

## Using Improvisation to Develop Conflict Resolution Skills

*by Debra Gerardi*

There are oodles of training programs for teaching negotiation and mediation skills. One of the most widely read books, *Getting to Yes*, looks at a four step process for facilitating negotiation. Developing personal skills for resolving conflict is an important first step before mastering processes of any kind. How to teach the skills of listening and agreement can be challenging. It is important to “show” and not “tell” students the skills of listening, intuiting, and problem solving. The use of improvisation games can facilitate the training process and help mediators, negotiators and parties in “Getting to Yes, And...”

[Part One](#) of this article outlined the basic skills necessary for creative problem solving and intuitive conflict resolution. Part Two of the article looks at the principles of improvisation and some of the games that can be used to teach listening, agreement, collaboration, and acceptance.

### **The Roots of Improvisation**

“Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves.” Viola Spolin

Although expressed by the ancient Romans through *Commedia del’Arte*, improvisation as a recent performance art began with the work of social worker Neva L. Boyd, founder of the Recreational Training School at Chicago’s Hull House, in the 1930’s. Her work in the area of creative group play incorporated story telling, folk dance and dramatics to stimulate creativity in children. Her techniques were studied and adapted by drama instructor Viola Spolin.

Spolin held the belief that if the environment permits, everyone has the capacity for creativity and improvisation. By increasing an individual’s involvement with their environment intellectually, physically and intuitively, the capacity for creativity can be developed. Spolin’s improvisational games develop an individual’s ability to listen, to agree, and to interact spontaneously to solve problems as a member of a group. Participants, or players, create stories and scenes spontaneously based on suggestions from an audience. The atmosphere is supportive and encouraging and there are no wrong answers during play. The games allow a forum for expression by all players

regardless of age, gender or socioeconomic status. The creative ability fostered by improvisation frees the person to explore what is possible and develop flexibility of thought, two essentials for resolving conflict and solving problems.

### **Some Principles of Improvisation**

“Direct communication is the moment of mutual perceiving.” Viola Spolin

Improvisation training begins with warm-up exercises designed to help players become more aware of their environment and the other players. Physicalization (using the body to create objects, emotions, characters), guided imagery, and focus exercises invite players to “get out of their head” and be present in the moment. A common warm-up exercise is “Freeze”. In this game, three players are given the task of moving randomly together in the space. The director asks the audience for an object or location and then calls “freeze.” The players freeze and then begin a conversation that incorporates both the audience suggestion and the positions into which they are frozen. This game forces the players to solve the problem of integrating the position with the suggestion by using each other’s ideas.

Improvisation is based on spontaneity. Planning ahead or worrying about what to say destroys spontaneity. Just as in a mediation or negotiation, there are unscripted dialogues. Selecting a position or calculating the other side’s interests ahead of time can block spontaneity and lead to impasse. When improvising, it is important to help players let go of control and be open to what is happening around them. This allows them to utilize their senses and intuition when interacting with each other. The point at which the players do not know what to say is the starting point for improvisation. It is the point at which they turn to each other to look for clues for moving forward. It is the impasse point in a mediation or negotiation. It is the point where the participants must let go and utilize their senses and intuition to interact with each other. It is the conversation we have when we have emptied our selves of our positions and preconceived notions. It is the point at which we are able to perceive together what is happening right now. It is the moment of direct communication.

### **Listening Intuitively**

“When we listen, we place our perceptions.”

“You must create a space in which listening can occur.”

William Isaacs

As William Isaacs says in his book, *Dialogue- The Art of Thinking Together*, listening opens a door within us to a greater sense of participation in the world. Listening is the key to improvisation. Improvisation is what we do when we carry on a conversation with others or when we enter into a negotiation or mediation. There may be a process or set of ground rules, but they do not tell us what to say. Knowing what to say requires that we listen.

Knowing what to say involves listening for clues from the environment. There are many blocks to participation that prevent people from listening. Being “stuck in your head” while planning a strategy or story keeps you from hearing what was just said to you. Clinging to a position, refusing to consider alternatives, or being judgmental block listening. Strong emotions, distracting noises, worrying, and constant busy-ness all block the ability to listen to the environment. They also block the ability to listen to the intuitive voice inside of us.

Improvisers frequently play a game called “Story-story” to develop listening skills. Listening as a team is a challenging skill. The game of Story-Story involves five or six volunteers who are invited to come up and tell a story that has never been told before. The audience is asked for a title to the story and the name of one character. The players line up and begin to tell the story one word at a time. By pointing randomly to the players, the director conducts the story, requiring each player to watch the director and listen to what was said just before his or her turn. Once players have mastered speaking one word at a time to build the story, the play progresses to one sentence at a time. The director continues to randomly select players to prevent them from mentally “writing” the story in advance. Play is further advanced by switching players in mid-sentence, requiring each player to finish the previous player’s thought or word. Players are instructed to accommodate any conflicting statements made due to a lack of listening, by justifying what was said and incorporating it seamlessly into the story. At the end of each game, the director “gives notes” and solicits feedback from the players as to what worked and what did not. The players have the opportunity to learn from immediate feedback from the other players and the audience.

Facilitating listening games enables the players to observe the consequences of not listening. The player’s natural tendency to craft a response before hearing an initiation leads to a disjointed flow of dialogue. Additionally, listening games teach the peril of

making assumptions. Jumping to conclusions or assuming the intent of another player's actions or words leads to conflict. In a playful setting, this conflict leads to big laughs. In real life, this conflict leads to the courts. Using games with made-up relationships or locations enables the players to critique the performance of a "character" rather than a peer or themselves. They are able to see typical human behavior without feeling singled out or judged. It is important that the director remember that there are no wrong answers during play and no bad ideas. The atmosphere must be supportive of all players. It is the skills of listening and agreement that are important and not the content. As players become more comfortable with each other, their creative ability will improve and the collective genius of the group will shine through.

## **Agreement**

Getting to Yes, And...

Fostering communication is the meat and potatoes of every mediation. Reaching agreement is the dessert. Facilitating movement toward agreement is an art and requires that the mediator know just how unnatural agreement can be. One of the many hurdles all improvisers must face is learning how to agree. Initially, players are nervous and may want to control the scene to contain their fear. This is also true of parties in a conflict. One way to control a dialogue is to disagree with ideas offered by the other person. Another strategy is to frequently ask questions of the other person, thus putting that person on the spot and forwarding the questioning player's own agenda. Practicing agreement scenarios is a great way to teach players how to overcome the natural tendency to disagree. Learning agreement is best taught through the game, Yes, and...

The game "Yes, and..." is a perfect method for showing how difficult it is to reach agreement and how revealing non-verbal communication can be. Two players are invited to play. They are instructed to agree with whatever the other player says and add information. To foster spontaneity, the audience is asked to suggest a fictional relationship for the two players. Examples include, husband and wife, sisters, lovers, and so on. The facilitator should avoid any real relationships between the players to enhance creativity. Next the audience is asked for a location where the two people may be having a conversation. Once the players have been given the relationship and location, they commence to have a conversation. The conversation is allowed to continue without interruption to its natural conclusion. The players may struggle with the simple task of agreeing with each other. Quite naturally, most players will begin to play,

“Yes, but...” which leads to conflict as they attempt to verbalize agreement without actually agreeing.

At the end of the scene, the director leads a discussion with the players and audience regarding their observations. The discussion includes the level of agreement, the power structure of the character’s relationship, the body language, and possible barriers to the character’s ability to agree. At certain points, the director may “freeze” the players and discuss the body language and the effects of non-verbal cues on the conversation. The game is repeated with several different pairings to demonstrate various communication styles and the natural progression toward disagreeing. Despite the lack of real life consequences, the players will continue to hold on to their character’s agenda.

Once the game is played correctly, the group becomes aware of the synergistic flow of dialogue that becomes possible when the characters agree. The players who are able to agree are perceived by the audience as: compatible, trusting, friendly, relaxed, open, and fun. The players who master agreement are carried from their initial ideas to a spontaneously crafted scenario developed purely through agreement with the other player. This game is great for training people how to prevent conflict, how to work as a team and how to overcome fear of letting go of an idea. In the hands of an experienced mediator, the game can be used during a mediation to help parties incorporate agreement into their conversation.

## **Acceptance**

“No one knows the outcome of a game until he plays it.

Without the other player, there is no game.” Viola Spolin

A well known principle among improvisers is “follow the follower.” The principle implies that at all times all players are following the lead of another player. Focus is seamlessly transferred from one player to another. The give and take of focus requires the players to watch each other and to listen for clues to the next beat. Follow-the- follower requires that each player accept the other player’s ideas and trust in their own ideas. Acceptance is a skill that requires a level of trust and willingness to let go of a position or agenda.

A simple game used to teach acceptance and the follow-the-follower principle is Siamese Talk Show. Two volunteers are selected to be “experts” on a talk show. The audience gives the players a topic of expertise, the more obscure the topic the better.

Acting as a talk show host, the director solicits questions from the studio audience. The rules for the players are simple- the players are Siamese twins who must speak simultaneously when giving answers to the questions from the audience. The players receive questions one at a time from the group and are then given the opportunity to spontaneously answer. Generally, the answers are only one or two words. Asking questions that require longer answers challenges the players. The players are forced to follow each other in determining what to say- they are speaking together as they listen. The audience is able to watch for the give and take of focus, for agreement, and for leading by a dominant player. The content of the answers is not important to the game but yield howls of laughter as the players try to come up with the answer and speak in unison. The more the players trust each other the easier it will be for them to accept the ideas of their cohort.

### **Improvise, Don't Ad Lib**

“How a problem is solved must grow out of the stage relationship. It must happen at the actual moment of stage lift- right now, and not through pre-planning. HOW kills spontaneity. Direct communication prevents HOW.”

Viola Spolin

There is a certain level of planning that goes into a mediation or negotiation. Who will attend, where to convene, and meeting time are all good things to plan. Planning a solution to the problem can be disastrous. Obviously, the problem is not defined clearly until both parties define it together. Drafting positions or solutions in advance of defining the problem will only lead to more conflict. Consequently, the parties and the mediator need the ability to improvise in order to resolve the problem. Improvisation should not be confused with ad-libbing. Improvisation is using everything in the environment to solve the problem. Ad-libbing, or inventing, is a sign that the person is withdrawing from the environment and from the other players. Ad-libbing destroys spontaneity. It indicates the players' attempt to plan rather than work with the other player to solve the problem. This is common in conflict situations where one party will avoid an uncomfortable moment by reciting policies, the law, or slippery slope consequences that are not relevant or serve as blocks to brainstorming. A good mediator can redirect the parties back to what is happening between them rather than issues outside the relationship. By communicating directly, the parties work collaboratively to come up with creative solutions. **Spread the Love**

“The shortest distance between two people is a laugh.”

Victor Borge

Providing an interactive, fun-filled environment for learning can spark creativity and spontaneity. Developing skills for solving complex problems, for resolving retractable conflicts, and for preventing escalation of disputes can lead to an environment where ideas and relationships can grow. Tapping the need to play in each individual is an ideal way for building those skills and bringing people closer together.

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