

TEAM BUILDING REDEFINED: IT'S TIME TO IMPROVISE

Use improv principles to enhance
communication and collaboration.

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This article is not in Strategic Contact's usual "Tech Line" column of Contact Center Pipeline for a reason. Yes, I'm a techie person, but I also happen to love the operational and people dynamics of the contact center. I bring my employees together each year, and this year we did something really different: We took an improv class. Even though they were not happy going in, they were really happy coming out! We all got a lot out of it as individuals and a team. And as consultants who help our clients with change and difficult situations all the time, we had some excellent discussions about the value of this sort of facilitated "team building" for the contact center. So I'm here to share and encourage you readers, who are leaders, to check it out.

Not a Saturday Night Out on the Town

Some of you may think "Improv" is something you attend on a Saturday night with friends. I've been to some excellent performances with Second City in Chicago and ComedySportz in D.C. The players are exceptional, and they know how to take the oddest of inputs from their teammates or the audience and turn it into something hysterically funny. It's very impressive, and certainly not something the average contact center professional would sit there thinking, "I could do this!"

When it comes to the contact center, I'm talking about improvising in a different context. Here is a definition from the Merriam Webster online dictionary that should resonate: *something that is performed, made or done without preparation*. If your contact center doesn't have to frequently adjust and do things without preparation, count your lucky stars. I have yet to see a center where every call follows a predictable path, every day plays out according to forecast and schedules match workload demand, and every quarter is managed with careful planning involving peers from marketing, IT, HR and elsewhere. Consciously or not, you are improvising every day in your center (and probably in your personal life, as well).

But you may face the same challenges I did: Most people have grown cynical about team-building events that deliver marginal (and often very fleeting) value, and telling someone they're going to an "Improv Class" may scare the living daylights out of them. So find a better way to label it if you must, but if you can learn some improv techniques to apply to communication, problem solving and collaboration, your center will be better for it. Think about how good it would be to have "tools" that make you as quick to respond, as clever, and as capable as improv artists. And maybe even handle it all with a bit more laughter!

Improvisation in the Center

Let me use some examples that may help you see, and sell, improvisation as a topic worth talking about with your peers and team. Center leadership, support staff and frontline members often take pride in their "firefighting" skills. The volume is higher, or the staffing lower, than expected, so you adjust on the fly (improvise) as you bring in pizza so agents can have shorter lunch breaks or work a longer shift and feel good about it. Marketing forgot to tell you about the new mailing, so you hustle to put a plan and communication in place as agents are bombarded with calls and questions. IT did an upgrade and something isn't working quite right, impacting every contact. So you quickly get the right people to address the technology issues while also putting temporary processes in place for your staff. Unfortunately, improvising doesn't always work. Maybe the manager threw out some guidance as he or she headed off to a meeting, the supervisors and support staff started working on it, and when the manager returned, everything went haywire and no one felt good about it.

Look beyond the firefighting to the day to day and you'll recognize more improvisation. Customers ask crazy questions and agents just want to say, "No!" But they can't. Execs ask for a report that you don't have, and perhaps doesn't make sense, but you have to come up

CONTACT CENTER ECOSYSTEM: STRONG INTERDEPENDENCIES

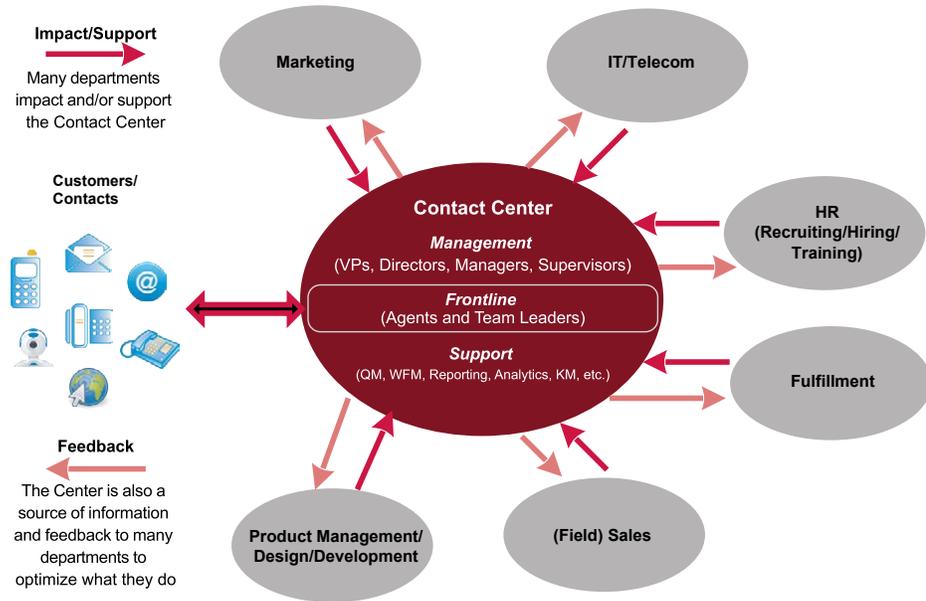


Figure 1: The Center's "Ecosystem" Requires Frequent Improvisation

with something to meet their need (again, "No" is not an option). In both of these cases, you must adjust and find a way to run with it rather than reject it. You must find a way to say "Yes, and..." instead of no. That's a key to success in improv, and one of the best takeaways from facilitated improv workshops.

The Value of Improvisation

The contact center is part of a complex ecosystem in most companies, as shown in Figure 1. The value of improvisation can be high for a variety of people and roles.

Let's start with executive leadership in the center, working with departments such as IT, HR for hiring and training, marketing, etc. Through exercises followed by facilitated discussions, you can build awareness of how much these groups impact the center and trigger "improvisational" activity. Even though centers are good at it, that doesn't mean they want to or should have to do it all the time! The team can learn how to use the power of "yes and..." to get things done collaboratively, or how taking time to slow down and clarify the goals and processes can reap (better) results. Other exercises can help leaders from these various departments learn to communicate more clearly for successful outcomes for all, even though each brings a different perspective, uses different language, and has different (and sometimes conflicting) priorities and goals.

Center leadership such as VPs, directors, managers and supervisors can also benefit in thinking about how they guide their staff—both frontline agents and support functions. They can gain new awareness of the importance of providing clear direction—or as clear as possible, given all the change, uncertainty and influences. They can see how to use teamwork to get things

done, and how respecting ideas and input of everyone leads to a better outcome. Centers might use focus groups or suggestion boxes, but you can take the input to new heights with a stronger sense of how to build on ideas, rather than rejecting, stopping and restarting. It can make everyone feel better about the effort and energy that goes into projects or other tasks when you reach a positive result, even if it goes in a slightly different direction than expected.

Finally, agents, team leaders and supervisors talking to customers can all grow in their role through improvisation. We routinely observe calls for our projects, and we witness the “numbness” that seeps in for people taking calls all day. They often don’t really listen to customers and end up just going through the motions, creating frustration and potentially executing the wrong transaction, entering or providing inaccurate information. Learning new tricks to listen all the way through what the customer says (while still complying with all those performance, quality and compliance requirements) is invaluable. Communicating clearly so the customer can respond in a meaningful way helps, too. Building on each other’s inputs to expand knowledge in wikis or SharePoint and drive greater information for everyone ties improv into the use of powerful, but often underutilized, technologies. Driving customer satisfaction and first-contact resolution leads to more priceless outcomes.

Improvisation is valuable in all these cases, not just because it applies, but because it is a different way of tackling problems and opportunities. It brings a new perspective in a fun, interesting, memorable and lasting way.

Our Favorite Improv Exercises

We spent several hours doing improv exercises and discussing their applicability to our work and to our clients and the challenges they face. Here are a couple of our team’s favorites:

1. “Bobsled” had us in lines of four people awaiting guidance from our facilitator, Patrick Short (see “A Conversation with Patrick Short, Improv Player and Facilitator,” on page 18). The instructions came quickly as we changed positions and directions. The commands had only subtle differences and were open to interpretation. Eventually, Patrick gave us control, adding new complications and leadership lessons. As we scabbled and laughed, we tried to *help each other as peers* so we could keep moving as a team. It quickly showed the importance of clarity in word choice (and the meaning that is conveyed). We could relate it to the different roles and responsibilities in contact centers. The exercise also showed how people “make it happen” and keep moving, whether or not they truly understand, can remember, can handle the pace or are clear on what you really want them to do.

2. “Sun and Moon” required us to adjust to each other. We each privately picked a sun and a moon and then tried to stay equidistant. The movement created chaos as change by one impacted all. Then, Patrick introduced variations to becoming equidistant, letting go of the need to actually get there, and moving in slow motion. Once we calmed the chaos, everyone could adjust better. It was a great exercise for building awareness of how what we do affects others, how we all need to constantly adjust, and how sometimes slowing down helps. It also made us aware that observing and trying to figure out what everyone else is doing may not help; better to focus on what we each need to do and adjust as needed.

These and the other exercises grew in importance as we discussed how to apply it to our world, and what it could mean for contact centers. We built great awareness on considering the language we use and the actions we take and how they impact others. The facilitation created “nuggets” to take back and use routinely as we work together.

It Will Be FUN and USEFUL!

CSz Worldwide has a great resource to get to know the Improv concepts: *Jill & Patrick's Small Book of Improv for Business*. This book shows improvisation is about “observing, connecting and responding.” Doesn't that sound like it could improve your inter- and intradepartmental interactions and the customer experience?

Next time you are looking for a team-building exercise, don't do the same old things that put cynical people on the fringes of the room with their arms crossed. Hire an experienced, expert facilitator and engage everyone in a fun, practical activity that will keep people talking and interacting in new and more effective ways—with each other and your customers.

Author's note: Interested in seeing how Improv can help your team work better together? Contact Strategic Contact to talk about working with our new partner, CSz Worldwide, to conduct a session for your center. [📞](#)

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Patrick Short is the general manager at CSz Portland and executive director of CSz Worldwide. Yes, he's a "player" (improv actor), but he's also a facilitator. He shared with us his experience and insights into applying Improv to the corporate world and contact centers in particular.

A CONVERSATION WITH PATRICK SHORT, IMPROV PLAYER AND FACILITATOR



HOW DID YOU GET INTO IMPROV? I was first exposed to improvisation as a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin in Creative Drama in the Classroom—using theatre techniques in elementary school education. Improv was a part of what we learned and taught. Then, once I saw the ComedySportz show, I was hooked.

AND HOW DID YOU START TEACHING CORPORATE LEADERS ABOUT IMPROV? After a show in 1989, some folks from Apple came up to us and asked us to teach them improv. It was that simple. Customers demanded it. We went along and figured it out as we went. Our syllabus from CSz 101, our adult beginning improv class series, gave us a pretty strong starting base.

WHEN DID YOU FIRST STEP INTO A CONTACT CENTER? I first delivered the improvisation message to customer service people in the early and mid-'90s at some big banks, airlines and technology companies. For the next 10 years, the call center business grew slowly, but we also led many groups in sales training that was, due to my not-so-hidden agenda, actually customer service and customer relationship training. I had 13 years of selling experience that gave me some insights into how companies work (and don't). Delivering extraordinary customer service is hard, but the culture and tools available through improvisation are particularly helpful.

WHAT DO YOU THINK MOST DIFFERENTIATES IMPROV FROM OTHER "TEAM-BUILDING" ACTIVITIES? The potential for lasting impact and change in the culture. Improvisation, when it's applied with some care and experience, CAN change your world.

WHAT ARE THE KEYS TO SUCCESS FOR ANYONE WHO IS GOING TO CONSIDER IMPROV WITH THEIR STAFF OR PEERS? Most important is *buy-in* and FULL participation from the boss(es). An Applied Improvisation workshop is the perfect time to set an example: *Lead by following*. I would highlight three principles:

1. **Everybody plays.** An atmosphere where people feel observed or think notes are being

taken can force them to be more careful and less open. When everybody plays, everybody wins.

2. **Reflection.** We have to connect the work (play) that we are doing to our lives and work. Talking with an experienced facilitator about what the games meant, what happened, why things happened and how they connect has terrific value. We have to find the balance, though—too much reflection time can slow the momentum of the event.

3. **Find ways to reincorporate the learning** into ongoing work, meetings and actions. Even a small reminder can help.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE COMMON "TAKEAWAYS" FOR ATTENDEES?

1. Let mistakes go. Don't obsess on them. Fix them, learn from them and move on.
2. Making others look good makes us look and feel good.
3. Real, focused listening works wonders.
4. Understanding status conflict helps us solve problems more easily.
5. When you connect and laugh with people, it becomes easier to work with them.
6. Be present.

DO YOU HAVE A FAVORITE ACTIVITY FOR CONTACT CENTER LEADERS?

One of my new favorites is called "Duo Drawing." With pens, paper and a partner, we can learn how to apply the concept of "Yes, And..." directly to our actions, how working against each other produces nothing of value, and how working together produces value AND makes us feel good. It emphasizes five really important skills:

- Teamwork
- Making the best of an unexpected crisis
- Finding inspiration in chaos
- Dealing with an uncooperative partner
- Finding out what cooperation can accomplish

We do all of this in about 10 minutes AND laugh a lot. Duo Drawing has a lot of "stickiness"—participants respond to it and keep referring back to it later. 🎯

About Contact Center Pipeline

Contact Center Pipeline is a monthly instructional journal focused on driving business success through effective contact center direction and decisions. Each issue contains informative articles, case studies, best practices, research and coverage of trends that impact the customer experience. Our writers and contributors are well-known industry experts with a unique understanding of how to optimize resources and maximize the value the organization provides to its customers.

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