



**Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode**

**Working Paper**

IIMK/WPS/175/OBHR/2015/11

**READYING FOR CHANGE: USE OF IMPROVISATION  
IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT TRAINING**

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**Readying for Change: Use of Improvisation  
in Change Management Training**

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## **Readying for Change:**

### **Use of Improvisation in Change Management Training**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the application and utility of improvisation, a technique that offers room for experimentation and generates uncertainty to trigger creative thinking and change management capability. A case study of a change management training program for professors of a university is used to elaborate on the principles of Improv and demonstrate how the tool can be effectively integrated into change management training, especially at the beginning of the initiative, when new ideas need to be accepted and firmed up.

**Design/ methodology/ approach:** The case was change management training program for 20 professors of a leading technical university in India. The university commissioned one of the authors to conduct a change management program to prepare their professors for change. Even though the changes were to be introduced in a phased manner, there was an apprehension of collective opposition to the change initiative if a buy-in was not created among the professors. The training mandate was therefore to create among participants a readiness for change. The training program used Improv games in conjunction with the Change Wheel (Kanter, 2011) for creating a mindset conducive to change management and planning how to bring about systemic change at the university.

**Findings:** Using Improv games participants were made to identify and confront their mental blocks and anxieties to accepting and implementing change. Further, instead of being dismissed or criticized, their concerns were creatively deployed to realistically assess the method of managing change. Improv games “Word Ball” “Yes And” and “Yes But” when incorporated into the change management workshop offered creative and interesting ways to explore multiple organizational and employee mind-set issues that could have hampered the change management efforts. The games were able to bring about openness to change and in turn an ability to accept and explore new possibilities that participants were earlier closed to. This, coupled with a conceptual framework of the Change Wheel, group decision-making and an ownership-based

approach resulted in the participants jointly creating a change management plan for the university.

**Research limitations / implications:** The case is limited to the Improv games used in the change management training program that initiated a change management process currently underway in the university.

**Practical implications:** Improv games helped elicit greater cooperation and enthusiastic participation from participants thereby creating a positive attitude towards organizational change efforts that are otherwise viewed with consternation. It was able to channelize communication from morale-dampening speculation into effective dialogue around the process of change management to be adopted. The participants left the program with increased confidence about their ability to implement the action plan and felt uniquely valued and appreciated for their contributions during the workshop.

**Originality/ value:** This paper elucidates how Improv games can be used in a change management program and describes its utility and versatility in enhancing training effectiveness. For Change Management consultants and trainers the method of usage of the games can come in handy in enhancing participant involvement, effectively eliciting ideas and in co-creating workable action plans with employees who are well versed with their workplace reality.

**Key words:** Improv, improvisation, learning, change management, innovation, creativity, collaboration.

## **Introduction and context**

Given the unprecedented speed of change that organizations need to keep pace with, the necessity of innovative training techniques that can help create readiness to change cannot be emphasized enough. One such training technique is the use of Improv games. The context of our using Improv was a change management program that one of the authors conducted for a state level government technical university. The university needed a transformational change to maintain its relevance in the context of several new private universities being set up and students migrating to major cities to pursue higher education.

Based on the need analysis shared by the university a week long change management program was designed that used the Change Wheel (Kanter, 2011) as a diagnostic tool and Improv games as pedagogy. Improv games helped create an atmosphere of informality and fun that set a benign environment for participants to freely share their apprehensions about the change initiatives. Through their particular form of practical intervention and participatory dynamics the games facilitated participation and solidarity.

The objectives of using *Improv* games were to offer participants an opportunity to:

- Experience spontaneity and connecting between seemingly unrelated ideas;
- Learn how to collaborate;
- Facilitate a critical examination of themselves and their environments and
- Create the right mental framework to accept and initiate change;
- Re-examine and refine the change management action plan through a critical analysis.

## **Setting the ground rules**

Listening, trust, collaboration and spontaneity formed the warp and weft of the *Improv* fabric that held the change management program together. Unlike a scripted theatre performance, all the lines in an *Improv* training session were made up on the spot. Therefore, participants were briefed that they were required to intently listen to their partners during the session and collaborate with them, without which the *Improv* game cannot be successful. Listening ensured that participants reach a heightened state of awareness. Improv requires the improvisers to be mindful of their thoughts, and their surroundings. This ensures that all the participants are on the same page and a coherent ‘group-mind’ emerges (Halpern et al. 1994).

## **Using Improv Games**

Ideally, most Improv games are effective when done with approximately eight to fifteen participants. If there is more number of people, smaller sub-groups of five participants each can be created to ensure effectiveness.

**Game One:** The session began with the participants playing the *Word ball* game on change. This is a game of free-association. In Word-ball, participants had to quickly think on their feet and come up with words they associated with change instantaneously. By adhering to this simple rule, the game turned into a fun activity in a very short period of time with a variety of thoughts being expressed. Since the basis of the game is to get the participants to make connections between the distinct ideas (as conveyed through the words that were used in during the game) as

quickly as possible, the facilitators enforced the rule of spontaneity – and getting the participants to let go of all pre-conceived notions of change as they played the game. The Word-ball thus became an efficient ice-breaker that turned around the mood of the room and laid the foundation for the sessions that were to follow.

### **Outcomes:**

Some words shared by participants were positive and supportive of change- e.g. improvements, growth; while some expressed their underlying fears about change e.g. uncertainty, increased workload, and competition. The author then used these words in the following session to debrief participants of the blocks to change that emerged from the patten of words used in the Word Ball. When the participants reflected on the words they spoke about change, they were confronted with their underlying biases against change and their fear to change. “Word Ball” thus is an effective way to elicit subjective feelings about an event, situation or a phenomenon that participants may otherwise be reluctant to share. The speed of the exercise makes certain that true feelings are expressed without much time to rationalize and repress while the spontaneous nature of the exercise creates an atmosphere of fun facilitating unbridled sharing of thoughts.

**Game two:** The next step was to get participants accept the need for change and creating a mindset conducive to change. Therefore, our task was to create a context through which they would realize the business rationale for the change and the perils of not changing. For this session we used the “Yes, And” game based on one of the most essential elements of Improv - accepting offers.

Before the start of the games, the participants were explained the underlying principle of ‘Yes, And’, which requires acceptance and building on ideas. In a conversation, there is a giver (who is



suggesting an idea) and a taker (who is listening and reacting to the idea). The giver makes an offer (an idea, strategy, suggestion, comment, observation etc), and the receiver may either choose to accept or reject the offer. The receiver in ‘Yes, And’, cannot reject the offer being made to him – he needs to accept it and build on it. This game was played out for an hour and resulted in participants working on reasons why change was essential and imminent and building on the change arguments rather than shoot them down in the first instance.

**Outcomes:**

The “Yes, And” game is a handy tool to start a discussion particularly when the facilitators want to create an environment in which participants need to think differently and find ways to support an argument which they may otherwise reject. The underlying principle of this process is to initially “force” conformity in thinking by persuading participants to support a proposition. We found that as this process of “accepting offers” is continued, then through such building of support and sharing of perspectives, a shared mental model emerges. We closed the session when there was a definite level of agreement on the need and scope of change was reached.

**Game three:** The third game was played after a half-day exercise using the Change Wheel (Kanter, 2011), a diagnostic tool and planning guide that examines how actions on each change dimension contributes (or not) to change. A change management exercise can be effective only when we take into consideration the wider context in which the target organization exists. The Change Wheel was used to incorporate the wider organizational reality into the internal processes of the university thereby work upon and evolve a change management action plan. Once the participants completed their discussions to comprehensively identify key actions and

change elements, we then used the “Yes, And” and “Yes But” games to re-examine and revise the action plan.

### **Outcomes:**

When the participants deliberated on the Change Wheel with the ‘Yes, But’ mindset, they discovered how change management ideas could be examined critically, and a number of ideas were debated and what emerged were fine-tuned suggestions which the groups were more satisfied with. The game of “Yes, But” offered an excellent process through which questions could be raised on initial action plan that was created. It is a well established fact that in group decision situations, participants are often reluctant to openly point out probable weaknesses and flaws in plans due to group think. Groupthink occurs among a group when the desire for harmony or conformity in the group tacitly prevents members from expressing their opinions thereby resulting in sub-optimal decision-making outcomes. Group members try to minimize conflict and reach a consensus decision without critical evaluation of alternative viewpoints, by actively suppressing dissenting viewpoints (Janis, 1972). Further, research indicates that highly cohesive groups without adequate decision procedures (the groupthink condition) exhibited less disagreement and resulted in making poorer decisions than the other groups (Callaway and Esser, 1984). Therefore, getting participants to speak up and share contrarian views was essential to the success of the program. The “Yes, But” game proved to be a clever way of offering opportunities to speak up.

Following this, with the use of the ‘Yes, And’ mindset, the participants recognized the importance of moving forth with ideas, instead of being stuck in arguments and were also able to further refine and add to the implementation plan for change. The advantage of using the games

was that they brought out both the passion and intellect of participants into an otherwise serious and challenging process. Thus, a combination of critical thinking through the ‘Yes, But’ mindset and free-flowing evaluation through the ‘Yes, And’ mindset allowed the participants to expand the breadth and depth of the discussion.

## **Methodology**

We examined the change management program as a case study to test the efficacy of Improv games. This case is developed based on constructivism, which proffers a methodology for investigating the beliefs of individual respondents rather than investigating an external reality, such as the tangible and comprehensible economic and technological dimensions of management (Hunt 1991). Within the constructivist paradigm, we see reality as a blend of perceptions and external reality. The design of the change management program uses Improv games as pedagogy and using constructivism helps us understand and examine the complex and evolving reality of perceptions of the participants. Using constructivism, we explore the values which are beneath the findings. For this we use the inductive method to arrive at the key takeaways. While using the inductive method of constructivism, the researcher is expected to be a ‘passionate participant’ (Guba and Lincoln 1994, p. 112) during the exercise (the program in our context). Data was gathered through the interaction between the interviewer and participants (Anderson, 1986) as well as in the form of summative assessments. For change management trainers the method of usage of the games can come in handy in enhancing participant involvement, effectively eliciting ideas and in co-creating workable action plans with employees who are well versed with their workplace reality.

## **Benefits of using Improv Games**

Vera and Crossan (2004) list out the three main lessons from improvisational theatre that can be applied to organizational improvisation: Improv is unpredictable and equivocal by nature; good Improv arises because its main focus is more on the process of improvising than on the outcomes of improvisation; and the use of techniques of agreement, awareness, use of collaboration in Improv, applied in an organizational context. The first two lessons are pertinent since the organization also operates in an unpredictable environment and the focus on the means to the end would likely result in better quality work.

Improvisation games can be adapted to help resolve differences among employees on the process of change management. The authors adapted the games to better suit each step of the program and use it in all phases of problem solving –to explore challenges, generate ideas, and get into action. Specific benefits of using the games included:

- Improved participation: Word Ball game improved audience participation so much so that after explaining the rules of each Improv game, the participants stirred the course of the session, with the author merely playing the role of facilitator.
- Self realization: Use of games like Word-ball helped the participants realize their inner fears and biases against change which could then be worked upon during the program.
- Devil’s advocacy: “Yes, But” allowed a critical examination of the practicality of various suggestions leading to the creation of a pragmatic action plan.
- Building on initial ideas: “Yes, And” helped in making connections between suggestions and participants were able to build on each other’s suggestions as well as come up with

creative ideas in implementing specific change initiatives. The game enhances the skill of giving and receiving and mutual support leading to increased trust among participants.

- Challenges assumptions: “Yes, But” and “Yes, And” help break habitual patterns of thinking, being, and doing; they open up participants to experiment without fear of failure.
- Trust, support and collaboration: The participants realized that their success depended on making their fellow colleagues look good. This enforced the importance of working in a team, and supporting others even when it is not for the sake of one’s personal gain.

Word-ball, “Yes, But” and “Yes, And” have multiple uses – they work well as warm-up tools, or as methods to showcase how ideas are connected by people. The games lend themselves nicely to modifications. For example, with a group of product development and marketing experts, the games can be used as a thematic brainstorming tool, helping participants come up with new ideas for a new product or service. The overarching theme could be laid out by the facilitator before the start of the session, thus restricting the ideas within a particular theme – useful for brainstorming. As an art form these techniques continue to evolve and because of their nature, the games can be created and re-created, depending on the learning outcome that may be required. Right now in several organisations, the tools of improvisation are helping individuals and teams to deal with change and complexity. By increasing people’s capacity to be spontaneous and work together generously, Improv games can enable leaders to be more effective in terms of presence, agility and communication skills, often in difficult situations.

## **Application to organizational learning and development**

The Improvisational mind-set and games have been applied and adapted to multiple organizational contexts over the past many years. These include: to understand business innovation (Crossan, 1997), product development (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998), organizational learning (Moorman & Miner, 1998), collaborative technology (McKnight & Bontis, 2002), team performance (Vera & Crossan, 2005), and creative problem solving (Kao, 1996). Corsun, Young and McManus (2006) found that managerial perception in an organization involves shortcuts, which may have significant negative effects on managerial functions, but these effects can be mitigated by applying Improv theatre games to management development. When combined the traditional approach to class discussion and role-playing, Improv offers participants reduced psychological risk of participation, building teamwork and trust, and enhanced creativity (Moshavi, 2001). Increased psychological safety created by Improv is one of the key imperatives to enhance organizational learning (Edmondson, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

We found that even when confronted with the inherent challenges and anxieties associated with change, the participants were particularly receptive to the games, and incorporated the learning with great enthusiasm. Because Improv is flexible in nature, the games can be modified as required depending on the context, audience and outcome desired. Word-ball has multiple uses – it works well as an ice-breaker, a warm-up tool, or as a tool to showcase how ideas are connected by people. Word-ball also lends itself nicely to modifications. For example, with a group of product development and marketing experts, the game could be used as a thematic brainstorming

tool, helping come up with new ideas for a new product or service. The overarching theme could be laid out by the facilitator before the start of the session, thus restricting the ideas within a particular theme – useful for brainstorming.

Miner, Bassoff, and Moorman (2001) remind us that improvisational games must be taken in context and viewed as a distinct type of real-time, short-term learning. The effects of the learning may linger after the classroom intervention depending on the personality types, learning abilities and how much the participants take away from the session. Continuous application of Improv games and cultivating an Improv mind-set may lead to the kind of intended links associated between improvisation and long-term organizational learning (Miner et al., 2001). Gibb (2004) had used Improv as an effective means of achieving management development, enabling managers to look at problems from a deep, rather than a superficial level, while also motivating managers to sort out problems following development experiences.

The authors continue to use and test the effectiveness of Improv in change management programs. As an art form this technique continues to evolve and because of its nature, games that follow its principles can also be created and re-created, depending on the learning outcome that may be required. Right now in the world's top organisations, the tools of improvisation are helping individuals and teams to deal with change and complexity. By increasing people's capacity to be spontaneous and work together generously, these tools enable leaders to be more effective in terms of presence, agility and communication skills, often in difficult situations.

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<i>Type of Document: (Working Paper/Case/Teaching Note, etc.)</i> <b>Working paper</b>	<i>Ref. No.: (to be filled by RCP office)</i> <b>IIMK/WPS/175/OBHR/2015/11</b>
<i>Title:</i> <b>READYING FOR CHANGE: USE OF IMPROVISATION IN CHANGE MANAGEMENT TRAINING</b>	
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<i>Subject Areas :</i> <b>Training &amp; change management</b>	<i>Subject Classification Codes, if any:</i>
<i>Supporting Agencies, if any:</i> NIL	<i>Research Grant/Project No.(s):-</i>
<i>Supplementary Information, if any:</i>	<i>Date of Issue: (to be filled by RCP office)</i> <b>March 2015</b>
<i>Full text or only abstract to be uploaded on website: (please choose one)</i> <b>Full text</b>	<i>Number of Pages: 15</i>
<i>Abstract:</i> This paper demonstrates the application and utility of improvisation, a technique that offers room for experimentation to trigger creative thinking and openness to change among participants. A case study on a change management training program for professors of a state level university is used to illustrate the use of Improv games for creating a mindset conducive to change and to facilitate ideation and discussions on how to bring about systemic change at the university. The use of Improvisation is particularly useful in the beginning of a change initiative, when the idea of change needs to be accepted and action plans drawn up. Using Improv games, participants were made to identify and confront their anxieties to accepting and implementing change. Further, instead of being dismissed or criticized, their concerns were creatively deployed to realistically assess the action plans they had drawn out for implementing change. The paper demonstrates the techniques and integration of the games into change management programs and summarises the benefits of its practice. For change management trainers the method of usage of the games can come in handy in enhancing participant involvement, effectively eliciting ideas and in co-creating workable action plans with employees who are well versed with their workplace reality.	
<i>Key Words/Phrases:</i> Improv, improvisation, learning, change management, innovation, creativity, collaboration.	
<i>Referencing Style Followed:</i> APA	

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