

**Session M309**  
**Using Improv Techniques to Teach Managers**  
**Recognition Skills**

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Session Learning Objectives:

1. Develop a repertoire of improvisational games for use in training.
2. Use the links between improv and effective management to develop your programs.



## ***Why Use Improv Games in Training?***

- Increase retention of materials
- Energize participants
- Draw attention to areas that require improvement
- Spice up training
- Build skills
- Facilitate lasting change

## ***What is the Improv/Recognition Connection?***

Employees want managers who:

- Listen respectfully
- Pick up on cues to needs and preferences
- Demonstrate trust
- Value opinions
- Are approachable
- Give clear and specific feedback

When they have a manager who does these things, they feel valued and recognized. Improv builds these recognition skills.

## **Principles of Improv**

- 1) Make each other look good.**
- 2) Accept all offers.**
- 3) Be obvious; not clever.**
- 4) Fail with humor**
- 5) See opportunities, not threats**

## Glossary of Improv Terms

### **Accepting**

Embracing offers.

### **Advancing**

Moving the scene forward, building on what has been presented.

### **Blocking**

Rejecting an offer from another player.

### **C.R.O.W.**

Character, Relationship, Objective, and Where – the critical elements of a scene.

### **Driving**

Taking over the scene.

### **Endowing**

Making an offer as to the attributes of another performer's character.

### **Gagging**

Saying or doing something funny at the expense of the scene.

### **Naming**

Identifying characters, relationships, objects, and locations.

### **Narrative**

The story that players develop as the scene progresses.

### **Objective**

What a character in the scene is trying to achieve.

### **Offer**

Any dialog or action which advances the scene.

### **Reincorporation**

Bringing back an idea from earlier in the scene, or from a previous scene.

### **Status**

A character's rank or standing in relation to the other characters..

### **Talking heads**

A scene without action where people simply talk.

## Improv Game Synopses

The exercise synopses will provide reminders of the activities from the workshop. If you did not attend, you may find that you do not have adequate information to recreate the activity.

### Circle Mirror

*Up to 20 people*

Everyone stands in a circle. Take turns pointing at someone in the circle until all have been selected (a hand on the head or chest until the selection process is complete can help immensely). Put hands down. Give the following directions to the group: "Copy the movements of the person you pointed to. Do not initiate any movements." Debrief on the desire to drive rather than to observe and take cues from others.

### Eye Contact - Walking

*Any size group*

The group forms a circle. Whoever is chosen to start (person A), makes eye contact with someone in the circle. When the person who is being looked at (B) notices the eye contact, they make a small noise of surprise. This then permits A to start walking toward them. B then must make eye contact with someone else in the circle before A reaches them and takes their place in the circle.

### It's Tuesday

*Performed in pairs*

The first player makes a mundane, emotionally uncharged statement (like "I see the rain has stopped.") The second player responds in a highly emotionally charged manner (such as "The rain has stopped! Oh no, I bet the family business on the rain continuing for two more days!")

### Mantra Walking

*Any size group*

An improv mantra is a statement that the player repeats to his or herself and uses to affect their behavior towards other players. For mantra walking players all take on the same mantra and then interact with one another. The facilitator has the group "try on" various mantras in order to see how each affects behavior.

## Mantra Meeting

*Groups of four to five players*

Played after Mantra Walking. Explain the idea of self-talk that occurs in the workplace. Participants are then encouraged to adopt a mantra based on common workplace self-talk themes (alternatively you can give them slips of paper with mantras to use. Have the groups hold a meeting to plan a project, using their mantras to influence their behavior. In the debrief, people should attempt to guess the mantras of the other participants. Talk about how behavior and results are affected by mantras.

## Clap About

*Up to 20 people*

Everyone stands in a circle. There are three clap options: clap right, clap left, or clap across the circle. The first person makes eye contact with the person to their left or right and synchronizes their clapping. The person on the receiving end then passes it to someone else by making eye contact and synchronizing the clap. As with Zip, Zap, Boing it is best to start by passing in one direction only until a rhythm is established.

## Mindset

*Performed in pairs*

Everyone stands face to face in pairs and shuts their eyes. Tell participants that their partner has come to them for advice on a business matter. Tell them that they're going to be given a series of phrases and that all participants are to make a gesture that they believe is appropriate for that phrase. After each phrase ask participants to open their eyes and observe their partner. Include phrases that encourage both a directive and inclusive mindset. Debrief on the effect of your partner's gestures.

## Sounds Good to Me

*Performed in pairs*

One player makes offers to which the other player may only say "Yes," "Sounds good to me!" or "I'll go along with that!"

## Status Walking

*Any size group*

- 1) Divide the group into *As* and *Bs*. Direct everyone to mill around the room. *As* attempt to make and hold eye contact for as long as reasonable before moving on. *Bs* try to look at the other person without making eye contact. Swap roles. Debrief for any associated status behaviors that participants have taken on.
- 2) All take on the characteristics they associate with high status, then low status.
- 3) Choose your status and interact with someone. Guess their status by pointing up (high), down (low), or sideways (middle).

## Word at a Time Story

*Up to 20 people*

Everyone stands in a circle. The object is to tell a story. In turn, going around the circle, each player provides one word of the story. Continue around the circle as many times as it takes until the story is complete.

## Yes, And

*Performed in pairs*

Use the exercise to practice accepting offers. After the first line of dialogue, each line begins their line with 'Yes, And.' You can have participants try to plan anything that is relevant to your organization.

## Yes, But Meeting

*Groups of four to five players*

A team enacts a short meeting together to plan a party. The first time round, every suggestion must be countered with 'No, because...'. The meeting is then replayed with participants responding to each suggestion with 'Yes But...' and then again with 'Yes And...'. Debrief on the level of progress the team makes in each round, as well as the difference in body language, pacing, and vocal style that comes organically out of the different styles.

## Yes, Lets

*Any size group*

Players mill around. The facilitator provides a location, e.g. a factory, a park, or a classroom. One player suggests an action. All players that like the action yell 'Yes, Let's' and start doing it. Whoever is not comfortable with the suggestion steps out to the sidelines, until the next suggestion.

## Zip, Zap, Boing

*Up to 20 people*

Everyone stands in a circle. There are three sound/movement combinations: Zip (gesture/pass to the right or left), zap (gesture/pass across the circle), or Boing (crossed arms to bounce back to the sender). The first person "Zips" the person to either side. That person then zips the next person until it has been around once. At this point you can begin to introduce unpredictability using Zap and Boing.

## Resources

*Improv for Storytellers*, 1999, Keith Johnstone - From the “father” of improv, this book provides great grounding in improv and storytelling, as well as lots of exercises you can use.

*Improv Yourself*, 2003, Joseph Keefe – Looks at the role of improv in a business environment.

*Improvise This!*, 2002, Mark Bergren, et al – Takes a personal growth perspective on building important business skills.

*Make Their Day! Employee Recognition That Works*, 2003 Cindy Ventrice – Shows leaders how to create an environment where people feel valued. Available in the ASTD bookstore and all major booksellers.

*Recognition Strategies That Work*, 2005, Cindy Ventrice – A step-by-step guide to the leadership strategies that create a culture where people feel valued. Available only on Amazon and at [www.maketheirday.com](http://www.maketheirday.com)

*Training to Imagine*, 2001 Kat Koppett – The most straight-forward tool for incorporating improv into your training programs.

## Websites

[www.alexlambtraining.com](http://www.alexlambtraining.com)

[www.improvencyclopedia.org](http://www.improvencyclopedia.org)

[www.learnimprov.com](http://www.learnimprov.com)

[www.maketheirday.com](http://www.maketheirday.com)

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**Cindy Ventrice** is an employee loyalty expert. Her organization offers consulting, coaching, surveys and focus groups, facilitated discussion groups, team retreat facilitation, and training all geared towards improving workplace morale and productivity. She has

worked with managers and supervisors in 14 countries. Her clients have included Cisco, MIT, State Farm Insurance, and WorksafeBC.

Ms. Ventrice, the author of ***Make Their Day! Employee Recognition That Works*** and ***Recognition Strategies That Work***, is a frequent speaker and has been quoted in national magazines, newspapers, radio, and television regarding what employers and employees can do to improve workplace morale and productivity.

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To learn more about Make Their Day! recognition visit both [www.maketheirday.com](http://www.maketheirday.com) and [www.maketheirday.wordpress.com](http://www.maketheirday.wordpress.com).



**Alex Lamb** has improvised for fourteen years and taught for seven. In that time he has founded three theater companies, trained business leaders from all over the world, and pioneered techniques now used from London to San Francisco. His clients have ranged from British Telecom and the University of Norwich Business School in Britain, to Cisco and UC Santa Cruz in the U.S.

Alex started his career as a machine-learning researcher at Edinburgh University before becoming a business consultant with Arthur Andersen.

With twenty years of experience in the software industry, he now splits his time between using improv to teach management skills and developing high-end custom business simulations to achieve the same goals. He is currently with Insight Experience, a leading international simulation provider who emphasizes bridging the gap between soft and hard skill development.

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Choosing the appropriate activities for your training:

	Game		Storytelling	Listening	Awareness	Accepting	Positive	Trust	Playful
WU	Zip, Zap, Boing	All		X	X				X
WU	Clap About	All			X				X
WU	Eye Contact - Walking	All			X				
WU/CZ	Circle Mirror	20			X			X	
CZ	Word at a Time Story	10	X	X		X			
CZ	Yes, Lets	All				X	X		X
CZ/AO	Sounds Good to Me	Pairs		X		X	X		
AO	Yes, But Meeting	Pairs		X		X	X		
AO	Yes, And	Pairs				X	X		
AO	It's Tuesday	Pairs		X		X	X	X	X
AO	Mindset	All			X	X			
S	Status Walking	All			X				
S	Mantra Walking	All			X		X		
S	Mantra Meeting	5		X	X				

Legend:

- WU Warm up exercises
- CZ Comfort zone stretches
- AO Accepting offers
- S Status