

## Improving team cooperation with Improvisation Theater techniques at SPE Unternehmensberatung GmbH

### Executive Summary

As part of its trainee program SPE Unternehmensberatung GmbH organized an Applied Improvisation team event to increase cooperation within the team of international trainees (*The working language of the team being German, the event was run in German.*) By participating in the playful exercises, the trainees discovered the strengths and styles of their fellow team members. They also had the opportunity to develop their communication and leadership skills, and through the Applied Improvisation activities, participants learned to cooperate with one another and to listen to each other. As a result, their team now functions in a more efficient and effective way.

### Situation



The SPE Unternehmensberatung GmbH (SPE), based in Mannheim, Germany, was founded in 1992. The company runs consulting projects for the utility industry and is an affiliate of the Fichtner GmbH & co KG Group with more than 1500 employees. With more than 60 successful RIVA and IS-U/CCS implementations and an average experience of more than six years per employee, SPE takes a leading position in this market segment and is an SAP special expertise partner for mySAP utilities.

As a development partner of SAP AG for the SAP component IDEX-GE, SPE has deep, industry-specific knowledge and has gained extensive project experience in unbundling. SPE also runs 9-month training programs to educate SAP consultants.

The trainee program, which started late 2008, built a team of six consultants from different countries: Germany, China, Marocco, and Cameroon. It interspersed practical, on the job training and classroom education.

For the teambuilding module of one training course, Ina Gäde and Dr. Stefanie Gerlach, both Education Managers at SPE, were looking for a different and effective method to develop soft skills within the team, and especially to increase cooperation between the trainees, who had trouble exchanging information during project work.

Therefore, in September 2009, SPE asked FTS to facilitate a team event using Improvisation Theater techniques.

Improvisation Theatre (aka Impro) is the art of acting without script or props: making everything up on the spot, in real time, following a set of guidelines and practices. When adapted to a business environment, the method is called Applied Improvisation.

### Trust, challenge, breakthrough

Of the group of eight participants, only the two Education Managers who organized the event knew that they would be using Applied Improvisation.

Few of the members even knew what Improvisation Theater is, and only one had ever done any acting before. One of the trainees was quite skeptical at the beginning: "When I first understood that it would be an Improvisation Theater workshop, I asked myself if this was supposed to be a joke. What on earth could Impro possibly have to do with my work or with team building?!"

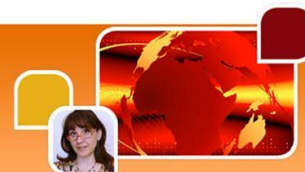
After removing all the tables and chairs from the room, the workshop started with some warm-up exercises. The purpose of the warm-up is to create a safe environment in which participants can take appropriate risks, following one of the Impro guidelines: "**Mistakes are allowed**".

### Increased group awareness

All of these exercises also aim to develop group awareness. It was easy to perceive the progress the team was making through a small activity called "Count to 20". This game is easy, yet challenging.

The participants stand in a circle and look down. The goal of the exercise is to count to 20, with only one person speaking at a time. Anybody can start the count; and anyone else can say the next number - but if two or more people speak at the same time, the counting must start again from the beginning. It is only possible to get to twenty if everybody really concentrates - while trying to be relaxed at the same time.

The group played it several times, for no longer than 2-3 minutes at a stretch. The first time they did not go further than "8", but just a few hours later, they reached "13" and by the end of the day, they had achieved a perfect "20"!



Other objectives of the warm-up phase are to get participants focusing on the present: “**Be here and now**”, “**Be aware of the others and the environment**”, and “**Listen, observe**”.



*“When you acknowledge and cultivate the value of the individual it results in a more cohesive team.*

*That’s what impro teaches you.”*



Then the group performed learning activities to develop trust and cooperation. As in the warm-up exercises, everybody takes part either in a group (in a circle) or in pairs. During this phase, participants learn two new guidelines: “**Yes, and...**” and “**Make your partner(s) look good**”. Thanks to the warm-up, participants felt comfortable to leave their comfort zone and try new things. After an activity in which participants learn to share leadership with their partners, another exercise helps them to show sides of themselves they usually hide at work. Activities that encourage the expression of emotions are much appreciated.

### **“Yes, and...”**

This is one of the basic rules in Impro. “Yes” means acknowledging what is there: whether that is an offer from a teammate or any unexpected element; “and” means building on that element, using it as a resource and adding something to it.

This guideline is the basis of effective cooperation. It allows team members to find a solution that no one would have thought of if working alone.

It requires everyone to listen to the others and be aware of his surroundings.

It fosters creativity by releasing participants from the expectation (and pressure) to generate something new.

It stimulates action by encouraging everyone to go a step further than he otherwise might have gone.

Finally, the participants could apply everything they had just learned through acting out short sketches.

The flow of the workshop is designed to gradually build confidence and trust that helps to overcome the fear of being in the spotlight, so by this point everyone feels comfortable to act in front of the others. Played in small groups, the sketches contribute to developing teamwork. During the debriefing following each activity, participants analyze what happened and relate their findings to their project work: how one person’s mood can influence that of the others, or how to let others lead, or how important trust is in a team.

This group also surprised themselves: by how willingly they took part in the challenging activities and reached beyond their own limits, and how quickly they discovered the positive in their teammates, when those persons were showing a new side of themselves.

During the activities, participants get to know their teammates in a completely different light than when working together on a project. This new view creates more trust, which is fundamental to effective communication and cooperation.

At the end of the workshop attendees were confident that they would work together better, that they would be

more attentive to each other, and that they would listen more actively to each other and have more empathy. They also concluded that Applied Improvisation was indeed relevant to their work!

## **Benefits**

“In addition to individual benefits described in the attendees’ testimonials, the workshop made it possible to identify many new aspects and skills in each team member and it has further contributed to the spontaneity of the group.” *Ina Gäde and Dr. Stefanie Gerlach*

SPE has gained a new, cooperative team of consultants!

### **FTS Training Consulting,**

Frederique Thiriet-Smith has worked in multinational companies for over 25 years, as project manager and education specialist, successfully leading multicultural teams with various reporting structures. What drives Frederique is a love of facilitating change and improving corporate communication while focusing on the human aspects of business.

Some years ago, she started to play Improvisation Theatre, which she now uses along with other playful activities as a tool for intercultural awareness, personal development, leadership, change management, team building, creativity, and communication skills development.

She promotes the use of experiential learning techniques to develop and improve those competencies at international companies.

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