



Improv(ing) leadership

Offer opportunities for all to be heard and supported, while sharing credit

I AM VERY PROUD to introduce you to my son, Jonathan Waldbauer (known in some circles as Jon).

Jonathan works for a significant nonprofit in our community. He is also employed by ComedySportz Milwaukee, where comedy is played as a sport with two teams of improvisational performers competing in various improv games. If you have not had the experience, I encourage you to check it out!

Jonathan and I often talk about leadership and the current challenges for leaders in this world of chaos, divisiveness and uncertainty. In listening to him, I began to realize that there are lessons from improv that, when applied, enhance leadership effectiveness.

Jonathan agreed that he would be my partner in writing this article. I posed the following questions for his consideration:

WE KNOW THAT THERE ARE NO SCRIPTS FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP. WHAT DO YOU THINK LEADERS MIGHT LEARN FROM IMPROV?

"Improv stands on a foundation of listening and building together. That process begins with genuinely inviting others' input and creating an environment in which folks feel safe and supported when they share their ideas. People will engage more passionately when they know they're actually being heard. Creating that space invites vulnerability, so it's important for leaders to actively show support for ideas that are offered.

"Improv thrives on a 'yes-and' philosophy, in which we validate an idea and develop it collaboratively. If someone shares an idea and it's shot down without further discussion, you've said 'no' to the idea and also to the person. You've directly discouraged future creativity, collaboration and innovation, and indirectly taught your teammates that their ideas will be scrutinized should they choose to participate.

"Alternately, embracing the offer, even if we're only taking a piece of it, creates the seeds

for the next idea. Not all of it may be gold or even usable. However, it's valuable in advancing the process. You're fostering an atmosphere in which people are celebrated and supported for what they bring to the table. Leaders need to take that next step, though – the 'and' of the 'yes-and' – because showing support for an idea without following it with action, will be experienced as performative and hollow.

"The hardest part of fostering an environment of creativity and support using the principles of improv requires continued work to dismantle the walls we've put up over the years as we've accumulated experiences, responsibilities and traumas that teach us that it's safer to say 'no.'"

WHAT DO YOU THINK KEEPS LEADERS FROM RISKING IMPROV LEADERSHIP?

"Businesses are focused on deliverables and deadlines; we know what needs to get done by when, and there are consequences if goals are not met. Because improv isn't driven by the same principles, taking the time to practice – and play – can feel like it's moving us laterally, if not away from the end goal within a business environment. Incorporating an additional creative thinking or brainstorming-style session when an organization has already been operating within specific strategic parameters and timelines can feel like a burden, especially since there aren't always tangible takeaways.

"However, when leaders take a step back from their processes to access the bigger picture, they'll note that fostering the 'yes-and' environment can create an energy that ripples through the work, through the process and through solutions. Leaders are likely to see, that offering opportunities for all voices to be heard and supported, while sharing credit, can create a workplace in which people feel empowered to take ownership, celebrate innovation and make bold decisions.

"Leaders who incorporate elements of improv into their workplaces may not see imme-

diately change in the organizations' output, yet they will be participating in a transformation of the work process itself with long term ramifications that position organizations for success."

WHAT DREW YOU TO LEARN IMPROV? HOW HAS IT INFLUENCED YOUR WORK AS A LEADER? YOUR WORK WITH COLLEAGUES, ETC.?

"I've been a fan of comedy since my dad first showed me tapes of his favorites from his youth, including Red Skelton, The Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers.

"Learning, performing and teaching improv has been transformative for me. Improv has offered me an avenue to become a lot more comfortable in my own skin. I believe improv can be used in conjunction with other tools to help facilitate personal and professional growth. At the very least, I'm practiced in listening and collaborating, and those are wonderful tools to bring into any new challenge." ■



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