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## What Brings Executives and Improvisers Together?

**What if improvisation had a lot to teach to top managers and CEO'S?  
Is it possible that they have more in common with actors  
than they would think at first?**

**By Filipa Moreno**

The art of the unexpected, the science of the unknown has come into the business universe through Daena Giardella, teacher at MIT, Leadership Consultant, actress and director. The professor identified the need to teach executives how they can build strong relationships with others and respond quickly to unexpected events. While in Portugal to teach to The Lisbon MBA students the foundations of improvisation, Daena Giardella explains how important it is to control the "inner critic" both on stage and in business negotiations.

**How can improvising skills be useful to professionals everywhere regardless of their responsibilities?**

The rise of global economic uncertainty in a fast paced, high stakes, often tumultuous environment means there is a greater need for improvisational skillfulness to successfully and strategically navigate unexpected developments.



The digital revolution and its explosion of communication immediacy have raised two related issues. First, our business "conversations" now happen at the speed of the internet - via emails, Twitter, smart phones, iPads, social media, etc. Our ability to be responsively connected requires the same instincts that improvisation teaches: adaptability, perceptiveness, emotional intelligence, spontaneity, flexibility, and the ability to be present in the moment with highly developed listening skills. Second, these heightened and pervasive digital conversations have also created a problem that improvisation training directly addresses: Many people are less practiced (and therefore

less comfortable) in live, face to face interactions with others in both formal and informal settings. Improvisation trainings give people the essential skills to communicate effectively, listen with empathy, build strong relationships, and become comfortable in their own skins while thinking and speaking "on their feet."

Finally, today's businesses realize that the cultivation of creativity is paramount for companies who want to be innovation leaders in our highly competitive marketplace. Improvisation offers the ultimate skill base for developing one's imagination, creativity and the freedom to take risks and express new ideas.

There is something I call the "improvisers mindset," which develops several different skills in us. One is to be open and curious, which is essential now because if leaders don't have open curiosity about their employees and the marketplace they have a tendency to get stuck in their ways rather than adapt to the changing times. The second is to be very much in the moment, present and flexible. Another component of this skill is to be able to take risks. Let's face it, we live and work in a high stakes, high risk environment. Improvisation trains a person to know when to take a risk, how to take a risk, when not to take a risk and when to make a decision when you don't have complete information, which is sometimes necessary in order to move a project forward. I call improvisation the art of the unexpected and the science of the unknown. We think we're sitting and having a meeting, and we have a certain agenda or a PowerPoint presentation. We know exactly what we're going to say, but all of a sudden someone opens the door and another meeting takes shape; the boss comes in and you think he is going to say one thing but instead he says he doesn't want to talk about this today, or there's a deadline we have to change. The improvisation skill base teaches people how to be open, flexible, centered in the moment, and able to deal with what goes on internally when all that stress is happening so there is a place to channel it. Today's leaders need the ability to avoid getting caught up in stressful thinking, which only creates fears, worries, and frustration. Effective Improvisers are able to put those negative feelings aside. And that's what leaders today need to do as well, to master the art of dealing with people and being able to effectively negotiate. Today's business world is no longer a just national marketplace, but a global one as well.

**I'll give you an example. Last week, our [former] Minister of Finance [Vitor Gaspar] was at a ceremony for the release of a new book. As a form of protest, a group of people in the audience started laughing intentionally while he was speaking. They were protesting the fact that the book was about some principles the Ministry of Finance used in the making of some austerity measures. He was stuck; he didn't know how to react.**

That's a perfect example. It is essential to have the agility to respond in the moment to what is actually happening in the room, instead of what we think should be happening. Sometimes there is a very human reflex to avoid the discomfort of the unexpected by pretending it is not happening and hoping it will go away. We see this in many ways right now in our current financial circumstances. The economy has created the need for downsizing in many companies, making them "lean and mean," more productive with a smaller work force. This is a crucial opportunity for the CEOs of these organizations to demonstrate that they understand the impact of these events on the remaining employees. It's a unique occasion for team building, to deal with what is actually happening in the moment of that company's life by directly addressing the inevitable

effects these changes have on the remaining employees. It's a moment for resolve and clarity, but also empathy. Some employees may be feeling bad for the people who left or fear about their own job security. This moment calls for inspired leadership where the CEO and management team communicate a clear vision that fosters a common purpose and motivation going forward. The CEO'S who are guiding their ships with this improvisational leadership ability are the ones who are successful. They are the ones who are saying that even though there are cuts, I'm still going to give training to the people because we need it more now than ever.

The whole principle of improvisation is this concept of "yes and..."

It's an attitude, a frame of mind, a way of thinking. Everything that happens in improvisation is called an "offer" and the improviser looks to build upon offers. This means that we are ready to respond to whatever someone says to us with an attitude of "yes and..." -- how can I hear your position and then add to it with my own ideas. It does not mean we have to agree. It simply



means we are respecting the other person's point and then adding our perspective to it. This is a collaborative rather than adversarial stance. This attitude helps move the scene or conversation forward. In business, this is such a useful principle, because if we think about most of our business conversations, in general, we say "yes, but..." For example: "This report is lacking certain information, I needed the details..." and the other person says "yes, but here is why I did not do that..." "But" negates everything that came before it in the sentence. Basically, it communicates to the other person that everything they said is not important. Why is this concept important today? Because we don't have time for people to get caught up in poor communication. Our digital communication works faster than sometimes our ability as human beings to make the point we need to make. So, if you keep saying "yes, but..." to me I'm going to be a little bit resentful and I'm going keep trying to get you to hear me and it doesn't make for the best building of a strong relationship.

Going back to your example, the Minister didn't know how to say "yes" to the unexpected events in the audience and add something. He could have offered a joke back. He could have said "I didn't know the book was so funny, we should think about maybe publishing it in the New York Times" or "I see you're finding the cartoons in the book, I'm glad you like them".

**This has a lot to do with creativity and entrepreneurship which are big trends in business today. Do you think improvisation skills can become as big of a trend?**

Yes, in fact I always think the missions of “entrepreneurship” and “improvisation” are almost the same. I taught at many schools that focus on entrepreneurship and obviously MIT Sloan. The entrepreneur has to be an improviser, because they’re starting with nothing, just like an actor on stage. They have nothing but an idea and they have to make that idea clear, they have to explain it and find a way to get you to buy into that idea and invest in it. It’s exactly what improvisation teaches. It is a very strong skill base for entrepreneurship and it teaches creativity, because the whole art of improvisation is imagination. And every moment in improvisation is an innovation, you have to innovate and invent something that wasn’t there before (and that no one thought of before). The entrepreneur is really an improviser who knows how to make an idea grow and manifest into a concrete successful business. The issue with many entrepreneurs and in startups, I think, is they’re very technically developed, they are very smart, and they have a very strong engineering or finance or business background. The people part, the knowing how to build and massage a relationship, how to make a venture capitalist comfortable to invest in a new startup — this requires a skill base that improvisation teaches because it’s all about relationship, effective communication, and awareness of the big picture. On stage, you have to be aware of everything that’s going on around you. At MIT Sloan, the leadership centre calls this sensemaking, where you have to make sense of what is happening around you in your company, in the bigger marketplace, and across other organizations in the world.

**Business leaders who are more experienced, the ones not just starting out – do they have this skill base?**

Some do and some do not. Each generation has its challenges and strengths with these Improvisational Leadership skills. Several decades ago these skills would have been considered “soft” skills. Sometimes more experienced leaders have come from a more hierarchical organizational model where flexibility, transparency, and responsiveness may not have been part of the culture. I do a lot of consulting in businesses and I have noticed a clear trend in recent years toward the realization that the Improvisational Leadership skill base is an essential, core skill. I have found that since 2001, there has been a palpable shift in our awareness that we need dexterity in dealing proactively with unanticipated events. In the USA, shortly after September 11th there was a NY Times Headline that read: “New Yorkers Learn to Improvise.” When the markets crashed in 2007/08 everyone in the business arena in the USA and abroad was plunged into a set of events that highlighted the urgency for facile and responsive leadership skills as people scrambled to meet the moment. The same is true in these recent years here in Europe with the crisis you have been facing.

Now improvisational leadership skills are no longer soft skills that are optional. It is now a hard skill set that is vital for success in these roller coaster times. I am finding there’s an explosion of requests from organizations that want to train their people to be more in the moment. It is not only the older, more experienced generation of leaders who needs greater development of these skills. I get calls from organizations saying to me “many people here, still in their 20s or 30s, are not comfortable having conversations one-to-one, they’re so used to texting, social media, digital communication, and emailing that when they have networking conversations or meetings in person– which is so important in business – they’re uncomfortable and awkward.” So, these Improvisational Leadership trainings are very important for people to cultivate influence, communication, and emotional intelligence skills. Managers are realizing that they need to get training

because they're dealing with change inside their teams, and they need people that are ready to deal with what is happening in the marketplace. There is uncertainty, ambiguity – it's not always clear – things are rapidly changing, everybody wants something different, conflicts can arise. Sometimes we get something different from what we expected, but we have to understand how to make that an opportunity, a possibility, instead of making it a failure.

That's one of the big things I'm helping people understand: that improvisers have to learn something that business leaders must also know – successful business people – which is *how to fail*. We teach about success, all the business books are about that, but what we need to learn is how to fail and then to rebound back toward success. We need to learn that when a mistake happens, that's part of the



creative process. If I make a mistake, it's not the mistake that matters but how quickly I can respond, regroup and recover. Many times business people are very risk averse because they're afraid of failing, and I think there's cultural context too. But in today's market we're already in a risk, we can't avoid it, so we need people who can ride the waves and manage the risks with clear thinking instead of fear. And improvisation teaches that. This connects to something very important I work with in my trainings called the "inner critic," which everybody has. It's the part of us that thinks we are not good, it's the voice in us before, during or after an event or presentation that chatters with an inner monologue of negative thoughts and negative predictions, telling us that we are not good enough or smart enough or likeable or whatever. The number one thing the improviser has to learn is how to manage that inner critic because if you're on stage and that is all you hear you can't perform, you can't innovate, you can't create. You're too busy babysitting the inner critic. I always say to people they have one more employee than you think you do and that's your inner critic – you have to manage it and find a way to rechannel the power that it has. Also, it's a very creative part of us. The inner critic always finds a way to get us and make us feel bad because it's so inventive! It's the part of us where we run to almost have a little secret rendezvous with self-doubt, because it's what's comfortable, like old shoes – they might hurt, but they're familiar. We have to manage the inner critic so it doesn't take over.

**You said executives have to be curious and open-minded. What other qualities are needed?**

There is a way in which the CEO has to be the source of the vision of the company, who sees the big picture, who earns the respect of people because of that vision and because people really feel that the CEO values them and cares about them. Everyone



knows that the CEO has to be intelligent in order to get to that level. However, empathy, emotional intelligence, and presence are the essential qualities that make the difference between a good CEO and a great one. They also have to possess something very authentic that communicates to all the people, including at the lowest levels of the organization, that the vision is about them too. And they matter because without them taking care of the smallest thing, everyone above them cannot do their jobs. You're important. It's authenticity, also a spirit of generosity, which is the heart of improvisation. You have to put both feet in and that's what the CEO has to convey. S/he has to hold the mountaintop vision and also be down to earth, so it feels like when they're walking into the room, they're all part of the team. There is a paradox: they have to be respected and earn high regard but, at the same time, not be feared.

The CEO has to be smart, aware of what's happening in the marketplace and the technological skills that drive the industry, even outside of the technologic business. Right now, everything is online so they have to be savvy and if they don't know they have to be able to delegate. A smart CEO knows how to delegate to other people who have greater expertise in certain areas. The other quality is a sense of enjoyment – to enjoy life, the mystery and the experiment of what they're making. There's a magic to the successful CEO, they want to invent and to make business happen not just because they want to make more money. Well, money is great, they have to be driven toward bottom line goals of course, but they also have to enjoy the journey and convey to other people that they're going on an adventure. They must convey to the employees a collaborative motivational message: "At times I'm going to ask you to work much longer hours, maybe at times its going to be hard, but when we get there it's going to be such a great destination that we all share and benefit from."

It's not enough just to have an idea, there has to be a strong operational sense. Many times people associate creativity and improvisation with generating great ideas, but I am saying something more than that. Improvisers know there has to be good implementation. You can't just have an idea; you have to implement it. A strong CEO has to be very good with the operational and implementation aspects and really motivated to make it happen. Then there is room to enjoy the journey, to be in the moment.

**The European Commission has seen the potential of these skills and invited you to teach an advanced program on improvising in negotiations. How did it go?**

It was a very interesting experience because what I saw, whether it's business students, people in retail, in trade, or politics, it's the same: they have to learn how to be in the moment. They were very open and interested in learning the concepts. I was co-facilitating with a member of the Harvard Law Negotiation Faculty. Negotiators know the heart of negotiation is improvisation. In negotiation, you can't know exactly what the other side will say; you can only be ready for whatever might happen. Improvisation is not just saying anything that comes into your mind; there is a structure and there are a set of rules which most people don't realize. It's like jazz where you have to know the structure and theory of music before you can improvise. I always tell business people that it's not about throwing away all the planning, but rather to use your planning to create a foundation so that then, when something happens, you can go off script in order to deal with the "now." The most incredible planning, the most perfect talking points (which politicians use), the most perfect structure you have in your mind (you

might be a genius) -- all of that is squandered, or wasted if it's not accompanied by a savvy awareness of being in the moment with people and knowing how to improvise. I can be brilliant but if I can't connect with you and really understand what your subtext is and what your real concerns are in the negotiation, all the training doesn't matter.

In business transactions, it's not always about the numbers or the data. Yes, the numbers are obviously paramount, but people walk away with the *feeling* they have about the numbers and the data as well as the *feeling* they have about the other person. If I trust you and I like you and you show me a good bottom line, I'm comfortable with the deal. If I don't trust you or I am uncomfortable with you and you show me the same numbers, I walk away not so sure. Improvisers know that and can feel the warmth, they can sense it in the eye contact and the body language. That's all improvisation skills. We're taught to not just listen to the words but to read the subtext.

**Looking into the many organizations you have collaborated with, we can say there are a lot of people seeing the importance of learning improvisation skills, which The Lisbon MBA already offers to students.**

The program that Belén Vicente, Catherine da Silveira, and David Patient envisioned and implemented is so inventive and innovative, because it gives the people in the program a development of not just the left brain in Finance, Economics, Macro/Micro Economics, Marketing, for example — all very important aspects of business – but it gives them a place, every week to open their minds and humanity to what will happen in the real world. So, they are exposed to something that is very much about creativity, knowing oneself, and interacting with others. They will remember that business, in the end, is about relationships and giving the other person something they need. That is why the way the LMBA Friday Forums program is structured is so unique and effective. In my workshop, for example, students participate for a whole day and evening to give them a deeper learning laboratory and experience. I can teach them in a way that isn't possible in many other settings because usually you're in class for just a couple of hours.

**While on stage actors are playing a role, they're not being themselves. But a CEO is required to be authentic and genuine while addressing his employees. How can an executive master this art and still come across as real?**

Actors are playing someone who they're not, it's a character and yes, the leader is obviously him/herself in the company. In both cases what will be believable and what will make an impact on the audience is the authenticity. The actor has to authentically become that character and even if it's a character that is very different from them, they have to find their human soul and make the audience believe they feel inside that character. Even if they're not using their own characteristics and qualities they find an authenticity that is believable.

The CEO is also playing a role called "CEO," which is different from the roles of son, daughter, friend, father, mother, or customer in a grocery store. We all play different roles according to where we are and great leaders say to themselves: "Even though I might be feeling tired or worried or distracted, I have to find a way to reach out and be vibrant and engaging." That's what it means to effectively play one's role.

The CEO has to be the chief motivator, somebody with vision. What's similar in actors and business people is that you find within yourself the quality of authenticity that you project out to the people. And then, in both cases, there is very similar training to help you connect with people.

### **Executives must be eloquent. Is this something they can learn from actors?**

The CEO giving a talk has to be articulate in the same way as an actor on stage. They have to understand vocal projection, magnetism, the ability to connect with people; he has to know something called "reading the room" as actors on stage. They're sensing what is happening in the audience. They have to project energy, warmth, maybe some humor like an actor does to bring people involved. They also need to have a comfortable sense of their body and feel comfortable in their own skin, which is something an improviser learns in order to, speak spontaneously and effectively on their feet. Ultimately the CEO is on stage. People are looking to that person as a character on the organizational stage who communicates certain qualities and a specific message. Ultimately it is a role they're playing.

### **Which top executives master the art of improvisation?**

Sheryl Sandberg has a fantastic presence on stage. She's very genuine, real and authentic. You know that what she is talking about, she has lived. She's a very strong example.

One of the masters at this was Bill Clinton. Even today as he travels all around the world as the leader of his Global foundation, he is adept at connecting with an audience, making things happen, and inspiring people toward action. It's a skill - an art form. Some people don't have it and need to develop it but the good news is - you can develop that. It's not just something you are born with.

Zeinal Bava, the former head of Portugal Telecom, comes to my mind because he has the vision to see that especially in these times, there is a need to get the kinds of training that the managers would need in order to lead the company into the next phase, while keeping up with current and future trends. I see him as a very forward thinking person. He has that drive. There is a connection with employees. At the same time he is driving to bigger markets and the company keeps growing.

*Daena Giardella is an executive leadership consultant, coach and professor at MIT Sloan as well as an actor and director. She introduced an innovative method for teaching improvisation to managers and other professionals and many companies and entities have requested her educational programs in leadership that focus on improvisation, entrepreneurship, team building, creativity development, and presentation excellence. At MIT Sloan School of Management, Daena Giardella teaches Improvisational Leadership as well as Improvisation & Influence. She has also led a training program on Negotiation and Improvisation for the European Commission in collaboration with faculty from Harvard University.*

