

# A Funny Thing Happened At Work: Team-Building Exercises

## WORKFORCE: Improv Theater Connect Staffs Through Comedy

■ By BRITTANY MEILING

Corporate team building often gets a bad rap, with employers forcing staff to participate in goofy games such as sandcastle building and egg-and-spoon racing — all in the name of “building trust and communication.”

One new exercise may inspire more employee eye rolls than others: improv comedy workshops. Perhaps out of fear of the unknown (or fear of the stage), the concept seems to make most staffers sweat. But do these workshops get results? One San Diego theater, **Finest City Improv**, says yes, and they’ve got the corporate client list to prove it.

The theater is charging companies thousands to host improv workshops for their employees, and dozens of San Diego firms are taking them up on the offer.

Improv comedy, once a training technique for actors, is also a popular form of theater. Actors are offered words from a live audience, such as “flowers” or “in-laws,” and the team on stage launches an unscripted skit based on the proffered theme. The word “flower” may inspire a skit about a woman who has received a cactus from her boyfriend (signifying his subconscious belief that she isn’t nurturing enough to water a “real plant,” of course). The comedy comes from the strange direction unplanned skits often take.

The comedic style is risky and, for some, terrifying. When a skit doesn’t



Photo courtesy of Finest City Improv  
**Kat Brown, left, and Amy Lisewski, who run Finest City Improv in North Park, teach communication skills and team building through improvisational comedy.**

pan out, actors must quit halfway through, regroup and launch a new idea — all in front of an audience.

While watching the spontaneous skits is entertaining to no end (just look at the success of the TV show “Whose Line is it Anyway?”), improv may have applications outside of the theater.

### Send in the Corporations

**Amy Lisewski**, who owns and runs Finest City Improv, said she identified the business applications of improv right from the start. The theater opened its doors in 2013, and it’s managed to earn

70 percent of its revenue last year from corporate workshops and training classes. The company has booked at least 25 corporate clients, including **Kaiser Permanente**, **IBM**, **GoPro Inc.** and **Synthetic Genomics Inc.** Some of these clients have become recurring customers, booking quarterly workshops for their staff.

The workshops and classes aren’t quite as scary as the stage. Groups of employees congregate in a room, and their only audience is their peers. Finest City leaders, including Lisewski and her business partner **Kat Brown**, lead the group

## FINEST CITY IMPROV

**CEO:** Amy Lisewski

**Revenue:** \$294,000 in 2015; \$197,000 in 2014; \$49,270 in 2013

**No. of local employees:** 3

**Investors:** Not disclosed

**Headquarters:** North Park

**Year founded:** 2013

**Company description:** Improv theater offering classes and corporate workshops on top of regular shows

**Key factors for success:** Diversified revenue stream, growing corporate client list

in improv sessions and games. When a participant starts to fade out, unsure of how to proceed, the improv pros jump in and keep the session moving.

What are these employees learning from improv? Lisewski said team building is just the tip of the iceberg.

“Great leaders must have the ability to build effective teams, establish team trust, and collaborate with others,” Lisewski said. She then references a quote from auto executive **Lee Iacocca**, “In the end, business operations can be reduced to three words: people, product and profits. Unless you’ve got a good team, you can’t do much with the other two.”

### Unit Cohesion

Improv, at its core, teaches the concept that working together is the only way to move forward. Actors must be open to all ideas that come across the table.

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More than that, actors must build on their teammate's ideas to provide the audience with a good story line. In improv, it's a big faux pas to turn down a fellow actor's idea on stage. Improv schools call this concept, "Yes, and," meaning actors must accept the offered storyline, and then build on it.

"The idea of improv is that there are no wrong answers, just things we haven't explored yet," said Jacob Bruce, a theater professor at the University of San Diego and longtime improv actor. "It develops and nurtures a group mentality, which in the corporate world is very handy, especially when you get into team projects."

Bruce sometimes teaches improv tactics to scientists, who need to polish their communication skills to present



Photo courtesy of Finest City Improv  
**Finest City Improv provides training classes for the public and corporate workshops for businesses. In addition to being fun, improv classes can help individuals with social anxiety, public speaking, and confidence-building.**

research and ask for grants. He says improv doesn't just teach them communication skills; it also teaches them collaborative skills.

"Scientists tend to get very focused on themselves and their own research, which can be a detriment to a group of researchers working together," Bruce said. "The days of Galileo staring up at the stars by himself are long gone. Everyone works with a group now. You have to collaborate with your colleagues and those who came before you."

Lisewski says improv classes coach teams to trust each other's ideas, and strive to make others look good.

"Improv teaches you to think, 'it's not mine, it's ours,'" Lisewski said.

### Opening Up

Tana Lorah, a Kaiser employee who participated in several Finest City workshops, said improv helped connect a disparate team and instilled courage in her colleagues.

"I've found that people at work are no longer shy about expressing their ideas," Lorah said. "In a company this big, we often work in silos, never connecting with colleagues except through email and over the phone. Even in our own office, at some level we're strangers. But building authentic connections with colleagues makes it easier for us to jump in and help each other. More hands make light work, and team building opens people up to saying yes to a helping hand."

Lorah said the program was so successful with a small group of Kaiser employees that the company hired Finest City to do a regional training session with 150 employees in Southern California.

The corporate workshops aren't just for the employees, Lisewski said. It's essential for the managers and leaders to take part, as well. After all, the "yes, and" principle is crucial to cultivating ideas from a team. Saying no, in contrast, may stymie creativity.

"When someone comes to you with an idea and you shut them down, what goes through their head is, 'I'm not good enough, this idea's not good enough, and I'm going to look foolish if I do it again,'" Lisewski said. "You're their leader, and if you do that to them — you shut them down — people stop bringing you ideas."

### Introvers Encouraged to Apply

While some express fear or aversion at the very concept of improv workshops, Lorah, Lisewski, and Bruce all attest that the introverted participants often learn the most from these sessions.

"There's a misconception that you have to be funny to do improv, but that's not true at all," Lorah said. "You just have to be a regular person. It really brings out your quieter members, and allows introverted colleagues an opportunity to express themselves in a safe place. It also brings out a creative side in these individuals that you might not see otherwise."

Lorah also noted that introverts often crave connections with people on a deeper level, and that building authentic connections with colleagues can lead to workplace happiness. And workplace happiness leads to retention.

"Once you get past the basic support and trust, the employees become more engaged," Lisewski said. "If people know more about the people they work with, they want to go to work in the morning. You've got to do more for your employees than give them a raise; they've got to be engaged."

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