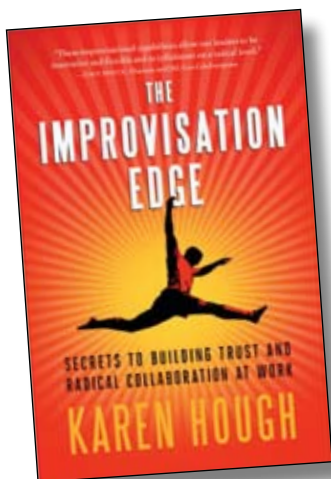




Learning from Improv Theater

What does improvisational acting have to do with building a nonprofit organization? More than you might think.

By Terrence Fernsler



The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work

By Karen Hough. 181 pages. Softcover. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, www.bkconnection.com

Karen Hough received training in improvisational theater, or improv, at Chicago's Second City and has been a professional improviser for many years. She learned how to transfer much of that training and practice to running a successful business. In *The Improvisation Edge*, she explains how improv behavior helps teams collaborate. She explores improv secrets and demonstrates how they're directly related to adaptability, which leads to improved organizational performance. Her insights are perfectly suited for nonprofit organizations, which rely as much on relationships to perform well as any business does.

The book begins by examining how work issues are

Improv behavior helps teams collaborate by building trust.

A Tip from the Improvisational Stage

One of the many creative exercises described in *The Improvisational Edge* is the Two-Headed Expert. Two people work as a team to answer a question from the group, each person saying just one word at a time, like this:

- Person A: "I"
- Person B: "am"
- Person A: "the"
- Person B: "two"
- Person A: "headed"
- Person B: "expert!"

Not only does this activity help people learn the advantages of teamwork, it makes it clear that each word, no matter how small, is important to the whole. It requires people to let go of assumptions, give up control, listen carefully to one another, and embrace the beauty of collaboration.

The best teams leverage the strengths of each member.

tied to the need for collaboration, flexibility, and trust. It turns out that four improv characteristics are important to developing these values:

- Being positive creates the capabilities for collaboration, innovation, and opportunity.
- Encouraging participation is a tool for building strong programs, and improv invites team members' contributions.
- The best teams leverage the strengths of each member to work toward a common goal.
- Being adaptable allows your team to deal with the unexpected and use it to advantage.

This fascinating book teaches us that improv teams are among the most rehearsed entertainers—a fact that opens a discussion about the value of practice, especially when behaviors are new. In a work setting, practice comes through daily interactions. This continual preparation helps people trust each other enough to meet uncertainty together.

Improv teams are among the most rehearsed entertainers.

Celebrating even small successes encourages team members to take on larger challenges. Learning and using improv behavior can turn the challenges we face into opportunities by helping us become more comfortable with creative solutions.

Collaboration, inclusiveness, and a positive attitude are essential for strong teams. Learning and practicing improv behaviors can build incredibly well-functioning teams, leading to more productive organizations. ■

Terrence Fernsler is policy analyst for Alliance FOR Nonprofits Washington and host of Third Sector Radio USA (www.ksub.seattle.org). He has been a nonprofit professional for over 30 years.