Yes And, Improv for Consultants

Idea In Short

Borrow improv's core habits: practice constantly, stay in the moment, build on others with yes-and, read the room and stay authentic. Then respect the three differences. Never fake an answer, treat mistakes as real and stay discreet in public. Consulting rewards flow and punishes bluffing.

An Unlikely Classroom

A night at an improv theater delivers plenty of laughter and one unexpected question: what can consultants learn from improvisation?1 The first reaction is dismissive. Improv means entertaining an audience, making things up and generally winging it, nothing like the well-choreographed meetings and formal presentations consultants deliver to clients. The dismissal does not survive reflection. Eight lessons transfer directly, and three sharp differences mark where the analogy must stop.

Practice and Presence

Improv actors practice relentlessly. They use games to hone skills, emphasizing readiness and flexibility to follow the action wherever it goes. In a single skit, performers imitated German, Scottish, Swedish, Klingon and Australian accents, a feat of preparation disguised as spontaneity. Consultants need the same sharpening. Practice the small things, writing well, speaking well and working efficiently in Excel, because you rarely get as much preparation time as you wish.

Presence follows practice. Improv actors hold no script and no memorized lines, so they commit entirely to the moment: alert, eager, responsive. Most professionals could do far better here, starting with not glancing at phones during meetings. Attention is a gift clients notice, and its absence is a message they also receive.

Yes, And

The signature rule of improvisation builds on whatever the other person said and did, because without listening the scene collapses into chaos.2 Confirm what the other said, then build on it. Contrast this with the common professional habit: people appear to listen while actually composing their rebuttal, a posture of yes-but, I think you are wrong. Consultants need to hear and understand the words, and just as importantly read the body language, absorb the culture of the client site and grasp how the organization makes its tacit decisions. The teams that master this move faster, because agreement compounds while argument stalls.

Emotional Intelligence and Authenticity

A troupe accustomed to acting together develops flow. Members know each other's strengths, humor and ambitions, reading one another like a couple married twenty years. Call it intuition, wisdom or emotional intelligence.3 Consultants tend to think more than they feel, which usually serves the work of data, logic and persuasion. The blind spot appears at implementation, because humans with feelings must execute the recommendations. Robots do not inspire adoption.

Authenticity completes the pair. Improv is personal to a fault, vulnerable and sometimes awkward. Consulting often looks like the opposite: well-dressed people with shiny diplomas from white-shoe firms. Credentials and authority matter, and so does being comfortable in your own skin, however unique, geeky or plain you believe yourself to be. Audiences of every kind detect performance and reward genuineness.

Getting Unstuck

If improv were a car, the gas pedal would be glued down. The dialogue, interaction and mood never stop, so performers go with the flow and take the lead of others. Consulting frequently looks over-orchestrated by comparison: project charters, status reports, deliverables, meeting minutes and statements of work. When the project inevitably hits a snag, junior consultants can turn fatalistic and stuck. Weathered colleagues lovingly remind them that most snags are just a dip or a bottleneck. Reach out to partners, mentors and executive sponsors, and bust through. As one consultant put it, just model through the problem. Two final lessons round out the eight. Remember the audience in everything, from

emails and proposals to phone calls and presentations. And have fun, perhaps the first lesson rather than the last. The improv actors were visibly in their element, with flow, ownership and centeredness that would survive an empty house. Consulting is too complex and exhausting to force. Recover the curiosity and joy of the beginner's mind, because enthusiasm was how everyone started.

Practicing Yes-And Deliberately

The habit can be trained like any other skill. In your next three client workshops, impose a private rule: respond to every stakeholder contribution by first restating its strongest element before adding your own. Notice how often your instinct is to correct rather than build, because that noticing is the training. Teams can practice together by running short brainstorming rounds where criticism is banned for ten minutes and every idea must extend the previous one. The output of such rounds is usually mediocre, and the point is not the output. The point is rewiring a room's default from debate to construction, a default that later survives contact with real stakes.

Where the Analogy Breaks

Three differences separate the stage from the engagement. First, do not make it up. When you do not know the answer, say so, then find it quickly. Faking an answer is the fastest way to ruin a reputation and get removed from a project. Second, watch for deal-breaker mistakes. Improv teaches that there are no mistakes, only material to build on. Consulting has real mistakes: bad Excel models, poorly reasoned presentations, uninformed clients and faux pas by immature consultants. A project manager cannot be careful enough. Third, remain discreet. Consultants grow comfortable at client sites, and after a few quick wins overconfidence follows. Airplane seatmates cannot help reading your screen, and strangers ask about your client constantly. One team once discussed a client candidly at a chain restaurant, stood up to leave and discovered client staff seated in the next booth. Not classy, and entirely avoidable. Take improv's flow and generosity, respect consulting's facts and confidences, and the combination outperforms either alone.

- 1Improvisational Theatre
- 2Yes, And…
- 3Emotional Intelligence

Summary

Improv teaches consultants to practice, listen, build on colleagues and enjoy the work. It also marks the boundary: consultants cannot make things up, cannot dismiss mistakes and cannot discuss clients in public booths. Take the flow, leave the fiction and keep the beginner's joy.