

## Developing Leadership Through Improvisation: Insights From the MBA Classroom

Marco Aponte-Moreno, University of Southern California, United States

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### Abstract

As automation and artificial intelligence reshape industries, the need for human-centered leadership skills—such as listening, collaboration, and creative problem-solving—has become increasingly urgent. This preliminary study explores the potential of improvisation, a technique rooted in theater, to develop essential leadership competencies. Drawing from Tina Fey’s principles of improvisation and Amy Edmondson’s psychological safety framework, the research highlights how structured improvisation exercises can foster adaptability, creativity, and interpersonal connection in leadership. The study involved 96 MBA students from an American university who participated in a 3-hour improvisation session. Improvisation activities such as “Yes, And,” “Freeze Tag,” and “Genre Switch” were conducted during the session to strengthen five critical leadership skills: listening, decision-making, collaboration, creativity, and psychological safety. Data were gathered through Likert-scale surveys, open-ended feedback, and facilitator observations. Preliminary findings revealed that participants overwhelmingly agreed the exercises helped develop these skills: 96% reported improved listening, 85% noted enhanced decision-making, 93% experienced stronger collaboration, 94% highlighted increased creativity, and 92% felt greater psychological safety. These results demonstrate the transformative potential of improvisation in fostering key leadership skills and building cohesive teams. This study provides practical insights for educators, corporate trainers, and leaders aiming to enhance leadership skills and build stronger teams.

*Keywords:* leadership, improvisation, emotional intelligence, psychological safety, MBA education

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## Introduction

As automation and artificial intelligence (AI) reshape industries, the demand for distinctly human skills, such as listening, collaboration, and creative problem-solving, grows. Leaders today must navigate ambiguity, inspire diverse teams, and create environments of psychological safety to thrive in this evolving landscape. Improvisation, traditionally a theatrical tool, has emerged as a powerful way to cultivate these essential skills. Improvisation fosters adaptability, creativity, and interpersonal connection.

This preliminary study explores the potential of improvisation exercises to enhance leadership and team-building skills. The study is based on a structured improvisation session involving a total of 96 MBA students in an American university. It sheds light on how improvisation can foster listening skills, decision-making skills, collaboration, creativity, and psychological safety. It provides actionable insights for educators, coaches, and corporate trainers.

## Theoretical Framework

Improvisation can be considered an effective tool for leadership development due to its alignment with key leadership competencies (Aponte-Moreno, 2024). The principles of improvisation, as outlined by American actress Tina Fey in her book *Bossypants* (2011), include four core rules:

1. Always Agree (“Yes”): Encourages openness and receptivity.
2. Say “Yes, And”: Promotes co-creation and collaboration by building on others’ ideas.
3. Make Statements, No Questions: Fosters confidence, assertiveness, and the ability to take initiative.
4. There Are No Mistakes, Just Opportunities: Normalizes experimentation and emphasizes learning from failure.

These rules align with the concept of psychological safety, introduced by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson (1999). Psychological safety encourages team members to take risks, share ideas, and engage in open dialogue without fear of judgment. The premise is that by fostering psychological safety in the workplace, teams will be stronger and more cohesive. By normalizing experimentation and reframing mistakes as learning opportunities, improvisation helps build environments of trust and mutual respect that are critical for effective leadership.

In addition, improvisation can significantly enhance emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) by cultivating key dimensions such as self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills. These attributes empower leaders to navigate interpersonal dynamics effectively and inspire their teams. Improvisation also aligns closely with Seligman’s PERMA model (2011), which defines a positive workplace through five pillars: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement. By fostering these elements, improvisation not only strengthens leadership capabilities but also contributes to a more fulfilling and productive work environment.

## Methodology

The improvisation session was integrated into an MBA Organizational Behavior course and conducted in person with a cohort of 96 students. The three-hour session was structured around three key improvisation exercises:

- “Yes, And”: Students worked in teams to build narratives collaboratively by accepting as truth what the previous team member said and then adding to it. The exercise demands active listening, concentration, and openness. It is used both as an icebreaker and as an activity to help students familiarize themselves with the four core rules of improvisation.
- “Freeze Tag”: In this group activity, students improvised scenes until one participant “froze” the action. At that point, the participant replaced another person in the scene and started a brand-new story. Everyone was expected to adapt immediately to the new story. The game requires quick thinking, flexibility, and the courage to enter the unknown.
- “Genre Switch”: Students enacted a scene based on a given premise (e.g., a meeting in the office) until someone changed the genre. At that point, all participants adapted to the new genre (e.g., from romantic comedy to horror; from horror to musical; from musical to documentary, etc.) and a new story began. The activity challenges participants to stay present and adapt in real time.

At the end of the exercises, a debrief session took place. The exercises were interspersed with facilitated reflection, brief discussions, and additional debriefs. Students were invited to notice what felt easy, what felt uncomfortable, and what surprised them.

Data collection involved three components:

- Post-session surveys using a 5-point Likert scale to assess perceived development in each of the five targeted skills
- Open-ended written reflections, completed immediately after the session
- Facilitator field notes, including observations of team dynamics, participation levels, and shifts in energy throughout the session

## Results and Discussion

The results, while preliminary, were remarkably consistent across the five targeted skill areas. Students reported significant perceived improvement in the categories tested (listening, collaboration, psychological safety, creativity and decision making). Their written reflections offered qualitative insights that brought the numbers to life. What emerged was not only a picture of skill development, but also a shift in how students related to themselves and others in a leadership context.

Listening stood out as the most widely cited area of growth. Over 96% of students reported becoming more attuned to others in the room. Many admitted they had previously thought of listening as a passive activity—something akin to waiting for their turn to speak. What they discovered through the simplicity of “Yes, And” was the rigor of active listening: letting go of preconceptions, making space for others, and co-creating meaning in real time.

Closely linked to this was collaboration, where 93% of students indicated stronger feelings of team cohesion and trust. Collaboration, in this context, was not about dividing tasks or aligning incentives; it was about engaging with others moment to moment, without a script, and building something together. The group dynamic evolved visibly throughout the session. As one student reflected, “It was one of the few times in business school where I felt like we were all cheering for each other instead of competing.” Another wrote, “I took a risk in front of my peers, and instead of being judged, I was applauded.”

Psychological safety, cited by 92% of participants as improved, seemed to arise organically from the structure and tone of the exercises. The culture of affirmation—central to improvisation—created a space where students felt free to experiment and even fail. Several remarked that it was a relief to not be evaluated or graded during the session, which allowed them to take interpersonal risks they might otherwise avoid.

Creativity also flourished in this context, with 94% reporting enhanced capacity for spontaneous thinking and expression. Students described the “Genre Switch” game as both liberating and challenging. The activity required them to abandon linear thinking and embrace absurdity, ambiguity, and surprise. For many, it was the first time in years they had accessed this kind of imaginative play. One student remarked, “It felt like I gave myself permission to be creative again. I didn’t realize how much I missed that.”

Of all the skills, decision-making showed the lowest rate of self-reported improvement; though still high, at 85%. This result may reflect the complexity of spontaneous decision-making in a group setting. The “Freeze Tag” exercise, in particular, pushed students to make rapid choices in front of an audience, often with little time to think. Some found this exhilarating, but others admitted they hesitated, overthought their choices, or felt frozen by self-consciousness.

Several students noted that the experience surfaced a deep discomfort with ambiguity and “getting it wrong”—feelings that are highly relevant to leadership under pressure. What seemed to help was reframing decision-making not as a test of correctness but as an invitation to act, adjust, and respond. Improvisation, by its very nature, makes room for imperfect action. This is something many students found both uncomfortable and freeing.

Beyond specific skills, the session seemed to spark a broader rethinking of what leadership can look and feel like. Students began to see leadership not as a matter of expertise or control, but as a set of relational practices grounded in presence, trust, and responsiveness. As one student reflected, “I realized I don’t have to know everything to lead. I just have to be fully present.” Others echoed this insight, noting that the session helped them access a more human, less performative version of leadership—one that welcomes uncertainty and values connection over certainty.

## Conclusion

Improvisation is more than just a fun theatrical experience; it is a deeply humanizing practice that helps emerging leaders rehearse the very skills our workplaces so urgently need. Through this session, MBA students were able to feel, not just understand, what it means to listen actively, to collaborate generously, to make decisions without full information, and to contribute to a space of shared psychological safety.

These early findings suggest a powerful opportunity for educators and leadership developers. By incorporating improvisation into business curricula, we not only enrich the learning experience but also model a different way of being with others: one rooted in trust, flexibility, and co-creation.

This study is a first step. Future work will expand on this framework through a semester-long MBA elective, *Leadership through Improv*. My hope is that more people will come to see

improvisation not as a performance, but as a practice for leading with courage, humanity, and imagination.

### **Acknowledgement**

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