

EXERCISE: IMPROVISATION FOR CREATIVITY

AUTHOR: LAKSHMI BALACHANDRA

Description

This series of three short improvisational exercises offers students the opportunity to identify personal limitations to idea generation and reflect on situations where creativity may have been stifled. Students will consider their personal abilities and reactions to their improvisational abilities, as well as approaches to incorporate improvisational thinking in entrepreneurial endeavors. The overall goal is to demonstrate how students can develop an entrepreneurial mindset through improvisation. Such exercises are routinely used for developing improvisational actors as well as for pre-show warm-ups for the actors. This methodology was created in the 1960s and remains the standard by which individuals learn to improvise. Improvisation is an important component of the entrepreneurship method because idea generation and the ability to incorporate relevant, timely information are critical skills for developing new ventures that will not only survive but thrive.

Usage Suggestions

These exercises work for all audiences, undergraduate, graduate, or practitioner. It is particularly relevant for new venture creation courses, entrepreneurial creativity and/or leadership courses, entrepreneurship bootcamps, and workshops.

Learning Objectives

- Cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset.
- Recognize limitations of entrepreneurial thinking (what holds one back).
- Practice improvisation for idea generation and creativity.

Materials List

None.

Pre-Work Required by Students

The optional readings below may be used for pre-work or post-work, depending on the audience.

Theoretical Foundations

- Spolin, V. 1959. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Johnstone, K. 1999. *Improv for Storytellers*. New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books.
- Hmieleski, K.M., and Corbett, A.C. 2008. The contrasting interaction effects of improvisational behavior with entrepreneurial self-efficacy on new venture performance and entrepreneur work satisfaction. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 23(4), 482–96.
- Neck, H.M. 2010. Idea generation. In B. Bygrave and A. Zacharakis (eds.), *Portable MBA in Entrepreneurship* (pp. 27–52). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Balachandra, L., and Wheeler, M. 2006. What negotiators can learn from improv comedy. *Negotiation*, 9, 1–3.

Time Plan (1 hour)

This exercise can be extended to longer sessions so that students can begin brainstorming entrepreneurial ventures. For the purposes of an initial introduction to improvisation, this teaching note has been written so that the exercise requires at least 60 minutes.

Introduction

0:00–0:05 (5 minutes)

Begin the exercise by introducing the concept of improvisation: Ask students generally if they know what improvisation means. Opening questions for the discussion can include:

- What does improvisation mean to you?
- Where have you seen improvisation?
- Has anyone performed improvisation? Seen it performed?

Overview

0:05–0:15 (10 minutes)

Explain how the students will learn the basics of improvisation and see how they could apply it to entrepreneurship, in particular idea generation and creating new ventures. The instructor can show examples of comedy improvisation performance (either live or through video clips from YouTube. Some good short examples include scenes from the ABC show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* An example clip can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qd8bvNW9_h4). After sharing an example,

discuss how performing improvisation can be learned: there are lessons offered for comedy improvisation and improvisational acting performance in improv theaters worldwide. An established framework exists to learn how to improvise. For this class, improvisation equals thinking on your feet. They will now be "in" an improv classroom, and every improvisation theater class begins with warm-ups. In order to think on their feet, they have to get up on their feet.

0:15–0:20 (5 minutes)

Warm-up 1

- Tell them to begin walking around the classroom and to observe every single object in the room.
- Then tell them to point at objects as they walk past them.
- As they point at each object they are to say what it is out loud – only they cannot call it what it actually is. They are to label it something it is *not*. And they are to do it quickly. Provide a quick example by pointing to an object in the room like the board and then say out loud "dog," and then point at another object like the desk and call it "potato" or whatever comes to mind.

After one to two minutes of them walking and pointing and labeling out loud, ask them to stop and be silent wherever they are for a group discussion.

When they stop, have them discuss how the experience of labeling objects was for them. Try to push them to explain what they were feeling. Some of the following questions can be used for this debrief:

- How was this experience?
- Did you find this exercise difficult to do? Why?

Summary of warm-up 1 Students should experience and be able to articulate:

- how difficult it is to break away from known "answers";
- how frequently they can get stuck in known patterns of thinking;
- the ease with which they start creating patterns with a known group: ing (e.g. eggplant, cucumber, tomato, lettuce), which is a way to make the experience easier (get the "right" answer) as opposed to pushing and fostering creativity;
- the need for students to want to be in control, rather than searching for newness or playing;
- feeling the sense of awkwardness in saying the "wrong" label out

loud, but having others around doing a similar activity makes the exercise less awkward;

- how easy it can be just to listen to others and follow their answers rather than coming up with their own new idea.

Warm-up 2

0:20–0:25 (5 minutes)

- Tell them to begin walking around the classroom again.
- When they come up to another student, they are to point at another student and name an animal, any animal that comes to mind, e.g. two students face each other and one points at the other and says "horse."
- Then tell them that the student who has been pointed at and labeled with a type of animal has to make the sound of the animal. If they do not know what sound the animal makes, they are to make it up and make some sort of sound.
- Then they switch, and the student who just produced the animal sound – in this example, the horse sounds – points at the first student and names an animal, e.g. "cat." This student then makes the sounds of whatever animal he or she was given.
- Once the interaction is completed, and both students in the pair have completed their animal sounds, they are to find new partners and repeat the warm-up exercise with two or three other students.

After two to three minutes of animal sounds, ask them to stop and be silent wherever they are for a group discussion.

Have them discuss how the experience of making animal sounds was for them. Try to push them again to explain what they were feeling. Some of the following questions can be used for this debrief:

- How was this experience?
- Did you find this exercise difficult to do? Why?

Summary of warm-up 2 Students should experience and be able to articulate:

- feeling a great sense of awkwardness – they are doing something they would normally be comfortable doing with children, but typically have never done in a classroom of adults or peers;
- not knowing the right "answer" or sound a particular animal makes, they would feel very frustrated, and then forget the instruction they were given to just make it up;

- once again, the ease with which they follow patterns – patterns offer a way to make the exercise “easier,” as they offer a means to come up with an answer or a label quickly rather than pushing creativity;
- how difficult it is for them to have no control as to what they have to do, rather than stepping back, enjoying the ambiguity, and searching for newness or playing;
- the fear they have of being “foolish” in a professional setting, how they do not want to be embarrassed by acting silly in front of others, and, in addition, the fear of feeling guilty, foolish, or rude for labeling others as certain types of animals with distinct connotations;
- this fear leads to self-judging and/or editing before they label their peer with an animal or before making the corresponding animal sound.

0:25–0:35 (10 minutes)

Warm-up 3

- Tell them to form groups of four wherever they are in the room.
- Then instruct them to play a game of word association, where anyone can go first, say a word, whatever word comes to mind.
- The person to the left listens to the word and then says a word that comes to mind based on the word he or she just heard.
- They continue in this way until you stop them, and they are to go as fast as they can (tell them to listen for further instruction).
- Once they get started, let them go for a minute or so, and then very loudly instruct them to “Switch directions!”

After another one to two minutes of word association, ask them to stop and be silent. You can have them return to their seats at this point or have them stay where they are for the final group discussion.

Now have them discuss how the word association experience was for them. Most will say this was easier to do, as they were in a group setting. So push them to explain what was happening rather than what they were feeling. Some of the following questions can be used for this debrief:

- How was this experience? If this was easier than the last two warm-ups, why?
- If you found this exercise more difficult than the last two, why?
- What happened when you were told to change directions? Why did this happen?

Summary of warm-up 3 Students should experience and be able to articulate:

- the ease again they experienced of getting into routines or patterns – how much they wanted to “control” the situation and outcomes;
- how much they were trying to be clever, or funny, rather than just coming up with any word that came to mind and following the exercise;
- typically they do not enjoy the ambiguity and opportunity to play and explore newness;
- self-judging occurs again, they feel limited in the direction for the exercise, and what words they allow themselves to say owing to their need to feel included or pressure to continue established patterns rather than pushing creativity and undefined randomness;
- students typically are *not* listening to the last word they just heard, and instead they focus on the words that people two ahead of them in the exercise are saying, as this way they can plan their response (this is highlighted with the change directions instruction).

Discussion

0:35–1:00 (25 minutes)

Once the students return to their seats, have them form groups of three to four and discuss what might be preventing their idea generation efforts related to initial new venture concepts. They should explore what holds them back when considering what they might do. Have them discuss the specific difficulties they experienced personally during the improvisation exercises and how they might get past these limitations to develop a more entrepreneurial mindset. Have a member of each group report out one recommendation for fostering creativity through improvisation. A closing discussion should include how to incorporate improvisation in their idea generation practices.

Key Takeaways

- How to incorporate improvisation to develop an entrepreneurial mindset: being quick on your feet and adapting or reacting rather than planning and pre-judging.
- Identifying and recognizing personal limitations to entrepreneurial thinking (why students are held back from creativity in idea generation, what their personal pitfalls are).
- How to develop an entrepreneurial mindset by incorporating tenets of fast and free thinking through improvisation for idea generation and creativity.

Teaching Tips

It is important to keep the warm-up exercises moving fast. It might be helpful to tell the students before they begin the exercises that they will feel really uncomfortable, but feeling uncomfortable is the point of the exercise. In the debrief discussions, some students will genuinely enjoy the exercises and will say they found nothing in them difficult. Asking for a show of hands of those who found the exercise difficult to do first is often a better way to begin the debrief, before asking about how they found the experience (in case the students who enjoyed the exercises stifle the discussion). In warm-up 3 it is very helpful to move around the room encouraging groups to speed up their words so that there are no long pauses. It is important for them to think quickly and see how to come up with new ideas rather than thinking or planning and judging their ideas before they see where the new ideas can take them.

Attribution

These exercises are based on foundational exercises used in improvisational training, widely taught in improvisational theater courses worldwide.