

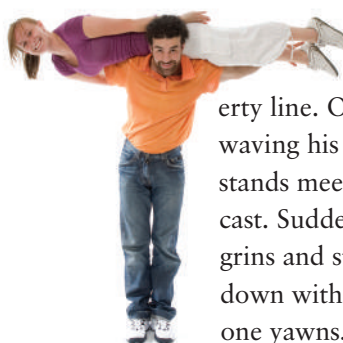


LET IMPROV  
COMEDY INSPIRE  
YOUR WORK ON  
THE PLATFORM



Bonanno conducts an improv  
comedy game as part of a  
presentation skills training  
program.

BY GILDA BONANNO



Two neighbors are arguing over a property line. One is shouting and waving his arms, while the other stands meekly with eyes downcast. Suddenly, the quiet one grins and starts jumping up and down with joy, while the angry one yawns, stretches and falls to the ground as if in a sudden sleep. The onlookers break into laughter and applause.

No, it's not an episode from *Judge Judy*. It's a scene from an improv comedy game, Emotions Swap, part of a presentation skills training program I conducted for chemical engineers at a *Fortune* 500 company.

In Emotions Swap, two people improvise a scene, rapidly changing emotions based on audience suggestions.

The performers demonstrate each new emotion in the context of the scene, trying to show

the emotion rather than just saying it in words. The result is an often-hilarious display of people exaggerating their voice and body language to express the wide-ranging emotions.

Following the scene by the "neighbors," the entire group performed Emotions Swap simultaneously in pairs. After the cacophony of emotions and the laughter died down, we discussed

how varying their voice, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture and movement gave specific meaning to the words they were saying and conveyed the emotions so the other person could understand them clearly.

Participants said they planned to apply these lessons to their own presentations so they could stop presenting in a lifeless monotone or with unchanging body language that made no differentiation in meaning or importance between words. They learned to be more animated and dynamic to help capture and keep the audience's attention.



### Life Without a Script

Unlike stand-up comedy or sketch comedy, improv comedy is completely improvised. There are no scripts or pre-planned scene outlines. Improv comedy rules and principles (see sidebar, page 30) offer structure and create an atmosphere in which the performers use audience suggestions as a launching point for their imagination.



# IMPROV PRINCIPLES

## • YOU CAN USE •

### Expect the Unexpected

Nothing in an improv scene is planned, requiring performers to be fully in the moment and responsive. As a speaker, sometimes things happen that, despite your best preparation, you cannot control, from an unanticipated audience question to a technology hiccup. When the unexpected happens, stay calm and trust yourself.

### Step Out of Your Comfort Zone

Improv performers step out of their comfort zone by going on stage without a script, outline or notes. If you're an experienced speaker, you've gotten good at delivering your signature story, but it's easy to fall into a rut. Continue to innovate and reinvigorate your content and delivery by trying something new; tell your story from a different viewpoint or with a different voice, or use original photographs instead of bullet points in your slides or use no slides at all.

### Keep It Short

Most short-form improv scenes are three to five minutes, forcing performers to get to the heart of the scene quickly. As a speaker, focus on the essential elements of your presentation so you don't exceed the time limit. Cut out the extra material and make sure every anecdote, statistic and example clearly relates to your message.

### Advance the Scene

Improv performers must keep the scene from stagnating to keep the audience's attention. When you're giving a speech, keep the audience engaged and move your presentation forward by adding emotions, varying your non-verbal communications and changing the tempo.

### Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

A frazzled improv performer is a nightmare. The same goes for speakers. Be your confident and best self without being cocky or high-strung. Be nice to people around you, and mind your stress levels. Remember your purpose and why you got into speaking.

I started taking improv comedy classes and performing while I was still working full-time as a project manager. I thought it would be fun and also hoped it would hone my stage presence and speaking skills. What started out as shows for a few friends at the local library eventually led to shows at Gotham City Improv in the ultimate comedy location—New York City.

When I finally quit my job to start my speaking, training and coaching business, I added improv comedy to my toolkit not only to continue refining my own skills, but also as a means of achieving better results for my clients.

I don't teach improv comedy as an end itself;

I use it as a vehicle through which to teach skills such as public speaking, innovation and communication.



# IMPROV EXERCISE

## THE ALPHABET GAME

**T**wo people create a scene, based on an audience-suggested activity. They alternate lines, with each line starting with successive letters of the alphabet—so the first person

starts their sentence starts with A, then the other person starts their sentence with B and so on.

Demonstrate this on stage first with the meeting organizer or senior executive participating (and modeling the behavior of stepping out of their comfort zone). Then invite everyone to participate simultaneously in pairs.

Use as a warm-up, ice breaker or a quick energy booster for your audience.

Give it a theme to match the event; for example, at a sales program, get the suggestion of a sales-related activity from the audience.

**Goals:** Thinking fast, listening, being creative.

**Hint:** *This game works best with fluent English speakers—and children can do it faster than adults!*

Whether it's engineers in India learning how to be supervisors, media professionals in New York improving their public speaking skills or new employees in Thailand planning their careers, my clients have used the improv inspiration to improve their presentation, communication and leadership skills while the fun and laughter opened their brains to the learning and made it memorable.

### Letting Go of the Fear

During improv comedy performances, I've had to cluck like a chicken, dance the tango with an alien and participate in the Olympic event of floor-scrubbing. After those experiences, I've learned not to take myself too seriously and to let go of my need for perfection. Previously, I had memorized my entire speech and was so worried about forgetting what came next that I would often rush through, without giving people a chance to absorb what I'd said. Inspired by improv, I abandoned the safety net of memorization and freed myself to be fully present to my audience rather than stuck in my head running through my lines.

**NSA members have fun doing improv on stage at a past NSA Convention.**

***“Unlike stand-up comedy or sketch comedy, improv comedy is completely improvised.”***

I still prepared and practiced my material, but not to memorize every word; instead, I practiced to get comfortable enough with the key elements of my speech so that I could express them a few different ways and still achieve the same goal.

Once on stage, I trusted that my preparation and experience would allow me to tap into my expertise and create whatever was needed for the presentation to be successful at that moment. I focused on authentically connecting to the audience so they could remember my message and better achieve their goals.

I became fearless on stage and learned not to turn little obstacles into insurmountable ones, such as when my lavalier microphone fell off and went flying across the stage while I was speaking or when I got stung by a wasp shortly before going on stage to present “Thinking on Your Toes.” Because of my improv background, I could focus on delivering value for my client rather than getting distracted.

### Make It Work for You

One of improv comedy's essential principles is to be in the moment. You can't be concerned about what you're going to say next or rethinking what you should have said in a previous scene. Instead, you must immediately be responsive to your team members on stage and to the audience's suggestions.

If you apply this principle—and all the fundamentals of improv comedy—to your work as a professional speaker, you can boldly step out of your comfort zone and be unflappable on stage while energizing your content and delivery.



*Gilda Bonanno is a speaker, trainer and coach who has helped executives and entrepreneurs on four continents improve their on-the-job*

*communication skills. She incorporates improv techniques into her programs to help participants boost their confidence and develop their communication, presentation and leadership skills. Be sure to attend her session at Influence 2015.*