

# How to Create an Agile Organization

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Creating space for employees to improvise solutions and play on the job can increase their ability to effectively respond to the unexpected using available resources.

In an increasingly fluid world, the ability to respond to fluctuations in the market, customer needs, the workforce, technology, as well as geo-political and social shifts is key to organizational success. Such responsiveness does not come from prepared agendas and scripts; it comes from creating an agile organization — one in which individuals, workgroups and all departments have the capacity as well as the systems and processes in place to respond quickly to changing conditions and emerging opportunities — the unexpected and unplanned — using available resources.

Until recently, business school and learning curricula focused almost entirely on developing competencies in dimensions of organizational life and commerce that could be controlled. This translated into a full lineup of courses in planning, analysis and strategy. But the bias toward learning solely for planning and control is slowly shifting. A handful of programs, such as MIT, Harvard and DePaul, now offer electives to help individuals become more agile by developing their improvisation capacity. Further, over the past two decades, management educators increasingly have begun to translate lessons from artists who spontaneously create entire pieces of theater from a single audience suggestion, or riff on a familiar musical score, for application in business.

## Lessons From Improvisation

The parallels between successful theatrical improvisation and departments, teams and organizations are direct. All organizational players can benefit from developing their improvisation skills. Many of these skills can be taught via games modified from improvisational theatre, improvisation principles, and by

fostering a collaboration environment. A common improvisation game involves inviting pairs or small groups to create a story on the spot using only one word at a time. As they listen and build on each other's ideas, individuals and groups develop flexibility while sharing responsibility for the process and the product of their collaboration. Like jazz musicians, theatrical improvisers do not simply cross their fingers and hope that they will be "on" any given night; they practice a number of principles, learned skills and create the space that supports their success.

Developing individual capacity for improvisation has three dimensions: competence, consciousness and confidence.

**Improvisation competence:** Competence in improvisation includes core concepts from improvisers in the arts as well as skill development to enable participants to respond to the unexpected using available resources. However, fostering skills and knowledge of improvisation is not enough to develop full improvisation capacity and must be complemented with equal attention to the next two dimensions.

**Improvisation consciousness:** Improvisation success depends on full engagement in the present moment. Improvisers have a heightened awareness of their surroundings; fellow players and all available resources, human and material; their intuition, creativity and past experiences. Improvisation consciousness can be developed by consistently inviting workshop participants to notice what they are aware of while improvising — first in facilitated settings, and later in informal workplace experiences — including what they feel physically, emotionally and mentally. With repeated invitations, participants increase their ability



to make optimal use of available resources for innovation and problem solving in the moment.

**Improvisation confidence:** Without confidence in their improvisation competence and consciousness, organizations likely will not improve their overall agility. Improvisation confidence develops over time through safe, repeated opportunities to practice in informal and formal learning and work settings. Safe space is co-created by leaders who model the behaviors they desire in others, by facilitators who reinforce key concepts and provide valuable coaching and by all organizational participants who co-construct the relational dynamics in each day-to-day interaction and collaboration.

**Individual capacity for improvisation can be developed through a three-faceted approach:** formal and informal training, acknowledging and reinforcing improvisation capacity, and including improvisation capacity in regular performance reviews.

Formal and informal training emphasizes experiential learning and highlights transferable principles, such as “Say, Yes, and . . .” in which all players accept the “givens” or non-negotiable boundaries and “offers” or ideas, opportunities and challenges. Such training is most effective when grounded in games such as the one described earlier and then evolves to enable learners to transfer skills to their day-to-day opportunities for improvisation. Soon organizational givens become exciting offers for employees to build off of by contributing positive ideas to advance the organizational story, solve the current problem or generate innovative strategies.

Acknowledging and reinforcing improvisation capacity should happen often. Employees should use the language of improvisation in day-to-day

## IN PRACTICE CONVERSATIONS FOR CHANGE

The conversations we have with ourselves and with others determine our ability to respond to the unexpected. Using different conversation types also will build improvisation ability. Begin with the following three:

- Conversation to create new possibilities.
- Conversation for action.
- Conversation for change.

To initiate a conversation that will create new possibilities, identify what is desired and envision it. Product innovations, new organization structures and new positions all begin with this type of conversation. It can help to guide sessions where leaders brainstorm new ideas, propose solutions to problems, uncover ideas from peers and team members or unravel a topic that is unclear.

Ways to begin a conversation to create new possibilities include:

- If we waved a magic wand and the problem was solved, how would we know? What would be different?
- What would you like to create?
- I have an idea I'd like you to consider. I'd like to hear your ideas, too.
- What are the options? Can we come up with three or more that we have not considered before?
- Let's consider this in a new way, put our puzzle pieces on the table and see where that takes us.
- If there were no limitations, what resources would you ask for?
- Someone invented the rules we are holding onto like they are set in stone; what rules are holding us back that we could consider renegotiating?

After exploring options, flow into a conversation for action. This conversation type builds momentum. Use it to identify the next step, gain agreement on goals and move forward.

Ways to begin a conversation for action include:

- What is the next action needed to move this forward?
- Then what? Then what next?
- What would you do next if failure was not possible?
- Is there a map we could draw that would show the sequence of action steps we are considering?

When attempting to change beliefs or behavior, conversations will have to evolve. Bring others along to understand how one way of thinking or operating transitions to something new and why they should consider the new idea. One can bring people along using a conversation for change. Prompt dialogue to show others what has changed so they have an opportunity to respond and contribute step by step.

Use a conversation for change when:

- A new leader joins an organization or team.
- A team member's performance is not meeting expectations.
- Significant change is needed or has just occurred.
- Boundaries need to be changed or reinforced.
- You need to open a dialogue about current reality and the desired state.
- There is a new project on the agenda.

Ways to begin a conversation for change include:

- What would need to exist for us to ... ?
- I am noticing shifting sands. Are you experiencing this as well?
- Google and Apple created positive changes, and we could, too, if we ...
- The current reality requires us to make some changes. Let's talk about how we can respond to this experience.
- If we got in front of the changes we think are coming, what would that look like?
- What would you like the new normal to be?
- Do you ever find yourself saying, "When we get through this crazy period of change, everything will return to normal"? That's a problem because we will be faced with ongoing change, and we need to accept and learn how to deal with change. One trend I've noticed that may bring about positive shifts is ....

A flexible menu of conversation options enables improvisation to flow smoothly. [CEO](#)

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activities, and leaders should encourage and reward those who effectively respond to the unexpected using available resources. For example, consider the bank teller who, rather than only focusing on routine transactions, listens to her customer and spots an opportunity to help reduce his mortgage payments — improvisation consciousness — or the supply chain manager who, upon being informed the box factory has been destroyed by fire, repackages holiday gift sets in baskets to fulfill orders on time. It also means shifting from a mindset in which improvisation is a last resort, only used when planning and analysis fail, to improvisation being a valued dimension of organizational responsiveness.

Leaders also can include improvisation capacity in regular performance reviews. Organizations that regularly provide feedback on expected dimensions of employee performance must be sure to include improvisation capacity in the evaluation rubric. Not only does this elevate the improvisation capacity to a valued organizational competence, but it also provides a regular forum to discuss a development plan that includes competencies that support organizational agility. As individual capacity for improvisation expands, so does the organizational capacity to respond to unplanned challenges and opportunities.

### Playspace and Improvisation Capacity

As organizations develop individual improvisation capacity through formal and informal training strategies — acknowledging and reinforcing improvisation success, and including improvisation capacity as a key

dimension in regular performance reviews — they must also foster organizational capacity for improvisation by creating structures, systems and processes that promote improvisation success and organizational agility. While there is no one prescription that fits all, there are four guidelines that can be enacted in most organizations to support organizational agility. In each of these guidelines, play is a key ingredient for success.

**Create space for the play of new ideas.** Agility requires flexibility, openness and, quite literally, room to move and play around a bit. It also requires space for experimentation, incubation and exploration. Many organizations are adopting some version of Google's well-known strategy in which every employee is encouraged to spend 20 percent of their time playing around with a new idea or exploring a topic or project about which they are particularly curious. This space for experimentation contributes to business success. Stanford University's Marissa Mayer, Google's vice president of search products and user experience, showed in a June 2006 presentation that 50 percent of Google's new products were incubated during 20 percent time, reinforcing the value of a culture that actively encourages and explores alternatives and fresh thinking. This playspace is essential for organizational agility as rigid routines rarely include room for innovative responses to the unexpected.

**Create space for people to play new roles.** When people have systems and structures in place that encourage exploration and new learning, they also have space to play new roles and discover new capacities. Not only is leadership buy-in and support essential to sustain organizational agility, new leaders often emerge when there is room for them to develop these capacities. Organizations that regularly create opportunities for people to play new roles — whether through formal job-trading or job-shadowing programs, or informally inviting people to learn or work in unfamiliar situations — enjoy the benefits of increased flexibility and responsiveness.

**Create space for more play in the system.** Organizations that have only as much structure — formal systems, policies and procedures — as their business demands are often more agile than their overly encumbered counterparts. With minimal structure, individuals, teams and entire organizations can respond quickly and effectively to emerging challenges as well as opportunities.

**Create space for improvised play.** As a complement to minimal structure, improvisers thrive when the boundaries in which they play are clearly established and the spirit of play is encouraged and recognized. When the new millennium brought high-end toy company Learning Curve the opportunity to expand product distribution into several mass market

outlets, it needed to dramatically increase productivity and efficiency, decrease its product development time, and improve communication and collaboration throughout the organization. To meet this challenge the company provided an intensive experiential learning session in improvisation and collaboration supported by informal coaching and reinforcement.

These efforts decreased new product development time from 18 months to six months and increased profits by 14 percent. John Lee, then Learning Curve CEO said, "The fear that many productivity-oriented managers and entrepreneurs have is that play must be a time dedicated to do something like having a game or a pizza party or taking a break. You know, it's seen as

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an isolated activity. The right mindset is there's a spirit of playfulness that goes to how you go about doing what you do, and not how you schedule it."

Chief learning officers and learning professionals at all levels are just beginning to tap the potential of their improvisation capacity and the business results of creating truly agile organizations. They are offering a range of experiential learning opportunities, aligning their systems and processes to support responsiveness, and including improvisation assessments in their regular performance reviews. As the language, value and capacity for agility are elevated to core individual and organizational competencies, businesses across sectors will enjoy the rewards of improved communication, collaboration, productivity and profitability. [CLO](#)

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