

# Build a Better Team With Improv

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## Pre-Ramble

Thank you for attending this session and taking the risk of putting down your computers, iPads and iPhones and spending three hours on your feet getting outside of your comfort zone. Our sincere hope is that this seminar opened your eyes to some of the possibilities that

improvisational techniques can make in your company and in your own development as a person, an employee and a team member. It was incredibly gratifying to see the group change from a collection of strangers to a group of people with shared experiences over the course of the afternoon. You are all rock stars.

Because we didn't know if we were going to have 10 or 100 attendees, we planned a range of activities and then (yes) improvised our way through the specific exercises. The following notes capture what we did in the workshop. If you have any follow-up questions, wish to discuss any concepts of applied improv in more detail, or just want to chat, please don't hesitate to contact us. We are passionate about helping businesses succeed through the power of saying "YES!"

## **Purpose of the Session**

The purpose of this session was to teach applied improv teambuilding techniques that you can use in your own company. Some of these you might wish to apply yourself. In other cases you may want to hire an improv company to come in and run the session themselves. The three specific sections of the session were:

1. Teambuilding exercises for fun and group unity
2. Improv-based techniques for brainstorming, ideation and getting to yes
3. Practice in presenting, speaking and interpersonal dynamics

It was our general hope that the "proof is in the pudding." By the end of the workshop, we genuinely wanted the attendees to feel like they were more of a team and knew each other better. Conferences such as OSCON can be very impersonal. We wanted to put everyone in the room on the same page for the rest of the week.

## **Our Agreement**

Before the session began, we all made the following agreement:

1. To give 100%, pushing outside our comfort zones and leaving our judgements (of ourselves and others) at the door.
2. To commit fully and work as a team.
3. To allow anyone to sit out any part of the session they weren't comfortable with (whether physically or emotionally), as long as they agreed that while sitting out they would not comment or judge on those who were participating.

## **Warm-Up Exercises**

These exercises were selected to gently introduce the attendees to one another, teach some techniques for learning (or reminding of) names and get people physically moving in the space and interacting with each other.

### **Name Circle**

We went around the circle and each attendee shared their name, where they were from and

what they did for fun. Different people chose to share the information in different amounts of depth and we didn't judge. We wanted to immediately show that there were no wrong answers in this workshop.

### **Cthulhu Name Technique**

We taught the "wiggle fingers under the chin" technique that allowed anyone in the session to be reminded of someone's name with no judgement. This is allowed to apply throughout the entire week of OSCON.

### **Line Up By**

Our first exercise to get people interacting. We asked people to line up across the room by height, age, day of birth, distance they traveled to OSCON and number of computers they have owned. This exercise immediately got people moving and talking to each other.

### **Hey Buddy**

Everyone is asked to walk about the room. At first they are told to avoid eye contact altogether. Then to make fleeting eye contact. Then to make more and more eye contact. Next, they are asked to briefly greet each other. Then greet each other for longer. And finally, to greet each other like a long-lost friend they had not seen in 20 years. We saw a range of different responses, from people tentatively shaking hands to others embracing each other in warm hugs. A definite physical and emotional icebreaker.

## **Teambuilding Exercises**

The following section of teambuilding exercises were used to get people playing, laughing and working together in teams. Some are easy, some are hard, and all are designed to get people working together on physical or mental challenges. All of them end up in varying degrees of laughter. *Don't ever underestimate the power of laughter.* When people laugh together after a shared experience, it creates strong bonds.

### **Paper Scissors Rock Battle**

An energy builder and exercise in positivity. Pair off in twos and play paper-scissors-rock. The winner goes to find another winner. The loser becomes the cheering section for the winner. Within a few rounds, the entire room is screaming and cheering for the last two winners. Engineers always enjoy figuring out the mathematics of how many rounds it will take to find the winner. :)

### **I Like People Who**

Form a circle in chairs, with one fewer chair than people. One person stands in the middle of the circle. They say, for example, "I like people who program in Javascript," and everyone to whom that applies must stand up and find another unoccupied chair. Whoever is left standing gets the honor of doing the next "I like people who..."

This exercise always gets people laughing and lets everyone learn more about each other and who has common interests. It's fun to watch the participants figure out the game and try techniques like very broad categories that force everyone up, or very specific categories to force one person up.

### **Tiger Martian Salesman**

Groups of three stand back-to-back, and on the count of three they act as either a tiger, martian or salesman. If all three do the same one, they "win" and cheer wildly. This exercise asks people to try to get a group mind going, and also to wildly celebrate even silly victories. It is strangely satisfying to have everyone do a martian.

### **Artist - Model - Clay**

In teams of three, one person strikes a physical pose as the model. One person is the clay, and they have their back to the model so they cannot see the physical position. The third person, the artist, must then "sculpt" the clay into the same position as the model, without speaking, touching the clay or physically demonstrating the position. After some of the high-energy exercises, we chose this to bring things to a more quiet, focused exercise that forces people to problem-solve together.

### **Knife**

In a group circle, one person mimes throwing a knife. The person they throw it at mimes catching it between two hands, and the people on either side of the catcher mime a ninja chop to the gut. This is a fun exercise that focuses on giving and receiving, paying attention and commitment.

Although all of these exercises are "games," this section was a very important part of the session, as they got the group laughing, playing, interacting and trusting. For a team to work effectively together they must first have mutual trust and an ability to communicate. The next sections of the session would not have been nearly as successful without the opening teambuilding section.

## **Brainstorming and Ideation Exercises**

In improv, we practice the rule of saying "Yes" to everything. Improv-based brainstorming encourages everyone to throw out ideas without judging their worthiness. Later, it's appropriate to evaluate and sift through ideas, but freedom to generate ideas without internal or external judgement can yield a wealth of amazing creativity.

### **Yes Circle**

To get us in the "Yes!" frame of mind we stand in a circle. One person points at another and the

person who was pointed at says “Yes!” The person who pointed then goes and takes the other person’s spot in the circle. Repeat, trying to go faster and faster, getting everyone in the “Yes!” frame of mind.

### **Yes-But / Yes-And Party**

Divide into groups of 4-8 people (the exact number is unimportant). One person is elected as captain, and that person proposes a theme for a party (i.e. “A unicorn party”). Go around the group and continue to add ideas about the party, each one starting with the word “But.” After a minute, each group shares details about the party they created.

Elect a new captain, create a new party, and repeat the exercise, using sentences that start with “And” instead of “But.” Report on these new parties that were created.

In every case, using “And” (an additive word) instead of “But” (a limiting word) allows for much broader ideas. With “But,” the group becomes focused around what WON’T work. With “And,” the group becomes focused around what ELSE will work. A great demonstration of the simplicity of adding and saying yes without judging.

### **Post-It Brainstorming**

Divide into new groups of 4-8 people. Each group is given pens and post-it notes and asked to spend two minutes, as fast as they can, brainstorming ideas for the perfect restaurant. The goal is not to judge or question the ideas, but simply to get as many ideas onto the wall as possible. At the end, the groups share their ideas and we see the wonderful range of possibilities, some absurd, some logical and some genuinely fresh and unique. Also, many involved bacon.

### **Fraternity Handshake**

After returning from a 30-minute break, we did this quick exercise in matching, acceptance and saying yes to all ideas. Form a circle and two people begin approaching each other. They make up a crazy “fraternity handshake” involving many physical movements and gestures, each accepting and mirroring and adding to what the previous person did.

### **The Advertising Game**

Break into groups of 4-8. Each group is asked to come up with a product, a description of the product, and how it will be marketed, in one minute. The only rule is that everyone has to shout “Yes! Yes!” to *every* idea that gets thrown out. This exercise demonstrates how fast you can make progress when everyone’s first reaction is positive. For anyone who has ever been in hours of bogged-down meetings, this exercise should be a breath of fresh air.

After each group reports on their product, they are given another two minutes to come up with a slogan, jingle and choreography to sell the product. Each group then reports the slogan and performs the jingle and choreography. It’s amazing to see how quickly each group was able to perform these tasks by all simply saying “Yes!”

## **Presenting, Speaking and Inter-Personal Dynamics**

The third part of the session allowed the attendees to apply some of the earlier learnings to games and exercises that challenge their confidence presenting in front of a group, their acceptance of one another and just a smidge of beginning improv scenework for fun and as a preview of what they might find if they take an improv class.

### **Dr. Know-It-All**

Four people stand in a line, and are the doctor who knows the answer to everything. The audience asks them questions, and they answer one word at a time. It's a great exercise in listening, presenting and not judging when things go wrong (as they inevitably do).

### **String of Pearls**

Eight people stand in a line. One person steps forward to say the first line of a made-up story. One person steps out and says the *last* line of that story. One person steps out and says the middle line of the story. Then each of the remaining people step forward and choose any place to add a line of the story. Ideally, in the end, it tells a coherent, linear story.

This is a great exercise in listening, problem solving, and jumping in with the trust that your teammates will be there to catch you and make you look good. No matter how absurd the last line of the story, someone else will jump in to make your choice look like the right choice. Technical groups are particularly good at the puzzle-solving aspect of this game.

### **Two Truths and a Lie**

Three people stand up. Two are given slips of paper that say "True." One is given a slip of paper that says "Lie." They are asked a simple question (i.e. "Where did you go to college and what did you study?") and they either answer truthfully or with a lie. The liar tries to make their response sound as truthful as possible, and the audience guesses who is the liar. This is an exercise in presenting with confidence.

### **Arms Expert**

One person is interviewed while a second person provides the arms for that person. An exercise in listening. The person doing the arms tries to provide appropriate arm gestures for the speaker, and the speaker tries to say things that justify the arm motions.

### **Two-Line / Four-Line Scenes**

Divide into two lines. One person steps forward from each line and they have a two-line scene. The goal of the second person is to accept, say yes (or equivalent) and add some information. Repeat exercise, going for four-line scenes.

## **Wrapping Up**

We ended the session in the circle with the attendees sharing their observations. We were thrilled that people had insights such as:

- Saying yes and being positive can help you as a leader.

- Not initially judging ideas can let more people have a voice and more ideas flourish.
- Playing together is fun and brings everyone together as a team.
- When everyone agrees to work together outside their comfort zone, everyone can be comfortable.

As session leaders, our observation was that over the course of three hours the group transformed from a tentative, distant collection of strangers to a cohesive team of people who had shared experiences and a much better chance of interacting over the course of the remainder of OSCON. If a group of complete strangers could make this transformation in three hours, we hope this helped everyone to see the possibilities that applied improv could have within your own companies.

## Where to Go From Here

If you found this session valuable and are intrigued about bringing applied improv techniques back to your company, there are many available resources. Applied improv can be used for many purposes within a company, including teambuilding, brainstorming and ideation training, and sales or customer support training. A trained applied improv company should be able to tailor a workshop to your specific needs. That's the beauty of improv.

### Do it Yourself

You can take any of the exercises from this session and try them within your own company or workgroup. Remember to keep an attitude of openness, positivity and "Yes!" Don't judge, and remember the agreement that anyone can sit out if they don't feel comfortable.

It is often more effective to have these workshops facilitated by an outside person or company, and your city should have improv resources that can design training for you.

### To find improv training in your city

Search the web for "Applied improv," "Improv teambuilding," or "Improv sales training."

### Need help finding a resource?

Contact Andrew or Wade and we can help you find a resource in your city. We know people.

### Take an improv class

Improv classes are incredibly fun and may be the single best tool you can put in your toolset for dealing with others, presenting, public speaking and just approaching life with a "Yes!" mindset. Both of our lives were *profoundly* changed by taking improv classes. A good class will be supportive and take you along gradually. Take a risk that could change your life forever. Take

an improv class. Contact Andrew or Wade for a recommendation in your city.

### **And finally**

The first step in building a better team with improv is to lead by example. You have the power to take everything you learned in this session and apply it to your own professional and personal life. Try saying “Yes!” instead of no. Try reserving judgement of others’ ideas and your own. Try taking risks and talking to someone instead of avoiding eye contact. The power starts with you.

## **Thank You!**

This was not the typical OSCON session. We can’t thank you enough for coming to our session, laughing, playing, sharing and taking risks. Please don’t hesitate to contact us if there’s anything else you’d like to chat about.

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Andrew & Wade  
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