term improvisation has been used in the performing arts going back hundreds of years, most notably in musical (both jazz and classical) and theatrical improvisation. While the definition provided by Bergren et al. applies very clearly to the performing arts, it is not meant to be limited solely to this area. All individuals improvise each and every day, in many aspects of their lives, from managing a detour on the way to work, to explaining to the boss why an assignment was late. In each case, the individual is creating something new (a new route to work, or an excuse for the boss) in a moment of spontaneity.

Member. A member of the client's research program group who went through some or all of the improv training sessions.

Organizational improvisation. The ideas, approaches, and mindsets that individual performance improvisers possess can be applied conceptually, at an organization-wide level, to the way that a company approaches its business, for example, in the identification of new opportunities, or in organizational learning. This system-wide conceptual mindset is known as organizational improvisation.

Participant. A member of the client group who went through some or all of the improv training sessions, and who also voluntarily agreed to be interviewed as a part of this study, thus becoming a study participant.

Single-loop learning. Argyris (1976, 1990) identified a method of learning within organizations that reinforces bad behaviors and that does not ultimately solve the problem or issue that is attempting to be addressed. With single-loop learning, "participants in organizations are encouraged to learn, as long as the learning does not question the fundamental design, goals and activities of their organizations" (Argyris, 1976, p. 367). Argyris believed that single-loop learning solves what he referred to as the presenting, or immediate problem within an organization, but that it does not address the problem's underlying cause. This inability, or unwillingness of individuals to question or address these underlying causes in order to solve problems allows the problems to recur (or loop back) because they have only been addressed at a superficial level.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to examine relevant literature that exists in both the research-based academic literature, as well as work that has been documented by leading practitioners in the field. Throughout this review, a number of themes arose that influence the understanding of the possible application of artistic processes and mindsets to improving individual and interpersonal effectiveness at work. First I will provide some background on the field of the arts, generally, including an introduction to the philosophy of, and concepts related to improvisation. Next will be an examination of relevant literature that is related to the field of OD, including the concepts of learning, comfort zone, and flow. This will be followed by a topic referred to as "organizational improvisation," and finally, a brief integration of theory and practice in this area will be presented.

A Brief Background on Arts and Improvisation

The arts as a metaphor. The premise of this dissertation was that art, or the arts collectively, can be used as a tool to improve employee and organizational effectiveness. Before proceeding however, it must be clarified what is being referred to here when using the term "the arts." Throughout time, philosophers, artists, politicians, students, patrons of the arts, and many others have debated the question "what is art?" Conceptual definitions of art within these groups, in abstract terms, included the possibility of an infinite number of answers to this question, as it seems clear that art means something different to everyone. For example, in his essay *What is Art?* author Leo Tolstoy (1904) stated:

> Art is not, as the metaphysicians say, the manifestation of some mysterious idea of beauty or God; it is not, as the aesthetical physiologists say, a game in which man lets off his

excess of stored-up energy; it is not the expression of man's emotions by external signs;

it is not the production of pleasing objects; and, above all, it is not pleasure; but it is a

means of union among men, joining them together in the same feelings, and

indispensable for the life and progress toward well-being of individuals and of humanity.

(p. 50)

Alternatively, French impressionist painter and sculptor Edgar Degas (n.d.) characterized

art as follows, "Art is not what you see, but what you make others see." However, legendary

comedian Groucho Marx may have summed up the concept of art most succinctly as Captain

Spaulding in the Marx Brothers film *Animal Crackers*:

Well, art is art, isn't it? Still, on the other hand, water is water! And east is east and west

is west and if you take cranberries and stew them like applesauce they taste much more

like prunes than rhubarb does. Now, uh . . . now you tell me what you know. (Heerman,

1930)

In the abstract sense, it is clear that art will be interpreted by each individual, in their own

way, through their own individual lenses, based on their own unique experiences, backgrounds,

and points-of-view.

On a more practical level, a clearer, more operational definition of art was found in the

Oxford Dictionary Online as "the expression or application of human creative skill and

imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be

appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power" (Art, n.d.). It is this operational,

working definition of art that served to help frame the analysis and discussion undertaken in this

study.

At its core in this more functional definition lay the concepts of expression, creativity and imagination, at both the individual and group levels. Inherent in this idea is the fact that individuals are creating things that do not currently exist. Ideas for this creation come from one's imagination and from the world around oneself. Artistic creation has to do with taking what one already knows and believes, seeing and experiencing the world in new ways, imagining possibilities, and finally, synthesizing and integrating all of this information into a new idea, a new work, a new interpretation, or a new product. to create something that did not previously exist.

While the Oxford (Art, n.d.) definition of art above referred most typically to the visual arts, art clearly exists in other forms, including aural and tactile works; the symphony orchestra being a prime example. That said, there exists a significant amount of literature relative to the arts as a metaphor for business, and in particular, the performing arts. These metaphors extend from the performing arts into business applications that include leadership, creativity, teamwork, effective listening, increased spontaneity, increased comfort in public speaking, and trust, among others. The following section will explore several performing arts disciplines, including the symphony orchestra and its conductor, and improvisational jazz, dance and theatre, as they all might relate to business concepts and applications. Many of the skills required in these performing arts disciplines have a clear and direct relationship to traits that are essential to enhanced employee effectiveness and engagement, as well as leadership, when looking at them as alternative methods of employee and organizational development.

The symphony orchestra and its conductor. The modern symphony orchestra is a collection of highly trained and specialized individual musicians, sometimes numbering nearly one hundred members, who must all work together, in concert with one another, to create a

unique musical and emotional experience for their audiences. Imagine the multitude of components (again, for up to some one hundred individual players) that must come together for a single thirty minute piece of music: rhythm, harmony, melody, tempo, texture, tone, pitch, intonation, and phrasing; all of this must come together seamlessly by all players in order to produce an exquisite work of art. When it does come together, both the players and the audience experience something that can transport everyone into another world. This experience, when executed at the highest levels, has the potential to truly stir the soul.

These players cannot do it alone, however. They must all implicitly agree to follow a designated leader. This leader serves as the guide for the ensemble, interpreting, establishing, and most importantly, communicating the vision for the piece. Players must follow the conductor's every move, every beat of the music, every shift of the eye brow, every hand movement, and agree to go together, wherever the conductor takes them.

Michael Hyatt, named by *Forbes* as one of the top 10 on-line marketing experts to follow in 2014 (Steimle, 2014), and who has written extensively on leadership development, associated organizational leadership to the job of orchestra conductor in one of his blog posts on leadership. After attending a symphony orchestra concert, Hyatt identified eight areas that orchestra conductors have in common with business leaders. He observed that orchestra conductors harness the talents of the players, lead with vision, motivate the players to be their best, have a plan for how to approach the work, and that they communicate that plan to the others (Hyatt, 2014).

Author Shellie Karabell, writing in *Forbes* magazine, also equated organizational leadership with orchestral conducting. She discussed a new corporate management training program being offered by business schools such as Harvard and INSEAD, whereby management

students are placed in the orchestra pits of area symphonies in order to observe and better understand the inner workings of the group in order to draw parallels with corporate management. In her interviews with a program director and one of the orchestra's conductors, they were able to identify key crossover leadership concepts that included acknowledging and encouraging the expression of individual voices, getting each of those individual voices to eventually play as one, adjusting leadership styles to get the best out of each player, and bringing people together, both inspiring and empowering each individual in the group to perform at their best (Karabell, 2015). If all references to a symphony orchestra were taken out of the previous statement, one could easily believe that this was the beginning of most any leadership textbook on the market today.

Finally, in a document prepared by the national service organization for American symphony orchestras, the League of American Orchestras (The League) articulated the key traits, roles and responsibilities of symphony orchestra conductors. In their document entitled "Traits and Skills of a Music Director" (League, 2001), The League described the orchestra conductor as one who is skilled in the art of persuasion, that builds a deep connection with the players, possesses a charisma that helps to move others, that they use both their body (actions) as well as their voice (words) to motivate others to follow, and that their power comes from the power of their vision. So again, the overlap here of leadership skills between the arts and business organizations seems undeniable. Where this metaphor will provide useful, as Harvard and INSEAD (above) found, is that individuals sometimes need to see the same concept or idea presented in a different setting in order for them to recognize, grasp and apply the ideas to their own situations. This idea will be explored further below, in the context of experiential learning.

The world of dance. Similar to the field of orchestral music, dance ensembles are also comprised of groups of highly-specialized individual artists, led by the vision and voice of a single individual, the choreographer. Writing in Forbes.com on her experience as a patron at a recent ballet performance, Donna Sapolin, founding editor of *Next Avenue*, a digital information-sharing platform and website for baby-boomers, developed by PBS (http://www.nextavenue.org/about), identified several links between her observations of the ballet performance, team effectiveness, and organizational leadership. She noticed, for example, how the ballet troupe members all worked so precisely together, watching each other, listening to one another's moves and breath, as well as to the orchestra, and completely supporting each other member for the good of the piece, intently concentrating with constant eye contact with one another (Sapolin, 2013).

Now, imagine a team of business professionals working together to solve a problem or innovate a new idea with that same commitment and intensity. Think of the potential progress that could be made utilizing the dancer's level of sustained commitment and concentration. Sapolin (2013) also noted the lifelong learning that dancers undertake, studying and taking lessons each day throughout their entire careers, and then participating in rehearsals and performances in the evenings. Again, this level of sustained commitment to something that one has devoted one's life to would be a good model for organizational members in today's workplace.

Sapolin (2013) further suggested that organizational leaders could benefit from the idea of tapping into their own human emotion, as well as that of the team's. That is, for leaders to possess empathy for those with whom they work, and to lead with compassion. This concept was further supported by Ms. Leigh Thomas, a former professional ballerina and now CEO of the

international Dare Creative Agency. In her article "I Went From Ballet Dancer to CEO and This is What it Taught Me" (Thomas, 2014), she discussed a host of personal traits that she developed over years as a professional performing artist that helped with her assent to the top leadership position of a major international advertising agency. These skills included not only the intense mental discipline and attention to detail she cultivated over the years, but more importantly was the emotional connection she learned to create with both her fellow dancers as well as the audience. This heightened awareness of her emotional self, developed during her career as a professional artist, was further intensified over the years throughout her development as a business leader. It is this ability to recognize and tap into that deep power of human emotion, first developed as a performing artist, that helped shape her as the business leader she is today.

Leadership theory is perhaps one of the more highly studied topics in business today. In his book *Leadership: Theory and Practice,* Northouse (2010) identified eleven leadership models or approaches that have been developed over the years. The earlier models focused primarily on the individual's leadership ability (traits approach and skills approach, for example), while more recently developed theories center more on the leader, in relation to others. These later models (transformational and authentic leadership, for example), place a heavy emphasis on the humanistic aspects of the leader, and in particular, the leader's relationship with followers. This includes the leader's deep self-reflection and an acknowledgement of the emotional connections that help to engage others, inspiring them to want to follow. It is precisely these approaches that encompass the idea of leading with a sensitivity to human emotion that Thomas (2014) developed as a result of her intense training as an artist throughout her life.

In an Internet search on Amazon.com performed on March 12, 2014, and using the search term "leadership" in the "books" category, no fewer than 131,000 titles were returned. Clearly

there is no shortage of literature available on this topic. However, out of the first one hundred titles returned in this search, only two made any reference to art or the arts: *Leadership Jazz – Revised: The Essential Elements of a Great Leader* (De Pree, 2008), and *Leadership is an Art (revised)* (De Pree, 2004). From this, it appears that, at least in the popular leadership literature, there exists a dearth of study and writing on the utilization and application of artistic processes and concepts in leadership training and development.

A deeper investigation into this topic however, identified a book by Denhardt and Denhardt (2006) entitled *The Dance of Leadership: The Art of Leading in Business, Government and Society*. In this study, the authors conducted a series of extensive, in-depth interviews with 31 leaders of arts organizations in the United States, and another 26 interviews with leaders in business, government, and academia. The authors were interested in exploring and identifying possible parallels and overlaps in leadership experiences between the two groups. Their findings uncovered several themes and traits that were common to both performing artists and organizational leaders. One primary theme that recurred throughout the work was the importance of leaders making connections with those they are leading. They identified the need to touch others at a deep, personal and emotional level in order to truly energize them. Through this process leaders are able to create shared meaning and purpose—something that connects leaders and followers, in very much the same way that an artist connects with his or her audience. It is this deep emotional connection and response that the authors believed would help leaders and followers to move forward more effectively, together.

In a review of Denhardt and Denhardt's (2006) *The Dance of Leadership* in *Public Management Review*, Melanie Kan (2007) noted that the idea of arts and leadership is under-researched and that the authors have opened the door to further study. Interestingly, because of

the interview methodology utilized by the authors, Han stated that, "neither do the authors provide any typical evidence of a rigorous analytic framework for their conceptualizations" (p. 589). Ironically, it is exactly this social constructionist approach of finding collective meaning that helped Denhardt and Denhardt to uncover the more humanistic leadership traits of shared meaning and experience in order to move groups forward, together. These humanistic aspects are the same traits that are inherently possessed by artists. It seems as though Han expected this study to possess a more measurable, quantitative approach to the work. However, the methodology utilized by Denhardt and Denhardt represented exactly what they were hoping to better understand—that is, the non-measurable, human aspects of effective leadership. This interpretive approach is also at the core of artistic creation and expression. Artists interpret the world around them, within a particular context, with the hope of engendering an emotional response and creating a shared meaning and experience between the artist and the audience. It is precisely this link that is the essence of this dissertation.

Improvisational jazz. Another form of artistic expression, the genre of improvisational jazz music, offers yet another parallel between the performing arts and business. Here, the emphasis is not as much on the leadership aspects of the group, as it was in classical music, but rather on the performance of the individual and the ensemble (the collective). A symphony orchestra performs from a precisely composed script (or score), and is led by a single individual who is meant to unify the individual members of the group, all of whom play together in strict rhythms and harmonies, as proscribed by the composer and interpreted by the conductor.

When examining the jazz metaphor however, the emphasis shifts to the individuals and their relationship with the ensemble. In a jazz ensemble, there is no conductor (or leader) and there is no musical script (or score). Rather, here the music is represented by a series of loosely

put together progressions of chords that establishes the overall arc, tone, and direction of the piece. Once the framework has been established by the group with a basic melody and set of chord progressions, each individual musician within the group will take turns playing extended improvised solos. Through these individual solos, each musician is responsible for creating an improvised interpretation of the piece that is fresh, new, and unique, while still fitting within the framework and structure of the core piece. Because the solos are all improvised each time, no two performances are ever alike. As the group pushes forward through the piece, the individual soloists must make instantaneous decisions, second by second, note by note, as to what they are going to play next. The goal is to create a work of art, on-the-spot, in a fast-paced environment, taking risks, all while listening intently to their fellow players, staying in constant visual and aural communication to ensure that they are all working together (Barrett, 1998).

The nature of improvisation. At the core of the jazz metaphor, as well as the foundation for this research study, is the concept of improvisation—that the musician creates his or her performance on-the-spot, spontaneously, and without preparation. An operational definition of improvisation (or its infinitive, to improvise), from *OxfordDictionaries.com*, stated: (1) to "create and perform (music, drama or verse) spontaneously or without preparation;" and (2) to "produce or make something from whatever is available" (improvise, n.d.). In examining the etymology of the word improvisation, it was found that the word takes a journey through the romance languages, most recently from the French *improviser*, to "compose or say extemporaneously," which came from the Italian *improvviso* "unforeseen, unprepared," and finally from the Latin origin *improvisus* "not foreseen, unforeseen, unexpected" (improvisation, n.d.).

So, what distinguishes jazz improvisation from other ensemble art forms is that in jazz, the individual musician creates the solo on-the-spot, extemporaneously, without preparation, while still having to stay in touch with the other players, staying within the framework of the underlying piece, including key, rhythms, harmonies, and tempo, all the while ensuring that they are all constantly working together and supporting one another. The components of a jazz ensemble that is working effectively together include individual discipline and exceptionalism, effective communication skills among the group's members, including intense listening, eye contact and body language, and support of one another for the good of the group. At its core however, is the development and nurturing of individual, spontaneous creativity.

The nature of jazz improvisation. In an article entitled "Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning," Barrett (1998) described some of the key characteristics of great jazz improvisers. He acknowledged that improvisation, while seemingly unstructured, does have to conform in certain aspects to a basic set of rules, including the key, the tone and feel, and the overall rhythm and harmonic structure of the piece. As the rest of the jazz group, referred to as the rhythm section, lays down and maintains this structure, the improviser is then free to spontaneously interpret his or her solo part. Barrett noted that even though the musician is improvising (or creating) the solo part on-the-spot, the player is actually also thinking a few notes and measures ahead, creating an arc of where the solo might be headed, given the overall structure of the piece.

Barrett (1998) warned however, that these improvisers can tend to fall into a pattern of dependent behavior, falling back on what they know, what they are most familiar with, and what they have created previously, therefore not creating, or even trying anything new. It is this falling back on habitual playing behaviors that can place jazz improvisers in a rut. The players stop

pushing themselves, returning to what they already know, playing what they have previously, and tending to play what is comfortable to them, taking little to no new risks in their performances.

In order to combat this complacency, Barrett (1998) suggested that improvisers create deliberate disruptions in their playing in order to interrupt these habitual responses, to push themselves out of their comfort zones and demand novel responses to the music (p. 609). He also described how good improvisers push themselves to take risks and to push themselves out of their comfort zones. Musicians that can do this are not afraid to make mistakes, nor are they afraid to fail. In fact, this is a key component in the process of becoming a better improviser. It is this combination of pushing oneself outside one's comfort zone, not being afraid to take risks or to fail, and embracing errors, that acts as a source of learning for the improviser. This is how jazz musicians get better. It is not as much practicing pre-determined elements in preparation for a specific piece. Rather it is this willingness, and perhaps even a calling, to go where the player has not gone before. It is that deep-seated need to explore the unknown that keeps the jazz improviser sharp and fresh. It is this willingness on the part of these artists to explore, and to push themselves outside their comfort zones, that leads to them learning and growing as artists and performers.

Another relevant aspect of jazz groups and improvisers is the concept of "being in the groove" (Barrett, 1998). Barrett described a condition where all of the players in a group, the soloist and the rhythm section alike, find a place where they all seem to be working seamlessly and effortlessly together, as if they each can read one another's minds. It is as if they are all able to anticipate what each is going to do next and are all going to the same place. This is not necessarily a common condition among musicians in a jazz ensemble, and it is one that is not

easily arrived at. It takes such an extraordinary freeing of the mind that these musicians "speak of being so completely absorbed in playing that they are not consciously thinking, reflecting, or deciding on what notes to play, as if they are able to simultaneously be inside and outside of their bodies and minds" (p. 614). Barrett characterized this condition of being in the groove in terms of a concept developed by Csikszentmihalyi (2003), known as "flow," which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

   Improvisational theatre. Improvisation in the arts is not limited solely to jazz music. In fact, it can appear in virtually any art form. However, one area in which it manifests itself quite extensively is in the area of the theatre. The literature is rich in practitioner-based methodologies and training books in this area. Similar to improvisational jazz, theatrical improvisation is based on the concept of creating a work on-the-spot, either individually or within a group, in that moment, with no pre-written script or preconceived idea of what the scene is going to be about or where it is headed. Improvisation in the theatre (referred to more frequently these days as "improv") is oftentimes used to help train actors in traditional drama programs in scene and character development (Madson, 2005). However, over the last 50 years or so, to many individuals, improv has become most commonly associated with comedic improv. Today, comedy improv theatres, troupes, and even television shows entertain audiences across the country with their spontaneous creation of comedic scenes on-the-spot, oftentimes based on suggestions from the audience. The television show *Whose Line is it Anyway* is a prime example of the popularization of comedic improv over the last few years.

   Theatrical improv is based on the idea of games—a collection of exercises and performance structures, for both individuals and groups, that are meant to stimulate and enhance the creativity of the participants, or to help them develop a specific aspect of their craft, such as

listening, for example. Viola Spolin (1993), the widely acknowledged creator of theatrical improvisation as we know it today, described in her book *Improvisation for the Theater* that this whole idea of improv developed from playing the game "Charades" as a child with her siblings. Then later, during the 1930s and 1940s, she applied this game-type approach to children's theatre classes which she would teach. She said the games were "a means to free the child and the so-called amateur from mechanical, stilted stage behaviors" (p. xiix). Spolin continued to utilize this training and development technique with both her child acting students, as well as an adult acting company she founded. The games eventually evolved into creating improvised acting scenes, where the actors were asked to base the unscripted scenes on the simple concepts of who, what, and where. Over time, the games, exercises, and scene and character development continued to grow, until she was able to see how her creation could be applied in performance settings by a professional theatre, when her son, Paul Sills, founded the Second City improv company in Chicago.

As improv has continued to grow since these early years of Viola Spolin, it has manifested itself in many forms, including games, exercises, and improvised scenes, in both improv workshop training sessions, as well as in live performances. Since the initial conception of Spolin's idea of play-games for children, the idea of games evolved into adult theatrical training and, over time, has retained its game-like feel and approach as these techniques have morphed into entertainment performance activities for the general public. And as noted above, this idea of improv games has now migrated into the corporate training milieu, as well. Throughout this study, the terms "games" and "exercises" will be used interchangeably to represent collectively all of these types of improv activities as they are applied to the corporate

training setting. This idea of characterizing formal, serious corporate training initiatives in terms of games and play will be discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5 of this dissertation

Rules of improv. For an art form that characterizes itself as unstructured, spontaneous, and creating ideas on-the-spot, there is nonetheless, as with jazz, a foundation, or structure, that helps provide a framework for improv participants within which to learn and work. These rules, or structures, are applied in a similar fashion to anyone who studies or performs improv, whether in a theatre performance setting, an improv class, or in a corporate training environment. While these rules vary somewhat in number and content from instructor to instructor, theatre to theatre, and book to book, the overall spirit of these rules is that there exists a body of generally agreed-upon principles that provide the basic foundation for improvisers. In reviewing a significant amount of improv training literature for this study, a representative sample of this variation in the interpretation of the rules of improv among authors included:

- Kerr (1998): 17 rules;

- Atkins (1994): 12 rules;

- Goldberg (1991): 9 rules;

- Madson (2005): 13 rules;

- Keefe (2003) 5 rules;

- Leonard and Yorton (2015): 7 rules, and so on.

So, it is clear that there is no definitive agreement, even among practicing professional improvisers and teachers, what the exact rules are, or how they might be applied.

Based on years of study, classes and reading on this topic of improv rules, I have compiled the following composite summary listing of what I believe are the key improv principles and rules that I have developed over time. These rules have been developed within the

context of improv training and performance, for improv performers and performance troupes, and which incorporate the spirit of the rules as documented by the authors listed in the previous paragraph.

1. Say "Yes, and . . ."

   This phrase means that you should try and accept whatever idea is given to you and work with it. Accept the idea (by mentally saying yes), and then add to the idea ("and …"). Then, continue to creatively build on the idea. For example:

   > Player 1: "Let's go to the store."
   >
   > Player 2: "Ok, I needed to pick up some milk anyway" (accepting the initial idea, and then adding to it).

   Now, there are two interesting pieces of information for the players to build on— that they are going to the store, and that one of them needs milk.

2. Always Support Your Fellow Partners

   The goal of any improv game is to make the group look good and to move the idea forward together, as an ensemble. Improv is not intended as a vehicle to showcase individuals. Rather, it is focused on the process and outcome of the group. This means disciplining oneself to not take the easy joke for personal gain, at the expense of the overall scene, if it means that the rest of the scene will fall flat.

3. Trust One Another, Unconditionally

   Trust is the cornerstone of all improv. One has to be able to depend on the others in the group, and they, in turn, have to know that they can depend on you. There must be an understanding that everyone has the best interests of the game, and

thus the group, in mind. I have to know that you have my back. For example, if my partner sees that I am having trouble coming up with a response, that person should step in and continue to add in additional information, or stall in some fashion, until I am able to respond to the scene.

4. Listen, Listen, Listen

    Another cornerstone of improv is to actively and effectively listen, constantly, to what each other is saying. One cannot effectively contribute to the advancement of the game without hearing, and understanding, what the others have said before you. This takes and intense level concentration and focus, along with a great deal of practice, to master.

    Since there is no pre-determined script in improv, it is incumbent upon each participant to contribute to the building of the scene. If a participant is not listening, the individual is unable to effectively contribute to the growth of the story. So for example, if someone in the scene has made a reference to a specific location, and because you were not paying attention, you did not catch that location, you are now going to have a problem adding value to the scene going forward. (Note that this also violates Rule #2 above, as the participant is now not supporting his or her fellow players.)

5. Do Not Negate Your Partner Or Their Ideas

    This principle is a corollary to "Yes, and . . ." (Rule #1). In a game, if your partner states "Let's go to the store," and you respond with "No," you have effectively just stopped the scene dead in its tracks. The scene is finished, as there is nowhere for it to go.

Consistent with "Yes, and . . ." (Rule #1) above, a better response here would be "YES, I would love to go to the store, AND I need some milk." Now the scene has somewhere to go. Why does the person need milk? What might happen on the way to the store? What or whom might they encounter at the store? A world of unknown opportunities now await these two players in the development of this scene if they just accept the initial premise by saying "Yes, and . . .", thus not negating the opening statement.

6. Try Not To Ask Questions

One of the goals of improv is to add new information to the game at each opportunity, attempting to advance the premise of the game. Questions remove that responsibility from the player, and pass it back to the other person.

Consistent with Always Support Your Partners (Rule #2, above), asking questions does not support your partners, as you are now passing the burden (or opportunity) of adding to the creation of something new for the scene, to them. So, instead of asking "Do you want to go to a movie?" the player should turn the idea into a declarative statement: "Let's go see the new Tom Cruise movie." This choice is more specific, more interesting, more active, and it moves the story forward. This now gives your partner the opportunity to respond with "Yes, and . . .," and will help to continue to build and move the story forward.

7. Be In The Moment

This is consistent with jazz musicians' being "in the groove," as noted by Barrett (1998), above. This rule suggests that to be at the height of your creativity, you

must focus intensely on what you are doing, not think about anything other than the moment you are in, listen intently, and respond spontaneously.

During an improv scene, you cannot be thinking about your to-do lists, an angry boss, or anything else that could serve as a distraction from the immediate task-at-hand, which is to advance the scene forward. This is accomplished by completely focusing on the scene, trusting and supporting your partner, listening, and saying "Yes, and . . .". As with the jazz musician, the participant's goal in improv is to develop an unrelenting focus, and to find the flow within yourself, your team, and the game.

8. Do Not Be Funny, Be Real

As noted above, improv has been associated most recently, in large part, with comedic improv. While this is certainly entertaining and fun to watch, being funny should not be the goal of improv training. The humor will come naturally, from the real and interesting choices that the participants make, in real and interesting situations. So, take the pressure off yourself to be a jokester. Just be yourself and the humor will naturally emerge from the situation (Bergren, Cox & Detmar, 2002).

For example, in the grocery store example above, you do not have to come up with the funniest thing to ever happen at a grocery store. Rather, what if you were to just pick an apple up off the rack and the entire stock of apples rolls out onto the floor? Then, what could happen next? So take the pressure off yourself for the best, or funniest idea, as it is typically not as interesting as where real-world situations may lead.

9. Make Active And Interesting Choices

In improv, there are never any wrong choices, as there is no script or plan against which to compare your response. Improv is truly made up, on-the-spot and therefore you cannot be wrong. Whatever comes out of your mouth is what comes out, and that is the right answer, at that moment.

If you trust your fellow players (Rule #3), they will support you (Rule #2), and say "Yes, and . . ." (Rule #1) to your choice. So take risks and chances. That is what this art form is all about. As with the jazz musicians, do not allow yourself to become complacent and fall back on canned responses or ideas that are easy, or pre-programmed. Step out of your comfort zone, take a chance, and make proactive, interesting choices that you may not have otherwise made.

10. Have Fun!

This is the most important rule of all. If you are not having fun studying, applying, or performing improv, you are not doing it properly. Do not take improv too seriously. Try and loosen up, lower your protective barriers, and step out of your comfort zone. As noted above, you cannot make a mistake in improv, as there are no wrong answers.

There are many other rules that could be listed here. These rules are meant as guidelines that provide a framework to help the player to become a better improviser and member of the group, as they help to encourage more creative ideas, spontaneous thinking, and active participation. Interestingly, there is a range of opinion from improv authors regarding the rigidity of these rules. Kerr (1998) said that these rules "must be followed" (p. 12), while Napier (2004) suggested throwing out the rules altogether, as he felt that they just get in the way of play and

spontaneity. However, the vast preponderance of authors reviewed for this study agreed that learning the rules, and trying to adhere to their spirit, as often as one can, will help one to develop one's improv skills and to become a better member of an improv ensemble.

However, as Napier (2004) suggested, one should not focus on the rules so rigidly that they get in the way of one's true inspiration and creativity. For example, if during a game, one beats oneself up because one asked a question, that individual is not now not in the moment, as he or she is thinking about something other than the scene. The "rules" serve as a framework only, and they get broken all the time. One will never be penalized for breaking an improv rule. Just make sure that everyone *always* adheres to Rule #10—to have fun!

Improv as a personal development vehicle. For those who study improv, whether the end goal is to perform on stage, or to just take a class to learn and have some fun, there are a set of personal skills that one can naturally develop over time. These traits are not always explicitly stated in improv class as learning outcomes, but they are, nonetheless, an integral component of the underlying improv material and training. It should be noted that these personal development traits will parallel, in many respects, the rules, or structure of improv, as discussed above. These rules and structures described above have been developed primarily to help players to advance their improvisational skills. However, a by-product of this training is that these skills, once developed, can have broader application outside the theatre space. In particular, these skills can serve, for example, to enhance interpersonal skills, creative thinking and approaches, and confidence on the job or in one's personal life.

A composite listing of some of the key personal traits that can be developed through the study of improv, which can then also be applied and linked to the business world, include:

- Enhanced Listening and Observation Skills

In order to fully contribute to, and participate in an improv exercise, players must actively listen to everything that each other player is saying (Rule #4, above). As one practices this skill day after day, participants should eventually develop more acute listening skills, which can then be applied in any situation.

As an improviser, one does not want to miss a single piece of information that one's fellow players are sharing with the group, as there is no script, and one can never get that moment back. The same is true at work. If one begins to daydream in an important meeting at work, he or she will miss the opportunity to contribute to that discussion, at that moment, and to help to move ideas forward. This goes for developing a keen awareness of non-verbal communication as well. Body language, in improv and in business, is oftentimes more important than the words that are being spoken.

- Collaboration and Working as a Team

  Rule #2 above stated "always support your partner." This goes to the very heart of improv, as one is usually working as a team, and therefore must constantly work to support that team. The same goes for the business world. Working as a team, and constantly working to support the other members of the team will serve to strengthen and advance the goals and outcomes of the group. This means putting the interests of the group (or organization) ahead of those of the individual.

- Building and Sustaining Trust

  This entire concept of working together as an ensemble, whether in improv or in business, to create something together, on-the-spot, with no previous preparation and no script, hinges on the fact that the group is able to work effectively

together. At the foundation of this group effectiveness is trust. Improvisers must be able to trust one another, and members of a team or organization must be able to trust one another as well. When players go on stage in front of an audience, they must be able to trust that the other players are not going to sabotage them, make them look bad, or embarrass them in some way. This trust in the relationships is only developed over time, through continued and ongoing practice, demonstration, and commitment to the group.

Organizations also have the opportunity to operate at a higher level of effectiveness if there is a climate of trust among the players (the employees). Learning to develop trust among employees via improv training would help individuals to translate that feeling and experience to the workplace. The individual can learn through improv what trust looks like, what it feels like, how hard it is to develop, and to sustain.

- Saying "Yes" to Opportunities

Saying "yes" (Rule #1, above) allows players to explore opportunities that may have not previously considered. Oftentimes in improv and in life, an individual's first reaction to another's idea is to say "no," either literally or figuratively (perhaps through one's body language, or "we don't have the budget for that," for example).

Organizations oftentimes develop a "culture of no," which similarly, can stop business ideas dead in their tracks. Bergren, Cox and Detmar (2002) referred to this as "using the power of 'no' to stop momentum, challenge trust, and close the door to discovery" (p. 92). Think of the missed opportunities that have been

passed over because someone in a meeting said "no, that will never work." An improv mindset of saying yes to opportunities will help to let ideas be heard. The problem with constantly saying no to opportunities is that one will never know where the idea could have led. Bergren clarified, that one is not literally saying yes to all ideas, but rather, saying yes to the thought of consideration of the idea, in some fashion. Obviously, not all ideas can or will be accepted, but at the same time, not all ideas should be arbitrarily dismissed. One cannot know where the kernel of a rejected idea may have led the group, down the road, were it allowed to percolate within the group.

- Seeing the World in New Ways

As there is no script to which to refer in improv, players must depend on what they know, or what they can create on-the-spot. Improvisers are asked to not make the easy choice or to fall back on what is comfortable to them. The more interesting improvisers always look for new opportunities, and look for alternatives to the obvious choice. Successful improvisers lead the audience to the point where the audience thinks "I know where this is headed," and then the player turns in a completely different direction, catching the audience completely off-guard.

This skill comes from a combination of being willing to take risks, as well as having a heightened awareness of the world around oneself. Successful improvisers pay close attention to the world around them, and file all of this information away for future use. This also entails a willingness to be a continuous learner, and to use this heightened awareness and knowledge for the benefit of the

group or team, when the time is right. This same pool of stored information, combined with the willingness to open oneself up to new ways of looking at things, can benefit businesses in the same way.

- Expanding One's Comfort Zone

Improv is designed to take participants out of their comfort zones in order to learn and grow. Similar to the jazz musicians discussed above, the goal in improv is to push players to challenge themselves, to try new things, and to take risks. The hope is that players will discover new things about themselves, their capabilities, and their world, with the goal of making their creative work that much more interesting.

Improv puts players on-the-spot, forcing them to generate their responses instantaneously. With this uncertainty comes a level of fear; that fear of the unknown, fear of failure, or a fear of embarrassing oneself (Lowe, 2000). The world of improv can help, in a structured and supportive fashion, to address these fears, and to encourage players to find their own ways, individually, to push past their fears into unexplored territory. Johnstone (1979) summed this concept up very succinctly:

> There are people who prefer to say "yes", and there are people who prefer to say "no". These who say "yes" are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say "no" are rewarded by the safety they attain. There are far more "no" sayers around than "yes" sayers, but you can train one type to behave like the other. (p. 92).

This ability and willingness of individuals to push themselves to learn new things by purposefully pushing themselves past their comfort zones has the potential to add substantial value to an organization's operations as a result of the new ideas and new ways of looking at things that could be uncovered through this discovery process.

- Enhanced Creativity

Improv is inherently a creative endeavor, as there is no one but the individual and his or her fellow partners to make up something entertaining, on-the-spot. This creativity can be developed through the continued practice of improv. The myriad exercises that exist (and there are literally hundreds, if not thousands) each help the players in some way to explore and expand their creative sides. This process involves trying to identify where ideas come from, how to develop those ideas, and then how to express them. This creativity can also be an invaluable resource for businesses if it is allowed to be encouraged, nurtured, developed, and harnessed.

Once players are able to identify, through practice, how and where creative ideas come from, they will feel more comfortable and develop a greater level of confidence in unstructured situations, on-stage, in a class, or in a conference room. They will begin to learn how to put themselves in a mindset to be able to access those creative places in their brains and to remove the roadblocks that serve to suppress those creative ideas. This includes being in the moment (flow), listening intently, and being keenly aware of the world around them.

- Spontaneity and Thinking On-Your-Feet

  The entire premise of the art of improv is that there is no script, and that everything is made up, on-the-spot. It may seem like a contradiction to try and teach spontaneity, but that is not really what improv is about. Improv is about not overthinking things, and not trying to be funny or to structure or pre-plan a response. Rather, as Keith Johnstone (1979) discussed in his book Impro: Improvisation For The Theatre, spontaneity in improv is about learning to willingly accept the first thing that comes to your mind.

  It is not that one does not have an initial, spontaneous thought to offer up. Instead, most individuals have learned over the years to sensor or filter that first impulse, in order to come up with something that is appropriate, or more intelligent-sounding. Improv is the complete antithesis of the old adage "think before you speak." It is learning to eliminate, or at least minimize this self-censorship. Removing these self-filters takes practice. This skill, once developed, again, can be an invaluable asset for businesses, particularly in brainstorming sessions, or when responding to an unanticipated turn of events with a client, for example.

- Building Confidence

  The purpose of this study is not to understand how to train people to become professional improvisational performers for the stage. What individuals may not realize is that everyone, each and every day, improvises—they are just not necessarily aware that this is what they are doing.

For example, when a client asks to see an alternate idea that a consulting team has not prepared ahead of time, the team may need to improvise a response in order to get (or keep) the business. Or, when one's spouse or partner asks why he or she is home late from work, the individual may be called upon to improvise a plausible explanation. In each case, a pre-prepared response is not available and so the individual must make something up, on-the-spot. These responses can have their roots in improv training.

Life has no script, and each day any number of unplanned or unexpected activities or events will occur. Having improv skills in one's toolkit will help give one the confidence to address these unscripted situations. "Life is an improvisation" (Madson, 2005, p. 15).

Applying theatrical improv to business. Within organizations, the tools and skills of improv can be applied in a host of areas in order to attempt to enhance individual and group effectiveness. These applications can include enhancing team communication and effectiveness (through effective listening—Rule #4), greater trust (Rule #3), and supporting one another (Rule #2). Creative idea generation and problem solving can be heightened by saying "Yes, and . . ." (Rule #1), and by not negating others' ideas (Rule #5), while developing more effective presentations can be achieved by possessing greater confidence, obtained by being in the moment (Rule #7), and making interesting choices (Rule #9). And finally, heightened employee engagement can result from having a more open, engaging, and fun culture (Rule #10).

In addition to these potential applications, Lowe (2000) suggested that organizational leaders could benefit from understanding and utilizing the tools of improv, in areas ranging from conflict resolution and resistance to change, to team building and strategic planning. What each

of these potential benefits has in common are the concepts of effective listening and communication, enhanced creative idea generation, overcoming fear, and creating a climate that encourages and supports one another, all in an environment where people trust one another and enjoy their work. There appears to be many potential benefits for an organization that not only supports an improv mindset, but that actively seeks to train and support its personnel in improv tools and techniques, to create a culture of "Yes, and . . .," versus a culture of "No!".

Unlike jazz improvisation, theatrical improvisation as a training and development tool is more than just a metaphor for business spontaneity. In order to truly benefit from the improvisational nature of jazz, one must first become a relatively skilled musician, something that not many of us can reasonably expect to accomplish. From there, one must then attempt to learn the art of musical improvisation. However, to participate in and benefit from theatrically-based improv training, one needs absolutely no experience whatsoever in theatre or the arts. Individuals can easily participate in improv classes and training exercises and, over time, can develop the capacity to embrace the concepts of improvisation (Crossan, 1998).

Relationship to Organization Development Literature

The use of improv in employee training and development has several constructs that are rooted in the foundations and principles of OD, including adult learning theory, the concept of flow, and pushing outside one's comfort zone. A review of the literature relative to these topics, along with their relevance to improv training in business, follows.

Learning. When employees are asked to undertake corporate-sponsored training, there is an underlying hope on the part of the organization that learning will, in fact, occur. This is because the organization would like to see a return on their investment, in either tangible or measurable performance enhancements (increased sales, for example), or perhaps less

immediately measureable factors such has a more effective organizational culture. Whatever their goal, these organizations hope that employees will find value in the training experience, and that this value will accrue, in some fashion, back to the organization in terms of increased individual and organizational effectiveness.

When developing corporate training programs, one question that organizations should consider is "is the training program aligned with the expectations of the organization?" For example, is the training topic relevant, is the learning sustainable or will its benefits erode over time, does the training methodology align with the learning styles of the participants, and what is the nature of the learning, generally (for example, gaining factual or technical knowledge versus transformational changes in behaviors)? Therefore, the nature and type of training relative to the organization's needs and goals should be carefully considered.

Experiential learning. There exists many well-researched theories of learning in the literature today. In *The Handbook of Education Theories* (Irby, 2012), there are some 101 learning theories covered, including cognitive-based learning, behavior-based learning, adult learning, transformational learning, and the list goes on. One theory of learning that served as a foundation for improv training and development in organizations is called Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). As its name implies, this approach is based on the concept of learning by doing.

ELT evolved into a formalized theory of learning, as well as a more recognized training methodology based in large part on the work of David Kolb, as introduced in 1984 in his book *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Kolb, 1984). In his updated, second edition, Kolb (2015) defined ELT as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 49). Kolb believed that people will better comprehend, retain and apply knowledge if they are able to embed themselves in a situation

where they are then in a position to live the experience. For example, an instructor could stand before a class and deliver a lecture to the students about the benefits of effective listening, even including some tools and techniques for the students to become better listeners. This may or may not be a skill that the students will ever effectively grasp, as it does not involve the actual practice of, or receiving feedback on the skills. In fact, the irony here is that the participants may have been distracted during the lecture, having not even listened to the presentation on effective listening, thus losing any potential benefit from the session.

Alternatively, students could be immersed into a learning environment where they would get the opportunity not to be told about what it means to be an effective listener, but rather, to experience and practice, first hand, the challenges and opportunities of mastering the skills of effective listening. This now becomes a process of self-discovery for the students, with the opportunity for them not only to experience the phenomenon, but to then reflect on the experience after-the-fact. This reflection process will then help students to make any needed adjustments in their application of the material the next time around.

Kolb (2015) identified four components, or stages within ELT, which he described generally as experience, reflection, thinking, and action. These stages were articulated more specifically by Kolb and Kolb (2005) as the ELT Learning Cycle, which is described in further detail, below. However, one key component of the four stages of ELT above—reflection—is at the core of experiential learning. What Kolb articulated, which built, in large part, on the work of noted philosopher and education theorist and reformer John Dewey (1933), was that experience alone is not enough to generate learning. Rather, one must also think about, or reflect upon that experience. Kolb (2015) defined reflection relative to the learning process as "the internal

transformation of experience" (p. 58). Through reflection, one is able to begin to put the experience into context, and thus begin to add meaning to the activity.

In addition to the four components of experiential learning identified by Kolb (2015) above, Kolb and Kolb (2005, as cited in Damasio, 1994, 2003; LeDoux, 1997; Zull, 2002) identified yet another key aspect of experiential learning which cannot be overlooked. This additional component was related to the role that feelings and emotions play in learning. They stated that "Reason and emotion are inextricably related in their influence on learning and memory" (p. 208). Within this statement was the belief that, because experiential learning is an activity in which the learner is actively immersed, real-time, and is therefore an active participant, one cannot dismiss the fact that individuals will have some type of emotional response (positive or negative) to various aspects of the experience, and that these emotional responses will inevitably impact the level and quality of learning that has the potential of taking place. The authors stated very specifically that "Negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning, while positive feelings of attraction and interest may be essential for learning. To learn something that one is not interested in is extremely difficult" (p. 208). Creating a positive learning environment therefore, would seem to be an integral component of a program's design.

This ingredient of experiential learning indicated very clearly that, for those that are responsible for developing experiential learning programs, the conditions and environment that surround the learning experience should be carefully considered in order to ensure an optimal learning experience for the participants. For example, being cognizant of the negative feelings and emotions that participants might experience as the result of anxiety from a lack of familiarity with the subject or method, or perhaps from a fear of being put on-the-spot in front of others, should be purposefully framed and considered, in order to minimize negative reactions to the

experience. Conversely, creating experiences that pique the curiosity or interest of the participants, or that have some unique aspect associated with the activity, have the potential of significantly enhancing the opportunity for learning.

Kolb's ELT also has its foundations, in part, in the work of Kurt Lewin, one of the acknowledged early pioneers in the field of OD. Lewin's studies in group dynamics in the 1940s, including T-groups (or "training groups"), identified that participants increased their learning when working together to solve problems, and then discussing together their experiences and reflections (Kayes, 2002). Kolb and Kolb (2005) noted as well, that ELT is not solely about the experience itself, but rather, it is the experience, combined with dialogue with others, discussing their shared experience, along with self-reflection. This dialogic approach, along with self-reflection, suggests that knowledge creation is situational, created by the learner based on the context of the individual's environment, interpreting of the events when discussing the activity with other participants, and the learner's previous knowledge and experiences, or frame-of-reference.

Another tenet of ELT, again, based on the work of Lewin, paralleled Lewin's work in an area referred to as "life spaces." Lewin believed that a person's behavior was a product of the individual's total life experiences, combined with their environment, or what he called an individual's life space. What this indicated is that a person's makeup is comprised of all of his or her previous life experiences, within that person's respective environment. In other words, the sum total of a person's life experiences, within the context of their particular environment, creates the individual's frame of reference, or the lens through which one sees and interprets the world. This includes a person's education, religion, upbringing, and all of the other factors that have had an influence on who that person is today. ELT reflects Lewin's theory of life spaces in

a concept referred to as "learning spaces." Similar to Lewin's theory, ELT suggests that a person's capacity for learning is contextual in that it is influenced by, and filtered through these same types of life forces (Kolb, 1984, Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Kolb (1984, Kolb & Kolb, 2005) described an individual's learning space in terms of a "learning cycle," that is, a combination of two sets of opposing axes that intersect—a standard X-Y grid, with a cycle that rotates clockwise around the grid, starting at the top (northern) point on the Y-axis. The Y axis represents an individual's preference for how one acquires knowledge: experience (the northern point), represents concrete experiences, while the southern point represents abstract, or conceptualized learning. The X-axis represents how an individual processes, or transforms that acquired knowledge. The eastern point on the grid represents personal reflection, while the western point represents further, active experimentation (trying an experience again).

Assuming that one's learning begins with a concrete experience (the northern point), the next step in the learning cycle moves clockwise to the eastern point—reflecting on the experience, then moves next to the southern point, where the learner cognitively processes both the experience and the reflection. Finally, the learner moves to the western point on the grid, where the individual tries the activity again, experimenting with, and modifying behaviors based on the individual's reflection and intellectual processing of the experience (Kayes, Kayes, & Kolb, 2005). Figure 1, below, reflects the ELT learning cycle.

Concrete
Experience

Active
Experimentation

Reflective
Observation

Abstract
Conceptualization
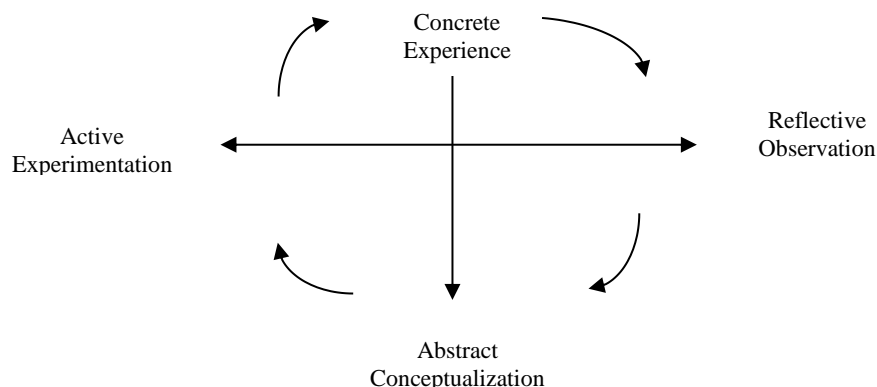
Figure 1. ELT Learning Cycle (Kayes, 2002)

According to ELT, all individuals fall somewhere within these four quadrants above, which represents the person's *preferred* learning style. Many individuals are able to navigate throughout the grid, as learning conditions dictate, regardless of their preferred learning style.

Several key challenges with this model exist however. First, not everyone learns at the same pace, nor has the same learning style. Additionally, as noted above, ELT believes that learning is contextual. Therefore, as each person's context and preferred learning style is specific to that individual, educators, when designing training programs, need to be cognizant of the fact, for example, that one person may embrace the opportunity for a learning experience (willing to give it a try, for example), while another person may be uncomfortable with that approach and would prefer to observe the activity and then cognitively process what he or she has seen.

The underlying premise of ELT is that learners are in control of their learning, and that they therefore make their own meaning. For the learners, this is based on the situational context, the background and frame of reference of the individual learner, as well as dialogue and reflection of the shared experiences with the others that have participated in the training. From an

epistemological standpoint this suggests an interpretivist belief, where the learner is socially

constructing the meaning of the experience (the training), based on the context, frame of

reference, and shared experience with others in the group. This is in contrast to more traditional,

positivistic approach to training, where information is transmitted from the teacher to the learner

as facts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb (2015) looked at experiential learning as a continuous

process, rather than an outcome based on a transfer of content. As learners continue to move

through the Learning Cycle, each successive pass updates the learning based on additional

experiences, reflection ,and cognitive processing.

   Single- versus double-loop learning. Another significant strand of learning theory that

was relevant to this study is the work of Chris Argyris and his models of single- versus double-

loop learning, and organizational defensiveness. A key concern of any learning initiative is that

of sustainability of the learning over time and, perhaps even more importantly, is the

organization focusing the learning initiatives on the proper areas of concern. Over the years,

Argyris has researched and written extensively on why organizations, along with the individuals

that comprise them, fail to learn and develop in a sustainable fashion. A brief review of his

organizational learning models follows.

   Argyris developed a number of interrelated models and theories in order to attempt to

identify and explain what holds both individuals and organizations back from truly learning how

to improve the effectiveness of the organization and its members over the long-run. These

learning models included single- versus double-loop learning, espoused theories versus theories-

in-use, individual defensive mechanisms, and organizational defense routines (Argyris, 1994,

2000).

Argyris believed that when making decisions, individuals in organizations would oftentimes get caught in a circular, self-reinforcing process he referred to as a single-loop of actions, decisions and results. Within this loop, similar recurring actions and behaviors would lead (or loop) back to generate similar results, with the loop or cycle continually repeating itself. What he found was that people were making decisions at a superficial level, addressing only the immediate surface-level problem at hand, versus examining the underlying root causes of, and the underlying beliefs surrounding the problem. He characterized single-loop learning as asking one dimensional questions that elicit one-dimensional responses, for example, "how do we fix this?" (Argyris, 1994). This means that, while the immediate problem may perhaps get fixed, the underlying *cause* of the problem has not been addressed, and so the cycle continues and the problem recurs. Basically, what Argyris believed, was that without addressing the underlying causes of an issue, the problem would continue to resurface; that is, similar actions leading to similar results.

What leaders and decision makers oftentimes overlook, or more likely, are unaware of, is how a deeper examination of their and their organization's underlying beliefs and values impacts behavior, failing to ask the deeper question of "why are we doing this?", or "what is the true cause of this problem?" Argyris suggested to look beyond the objective facts of the situation, and inquire about the underlying reasons, assumptions, and motives surrounding the situation. What this allows, Argyris suggested, is for decision makers to understand, at a deeper, more fundamental level, *why* the condition of concern exists, being able then to better address and learn from that examination. If those issues were allowed to be honestly and openly discussed, it would allow the organization to get more to the root of the problem, hoping to identify a more long-lasting, sustainable solution, rather than having the problem keep looping back around.

By examining and understanding why a problem keeps recurring, versus continuing to fix

the same problem over and over again, the organization will be better equipped to truly learn and

grow from this examination. Argyris identified this additional step of looking more deeply at the

underlying causes of a problem as an additional, second loop in the learning process. This second

(or double) loop, the looping back past the surface-level problem in order to examine the

underlying beliefs and values, represents the deeper, more sustained learning for Argyris. Figure

2 below represents the flow of both the single- and double-loop learning models:
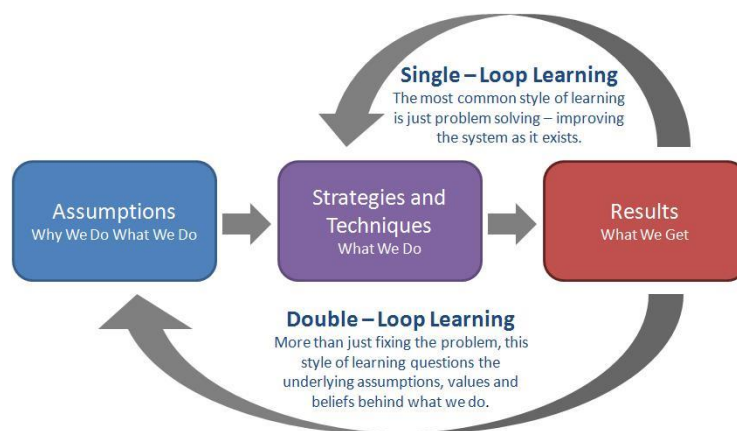
Figure 2. Single-Loop versus Double-Loop Learning Model

(Source: http://www.selfleadership.com/blog/leadership/reflecting-and-leaning-
2009-to-2010/)

In order to more fully describe single- and double-loop learning, Argyris (1994, 2000)

identified additional models that he believed governed individual behaviors. He believed that all

individuals have what he referred to as "espoused theories-in-action," which represent an

individual's internal beliefs about how one *should* act, and what one believes ones' values are.

However, he found that when individuals get into decision-making situations, where one might

need to protect oneself in some fashion, individuals oftentimes fall into defensive behavioral

mechanisms that tend to protect the individuals from embarrassment, or from threatening situations, like having to admit to a major mistake, for example. Here, Argyris found that individuals move into behaviors that they actually use (versus those behaviors that individuals espouse to possess), which Argyris called "theories-in-use." Built into each individual's theory-in-use are protective mechanisms "to remain in unilateral control, to maximize wining and minimize losing, to suppress negative feelings, and to be as rational as possible" (Argyris, 1994, p. 80). The goal of these defensive mechanisms is to control others, while not allowing oneself to be controlled. Argyris characterized this theory-in-use as "Model I theory-in-use." Model I behaviors allow individuals to address only what is at the surface, thus preventing individuals from being able to explore and identify the deeper, underlying issues that are at the true root of the problem. Once an individual's innate protective, or defensive mechanisms kick in, these mechanisms limit the individual's ability to open up, to share, and to be honest with oneself or others, therefore preventing the individual from exploring and addressing the deeper, underlying issues which may be the source of the problem. This Model I theory-in-use serves to perpetuate single-loop learning.

Alternately, individuals that are able to overcome these defensive mechanisms by engaging in honest self-reflection and openness, and who possess an internal commitment to the organization, are much better positioned to address underlying organizational issues and thus to learn from them. According to Argyris, this is where the opportunity lies for true learning, and it is characterized by the second loop in the double-loop learning cycle. He referred to this individual model of behavior as "Model II theory-in-use" (Argyris, 1994, 2000).

Argyris (1990) also found learning roadblocks at the organizational level, as well as the individual level. He characterized these roadblocks as an organization's "defensive routines."

When individuals within organizations practice Model I theory-in-use behaviors, over time, these behaviors become a part of the underlying fabric, or culture, of the organization. Similar in their goals and outcomes to individual defensive mechanisms, these organization-level defensive routines serve to limit organizational learning by not allowing individuals or groups to discuss, much less correct, problems, issues, or inconsistencies of message within the organization that are holding it back. Examples of these defensive routines at the organizational level include:

- Mixed messaging: "we would like your feedback . . .," and then doing nothing with it;

- Skilled incompetence: allowing Model I behaviors to continue to perpetuate themselves, rather than stepping in and breaking the cycle;

- Fancy footwork: individuals that pass-up opportunities to address defensive routines, thus allowing them to continue;

- Organizational malaise: an overall feeling that all of these defensive actions give a sense of hopelessness to employees.

The relevance of Argyris' work to this study is that improv training and thinking, if supported and sustained, can become embedded into the fabric of an organization. Thus if, through this type of training, employees of an organization can learn to become more open and trusting of each other, become more supportive of one another, and learn to listen to understand, and not just to respond, organizations have a real opportunity to transform from single-loop, Model 1 organizations, to double-loop, Model II learning organizations. In fact, Leslie Stager Jacques, in her article entitled "Borrowing From Professional Theatre Training to Build Essential Skills in Organization Development Consultants" (Stager Jacques, 2012), directly equated improvisational acting with double-loop learning. Specifically, she recognized the special nature

of "Yes, and . . ." in improv as the opportunity to accept another's premise and then build on it. In the workplace, as participants begin to listen to one another, and provide "Yes, and . . ." responses, they get the opportunity for feedback from one another and the opportunity to learn or, as Argyris himself stated regarding double-loop learning: "the detection and correction of error require[ing] changes in the underlying policies, assumptions, and goals" (Stager, 2012, p. 256, as cited in Argyris, 1980, p. 291).

Comfort zone. As was noted by Barrett (1998) in the discussion regarding jazz improvisation, some jazz improvisers have a tendency to get too comfortable in their playing, falling back on pre-established routines. They do not push themselves out of their comfort zones in order to discover new musical ideas and therefore do not learn or grow as artists.

This inability, or perhaps the lack of a willingness to even try, of individuals to push themselves out of their comfort zones can exist in both their personal, as well as their professional lives. This unwillingness can manifest itself in any number of ways—not wanting to expose oneself to new people or situations, not wanting to travel to new places, an unwillingness to read or discuss ideas that are not in agreement with one's own belief system, an unwillingness to even see a movie that one thinks one is not going to like, and the list goes on. Unfortunately, this inability or unwillingness to try new things serves to limit a person from exploring new ideas, new points-of-view, new relationships, new experiences, and most importantly, new ways of looking at and interpreting the world. In short, it limits one's opportunity to learn and grow.

Discovery and learning can come from anywhere, in any form, and at any time. However, individuals need to be receptive to allowing themselves to be put in those situations and environments where learning has the opportunity to occur. The jazz trumpeter that plays basically the same solo each night, in the same key, in the same rhythms, with similar musical

progressions, is not learning to become a better jazz improviser. What if one evening, the player spontaneously (that is, without prior rehearsal), tried the piece in a new key, or played it half as fast as the previous night? Or, what if the player had gone to see a concert of Reggae music the previous weekend? How might all of these choices influence the player's interpretation and performance of the work the next night?

It is this same premise that allows for growth and new learning in people's personal and professional lives. For example, what if an individual had the opportunity to travel to a foreign country, from the United States to say, Eastern Europe, being exposed to a language and culture with which the individual had no previous experience? What might the initial level of comfort (or discomfort) be for this person? What might the opportunities be for learning for this person in this situation? It is the ability of individuals to identify the boundaries of their comfort zones and then be willing to push themselves past these limits and to take some risks that will create new opportunities for learning. Minahan and Conbere (2011) referred to this area outside the comfort zone as the "learning zone," as this is an area where there exists the opportunity for new experiences, and thus new learning. James and Brookfield (2014) described these types of new experiences as disorienting for people that are trying them. They suggested that this element of risk from attempting a new experience causes a rise in adrenalin, and that is precisely what makes the activity, and the resultant learning stick. Minahan and Conbere noted however, that pushing to far outside and individual's zone of comfort will eventually lead to what they referred to as the "panic zone." Clearly, this is not an ideal place to encourage individuals to go, as this state of panic will begin to generate defensive, or protective mechanisms, shutting down any curiosity or interest on the part of the individual, thus limiting any further potential for learning. Therefore this boundary between the learning and panic zones needs to be kept in mind when

considering or devising learning programs, as intentionally pushing participants into the panic zone will be counterproductive to the goals of the training program.

In an organizational setting, if employers wish to encourage personal learning and growth within the employee base, they need to encourage employees to take some risks—to push employees to venture outside their comfort zones and try something new. This approach may, however, not be a part of the organization's culture, so recommending this type of action must be done with some forethought so as not to induce a panic in the participants before even getting started.

Again, this comfort zone boundary is different for everyone, but individuals will know instinctively where these boundaries lay. Much of peoples' unwillingness to try new things or to take risks comes from a sense of fear—a fear of embarrassment, a fear of some type of threat to themselves or their reputation, or just a fear of the unknown. This ties directly back to the concept of single-loop learning in the previous section, where individuals are unable or unwilling to look more deeply into the underlying foundations of their beliefs. In order to minimize these types of fears, the risks do not have to be major undertakings at first. Trying something new may be as simple as taking a new route to work, or sitting in a different spot at the weekly staff meeting. Eventually, this individual may even push him or herself to, for example, take a dance class. What this affords the individual is an opportunity to see, and to experience something in a new way, in a new light, and from another point-of-view. What if, in an individual's new seat at the staff meeting, he or she begins to notice things out the window that the individual could not see before? Could that become a source of inspiration for the next big idea? What if, on that person's new route to the office, the person sees a park with children playing? Any one of these seemingly meaningless, uneventful observations might just provide the impetus for a big new

creative idea at home or the office; a stimulus which the individual would have missed had the person not pushed him or herself to take even a small chance at trying something new. Learning abounds, and new experiences are everywhere. Individuals just need to be willing to take that first stop out of their comfort zones and see what the world has to offer.

In their article "There is Business Like Show Business: Leadership Lessons From the Theatre," Dunham and Freeman (2000) discussed how theatrical directors help actors to get over their fear of expressing themselves creatively. One technique was to have the actors work together in group settings, performing improvisational exercises. They found that this helped to build trust and individual confidence within the group. The directors also actively encouraged actors to experiment with their characters, with the understanding that failure would be a natural part of the exploration process. It is this acknowledgement and acceptance of possible failure that helped to create a safe place for the actors to experiment, without fear of criticism or penalty. By establishing and clearly defining these safe zones during the activities, it allowed the participants to feel less anxiety and uncertainty about possible personal damage (embarrassment, humiliation, etc.), which caused individual defenses to be lowered, and the zone of comfort to be expanded. With this expansion comes the potential for increased learning.

In their application of these theatre experiences to organizational settings, Dunham and Freeman (2000) recognized that experimentation by employees is inhibited by fear. Therefore, the authors recommended that leaders acknowledge these fears, and help to alleviate them by the leader's actions and words. This means that leaders recognize that, with the expectation of experimentation on the part of employees, there will come some failures. It is up to the leaders to ensure that employees are not penalized for these attempts, and also that there is a non-judgmental climate of support and trust within the organization for risk-taking.

From an improv standpoint, coming out of one's comfort zone means making a choice to say "Yes, and . . .", to try new things, and a willingness to consider new ideas, new opportunities, and new points-of-view. These actions will help employees to build new frames-of-reference relative to how one sees the world. Over time, individuals may find their comfort zones expanding, along with a willingness to try even more new things.

Finding flow. The concept of flow in jazz improvisation in a preceding section was identified by Barrett (1998) in terms of improvisers being "in the groove." He characterized this groove by musicians as "being so completely absorbed in playing that they are not consciously thinking, reflecting, or deciding on what notes to play" (p. 614). Flow surfaced in the OD literature in large part through the work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who has authored several books on the subject, including applications in both one's personal and work lives. Through his research on happiness and enjoyment, he identified common experiences that were shared by individuals who had been performing unrelated activities. He gave the feelings of these common experiences the term "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

Flow is not a tangible item. Rather, it is a state of both body and mind, working harmoniously together as one. In his original work in 1975, Csikszentmihalyi (1975) defined flow as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (p. 36). In a subsequent work, he characterized the feeling of flow as "being carried away by an outside force, of moving effortlessly with a current of energy, at the moments of highest enjoyment" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 39). Some of his research subjects characterized their feelings of flow as follows:

- An elegance;
- Working together with others in a smooth and efficient manner;

- Becoming completely involved in the task;

- No distinction between thought and action, and between self and environment;

- Being totally absorbed in the activity;

- The sensation of being in a different world;

- Being engrossed in a good book and just losing yourself in it (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003).

The application of flow to the field of OD is first, to understand that employees who can find a state of flow while at work are going to be more productive, more engaged in their work, and will experience a greater sense of happiness while on the job, all of which accrue benefits to the organization in terms of its overall effectiveness (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Second, is for OD practitioners to understand not only what flow is, but also the important role that flow can play in contributing to the effectiveness of organizations. The next step therefore is to help organizations identify strategies and tools that attempt to integrate this type of mindset into the fabric of the organization, creating a culture where flow can flourish, and improv could be one of those tools.

The link between flow and improv is similar to that of flow and the jazz musician. Flow is an integral part of virtually any creative endeavor. In fact, one of Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) research subjects was a professional dancer, who characterized her feelings of flow in terms of total involvement, having her body awake all over, and her energy flowing very smoothly (p. 39). In improv, the goal is to replicate this exact same feeling and mindset—to free oneself of all thoughts except the task at hand, at that moment. In fact, improv Rule #7, above, states that very concept, of being in-the-moment, just losing yourself in the scene, exercise, project, or thought.

A theatrical improviser that is experiencing flow can develop a stream of consciousness that is totally spontaneous, with no outside thoughts, worries, or concerns interfering with what

is happening creatively at that moment. When this happens, it is quite literally, a flood of ideas that just streams into an individual's mind. And, as with the improvisational jazz ensemble, flow can be created among the ensemble members of a theatrical group if each is committed to the moment, has trust, is willing to support one another, and is willing to work together for the good of the group. This can happen only if each member has made the investment of time and energy to really get to know the other members, in terms of having developed a mature and effective working relationship based on trust, respect, openness, and honesty. If an individual or a group is able to find flow in and through their improv work, the hope is that they can then take that feeling, remember how it felt and how it was created, and apply it to other aspects of their daily lives. James and Brookfield (2014) suggested that though creative reflection, one may be begin to experience these feelings of complete involvement, serenity and timelessness, and that everything else one is aware of has fallen away . . . otherwise known as flow. The study of improv, as a creative and experiential endeavor, can help to provide that conduit to finding flow.

Organizational Improvisation

Within the academic literature, a new field of study has arisen over the last 15-20 years, and is referred to as "organizational improvisation." In a search of the Business Source Premier database on April 26, 2015, using the search term "organizational improvisation" in any field, for "peer reviewed journals," only 25 English language titles were returned, ranging from 1998 to 2014. The same search was then performed using the PsycINFO database, which returned only 12 articles, most of which were overlapping from the previous search. Clearly this is a new and emerging field, apparently with little formal empirical study having been published to-date.

With such an emerging field of study, several definitions have arisen throughout this literature. For example, Moorman and Miner (1998) defined organizational improvisation as "the

degree to which the composition and execution of an action converge in time" (p. 698), while

Pina, Vieira, and Kamoche (1999), in a comprehensive literature review of the subject to-date,

created a blended definition of organizational improvisation as "the conception of action as it

unfolds, by an organization and/or its members, drawing on available material, cognitive,

affective and social resources" (p. 302). Within the context of this existing literature, these

definitions, among others, represent from the academic community a very formal, scientific view

of improvisation in organizational settings. What I have discovered through the review of this

existing literature is that the focus of this emerging field has centered, in large part, around the

organization itself, as the improvisational unit, rather than on the individual members of the

organization, thus taking a very macro view relative to the application of the concepts of improv.

For example, Moorman and Miner (1998) characterized organizational improvisation as a form

of organizational competency. In other approaches, the literature identified the application of an

improvisational organization mindset to areas such as organizational planning, change

management, and organizational learning as frequent topics. More specific applications within

organizations have centered around project management, new product development and service

management.

Because organizational improvisation is an emerging field of study (as represented by the

only 25 peer-reviewed articles found to-date on the subject) Vendelo (2009) discussed areas for

future research. In his discussion, Vendelo (as cited in Gordon, 1992) identified several

challenges to developing empirical studies in organizational improvisation. One problem he

identified was that of what to measure, and how to measure it. He indicated that measurement of

the effects of improvisational actions within an organization rely on after-the-fact empirical

evidence, and that this type of retrospective reporting is not a reliable methodology. He also

suggested that researchers must create a standard of expected outcomes, against which improvised outcomes could then be measured. He suggested that researchers bring stopwatches and copies of written standards of the activities to be measured to the studies. Finally, Vendelo quoted Italian organizational theorist Claudio Ciborra, from a talk given at the 2000 Academy of Management Meetings in Toronto, as follows, "People improvise when they are overwhelmed by the world, and thus, are forced to read the world in a different way" (p. 453, no secondary source citation available).

Another research agenda in this area was suggested by Vera and Crossan (2004) in their article "Theatrical Improvisation: Lessons for Organizations." First, the authors concluded that theatrical improvisation skills can be taught to members of organizations, and that theatrical improvisation holds significant promise for businesses, which the authors believed can lead to better firm performance. They also suggested that managers pursuing this avenue should attempt to influence the culture of their organizations to create more "nurturing improvisational processes" (p. 744). The authors then pointed to further quantitative research and testing opportunities they believed would be beneficial in the areas of spontaneity, creativity, and the impact of improvisational methods on how firms compete in the marketplace.

This discussion on organizational improvisation has been included in this study in order to demonstrate the range in viewpoints and beliefs about what improvisation is, the role that it can play within an organizational context, and even how the topic is researched and studied. Based on the existing literature, it seems clear that academicians are focusing current research agendas primarily on the impact and potential benefits of improvisation on the overall performance of the firm. They seem to be seeking ways to test, measure, and thus attempt to

prove (or disprove) the value of an improvisational mindset and practices to an organization, at a firm-wide level.

This positivistic approach to the topic, as represented by the desire to test and measure outcomes, in many ways, seems counter-intuitive to the very nature of improvisation. Just look for example, to Vendelo's (2009) quote above, of Claudio Ciborra, who characterized those who improvise as being overwhelmed with the world. So does this mean that if individuals had better coping mechanisms that the tools of improv would not be necessary? Ciborra's viewpoint seems wholly antithetical to the underlying spirit of improvisation, which represents the desire, versus the need, of those practicing it to see things differently, and to want to think more quickly, creatively, and spontaneously, for their personal benefit and growth. Individual employees oftentimes make a conscious choice to develop within themselves skills that will help them to become more effective members of the team, both individually and as partners and collaborators. These individuals see the value in personal growth and development and therefore seek out a means to expand their knowledge and skills, either within, or outside of work.

For improvisation to work at an organization-wide level, the improv mindset must first be developed within the individual members of the organization via individualized, specific training, which needs to be supported by the organization's leaders. These leaders must then find ways to instill this mindset into the culture of the organization in order to have any expectation of sustainability. It is unrealistic to believe that an entire organization can become an improvisational organization in their approach to business if the individual members of the organization have not first been exposed to the concepts, tools, and mindset of improv, or have not embraced this mindset in their day-to-day work. Further, I would argue that the quickness with which an individual responds to work situations, or the quality of a creative idea, which

some researchers above have suggested attempt to be measured and quantified, is secondary to questions that have yet to be studied, such as how, and in what context are these individual skills developed, and what variables might influence an individual's acceptance and application of improv tools. In the studies reviewed for this dissertation, there is a consistent underlying assumption that the individual members of organizations (and the organization, collectively for that matter) have already attained a certain level of improvisational skills, yet these studies never explicitly address the issue of whether or not this is the case. Further, if these skills have not yet been obtained, how might the organization go about developing these skills and mindsets?

Therefore, antecedent to the idea that organizations should behave with an improvisational mindset is the actual development of those skills, tools, and beliefs at the individual and group levels, then identifying ways to embed the behaviors into the long-term fabric and culture of the organization. For example, not all individuals will learn improv skills at the same rate, in the same fashion, or even learn or accept them at all. There is a very individualized component to the acquisition and application of improv skills that has not as yet been approached by academic researchers. The current studies, discussions and analyses surrounding the use of improvisation in organizations are more theoretical in nature, and do not appear to be based on practical application, nor does the existing research address how to actually accomplish, or even how to begin to undertake the type of training needed at the individual level to begin to develop an improv mindset or its related skills and tools. I hope that the findings in this dissertation will contribute to further understanding of the issues surrounding this line of research at the organizational level.

Integration of Theory and Practice

Improv is not just a theoretical concept, but rather a specific training application method that is being used by practitioners around the world. For example, there exists an organization called the Applied Improv Network (http://www.appliedimprov.com/) which, as its name implies, is a group of professional improv consultants that develops training programs for organizations across the globe. This is an international service organization that supports practitioners that offer corporate training services using the types of improv techniques described throughout this paper. Their mission, taken from their website (http://www.appliedimprov.com/about-ain/mission-and-values/), states:

> Our members are business professionals and academics who use improv tools, experience, and theory for human development and training in communities and organizations. These applications may include—but are not limited to—facilitating creativity, innovation, effective strategy, organizational vitality and alignment, better relationships, conflict resolution, and storytelling.

The group acts as a service organization, providing resources and discussion forums for practitioners and academics that study and practice improv techniques in training and development environments. Their services include a consultant search service, sharing of information via blogs and other social media tools, as well as hosting of an international conference each year. Clearly there appears to be growing support and demand for this type of experiential training in the workplace.

Additional evidence that this type of experiential training is gaining momentum and is rapidly becoming recognized as a legitimate training method is that top MBA programs around the country have begun to include improv training in their curricula. Based on a review of these schools' websites, MBA programs at schools such as Duke, the University of North Carolina

(Chapel Hill), Columbia, George Mason, the University of Maryland, Northwestern, Penn State, UCLA, MIT, and Stanford have all added an improv training course for their students. In an article found at NPR.com, Julia Flucht wrote a story about her interview with an improv instructor at MIT's Sloan School of Management. Several key points were made by the instructor. First, the instructor noted that the concept of "Yes, and . . ." is probably the most important technique she covers. The instructor noted that so often, people in business run into the "Yes, but . . ." response which, she says, is really just a negation of the idea, and not true acceptance. She therefore teaches students how to respond to those that say something like "I really like your idea (Yes), BUT . . . it will never work" (Flucht, 2012). Note that this approach is consistent with improv rule #1 (Yes, and . .), and rule #5, (do not negate your partner), discussed in a previous section.

A concern that the instructor noted is that there is oftentimes a hesitation of business students to embrace this type of learning. Business students have a tendency to be formal and uptight, are taught not to let their guards down, and to not look silly, as this may be perceived as a position of weakness. So there are always a few students that do not grasp the underlying value of the course. On the other hand, the author cited an example of a student that had graduated from her program and was able to reflect back on the improv training while in a particularly stressful business situation. Because of the improv training, the former student was able to put her quick thinking to use to help get out of the situation (Flucht, 2012).

One additional point that the author uncovered from the instructor was that improv training also teaches these MBA students how to fail, which they are not used to doing, particularly in business school. The author noted that the instructor believes that it is not the mistake that is important, but rather, how the person recovers from it, and that is a perfect

example of where quick-thinking improv training can benefit those in the workplace (Flucht, 2012). This application of improv training in some of the leading business schools across the country is an acknowledgment of the perceived value of the method as an important and viable training and development tool for today's employees.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Ontological and Epistemological Framework

The nature of this study was based on a desire to seek an understanding of the impact of a specific experiential training method on the participants. My interest in this study was not to quantitatively measure outcomes, nor to prove or otherwise demonstrate that this particular training method is more or less effective than another method. Rather, my interest was to understand the human experience. Underlying my research question was the belief that knowledge is socially constructed by members of a group, based on the meaning that each member, individually and collectively, assigns to their experiences. The nature of a reality that is socially constructed by its group members based on their context and experiences is an ontological approach known as social constructionism. This is juxtaposed against the ontological view of objectivism, which believes that reality is fixed and never changing (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2008). Through an objectivist lens, there cannot be more than one meaning, or interpretation of a phenomenon, as that meaning is fixed. Social constructionists believe however, that a phenomenon can have more than one meaning, depending on how an individual group constructs, or interprets, the meaning of the event, based on their individual and collective contexts and experiences. In other words, individual groups create meaning, and that that meaning, or perception of reality, is not fixed. As a result, there may be more than one reality, or human meaning, ascribed to an event (Crotty, 1998; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007).

Supported by the ontological viewpoint is the question of epistemology, or *how* we know what we know. Within the social constructionist ontology is an epistemological approach known as interpretivism. As its name implies, meaning (or knowledge) is ascribed to a human event

based on the interpretation of the event by the individual. The individual's experience will be filtered through that person's own lens, or frame of reference, based on the individual's past experiences, backgrounds, education, culture, and so forth. As each set of lenses will be different for each individual, so will the interpretation of the experience. It is through these individual and collective interpretations that the individuals and the group make meaning, thus creating their perception of reality (Conbere & Heorhiadi, 2008). For example, someone in an experiential corporate training exercise who is very outgoing and gregarious may experience (or interpret) the exercise much differently than someone from a culture outside of the United States, where interaction and participation are not encouraged. The reality, or meaning, of the exercise to these two individuals may each be very different.

Methodology Rationale

The selection of a methodology and related methods in any research study should be based on the researcher's judgment as to the most effective way to answer the stated research question. The nature of this study is to seek to understand the human experience of a specific phenomenon within a specific group of individuals, versus to explain or test the phenomenon, or to attempt to identify its cause and effect, (Stake, 1995). I was interested in understanding the phenomenon, as posed in my research question in Chapter 1, through the voice of the participants, within their natural setting and context (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, for this study, I chose to utilize an interpretive case study methodology. Gall, Gall & Borg (2007) provided a clear definition of a case study as "the in-depth study of one or more instances of a phenomenon in its real-life context that reflects the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon" (p. 447). This definition aligns closely with the stated research question as it relates to the improvisational training method (the phenomenon), in its real life context (the

interactive, experiential training), within a specifically identified work group (the case

boundary).

Stake (1995) identified a number of criteria for determining the appropriateness of using

the case study as a research approach. Probably most important is the proper identification of the

case. The case must represent an identifiable, bounded system, within which the phenomenon of

interest is present. The role of the researcher is also important to understand as, in an interpretive

study, the researcher becomes a part of the study, rather than being independent of the

environment. This allows for the researcher's direct, first-hand observation and interpretation of

events. Their interpretation will be based on a combination of the researcher's analysis and

synthesis of all data sources, as well as the researcher's own knowledge, background and

experience. It is the role of the researcher to present the participants' stories, along with the

researcher's own interpretations of the phenomenon, in a richly descriptive way so that that

readers are able to "experience being there" and are thus able to draw their own conclusions

(Creswell, 2007).

Based on the criteria above, I believe that the selection of an interpretive single-case

study for this project is consistent with the foundations of interpretive case study research as

identified by Stake (1995) and Creswell (2007).

Description of the Study

General overview. Consistent with Stake's (2005) definition of a case study above, this

case consisted of a single, self-contained post-doctoral research department fellowship program

within a major Midwestern tier-one research university. Collectively, this departmental unit will

be referred to as the "client" (or "client group") throughout this study. The client group

contracted with a nationally-recognized professional improvisational theatre group that provides

improv and sketch comedy performances, improv education, and corporate improv training

services around the country. This latter group will be referred to as the "facilitator group" or "the

facilitators" (individually) throughout this study.

Prior to the commencement of the training sessions, I sat in on a telephone planning

conversation between the leaders of the facilitator group and the client group in order to gain an

understanding of the goals of the client, as well as to understand how those goals might shape the

specific nature of the individual training sessions from the facilitator's perspective. The client

group's goals for the sessions are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Both the facilitator and client

organization consented to participate in the study prior to this planning session. During this

meeting, my only input was a suggestion for the client to consider the possibility of up to three

training sessions, versus the single session training they had done in the past, in order to identify

any possible longitudinal effects of the training on the participants. The idea for three sessions

was proposed in order to give participants time to reflect on the training, and to see if they would

take the tools they had learned back to the workplace for possible application. During the

planning meeting, the facilitators noted that three sessions would also give them the opportunity

to design more in-depth material for the client that would build upon the previous sessions.

In order to understand the content and structure of the training sessions, I was present at,

and observed each of the three sessions, with no direct intervention of any type on my part. My

presence at the sessions was solely as an observer, in order to provide me with some context

during my individual interviews with the study's participants, which were to take place several

weeks after the completion of each session. My presence at the sessions was not meant in any

way to observe, critique, or otherwise judge any individual in the training, nor was it to critique

or evaluate the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the facilitators or their methods. The one-on-

one participant interviews subsequent to each training session were the primary data source for the study. The goal of the interviews was to attempt to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences, first-hand, relative to the experiential training sessions, to see if they were able to apply the training back at work, and to see if and how their experiences changed over the course of the three sessions.

The facilitator group. The facilitator organization has been in business for over fifty years, and has developed a national reputation for its innovative corporate training services. They boast an extensive client list, including many Fortune 500 companies, and the leader of the organization is a nationally-recognized speaker and trainer. Their credentials in both improv performance and training are highly respected in their field. The training sessions were coordinated by a senior member of the facilitator group's leadership team, while the individual training sessions themselves were led by two experienced members of their training and education department. These two individuals are also currently, or have been members of the organization's professional improv performance troupe, both of whom have an extensive list of performance and training credits to their names.

The client group. The client group is an academic research department comprised primarily of post-doctoral research fellows that were brought together for a one-year fellowship program. The goals of the fellowship program are to research and identify unmet needs in their field, brainstorm possible options to meet those needs, and then develop prototype solutions, with the ultimate goal of developing viable and marketable new end-products that will serve as breakthroughs in their market. After a vigorous initial interview process by the program director, the individual fellows were selected and the group came together for the first time approximately

six weeks prior to the first improv training session. None of the group's members had ever worked together prior to the formation of the team.

The fellowship program has a director that oversees the program on a very broad level (program resource allocation, logistical coordination, and team training and development, for example). However, this individual does not get involved in virtually any of the day-to-day direction or supervision of the group. Part of the goal of the fellowship project is for the team to discover together, for themselves, how best to work together, and to identify and evaluate which research projects appear most viable to pursue for possible commercialization. The year-long fellowship period is broken down into three phases. Phase I is primarily an orientation period, where the group members spend all their time together attending dozens of lectures and other types of training, on any host of topics (marketing, leadership, technical training, etc.). It was during this first phase that the first improv training session took place. Phase II is devoted to the exploration and discovery of possible research avenues, while Phase III is the implementation and execution period. During Phase II, the group broke out into two teams, both with separate research agendas. During Phases II and III, the members worked closely within their small groups, but also had regular interaction as a single large group as well, including weekly check-in's, and sharing of ideas, for example. Physically, they all share a common work space within the fellowship program's offices.

The nature of the work being undertaken by the fellowship program is, by definition, a highly creative endeavor. The researchers are being asked quite literally, to create life-changing products that do not currently exist, based on market research that the fellows undertook during Phase II of the project. It is for these reasons that the program director felt that the experiential improv training that is the topic of this study might be of benefit to the group members, and

therefore arranged the training sessions with the facilitator. In addition, the program director had arranged a similar single training session with this facilitator for the prior year's group of fellowship researchers, and the director had felt that this prior year's training had, in-fact, benefited the group's members in their work. During the planning stage of the training with the facilitator this year, it was determined that the program director's goals for this year's sessions were consistent with the overall goals of improv as discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. Specifically, these training goals included enhancing listening skills, increasing spontaneity of thinking and idea generation, working cohesively together as a team, and identifying new and alternative ways of looking at things—all skills that would be of great value when developing new and innovative life-changing products.

The participants. In all, there were twelve members on the research team, all of whom participated in some or all of the training sessions. Ten of the department's twelve personnel agreed to participate in the interviews, which served as the foundation for this study. For purposes of this study, the term "member" will refer to a member of research team who went through the training, while the term "participant" will refer to a team member that voluntarily agreed to be interviewed for the study, thus becoming a study participant. Out of the twelve members of the research team, ten voluntarily agreed to be interviewed as a part of this study.

One of the ten participants in the study also serves as the director of the program. Also, for two of the participants, in addition to being members of the research team, they are also full-time employees of a Fortune 500 company in the area that had a research interest in the work being undertaken by the fellowship program, and that actually sponsored a portion of the current year's research projects.

The table below is a summary of the department's members versus participants, as well as which members participated in each of the interviews (DNP = did not participate).

Table 1				
Members versus Participants				
Member Number	**Participant Number**	**Interview #1**	**Interview #2**	**Interview #3**
1	1	X	X	X
2	2	X	X	DNP
3	3	X	X	X
4	4	X	X	DNP
5	5	X	X	X
6	6	X	X	X
7	7	DNP	X	DNP
8	8	X	X	X
9	9	X	X	X
10	10	X	X	X
11	Declined to participate in the study	N/A	N/A	N/A
12	Did not respond	N/A	N/A	N/A
Interview Totals, by Session		**9**	**10**	**7**

As noted in Table 1 above, ten of the twelve members of the research department agreed to participate in the study, and a total of 26 individual interviews were undertaken as a part of this study. Basic self-reported demographic information was collected for each participant. However, due to the small size of the group, for confidentiality purposes of all members of the group, I have chosen not to report their individual demographic responses in the table above. By listing individuals' demographic information, I felt it would be too easy to identify individual members versus participants, thereby compromising their anonymity, which was assured as a

condition of the study. The identifier numbers above are also used as the individual pseudonyms

for each participant when analyzing and discussing the findings of the study in Chapters 4 and 5.

I have chosen to summarize participant demographic information below, with the hope that this

will still give the reader at least a partial picture of the makeup of the overall group. Following is

the aggregated self-reported demographic information for the participants.

Table 2

Aggregated Participant Demographic Information

Age range:
20 – 29:	2
30 – 39:	5
40 – 49:	2
50 – 59:	1
	10

Ethnic background:
Caucasian:	7.5
Middle eastern descent:	1.0
Asian-Pacific Islander:	1.5
	10.0

Highest level of education attained:
Doctoral:	9
MBA:	1
	10

Regarding the gender makeup of both the participant and member groups, I determined

that the reporting of any information relative to the gender breakdown of either group would

compromise the anonymity of the members, and am therefore unable to report gender

information regarding the members of the group or of those that participated in the study. While

I realize that readers of this study might find the gender information useful when attempting to

interpret the findings of this study, ethically I cannot disclose this information. This ethical

obligation to all individuals associated with this study is of paramount importance, and I felt that

disclosing this information would breach the agreement I made with all of those involved with the client group. I do not believe that the withholding of member or participant gender information has materially compromised the outcome of the study or the reader's ability to draw reasonable conclusions from the study's data and findings.

The training sessions. Three, three-hour training sessions were conducted at the facilitator's offices over a three-month period. The duration of time that elapsed between training Sessions #1 and #2 was 46 days, while 35 days elapsed between Session #2 and Session #3. The sessions were spaced in this fashion in order to provide the participants time to reflect upon and begin to apply the training tools and concepts that resulted from the sessions.

The space. The facilitator's training room was a large empty rectangular room of approximately 900 square feet (60 feet x 15 feet), with windows on two sides, and blue painted drywall interspersed among old, exposed brick walls on the other two sides. Large, poster-sized pictures of the facilitating organization's past performances hung on the walls. Overhead fluorescent lighting hung from the ceilings. The only furniture in the training area was chairs for the participants and facilitators. Adjacent to the training area was a small relaxation area with couches, a small kitchenette, and a ping-pong table.

Session structure and content. Each session was led by a team of two facilitators from the facilitator group. The sessions were each structured in a similar fashion, beginning first with a series of group warm-up exercises, all performed in a large circle so that participants could easily engage with one another. The facilitators then moved into the more substantive aspects of the sessions, which typically took up roughly two of the three hours. The group took a short break approximately half way through each session, where the members talked among themselves or engaged one another in vigorous games of ping-pong.

An integral component of this type of training is the debrief discussion that follows each exercise. After each exercise, the facilitators addressed the group and asked them a series of questions that were meant to get the members to think about what they had just experienced. The facilitators' hope was that the session's participants would be able to draw a link between the activity they had just experienced, and their research work back at their offices. Sometimes this link between the training and their jobs appeared clearly evident, while at other times, the links were more abstract. The facilitators' goal in this latter approach was to allow the members to draw their own inferences from the exercises rather than to attempt to tell the session participants what they should have gotten from the experience. Throughout all the training sessions, the facilitators would also discuss with the participants basic improv principles which, as the facilitators felt, were important for the participants' personal development. For example, in Session #1, the facilitators discussed a number of general improv principles such as: (a) the importance of working together and supporting one another, (b) the concept of "Yes, and . . .", (c) being present and in-the-moment—that is, to focus and concentrate on the exercises, (d) intense listening, and (e) spontaneous thinking. All of these improv concepts were discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, as well.

The games, exercises, and activities that the facilitators chose for the sessions were tailored specifically for this group based on the planning meeting they had had with the client's program director prior to commencement of the sessions. A detailed listing and description of each game, for each session, in the order they were presented, is included in Appendix A.

The interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with the study's participants several weeks following each training session in order to allow the participants to reflect upon,

and begin to apply the tools presented at the sessions. Following is a schedule of the duration of time that elapsed between the training session and the corresponding follow-up interviews:

Interview #1: 43 days after Session #1

Interview #2: 33 days after Session #2

Interview #3: 49 days after Session #3 (not including a 21 day academic holiday break)

The interviews were scheduled by me via email with each individual, one to two weeks ahead of time. (See Appendix B for a sample of the email Invitation to Participate.) All interviews were held in the client's offices, in one of their conference rooms. Interviews ranged in duration of approximately 30-60 minutes in length each. A total of 26 individual interviews were conducted over the course of the three training sessions, per Table 1, above. Even though only three training sessions and three sets of interviews had been planned as a part of this study, I felt that after the 3rd set of interviews we reached a saturation point. I believe that by the end of the 3rd set of interviews, the participants shared with me all significant insights regarding the training and its subsequent application that they were able to recall, or willing to discuss with me.

The initial discussion points and questions that were posed to all the participants included:

1. "Tell me about your experience in this training session."

2. "Has this training influenced your work?"

3. "Do you have any thoughts or observations regarding self or others relative to this training?"

As the conversations progressed, additional issues were oftentimes uncovered, which are documented and discussed in Chapter 4: Findings.

All interviews were recorded after obtaining consent from each participant, in accordance with the ethics protocols described below. Subsequent to the interviews, the recorded interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist again, in accordance with the confidentiality and ethics protocols below.

Data Collection and Analysis Methods

As noted above, the primary data collection method for this study was my personal, one-on-one interviews with participants who agreed to be a part of the study. In addition, the interviews were supplemented by my own observations of the three training sessions as described above, in order for me to have a contextual frame-of-reference during the interviews, as well as to document for this paper the general nature and structure of training sessions.

From the recordings, transcribed data, and my interview notes and memo comments, I utilized an interpretive data analysis software program called N-Vivo, to assist me with the coding, grouping, and categorizing of the data by identifying significant, common or recurring ideas, issues, and experiences of the participants. From the N-Vivo software, these recurring ideas, issues, and experiences were aggregated for organizational purposes into topical categories and sub-categories, which then formed the foundation of the study's findings, as documented in Chapter 4. These findings and topical categories were discussed with my dissertation committee, who helped me to uncover the deeper meanings and essences in the data, thus forming the basis of the themes that were ultimately uncovered as a result of the research. These themes were then analyzed and discussed in-depth in Chapter 5.

All data and records were secured at all times in accordance with the confidentiality and ethics protocols, below.

Researcher Background and Possible Biases

  By its very definition, interpretive research data and conclusions will be interpreted by both the researcher as well as the reader, and will be influenced by each individual's own frames-of-reference. According to Creswell (2007), "Researchers recognize that their own background shapes their interpretation, and that they position themselves in the research to acknowledge how their interpretation flows from their own personal, cultural, and historical experiences. Thus the researchers make an interpretation of what they find, an interpretation shaped by their own experiences and background" (p. 21). Therefore, having the reader understand the researcher's background and frame-of-reference is an integral part of any interpretive study.

  As some background on myself, I took my first improv class in 1985, and have been studying, performing, and teaching improv at various times throughout my life since that first class. During that time, I have also held senior administrative leadership positions in a number of cultural nonprofit organizations, and am currently on the faculty of an arts conservatory in North Carolina where I serve as the director of an MFA program in performing arts management. All of these experiences have influenced my interest in this dissertation topic, and have led me to believe that there is real potential in improv as a legitimate and effective corporate training and development tool. I am hoping that this study will enhance both my and the readers' understanding of this experiential training method.

  Given this background and frame-of-reference, a potential bias for me in this study could exist relative to my possible preconceived notions as to the effectiveness and desirability of this type of training. My favorable outlook on improv training could have affected how I structured the study, as well as how I asked the interview questions and interpreted the responses. In order

to minimize this potential bias during the study, I tried to remain cognizant of this important issue at all times, including during the study's design, the interview process, and the analysis, inference and conclusion stages. For example, I determined my three primary interview questions and then reviewed them with my dissertation committee and the school's Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to the interviews in order to ensure that the questions were posed in a broad, non-leading fashion. Also prior to the interviews, I made notes to myself to remember not to appear to "push" improv training, but rather, to listen intently to what the participants' experiences were. In fact, I made a specific note to myself that the study was about their experiences, not what I thought about this training method. Then, subsequent to each round of interviews, I reviewed the tape recordings, making additional notes as to how to continue to ensure a neutral tone and approach in future interviews. I also stated to several participants during the interviews themselves that I was not taking a position on the training, pro or con, but that I was interested solely in what their experiences and perceptions were. As a result of these steps, I believe that I was able to conduct this study in a manner that minimized the potential bias concerns described above.

Credibility of the Study

Readers of any research study want to know that they can rely on the data, descriptions, and conclusions found in the work. For positivistic studies, this can be undertaken by the researcher's clear documentation of the study's methods and protocols, along with well-documented quantitative measures of validity and reliability. However, in interpretive studies, these quantitative measurement factors do not exist, so the researcher must find other ways to help readers assess the soundness of the research, and whether or not the study's methods have

been constructed and undertaken in a way that will allow readers to be able to rely on the study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

In my role as an interpretive researcher, it was therefore incumbent upon me to provide credible, believable data, interpretations, inferences, and conclusions through accurate and comprehensive descriptions, and to minimize misrepresentations, so that readers can have confidence in the overall study. This should then afford readers the opportunity to interpret the work in their own way, through their own lens of knowledge and experience. In interpretive research, this is referred to as the study's credibility (Stake, 1995).

In order to heighten the credibility of this research study, I employed several techniques to help ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the study's design, findings, and conclusions. Stake (2005) provided a rich description of methods that interpretive researchers might utilize in order to heighten the creditability of their research, including triangulation and member checking.

Triangulation. Triangulation represents a comparison of results from different angles and sources. Confidence is gained if, for example, a similar account is described by multiple sources. However, as interpretive research is based on the interpretation of experiences from each individual's point-of-view, three different people may have perceived the experience very differently. This does not necessarily weaken the credibility of the study, but it may call for additional follow-up.

Data triangulation. The first type of triangulation Stake (1995) identified is a triangulation of various data sources. What I looked for here was a consistency of responses over the duration of the three interview sessions. In this study, three separate training sessions were undertaken in order to increase the opportunity to triangulate participant experiences and

responses. For example, prior to the 2nd and 3rd interviews, I reviewed the tapes and my notes in detail, making sure to follow up on key items or questions that may have arisen from the previous sessions. I also compared participant responses to what I observed generally throughout the sessions (though again, no individual member's participation is commented on by me in any part of this study as a result of my observations). I was able therefore, to triangulate responses from the participants (including the client group program director), as well as my own personal observations throughout the duration of the study. In addition, for this study, because I had the opportunity to hold in-depth interviews with each participant over a series of three separate interview sessions, this process afforded me the opportunity to follow-up with each participant, in-person, in order to clarify or question their previous responses, particularly if I sensed any inconsistencies. I believe that as a result of this process, I was able to minimize misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and mischaracterizations that may have occurred on my part during the interviews. This step therefore also served as a form of member-checking as described by Stake (1995).

Investigator triangulation. Investigator triangulation occurs by asking others to read this study and review it for reasonableness, soundness of methods and conclusions, and for overall credibility. Therefore, I enlisted one outside doctoral-level reader not associated with the study who has a familiarity with this topic to review my work from a credibility standpoint. Stake (1995) also noted that this would allow for the possible identification of alternate or additional interpretations, or possible researcher bias. This individual's comments and critique were duly considered in this final version of the paper.

All of these credibility steps, discussed above, should help to enhance the reader's, as well as the dissertation committee's confidence that the study's protocols and conclusions were thoughtfully and soundly developed and executed.

Possible Study Limitations

In order for readers of an interpretive study to have access to as much information as possible about the case, the context, and the researcher's point-of-view, it is incumbent upon the researcher to disclose to the reader any possible limitations in the process that may affect the reader's interpretation of the case. This could include for example, limitations in access to participants, data collection shortcomings, or possible researcher bias. The goal is to be as transparent as possible so that the reader may draw conclusions that are based on as complete a set of information as possible. Following are possible limitations to this study that I have identified.

Presence of the researcher. I physically observed each of the three training sessions that the members participated in. While I was in no way an active participant, nor did I contribute to the sessions in any fashion, the mere fact that I was present in the room could have caused some of the participants to not behave as they would have without me being there. However, based on feedback I received during the one-on-one interviews, this did not appear to be of any concern to any of the participants that I spoke with.

Participant honesty. There is always a risk that participants will not be open, honest or forthright during their interviews with me. I addressed this concern by reassuring each participant individually of my intentions with the study, that their privacy and confidentiality would be both respected and guaranteed, and by creating an atmosphere of trust throughout the study. During the interviews themselves, I felt that I developed positive relationships with each

participant, and we had, what I believed in all cases, to be open, honest and frank discussions about their experiences. The rich nature of their feedback indicated to me that they were being truthful and open with me. I also used the triangulation methods described above to cross-check for inconsistencies in responses among the participants between each of the interviews.

Based on these steps, I do not have any reason to believe that, at any time during the study, the participants were being anything but honest, open and sincere in their responses to me. I believe that I had a very open and trusting relationship with each of the participants.

Not a longitudinal study. This study was carried out over a three-month period, with each session approximately a month to a month-and-a half apart. A question that could arise is what the participant responses might be in say, one year from now, and how those responses might differ from those obtained during this three-month study. In other words, how will I know if this training method is sustainable over a longer period of time? Given the constraints of time to undertake this study, it was not feasible to extend the timeframe beyond the initial three month period. I do believe that holding three sessions over a three-month period has strengthened the results of the study, over those of a one-session study only. Three sessions allowed participants to reflect on each session and begin to apply what they learned, reinforcing their training with the second and third sessions. This structure provided me the opportunity for the comparison of experiences and responses over three months, giving a stronger picture than with just a single-session study. However, no further follow-up was undertaken with the participants after the completion of the initial three month study period.

Possible researcher bias. As noted above, I have a fairly significant background in the field of improv, as both a student and a teacher. I naturally have in my mind how I would structure the training sessions, were I the facilitator. I therefore needed to keep in mind that there

are many ways to lead these types of sessions, and that the client group engaged one of the leading improv training companies in the nation to facilitate their training. In part, I was interested in observing the facilitator's approach, and how this approach aligned with the client's goals for the sessions. Consistent with my research question however, my primary interest was how the participants responded to those methods, whatever they were.

I found that, throughout this study, my concern over comparisons or critiques of the facilitator's training methods on my part did not materialize. I was able to overcome this during the sessions by focusing intently on the trainers' methods and goals (relative to the client's pre-established needs), how they executed the exercises, how they interacted with the participants, and how the participants responded to the training. In all honesty, the training moved so quickly and seamlessly that I had no time to think about how I might have done the training any differently; I was completely engaged in the experiences of the participants at all times.

Generalization of Results

Given the inherent nature of interpretive research, no generalizability of results from a sample to a larger population is expected, nor possible, due to the differing nature of the processes, as well as differences in data sources (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007). The interpretive case study, by definition, is the study of a phenomenon within a specific, bounded system. For this study, I was only interested in the lived experiences of the case participants, in terms of how they interacted with and responded to the phenomenon, within their specific environment and context. Stake (1995) indicated however, that results of case studies may be used to influence or modify existing generalizations. In that respect, it may be that the assertions developed as a result of this study may in-fact influence how others perceive or reflect on related phenomena, but in other contexts. The goal of this study however, was to explore the stated research question and inform

the reader regarding the assertions and conclusions developed as a result of this specific case, in this specific context.

Ethical Treatment of Human Subjects

In accordance with research protocols as established by the University of St. Thomas and as overseen by its Institutional Review Board (IRB), the following protocols were put in place to ensure the protection of human subjects, as well as any vulnerable persons that may have participated in this study.

- Permission from the client organization to conduct the study

  I secured written permission from the client organization agreeing to participate in the study. I outlined for them as clearly as possible the nature of the study, possible risks, the time commitment, and any other items that I deemed material to the client relative to the study. I also answered as honestly as I could, any questions that the client had regarding the study or its process.

- Agreement with the facilitator

  Likewise, I secured a written agreement with the facilitator organization, detailing as above, the material aspects of the study, along with their role expectations and again, answering any questions that they had.

- Informed consent forms for each participant

  I obtained signed informed consent forms from all participants agreeing to volunteer for this study. I made it clear that their participation in the interview portion of the study was not mandatory in any fashion, and that their participation was completely voluntary. (Note: as the client group's employees' participation in the actual training sessions was initiated and coordinated directly by the client

organization as a part of their organization's training program, the IRB

determined that separate consent forms for the training sessions themselves were

not required.)

- Permission to audiotape individual interviews

It was my desire to audiotape all one-on-one interviews with the participants for

transcription purposes. Prior to each interview, I made it clear to each participant

my interest in recording the interview session, but that they could decline to have

their interviews taped, with no repercussions. This information was also included

in the Informed Consent Form that each participant signed.

In order to guarantee participant confidentiality, I had procedures in place

so that no one other than myself, the professional transcriptionist, and my

dissertation committee members had access to the recordings. The sessions were

digitally recorded and stored on a password-protected computer. All recordings

will be destroyed after final approval of the study. There was no videotaping of

the training sessions or the interviews.

- Protection of data

All data compiled by me as a part of this study, including audio recordings,

research notes, interview transcriptions, coding data, drafts of the study, etc. were

stored on a password-protected computer, and regular backups were made to an

off-site, password-protected cloud-based account.

- Assurance of privacy

I personally assured each participant complete privacy, confidentiality and

anonymity throughout the study. My goal was for participants to share with me as

openly and honestly as possible their true and complete experiences. Therefore no individual names, positions, etc. were used or disclosed that would serve to identify any individual responses, respondents, or organizational affiliations. Nor did I share any individual responses with any other participants in the study. All responses were kept strictly confidential. I also did not share any individually-identifiable responses or observations (for either participants or members) with the client's program director at any time during this study; that is, anything that might put any participant or member's position with the organization in jeopardy.

I do plan to share a copy of this final research dissertation with the client organization and the facilitators so that they may benefit from the results of the study, however they will not have access to any individually-identifiable information. In addition, this dissertation will be publically available through on-line dissertation publication services, and through the school's library. With this in mind, when drafting this paper I have been careful not to disclose any organization or participant identities, comments, or observations that could be traced back to any specific individual or organization that participated in the study.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to attempt to understand the lived experiences of the

participants of a bounded work group that went through three sessions of improv training

together over an approximately three-month period. The goal was to attempt to identify if

participants were able to learn the improv concepts and techniques, and then take these concepts

and techniques back to their workplace and apply them in their day-to-day jobs. Individual

interviews were undertaken with each participant approximately three to four weeks subsequent

to each training session. My research question was:

What is the perceived impact of interactive, experiential theatrical improvisational

training on individual participants and their related work groups when this training is

used for employee development purposes?

Once all the interviews had been completed, participant responses were organized, coded

and grouped according to several key issues that arose throughout the study. These issues are

presented below, in the remainder of this chapter.

Additional Background on the Client Group

Fellowship program goals. In conversations with the client group's program director

(and who also served as a participant in this study), both in the planning stage, as well as during

the participant interviews, this individual outlined for me several goals of both the fellowship

program generally, as well as for the improv training sessions specifically. The director clarified

that the structure and purpose of the fellowship program has several unique organizational

characteristics that do not parallel what one might consider to be a more traditional corporate

work group structure—that is, a defined corporate department or division, for example.

The current cohort of client group members were assembled as the result of a rigorous application and screening process, where the program director was looking for applicants' demonstration of technical knowledge (as demonstrated by their previous academic and research work), the ability to think creatively about solving problems (as demonstrated via a series of exercises all applicants had to perform), and the director's perception of the group's ability to work together. The overall goal of the fellowship program was to research and identify significant unmet market needs in their field, and then design and prototype new products that could be ready to go to market, all through a creative and innovative research and development process as defined by the collective group.

As a part of the fellowship training, the program director purposefully took a very hands-off approach to the fellows' work. The reason the director gave for this was that, after leaving the fellowship program, these fellows would be expected to become leaders in innovation and research in their fields, and it was therefore a purposefully designed part of their program to let the group members learn how to work together, and to solve problems together, on their own, with little (if any) intervention from the program's leadership. In other words, a significant part of the program's goal was for these individuals to discover, on their own, how to work together, how to solve problems together, and how to become leaders in the areas of innovation and discovery. During the initial orientation phase of the members' training, the program set up a number of seminars and training sessions on a variety of topics to help with the members' orientation to the project, as well as to facilitate them getting to know one another and to begin building working relationships. One of those training opportunities was this series of improv training sessions. However, these sessions just showed up on the members' calendars as "improv session," with no explanation whatsoever from the director as to the nature of the training, the

types of activities, or the purpose, goals or expected outcomes of the sessions. The members were basically told to just "be at this location at this time." This particular lack of information on the part of the program director was also purposeful, as the director was interested in creating uncertainty in the participants' experience, meaning that they would have not time to prepare for what was coming and would therefore just have to "go with it" and adapt to whatever was going to be presented to them. This had the potential to make some participants uncomfortable with the uncertainty, while with others, it may have excited them.

Once the initial orientation phase of the fellowship program was completed, the group members began the exploratory-discovery phase of their work, which included the initial research and identification of potential problems and opportunities to pursue. From this point on, the program generally let the members work completely on their own, including the taking on of administrative tasks such as how often to meet, and the structure of the group (a single leader versus rotating leadership or no leadership, for example), as well as the specific work of researching, identification, and selection of the projects on which they were going to spend their time. A good portion of their time spent in this exploratory phase was spent in idea generation and brainstorming. It should be noted that the client group undertook similar improv training in the prior year, with a different cohort of fellows, using the same facilitator, so this was not the first time the program director and the facilitator group had worked together. In the prior year's training however, the client group only received one training session, versus the three sessions they received this year.

Improv session goals. Going into the improv sessions, the program director had a number of outcomes that this individual hoped would be achieved over the course of the three training sessions and beyond. These goals were communicated to the facilitator group in order to

aid in their session planning, however the goals were not communicated by the program's leadership to the program members.

The program director discussed several types of outcomes that were hoped for as a result of the training. Two key areas emerged, related to (1) brainstorming and idea generation, and (2) the interpersonal aspects of how the members might work together to achieve the fellowship program's ultimate goals of new and innovative product development. The director also spoke of the benefits of the experiential nature of the training, in that the members would be able to exhibit (that is, practice) the skills, and also observe behaviors that are exhibited by the other members, learning to respond to possible differences in style and personality, all "on the fly." The director felt there was a great deal more value for the group members in experiencing the skills directly (for example, listening, thinking on-the-spot, etc.), rather than sitting through the same material being presented in a more traditional lecture-type corporate setting.

One thing in particular that the director noted, was the hope of identifying and "rooting-out" negative behaviors that have the potential to occur in creative, brainstorming idea generation sessions. The hope was for the group members to begin to become aware of instances where they might have the potential themselves to respond to ideas in a negative or counterproductive fashion through their interactions or attitudes, thus bringing down the energy and possible positive outcomes and creative thinking of the session. The director's hope was to heighten the group members' self-awareness of these possible negative behaviors, so they could more easily identify when they were exhibiting them.

It was also interesting that all but one of the study's participants self-identified during the interviews for this study as being introverts, according to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). The entire client group had taken the MBTI test a few weeks prior to the first improv

session as a part of their orientation process, in order to help them identify ways to work more effectively together by having an awareness of each other's MBTI preferences. As a result of this heavy skewing of the group toward introversion, the director's hope was that this type of interactive, participatory training would help to bring them out of their shells and get them to know one another better, on a more personal level.

The program director also discussed the idea that a part of the fellowship program's goal was for the group members to become change agents in the field of innovation and new product development once they completed the fellowship program. As a part of this personal development process, the director believed that the group members must be comfortable with change, which involves them being placed in, and being able to deal effectively with uncomfortable situations. The director felt again, that this type of experiential training, gained while still a part of the fellowship program, would help the group members to develop this skill by being placed in uncomfortable situations now (that is, the improv sessions), and having therefore, to learn to adapt to that feeling of discomfort by learning to change within themselves. The director believed that having this type of training experience together, as a group, would be more supportive of one another for this type of subject matter. The director stated, "You're all with colleagues and peers that are not going to make fun of you. You're all in the same boat and you learn what it feels like to be uncomfortable." This was also the reason that the director did not tell the group members anything ahead of time about the training that they were going to, other than that it was an improv session. The goal was for them to have some anxiety and uncertainty going into the sessions. Some participants even stated during the interviews that they did not know that it was to be a training session.

The final point that the director discussed as hoping to achieve as a result of the sessions was the possible positive impact on the culture of the group that the director hoped would result from them going through a shared experience of this nature together. The hope was that the group members would begin to develop a common language and interpersonal techniques to bring back to their work, and also to have some fun with the training along the way. The director characterized this desired culture as the group members having "kind of an inside joke" of sorts; an experience that they all shared, and could then collectively look back on together. Within this context, the director believed that this shared experience might then give the group members permission to deal with possible individual and group negativity more effectively, in a more fun and light-hearted way. The director referred to this as a type of "self-regulation" in terms of managing the negativity and potential uncooperativeness that might occur within the group, particularly during the idea generation phase of their work.

Overall, the program director was seeking to address the development of team dynamics and culture, develop brainstorming and creativity skills, and to encourage the group members to learn and grow by pushing them out of their comfort zones, all within a safe, controlled environment. From the improv training sessions, the director wanted the group members to learn something about themselves, to learn to work together more effectively, to walk away with a sense of accomplishment, and to have some fun while doing all of this. In short, this was intended as part of a process of self-discovery in becoming leaders and agent of changes in the field of innovation and new product design within their field.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to documenting the key issues that emerged as a result of my interviews with the participants. These issues represent the significant facets of their experiences, prior to, during, and subsequent to the training sessions.

Participants' Pre-Session Experience

As noted above (and as confirmed by the program director), the participants had virtually

no idea what they were getting into or what to expect before arriving at the training center other

than that they were going to an improv session. Most had at least heard the term "improv" before

and were familiar with the concept through the popular television show *Whose Line is it*

Anyway?. One participant had seen live improv while at college, and another had done some

game-type workshops previously. Otherwise, none of the participants had ever been involved in

the study or performance of improv, in any fashion, prior to these sessions. Participant #2 even

stated specifically, "I didn't even know what improv was."

This lack of any previous exposure to improv, combined with the limited information that

had been provided to the participants by the program prior to the first session, lead to a variety of

thoughts and emotions as the participants prepared for their first improv session. Because of their

lack of familiarity with the field of improv (or its related training methodologies), there was a

great deal of speculation and uncertainty among the participants going into the first session. For

example, participant #5 stated, "There was definitely a lot of uncertainty and wondering and

skepticism among everyone beforehand." In fact, six of the ten participants stated specifically

that they had no idea what to expect or what they were getting into. Participant #7 stated, "I

didn't even know it was a training session . . . it wasn't built up as a training session." Participant

#2 could not initially make the link between the upcoming first session and what they were doing

in their work. The participant noted that, "By the time I arrived at the place, I kind of understood

that it was a theatrical company." Participant #4 went into the first session with a fairly open

mind, and stated, "I didn't really know what it was going to entail, but it could be fun and

exciting, and maybe embarrassing, but hopefully good in developing relationships with co-workers."

There were also a number of participants who expressed fairly significant reservations regarding the possibility of having to get up on stage and actually perform comedy, perhaps even in a type of "stand-up routine" capacity. This misperception again, was the result of a dearth of information regarding the nature of the session beforehand on the part of the program director. Participant #9 felt that this type of activity would be intimidating, but followed up with "Boy, I'm not going to like that [performing], but I'll go for it. I'll definitely be a part of it and it will be interesting, but it's not my comfort zone." Other comments before going into the first session included, "nervousness," "uncomfortable," and "I was not looking forward to it."

Yet despite all of these apparent hesitations, I got the feeling that most everyone went in with a fairly open mind, a positive attitude, and a willingness to try whatever might be headed their way. Participant #8 summed up the Session #1 pre-session experience as, "They [the program] are always trying to surprise you and get you out of your comfort zone, and kind of get you doing something new. That kind of made me more open for anything that was going to happen."

Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, once the participants had gone through Session #1, their perceptions and expectations going into Session #2 were quite different and much more positive. Participant # 1 attributed this to greater familiarity with the process the second time around, as well as them being more comfortable with each other as a group. Participant #4 felt much less anxious going into the second session, as "the ice had already been broken," noting further, "it stands to reason that it's one of those things where the more you do it, the less awkward and more comfortable it becomes." And finally, participant #5 stated "I was

not looking forward to it last time because I didn't know what was going on. But I am looking forward to it this time." So clearly, once the participants had the opportunity to go through the first session, they were able to experience the actual activities involved in the training, dispel many of their pre-conceived notions of uncertainty, discomfort, anxiety, and nervousness that existed prior to Session #1, and actually have fun.

Breaking Down Mental Barriers: No Bad Ideas

A key component of improv training is to help individuals learn to think more spontaneously, and to not filter their thoughts and ideas prior to speaking. Most individuals were taught from an early age to "think before you speak." However, this is the antithesis of the improv mindset as, by definition, improv is made-up, on-the-spot. The belief is that the more one thinks about something ahead of time, the more one gets in one's own way, due to the built-in filtering and self-editing mechanisms that one has been conditioned to adhere to over time. In improv, these mechanisms and processes are referred to as filtering, editing oneself, and blocking; that is, the establishment of mental roadblocks, as these actions serve to inhibit the exercise of spontaneous thoughts, free-thinking, and the sharing of ideas with others. In an improv setting, this spontaneity is oftentimes referred to generally as "thinking-on-your-feet" (as discussed in Chapter 2).

A good number of the improv exercises that were presented throughout the three training sessions were focused around providing participants the opportunity to practice thinking-on-their-feet. The exercises forced the participants not only to say the first thing that came to their minds, but also to try and not think ahead of time about their possible responses, or where the exercises might have been going. Once the participants began to think about their responses ahead of time, they noted that their internal editing filters would go up. Examples of these types

of exercises from the sessions (as described more fully in Appendix A) included warm-up games such as Word Pizza and Zoom-Schwartz-Perfigliano, along with more application-based training exercises which included Listing of 5 Items, Creating a Story (on-the-spot using 3 picture cards as stimuli), and Group Storytelling (one word at a time, one sentence at a time, and finally, an ongoing story, until they were tagged out). Each of these exercises was designed to force the participants to provide an immediate response, minimizing any time to establish any internal filters, roadblocks, or pre-prepared responses.

Acknowledgement of roadblocks. One of the most frequently discussed issues that the participants identified from the sessions was their recognition of the challenges related to breaking down their mental barriers. Nine of the ten participants had significant comments and observations in this area. A number of the participants actively acknowledged the existence of roadblocks that they had created for themselves, both intentionally and unintentionally. For example, Participant #2 noted, "I definitely had the roadblocks. I was trying to push them away too, but I still had them." Participant #1 went even further, and proactively acknowledged this issue as, "I like to filter what I say. I'm not one to blurt out what I'm thinking. I don't want to say something that makes me look silly." Participant #8 also recognized this as an issue, and stated "I was putting too much interference into it [the exercise], because I kind of locked myself up toward the end." Most of the participants shared with me similar feelings that they experienced at some point during the sessions.

Possible reasons for roadblocks. From the participants' point-of-view, these roadblocks manifested themselves in several ways. Two of the greatest obstacles they identified, generally, were wanting to be funny or clever, and not wanting to look stupid in front of the group. They were also concerned about wanting to say the "correct" thing for that moment. Interestingly,

Participant #8 noted however, that the exercises never seemed competitive in terms of wanting to outdo one another. Rather, it appeared from their comments as though they just wanted to look good (that is, smart) to the rest of their group, versus one-upping them. In fact, Participant #8 even referred to a "social component" that seemed to exist related to how their responses might come off to the group.

From the participants' comments, the filters and roadblocks seemed to be primarily self-imposed. Participant #4 discussed being uncomfortable during the "List 5 Things" exercise:

I think you get in your own way. I had to come up with something that's good, versus just coming up with something . . . I think it's just a build-in filter, right? You like for the ideas that you put out there to not be completely ridiculous even if it's understood that completely ridiculous ideas are fine in this setting. I think it probably does take some training to get over that.

Participant #6 appeared to put even more thought into the supposed spontaneous responses beforehand, and thought during the exercise about what the probable goals of the responses were to be. The Participant stated:

You are trying to create something that's good, and however you evaluate that yourself is interesting to reflect on. Am I looking for a laugh, am I looking for myself to be amused, am I looking for it to mean something for me? So, developing your internal . . . taking a look at what your own internal criteria is, because the criteria doesn't actually matter, because it's a game.

Participant #10 even acknowledged that the early conditioning of thinking-before-you-speak affected the Participant's responses. The Participant stated:

I think . . . at least how we've been trained or grew up to think is, "OK, I've got to

anticipate what's going to happen, make a decision now, and then when it comes my turn

I can quickly turn around and give the perfect answer."

While the participants above clearly acknowledged the existence of internal filters and

mental roadblocks initially, two of the participants indicated that the concerns they had regarding

roadblocks eventually seemed not to matter as much, once they got more comfortable with the

exercises. For example, Participant #4 realized:

Self-criticism is probably the biggest road block, but you've got to get that out of the

way. Mine [items to list] was flavors of ice cream that don't exist. Coconut sardine . . .

well, I'm glad that one doesn't exist. And then just whatever, just roll with it.

Thinking quickly: No bad ideas. As the participants progressed through the series of

sessions, they began to discover the improv adage that there are no bad ideas in improv. Once

this realization began to unfold, the roadblock concerns noted above began to diminish. Also

helping this was the fact that several of the participants characterized the training sessions as safe

zones, meaning that they were all in it together, which seemed to give them permission in the

later sessions to not feel as pressured to come up with the "best" answer. Further reinforcing this

idea of no wrong answers was something the facilitators told the participants during one of the

debriefs. They stated, "You are not looking for the best idea; you are just looking for the next

idea." The facilitators helped the participants to understand that one never knows where ideas

may lead, and that the eventual idea that gets used may have come from an earlier, seemly silly

idea at the time.

A good number of the exercises that the facilitators presented required immediate

responses on the part of the participants. In one of the warm-up exercises for example, called

Word Pizza, participants stood together in a circle and, one-at-a-time, tossed a random word to someone else, at which point the receiver would have to immediately repeat the tossed word, then free-associate a second word and then toss a new, related third word to another player, where the process repeated itself. The goal of the game was to encourage participants to go as quickly as possible, and to say the first thing that came to their minds, regardless of its meaning, the humor or creative nature of the word, or even if the word made sense. At the same time as participants were tossing the words to one another, they were also making a pizza-making gesture above their heads, then tossing the imaginary pizza to the recipient along with their word. This physical motion served to further distract the players, giving them even less mental opportunity to think about what they were going to say. The goal for the participants was purely to say something, immediately—anything.

A second family of exercises where these quick-thinking skills were presented related to storytelling. In the storytelling exercises, five or six participants stood in front of the group, and had to create a cohesive story, on-the-spot. In the first round, the participants could only add one single word at a time, while in the second level, they could speak only one sentence before moving to the next person to add their part. Finally, in the third level of the exercise, one participant would start telling a story, extemporaneously, until another participant "saved" the individual by tapping the speaker out. At that point, the second person would have to continue the story exactly where the first person had left off, again extemporaneously, until that individual was saved (tapped out) by a third person.

All of these exercises were designed so that the participants had little, if any time to pre-prepare a response. In particular, several participants noted that in the third level of the storytelling exercise for example, it did no good to pre-prepare anyway, as they had no idea

where the previous person was taking the story until another person stepped in. Participant #9 characterized this experience as,

> The progression of the storytelling, building on each other's ideas . . . it was enjoyable, challenging, but challenging in a different way, because you can't really prepare for it. You have to take what's given to you, think on-the-spot, and put something out there . . . do the risk of "this might be really stupid, but I've got to put it out there because we've got to keep it going."

This idea of not letting the group down as a result of not being able to come up with a response quickly enough was noted by several of the participants. They all seemed to have a strong commitment to working together and supporting one another.

Understanding filtering: Application to work and life. Once the participants heighted their awareness to the concept of individual filtering and roadblocks of ideas, identified what it felt like to experience filtering and blocking, and had the chance to practice together the minimizing of these filters during the sessions, they were able to better identify how these concepts could apply to their work and life. By far the single-most identified application of filtering by the participants to their work was in the area of brainstorming and new idea generation. Because of the specific nature and objectives related to the formation and existence of this particular group of participants, a great deal of their day-to-day work focused on creativity, innovation, and the development of new product ideas. Ultimately, the success of the entire client fellowship program was predicated on the ability of the group to generate creative and unique ideas at the front-end of the process. As a result, the function of effective brainstorming played a vital and substantial role in the day-to-day work of the client group.

Having tools available to them that facilitated the brainstorming process was noted to be of great value to them.

Participant #2 spoke to the value of understanding filtering as follows,

I've been in a research and development role in all of my career. And so it's a creative

job, and trying to come up with new ideas for things, that you tend to do that. I think

training to try to break down those walls is how you unleash your creativity, so that's one

of the applications that spoke to me.

Participant #1 identified the value of the spontaneity and filtering exercises as "It helps you to be able to kind of throw things out there, and it's helpful in brainstorming. It kind of helps get past the barrier of 'Hey, do I want to say this thing or not?'" Participant #4 echoed the statement made by the facilitators regarding not needing to come up with the best idea, but rather, coming up with the next idea. Participant #4 stated,

You're trying to learn something new about a [condition] that you're not at all familiar

with, to come up with something new, or with a problem that has yet to be addressed

effectively. You're going to come up with all sorts of ideas that are either silly or won't

work or have been tried before. But if you don't filter through those, the odds aren't good

that you'll get to the one that has . . . I mean a lot of times the ridiculous idea is the one

that actually kind of sparks a plausible one in the next person who hears it.

Participant #9 also noted a very specific relationship between filtering and brainstorming, discovered as a result of the training sessions:

I think to get you to practice thinking quick, but then also keeping your internal filters at

a minimum and just be free and open to say whatever . . . risk being stupid, or perceived

as being stupid or saying something that you didn't intend, or form to the level that you

want to. I think probably for future brainstorming sessions it's important to get all ideas, however perceived crazy they might be, out and not stuck in someone's head, so getting practice in spitting out kind of the first thing that comes to your mind and being OK with that.

These quotes above represent very clearly what the facilitators were referring to in that it is not the best idea one is looking for, but rather, the next idea, which may lead someone else to another idea, which may lead to another idea, and so forth. This process might ultimately lead to the idea that finally gets accepted. Note that the participant references above related solely to the internal filtering of ideas. The concept of filtering (or rejecting) ideas of others', externally by the group, is discussed in further detail, below.

Other areas that the participants identified where they were able to apply the filtering concept included, for example, Participant #1 who, as a college professor, described the Participant's fear of straying away from prepared class notes, even though the students really wanted to hear more extemporaneous stories about the material from the Participant. The Participant indicated a perceived greater comfort level now in being able to speak off-the-cuff, specifically as a result of this training. Participant #6 also tied the filtering material back to teaching, in particular to an undergraduate class in innovation that the Participant was teaching. In order to demonstrate spontaneity and the breaking down of creative barriers, the Participant developed a two-person game for the students called "Tigers are Great Because . . . ". In the game, each person, in rapid succession, had to list off one reason that tigers were great: Tigers are great because (they are big); Tigers are great because (they roar), etc. Regarding this application, the Participant noted:

I used that [exercise] to lead into the brainstorming, so then now they're going to

brainstorm needs. And the point was to get them to generate lots of ideas quickly, without

internally filtering it. Just get them out and filter them later.

The Participant created this game for the students as direct result of the improv sessions.

Filtering: Individual learnings and self-reflections. Understanding the concept of

filtering and roadblocks, along with attempting to identify ways of dealing with these barriers, is

a very individualized and personal learning process. As an example, Participant #9 reflected

deeply as to what this heightened awareness of filtering has meant to this individual. During the

interviews, this individual spoke in a very reflective fashion about this individual's inability to

express personal viewpoints in a group setting. The individual framed this issue very clearly in

terms of mental roadblocks and the desire to not look stupid, to not say something controversial,

or to not appear uninformed, for example. The Participant also found value in the sessions

relative to the ability to actually practice not holding back thoughts, and being able to do so in a

safe space.

> For me personally, it's always just being reinforced, just put it out there. State your views
>
> on things and put it out there. Whatever situation it is, be true to who you are and not
>
> hold back or anything like that. I'm one of those personalities that needs to have a
>
> continual reminder of that. So this was a big reminder, and actual practice in the
>
> importance of doing that, and that it's OK to put yourself out there even though you
>
> might not be as ideal as you would like, and that's OK; it's actually desirable that people
>
> come to each other in that mode of being real with each other. So it was a great
>
> reinforcement of that principle and a way of practicing it.

The Participant also reflected on the interpersonal/social aspect of filtering:

I think one way that this has been helpful is helping to allow myself, to give myself

permission to say what pops into my head, when it pops into my head. I'm much more

introspective of, "OK, let's analyze this, I want to say something but how is the best way

to say it?" A whole bunch of thinking before anything comes out. Just to give myself

license to be a little more free to throw it out there. If it's wrong, so what? You'll get past

it. Or, if someone takes it the wrong way, you'll get past it, but just trust yourself. But the

majority of the time it's not going to be a bad thing to throw out there.

Finally, the Participant acknowledged the possible perceptions and responses of others to just

"throwing it out there," and the confidence that the individual developed as a result of the

training:

It's a protection mechanism but, you know . . . I've always looked at people who don't

have that filter, sometimes annoyingly, but a lot of times like, "Oh, I need to develop that

just a little bit, I don't have to go all the way there, I don't want to, but I need to have that

ability and confidence." So this has been helpful in just reinforcing that, "Yeah, you can

do it."

Group Dynamics: Heightening Interpersonal Skills and Relationships

Another key issue that arose from the study related to the concept of the dynamics of the

group, the nature of how the participants worked together, and the group's culture. When the

program director discussed the overall goals of the training prior to commencement of the

sessions, the director referred to these issues collectively as the interpersonal aspects of the

group. The reason this was important for the director was that this was a group that had just

recently formed, never having worked together previously, and the group was only to have a

lifespan of twelve months. Therefore, the director felt it was important that, if the overall goals

and purpose of the fellowship project were to be accomplished (that of discovering and

developing new and innovative products), the members would need to learn to work together,

and to do so in fairly short order. The participants' comments and observations in this area

relative to the improv training revolved around several key topics: (a) supporting one another, (b)

the notion of trust within the group, (c) the nature of how the group worked together, and (d)

development of a common bond and language among them.

Supporting one another. It was clear throughout all the interviews that this was a group

that was dependent on collaboration in order to succeed. At the time of the interviews, the client

group had broken out into two teams, each of which were responsible for generating new product

ideas independent of one another. The group members also met regularly as a whole, in order to

check-in, share ideas, and to support one another. It was clear from the onset that the members

were not developing products individually or separately, and so it was incumbent upon each

member to learn how to work together, for the good of their respective teams and for the

fellowship program overall.

Commitment to the group. One area that several participants spoke about was the group

storytelling exercises (individual words only, then individual sentences only, then

extemporaneously speaking). Several spoke about their feeling of a commitment to the group in

terms of continuity and keeping the story going. Participant #3 described the feeling during the

extemporaneous story portion:

> I did like the part with the storytelling, the group storytelling . . . when one was to take
>
> over from another and get somebody out and take over for him because he thinks he's
>
> been telling too long. I think that was a good model for cooperation. . . . Just feeling that
>
> your colleague is there and he is getting too long and getting tired, or running out of

ideas, and it's time for you to step in and help him, stuff like that. And also the continuity

of, the idea behind it is that you need to continue on somebody else's work.

Participant #9 echoed a similar commitment to the group:

You feel that kind of camaraderie and responsibility to everyone else who is part of that

story to do your part. I found that really enjoyable actually. I think it, it's actually, I think,

a very cool way of building some level of team dynamics because you have to depend on

each other and you have to keep it going. You can't stop and say, "Oh, that's a stupid

idea, don't go that way." You just have to, "OK, here we go."

This observation by Participant #9 also demonstrated that this feeling of commitment to the

group to keep things going also forced participants to practice the concept of thinking-on-their-

feet (discussed in the previous section), saying whatever came out at that moment in order to

keep the story going for the benefit of the group. The alternative would have been to freeze-up

(mental roadblocks) and stop the exercise dead in its tracks, thus letting the group down.

Participant #1 also made a direct link between the storytelling exercises and their job of

working together toward developing something cohesive. When asked which exercises stood out

as having value and applicability, the Participant noted:

Well, the storytelling, and having to listen to people in order to make a coherent story.

And then also creating a creative, cohesive thing by telling a story. I appreciated that part

of it because it's kind of what we're about, is to create something cohesive.

Yes, and . . ., versus no. Another topic that came up repeatedly during the interviews was

the concept of being supportive of one another and of each individual's ideas during

brainstorming sessions. The participants discussed the value of saying "Yes, and . . ." to ideas,

versus "no" and the power that each statement had. They also tied these ideas back to the training sessions. For example, after the first training session, Participant #8 observed:

> One useful aspect of improv in business is to keep things going, don't put up a stop sign when someone is leading you down a path—like an improv situation and you just say, "No." Well then that kind of stops here—you just kind of have to keep pushing it along. We do that a lot in brainstorming as well, that an idea, no matter how crazy, or if you think it won't work, just keep helping that idea along and see where it goes.

After the second training session, Participant #8 reflected further on this individual's awareness and learning in this area:

> From the first session I think we talked about building on people's ideas and keeping kind of momentum going and not being critical of them until they've been kind of vetted a little bit or kind of build on them. That, I think, has been easier, and I'm getting better at that.

> During the third and final interview, Participant #10 discussed the value of "Yes, and . . ." to the group, and how they had begun using that concept to work more effectively together:

> In different discussions, somebody starts to get a little too negative on ideas when people are throwing ideas around, and somebody will speak up and say, "Yes, and . . .". I think part of the nice thing about the training is it gives you sort of a framework to address some of the negative things that affect brainstorming, and do it in a neutral way. Because everybody has had the training now, so you can say . . . so if somebody is being too down on something or too negative, you can say, "Well, Yes, and . . . ," and everybody understands that and it's not considered, like a harsh criticism, it's acceptable.

Also during the third round of interviews, Participant #9 discussed how not everyone in the group had necessarily yet embraced the "Yes, and . . ." mindset. The Participant described being part of a brainstorming session with a small group:

> We did have one other brainstorming session . . . so we were brainstorming, and another group member was like, "Yeah, let's just get some crazy ideas out there." And I was like, "Yeah, let's do it." So I was on the board and . . . so we started writing, and I wrote something down that was funny, and then a third group member was a little . . . we wrote something down and the third group member was a little like, "That can't happen." But then the first group member was like, "Yeah, I know, we're just getting crazy." I'm like, "Yeah, we're just trying to expand these, let's see where this goes." And it actually did end up going down, it went kind of a crazy route but then circled back to, "Oh, that actually brings us to an area that we hadn't been thinking about."

Participant #9 continued with this example, and reflected on the challenges with the team when not everyone in the group has adopted the improv mindset:

> If you have more people within a group that all bought into it [Yes, and . . .], then that makes sense. I could have been like, "Well this is like a 'Yes, and . . .' sort of opportunity," because I thought that as well, but since [the third group member] has not really bought into it then I didn't bring it up. But in my mind it just seems very clear to me that yeah, we went down . . . you know, [a weird new product idea], and then that led to X-Y-Z.

While Participant #9 did not label this situation specifically as a "Yes, and . . ." opportunity to the brainstorming group because of the perceived lack of acceptance of the concept by certain group members, the Participant stated that they were, nonetheless, able to eventually continue

down the path of some crazy ideas (as the Participant referred to them), which eventually did

lead to some potentially viable ideas, as indicated by the linking of idea X, to idea Y, then

finally, to idea Z.

Trust and the creation of safe spaces. At the onset of the improv sessions, this group

had only been together for some six to eight weeks, and most of that time had been spent in

lectures and other orientation-related activities. Therefore, they had not yet had the opportunity

to work together in a true creative and developmental capacity. The combination of improv

exercises, particularly those where participants were pushed to lower their roadblocks, and the

opportunity to begin to work more closely together in the discovery phase of their work, all

helped to strengthen their interpersonal bonds. Relating the value of the improv training to their

brainstorming activities, Participant #8 noted:

> Even if an idea that we're taking or working on doesn't go anywhere, it still kind of gives
>
> a comfortable safe environment to kind of speak freely, and I think that's another big
>
> component of it [the improv training].

When asked how that safe environment developed, the Participant stated "Well, mostly just the

not saying no. Because if you're saying no to someone's idea when you're brainstorming, people

also tend to take that as no to you, not just your idea." What Participant #8 was alluding to here

was that the improv training has helped the group not only to recognize when they are not being

supportive (by saying no), but also that the training process has helped to depersonalize feedback

within the group, particularly during idea generation sessions.

Participant #9 discussed how this feeling of a safe zone helped the Participant to learn to

push the boundaries of this individual's comfort zone:

I'm in, what feels like a safe group . . . for all of us to get comfortable with each other to

a deeper level—to the point where, for myself, trying to push my normal tendencies, take

a little more risk in putting things out there and seeing what comes from them.

Participant #6, even after Session #2, had a slightly different perspective on whether or

not a safe zone had yet truly been established within the group, and questioned how this gets

established within groups. The Participant believed that while this safe space could probably

develop organically over time, it might be more effective to have more overt experiences and

direction from their organization's leadership. This was a challenge however, as the client group

was, by design, self-directed, and therefore there was no one present day-to-day that served as

the formal group leader—someone who could help to establish or reinforce this mindset. This

quote from Participant #6 characterized the individual's feelings:

Somebody who is an authority [figure]. So when you're in a complete kind of peer

system, then it's really, having somebody who has the skills to create and name, like

when safe spaces are safe spaces, I think that's where you would actually see what a

really big impact of the philosophy of improv in a work environment.

The idea of a safe zone tied in closely for the participants with the concept of trust. Most

all of the participants spoke about the role that trust played within the group, and how that might

be developed through the use of improv. Several participants also noted that the improv exercises

"leveled the playing field," as they were all in it together. They felt that this contributed to both

the concept of a safe zone and to building of trust within the group. For example, Participant #2

stated:

So where does trust come from? Well if you look through these lists of these [improv

games], I'm going to just call them "silly games" for the moment. If you jump into the

middle when you have to announce yourself by saying . . . like doing a little pirouette and saying, "My name is [redacted]," and then the whole group does it, you feel like a complete idiot but then you get to look at the person to your left and go, "Ha-ha, you're next." You're all in it together, so it levels the playing field. I think by doing those exercises you build trust among the participants because you're embarrassed by doing these things and you're put on-the-spot and then all of a sudden you're kind of in this together.

The participant continued, and identified a direct link between the improv training, openness, trust, and their work:

You need to do some of these exercises just to loosen people up and to get them out of their comfort zone and to get them out of their shell, to trust one another, to have it OK that there is no wrong answer. I think that's another thing that these things [the exercises] show, that you go through a few of the exercises and you realize there is no wrong answer, why am I trying to be smart about it? And it just opens you up. So now all of a sudden you've created this environment, if you will, that's positive, that's got trust and now you really can do a facilitative brainstorm session that gets to the heart of what you want to get at—and I think it would be highly effective.

Participant #1 identified the trust aspects that this individual found were imbedded in the improv exercises:

These are the same people you're going to be working with, so there's the trust aspect of it—that I may say something stupid but they'll get over it and we're not going to humiliate each other. Do you know what I mean? So there's a trust aspect—you build some comfort in the people you're working with.

The Participant discussed further, how this aspect of trust was developed in and as a result of the improv sessions:

> I think we all have to be vulnerable and I think being vulnerable is hard for people, or it's hard for me. We're all forced to do it there [in the training sessions] and I think that is kind of a team building sort of thing.

> Finally, Participant #10 discussed the importance of trust in the work that they were

doing: "Trust is huge. I mean you can't innovate and come up with new ideas in an environment where you don't trust anybody else. Or at least you can't do it very effectively."

Common bonds and shared experiences. Perhaps a bit more nuanced examination of how the concepts of trust and safe spaces were developed by the group can be found by looking at the Participants' improv experiences at a more fundamental level. For example, Participant #8, after the first session, noted:

> I think one other kind of aspect that kind of helps within in the work is not just getting to know each other more intimately with those kinds of exercises, but just the act of doing something that neither of us have done before. Doing something novel together puts everyone on the same playing field.

Participant #8 also discussed the experiential nature of the training, and that that helped to bring people together in a unique way:

> If I do something novel, that kind of sticks in your memory. It kind of helps to enhance the camaraderie, kind of like how they say how close people get when they go into war together. It's a novel situation, it's very highly emotional and intense. This is a much lighter and way-diluted form of that, but the principle, I think is still there.

After the second session, Participant #8 commented further of the value of the training sessions:

I think the more significant impact has just been the camaraderie developed by going

through the [improv] experience together. Everyone was a little uncomfortable like we

mentioned last time, everyone is on the same level and just going through that together is

really . . . probably the biggest impact on. . . . It also acts as a catalyst when we're

working together, and helps develop a little more trust and comfort with each other.

The benefit of everyone having to go through the training together was reinforced by

Participant #9, who stated:

Most of us are introverts that were there, that's just kind of the nature of the ballgame,

and that's probably why we were there—that's part of it. So, what helps me as an

introvert is to see others who I know are similar to me in those traits, also going through

the same experience. So even if it is at times an uncomfortable or a little unsettling

experience, if you know your colleagues are going through the same thing, it just helps—

just helps you to stick with it and, "Oh, they're having to do it too, it's not just me." That

type of synergy between the participants was helpful. And it also, I think in retrospect,

was a learning experience about each other and a little bit of . . . it was part of our

formation. I think we got to learn a side of each of us that we hadn't necessarily seen yet

and it was a good vehicle to do that. Laughter is always a good thing.

Participant #9 continued, and summed up what several other participants also noted:

I think a lot of that is the shared experience. We went through a three-hour experience

that challenged all of us in subtle ways, different ways probably, but it's a shared

experience that we can all look back on and when you come out the other side, you do

have a sense of a little bit of bonding and a little more cohesiveness.

Participants continued to recognize and acknowledge the shared experiences of improv, including the impact on their relationships, and how they worked together. When discussing team dynamics just prior to the third training session, Participant #9 stated, "You get the huge step function after the first session, but there was continuing deepening of the relationships and understanding of each other in the second one. I anticipate that again for tomorrow."

These common bonds and shared experiences that the participants continued to refer to seemed to have begun to work their way into the mindsets of most of the participants in the group. While the participants could not oftentimes point to specific instances or examples of where they directly applied the improv exercises they experienced in class, several recalled that the improv mindset seemed to have begun to work its way into many of the group members' thinking. Participant #10 explained:

> Yeah, so I see it in that they learn sort of a common language and technique that they can bring back. They tend to have fun with it, you know, like even you did—you said, "Yes, and . . .." That's a piece that always comes back and they sort of latch on to . . . it gives them this inside joke to work with. It has the characteristic of like an inside joke, which is like a bonding thing, so it kind of brings the group back together whenever it's brought up. Even if they don't remember that experience directly, it's part of their shared culture . . . . And because of the shared training, the shared language, it is a polite way to do it [remind each other about negativity] and everybody inherently knows that we're all susceptible to that negativity and it's not something to be ashamed of, it's something to take note of.

While all members of the client group went through some or all of the training sessions, several participants interviewed indicated that not all members of the group embraced the improv

mindset. For these individuals, the participants noted that it was definitely harder to engage with these individuals in terms of outwardly utilizing the improv tools and approaches. For example, if these individuals did not find value in the training, then engaging them with a "Yes, and . . ." approach would not be an effective way to move that team forward. This issue will be discussed in further detail, below.

Individual Participant Learnings and Self-Reflection

The experiences identified in the preceding section had to do with how improv training helped the participants work better together at an interpersonal level. During the course of the interviews, the participants also identified a number of areas where the training resonated with them at an individual level, as well. They discussed how and where they heightened their awareness of behaviors they needed to work on, as well as things they discovered about themselves as the result of their self-reflection. This self-reflection and self-discovery became an important component of their learning that occurred as a result of the training. Following are several areas from the training that the participants identified as having affected them personally in some way.

Effective listening. A good number of the participants discussed how difficult they found the skill of listening effectively, as many of the exercises contained an active listening component. They noted how difficult active listening actually was, once they were put in a position where they had to practice it together as a part of the various exercises. They talked not only about how difficult it was to do during the exercises, but also how they valued the opportunity to practice it, as well as how they attempted to apply it, back at work. In addition to heightening the awareness of this important skill for the participants, individually, it also came to

light that the participants also began to notice that a number of their fellow group members needed to work on this skill while at work, as well. For example, Participant #8 noted,

> Yeah, a lot of the activities focused on active listening and that's something that I myself need to work on. And when I start to be more aware of it and interactions with the fellows, everyone else needs to work on it as well.

Participant #8 discussed further, the value derived from the other part of listening, which is reaction and feedback to what was said. The Participant noted that both the participant and other members of the group have this problem from time-to-time:

> So yeah, just being able to acknowledge that someone said something and that you processed and thought about what was said before moving on. And the activities that we did that day, they really forced you to do that. You had to really actively listen and react, whereas the first session was more generate ideas, building on each other and keep things going, keep the movement going. This [Session #2] was more reactive—when someone does something I need to react to it . . . . I've witnessed several times where me, myself, or someone else has mentioned something, and then other people just start talking and no one really . . . what happens is they say that same thing the next time it comes up and they say the same thing the next time it comes up. I do the same thing too. I retell it because I don't feel like anybody has heard it, and I want to see if that was value-added or if everyone just says, "Yes, we heard that, now let's move on." Until you have that acknowledgement and that someone processed it and gives you feedback on it, there's nothing you can really do with it.

This Participant was clearly able not only to establish a link between the listening/reaction exercises and their work, but also was able to identify specific applications where the

development of this skill was of value. By the time of the third interview, when asked how the practice of active listening was coming along, the Participant stated, "That's getting easier to do . . . I don't have to actively do it as much. I think it's been helpful."

When asked what Participant #10 was trying to work on from the improv sessions, the Participant had the following observations, including applications outside of the office:

Like in interactions in groups—like trying to listen more. I know, in the past, I've been much more trying to think what I'm going to say next and not really listening to what they're saying, and those things describe how I would interact in the past perfectly. And so, yeah, being much more open to what they're saying. Where I haven't been as good at applying it but . . . and I catch myself after making the mistakes, "Oh, I should have done it this way," was interactions at home with my [partner] and listening. Yeah, I've been really bad at it.

As with several other participants, Participant #9 observed how difficult active listening really was, once the group had to actually put it into practice during the session exercises:

I mean that's huge [listening]. You can't do any of those activities [the improv exercises] to any adequate level if you're not mentally listening and engaged. If you're distracted with other thoughts, it's going to be clearly evident in these types of activities. So, that was probably, if you think about it, it was probably the listening that was actually the most exhausting. You're focusing your attention to listen intently, trying to block everything else out. I have to listen to what [another participant] right next to me is saying because I'm following [the participant's] story, so you're just intently listening. It's exhausting.

Participant #9 continued:

It falls into that "the more you practice it the more engrained it can become." Having the

intensity of focus that these situations provided is not necessarily something that you

have often, so it's good to connect with what that feels like, to recognize what true

listening and concentration really is.

The comment that follows from Participant #1 was characteristic of many of the other

participants: "I'm definitely more consciously thinking about, when other team members are

talking, listening to what they're saying and then, so yeah, I more consciously have been trying

to do that."

Intense concentration: Being in the moment. One of the major tenets of improvisation,

as discussed in Chapter 2, was the intense focus and concentration that is needed to effectively

execute an improv performance or exercise. This was referred to specifically as "being in-the-

moment;" that is, thinking of nothing else but what is happening right then. The facilitators of the

improv sessions therefore, designed a number of exercises for the participants in order to

demonstrate what this intensity of concentration actually felt like in practice. In particular, the

application of this skill arose during the group exercises, where the participants did not know

when next they were going to be called upon, especially if they had to continue the exercise

where the previous person had left off (group storytelling, for example). Other examples were in

the group warm-up games, where the activity moved very rapidly around the circle, in a purely

random fashion. Participant #1's comments described what several participants noted, generally.

Regarding the warm-up exercises, Participant #1 commented:

Those are more like "being in the moment" sort of things—like if you're not fully

concentrating, it's totally going to blow up. I think our group did a really good job with

those. Those are intense, you're exhausted by the time you get done with those. You're

trying to pull in all these cues.

When I noted to the participant that others had also characterized some of the exercises as

exhausting, the Participant commented on what that individual was feeling: "Yeah, and it's just

because you really have to be . . . all your senses kind of going at once when you're looking for

non-verbal cues and all this stuff." When I followed up with the Participant, inquiring if the

individual saw application of this skill at work, the Participant replied,

I think so. Because being present when you're in a meeting, not having your mind . . . we

all have a tendency to start drifting and so just trying to pull it back to the moment . . . .

These sessions have definitely made me more aware—just being at that moment,

listening to the person. I still drift off, but it's that awareness of that, and pulling it back.

The Participant also recognized that a part of this intensity of concentration was also in paying

attention to the non-verbal cues around the room:

Yeah, so I think the knowledge of that and engaging . . . I think some of these [exercises]

help engage with all your senses and the people around you too, not just listening but the

non-verbal stuff too. Especially with that synchronized clapping [warm-up game]—you

have to do that. And how we know who is clapping . . . sometimes you get confused,

right? But it's like all these sort of looking at you to leaning in towards you and things

like that. So I think that helps with the non-verbal stuff and being present.

Experiential nature of the training. A key aspect of this research study was to attempt

to ascertain the impact of experiential training on participant learning. Several participants

commented throughout the interviews as to the value they found in experiencing the concepts

rather than just reading about them or having them spelled out in a lecture. They found great

value in feeling what the concept felt like to actually execute, and they recognized the importance not only of actually practicing the skill, but also practicing it with their co-workers. Participant #8 explained:

> I was aware of that kind of aspect and the importance that improv has in that—in not saying no, but actually doing it, and with a group of people that I will be working with doing that, that kind of makes everyone else aware of that, and I was . . . it's different reading it than doing it. So you read it and go, "Yeah, I should do that," but when you actually do it then you realize I don't do it as well as I . . . I'm not practicing what I preach I guess. It was more of a . . . it wasn't so much being aware of that, as it was seeing how I actually execute that. I saw that that was something I needed to work on.

This Participant clearly recognized the gap that existed between that individual's perceived level of the skill and the actual execution of that skill in practice. For this individual, that was a breakthrough learning moment.

After the second session, Participant #2 reflected on the value of learning from experience:

> So another thing I think, is that physically you need to do some of these exercises; it's not just a theoretical paper argument. You can read through this whole list [of exercises] of doing this, and you could understand it intellectually, why you would do it and all this stuff, but you actually have to do it.

Participant #2 continued, discussing the value in applying experiential learning to the job:

> The experience of the learning really puts it in place that you . . . the why. I can free flow easier now that I've actually practiced it. I can reduce those mental hurdles and it makes me feel more comfortable with my co-workers.

Relative to individuals' overall self-reflections on these training sessions, Participant #2 had clearly given a great deal of thought about the overall improv training and its application to work. After the second session, the Participant came to the interview prepared with a list of four key elements of the training that this individual had developed, and felt were integral to successful application of the material, on-the-job. The four items were: (1) "reduce the mental fences," (2) "allow for a free flow" of ideas, or "mental calisthenics," (3) "you must trust everyone in the room," and (4) create "a positive environment." This improv material clearly had resonated with this individual, who had put a great deal of thought into not only the purpose of the exercises, but also into how to apply these principles at work, and why they were important to moving the group forward. The common theme that ran through all four of these ideas was to create a safe, positive environment, where people can trust one another. This environment could then lead to the lowering of roadblocks, which could then create an environment that fosters greater creativity and free thinking. The individual noted, for example, that if there were power differentials in the room during a brainstorming session (and where trust was not present), this could severely inhibit the free expression of ideas, due to the risk of looking stupid to the boss, not to mention the possible consequences of the actions.

Improv Training is Not for Everyone

Something that became evident during the interviews was the fact that, according to the participants, not everyone in the client group embraced the improv concept as a training and development tool. This training method was a very specific and stylized type of training, and it perhaps could not be expected that every person would respond to it in an enthusiastic, positive fashion. During the course of the interviews, a number of participants noted that they believed that some group members (that did not participate in the study) did not find value in the training

and therefore did not fully embrace the spirit of this particular training methodology while on-the-job. Being careful not to breach the confidentiality of anyone involved with this study, the participants noted the negative effects that this had at times, on the energy during the sessions. The participants that spoke to me about this issue also noted that because of this mindset, it oftentimes made it difficult to utilize directly the improv techniques when back at work. In other words, not everyone was on-board with this training method.

These observations from the participants raised the issue more generally, in terms of how organizations, leaders, facilitators, and OD professionals might address the fact that some individuals or groups might, for whatever reason, not be willing to embrace this type of experiential training. Further thoughts and discussion on this, in a broader context (not related to this specific group), are presented in Chapter 5.

Sustainability of the Training and the Need for Reinforcement Opportunities

Throughout the interview process, I became concerned about the fact that most (if not all) of the participants could not recall, unaided, many of the specific activities that they had done during the sessions. Once I reviewed with them the listings of activities, they were all able to recall a good amount of the sessions' details, which has provided the basis for this chapter. That said, it did raise a question for me, which I pursued with the participants during the interviews. My internal question was related to the sustainability of this training after the study was complete. That is, if the participants were unable to recall, without help, the activities they undertook during the sessions, were they going to be able to truly apply and sustain this training tools and concepts subsequent to the study, in the long-run? When I discussed this aspect of their experience with them, the comments that surfaced identified several issues, including: (a) identification of links between the training exercises and their application at work, (b) the

sustainability of the training over the long-term, (c) the role of leadership in helping to sustain

the application of the training tools and mindset, and (d) the need for reinforcement opportunities

subsequent to the training. Again, once the participants were shown the list of exercises from the

previous session, they had no problem in recalling their experience for this study. However, they

did identify these several key areas below, that they believed would potentially impact the

continued application and usefulness of their training experience over time.

Identifying the links between training and application. A concern that surfaced from

nearly all the participants at one time or another throughout the interviews related to their ability

(or inability) to identify or establish clear linkages between the purpose of an exercise and how

the skills represented by that exercise might be applied to their work. The participants were

clearly able to identify a number of useful skills and concepts that they were able to take away

from the sessions, particularly in the individual learnings, as described in the previous sections.

A number of these skills had to do with self-development—items such as enhanced listening

skills, or the lowering of mental roadblocks. Also as noted above, some groups, for example,

even began to implement some of the warm-up exercises into their brainstorming routines. What

seemed less clear to the participants however, was how to actually apply the skills to their work,

in a purposeful, practical, and consistent way. While they clearly found value in the exercises,

the participants felt that they were oftentimes left to identify the specific application links for

themselves.

From the facilitators' standpoint, they did not, in fact, typically introduce each game or

exercise with a formal "purpose" statement such as "here is what we hope to get from this

exercise." Rather, they typically just set the exercise up and got people going. At the conclusion

of most exercises, the facilitators did however, make a point to debrief with the group as to what

they had just experienced. That said, participants felt that the debrief conversations were sometimes more about what they had experienced and how they felt about it, rather than, "Ok, how could you actually apply this in your day-to-day jobs." Again, I am not suggesting that the participants did not find value in the sessions, nor that they did not learn anything from them. Rather, from their comments, there appeared however, to be a gap in some cases between the acquisition of the skills and their possible application. All participants stated very unequivocally that they very much enjoyed the sessions, and each one was able to talk in detail about a number of things that they learned over the course of the three sessions. It seemed as though the participants were saying "OK, we have all these new skills and tools, so now what do we do with them?"

Some comments related to this issue included, for example, this observation from Participant #8 after the second training session:

> So maybe a little clarity there for the sessions would be kind of helpful—to say how this translates into something that you would do in the office every day. And that was done a little bit, but maybe there would be a better way to kind of hit that home a little more . . . . I guess stories really help in that regard. If they could tell a story about being in the office where that would happen, an example. Because it's very general to say, "And that was about active listening, so be an active listener."

After the first session, Participant #7 explained:

> I think one thing that will probably help is if going into it there's clear cut goals or objectives for that session. So like, "These are the exercises that we're going to do," and I don't remember there being any—maybe I just didn't get them. I'm not sure, but if it says, "We're going to be doing these exercises and this is why we're doing them, this is

what we hope you accomplish or take away from it. And, between sessions, these are things you should think about and how to incorporate them into your life." . . . So that's . . . that would probably help me. I remember the actual exercises—we got up and had to say stuff about each other that was in common and something different, we had to brainstorm movie titles down the line and stuff, we had to try to throw a ball and stuff. So, I remember all those things, but then I don't recall a specific objective for each task. We kind of talked about it and about how we felt when we were doing it and what we noticed, what we observed, but never did we say, "Well this is why we do this and this is what you should take away from it." It wasn't just laid out. I think that helps to frame the exercise. So maybe that's why I don't quite . . . it didn't quite stick with me.

Participant #3 had a different experience. When asked about the adequacy of the linking of the material to their work, the Participant stated, "I feel I can do that on my own….I think the way they explained it was good enough."

Participant #2 articulated why this individual felt that a clarity of purpose, identified up-front, is so important to the process:

I think you also have to tell them [the participants] why you're doing this stuff. If you were to start with a cohort of people and you just brought them into a room, like the first time we did it—we didn't all know why we were there, what we were going to do and all this. I think that was a miss on their part. I think they should have been deliberate and told us, "We're going to do some silly exercises because you need to level the playing field, camaraderie, and develop a trust amongst you, and break down some barriers that we have as professional people. We need to get past that so we can get creative."

The Participant continued:

> Maybe they just wanted us to discover it [the links] on our own, because it would sit in further. Perhaps, but I don't think you can . . . that's so important to do this, I think, that you shouldn't depend on chance that it's going to happen. I think you have to be deliberate . . . . I think that if you came in and said we were going to do games and you weren't deliberate about the why, so you were relying on the way they [the facilitators] did it in the first place and they kind of left it open for us to figure it out, I don't think everybody is going to get it. I don't know, I consider myself fairly well with it from an intellectual perspective, and it took me a while to figure out the front end of it . . . . So if it takes . . . some people won't get it, and they will shut down because they don't get it. They'll be like, "This is just games, why are we . . .?", and then you have lost them. That's why I think if you're deliberate about it, you could potentially gain them and say, "OK, I'll go with you for a little while and see how this works."

In certain areas however, this Participant was able to draw very specific links from the exercises to their group's work. For example, regarding a storytelling exercise where the participants were asked to create a children's story on-the-spot, using three picture cards as their inspiration, this same Participant noted:

> Yeah, because the stories are just . . . I mean the pictures are just constraints, right? We always have constraints in [our field]. Those are what we call product specs, or marketing specs. So those are the constraints. So if you put those on your picture cards and now say, "Ideate within this space," it's not that different.

So again, it is not that the participants did not find value in the training, nor were they not able to make any links at all. They did feel however, that more overt and consistent linkages throughout

the sessions would have been beneficial. Participant #6 added an additional perspective to the issue regarding structured training, versus unstructured application environments:

> I think, again, without somebody really specifically tying it into, and making the connections between the work that we're doing and the process that we're coming up with and the innovation thing, I think it's a weak connection . . . . And then . . . yeah, it's hard too, because this stuff [the improv training], again it's really highly facilitated, where until you see that the group dynamic works, even though it's really creative, it's highly structured. So when we're in this environment that's very unstructured . . . and you're just kind of like, "OK, how should we approach these, guys?"

Participant #4 described this individual's perception of how the exercises were set-up. The Participant noted two different ways the facilitators could have approached the framing of the exercises: "Here's what we're going to do and here's why. Or, we'll get to the why later, for now let's just do this exercise. And that's more what we've been doing." Then, regarding the debrief, the Participant recalled, "Right after you do the exercise, they ask you, 'Well what do you think of that?'. And then after that you get a bunch of leading questions, 'Did you find that you felt uncomfortable?'." This Participant clearly felt that the links between the development of the skills and their subsequent application at work had not been established.

> Participant #5 saw the purpose of the training perhaps in a bit of a different light:
> It's more an attitude that they're teaching and sort of that side of things. I don't know, that's my opinion on it. It wasn't like any of the activities we did there taught us how to do a brainstorming session or how to create ideas or things like that. It more taught us about how to have the right attitude and mindset and communication skills and sort of all of those basic skills that we need as individuals in order to thrive in that environment.

Participant #5 continued, concerned that there was not a more defined plan to link specific skills (versus just an attitude, per the previous quote) and specific, direct application to their work:

> I think the best way to ensure sustainability in the long run is to have sustainability in the short run first, to have people walk away from it [the training session] and immediately see some value, have some sort of plan.

Lack of internal leadership. The group that was selected for this case study had a very specific and unique operating structure and purpose. A key component of this structure, as well as a stated goal of the program as discussed by the program director at the beginning of this chapter, was the program's desire to develop leaders, and to have this development evolve as a process of self-discovery. As a result, there was a purposeful "hands-off" approach taken by the program's leadership relative to the day-to-day management and direction of the group, in an attempt to attain the goals of the program. The program wanted the group to be self-directed, and for the group members to figure out what this meant, on their own.

This structure, and the related program goals, became very evident in many of the comments by the participants regarding the application and sustainability of the improv concepts within their group. The sentiment was nearly overwhelming as to the need for an internal "champion" as they called it—someone in a leadership position that could serve to encourage, support, and direct the group toward the adoption and application of the improv concepts in their culture and day-to-day work. As this group was designed to be self-directed in their work, without a clear leadership figure sheparding this improv mindset and helping to infuse it into the culture of the group, the application and sustainability of the training was left solely to the individual group members, as well as to the group, collectively. This lack of formally-defined leadership, combined with the fact that several of the participants were having some difficulties

in establishing clear links between the training and its application (as discussed in the previous section), led to the following types of comments, below.

Participant #6 reflected on the sustainability of the training relative to the leadership issues, as follows:

It really comes down to the leadership and that you have to have leadership who is pulling it [the improv mindset] into the organization. So where you just do this as a group and, "Oh that's fun, that's cool." But if you want to bring it into the day-to-day work process, I think I mentioned that before—this, "Yes, and . . ." thing, we can do that as a group, we can kind of cue in, "Yes, and . . .", but if you really have a leader who is doing that intentionally, that's how you can really build that link . . . . I would say that maybe things develop organically to that safe space . . . . So when you're in a complete kind of peer system, then it's really . . . having somebody who has the skills to create and name, like when safe spaces are safe spaces, I think that's where you would actually see what a really big impact of the philosophy of improv in a work environment. You basically need to have . . . maybe it's more like managers or somebody who has that with a team who can come in and effectively set up and build that safe space and then you give the people the language and the tools to actually participate in that space.

The point that this Participant was making, which was echoed by others, was that it was more difficult to infuse the improv mindset into the fabric of the group when the infusion was dependent on the individual members of the group attempting to apply and sustain it, versus having it being supported by a formal group leader.

Another comment that surfaced related to the challenges surrounding the lack of formal leadership, was that, as noted earlier, not all members of the group supported the improv training

approach. This made the explicit use of the improv approach difficult to bring up at the group level, by other group members, as there was not one hundred percent buy-in; something that a more formal leadership structure might have been able to better navigate.

Sustainability and reinforcement. When the subject of sustainability came up during the interviews, most participants did not feel that the training skills and concepts were sustainable in the long-term without some type of subsequent intervention, due primarily to the reasons listed earlier in this section. Again, while all of the participants found value in the training, particularly at the individual level, combined with the fact that they were actually applying the concepts sporadically within their smaller research teams, the participants felt that there was just not enough of a direct linkage between the material and their work to be able to infuse and sustain the improv mindset and tools into their day-to-day work over the long-run. This is not to say that they did not wish to sustain it. Rather, it was just that there were few mechanisms in place in order to facilitate the sustainability of the training, particularly without a formal leader in place to serve as a champion of the mindset.

Given this acknowledgement by the participants relative to their belief regarding the lack of sustainability of the training, combined with the fact that they really did enjoy the training and found value in it, they identified a number of follow-up and reinforcement opportunities that could be undertaken in order to continue to build upon the foundations that were lain during the training sessions. The ideas ranged from a more purposeful attempt on the part of the group members to solidify this approach among themselves regarding the way they work together, to more formal, targeted and regular interventions on the part of the facilitator group. Following were a few of the suggestions the participants identified that they felt would help to reinforce, and thus sustain, the initial training sessions over a longer period of time.

***Additional facilitator-led brainstorming sessions*.** By far the suggestion that the greatest

number of participants identified was to bring the facilitators back in some capacity to either lead

or assist with brainstorming and creativity projects that the participants were actually working

on. A part of the critique with the sessions, as noted above, was that the participants felt that

there was not enough of a direct, specific linking of the training concepts to their work. During

the interviews, the participants believed that bringing back the facilitators for additional sessions,

at the participants' workplace, would provide the participants with the opportunity to refresh the

skills they had learned previously, to put the training into practice, and to reignite the energy and

the feeling of spontaneity that was present during the sessions. The participants also felt that this

type of activity would help them to observe, first-hand, how to apply the training concepts to

their specific environment and projects. They also believed that by experiencing this type of

session or sessions in their offices, in their specific context, it would really help to sustain this

training on a longer-term basis, as they would be able observe directly, the linkage of the

material to what they do, and how the tools can be applied to their specific situation. Remember

that the participants' attitude was, "OK, we have all these new skills and tools. So now, what do

we do with them?"

Six of the ten participants spoke specifically to the value of this idea of bringing the

facilitators back for additional sessions. Following were a sampling of their thoughts. Participant

#10 identified the potential value of bringing the facilitators back to work with the group in their

offices:

It might be interesting to have one of the facilitators come in and facilitate a

brainstorming session on one of their projects. The [brainstorming] example that we did

in the last session was really good, but I always think that when the example is in the

subject matter that you're actually working on, it hits home a lot more. So doing a few sessions maybe that they come and facilitate, and maybe even give some analysis and critique about how it went at the end of that brainstorming session. So then it sort of connects the training to their space and their activities here a little bit more, and then it might help it sink in that much deeper into what they do for the rest of the year.

Participant #5 noted the value of the facilitators' energy, and also of just having them present, again, to assist with topics related to projects on which the group was actually working:

Bringing one or both of them here and doing a brainstorming session on our turf, on our sorts of things, and just . . . really having them there in that sort of interaction, just the energy and communication just gets that all flowing, which is the first thing you need to have the creative juices flowing.

Participant #6 even took this idea one step further:

Like one of the things I kind of thought of leaving the workshop [session] was, it would be fun to bring them here, especially on a Friday afternoon or something, and like take . . . . , because we have a ton of ideas and stuff and problems that are kind of on the back burner—not interesting enough, and we've talked about doing this, early on, we were actually doing this, was to taking a day, like a Friday, and just working on . . . like one of the projects that we had picked up in the (inaudible), and so I think that would be fun.

The participants had clearly given some thought to ways to continue to advance the improv training ideas that were introduced in the sessions, which indicates that the training did, in fact, resonate with them. Of the six participants that discussed this option specifically, all six were very enthusiastic about the potential opportunity to do further work with the facilitators.

***Additional facilitator-led general sessions*.** Similar to the suggestions in the previous section, the participants also suggested bringing the facilitators back, into their workplace this time, for more general improv sessions that would be similar in format and structure to the initial round of sessions. The difference between this and the previous suggestion was that, instead of focusing on brainstorming facilitation specifically, these sessions would serve simply as refreshers, allowing the group members to gain additional experience, to loosen everyone up, and to have some fun together. In fact, the participants even suggested that this type of session could be scheduled on a regular, recurring basis. Participant #10 noted the social value of additional sessions:

Of course, practicing it helps, so periodically getting forced to do these things gets them to practice it whether they spontaneously do it on their own or not. I think the other great aspect of maybe doing some other sessions later on would be the social aspect, just sort of doing something fun together that's not related to a project or to work or something like that. Maybe attaching it to even like . . . let's do this two-hour session and then let's all go out and grab beers after, that sort of thing would be really important, really helpful for a group like this.

Participant #9 felt additional sessions would help to keep the tools fresh:

Yeah, to get us back to where we were. There's always . . . you forget it as time goes on, but then if we just continually get jumped and back up to that level, I think the more you can stay at that engaged, conscious level with this stuff, the more it will start seeping into the bones and stuff like that.

At the conclusion of the final training session, Participant #9 lamented,

I know for myself it was . . . it was bittersweet having the ending—like, "Ahhh, shoot,

this is our last time, it would be fun to keep doing this every couple of months until our

fellowship is done."

Participant #1 also believed there would be value in having additional refresher sessions.

The participant suggested:

Periodic workshops, quarterly or something, would make sense…just to force you to . . .

similar to the ones we've done. I think doing more frequently may have diminishing

returns just because kind of what we said, as a group you're already doing these things.

But I think over a longer period of time, every once in a while, it would be valuable just

to kind of reinforce things that may have atrophied or whatever.

Other reinforcement ideas. Two other suggestions surfaced during the interviews that the

participants believed would help to sustain and reinforce the initial training sessions. Participant

#4, in deference to those within the group that did not necessarily embrace this type of training,

suggested the possible formation of an informal improv-type group within their team. This way,

only those that enjoyed that type of material and that wanted to continue it could get together,

say once a week over lunch, to practice these skills, and maybe even have a performance for the

team every once in a while.

The other suggestion for sustaining and reinforcing this improv training material came

from Participant #5, who suggested that perhaps one of their own team members could step up

and assume a leadership role within the group in order to advance these training concepts in a

more purposeful manner. The Participant noted, "And so it's not that you need someone to be an

advisor [facilitator]. You just need someone to be that energy source initially to jump start and

get everything going again."

Interestingly, both of these latter two suggestions did not involve any outside intervention, but rather were based on the team members themselves initiating the reinforcement activities which interestingly, is consistent with one of the program director's overall goals for the fellowship program. Whatever the option, it was clear that the participants were all very interested in some form of follow-up sessions or activities, not only to refresh the skills and to learn new techniques, but also to continue to build the bonds of the team and, as Improv Rule #10 from Chapter 2 stated: "have fun!"

Summary

Throughout the interviews, all participants indicated that they enjoyed the training and that they had fun during the sessions. They were all also able to identify areas where they learned something or found value in the training, whether it was individually-based skills such as enhanced listening skills, or pushing their personal comfort zones, to more team-based concepts such as building stronger bonds among the group members. Many of the participants were also able to point to areas where the training heightened their awareness to their own individual behaviors; behaviors that had potential negative impacts on the group's effectiveness, such as dismissing another's ideas during brainstorming for example, by saying no, rather than "Yes… and."

What was less clear to the participants in many cases was the direct establishment of links between these generalized skills and how the skills could have been applied to the participants' daily work. While the facilitators undertook debrief discussions after many of the exercises, the participants felt that in many cases, they still lacked a clear understanding of how to apply the training concepts to their day-to-day work. The facilitators were not, in fact, explicit in all cases as to "here is what we did, and here is how to apply it to your jobs," and some

participants felt that this actually did need to be more clearly articulated to the group. I believe that in some cases, the facilitators hoped that the individuals would have discovered those links themselves through the debriefs or self-reflection. However, as Participant #2 noted regarding the facilitators being deliberate (or explicit) about the purpose of the exercises, both before and after completion of the activity: "that's so important to do this, I think, that you shouldn't depend on chance that it's going to happen."

While the participants did identify perceived gaps between the development of certain skills and their ability to apply those skills back at work, they also were able to recommend ways that their organization, the facilitators, and even the individual members of their group themselves could work to enhance and heighten the application of the session materials. These activities included, for example, holding additional, more targeted training sessions, on a more regular basis. This would serve to help reinforce, and thus sustain, the initial learnings, infusing the improv mindset more consistently into their day-to-day operations. A strong majority of the participants were in favor of some type of continued training. It should be noted however, that these findings also uncovered the fact that that not all members of the client group were in support of this method of training and development. Since these group members were not participants in the study for interview purposes, direct data from these members were not collected.

Finally, Participant #9 was able to make a direct and poignant connection between the storytelling exercises from the sessions, and the work that they do each day. The Participant summed up this link as:

Everybody is a storyteller, everything is a story. The needs that we're tasked to find are really . . . we have to uncover the stories and we have to be able to adequately tell those stories to get others excited about them.

Clearly, in this particular case, an effective link was, in fact, established between the session material and the Participants' work.

Chapter 5

Analysis, Discussion, and Conclusions

This study provided me with the opportunity to look deeply into the experiences, thoughts, and reactions of a group of individuals that went through a multi-session experiential improvisational training workshop together. This training was proposed by their organization as a way to serve as both an individual and group learning and development vehicle. The material in this chapter is based on my synthesis of all of the relevant data collected as documented in Chapter 4, combined with my own personal knowledge, background and experience in this field, as well as my perceptions, observations, and interpretations of the study itself (those not necessarily reported directly by the study's participants).

It should be noted that as the case unit in this study (the client group) possessed certain structural characteristics that were unique to this specific group (characteristics such as the limited lifespan of the client's project, the desire for members' individual leadership development, and the self-governing nature of the group), as compared to more traditional corporate operations, my analysis and conclusions in this chapter will address not only this case group, but also, in some cases, may look at the possible broader ramifications of the findings outside of this case's boundaries. Clearly, these ramifications will not be statistically-generalizable, nor would I characterize them as such. However, in some areas my analysis and conclusions may include things that readers might wish to consider as they think about this material in a broader setting, outside of this particular case unit. This is consistent with what Stake (1995) referred to as naturalistic generalizations, or those that modify or enhance pre-existing generalizations gained from one's own experiences (p. 85). This is in contrast to the creation of new generalizations based on the study's data and findings.

Identification and Discussion of Key Themes

During the course of the study five key themes emerged from the data and findings as documented in Chapter 4. These themes are analyzed and discussed in detail, below.

Theme one: Types and extent of participant learning. At its foundation, this study was focused on the concept of employee learning and development, at both the individual and interpersonal (or group) levels. Prior to commencement of the study, the client group had engaged the facilitator group to provide a training program specifically with the goals of heightening the client group members' creative abilities and processes, and enhancing the group's interpersonal interaction skills, all in order to create a more effective working environment. The client group hoped that the group members would gain additional skills and knowledge (that is, learning) in these areas. My research question centered on gaining an understanding of the experiences of the participants as they engaged in this arts-based, experiential learning curriculum, within the context of working toward attaining the client group's learning outcomes. Implicit in my research question was whether or not, at what levels, and under what conditions, individual participants perceived that learning had occurred, at both the individual and group levels, as a result of the training. The concept of learning did, in fact, become the most significant and common theme that arose from this study.

Individual participant learnings. I believe that significant learning occurred at the individual level for most of the participants. While the participants discussed varying levels and types of learning that they felt occurred within themselves throughout the period of the study, most nonetheless described significant and meaningful takeaways from the overall experience. These individual takeaways included the concepts of the identification and addressing of mental roadblocks and self-imposed filters; being "in-the-moment," including enhanced listening, focus,

and concentration skills; and a willingness to step out of their comfort zones to take chances that involved risks that they perceived could possibly jeopardize their social or professional standing within the group. The participants also found ways to incorporate their learnings into other aspects of their lives, outside of the work environment.

Mental roadblocks and filters. By its very nature, the art of improvisation involves the creation of something new, from scratch, on-the-spot, whether that creation is an instrumental jazz solo, a theatrical comedy scene, or even an excuse for one's boss as to why one's report was late. When creating something on-the-spot, the implication is that the creation is immediate, drawing on an instantaneous, top-of-mind, freely associated thought or idea. Therefore, being able to generate a free-flowing stream of unfiltered, creative ideas in response to the stimuli is essential to any form of effective improvisation.

The participants in this study consistently acknowledged the presence of mental walls, or roadblocks, that they possessed that prevented them from fully exploring potential spontaneous ideas. This manifested itself in the form of both freezing up (mental roadblocks), and also in personal filtering of ideas (for example, "should I say this, or not?"). Because of participants' perceived expectations of the group to be funny, or to be "appropriate" in some way with their responses, they oftentimes filtered ideas that were, in fact, on the tips of their tongues. These hesitations were clearly evident while observing the sessions, and are very common in those participating in improvisational exercises and performances.

Awareness and acknowledgement of these roadblocks and filters are the first steps in overcoming these issues. As one becomes aware that this phenomenon is occurring within oneself, one can consciously work to respond differently. One must however, give oneself permission to overcome long-held notions of "thinking before you speak." To do this, in effect,

involves saying, literally, the first thing that comes to one's mind. It is very much a free-association type of mentality, and there are any number of exercises that can help individuals to work on this skill. Once brought to their attention, the participants in this study began to recognize and acknowledge these mental roadblocks, and found that as they worked on minimizing the mental pre-processing of ideas, they could improve this skill, particularly in the filtering of ideas, which is consciously self-imposed. Once participants stopped trying to say the "right" thing, or the funniest thing, they found that this free-flow of (oftentimes random) ideas, became easier. So this heightened spontaneity of thoughts and ideas is definitely a skill that can be worked on at the individual level, and significant progress, over time, can be made. The more one is able to reduce these roadblocks and filters, the greater the potential exists to generate or create an idea that could potentially lead to the solving of a problem, or the creation of something significant that did not previously exist. These mental constraints that individuals place upon themselves serve only to limit the extraordinary potential of the human imagination, and where that imagination may lead.

Being in-the-moment. Another significant learning at the individual level that participants identified was related to the extremely heightened level of concentration and focus that the exercises taught them. A traditional corporate speaker could stand in front of a group and tell the group how important it is to focus at work, or to listen more intently in meetings. However, once one is given the opportunity to actually experience that increased level of focus, concentration, and listening, the meaning of the message becomes more real—more applicable, as the individual has actually felt what that intensity feels like, through experience. And with that experience, an association is then made between the feeling and the activity that created that feeling. The value of experientially-based training such as improv is that the experiential nature

of the activity allows participants to practice the techniques, and to actually feel and experience what it takes to reach that heightened level of concentration takes on their part. In fact, more than one participant characterized this component of the training as "exhausting." Once participants have this experiential and emotional feeling embedded within their memories, it should be easier for them to recall and thus recreate that feeling and intensity in work-based situations. Several of the participants did in fact report that exact application, at the individual level, when back at the office—that they were listening more critically, and focusing on the messages and ideas of others, rather than attempting to formulate their own responses while others were talking. This concept of being in-the-moment is, in fact, one of the core tenets of improv as outlined in Chapter 2—Improv Rule #7: "Be in the moment." Once participants are made aware of this concept, and have had the opportunity to actually experience the feeling first-hand through experience-based training, it becomes much easier for the individual to recall, and thus begin to practice it in real-world situations at work and elsewhere.

The concept of being in-the-moment, including these intense (sometimes exhausting) levels of concentration as reported by the participants, is also consistent with the concept of flow, as discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2. Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2003) characterized flow as the body and mind working together in harmony with one another, being totally absorbed in an activity. It is as if the individual has the ability to just tune-out everything around him or herself, and become one with the activity. Barrett (1998) alluded to the jazz musician who is so caught up in the moment that the individual is "not consciously thinking, reflecting, or deciding on what notes to play" (p. 614). With work and practice, the experiences in theatrical improv can, without question, also reach this heightened level of concentration and focus—and this is what the participants in this study were beginning to work toward.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 2003) also noted that this concept of flow can work not only at the individual level, but also among group members. So, while the participants in this study appeared to be moving in the direction of finding flow (or at least the awareness of it) within themselves, they did not report nor did it appear that they had necessarily found that same symbiotic body and mind relationship when working with the others in their group; that is, a symbiotic bond among the participants. This would be akin to the jazz metaphor as discussed by Barrett (1998), where jazz soloists all "find a groove" together—they are all playing as if one instrument. In improv, that mode of being comes when two or more participants are in a zone, together, and nothing else in the world matters at that moment but the others in the group. From this experience, it would be the goal then that the participants could, with practice and commitment, translate that feeling of oneness to their work together back at the office. This could manifest itself in a brainstorming session, for example, where all of the group members are firmly committed to working together, respecting one another, and creating an environment of support and trust; where the group begins to function as the improvisational jazz musicians do when they are all "in the groove," with a seemingly spontaneous, free-flowing stream of consciousness and ideas.

Comfort zone. Another key learning at the individual level occurred relative to the participants' willingness to take chances with their own actions and responses—to step out of their comfort zones. Significant learning and growth has the opportunity to occur as individuals make the decision to step out of their normal routines and try something new, something different, something perceived as more risky, that perhaps even makes them uncomfortable. This discomfort is due, in large part, to the unknown nature of the activity and its potential for negative outcomes. Or perhaps, the individual had a previous bad experience in a similar

situation, which may be painfully etched in the individual's brain. Yet if individuals are able to

find a way to push themselves through this initial discomfort, in situations where the benefits

may outweigh the risks, or where one is reasonably assured of a "safe space" in which to

experiment, the individual has the opportunity to experience something new, and thus to learn,

grow, and expand one's horizons. I myself oftentimes wrestle with this issue, and as I push

myself past my comfort zone, more often than not I am pleasantly surprised by the outcome of

what lies on the other side.

Barrett (1998) discussed improvisational jazz musicians getting to too comfortable with

their playing, falling back on pre-established routines rather than taking risks and trying new

ways of interpreting the music, on-the-spot. This may be the case for many individuals generally,

in that they get comfortable with the way things are, and oftentimes therefore do not wish to

disrupt that status-quo that has been established, and which serves as a protection mechanism.

Unfortunately, while stepping out of one's comfort zone does serve to minimize disruptions in

one's life and preserve the status-quo, it also sets the individual up for a series of potential

missed opportunities—opportunities to try new things, to see the world through a different lens,

and thus, to learn and grow. Minahan and Conbere (2011) referred to this area immediately

outside of one's comfort zone as the "learning zone," and that is exactly what has the potential to

happen if one is brave enough to take that step that pushes one past the point of safety—into that

world of the unknown. However, in order for this approach to be an effective learning tool, an

environment must be established so that the individual does not move from the learning zone

into what Minahan and Conbere referred to as the panic zone. Here, as its name implies, learning

ceases, as the individual feels a complete loss of control and perceives a significant threat to him

or herself, in some fashion, be it physical, emotional, psychological, or social.

Consistent with ELT theory (Kolb, 1984, Kolb & Kolb, 2005), as individuals have the opportunity to participate in a new experience, these individuals will then reflect upon, and then intellectually process the experience. Based then on these reflections, these individuals will make the decision as to whether or not to try the activity again, and if so, with what modifications. The participants in this study were oftentimes asked to do things during the training sessions that they were either unfamiliar with, or uncomfortable with, or both. In these situations, all of the participants jumped in head-first, with enthusiasm, as that is what they were being asked to do.

During the sessions, I did not observe anyone that was unwilling to try an activity, or that even hesitated to jump in. The participants understood that there could be a benefit to them, in terms of learning, growth, and self-discovery if they participated fully in the exercises. They also knew that they would never be in any actual danger, as the facilitators made it clear at every turn in the training that the sessions were what they referred to as "safe zones." This meant that during the training sessions, each participant could be assured that there would be no repercussions or ramifications of any sort for things they said or did as a part of the exercises. The facilitators also made sure that the participants all understood this, and that they were all committed to this approach, particularly as "they were all in the same boat" as several participants noted during the interviews. This, in effect, gave the participants permission to take that step of uncertainty outside of their personal comfort zones. Some steps were larger than others, but each step was relative to that individual's level of risk-taking. Some had the attitude of "what the heck," while others were a bit more measured and cautious in their approach to the exercises. Yet in either case, learning occurred for that individual. It was also made clear that no one had to participate in any exercise if he or she did not wish to, for any reason, again, with no repercussions; no one chose that option.

This finding is also consistent with the concept of safe zones as discussed in Chapter 2 of this study by Dunham and Freeman (2000). Here, the authors discussed theatre directors who would attempt to create safe spaces for their actors in order to help them to lower their personal defenses while trying new things. The authors noted that with this lowing of defenses came the potential for increased learning, giving the actors permission to experiment with different approaches or interpretations.

Several of the participants noted that they learned a great deal about themselves as the result of pushing themselves beyond what they would normally do in this type of situation. In particular, they experienced heightened self-confidence as the result of taking a chance (of being embarrassed, of making a mistake, etc.), along with finding out what controlled risk-taking felt like. This increased confidence was also a result of heightened trust among the group members (discussed further, below) that developed during the sessions, as it became apparent throughout the training that they were all in the same boat, and that there was no potential retribution, either professionally or socially, as the result of saying something that did not make sense, that wasn't funny, or that was just an odd response. There is an long-held adage in improv which states that there are no wrong responses in improv, because there is no script, and everything is made up, on-the-spot. This concept of no wrong responses and stepping out of one's comfort zone is also consistent with the discussion in a previous section in this chapter relative to spontaneity and filtering of responses. If spontaneity and the removal of filters is truly to be encouraged and allowed to flourish within a group, then a safe space must be established, where individuals can generate ideas, no matter how silly or inane they may seem, without the fear of criticism or reprisal. This safe space can only exist when the individuals within the group trust one another and understand and acknowledge that supporting one another is a key component of the creative

process. This is consistent with Improv Rule # 2: "Always support your fellow partners," and Rule # 3: "Trust one another, unconditionally."

Applications outside of work. One final aspect of individual learning that was uncovered related to the fact that the participants were able to find ways to apply these individual developmental improv tools outside of work. Ideally, the improv mindset is not one which should be turned on and off, or used solely at work. In the bigger picture, improv is intended as a lifestyle—a way of approaching life itself, not solely a tool to be applied to one's job. Improv skills can be applied anywhere—at the office, at home, at the park, or at a ball game. In the Literature Review in Chapter 2, Madson (2005) noted that having improv skills in one's toolkit gives one the confidence to step into unscripted situations, in any variety of settings. In summing this concept up, Madson stated "Life is an improvisation" (p. 15). During the study, the participants identified several examples and situations where they were able successfully apply these skills outside of the office, including at home, or at other jobs they held.

The more one is able to think of improv in this broader sense, as a mindset or lifestyle, the more naturally the skills will come while at work, as these skills will have become naturally embedded into the way an individual approaches his or her life, regardless of location or situation. In the Literature Review in Chapter 2, Bergren, Cox and Detmar (2002) discussed this "improv mindset," and talked about the value of saying yes to new opportunities, versus no, which can shut down any possibility of exploring new avenues and ideas. Johnstone (1979) also echoed this belief stating "There are people who prefer to say 'yes', and there are people who prefer to say 'no'. Those who say 'yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say 'no' are rewarded by the safety they attain" (p. 92). Learning to say yes, to take some reasonable chances, and push past one's comfort zone can become embedded in one's mindset,

as a way one views the world. To develop this mindset however, takes commitment and practice, along with giving oneself permission to open up to this new way of looking at things. Those who say no will, in many respects, stay safe, but at what cost? Is that perceived "guarantee" of safety worth the cost of the potential missed opportunities to bring genuine added joy and happiness into one's life as the result of taking a chance—of increasing the opportunities to experience and learn something new, and perhaps, even something life-changing? Each individual must make that decision for him or herself.

So for example, when one is at a wedding reception and is asked to give an impromptu speech about the bride or groom, the individual with some improv training or background should, more probably, be able to stand up confidently, take a chance, and entertain the audience with a whimsical anecdote about the newly married couple. Or, at that same wedding, when the band starts playing and someone is asked for a dance, next time take a chance . . . and dance.

Group learnings. The learning that occurred at the group level for this case was less tangible and specific than the individual learnings. There appeared to be a less consistent application of the training principles by the participants when back at work, primarily because no single individual had control over, or responsibility for the group's learning and application process outside of the training sessions, including the program director or a leader from within the group itself (this concept is discussed in further detail in Theme Three, below). Yet while the group learnings did not perhaps manifest themselves in obvious or consistent ways, the participants nonetheless, were still able to point to a number of areas where they felt that the training provided value to them collectively, as a group. Several interrelated concepts relative to increased awareness of, and sensitivity toward more effective functioning of the group were noted by the participants. For example, a number of the participants stated that they tried to show

greater support for the ideas and work of the other group members while back at the office by utilizing the "Yes, and . . ." mindset. This approach demonstrated a willingness on behalf of the participants to allow the group to explore a greater range of ideas, and not just their own individual agendas. Combined with an increased willingness at the individual level to devote greater focus on, and attention to others through enhanced concentration and listening, this "Yes, and . . ." approach did appear to begin to work to create stronger, more supportive working relationship among the group's members, according to the participants.

The participants were able to point specifically to improv exercises that helped to increase their awareness and focus toward how the group members interacted and worked together. Because the facilitators continually reinforced with the group that the training sessions were safe spaces, and that they were encouraged to make mistakes, the participants realized early on that they were all "in the same boat," going through the same experience together. Given this environment, the participants determined that they could all look silly together, they could laugh at and with one another, and could also support one another. All of this served to develop a stronger bond among the participants, with several of them noting that they did not want to let the other group members down during the sessions by saying something that did not appear to fit, which then would have upset the flow of the exercise. The commitment of the participants to the group appeared to grow with each session, which continued to increase the trust and the comfort level among the group members. Because this environment was established early-on during the training sessions, the participants were able to build on this approach, and therefore create a safe space to let their guards down and to try new things, together, during the training.

An important by-product of this increased trust and group cohesion that the participants felt throughout the training was a feeling of increased vulnerability. The reason that the trust

among the group members was strengthened throughout the training was, in large part, due to the participants' willingness to let their guards down. Again, the facilitators did a good job of making the participants feel comfortable during the sessions, and over the course of the three sessions, the participants experienced a certain sense of emotional exposure that they allowed themselves to be receptive to. This emotional exposure produced a feeling of vulnerability among many of the participants, as they were, in effect, stepping out of their comfort zones, and trusting the facilitators and the other members of the group to not ridicule or judge any individual participant's participation, responses or progress. Again, as several participants noted "we were all in the same boat."

One final positive group learning observation that resulted from the training related to how the participants acknowledged what they referred to as a "shared experience." Given the level of the support and trust that was developed by the group, they found that they all had a common frame-of-reference—that is, something that they could all look back on together, share, and laugh about when back at the office. This made individual participant attempts to informally interject improv tools into their work a bit easier, as they could do it in a more lighthearted, non-threatening fashion because of their shared experiences together. For example, if one group member were to cut short or otherwise criticize an idea from another group member, one of the other participants could, in a more playful manner, now state "that is not very 'Yes, and . . .' of you," and the group could laugh, and know what that meant.

The identification and acknowledgement of these common bonds may also represent the beginning of what might be considered as a new set of shared values among group members. Now, not all group members have yet to embrace this improv mindset, so it has clearly not fully embedded itself within the group. However, with the proper nurturing, encouragement, and

reinforcement opportunities, the improv mindset does have the potential to have a transformational effect upon the group in terms of how they work together. These new behaviors and beliefs, if instilled at a deep underlying level, are the types of conditions that Argyris (1994) had in mind when discussing his double-loop learning model. With this model, it is not just the surface-level behavior that changes (as is the case with single-loop learning), but also the underlying reasons for the behavior—a new belief or set of beliefs that there may be a better, more effective way to approach an issue. As discussed in greater detail in Theme Five, below, I believe that this group has the potential to reach a transformational, Model 2 level of learning, but collectively, at the conclusion of this study, they had not yet reached that point together. This was due in large part to two issues that arose throughout the course of the study. First was the lack of purposeful, day-to-day support of the training mindset and use of the related tools with the group on the part of the program's leadership. Second was that not all members of the team embraced the improv mindset. Both of these issues are discussed in greater detail in subsequent themes, below.

Experiential nature of the training. Several of the participants noted throughout their interviews that the experiential nature of the training contributed significantly to their ability to better understand the concepts being put forth by the facilitators. The experiential nature of the training was an aspect that was of significant interest to me and was, truly at the core of this study. A large part of my interest in undertaking this study in the first place was to understand how the participants might respond to putting themselves in the middle of the learning process and taking control of their learning by becoming active participants, through actual experience.

Several benefits materialized for the participants as the result of this experiential training. First, experience-based learning allowed the participants to practice the concepts, real-time, with

their fellow group members, under the guidance and direction of professional facilitators. Not only did this allow for the creation of a safe space for the participants to truly explore the concepts, but it also allowed the participants to have an emotional, as well as an intellectual response to the exercises. These emotional responses will give the participants, down the road, the ability to better recall and associate the activity (the experience) and their related learning, to the emotion that they felt at the time of the activity. This recall of the emotional response to the associated activity will serve as a trigger for the memory of the learning that the participants experienced during the exercises. This phenomenon of emotional memory cannot be as easily replicated with more traditional training sessions delivered via a standard lecture format as, with a lecture only, the participant is a passive versus active learner. The experiential component of this type of training helps to solidify the learnings into the participants' memory because an emotional association has been established. As participants recall how they felt during an exercise, they are better able therefore to recall and replicate their initial learnings, because of the association with an emotional feeling within themselves.

Another benefit that accrued to the participants during this training was their opportunity to reflect upon, and discuss their experiences with one another at the conclusion of many of the exercises. This opportunity for dialogue allowed the participants to immediately process the experience together, as well as to reflect upon, discuss and share their interpretations of their experiences with the other group members. According to Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as described by Kolb (2015), and Kolb and Kolb (2005), this opportunity for dialogue and reflection is a critical step in the experiential learning cycle, as this process helps to inform participants where to make adjustments in their behaviors and approach relative to the experience the next time they try it. These debriefs served to help participants reinforce certain

concepts, as well as to talk about what worked, what did not, and why. It also provided participants the opportunity to identify and discuss certain behaviors that were perhaps serving as roadblocks to increased personal and interpersonal effectiveness at their workplace. Additionally, this reflection and feedback was immediate, as the debrief sessions occurred immediately at the conclusion of the exercises. According to ELT, learning can occur throughout a repeated four-step cycle, which includes: (1) the experience, (2) reflection on the experience, (3) intellectual processing of the experience and related reflection, and (4) deciding whether and how to retry the experience, making adjustments based on the information gained from the previous steps. It is through this complete cycle that learning occurs. So, as the participants make adjustments based on further trials, reflections, dialogue and intellectual processing, additional learning and growth can continue to occur. In traditional lecture-based training, this learning process is much less defined and does not provide the same forum or structure for trial, reflection, processing, adjustment, and re-trial.

A final benefit to the participants that arose from this experience-based training related to the opportunity for the participants to build, real-time, the interpersonal relationships among the participants. Because of the nature of this training, the participants were able to share common experiences and, as a result, interpersonal bonds were developed and strengthened, trust was enhanced, and the participants learned to see what it felt like to actually support one another through the use of concepts such as a heightened focus and concentration, and "Yes, and . . ."

It was clear to me both while observing the sessions (including the debriefs), as well what I learned during the interviews, that the participants very much enjoyed the experiential nature of the training, and they consistently engaged in all aspects of the participative sessions. For example, during each of the three sessions, I observed that none of the participants reached for

their mobile phones during any part of the training, to check messages, send a text, or to take a call. The participants committed fully to the exercises, and listened to the guidance and direction of the facilitators. In fact, the facilitators themselves were very engaging and high energy throughout all of the three sessions, and their infectious nature certainly contributed to the energy in the room and the willingness of the participants to jump in and take a chance with things about which they may have felt uncertain, or with which they were unfamiliar. In fact, the facilitators informally mentioned to me after one of the sessions that the participant group was very engaged, and seemed to have more fun than many other of their client groups.

The interactive, participatory nature of this type of training, combined with the immediacy of coaching and feedback that the participants received from the facilitators, all contributed to an overall positive learning experience for the participants. Given the goals for the training as set forth by the program's director, I believe that the participants got more out of the time spent in these three improv sessions than they would have covering comparable training topics delivered via a more traditional lecture-style format, even if tangible, consistent outcomes were not necessarily evident in some cases.

Theme two: Gaps in the ability to apply learning concepts. While it is clear that learning did occur as a result of this training (as the discussion in Theme One above clearly articulated), translating the in-class learning concepts into specific applications and actions at the group level once back at work was, in many cases, challenging for some of the participants. While one or two of the participants did not identify this as a major concern, a majority of the participants throughout this study had at least some difficulty in actually applying specific training concepts back at their jobs. While the facilitators built in specific de-brief time at the end of most of the exercises in order to discuss the experience with the group, these debriefs often

consisted of "how did you feel?" or "what did you take away from this exercise?" types of questions. The de-brief discussions oftentimes did not get as specific as "how can I take this back and apply it specifically to my day-to-day work?". This particular group of participants felt that a much more specific link relative to how to actually apply the tools they learned in their specific environment would have been helpful.

Many of the participants also felt that it would have been helpful for the facilitators to prep the group *before* each exercise so that they could then go into the exercise with an idea of where the exercise was headed, in order to gain an understanding of the anticipated goals and outcomes as they were doing them. As the facilitators did not typically begin each exercise with this type of explanation, the participants characterized this as a "missed opportunity" to help them gain an understanding of why they were doing a particular exercise.

Relative to this inability of the participants, in many cases, to make links between the exercises and their daily work, in talking with the participants, it seemed as though the learnings at the individual level (as discussed in Theme One, above) were better grasped and applied than those at the group level. For example, the participants discussed their individual learnings relative to more effective listening skills, enhanced concentration, being in-the-moment, and a widening of their comfort zones—all skills within their direct control. Perhaps due to the inherent nature of these exercises, the goals and outcomes, as applied at the individual level, seemed more evident or obvious to the participants. In addition, these individual-based skills are skills that one can think about, practice, and develop on one's own, without being dependent on others in order to derive the benefits.

Yet even with these gains in individual learnings, I got the impression that there was still the continued lingering question among the participants of "what are we supposed to do with this

stuff?" Again, I got the sense that this attitude seemed to manifest itself primarily when referring to the group, in situations that were perhaps less concrete and tangible in their application–concepts such as how to work more effectively together, how to be more creative as a group in brainstorming sessions, how to infuse these concepts into the culture of the group, and how to sustain them collectively over the long-term—all areas that require a group commitment.

Also contributing to this gap in the ability to apply certain concepts back at their work was, I believe, the possible makeup of the group itself. As discussed more fully in Theme Four, below, nearly all members of the participant group possessed a very positivistic epistemological view of the world, as evidenced by nine of the ten participants possessing doctoral-level degrees in what is typically referred to as the "hard sciences." With this type of training and view of the world, there is very much a quantitative, "cause and effect" mentality and approach to their lives and work. I believe that this did influence, in some cases, participants' ability to make some of these connections that the facilitators were hoping would be made on their own. This is in no way a statement of judgment regarding any of the participants inherent ability to learn the concepts. However, each of us has a set of lenses through which we view the world, which is, at its core, neither good nor bad–it is just the way it is, and I believe that these lenses, for this participant group, potentially had an effect on how they perceived, experienced, interpreted, and applied the training concepts.

Theme three: Sustainability of the training and the role of leadership. A third major theme that arose from the findings related to the perceived inability of the participants to be able to sustain the training concepts over the long-term. Consistent with the discussion in Theme Two relative to the participants' inability to link the training to their work, here, the question became that if the links could not be, or were not firmly established during the training period, how could

these concepts and skills be expected to be sustained over a longer period of time? One participant even alluded to the question of if they are unable to apply them now, how can they be expected to sustain the tools and apply them down-the-road?

The participants in this study were concerned over the sustainability of the training efforts for three reasons. First, they did not feel that there was an environment at work that encouraged ongoing support and practice, due in large part to the leadership structure of the program. Second, there was no formal plan in place for reinforcement of the tools and techniques once the formal training sessions had ended, and third, not all members of the group were necessarily "on-board" with the improv mindset.

Ramifications of the program and leadership structure. Given the unique nature of the design and goals of the client's fellowship program overall, specifically related to the development of leaders in their field, it was a stated goal of the client at the onset of the fellowship for the group to be self-governing, and that there would not, in fact, be a formally-assigned traditional leader or other administrative head of the group on a day-to-day basis. As a result, the group would need to figure out, on its own, how to structure itself and learn how to work together day-in and day-out. So, other than some high-level administrative oversight by the program head to ensure that the program stayed on track, the members of the group were basically on their own, from day one of the fellowship period. This meant that there was no single individual, such as a department manager or division head, to serve as a steward of the improv approach during and subsequent to the training sessions—no single individual to encourage, remind, or reinforce with the group members the value of the improv mindset, nor to encourage the use of the tools on the day-to-day basis. This lack of a formally-designated leadership sponsor left the group to apply and utilize these new tools and concepts on their own.

Again, this lack of direct group leadership was by design with this client, but it appears to have unwittingly contributed to the inability of the group to collectively and effectively embrace these improv concepts on a regular and consistent basis. This absence of formal leadership left the group overall, as well as the several sub-group configurations, on their own to attempt to apply the training concepts on a more ad-hoc basis, rather than allowing the mindset to become embedded into the fabric of the group as a whole. This phenomenon definitely contributed to the participants' feeling of a lack of long-term (or even short-term, in some cases) sustainability of the training.

Lack of reinforcement opportunities. Contributing further to the perceived lack of sustainability on the part of the participants was the fact that there were no formal opportunities for reinforcement that had been designed into the training program. That is, once the three originally-scheduled training sessions had been completed, there were no further formal interventions or reinforcement sessions planned that involved the facilitators. Particularly in light of the fact that there was no single internal champion of the improv tools and concepts that could help to sustain the training mindset, the participants felt that additional brush-up, or follow-up type sessions would have helped them to both practice, as well as further apply and reinforce the skills they learned during the initial sessions. Participant suggestions ranged from additional, periodic brush-up training sessions with the facilitators, to having the facilitators back to actually lead a brainstorming or idea generation session so that the participants could both see and experience the concepts, in action, in their specific and unique environment. The participants overwhelmingly felt that this would have helped to reinforce and better sustain their initial training.

The improv mindset. It was also uncovered during the study that not all members of the client group, for whatever reason, embraced the improv mindset. The effect of this was that application of the training back at work, particularly at the group level, along with subsequent reinforcement opportunities, impeded the group's ability to fully adopt the training's mindset. As this was yet another factor in the lack of infusion of the improv mindset throughout the group, it also therefore impacted the long-term sustainability of the tools within the group.

The ability to gain the initial improv-related skills, make the links back to work via application, and the subsequent practice and reinforcement of these tools is absolutely critical in the ability of the group to sustain these new tools, learnings, and behaviors over the long-term. This assertion is supported again, by ELT as discussed by Kolb (2015), and Kolb and Kolb (2005). According to ELT, long-term learning, through experience, will have greater chance of effectiveness when the experience is repeated, and the participant has the opportunity to make adjustments in their actions based on reflection and intellectual processing of the experience. The greater the number of times the participant has the opportunity to repeat this learning cycle, the greater is the opportunity for the participant to make adjustments, and thus contribute to enhancing his or her learning. In this case, frequent opportunities to repeat the initial experience, in practice while at work, would have given the participants the opportunity to "cycle through" the four-step ELT process many more times, allowing them to think about what worked and what did not, and why, make further adjustments, and then try again, thus continuing the cycle of learning. It would have also given the group, collectively, the opportunity to discuss these trials, together—a dialogue which is also encouraged by ELT.

This long-term sustainability would certainly be the desire of employers who are considering a substantive investment of resources, both time and money, into a training initiative

of this nature. If this is the case, then it important that during the front-end planning that

reinforcement and sustainability mechanisms be both acknowledged and built into the training

and development plan so that participants are able to take their learnings back to their work

where they have the opportunity to put the tools and techniques into consistent practice.

Theme four: Participants' world view. Nine out of the ten participants in this study

self-identified as possessing a doctoral-level degree in what would typically be considered the

"hard sciences" (engineering, medicine, chemistry, engineering, etc.). This, along with

information I gained from them during the interview process, led me to the conclusion that these

individuals all had a very positivistic view of the world. What this means is that their point-of-

view of the way the world works, their worldview, the nature of their reality (their ontology)

assumes that reality is unchanging, and can be discovered through development and testing of

hypotheses via experimentation. In other words, beliefs about a phenomenon can be either

proven or disproven through controlled pre- and post-testing, and the use of random samples in

order to create generalizations. This epistemological approach is in contrast to interpretivism, in

which individuals believe that meaning is socially constructed and that human groups themselves

create meaning. A key difference between these two epistemological approaches is that under

positivism, the world is fixed, and hypotheses can be either proven or disproven through

experimentation, while under an interpretivist viewpoint, the meaning of a phenomenon is

contextual, based on the situation and environment present at the time. As the environment and

context changes, so may the interpretation of the phenomenon.

In addition to my association of the participants' academic training as post-doctoral

researchers in the hard sciences to a positivistic view of the world, at least two of the

participants, during the interviews, offered me suggestions as to how to design a "better" study—

one that would utilize the scientific method, including the development of a hypothesis, pre- and post-testing, the use of control groups, and the development of measurements that would provide quantifiable, measurable results. My sense was that at least some of the participants did not quite understand how the type of study that I was undertaking would provide meaningful data and results from which to advance the knowledge base in my area of study, particularly if I were not "proving" anything with my results. Yet any comments or attitudes that I may have perceived in this area from the participants were not in any way mean-spirited nor critical of my work. I believe they were sincerely trying to be helpful, based on their beliefs of how one should study this type of phenomenon, as that is the way that they see the world—one of testing, measurement, and "proof." My belief regarding the participants' positivistic worldview is not one of judgement; it is neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. It is just what it is. However, I do believe that this perspective influenced the participants' experience in this study.

As was discussed in a previous theme, a majority of the participants noted that they had trouble linking the class-based concepts and exercises back to their work. The participants stated that they had hoped the facilitators would have made a more direct link from the exercises to the application of the exercises to their work—in other words, A leads to B, B leads to C, etc., which represents a positivistic view of the world. Again, not all participants demonstrated this viewpoint, and not in all situations. However, I do believe that this overall positivistic view of the world, through their eyes did, at times, influence their ability to translate the class material into practice when back at the office. For example, I believe that were I able to produce statistics to the group that stated that doing exercise "A" would lead to an X% increase in creative ideas, this may have helped them to better understand the value of a particular exercise, or which variables served to influence the outcome, and perhaps how better to apply the results. This is a

very methodical approach—one that is representative of an overall positivistic background and training. Yet in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, Kolb and Kolb (2005) noted that ELT is based on individual participants making their own meaning of the learning experiences, based on the situational contexts and frames of reference of the individual learners, combined with reflection and dialog of the shared experience with the other participants. This type of learning, where the individual constructs his or her own meaning from the experience, has a very interpretivist epistemological basis, which is in sharp contrast to the positivistic approach where these is only one right answer. I believe that this difference in the participants' point-of-view may have influenced their ability to identify some of the links that the facilitators has hoped for.

Again, this is in no way a criticism of anyone (participants or facilitators) in this study. In fact, I could not have had a more cooperative, friendly, and helpful group of participants for this study. It is just a point of observation that I believe should be taken into account when designing a training plan—to take into account the background and makeup of the group. Then tailoring, where possible, the training sessions to include approaches that are most consistent with that particular group's makeup and propensity for learning. For example, developing an experiential improv training plan for a group of engineers might be different than for a group of creative advertising professionals. In this case study, perhaps some up-front set-up and explanations of the goals of the exercises, or discussion of more tangible application links immediately following the exercises, might have helped the participants to better translate the activities into more specific applications back at their work.

Theme five: Transformational learning has not yet occurred. Any time that an organization is interested in undertaking a significant transformational change initiative within its organization, whether related to its processes, its culture, or other aspects of its operation, it is

not unreasonable to expect that the initiative will take some extended period of time to take hold and become integrated into the fabric of the organization. This is because the organization is asking for changes in employees' underlying behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, approaches to work, and relationships with co-workers and leaders, at both the individual and group levels. Done well, this embedding of new mindsets and behaviors takes time—it cannot be expected to happen overnight. The group in this study participated in three, three-hour training sessions over the course of three months, with no formal follow-up or reinforcement sessions. And, while it is clearly apparent that learning did occur within the group's participants (particularly at the individual level), it cannot be said that learning, at a truly transformational level, had occurred within the group by the end of the three-month training period. First, it seems clear that this new approach had not yet been embedded into the daily ongoing operations of the group. Second, not all group members had embraced the concepts advocated by the training. Third, there were no formal reinforcement mechanisms employed by the group or recommended by the facilitators, and fourth, and perhaps most important, there was no proactive support from the group's leaders subsequent to the sessions in order to encourage, reinforce and sustain the desired learnings and outcomes, in day-to-day practice—there was no designated internal champion.

In order to believe that true transformational learning has occurred, there must be continuing evidence of the embedding of these new beliefs and behaviors into the underlying culture of the group, including its leadership. The creation of an environment that is conducive to transformational learning can be developed based on a confluence of factors. First, there must be ongoing and visible support of the desired transformational behaviors from leadership. Next, there must be ongoing opportunities for reinforcement of the desired behaviors for the group's members. Finally, the value and benefits of the desired transformation should be effectively

communicated to the group both prior and subsequent to the training, and reinforced by leadership on a day-to-day basis.

Role of leadership. Ideally, leadership should be modeling the desired values, beliefs, and behaviors in their day-to-day actions, decisions, and interactions with others, both within and outside the group. A significant part of the long-term adoption of these new beliefs by the group must come from the leaders "leading by example," not only to demonstrate the how and why of the behaviors, but also to help communicate and demonstrate the *value* to the group in adopting the changes. It is therefore essential that the leaders model the desired behaviors and to set the tone for the organization.

It is also important for leaders to acknowledge that not all individuals will adopt the desired changes at the same rate, and in fact, some will not adopt them at all. Therefore, leaders must be cognizant of these adoption-related issues when designing the initial change plans. With the group in this study, the leadership chose not to disclose to the participants the nature of the training, the desired goals and outcomes, or the potential added value to the group, prior to commencement of the sessions. Therefore, there was some heightened anxiety and uncertainty going into the sessions. However, the participants in this group were used to dealing with uncertainty as a part of their overall fellowship program, so they were able to adapt to the spirit of the training fairly quickly.

This may not be the case with other groups however, so leadership should attempt to establish, and clearly communicate the nature and goals of the training prior to commencement of the sessions. As Kolb and Kolb (2005, as cited in Damasio, 1994, 2003; LeDoux, 1997; Zull, 2002) noted, the role that feelings and emotions play in experiential learning cannot be overlooked. The authors believed that negative emotional responses associated with an

experiential learning activity, including fear, anxiety, and uncertainty could actually serve to block learning, particularly if these emotions and feeling exist before even beginning the training. Conversely, individuals that go into an experiential learning situation with a positive attitude and a willingness to give it a try will have a greater propensity for increased learning. So, while the initial anxiety experienced by this study's participant group did not appear to translate into any type of diminished learning (as this group was already used to being placed in unusual situations, as a part of the overall fellowship training), this may not necessarily be the case for other groups. Leaders should therefore, take these potential emotional responses, both positive and negative, into account when preparing a plan for their training with the goal of minimizing potential negative responses, and heightening possible positive attitudes toward the training. This can be accomplished through effective and timely communications with the group, providing them with information and reassurances about the nature, goals, and objectives of the activities.

Reinforcement opportunities. Consistent with ELT theory, group members need time to try out the new behaviors, mentally reflect on and process them, and then retry the skills that were initially presented during the sessions. By providing time, as well as a forum for group members to regularly revisit these concepts, group members are given the opportunity to continue the discovery process that they experienced during the initial training sessions, allowing the ELT learning cycle to continue in an spiraling upward direction. Each successive pass through the learning cycle allows participants to heighten their learning, based on these additional updated experiences, reflections and cognitive processing (Kolb, 2015). At the individual level, this added time for practice and reflection, combined with the opportunity for the group members, collectively, to discuss, reflect upon, and continue to try the new tools, should help to continue to solidify the value and benefits of the new approaches as introduced

during the initial training sessions. Additional formal, follow-up facilitated sessions would also help to contribute to this reinforcement process.

Opportunities for communication. Notwithstanding the goals of this particular group to have the group members attempt to discover the value of the training on their own, as well as how to apply the training subsequently, in most instances it would behoove the organization to communicate clearly up-front, the nature of the training initiative, the value of the training to the group, and the desired outcomes. As noted by Kolb and Kolb (2005, as cited in Damasio, 1994, 2003; LeDoux, 1997; Zull, 2002), the goal generally, should be to make the participants feel comfortable about going into the training in order to minimize any potential anxiety, rather than risk them developing walls of resistance because of misperceptions or misunderstandings regarding the nature of the training, before even giving it a chance. These walls will only serve to slow down the training process and its absorption, and possibly even to deny the eventual adoption of the new behaviors at any point in the future. If, for whatever reason, participants are unwilling to even give the training a chance at the onset, there is little hope of them having a transformational learning experience as a result of the training. Therefore, anticipating possible roadblocks, and developing systems to minimize these possible perceptual walls of resistance prior to the commencement of the training will help to facilitate the potential for a transformational learning process moving forward.

Again, a true transformational learning process takes time, for all of the reasons noted above. However, these recommendations above, including leadership, reinforcement, and communication, will serve to help guide and reinforce the training, providing an increased opportunity for infusing the learnings into the long-term fabric of the organization and its culture. Due to the design and timing of this particular study, I was unable to follow-up with the

participant group toward the end of their twelve month fellowship project. It would have been interesting to see if additional time helped this group to begin to embrace and embed the training concepts more into the fabric of their culture.

Organizational improvisation. In the Literature Review in Chapter 2, the concept of organizational improvisation was introduced. This subject area related to the organization as a whole taking on an improv mindset, and that this could be used as an organizational competency (Moorman & Miner, 1998). Vera and Crossan (2004) believed that improv skills could be taught to the organization's members, which could lead to better firm performance, but that this mindset needed to be incorporated into the organization's culture. What was missing from the majority of the literature reviewed in this area however, was the acknowledgment that, in order to have this improv mindset present at the organizational level as a way of thinking and approaching business, it must first start with the individual members of the organization. This study has provided a glimpse into the challenges and work that is needed to transform an organization into an improv organization where this mindset has truly been infused into and adopted by a majority of the organization's members into the underlying fabric and culture of an organization. As noted above, this double-loop, Model 2 learning as proposed by Argyris (1994) takes planning and a commitment by leadership, and is developed over a long period of time.

I am not at all suggesting that an organization-wide improv mindset cannot be accomplished, because I truly believe that it can. However, what I found lacking in the current literature was a recognition and acknowledgement of the issues surrounding what it takes to actually get to an improv-based culture on an institution-wide level. This approach does not just happen because management would like it to. Because what is being asked affects the deep underlying beliefs of the individual employees, and involves possible significant changes in

behaviors and approaches to work in terms of learning, an initiative of this nature will take an explicit long-term commitment from the senior leadership of the organization, and it must start with each individual employee. Only then will it have the opportunity, over time, to become a part of the culture and workings of the company.

   A caveat regarding transformation. While it may oftentimes be the goal of management to undertake a significant transformational change effort within their organization, transformation does not always have to be the end-goal of this type of training. Improv training can be a fun and valuable exercise for any group that is looking to help stimulate creativity, build greater rapport among group members, enhance spontaneity, or to just have a fun afternoon away from the toils of the day-to-day routine. As discussed in the Literature Review in Chapter 2, there are still any number of benefits that can accrue to the individual participants, as well as the group, that may not be looked upon as transformational. This composite list of participant benefits included enhanced listening and observation skills, heighted collaboration and teamwork, a heightening of trust, looking at the potential in opportunities and suggestions by saying "Yes, and . . .," looking at the world in new ways, expanding one's comfort zone, enhanced creativity, a heightened level of spontaneity and the ability to think quickly on one's feet, and a heightened confidence. These are all positive traits that any employer should hope to foster within their employees, even if the experience is not transformational in nature. If each participant employee were to come away from even a single training session with a heightened awareness of just one of the above benefits, then that might be worth the price of a single-session investment. Therefore, transformative learning does not necessarily have to be the ultimate goal, but it certainly can be in the right situations, with proper planning and a commitment by the organization's leadership.

Sometimes however, just a lighthearted day away from the office is enough to give employees a boost in thinking a bit differently. Perhaps an employee gets the opportunity to meet someone in their area that they otherwise would not have met. Or perhaps one of the exercises inspires someone to look at the world just a bit differently by taking that new route home from work, or by volunteering for a project he or she would not have otherwise. The training may inspire an individual to take that chance and step out of that person's comfort zone. There are hosts of benefits that can accrue to individuals, as well as to the organization, as the result of improv training, and they do not all have to be transformational.

Conclusions

The experiential training methodology utilized in this study had the potential to be an effective long-term employee development tool for the client group. However, several issues and conditions were present that prevented the training from providing truly transformational learning at either the individual or group levels. It is also clear from the findings however, that learning, while not necessarily transformational in nature, did in fact occur at both the individual and group levels, although the nature and substance of those learnings varied among participants and groups. The greatest level of learning appeared to occur with those participants who were highly engaged in the method and the material, and who recognized the potential value in the training. In addition to actively participating in the sessions, these individuals also engaged in deep self-reflection subsequent to the sessions, and made an effort to make connections between the class-based exercises and their application at work and in their lives.

At the individual level, learning began to occur in the areas of enhanced listening skills, greater focus and concentration on what others in their work group were saying, including a heightened respect for their ideas, a heightened ability to recognize and address mental

roadblocks that were preventing creative idea generation, and for many, an increased willingness to step out of their comfort zones and take both personal and professional risks in front of the other members of the group. All of these enhanced skills could reasonably be traced directly back to the training sessions. These participants were inspired to embrace and try out what they had learned, certainly at least at the individual level.

At the group level however, learning was inconsistent, and application of the material by the group was, at best, intermittent. There were several reasons for this. The primary reason was that, given the unique nature of the design, structure, and goals of the client group's fellowship program, the presence of formal, ongoing group leadership was minimal, serving only in some broad administrative roles. By design, the program's director purposely did not supervise nor direct the work or interactions of the group on a day-to-day basis. This is by no means a criticism of the director, as this relationship with the program members was intentional, given the larger overall goals of the fellowship program. This condition was unique to this specific group, by design.

Yet as a result of this hands-off approach by the program director, there was no one present day-to-day within the group that could serve, on a consistent basis, to encourage and reinforce the application of the principles and tools that were garnered as a result if the training sessions. Nor was this single leadership individual present who could help to communicate the potential value to the group, or to help assure individual members that engagement (or non-engagement) with this material would not negatively impact the member's standing within the group or the program. It was clear by the end of the three sessions that the training had not become embedded into the overall fabric or culture of the group.

Also at the group level, there were certain members of the group that did not, for whatever reason, embrace the spirit or tools of the sessions, which contributed to the training not fully infusing itself into the group's culture. According to the participants, this lack of engagement effected, in some respects, how the group (and sub-groups) worked together during the period of the study. Yet while the participants were able to provide examples of where this lack of engagement made it more difficult, at times, to attempt to try the training concepts together, there were also numerous instances that the participants could point to, particularly in their smaller group work, where members were able to enthusiastically attempt to utilize certain of the training tools (for example, using warm-up games and exercises prior to a brainstorming session, or supporting one another's ideas through the use of "Yes, and . . ."). Again, these techniques were used very ad-hoc due to the lack of buy-in from some group members, combined with the lack of reinforcement reminders and opportunities from the group's leadership.

Another challenge with consistent, long-term adoption of the training concepts at the group level occurred as the result of the inability, in many instances, of the participants to be able to adequately make a link between the workshop training and the subsequent application of that training back at work. It is not that the participants did not understand the nature of the exercises or the material at a conceptual level. It seems however, that they were unable, in many cases, to adequately link the training tools and concepts back to their specific jobs. There are several reasons that could have contributed to this phenomenon. First, is that the session facilitators were not always explicit in identifying this linkage. While there was a debrief held with the group after most exercises, these debriefs oftentimes did not go into a level of detail that was specific to the application at their workplace. Many participants felt that this was a missed opportunity on

the part of the facilitators. Again, it was not that the participants did not grasp the nature and essence of the exercises generally, nor even their application at a personal level. However, it was this link of utilizing the tools and concepts at the collective, group level that appeared to be the challenge. This, combined with the absence of formal group leadership to provide a reinforcement structure, and the fact that certain group members did not embrace the improv training concepts, that prevented full and lasting infusion and adoption of the improv tools and mindset by the collective group.

This is not to say that learning did not occur, nor that the participants did not find value in the training. Again, individual learnings, along with personal application and growth, in many cases, were strong. However, the lack of a direct, explicit link to the job, combined with an absence of support and reinforcement, both formally and informally, at the organizational level, inhibited the sustained infusion of the training throughout the group over the long-term, and therefore impeded possible transformational learning opportunities at the group level.

While true transformational learning does not appear to have occurred within this group by the conclusion of this study, that is not at all to say that there is no value in this type of training, nor that this type of training should not be considered as an employee development vehicle. On the contrary, there are a great many positive outcomes that can, and in fact did, arise as a result of experiential improv training. First (and consistent with Improv Rule #10 from Chapter Two), is for the participants to have fun and enjoy themselves. A fun afternoon of improv, away from their desks can help to reduce stress, help the members of the group to get to know one another better, to form or strengthen relationships, and to heighten awareness of the myriad learning concepts that have been discussed throughout this study. These tools can all help serve to benefit those individuals immediately. Long-term group transformation does not have to

take place for value to accrue to the individual or the group. In the short run, improv training can help to build competencies such as more effective listening, heightened concentration and focus, and identification and addressing of mental roadblocks that serve to stifle creativity. At the group level, improv training can also serve to begin to heighten awareness to the issues of team building and trust, including the development of common bonds and experiences. As was the case with this study, the participants found great value in the training, but did not necessarily find it sustainable at the group level, in the long-run.

However, if organizations are seeking to truly transform employees' underlying beliefs, values, and behaviors with regard to their effectiveness at both the individual and group levels, more time will need to be devoted to this type of initiative. Management needs to be actively involved at all stages of the training, visibly support the transformational efforts, and provide a context and background as to the potential value of the endeavor for those that might be reticent to try it, who do not understand why the organization is undertaking this method, or that do not see value in either the commitment of time or in the potential outcomes. This communication should therefore begin prior to the actual training sessions in order to minimize possible anxiety and apprehension levels of the participants as the result of possible misunderstandings about the nature of the training. Participants will have a much greater positive response to the material if they are in an upbeat frame of mind, versus going in with negative emotions such as uncertainty and anxiety. This apprehension has the potential to lead to less than optimal acceptance by the participants, and could actually serve to undermine the initiative altogether.

The chances of failure of a transformational change effort as the result of the utilization of improv-based techniques might be mitigated with thoughtful consideration by management of several key points. First, the leaders of the organization or work unit must see value in the

approach. They cannot truly support an initiative of this nature, or ask others to, if they do not themselves believe in it. Leaders must also visibly and actively support an improv mindset throughout the workplace, and have an ongoing presence within the group in order to encourage reinforcement opportunities. Leaders should also proactively attempt to continually communicate and demonstrate the value and desired outcomes of the training, acknowledging however that not all individuals will engage with this method, or that they may engage at different acceptance rates. Finally, for this type of experiential training approach to be embedded into the culture over the long-run, leaders should provide ongoing improv-based training opportunities for the employees, allowing them to ask questions, hone desired skills, and to identify areas of additional application.

It is unreasonable to expect that true transformational change can occur overnight—that is, with only one or even a few training sessions. Group members need time to process their experiences, reflect on them, experiment with modified techniques and behaviors, and finally, retry the tools. Management also needs time to observe, monitor, encourage adaptation, and provide reinforcement opportunities, without penalty, for participants, recognizing again that individual employees will learn and adapt at different rates. Management must also be cognizant of those group members that may not engage in the training as quickly or as enthusiastically as other group members, or who may question, or even reject experiential improv as a legitimate development methodology. Proactive, regular, and open communication between management and the group members is therefore essential in order for these initiatives to have the potential to succeed.

Was My Research Question Answered?

From Chapter One, my research question for this study was:

What is the perceived impact of interactive, experiential theatrical improvisational training on individual participants and their related work groups when this training is used for employee development purposes?

My goal going into this study was to understand the experience of the participants that went through the series of three experiential improv training sessions together, in order to better inform OD practitioners and corporate managers that may be considering this type of training. Based on the study's findings as documented in Chapter Four, along with my identification, analysis, and discussion of the major themes that arose from those findings, and my conclusions as documented in this chapter, I believe that I have satisfactorily answered my research question. The findings uncovered through this study, along with their subsequent analysis and conclusions will, in my opinion, provide meaningful and useful information for those in the practice or study of OD. These implications are discussed further in the next section, below.

Implications for the Field of OD

This study focused on the examination of the impact of a specific experiential learning methodology, known as theatrical improvisation, on a group of individuals that work together within a defined organizational unit. This topic is relevant to the field of OD as much of the subject matter, findings, and conclusions in this study are consistent with major, foundational aspects of OD, including adult learning theory, experiential learning, change management, employee and organizational effectiveness, leadership and culture, flow, comfort zones, and perhaps most important, transformational adult learning, as reflected in Argyris' (1994, 2000) double-loop learning model.

As practitioners, this training methodology may have significant potential application and benefit to the clients of OD consultants. Consultants that are looking for an employee

development program for their clients may wish to consider an experiential learning approach as described in this study. Before practitioners recommend this option to a client however, several factors should be considered, as this method might not be the most appropriate tool for a given client, in a given situation. First, one should always assess and gain a clear understanding of the needs and goals of the client—is the client looking for a fun, short-term team-building activity, or something more substantive, consistent with a longer-term, transformational change initiative? The former is fairly easy to address. However, the latter will take time and thought in order to put together a plan with the client, the results of which have the potential to become truly embedded into the long-term operation of the organization consistent with transformational, double-loop learning concepts.

In order for the practitioner to provide informed professional guidance to the client in this area, the consultant must have a deep understanding of this specific experiential learning process, including the risks, benefits, and level of commitment required by the organization. It is incumbent upon the consultant to provide thoughtful, informed counsel to the client that the consultant believes is in the best interest of the client at that time. For example, it must be made clear to the client the level of ongoing support and commitment this type of initiative is going to take on the part of senior leadership. As this study demonstrated, ongoing support, particularly in the areas of both formal and informal reinforcement of the training principles, is essential if one hopes to sustain the tools over time. If leadership is unable or unwilling to make this commitment, then a long-term program of transformation based on these specific techniques may not be the best choice at this time.

If the consultant is able to pass this threshold of organizational commitment with reasonable assurance on the part of the client, the following items should then also be considered as the plan is being developed:

- Thoughtful and Careful Pre-Planning

  The consultant should attempt to make an initial assessment with the client as to the general nature and background of the participants within the group, relative to their possible receptiveness to the training, individual learning styles, as well as their ability to translate the tools to the job. Adjustments can be made to the training plan and approach up-front, based on the outcome of these assessments, which could include allocating time for additional discussion of possible specific applications of the tools, both prior and subsequent to each exercise. This could be done in coordination with the professional facilitators.

- Anticipation of Possible Roadblocks to Learning

  If the consultant is able to anticipate in some fashion where potential roadblocks to learning may occur, it may then be possible to put mechanisms in place that have the potential to minimize resistance and misunderstandings. These mechanisms should include clear communication with the participants, prior to the sessions, as to the nature of the training, its value, desired outcomes, and potential benefits to the participants and the organization. It should also be made clear at the onset that no one will be forced to participate, nor asked to do anything that that one would truly be uncomfortable doing, and that there will be no penalty or other retribution for non-participation or perceived failures during the exercises themselves.

- The Role of Leadership

As noted throughout this study, the role of leadership is critical to the long-term success

of a transformational program of learning of this nature. Therefore, the organization's

leaders must be willing to commit to modelling, supporting, and regularly encouraging

the desired behaviors and the underlying beliefs of the training. This also includes

consistent monitoring by leaders back at the office, encouraging adoption of the tools,

and providing reinforcement opportunities.

- Reinforcement Opportunities

Leaders must also provide for both formal and informal opportunities for reinforcement

of the tools again, on a regular basis. These opportunities could include a number of

facilitated follow-up sessions either on- or off-site or, as one participant in this study

suggested, perhaps the formation of an in-house improv group that could serve to

continue the development of the improv mindset and tools, as well as to help build added

camaraderie within the group and throughout the organization. From the findings in this

study, it was clear that the embedding of these training principles takes ongoing time and

practice, and there is no reason to believe that this would not be the case with other

groups.

- Identify Assessment and Evaluation Points

With the significant investment of time and money for a transformational initiative of this

nature, it seems reasonable that management may wish to periodically assess how the

training tools are being used—is the program producing the desired outcomes? In order

to help management to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, the OD consultant,

working with the client, could consider evaluative tools such as periodic surveys,

interviews with group members, observational assessments from department heads, some

agreed-upon quantitative measures of output or effectiveness, and feedback from the

facilitators. Obtaining some combination of feedback from the participants and

management on a periodic basis will help the consultant, the organization, and the

facilitator make any potential mid-course corrections to the plan that may be required.

- Professional Outside Facilitation

  I recommend that OD practitioners with little or no background in improv not attempt to

  facilitate these types of sessions on their own. The skills, tools and nuances of this

  technique take years to develop, not to mention the adding in of the coaching and

  development aspects. There are many excellent improv-based facilitators available

  throughout the U.S. that have extensive and successful track-records in this type of

  corporate training. Many have a national scope and reputation and are willing and able to

  assist with the development and delivery of programs from anywhere throughout the U.S.

  and the world. For example, an Internet search of improv training groups in one's area

  using the search term "corporate improv trainers" would be a good place to start, and will

  yield a listing of qualified and reputable training groups. Another resource is the Applied

  Improvisation Network (http://appliedimprovisation.network/) which has a host of

  resources for those seeking professional improv facilitation trainers. Locating and

  developing a relationship with qualified professional improv-based facilitators is essential

  in helping to assess and evaluate the needs of the client, as well in developing a specific

  training and reinforcement plan that is consistent with the organization's needs.

  Another option for OD practitioners is to learn to become improv facilitators themselves.

The individual would need to find a qualified improv training center in his or her area and begin

a rigorous plan of study, perhaps over a number of years. Consistent with the findings and

conclusions in this study, improv is not something that is picked up and applied, at a high level, overnight, but with practice, certainly can be learned. Improv, by its very nature, is experiential. Therefore one cannot just read about improv and become an improviser or improv trainer—these skills and tools must be practiced, with others, on a regular basis in order to develop their facility, and to have the training become embedded into one's behaviors and mindset (not unlike the findings in this study). But it can certainly be done.

Improv can be a very fun and entertaining activity for one to do each week and, over time, could have a significant positive impact on one's personal wellbeing and development, as well as the possibility of providing benefits to one's clients and OD practice down the road. Be careful however, not attempt to jump into the improv arena as a facilitator without the proper training, as this will not serve one's clients well, and it could well harm one's reputation as an OD practitioner if done poorly. If a practitioner were seriously interested in adding this training methodology into his or her consulting toolkit, it is recommended that the first step be to identify qualified partners in the area that could advise and assist the practitioner as to how best to incorporate this into one's practice, and to best serve the client's needs. It is also highly recommended that the practitioner actually take a beginning improv class, whether the goal is to eventually teach it or not. Just having the experience of what one's clients might go through is critically important if one is to recommend the program to a client. However, perhaps the most important reason for the OD practitioner to take a beginning improv class is to be consistent with improv Rule #10: to have fun!

From a research perspective, this study has identified several areas that have a potential impact on the field of OD in terms of further research that is needed. These areas of potential impact are discussed in detail in Recommendations for Future Research, below.

Limitations of This Study

Two limitations that existed for this study that are important to note include the lack of statistically-generalizable results, and the lack of follow-up with the participants over time. As this study was designed as an interpretive case study, statistical methods were not employed in the design, collection or interpretation of the data. Therefore, the study's results cannot be stated as being applicable to, or generalizable over the broader population. For example, random sampling of populations was not undertaken, nor were control groups, or pre-and post-test methodologies applied to the study's design. That said, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, Stake (1995) noted that knowledge acquired through interpretive methodologies can, in fact, be used to help inform readers in order to help, for example, modify or amplify existing generalizations. It is this latter form of generalization that I hope readers of this study might find useful. However, the limitation that exists with this work is that the results are not automatically applicable to the broader population in the form of statistically-generated generalizations.

A second limitation of this study is that I do not know what the impact of this training will be on the group in say, twelve months from now. I cannot predict whether they will have retained the training material, continued to apply it, or if it worked its way into the underlying fabric of how the group works together. Both of these limitations could provide the basis for further research in this area, which is discussed in the following section.

Recommendations for Future Research

Four issues arose while conducting this study that could be of interest for further research in this area. First is the issue of sustainability of the training material over the long-term, particularly without further formal reinforcement. The scope of this study spanned an approximately three-month period, with the perceived effectiveness of the training from the

participants' point-of-view during that time, particularly at the group level, being intermittent, at best. It would have been interesting and informative to revisit this group of participants at the completion of their twelve-month fellowship program to see if and how this material became further infused into the culture of the group, and if and how the participants were able to continue to utilize the individual learnings they identified in Chapter 4 of this study. In fact, when the program director initially approached the facilitator group about the sessions for this year, they were originally discussing holding only one session. As I was invited into the conversation to discuss the possible research avenues for their training, I suggested extending the sessions out to three sessions, over three months for the very reason of wanting to observe the impact of multiple sessions. In order to better assess the ability of the participants to retain and apply these tools over a longer period of time, a longitudinal study over say, twelve months, would help to provide even greater understanding of this training method's long-term effectiveness.

A second area for further study was actually mentioned by Participant #3 during the interviews. In Chapter 4, this participant had stated that it was hard to draw a direct correlation between the training and increased effectiveness by the group. Given the Participant's background as a positivistic researcher, the individual suggested developing a study that would better isolate variables thought to have an impact on performance and develop tests to measure any possible changes, using pre- and post-testing, and a control group. This type of study is clearly something that could be designed and could be a logical next step to better understand the effectiveness of this type of training. For purposes of my study, I felt that this type of positivistic study was premature, as I believed that I did not yet have a clear understanding of what the participants were going through, and would not have been able to identify which variables may

be influencing behaviors and outcomes. Now that I have a better understanding of the participant experience, there is perhaps a better foundation of knowledge to move ahead with further types of studies in this area, including those that could more directly measure and quantify outcomes.

Another area that could serve to add to the existing base of knowledge would be to undertake a similar case study with a more traditional corporate group that does not have some of the unique structural attributes of this group. While the group that was selected for this study served as an invaluable resource, it became evident at times that differences existed between the study group and more traditional corporate environments in terms of the nature of their operating structure, including the limited life-cycle of the group, and its leadership expectations. It would be of interest to understand what possible differences might exist in participants' experiences, as well as the training process itself, given a more traditional corporate environment.

One final area that this study uncovered which warrants further study is the role that leaders play in the implementation and infusion of the tools of improv, along with the related mindset, into the fabric of the organization. This study identified that there were numerous benefits that accrued to the participants at the individual level as a result of the training. However, the participants believed that the benefits that were anticipated at the group level were not as fully realized due, in part, to the lack of reinforcement mechanisms provided at the leadership level. The participants felt that because there was no one at a leadership level to outwardly champion the use and benefits of the improv approach, its implementation and application in the workplace at the group level was sporadic at best. This was because there was no one in an official position of authority within the group that provided formal reinforcement mechanisms and opportunities in order to sustain the training over the long-term. Therefore,

application and reinforcement of the improv concepts at the group level were left to the individual group members.

While it was understood that this hands-off approach on the part of the group's leadership was purposefully-designed as a part of the group's overall training program goals, it does nonetheless raise the question of the role that leadership might or should play in the implementation, reinforcement, and infusion of an improv approach into an organization. Further study is therefore encouraged to better understand the role of leadership in implementing and sustaining a program of this nature.

Personal Thoughts and Final Reflections

I have wanted to write a doctoral dissertation based on theatrical improvisation for probably some twenty years now, but never knew exactly how I might actually accomplish that. During the first OD class in my doctoral program however, I realized that there was a natural and clear overlap between the principles of OD and the field of improv, and my dissertation problem was solved.

As was well-documented throughout this study, the improv experience means something different to everyone, and as a result, different aspects of the training will resonate differently with each person. The issue of pushing past one's comfort zone resonates highly with me. I think back on all of the opportunities for learning and growth that I have missed out on as the result of a reticence to try something new—to take a chance. Improv has helped, and continues to help me each day, to not let the world pass me by. As was noted in the Literature Review, even small changes to one's routine (and I use the word *routine*, literally) can help one to see the world in a new way, and to see things that one would perhaps never otherwise notice or experience.

The findings in this study identified some potential gaps between the exercises and the application aspects of the training. What is harder to identify however, is which of these training concepts implanted themselves, subconsciously, into the minds of the participants. Things like taking a new way to work, or perhaps seeing a movie that one may otherwise not have seen. All of these tiny improv fragments may begin (or continue) to manifest themselves in small, imperceptible ways, but that nonetheless, will contribute to enhancing, in some small way, the lives of the participants and those around them. These may not be measureable changes, nor perhaps even perceptible in some cases. Yet the improv mindset, when allowed to take hold, has the ability to implant itself in many ways.

For me, improv is not as much about a set of tools, as it is a way of life. Having a more spontaneous attitude, listening more effectively, trying hard to support my coworkers and family, trying to find the joy in life and the positive aspects of a situation; all of these things comprise the spirit of improv, or what has been referred to in this study as the improv mindset. Improv can be a way of life, and that is another aspect that I hope the participants in this study will discover as they continue to have the opportunity to reflect back on their training. I believe that this perspective is something that the field of OD could take advantage of as well, in terms of the general overall health and wellbeing of their clients. The journey that has encompassed this research project has been an absolute joy for me. Every person that participated in this study was supportive of my work, and truly wanted to contribute to help make it a success. That, to me, represents the true core of the improv spirit.

For those individuals that are frightened to get out there, or uncomfortable at trying new things, or who just cannot seem to take that first step into something new or unknown, there is a great big world out there, full of new things that just may, in some small way, help to change

one's life. So in conclusion of this study, as country singer Lee Ann Womack suggested, next

time, when you get the chance to sit it out or dance, take a chance . . . and dance.

> I hope you never fear those mountains in the distance,
>
> Never settle for the path of least resistance,
>
> Livin' might mean takin' chances, but they're worth takin',
>
> Lovin' might be a mistake, but it's worth makin',
>
> Don't let some hellbent heart leave you bitter,
>
> When you come close to sellin' out, reconsider,
>
> Give the heavens above more than just a passing glance,
>
> And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance . . .,
>
> I hope you dance,
>
> I hope you dance.
>
> (Sanders & Sillers, 2000)

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Appendix A

Listing and Description of Improv Games and Exercises, By Session

Session #1

Introductory Exercises

1. Getting to Know One Another

   Description:
   In this exercise, participants were separated into small groups of 3-4 persons. The first thing they were asked to do was to draw a circle on their group's whiteboard and list inside the circle all the things that the group member had in common—as many as possible. They were given the instructions to not judge or edit, but rather, to just make the list. Typical responses included things like travel, hobbies, etc.

    Next, they were each asked to identify, individually, something that made the person unique within the group, and then list the elements of that story on the whiteboard, outside the circle. Each individual described an experience that was fairly unusual (for example: "I lost my passport while in a foreign country and found out from a cab driver that I could get a new passport photo from a guy in a van outside the airport").

   After each small group had completed their lists, the facilitators reconvened the large group, and each group had to present all of their items (both common and unique) to the entire group.

   Purpose:
   For participants to get to know one another at a bit deeper level, by sharing something personal about themselves that would probably not come up in the course of a normal work day.

2. Freeze Tag Presentation

   Description:
   Typically, the game of Freeze Tag involves two participants who begin to act out a random scene together, based on an initial suggestion from the audience. Then, when the players get into an interesting pose or gesture, the audience yells "freeze" and a new, completely unrelated scene begins, based on the frozen positions from the previous scene. In a performance setting, one or both of the "frozen" players would get tagged out by another performer, who would then have to begin the new scene, based on the frozen position.

   In this training session however, the facilitators began a two-person scene, based on a suggestion from the group. As the scene progressed (typically only 10-15 seconds or so).

a group member would yell "freeze," and the facilitators would begin a new scene. What became evident to the group members after several rounds of "freezing," was that the facilitators were generating all of their ideas for the scenes from the group's whiteboard lists from the previous exercise, with each scene being based on one of the unique experiences of the group. The facilitators performed a separate scene that corresponded to the unique experience of each member of the training group.

Purpose:
Freeze Tag is used both as a warm-up exercise, as well a game that is used in performance. The goal is to force the players to think quickly and to make spontaneous choices based on whatever image comes to mind from the poses that the players are frozen in. It is a very effective way to demonstrate and practice creativity and free association of ideas, and can go in whatever direction the players take it. It is also an exercise that all members of the group can get involved in, as it is oftentimes done is a circle. It also helps participants to learn to generate creative ideas based on visual stimuli, in this case, the frozen position of two individuals.

In this case, the exercise was a way to demonstrate to the participants one of the many activities that improvisers have available, as well as to demonstrate what a professional improvisation game looks like. However, not only did the impetus for the next scene come from the frozen pose of the performers, but the scene was then also based on the unique experience listings of the participants. This was a very creative way to allow the group members to see each of their individual unique experiences acted out in a humorous, entertaining manner.

Warm-Up Exercises

4. Shake it Out

   Description
   In this exercise, participants stand in a circle as the facilitator and the group together count down from 8 to 1 while everyone shakes out various parts of their bodies. For example, "Right arm: 8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1; left arm: 8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1," continuing with legs, hands, feet, etc. The exercise was then repeated at a faster rate, starting this time at 5, and then counting down to 1.

   Purpose
   This exercise is used as a physical warm-up for the body, to get the kinks out, and to get the blood flowing. It also helps to get everyone focused and engaged, and helps to begin to get everyone to be "in the moment." This is meant to be a very high-energy exercise.

5. Everybody Go…

   Description:

In a circle, one person starts by stepping up and announcing "Everybody go_____,"
while performing some type of big physical action, accompanied by a silly noise of some
sort. The group then responds together with "Yes," and they all perform the action and
noise in as big fashion as possible. For example:

> 1st person: "Everybody hop on one leg while making a whooping noise"

> Group: "Yes," then everyone performs the action and sound together

This continues around the circle until everyone in the group has had the chance to lead an
action

Purpose:
The purpose of this exercise is to help participants to break down barriers and filters. If
done within the spirit of the exercise, participants should try to be as silly and uninhibited
as possible, stepping out of their comfort zones if they can. It also helps participants to
explore their creative sides, as well as to begin to build the foundations of trust and
common bonds, through participating in a shared experience of this nature together.

6. Word Pizza
    (Note: A variant of this game is sometimes called "Wordball" by other improv groups.)

    Description:
    In this word-association exercise, participants stand in a circle, where the facilitator starts
    making a pizza-tossing motion, while then simultaneously tossing both the imaginary
    pizza and a random word to another person in the group. The receiver then has to start
    making the pizza-tossing motion and immediately respond with three words: (1) they
    have to repeat the word they just received, (2) state a second, related word (the first thing
    that comes into their heads), and (3) a third word, related to the immediately preceding
    word, while then simultaneously tossing the third word, along with the pizza, to another
    random person in the circle. For example:

    > Person #1:   "Car" (tosses "car," along with the pizza, to Person #2)

    > Person #2;   "Car," "Fast," Speed" (Person #2 tosses "Speed," along with the
    >   pizza, to Person #3)

    > Person #3:   "Speed," "Drugs," "Aspirin" (Person #3 tosses "Aspirin," along
    >   with the pizza, to Person #4, and the process continues)

    Purpose:
    The primary purpose of this exercise is to get the participants to begin to not "pre-think"
    their responses, and to learn to experience what it feels like to respond with whatever
    comes out of their mouths. The goal is immediate free-association, so the response does
    not have to make sense to anyone (including the person saying it), and there should be as

little thought put into it as possible—it is literally to say the first thing that comes to your mind.

The purpose of the pizza motion is solely to distract the participants so that they do not have as great an opportunity to "think" about their responses. And, in a further effort to minimize participants' opportunity to think about their responses, the facilitators will encourage the group to move as quickly as possible, speeding things up with each successive round. This exercise also forces participants to be in-the-moment, having to listen, focus, and concentrate on where the word-pizza is at any given moment, as it may be coming to them next.

What inevitably happens at some point during this game is that a participant will begin struggling, unable to generate a response, and the person is not used to thinking this quickly. They struggle to come up with the "correct" response, versus saying the first thing that comes to their minds. This is where participants begin to learn how and when mental walls might arise, along with what it feels like to try to overcome these barriers.

Application Exercises

7. <u>Sending a Synchronized Clap</u>

   (Version #1 – in a straight line)
   (Version #2 – in a circle)

   <u>Description</u>:
   In this exercise generally, an individual participant starts the exercise with a single clap, while at the same time pointing their extended hands and arms to another individual in the group, thus sending their clap to the second individual. The individual receiving the clap from the sender has to be aware that the sender is sending the clap to that specific receiver, and be ready to receive it or the transfer will be missed.

   The key here is that, if they are in-sync with one another, the sender and receiver should both clap at the same time. Once person #2 has received their clap, they then immediately attempt to establish non-verbal contact with a third person and pass their clap on to that individual. Ideally, there should only be one clap heard, per pair of individuals.

   The only way the sender can communicate to the receiver that the clap is coming is through eye contact, body language, and the clapping motion itself. This exercise should go in very rapid succession, with little to no break between senders. In fact, if done well, the group will begin to establish a kind of innate rhythm pattern within the group, where everyone is mentally in-sync with one another.

   In Version #1, the group members are all standing in a straight line while performing the exercise. In Version #2, the participants are standing together in a circle.

Purpose:
The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate and practice effective communication, as the sender and receiver have to be aware of one another, and they have to understand that a non-verbal communication is taking place between them. So, non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language are essential to the effectiveness of the game. A high level of concentration is also required at all times, as the participants all have to continuously watch everyone else, as no one knows when the clap is going to be passed to them.

If the group is truly in-sync, the sender and receiver should clap at the exact same time, as if it were one clap. To make the exercise more challenging, the group should attempt to do it faster and faster each time. The key however, is the synchronization of the claps between individuals. This indicates that they are both aware of the transmission and receipt of the message, with the clap representing the message.

In Version #1, because the participants are all standing in a straight line, this will make the exercise much more challenging, as the lack of ability to easily see one another will clearly inhibit effective communication between individuals. In Version #2, the game becomes easier, as the individuals can all see one another, thus improving the chances of sending and receiving the same message.

8. List of Five Items (Version #1 – items that already exist)

Description:
In this exercise, 5-6 participants stand in a line in front of the group. Each takes a turn listing five items that already exist, that are assigned to that person by the facilitator (for example, five book titles, or five television shows). After each item, the rest of the group counts up, beginning at one. So, for example:

> Facilitator: "List five book titles that already exist"
>
> Participant: "Gone with the Wind"
>
> Group: "One!"
>
> Participant: "The Shining"
>
> Group: "Two!", and so on.

The facilitator moves down the line until each participant has had the opportunity to complete their list (each person gets a different list).

Purpose:
The purpose is for the participant to think as quickly and spontaneously as possible, and to not filter the responses. The purpose of the group response it to build some excitement and encouragement for the participant. Remember, that in Version #1, the items are all

things that the person already has some familiarity with, so they are not creating things from scratch. Rather, they are just being asked to recall familiar items, as quickly as possible. The challenge comes when the participants thinks internally, "Is this the right response?" or, "Is this good enough?"

9. <u>List of Five Items</u> (Version #2 – items that do not already exist)

<u>Description</u>:
This is the same as the previous version, except that the list items are now for things that do not exist. For example, the list might be for five ice cream flavors, or five children's book titles that do not currently exist.

<u>Purpose</u>:
In this version, the participants now have to create something new. The participants will oftentimes want to come up with something clever or funny, but the point of the exercise (as with Word Pizza, above) is to just say the first thing that you think of, with as little filtering of the response as possible. The key to remember with improv is, that there are not wrong answers, and that is sometimes hard for participants to grasp at first.

<u>Session 2</u>

<u>Warm-Up Exercises</u>

1. <u>Shake it Out</u>

2. <u>Synchronized Clapping</u>

3. <u>Word Pizza</u>

4. <u>Reintroductions of the Group</u>

<u>Description</u>:
This exercise is similar to "Everybody Lets…" from the previous session, however here, the participants states their names, and then perform a silly action (a pirouette, for example). Together, the group then repeats the person's name and the action, simultaneously. Again, the goal is to make the action big, and silly, as this is meant to help reduce potential inhibitions of the group members.

5. <u>Zoom-Schwartz-Perfigliano</u>

<u>Description</u>:
In this exercise, the participants all stand in a circle and are given a set of instructions as to how to send the focus of energy around the circle among the group members. This focus is represented in a motion similar to the Synchronized Clapping exercise motion—a forward clapping motion, supported with eye contact and body language. The movement

of the focus of energy around the circle is dependent on a set of four instructional words: Zoom, Schwartz, Perfigliano, and Twizzler. Each word denotes a specific action/direction of the focus, as follows:

Perfigliano: Moves the focus either right or left, by one person.

Schwartz: Moves the focus to anyone in the group except to the person's immediate right or left.

Zoom: Returns the focus to the previous person.

Twizzler: Similar to a Perfigliano (that is, it moves the focus to the immediate right or left), but it must jump over the immediate next person first.

Purpose:
As noted above, this exercise parallels in some respects the Synchronized Clapping exercise from Session #1, except that now, participants have to contend with the added distraction of remembering the directional words, along with properly executing the instruction that is indicated by the word.

The key point with this exercise is the intense focus and concentration that is required on the part of the participants. If you take your head out of the game, even for a moment, you risk missing where the focus is, as well as where it is going. Plus, you have to constantly remember what each of the directional words means, both when the focus comes to you, as well as what you are then going to do with it to pass it on.

Application Exercises

6. Creating a Story Using Three Cards

Description:
Participants are paired into dyads and each participant is given a set of three cards with picture/images on them, from which they must create a story to tell their partner. The participants are given 2-3 minutes to create a story of approximately 60 seconds in length, that connects, in some way, the three images. The stories should be creative, and participants are encouraged to take liberties with the material, meaning that the stories do not have to be strictly linear in nature. Participants are also instructed to put some energy into it, and to make eye contact with their partners as they tell them their stories.

Purpose:
The purpose of this exercise is to make the story engaging to the storyteller's partner, with whatever tools the person has available (words, sounds, gestures, inflection, facial movements, etc.). This is an exercise in spontaneous, creative thought, in order to generate a continuous and coherent stream of consciousness, using three unrelated stimuli

as the foundation, and with virtually no preparation time. This exercise demonstrates where ideas might come from based on visual stimuli, and how to construct those ideas, into meaningful stories with virtually no preparation time. The story becomes almost, just a stream of consciousness for the participant.

7. <u>What's in the Box?</u>

<u>Description</u>:

The participants are asked to form two single-file lines of approximately equal length, with the first person in each line facing the other. The first person in Group #1 is assigned to offer an imaginary box to the first person in line for Group #2, who asks, "What's in the Box?" The person from Group #1 (the person offering) then has to respond with one of three types of responses, described below. The receiver (from Group #2) has to then find some way to respond to the item in the box in a positive fashion, regardless of what was given to them. The item is always referred to as a "gift," so the receiver must always find some way to demonstrate gratitude for the gift, in the form of "thank you," and a positive response.

Example #1: The gift is something positive

Offerer: (Hands an imaginary box to their partner)

Receiver: "What's in the box?"

Offerer: "It's a new house!"

Receiver: "Oh, that's great, thank you! I could use a new house, as I'm getting evicted from my apartment next month!"

Example #2: The gift is something negative

Offerer: (Hands an imaginary box to their partner)

Receiver: "What's in the box?"

Offerer: "A parking ticket".

Receiver: "Wow, thank you! I really wanted to meet that cute person at the parking ticket window at City Hall, so now I can do that!"

Example #3:   The gift is something that you might encounter specifically at work (both positive and negative versions)

              (same structure as above)

Purpose:
In this exercise, the point is to learn to look at all situations that you face as "gifts," and to look at all gifts as opportunities to turn the gifts into something positive. The response of "thank you" to all gifts helps participants to reinforce the idea that a positive reaction will go a long way when dealing with difficult situations.

8. Group Storytelling (4 versions)

Description - Version #1: One Word at a Time
In version #1, 5-6 participants stand in a line in front of the group and are asked to create a story together, with each person only allowed to add one word to the story at a time. One person starts the story, and after the person adds their word, the story moves sequentially down the line, with each person adding in their word. At the end of the line, the story circles back to the first person in line. This continues until the group feels that the story has reached a conclusion.

Description - Version #2: One Sentence at a Time
This is the same as Version #1, except that now the participants are allowed to add in one complete sentence at a time to the story.

Description - Version #3: One Sentence at a Time – Adding in "Yes…and"
This is the same as Version #2, except that now when the participants add in their one sentence to the story, the sentence must be preceded by the phrase "Yes…and."

Description - Version #4: Extemporaneous Story
In this version, one person steps out from the line of participants and has to begin a story, from scratch, based on a suggestion from the group observing the exercise. This person must continue talking, creating and telling the story on the fly, until one of the person's teammates taps the person out (or "saves" them"). This second person must then pick up the story as close as possible to where the first person left off, and must continue until that person is tapped out. This cycle continues until the group feels the story has reached a conclusion.

Purpose:
This is an exercise in creative, spontaneous thinking, being able to put together and sustain a cohesive line of thought over a sustained period of time. Another goal of the exercise is to learn to listen, focus, and concentrate intensely, so that the individual does not miss a part of the story. If a person "zones out" and gets out-of-the-moment, the person risks losing track of the story, and thus is not able to continue the storyline it in a logical fashion. The person risks letting the team down if not in-the-moment, as each person plays a role in achieving a successful resolution to the story.

<u>**Session 3**</u>

<u>**Warm-Up Exercises**</u>

1. <u>Shake it Out</u>

2. <u>Sending a Synchronized Clap</u>

3. <u>Zip-Zap-Zop</u>

   Description:
   This game is similar to Sending A Synchronized Clap (above) except that now, along with the clap that is sent to the next player, the person must also send one of the three words, Zip, Zap, or Zop, in that order, along with the clap. This game should go quickly, not giving the participants any time to think. If the first person receives a Zip, then that receiver sends a Zap to the next person, who, in turn, sends a Zop to the next person, and so on. This continues until the group loses track of where they are and the exercise breaks down.

   Purpose:
   The purpose is similar in some respects to Synchronized Clap, with the added difficulty of now having to also keep track of a word sequence. It forces participants to listen and concentrate even harder, as well as to continue to be in-sync with their fellow players. Everyone must pay close attention to where the game is, being in-the-moment at all times. Otherwise, participants risk missing something that was sent to them, or where the group is in the word sequence, thus breaking down the exercise.

4. <u>Word Pizza</u>

5. <u>List of 8 Things</u> (that do exist, and that do not exist; also, expanding the list from 5 to 8 items)

6. <u>Zoom-Schwartz-Perfigliano</u>

<u>**Application Exercises**</u>

7. <u>Group Brainstorming Activity – Distributing sandwiches to the homeless</u>

   Description:
   This exercise was designed as a real-world application of the cumulative exercise skills from the previous sessions. Here, the participants broke into three groups, and had to brainstorm different aspects of how to address a social problem in the area: how to assist an individual that distributes sandwiches to the homeless each day. The participants were given the background on the project, and the importance of the project to the community. The three ideas to brainstorm (one for each group), included:

    a. How to increase the scope and scale of the project?

    b. Create three marketing initiatives and related taglines in order to increase the visibility of the project, with the goal of heightening awareness, interest and participation in the project by the community.

    c. Identify several partnership strategies, including possible partners and sponsors.

Purpose:
The purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate, with a real-life situation, the process of creative brainstorming, and how the team members must work together to support one another in order to achieve the goal of helping to increase the effectiveness of this important charitable community service.

It reinforces skills such as listening to one another, supporting one another's ideas by deferring judgment (mentally saying "Yes…and"), and identifying creative ideas to solve a problem, using the technique of not filtering your ideas—by saying the first thing that comes to your mind. All of these skills and techniques were covered at some point during the previous training sessions.

Wrap-up Exercise

8. Matching Words

Description:
While in a circle, one person would toss a word to another person (similar to Word Pizza), but this time, both people have to try and mentally anticipate the related (second) word, and then both have to say their related word simultaneously, to see if the words match. Then, the receiver of the word would repeat the process to a third player.

Purpose:
To build concentration, and trying to get into the same mindset as your partner. This is the ultimate test of being in-the=moment, and being in-tune with your partner and the group. Again, intense concentration, listening, and focus are key.

And finally, the true underlying purpose of each and every one of the exercises listed in this Appendix was . . . to have fun!

Appendix B

E-mail Invitation to Participate in the Study

Hello:

This is Dave Olson and, as you may know, I am conducting a doctoral research study through the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis on the topic of using theatrical improvisation as an organizational training and development tool. More specifically, my research is focused on attempting to gain an understanding of your experience as it relates to your participation in the experiential improvisational (improv) corporate training sessions with FACILITATOR ORGANIZATION (redacted). I would like to invite you to participate in this study.

My study consists of two parts. First will be to observe your three individual training sessions. My interest in this is to observe how participants respond to the interactive, participatory nature of this type of training. The second component of the study is to undertake voluntary follow-up interviews sometime after each training session with any participants who wish to share their experience with me. Here, I am interested in gaining an understanding of: (1) your individual experience relative to the improv training, from your point-of-view, (2) if this training has influenced your work, and (3) if you have any observations of self or others relative to this training.

Participation in the individual interviews is strictly voluntary, and you may choose to opt-out at any time during the study, with no penalties or repercussions of any type.

If You Would Like to Participate
The first round of individual interviews has been scheduled for Tuesday and Wednesday, October 27th and 28th at your offices at CLIENT NAME (redacted). I have blocked off one-hour sessions from 8:00 am - 12:00 pm and from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm each day, in order to give you some flexibility in your scheduling. I do not anticipate that the interviews will take the full hour, but for this first set of interviews, I will need to review with you prior to the interview our university's Informed Consent/Confidentiality protocol, a copy of which is attached for your review. I will also review this form with you at the beginning of our individual sessions and answer any questions that you may have regarding the study.

If you would like to participate in the interviews, please email me back with 2-3 preferred times somewhere within those two days listed above, and I will get back to you with a time and date confirmation. If you have no time preference (that is, you can make it anytime during the two days), just let me know that, as well. As I am sure you will understand, for confidentiality purposes, I am unable to post the typical "group sign-up" sheet, as all interviews will be kept in the strictest confidence.

I hope you will consider sharing your experience with me. If you have any questions regarding the study, please do not hesitate to contact me at olso8253@stthomas.edu, or at 612-799-1490. Thank you for your willingness to consider participating in this study.

Dave Olson

Appendix C

Approved Participant Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

Olson Doctoral Dissertation Project

IRB log number: 805953-1

My name is David Olson. I am a doctoral candidate and I am conducting doctoral research regarding the use of experiential theatrical improvisation techniques as a corporate training method. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a member of the Innovative Fellows Program at the Medical Device Center at the University of Minnesota. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being supervised by Dr. John Conbere, and is being conducted through the University of St. Thomas, School of Counseling, Education and Leadership, Department of Organization Learning and Development.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to attempt to gain an understanding of your experience as it relates to your participation in experiential improvisational (improv) corporate training. My specific research question is as follows:

> *"What is the perceived impact of interactive, experiential theatrical improvisational training on individual participants and their related work groups when it is used for employee development purposes?"*

My study will consist of two parts. First will be to observe the three individual training sessions your employer has scheduled for you. My interest in this is to observe how participants respond to the interactive, participatory nature of this type of training. The second component of the study is to undertake voluntary follow-up interviews after each training session with any participants who wish to share their experience with me. Here, I am interested in gaining an understanding of: (1) your individual

experience relative to the improv training, from your point-of-view, (2) if this training has influenced your work, and (3) if you have any thoughts or observations of self or others relative to this training.

Participation in the individual interviews is strictly voluntary, and you may choose to opt-out at any time during the study, with no penalties or repercussions of any type.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in the three interactive training sessions that your employer has set up for you;
2. Participate in confidential, one-on-one interviews with me subsequent to each training session.

Each of the three training sessions is scheduled to last for approximately three hours, and will be coordinated through your employer. Each of the three individual interviews is expected to last no more than 30 minutes or so. I would like to request that I obtain your permission to audio tape your interview. So, before the beginning of each interview, I will notify you of my intent, and gain your affirmative consent before taping our interview session. You may decline my request to tape the session, for any or no reason, without any penalty or repercussion.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has no discernable risks to any of the participants.

There are no direct benefits that any participant will receive for participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or your position in any way. The types of records I will create include:

1. Personal field notes from my observations of the three training sessions
2. Personal notes from each of our individual interview sessions
3. Audio recordings of each of our individual interview sessions (with permission)
4. A written transcription of our individual interview sessions
5. Data analysis worksheets that will be used to analyze, code and categorize my observations and interview responses.

All electronic files and records will be kept on a password-protected laptop computer, which will be continuously backed up to a password-protected cloud-based Dropbox account. All hand-written records (notes, etc.) will be kept in a locked file in my office. No one other than me will have access to the audio recordings, and all recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study. I also plan to use a professional transcriber who will create written transcripts of the interviews from the recordings. The

transcriptionist has signed a confidentiality agreement and has agreed not to discuss or disclose any information in the recordings with anyone other than me.

In order to ensure the complete anonymity and confidentiality of all of the study's participants, I will assign pseudonyms to all interviewees, which will be used throughout the study, in all notes, records and final reports. In addition, I will not disclose to anyone that is going through the training, nor to your employer nor to any member of facilitation group, who is or is not participating in the interviews.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your fellowship position at the University of Minnesota, or the University of St. Thomas. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time up to and until the time of, or anytime during your individual interviews. Should you decide to withdraw from the study, data collected by me up to the time of your withdrawal may be used in the study, unless you request that it not be used in any fashion. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask, for any reason.

Contacts and Questions

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later on, you may contact me at any time at 612-799-1490. You may also contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. John Conbere, at 612-387-6057 should you have any questions or concerns regarding any aspect of this study. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I also agree to have my individual interviews audio recorded, and understand that the recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

_____   _____
  Signature of Study Participant   **Date**

_____
  Print Name of Study Participant

_____   _____
    Signature of Researcher   **Date**