

# Challenge It Now

"Challenging our habitual ways of thinking and doing."

## Why Bill Murray Could Be Management Material

*by Jennie Ayers*



Einstein once said that imagination is more important than knowledge. And Harvard Business Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter says that business today is less a results oriented process than it is “an imaginative exercise”. To be successful in today’s global economy, business professionals need to be flexible, capable of quick thinking, able to see a situation from different angles, capable of working within ambiguity and uncertainly while still moving forward confidently, able to formulate creative solutions and recognize and use the unexpected as opportunities. Sound impossible? It’s not - especially if you challenge habitual ways of thinking and doing to go “outside the box” of conventional training methods and turn to *improvisation*.

**Improvise - to invent, compose  
or perform with little  
or no preparation**

### *Improvisation - A Brief History*

When people hear the word “improvisation”, they may think no farther than Drew Carey’s television show, “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” Historically, improvisation goes back to the ancient Greeks when a guy named Thespis stepped out from the Greek chorus and spoke off the cuff.



We trace modern improvisation to Viola Spolin, who used theatre games in the 1930's to help immigrant children socially integrate. She refined those games to focus on creativity and play to help individuals get in touch with the ability to create and unlock their self-expression. Viola's son, Paul Sills, participated in her workshops. He went on to co-found Second City, which became world famous when many of its performers (Bill Murray, Dan Akroyd, Jim Belushi, Tina Fey, Chris Farley, John Candy et al) showed up on "Saturday Night Live."

## ***Improvisation - An Example***





Let's look at a sample improvisational exercise entitled "Six Episodes".

A group of participants is given a task - let's say their job is to launch a new search engine on the internet. The group has one minute to prepare six scenes, in which they complete the task (launching the search engine). At the end of the one minute prep time, discussion ends and the group plays out all six scenes.

## ***Now What?***

So what does this have to do with becoming more effective in today's business climate? A lot - as it turns out.

In order to have a successful outcome of the task given for the improvisation, our group has to do several things:

-  Think quickly and generate a creative solution to the challenge of launching a new product.
-  Collaborate to formulate a plan; successful collaboration necessitates that people listen to one another and build on each other's ideas.
-  Be flexible and adapt to changes in the plan as it's played out.
-  With only a minute to prepare, the group's operating under a certain amount of ambiguity, yet they have to move forward to complete the scenes.

The skills needed to successfully work improvisation are the same skills needed to successfully work in business today.

# **5 Stages of Improvisation**

**Resistance**

**Acceptance**

**Challenge**

**Frustration**

**Breakthrough**

## ***The 5 Stages of Improvisation***

Using improvisation to hone speaking, leadership and team development skills is a slam dunk for today's companies looking for any edge to compete in today's rapidly changing business world. And its use as a legitimate training tool has been sanctioned by no less an institution than MIT's Sloan School of Management. However, you're still likely to encounter what I call the 5 Stages of Improvisation.

### **1) Resistance**

It's common for people to resist improvisation at first. Improv asks you to take a risk and put yourself out there and "wing it". But improvisation is like playing an instrument or taking part in sports - the more you play, the better you become.

### **2) Acceptance**

With a skilled facilitator, it doesn't take long for participants to reach this stage. By starting off with a few simple warm up exercises that are fun and get the creative juices flowing, you get a taste of how free wheeling and exciting improv can be.

### **3) Challenge**

As you move into more complex games, you're challenged to push the creative envelope, go outside habitual interactions and discover insights you don't access in everyday life.

### **4) Frustration**

You may feel ready to give up. You see the top of the mountain but don't think you can get there. Hang on. I've seen some of the best improv work done when people are on the verge of giving up. Again, a skilled facilitator can motivate the group to keep pushing through to...

### **5) Breakthrough**

That glorious moment when everything clicks, when you find creativity on the other side, when you discover new and surprising solutions, when you're pumped with the feeling of "I did it!" or "We did it!"

## ***Creativity***

Professor Michael Ray of Stanford Graduate School of Business developed that University's classes in creativity based on the premise that creativity lives in each one of us and that it is absolutely essential for success in all areas of our lives, including business.

There's no better way to tap into your individual or team creativity than through improvisation. Improvisation challenges you to let go of what feels comfortable, to let go of your fear of taking risks, to let go of your fear of failure and to let go of linear-only thinking that inhibits inner creativity. Improvisation will help make you a better team member because it calls on you to listen to understand, not listen to reply. Improvisation depends on building on the ideas of others, which helps create a culture of support and trust. Improvisation will help you break patterns of behavior to better navigate effective change and enhance your leadership skills.

***What are you  
waiting for?  
Try improvisation  
now!***

Jennie Ayers brings more than 20 years of experience as a performer, writer, director and producer in both theatre

and television to the business industry. She's written more than 25 episodes of television comedy and spent two enjoyable years writing for comic Jeff Foxworthy. Her coaching expertise focuses on the synergistic use of body, voice and improvisation to help professionals and executives build confidence and competence in their presentation and platform skills.



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