

How Managers Can Use the Rules of Comedy to Engage Teams

By Stephanie Vozza

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As employees return to the office, interacting in real life can feel awkward after being remote for more than a year, so it's up to managers to help set the tone and break the ice. One way to do that is to borrow tools from comedy.

"This year taught us that we're not working with a script," said Kelly Leonard, executive director of insights and applied improvisation for The Second City, a Chicago-based improvisational comedy club that also offers classes for businesses. "[Comedians] are adept at navigating the world without a script."

These four rules of comedy can help managers ensure that employees feel valued and safe sharing their ideas in the workplace:

1. Be willing to be vulnerable.

"Comics teach the audience how to enjoy them in the first five minutes of their act," Leonard said. "That often involves self-deprecation. Connections happen when someone shares their authentic self."

Sharing weaknesses and struggles with humor can be a great equalizer, said Tara Lilien, chief talent officer for Peppercomm, a New York City-based strategic communications firm that puts all of its employees and managers through comedy school to broaden their skills.

"Finding common ground is critical when you're a manager," she said. "Your team appreciates it when you humanize yourself. Adding a level of levity to the workplace also helps reduce stress."

For example, managers might share some of the embarrassing things that happened while they were working from home, such as having a child interrupt an important Zoom meeting.

2. Think like an ensemble.

While The Second City launched the careers of stars like Tina Fey, Bill Murray and Eugene Levy, improv is based on the concept that "all of us are better than one of us," Leonard said.

"We celebrate and empower the other," he explained. "It's a skill set that can help managers be effective, too, and it needs to be practiced."

The success of "Saturday Night Live" can be attributed to producer Lorne Michaels' ability to assemble a unique collection of actors and writers, said Peter McGraw, author of *Schtick to Business: What the Masters of Comedy Can Teach You About Breaking Rules, Being Fearless, and Building a Serious Career* (Lioncrest Publishing, 2020).

"One of the things that happens in business is a tendency to focus on a lone genius, like visionary Steve Jobs," McGraw said. "In comedy, a successful sketch requires more than a single point of view. Business leaders should seek out diverse perspectives and let those voices be heard in the same way Lorne Michaels stocks the room with different minds."

3. Listen completely.

Listening is the willingness to be changed, said Max Dickens, author of *Improvise! Use the Secrets of Improv to Achieve Extraordinary Results at Work* (Icon Books, 2020).

"It's not just making a listening face and listening noises and maybe throwing in a bit of paraphrasing, like executives learn to do," he said. "Real listening is being open to what you hear and letting it impact your response."

One of the exercises The Second City uses in its classes is called "The Last Word." Groups are put into pairs and told to create a dialogue, with each person adding one sentence to the conversation. The rule is that the last word of the other person's sentence must become the first word of yours.

"What people notice is that they usually don't listen to the end of sentences," Leonard said. "Human beings think they get the gist of what someone is saying, but this isn't true. We don't necessarily understand everything someone's going to say, and we may miss crucial information."

4. Create safe spaces.

To engage employees, you need an environment where everyone feels safe to contribute. Improv uses the phrase "yes, and" to build positive dialogues.

"You affirm what someone else says and build upon it rather than shutting an idea down," Leonard said.

Safe spaces also need a level playing field, which means managers must address status, Dickens said. "Status is where you are in the hierarchy," he explained. "Leaders are at the top, and they can own the room when they need to push things forward. But fantastic leaders also give away status to bring others into the conversation."

"I call it the monologue effect," Dickens said. "Senior people are used to just talking, talking, talking. We have to remember that communication is a dialogue. Leaders need to have the self-confidence to let that happen."

Talking last can reduce your status. "The average manager is well intentioned, but they often tackle a problem by sharing their thoughts first," McGraw said. "Once you tell employees what you think, it colors what they think. [Employees have] their own sets of challenges; they don't want to add 'disappointing the boss' to the list. Ask for your team's input first, solve second."

McGraw also encourages managers to do an exercise using a comedy tool he calls "schtick storming." "Have your team purposely brainstorm terrible ideas," he suggested. "Tell them to not self-censure; no idea is dumb enough. On occasion you get an idea that is so crazy, it might work."

These tools help you build relationships, which is what comedy is about, Leonard said.

"It's not about going back to the office and saying 'yes, and,' " he said. "It's about adopting a 'yes, and' mindset. It's about being in a place of gratitude for the information that's being shared. By being present and accepting what is in front of you, you can create stronger results."

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