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By Natalie Shure

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When the office gets goofy: Improv for professionals



When most people think about improv comedy classes, they think about over-the-top performances and aspiring future Saturday Night Live cast members. While this reputation for goofiness might seem ill-suited for the buttoned-up professional world, many improv theatre companies are challenging these expectations by offering corporate training courses to various companies. By drawing upon lessons from the world of improv, instructors strive to promote the development of team building, communication and problem solving skills applicable to the workplace.

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"Improv is so cavalier and edgy," conceded Carter Edwards, who helms the corporate leg of the Upright Citizens Brigade. "But as soon as we started this, we started to see how translatable the philosophies of improv were to corporate training." Chief among these philosophies is the strategy of 'yes, and,' which encourages actors

in a scene to accept and build upon anything their partners create. "The majority of the corporate world would never think to do this, but as soon as we describe it to them, there's a major a-ha moment that goes on with the participants," Edwards said.

To help professionals work harmoniously and productively, Rob DiNinni of Stage Coach Improv has also made 'yes, and' a central tenet of his corporate improv program. "If you acknowledge and understand someone's point of view, you create a collaborative environment, DiNinni explained. "You can debate instead of negate."

Employees often bring these lessons back to their jobs after completing the program. Rebecca Cronin partnered with Stage Coach Improv as part of her work at Phillips. She described a heated meeting at the office shortly after several employees participated in a Stage Coach training session. "One of my colleagues stepped in and said, 'yes, we're going to do that, and...' in a really exaggerated tone, and got everyone laughing," Cronin said. Recalling the lesson from improv helped get the meeting back on track.

Despite these professional benefits, it can be difficult to convince people to unwind in a work setting. "With professionals, you have folks who are at their best in front of a computer," DiNinni said. "We try to create a psychological safety net so everyone feels comfortable taking risks."

The majority of participants do eventually get past that hump. "I love watching the transformation in people when they finally relax enough to have fun with it," Cronin said. "These workshops are the time and place for it."

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