

Off Script

MASTERING THE ART OF
BUSINESS IMPROV

PETER A. MARGARITIS, CSP, CPA

FOREWORD BY **JEFFREY HAYZLETT**

Chairman, The C-Suite Network

PREFACE BY **JAY SUKOW**

Founder, Today Improv



INTRODUCTION

I love a good challenge. Convincing business leaders that improv (i.e., improvisation) isn't just something that comedic actors do but that it's a powerful business tool — and an overall leadership method or mindset — has been one of the more difficult challenges of my career. I remain undeterred. The first part of the challenge starts with convincing executives, directors, and managers that I'm not suggesting they develop their team into the next ensemble cast of the American TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* The second part of the challenge involves busting the pervasive myth that people who improvise are just “winging it” and “making stuff up” as they go along.¹ And this is where I want to start our conversation about business improvisation — addressing the “winging it and making stuff up” myth in the improv process of preparation, practice, and letting go.

1 Fun fact: One of my trusted advisors suggested I title this book *Winging It!* I loved the playfulness of the title, which helped inspire me to choose *OffScript*. But, as you're about to learn, what the magic of “going off script” results when the speaker or leader is over-prepared and confident, not under-prepared and pulling off the bluff. Keep reading. This is about to get fun!

Preparation is a key to success and, if you've read my second book (*Taking the Numb Out of Numbers*), you know that I'm the king of preparation. Unfortunately, however, when most people think of improv, they think of off-the-cuff comments and unplanned behaviors; they don't associate improvisation with preparation. If you're approaching this book and are thinking the same thing — that "But Peter, improv is all about winging it!" — I promise to do my level best in changing your mindset. In fact, great leaders are masters of improvisation.

Great leaders are masters of improvisation.

By way of example, let me give you an insider's view of how I prepare for speaking engagements (a topic about which I know a thing or two, as I make my living as a professional speaker). When I prepare for any speaking engagement, I research the topic, take tons of notes, prepare my slide deck, rehearse the words and content, and practice the delivery of the presentation. Along the way, I think of questions that might be asked (and objections that might be raised!), obtain and study the demographics of the audience, develop a backup plan for travel delays, and discuss with the meeting planner the tech/AV requirements and room set-up details. When I'm preparing to deliver a virtual program, I do the same preparation but put extra focus on the development of a backup plan just in case I lose power in my home or off-site office, if the internet goes down, or if the computer crashes. Co-working spaces and hotels are the best alternatives. While much of this pre-event work is practical, part of this preparation sits in my subconscious mind — remembering prior experiences that went awry and the solution I applied to correct the issue. Mindset is part of preparation too. For me, this preparation gets very granular, and no stone is left unturned. Go ahead and say it — I know what you're thinking. I'm perhaps obsessed with preparation. But if I could be so bold as to advise you on this matter, I'd suggest you double-down on preparation too.

Practice Makes Perfect (or Close Enough)

In addition to preparation, an equally critical part of success when you're about to communicate (about an important topic, with important stakeholders, or during important moments) is practice. It doesn't matter whether you're getting on stage for a keynote address, stepping into the board room to make a high-stakes presentation, or broaching an important conversation with a colleague or customer, practice matters. I was asked recently to give a five-minute presentation. "What's the big deal," right? Five minutes sounds easy! Not so much. After I figured out how many words are spoken in five minutes (about 750 words), I wrote out my presentation to only have 400 words. I wanted enough time to allow for pauses and to keep my pace at a regular rate. So, I started to practice. I spent about five hours practicing for a five-minute presentation. I wasn't trying to memorize the presentation; I was working on the cadence, tone, pauses, body language. And all the while, I was placing tiny memory seeds in my brain. The worst thing you can do when giving a presentation is to go into it with no memory of having done it before. Pacing around your office or a hotel room or your living room, practicing what you're going to say is, indeed, giving your mind and your body (and even your tongue) the benefit of "having done this before."

**It doesn't matter whether you're
getting on stage for a keynote address,
stepping into the board room to make
a high-stakes presentation, or broaching
an important conversation with a colleague
or customer, practice matters.**

When it came time for me to speak on the fateful day of the five-minute presentation, I took a deep breath, trusted my preparation (not my instincts but my preparation!), and put all my notes and written text into a trash can. Then I leaned into the unknown and started speaking. The result was amazing — and the five-minute presentation was a huge success. I felt great — energized and confident and accomplished — and my audience got what

they bargained for and what they deserved. Because I let go of perfection and had fun — because I had prepared and practiced — I was able to guarantee a most exhilarating experience.

“Greatness is in the preparation, not the performance. Greatness is in the preparation.”

– DR. JACK HYLES

But what does preparation have to do with improv? Everything! You see, preparation and practice give you the foundation to be able to improvise. To be able to successfully go “off script,” you must first master the script (then throw it away).

When it came to that five-minute presentation with the five-hour practice session, I was able to bring passion into the conversation that I was having with the audience because I was well prepared. If I had been anxiously trying to read a script or remember what bullet points were in my notes or on my slides, I wouldn’t have been able to bring my best, most authentic, and most relatable self to that moment. I shared a couple of PowerPoint (PPT) slides with a few words and two pictures so the key points would be visible for the audience through the short presentation. At one point, I was actually able to slip in an inside joke (a mention of a “onesie”) just as it popped into my head at the right time. When I said it, I heard a huge laugh from the colleague for whom that the joke was reserved. *That* is improvisation!

Even when I tell this story to business leaders, they give me a polite “I get it” and start moving on. Then I ask them if they have ever delivered a scripted presentation to the board of directors, or a sales pitch to an important prospect, and if they’ve ever panicked when they sensed that their message was not being received accurately or with the intended emotional response. “Have you ever seen the crossed arms or the distracted glances toward the clock or the door or the raised eyebrow?” When given the time to reflect on the presentations they have given that didn’t quite hit the mark, the business leaders I’m talking to change that polite but disinterested look of “yeah, I kind of get what you mean” to “Oh, yeah ... I remember that time when ...”

Then I tell them about Martin Luther King.

Off-Script Moments in History

Did you know that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., improvised his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech? Most people (when asked this question — which I am prone to ask often) stop dead in their tracks and reply, “Seriously?” or with a confident, “No, he didn’t.” But it’s true. The historic “I have a dream” portion of King’s brilliant oration was not in his prepared speech that day. Dr. King had used the powerful “I have a dream” language in several speeches months before the March on Washington, but it was not planned for inclusion in his speech on that particular and historic day. It had been cut out ... because he had used it before.

Many people have told the “King improvised the speech” story, and all the credible accounts sound pretty much the same. Let me introduce you to (or help you revisit) a few facts about King, his speech-writing skills, his first forays with improvisation, and the “I Have a Dream” speech — facts and observations that are relevant to our conversation here about the value of “going off script” as a modern leadership strength. Let’s step back in time, long before the March on Washington, to see how a leader who loved his scripts learned to throw them away when the moment called for a different kind of leadership.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., began honing his speechmaking craft when he was 14. He won a speaking contest as a teen and an oratory award in college, and he was destined to deliver the kinds of remarks that would change lives and even a nation. He was meticulously prepared when it came to every word he spoke from a stage or a pulpit. Indeed, he was anything but an improviser. When Dr. King began his career as a preacher, he was known to spend 15 hours crafting each sermon and then committing it — word for word — to memory. He delivered those sermons to his congregation exactly as he had planned and scripted them. He did *not* go “off script.”

Then came an unexpected moment when there was no time to write and memorize a detailed speech. Rosa Parks, in December of 1955, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man in Montgomery, Alabama. Four days later, with just 20 minutes to prepare what he later called “the most decisive speech of my life,”² Dr. King spoke to an audi-

2 “Chapter 7: Montgomery Movement Begins,” Stanford, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/>

ence of 50,000 people at the Holt Street Baptist Church. He was responding to the news and to current events as they unfolded; the moment was now and there was no time for scriptwriting and a dozen hours of preparation, practice, or memorization. With just a few ideas planned in advance and with the pressure of a large crowd and several television cameras, he improvised brilliant moments like: “You know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression.” King was learning to improvise in real time.

“As he spoke, King listened to the crowd, feeling out their response, speaking in the moment,” explains bestselling author and renowned broadcaster Tim Harford. “His early sentences were experiments, grasping for a theme, exploring how each sounded and how the crowd responded. Each phrase shaped the phrase that followed. His speech was not a solo. It was a duet with his audience.”³

Eight years later, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States was in full force and Dr. King had since enjoyed the benefit of more experience when it came to trusting himself to go “off script” in front of big audiences. The night before the March on Washington, Dr. King and his inner circle were working on the final version of his speech for the next day. Dr. King felt that this needed to be a finely tuned speech — precisely crafted and with nothing left to chance. Dr. King wanted the speech to have a similar impact on the nation as the Gettysburg Address, so he had included the “I have a dream” paragraph because it had elicited positive results with previous audiences. But a member of Dr. King’s inner circle, Wyatt Walker, convinced King to cut the practiced segment because Walker felt that it had been used too many times in the past.⁴

On August 28, 1963, Dr. King was delivering his prepared remarks (a speech originally titled “Normalcy: Never Again”) to a quarter million people who

king-papers/publications/autobiography-martin-luther-king-jr-contents/
chapter-7-montgomery-movement.

- 3 Tim Harford, “Martin Luther King, Jr., the Jewelry Genius, and the Art of Public Speaking,” February 26, 2021, Podcast Episode, *Cautionary Tales with Tim Harford*, <https://timharford.com/2021/02/cautionary-tales-martin-luther-king-jr-the-jewelry-genius-and-the-art-of-public-speaking/>.
- 4 Rachel Chang, “Martin Luther King Jr.’s Famous Speech Almost Didn’t Have the Phrase ‘I Have a Dream,’” *Biography*, January 15, 2020 (updated January 19, 2021), <https://www.biography.com/news/martin-luther-king-jr-i-have-a-dream-speech>.

had marched to and through Washington, DC, when about two-thirds of the way into the speech, he decided to go “off script.” Perhaps he remembered that a great speech is a duet, and not a solo. He started improvising when he reached a sentence that felt clunky. Instead of calling on the crowd to “go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction” (quite a mouthful, indeed!), he went with:

“Go back to Mississippi; go back to Alabama; go back to South Carolina; go back to Georgia; go back to Louisiana; go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.”⁵

He paused for a moment, looking at his script, when Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who was standing near Dr. King, shouted out, “Tell them about the dream, Martin! Tell them about the dream!” Few people, it has been recounted, heard Mahalia’s words except for Clarence Jones (Dr. King’s advisor and speechwriter) and, of course, King. It’s up for debate whether Jackson’s words triggered King’s “off script” moment or whether he was headed for that improvisation on his own. But what we know for sure is that he didn’t deliver several paragraphs of the originally scripted speech. And the confidence and instinct to improvise allowed King to inspire a nation.

Just after the moment when Jackson shouted to him, which you might notice if you watch film footage of the speech, Dr. King leaves his prepared notes behind to improvise the entire next section of his speech — the historic section that began:

“And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”⁶

5 Emily Crockett, “The Woman Who Inspired Martin Luther King’s ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech,” Vox, January 16, 2017, www.vox.com/2016/1/18/10785882/martin-luther-king-dream-mahalia-jackson.

6 Carmine Gallo, “How Martin Luther King Improvised ‘I Have a Dream,’” Forbes, August 27, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carminegallo/2013/08/27/public-speaking-how-mlk-improvised-second-half-of-dream-speech/>.

Six minutes of Dr. King's 17-minute speech, now famously known as the "I Have a Dream" speech, were improvised.

Long after the March on Washington, Dr. King was asked about that moment of improv, and he said, "I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point ... The audience response was wonderful that day ... and all of a sudden this thing came to me that ... I'd used many times before ... 'I have a dream.' And I just felt that I wanted to use it here ... I used it, and at that point I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether. I didn't come back to it."⁷

Not all moments of improvisation make history. But learning to go "off script" can certainly lead to new opportunities and vital evolutions (and revolutions) in your life.

Not all moments of improvisation make history. But learning to go "off script" can certainly lead to new opportunities and vital evolutions (and revolutions) in your organization, your career, your relationships, and your life. Dr. King went "off script," and so can you. This book will teach you how.

Creating Participants, Not Spectators

I once had the opportunity to speak with retired Ohio Judge Patricia Blackmon, who has delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech with the Cleveland Orchestra, and I asked her about Dr. King's speech. Blackmon, who was Ohio's first African-American female appellate judge, told me that the Mahalia Jackson story is truth and not folklore. Then she asked me if I had ever been to a black church. I replied, "No." And that's where our conversation began to sparkle with insight. Blackmon told me that the ministers at predominantly black churches are nearly always wanting the congregation (the audience) to participate in their sermon. She has seen several ministers go "off script" when they are not getting the anticipated feedback from their congregation. Judge Blackmon believes that Dr. King

7 Gary Younge, "Martin Luther King: The Story Behind His 'I Have a Dream' Speech," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/aug/09/martin-luther-king-dream-speech-history>.

did the exact same thing when he went “off script” and inserted the “I Have a Dream” monologue into his March on Washington speech. Participants, not spectators. To me, this suddenly made so much sense.

I have often explained to clients and to other stakeholders, especially if I’m teaching them how to deliver impactful presentations, that the goal is to create and engage *participants*, not spectators. I have joked that presentations are like football games — with 22 people on the field who desperately need some rest and 40,000 or more people in the stands who desperately need some exercise. Dr. King got the masses of people in Washington to participate. Ministers seek to get their congregations to participate (with an “amen!” or much more). Good professors and good presenters and good motivational speakers and, yes, even good *business leaders* can and do seek to get participation from their audiences. Being willing to improvise is foundational to creating that kind of interaction and dialogue.

You see, improv is not about making stuff up or just winging it; improvisation is about deviating from your prepared remarks, thoughts, and ideas and adapting to what your audience is wanting or missing ... to inspire them into action. That’s what happened for Dr. King in August 1963. Winging it? Not a chance! He was drawing from previous speeches, previous experiences, and from the significant preparation and practice that preceded that historic day.

**You see, improv is not about making
stuff up or just winging it; improvisation
is about deviating from your prepared
remarks, thoughts, and ideas and adapting
to what your audience is wanting or
missing ... to inspire them into action.**

Executive leaders, senior leaders, and aspiring leaders, there is a lot to learn from Dr. King’s speech and the power of improv. While reading this book, keep an open mind to the world of improv and its timely application in a modern world — in *your* world. Whether you love or hate the acronym, you likely know all about operating in a “VUCA world” — a business climate that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA). Dr. Ronald

Dufresne, management professor at Saint Joseph's University, suggests that, "The critical skills needed for leaders in the face of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity are self-awareness, listening, communication, adaptability, critical thinking, and collaboration."⁸ Mastering the art of business improvisation can teach us these very skills, and so much more.

Improv is Not About Being Funny: How It All Began

Back in 1998, I performed stand-up comedy in the big cities of Ohio — Cleveland, Cincinnati, Dayton, and Columbus. One day after an open-mike performance, I was approached by a comedian friend and asked if I would be interested in an improv comedy workshop. I replied, "Sure, why not?" Little did I know that my life was about to change forever.

I showed up for the improv class not knowing anything about improv comedy, other than what I had gleaned from watching the TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. The class — truth be told — was bizarre. We played these crazy exercises, immersing ourselves in skits and doing what felt, to me, like acting. Coming into this experience as I newbie, I had mistakenly thought we would spend the afternoon *writing* comedy. The instructor kept harping on two words — "Yes! And ..." I wasn't quite sure why those two words were so important. Oh, was I in for a lifechanging lesson!

Before that first class was even over, I was looking to cut and run. I wasn't sure if I was coming back the following week. *Was this really for me?* I was intrigued about the concept of improvisation and yet still very confused. Then the instructor gave us an assignment for the next week: study the 1970s. "Absorb everything that you can — movies, TV shows, news events, everything," he said. Hearing that the class came with homework assignments somehow made me feel better, like I knew now why I felt like a fish out of water. That must be what I missed — the homework assignment from the week before. Now, I was catching up. *I could do this!*

8 Ronald L. Dufresne, PhD, "Using Improvisation to Develop Leadership for a Volatile World," *Journal of Leadership Education*, 2020, Vol. 19, Issue 4, https://journalofleadershiped.org/jole_articles/using-improvisation-to-develop-leadership-for-a-volatile-world/.

I wasn't about to give up. The following week, I showed up to the improv comedy class, once again, this time having done my homework. We were hilarious during the exercises — for those who did our homework. And those who didn't? Well, they sucked. This was my first “art of improvisation” ah-ha moment. The lightbulb of insight burned brightly. To be funny in improv, you have to have a solid baseline of knowledge and information; to adapt to these exercises, you need material from which to draw.

Without realizing it, I was learning to collaborate with “colleagues” (in this case, the other men and women on the improv theater stage) and to provide meaningful experiences for a broader audience as well. It would be a long time before I understood how to apply improvisation techniques in the workplace and in real life (and longer still before I'd be writing books about it for leaders like you), but I was on my way.

Improvisation, as it turned out, wasn't “winging it” – it was mastering it.

Rule #1 for becoming an effective improviser is that you must live and die by the open-minded and collaborative concept of “Yes! And ...” To take conversations forward (and during comedy sketches, to take the comedy storyline and impact further), I needed to draw upon the education, knowledge, and life experiences of my teammates and myself. I had to validate their vantage point with “yes!” and then build upon it with “And ...” I had previously been performing stand-up comedy, where my success on stage followed a comedy-writing formula: premise + punchline + tag.⁹ But improv was so very different. It was hard, and it required a lot of homework (*who knew?*) and it required a sort of “script” that had to be researched and practiced and then, in the final moment, modified or thrown away altogether. Improvisation, as it turned out, wasn't “winging it” — it was mastering it.

Within just a few of those improv-comedy classes, I knew I was falling in love with a new craft and a new way of thinking about (and communicating in) the world around me. So I threw myself into the experience. First, I decided to learn more about the history of improv. I started reading about the

9 In comedy, a tag is a short add-on punchline to keep the laughs going.

godmother of improvisation, Viola Spolin, who was an actress and educator, an author, director, and creator of theater games. In the very same year that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke famously at the March on Washington, Viola Spolin published the first edition of her book entitled *Improvisation for the Theater*. She and her son, Paul Sills (who ultimately popularized her methods and her work), were affiliated with iconic organizations, like the Young Actors Company in Hollywood and founded The Second City (from which many notable entertainers got their start, like Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, John Candy, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Del Close, Eugene Levy, Catherine O'Hara, Nia Vardalos, Colin Mochrie, Ryan Stiles, Mike Myers, Steve Carell, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Chris Farley, Stephen Colbert, Aidy Bryant, Jay Sukow, and many others.

During her time as a drama supervisor in Chicago (1939-1941), Viola Spolin worked with children and recent immigrants in low-income neighborhoods. And the magic of the work she did intrigued me:

“She felt the need to establish a form of theater training that incorporated what she'd learned about the benefits of play from Neva Boyd, one that could reach across divisions of culture and language. Lectures about traditional theater techniques were useless with children or adults with limited English skills. Still, when those lessons became the focus of a game, the students were able to incorporate them organically, full of the spontaneous physical expression needed for true theatrical communication.”¹⁰

For me, reading about Spolin's work with children delivered another “ah-ha moment.” Spolin was a communicator, not a comedian! The theatrical teachings to children and immigrants were designed to help improve their communication skills; they weren't meant to be funny or to “entertain for entertainment's sake.” Today, I fully understand and embrace that improvisation is a method of communication that has as many merits today in the business world as it did back in the late 1930s and early 1940s in low-income, urban neighborhoods.¹¹


¹⁰ www.ViolaSpolin.org

¹¹ I would be remiss if I didn't mention that Viola Spolin's son, Paul Sills, and Compass Players were active from 1955 to 1958 in Chicago and St. Louis. Like The Second City, the Compass Players was the launchpad for some incredibly talented professionals. Two of the members of the Compass Players were Michael Nichols and Elaine May. You may or may not recognize their names, but they were best known as the comedy duo of “Nichols

So is this book, *OffScript*, about theater or acting or comedy? Not really, and not much. It's about proven methods that organizational leaders like you — whether you work in a Fortune 1,000 company, a small business, a nonprofit, a government organization, or anything in between — can apply to your work every day. It's about learning to let go of the control we all so desperately cling to as leaders and instead embrace the opportunity to go “off script” in our conversations and negotiations. It's about being present instead of rushing to the future, and about collaborating in authentic, empathetic ways.

Most books written about improv have been from the theatrical perspective. However, the more you dig into understanding the theatrical principles, it becomes clear that improv is a leadership technique based on collaboration, play, taking risks, acceptance, and positive outcomes.

**Improv, in short, is good business.
I happen to think you can't achieve
your leadership potential without it.**



Since the publishing of my first book, *Improv is No Joke: Using Improvisation to Create Positive Results in Leadership and Life*, I have been curating business articles, videos, and books, all which support the viewpoint that improv is a viable leadership strategy to increase productivity and profitability, improve morale, and decrease turnover. Improv, in short, is good business. I happen to think you can't achieve your leadership potential without it.

and May.” Here is a partial list of achievements they earned based on what they learned in the early years of improv comedy.

Michael Nichols (director): Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, *The Odd Couple*, *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman*, *The Graduate*, *Silkwood*, *The Birdcage*, *Primary Colors*, and Charlie Wilson's *War*. He won six Tony Awards and five Academy Awards.

Elaine May (screenwriter): *Mickey and Nicky*, *Heaven Can Wait*, *The Birdcage*, and *Primary Colors*. As an actress in *The Waverly Gallery*, she won the Tony Award for Best Actress in a Play.

Understanding the Improviser's Brain to Generate Better Business Results

Dr. Charles Limb is a neuroscientist, a surgeon, a jazz saxophonist, and one of only a few people who have studied the improvising brain. Dr. Limb conducted research on people as they improvised inside brain scanners called fMRI machines. And what he found, as he watched oxygen-rich blood flow to different areas of the brain — and oxygen-depleted blood flow away) while musicians played experimental jazz or performed freestyle rap, was that you can actually see differences in brain function between improvisers and memorizers. The freestyler/improviser's brain (the person we would think of as having gone “off script”) lights up the “visual” areas of the brain while the memorizer (the person who sticks to a script or to the music or lyrics as they are written) has a brain that lights up the “language” areas. Indeed, something different and special happens in the brain when we “go off script.” In a TEDx Talk, Dr. Limb explains:

“These are multifunctional areas of the brain; these are not the jazz areas of the brain. They do a whole host of things that have to do with self-reflection, introspection, working memory, etcetera. Really, consciousness is seated in the frontal lobe. But we have this combination of an area that's thought to be involved in self-monitoring, turning *off*, and this area that's thought to be autobiographical, or self-expressive, turning on.

“We think that at least a reasonable hypothesis is that, to be creative, you should have this weird dissociation in your frontal lobe. One area turns on, and a big area shuts off, so that you're not inhibited, you're willing to make mistakes, so that you're not constantly shutting down all these new generative impulses.”¹²

An improviser's brain is developed over time as one continues to train their instincts in new ways.

An improviser does three things differently from how other people might. They:

12 Charles J. Limb, MD, “Your Brain on Improv,” TEDxMidAtlantic, November 2010, https://www.ted.com/talks/charles_limb_your_brain_on_improv/transcript.

1. Silence their inner critic and allow creative thoughts and ideas to flow out.
2. Are very curious about everything and love to learn about things that might be foreign to them.
3. Create lists of associations (things similar or related to a specific topic).

The improviser's brain is curious and calm, educated and connected, open-minded and deeply focused all at once. What happens in the mind of an improviser is strikingly similar to what a stand-up comedian does. But improvisers don't summon this kind of energy or gather these associations to be used in a joke; improvisers don't make jokes but instead they use these associations to help build more creative thoughts.

**The improviser's brain is curious and calm,
educated and connected, open-minded
and deeply focused all at once.**

The Case for Mastering the Art of Business Improv: A Wealth of Leadership Impact

So, how do we tap into the wealth of leadership impact that improvisation offers and bring it into our business world? Start with curiosity, and with four big questions.

Curiosity is my strong suit. Over the past two years, I have been doing much research on the topic of improvisational leadership. I have curated 70 articles, 28 books, and 26 YouTube videos based on improv or improv leadership characteristics. Before I wrote this book, I had some homework to do (just like for that improv class! So much homework!). In his book, *Getting to "Yes And,"* Bob Kulhan argues that influential leaders can fully and effectively answer four questions about themselves:

1. Why this?
2. Why now?

3. What do I have to do?
4. What's in it for me?

I like Bob's simple, powerful questions very much. So let me answer them for you here, in the contexts of why you should consider bringing improv into your organization.

QUESTION #1: WHY THIS?

Why business improv for your organizational culture and your leadership style? Because it's where the proverbial rubber meets the road. Improv is where strategy and planning meet implementation. Improvisation is a communications technique that requires leaders to be present and, in the moment, to listen as if the business depends on it. Business improv requires that we respond honestly, put the thoughts and needs of others ahead of our own, and adapt to the unexpected challenges and opportunities.

Focus on the things you can control and ignore the things you can't. Doing so will bring you clarity during chaotic times.

Improvisational communication lets you as a leader focus on the things you can control and allows you to ignore the things you can't control. Doing

The 7 Foundations of Improvisation

1. Respect
2. Trust
3. Support
4. Listen
5. Focus
6. Adapt
7. Maintain the "Yes, and ..." mindset

this will bring you clarity during chaotic times. With practice, your brain will slow down to focus on the details, the context, and subtext of the conversation to guarantee nothing is missed. The foundations of improvisation will guide and strengthen you and your teams.

Improvisation is all about reacting and adapting to a changing landscape by accurately assessing a given situation's needs, which allows the conversation to move forward in a positive new

direction. Improvisation is about building more substantial teams, being creative and innovative, collaborating with others, negotiating from a place of win-win, becoming highly focused during times of stress, setting your ego aside for the good of the organization and others, demonstrating empathy, and being very comfortable with the uncomfortable. Improvisation strengthens your emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills.

Business improv is about letting go of your own agenda to listen intently — to be empathetic and open-minded in the present moment — so you can truly connect with colleagues and other stakeholders to generate optimal results.

**Business improv is about letting go of
your own agenda to listen intently – to
be empathetic and open-minded in the
present moment – so you can truly
connect with colleagues and other
stakeholders to generate optimal results.**

Improv will help you:

- ➔ Push conversations forward and explore new possibilities
- ➔ Tackle delicate situations and improve internal and external negotiations
- ➔ Manage personal and organizational change
- ➔ Deliver impactful presentations
- ➔ Create space for innovation, process improvement, and profitable, sustainable growth
- ➔ Reduce stress, increase joy, improve productivity, and transform cultures

When it comes to “Why this?” and business improvisation, I could regale you with justifications and stories all day. But, as you can see, improv at work changes the culture and the communication in a way that generates positive, measurable results.

QUESTION #2: WHY NOW?


I began writing this book during the height of the COVID-19 global pandemic. If ever there was a time to adopt the improviser's mindset, it was in that moment of chaos and unpredictability. The rules were changing every day. Stakeholders were scared and confused; some were very sick; others were grieving. Employees were struggling to adjust to new safety protocols and even new places of work, and people's personal lives (including the loss of daycare or a school routine for their children) were bleeding over into their work lives. I have a friend who is a communications coach and the pandemic made her services all the more critical to her clients. She shared with me that her phone was ringing off the hook with questions from leaders (people like university deans and small business owners and corporate C-suite leaders) with questions like: "How do I stand up in front of everyone and give a speech with no script? They want to know when we're coming back to work and 'what happens if' — and I don't have any answers." The world has always been chaotic, but the pandemic forced the entire world "off script" and only the lucky few (i.e., the prepared and practiced) were ready.

We are all busy and there never seems to be enough time to read an entire business book, to complete the exercises it suggests, to make the personal change it inspires us to pursue, and to put our new learning into action at work. But the longer you put off to tomorrow the commitment to mastering the art of business improvisation, the more your workplace relationships will flounder, the more negotiations will come up short, the more innovation will be lost to the status quo. Opportunity, growth, success, profit, and even happiness are on the other side of change. And, like it or not, change is happening all the time — imposed change and designed change. As leaders, we need to be adaptable, collaborative, creative, innovative, and willing to embrace risk. And the time is now.


The world has always been chaotic, but the pandemic forced the entire world "off script" and only the lucky few (i.e., the prepared and practiced) were ready.

Change is a constant. You can either lead change, follow change, or ignore change. Leading change gives you a voice in the conversation. Following change allows you to be a witness in the conversation. Ignoring change will lead to pain, dissatisfaction, and even unemployment. Which do you prefer?

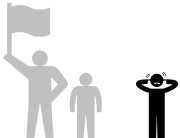
Lead, Follow, or Ignore: How Do You Respond to Change?



LEADING CHANGE...
...gives you a voice in the conversation.



FOLLOWING CHANGE...
...allows you to be a witness to the conversation.



IGNORING CHANGE...
...will lead to pain, dissatisfaction, and even unemployment.

Which path will you choose?

QUESTION #3: WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO?

Leaders need to learn to live in the moment and become *engaging* and engaged *with* their teams. An improvisation mindset helps you do precisely that. An “off script” attitude helps in building and maintaining relationships while strengthening the focus of those relationships. Can you park your ego and suspend judgment? If not, give it a try. I’ll show you how. First, cross your arms over your chest in whatever way feels natural to you. Now cross your arms the opposite way. Uncomfortable, right? Of course, it is, *and* if you began crossing your arms differently every day for a long period of time, at some point, it would be *comfortable*. You would adapt. That is precisely what change feels like. Uncomfortable at first, *and* you will eventually get comfortable with the uncomfortable.

So that’s the first step when it comes to “what you have to do” to begin embracing business improv. While you are attempting to live in the moment and lean into uncomfortable situations, you must be respectful, be trustworthy, and provide support to others. Influential leaders are better communicators because they “listen to understand” not just “listen to

respond.” Empathize with your team and be more vulnerable. Embrace the foundations of improvisation into your leadership style and the way you live your life. This sounds simple, and it takes work. Whenever I’m taking on large tasks, I think to myself: “How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time!” And then I take one bite or one step, or I check off one thing on my “to-do” list. Before I know it, I’ve made big progress. The same can be true of your decision to become a leader with an improviser’s mindset. Don’t be overwhelmed with all there is to master. Simply practice improvisational leadership every day and watch your team respond positively and become more productive. And guess what? It doesn’t cost a thing to change your mindset, your behavior, your attitude, or your communications. You can just get busy doing it ... and then start reaping the rewards.

To be sure, improvising is the exact opposite of the traditional methods of learning and development. And that’s a good thing! Sitting in a classroom or a board room, being lectured to for hours upon hours does not increase retention. It increases boredom. It is just a mind-numbing data dump of facts, figures, and content that is uninspiring. We have lost the motivation to engage the audience in action so we need to fight our way back. When you take the improviser’s mindset, we turn the content into stories, analogies, and metaphors so the audience will pay attention, which increases retention of information (and, in turn, reduces rework and improves productivity).

**It doesn’t cost a thing to change
your mindset, your behavior, your
attitude, or your communications. You
can just get busy doing it ... and
then start reaping the rewards.**

In Question #2 above, I argued that the answer to “why now?” hinges on the urgency of addressing risks as they arise and not hiding from them. So what exactly do you need to do now? You need to embrace risk. That means being open to lots of new ideas, even the ones that make you initially respond with negative emotion. Embracing risk is all about not being punitive to those who come up with new ideas (even the ones that initially strike you as silly or stupid or impossible or inappropriate); a leader who embraces risk is one

who celebrates those ideas even when they “fail.” I like to think of the word “fail” as an acronym — FAIL — that stands for “First Attempt In Learning.” If you don’t allow your team (or yourself) to FAIL and if you punish your colleagues (or yourself) for taking a risk, all you will achieve is a delay in your ultimate success. Because it will take you longer to solve the problem once everyone is living in the fear of being punished. Give your team the freedom to fail and watch them grow.

Without fear, there is safety. And safety creates opportunity. Improvisational leadership provides psychological safety to the team, allowing everyone to speak their minds and to feel safe taking risks in front of each other. Don’t take my word for it — just ask Google, the powerhouse company that believes that psychological safety is “far and away” the most crucial dynamic of a successful team.¹³

Give your team the freedom to fail and watch them grow.



What else do you need to do? Be vulnerable. Showing vulnerability as a leader makes you relatable and human. Your leadership inspires your team, in turn, to become vulnerable and allows the team to set aside their individual and collective egos for the good of the organization. Indeed, the improvisational philosophy is what modern leadership requires of us today. It’s not the command-and-control “I will tell you what to do” leadership style of the 1950s and 1960s (and even the 1970s and 1980s and beyond!). Improvisational leadership is a collaborative and inclusive leadership style that focuses on the team and not the leaders themselves.

QUESTION #4: WHAT’S IN IT FOR ME?

It’s a fair question and not a selfish one, so go ahead and ask it. What’s in it for you? When it comes to improvisational leadership, there is a lot in it for you, as the leader — in short, you are rewarded with more tremendous respect from your team and from others in the organization. You will be the

13 Julie Rozovsky, “The Five Keys to a Successful Google Team,” re:WORK, November 17, 2015, <https://rework.withgoogle.com/blog/five-keys-to-a-successful-google-team/>.

improviser/leader who others admire and want to work with. I have never felt that people work for a boss — leadership is earned and it has nothing to do with a job title. Being a skilled and authentic improviser allows you to earn the respect and relationships you (and your organization) need for success.

Today's leadership demands more collaboration and less of an “it's all about *me*” approach. You may have the authority and the power to hire and fire or to bark out orders, and that is not leadership. (By the way, if you were thinking “*but* that is not leadership,” you're correct. *And* I'm doing my best to practice what I preach when it comes to “yes, and ...” instead of “yes, but ...”) I've always loved Simon Sinek's definition of leadership; he says that being a leader has nothing to do with rank or authority, but that a leader is “someone who embraces the awesome responsibility to see those around them rise.”¹⁴ When you adopt that mindset, you teach everyone in your organization that they are all leaders, no matter their title or seniority. So if you're wondering “What's in it for you?” — which is exactly what I've asked you to ponder — the answer is “a whole lot!” Let me offer just a few examples of what's in it for you.

When you commit yourself to a new way of being at work — an attitude and set of behaviors that is driven by an improviser's mindset — the rewards are significant and many.

- You will create a culture that inspires others to action
- Your influence will be contagious to all
- You will be the spark of innovation as your willingness to ask for bad ideas will ultimately lead to good ideas.

Let's talk about why I think asking for “bad ideas” is such a good idea, shall we? In the world of improv, “bad ideas are bridges to good ideas — and having no ideas lead to nothing.” Imagine watching an episode of *Whose Line Is It Anyway* in which Drew Carey as the host sets up an exercise with detailed instructions and then the cast members stand there quietly, scratching their chins, devoid of ideas ... good or bad. “No ideas” is

14 Simon Sinek, Facebook Photo Caption, October 4, 2020, www.facebook.com/SimonSinek.

a disaster in entertainment improv just as it is in workplace improv. So how do you get people to share their ideas at work? Think like an improviser!

When you ask your colleagues for ideas, it's important that they feel prepared, empowered, and safe to speak up. If you have an initial idea to share, go ahead and share it, but show that your idea is the setup, not the end solution. Go ahead and say, "This might be a crazy idea but let's be open to crazy ideas." Or "Help me think this through." Or "Can you offer some ideas that build upon this initial idea or blow it up entirely to replace it with something better?"

Involve your employees in decision-making, problem-solving, and strategy. Listen to their ideas, their issues, and their feelings with empathy. Increase your emotional intelligence, along with your team's capacity for respectful, compassionate collaboration. Don't be afraid and, if you are, push forward anyway. The only way to become comfortable with the uncomfortable is to face it, head on. By doing so, your turnover will reduce, engagement will increase, problem-solving will require less time, and your bottom line will grow in ways you could never have previously imagined.

**Involve your employees in decision-making,
problem-solving, and strategy. Listen to
their ideas, their issues, and their feelings
with empathy. Increase your emotional
intelligence, along with your team's capacity
for respectful, compassionate collaboration.**

There's nothing worse than feeling uncomfortable at work (or on a stage); and yet that discomfort is something that the greatest leaders learn to lean into rather than flee from. Improv teaches us how to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, how to be present, to take risks, and to draw upon our knowledge base. When you think about it, we all are improvisers in our personal and professional lives. Now, it's time to improvise with intention.



ASK YOURSELF

- ➔ How can you and your organization begin to adopt these improv foundations — asking for bad ideas, listening with empathy, leaning into discomfort, and throwing away your scripts?
- ➔ What will it take to go beyond just testing out the foundations to actually incorporating them into your culture to ultimately create leaders who lead and adapt in a very challenging business climate?
- ➔ What can you do or decide *today* that gets you started?

The Journey Through *Off Script*: What to Expect in the Chapters Ahead

Okay, readers, you have been fully oriented and introduced to the concept of “going off script” in business and embracing an improviser’s mindset. Now, it’s time to dig in. So let me tell you briefly about the chapters that await you, and then let you turn the page, grab a notebook and pen, and get started mastering the art of business improv.

The overall intention of this book is to change your mindset as it relates to the words “improv” and “improvisation” so that you can apply them in meaningful ways in your careers, companies, and lives. The first goal is to bust the myth that improv is all about making things up, that it’s only a comedic tool, and that’ it’s not meant for the business world.

The second goal is to create a vision in your head to see that improv creates a dynamic and vibrant culture for your business.

Here’s what to expect in the chapters ahead ...

Chapter 1 — Rewriting the Script: Leadership, Improv, and a World of Opportunities — begins with a discussion about the philosophy and power of the phrase “Yes, and ...” as well as a discussion of how “No” is appropriate in limited use.

Chapter 2 — Off and Running: Vulnerability and Generosity as the Fuel for Selfless Leaders — takes you through an exploration of how to move the focus from the leader or boss and to the team, the collective, and the stakeholders.

Chapter 3 — Flipping the Script: Making It All About *Them* and Not About *You* — invites you to examine why empathy is essential to being a leader.

Chapter 4 — Way Off Base: The Death of the Ego in Modern Leadership — outlines why ego-based leadership is outdated and improv-based leadership is a more preferred way to lead an organization and a team.

Chapter 5 — Off Key: Learning to *Listen* to Avoid Tone-Deaf Leadership — is all about becoming a better listener by eliminating internal and external distractions, parking your ego, and truly listening to the other person so you can learn and not just respond.

Chapter 6 — Mastering Authentic Leadership: The Art of Monotasking and Being Present — explores the term “being present” and why leaders need to be more present, offering an alternative to multitasking and distraction.

Chapter 7 — Scripted for Safety: Letting Go of Negativity and Dismissal — introduces you to the concept of psychological safety and outlines its relationship to improvisation, helping you see what is possible when professionals stop condescending to or dismissing one another.

Chapter 8 — Turned Off: Walking Away from Your Inner Critic — describes how your inner critic can be detrimental to your leadership effectiveness and the impact it can have on the team at large.

The third goal of this book is to provide you with practical tips on how to use improv in your daily business life so you can be impactful in what

you do. The day-to-day realities of improv at work are explored in the book's second part.

Chapter 9 — New Scripts: Communicating and Collaborating for Better Results — teaches you how to use improv in corporate conversations.

Chapter 10 — Unscripted Give-and-Take: Using Business Improv to Resolve Disputes and Negotiate Deals — unveils how improv is used effectively when negotiating or moving issues and conversations forward.

Chapter 11 — Off Course: Mastering Change Management with a New Mindset — is all about how to use improv when dealing with change.

Chapter 12 — Taking a Load Off: Stress Relievers for Overwrought Leaders — offers a juicy list of tips for reducing stress at work and in general.

Chapter 13 — The Art of Innovation: Deploying Improve Techniques to Arrive at Creative Solutions — and **Chapter 14 — Better Off Together: Inspiring a Creative, Idea-Generating Workplace** — are chapters that work together to make the case that we need to innovate differently, and that improv is the key.

Chapter 15 — The Ultimate Pay-Off: Leveraging Your Leadership to Build the Best Team — provides you with ways to use improv in resolving conflict, problem-solving, and building cohesive teams.

Chapter 16 — Facing Off: You, the Audience, and the Art of the Imperfect Presentation — is a primer on how to use improv to help you prepare and deliver more effective presentations.

Chapter 17 — Off Site: Making Sure Your Virtual Presentations and Meetings Don't Suck — is full of ideas for the Zoom generation.

Chapter 18 — Off Kilter: The Pandemic as the Ultimate Improv Exercise — celebrates you and reflects on all we endured and learned about improvisation during the COVID-19 crisis.

Chapter 19 — Off Color: An Improviser's Journey in the American South — is a final story told in hopes of helping all readers of this book understand that we come from different upbringings and vantage points and that opening our minds and mastering the art of improv can be challenging in a variety of ways (but oh so rewarding in the end!).

The last goal of this book is a bit of a bonus — but (and!) a big, practical one I think you'll enjoy. It's my final goal to help you stretch your new improv wisdom and take the "Yes, and ..." approach to exploring how your financial conversations (up, down, and across your organization) can be more powerful. Talking about sales and profits, operating expenses, and capital investments are often the heart of "doing business" and improv can help you do it more effectively.

So let's dig in! Turn the page to learn how mastering the art of business improvisation is the power — the driver — behind extraordinary leadership. It allows us to be our best, most genuine selves and it empowers us to go "off script" to make a difference ... to create impact and to manifest a legacy of excellence.