IMPROVISATION IN LEADERSHIP EDUCATION: "MAKING INTERACTIONS WITH OTHERS MORE POSITIVE AND MEANINGFUL"

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ABSTRACT
Improvisation is synonymous with unplanned performances. Paradoxically, successfully engaging in improvisation involves structured underlying techniques. These structured elements have transferable applications to leadership and organizational development. The purpose of this research project is to explore students' experiences engaging in improvisation during a weeklong graduate course. We employed a basic interpretive qualitative approach to examine learners' perceptions around the applications of improvisation tenets and strategies to their professional lives. Results from this study highlighted that the use of the improvisational tenet yes, and motivated participants moving beyond a personal agenda to promote collaboration. Improvisation also facilitated the assessment and mindful adjustment of energy to inspire authentic engagement with others to build trust. Additionally, learners embraced spontaneity to hone their ability to adapt and react in time to change.
Keywords: leadership development, learning and development, improvisation

Introduction
Leaders are expected to have a dynamic impact on organizational culture and inspire employees to drive success for the organization (Goleman, 2000; Leonard, 2017). As a result, there is a growing body of knowledge centered on cultivating effective leaders and relationships across the organizational hierarchy. There is not a singular absolute checklist of attributes one can follow to become an effective leader; however, one's skills in adapting, influencing, and connecting with people represent employee-focused trends in leadership (Allen, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Yukl, 2013). The literature revealed several recommendations to support building authentic employee relationships, such as cultivating skills around empathy, mindfulness, and interpersonal awareness (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Goleman, 2000). These recommendations emerged as a way to support leaders in managing oneself, employees, and other stakeholders.

This study explores student learning in a graduate business course focused on aligning improvisational strategies and leadership skills. Improvisation and improv are similar terms used interchangeably in this project. Much of the contemporary understanding around improv associates it with spontaneity; in fact, the art of improvisation involves performance without planning (Zaunbrecher, 2011). So, how does spontaneous theater assist in developing leaders in business?

Even though performances are spontaneous, successful improvisation involves structured underlying techniques and strategies. For example, improv shows often begin with a group of improvisers receiving a prompt from the audience. The performance ensemble accepts the information shared and organically builds on that prompt; furthermore, they expand on the contributions each member provides to construct a performance. For the individual performers to come together and create a cohesive show from nothing other than a prompt, it requires members to possess honed skills in suspending judgment, active listening, open communication, energy manipulation, adaptability, and team building (Salinsky & Frances-White, 2017). Several effective leadership practices encompass similar abilities (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Goleman, 2000; Nelson & Squires, 2017) and focus on the importance of authentic connections with employees (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015). Additionally, these skills, when executed well, contribute to assisting with cultivating an innovative organizational culture (Crossan, 1997).

The merging of business principles and improvisational tenets and approaches represents an expanding area in practitioner literature and research (Bernard & Short, 2012; Koppett, 2013; Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017; Leonard & Yorton, 2015; Vera & Crossan, 2005). The purpose of this research project is to explore a merging of these two worlds by examining students' experiences at Duke University's Workshop in Managerial Improvisation. More narrowly, the examined learners' experiences include their perceptions around the engagement in improv

exercises and the potential applications of improv tenets and strategies to their professional life. The knowledge gained in this study may prove valuable to organizational leaders, company training and development departments, instructional designers in business programs, and improv facilitators. Through a basic interpretive qualitative approach, we sought to answer the following research questions: 1. What are the experiences of learners in the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation course? and 2. According to participants, what function do they believe improvisation will serve in their professional life?

Understanding Leadership
To understand the applications of improv in grooming professionals in business, it is important first to understand the meaning of leadership and address leadership strategies. Leadership, as a concept, is a broad topic with varied methods of execution and styles. The approaches vary in purpose, short- and long-term outcomes, and across sources. As such, it becomes necessary to narrow the focus for discussion and provide the definition of leadership.

This article embraces the understanding that "Leadership is taking responsibility for getting results through the efforts of others" (Leonard, 2017, p. 245). Johnson (1976) echoes this in his seminal article, highlighting the main objective in developing employees is to drive performance. With this understanding as to the broad purpose of leadership, a delve into deeper aspects of this role can focus on methods of enacting leadership, aspects of successful leadership, and common traits of an effective, employee-focused leader.

The Evolving Understanding Around What is Effective Leadership
Several leadership theories exist, but there is no singular agreed-upon approach (Allen, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017). Trait-based, behavioralist, competency-based, situational, transformational, transactional, and other theories represent past trends in leadership and organizational development (Nelson & Squires, 2017). A popular method for determining successful leadership is to reverse engineer leaders by examining those leaders who achieved their goals time and again. The idea behind this behavior is to find an index of attributes that all successful leaders possess to discover those that are trainable. The discovery of these attributes allows for the development of a model to train them with the goal that this will lead to developing great effective leaders (Leonard, 2017).

Organizations look to leaders to possess desired traits, behave in certain manners, and even possess specific skills, all in an attempt to find the cross-section of attributes for these qualities that comprise a successful leader (Nelson and Squires, 2017). As a result of the research surrounding this topic, Nelson and Squires (2017) provided a landscape of researched leadership approaches. They reviewed how researchers sought to source specific leadership attributes to define the most successful collection of attributes or style of leadership. They concluded that no one style or collection of traits had been shown to work across all circumstances; furthermore, they conclude that being adaptive as a leader tends to allow for the adoption of traits needed at the moment to best serve the organization (Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Understanding how to cultivate effective leaders is an evolving phenomenon that is situation-based. Along with adaptive approaches (Nelson & Squires, 2017), social and influencing skills emerged as important elements in the literature (Allen, 2018; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Yukl, 2013). As such, this section explores some trends surrounding cultivating adaptive and employee-centered, influential leaders.

Approaches to Effective Leadership
One may adopt a variety of approaches when leading a group of employees from one-directional conversations with instructions, desires, and consequences to open dialogue where communication flows both to and from the leader. As with any approach to varied and encompassing tasks, some approaches are more effective than others for sustainable success. For example, only dictating what needs to be done or setting intense fast-paced and high-performance standards may work under specific circumstances (Goleman, 2000; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015); however, employees may feel disconnected in this type of organizational culture (Jones, Davis, & Thomas, 2015). Even transactional leader-to-employee relationships, which distribute rewards in exchange for good performance, are found to be more effective in the short-term rather than long-term (Curtis, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017). These approaches can be seen in individualist and competitive environments or with leaders trying to redirect an underperforming company, but as Jones et al. (2015) found, employees, especially those developing skills, may be overwhelmed and disengaged in competitive settings. These approaches typically adopt a linear form of communication with edicts and instructions coming from the top-down and lacking authentic interpersonal connections (Goleman, 2000).

Rather than solely commanding actions and results, effective leaders adapt to meet the needs of the team or environment (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013; Nelson & Squires, 2017). Visionary leaders or authoritative leaders also represent a reasonably linear approach; however, they consider an employee's motivations and inspire them toward a common goal (Goleman, 2000). Other more inclusive, less linear approaches encourage a leader to spend time getting to know individuals on his or her team. These leaders display secure attachment by being warm and empowering employees; additionally, they cultivate synergy between team members (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Underwood, Mohr, & Ross, 2016).

Another leadership approach that stimulates innovation toward a shared vision is transformational leadership; however, leaders embracing this style motivate and encourage employees at an individual level (Curtis, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Underwood et al., 2016). Underwood et al. (2016) considered the relationship between transformational leadership and attachment styles, and their findings mirror related research that highlights the effectiveness of transformational leaders with secure attachment styles. They found that transformational leaders with secure attachment are confident in their abilities and cultivate trust with their employees.

Affiliative leaders connect people and encourage inclusion to resolve conflict. A leader may also consider employees' perspectives and approaches when developing the organization and their people (Goleman et al., 2013), which represents a more democratic approach. To develop employees and foster company talent, leaders may also assume a coaching style where they connect personal and organizational goals (Goleman, 2000). The servant-leader role represents a more inclusive and collaborative approach that involves adopting the behavior of thinking of one's employee first (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018).

A focus on people is at the core of these non-linear approaches. Leaders employing these roles possess social skills in empathetic and active listening. They are personally mindful and possess interpersonal awareness of how others receive them. They embrace these employee-focused approaches while developing with the employee to achieve desired organizational outcomes (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Goleman, 2000; Goleman et al., 2013; Lind & Sitkin, 2007).

In driving business objectives, leaders also employ various influential tactics. Tactics that appear to be less employee-centered, such as exerting authority, applying pressure, using others to influence, may result in obedience but be counterproductive in the long-term (Curtis, 2018; Yukl, 2013). A leader may attempt to influence an employee through legitimacy, which involves exerting authority to move in a direction; however, an absence of established credibility can be deconstructive (Maister, Green, & Galford, 2000; Yukl, 2013). When a leader establishes an objective for an employee, the leader may micro-manage the execution and threaten the employee with punishment should the employee not meet the outcomes; this approach can also be counterproductive. A leader may use coalition tactics by recruiting others to influence an employee toward a performance objective (Yukl, 2013), which is the opposite of building authentic relationships and establishing intimacy between members (Maister et al., 2000).

In contrast, rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, consultation, and collaboration were found to be the most effective influence tactics for a leader in obtaining support on an initiative (Yukl, 2013). A leader who has established credibility with an employee may employ rational persuasion to drive an objective; this involves providing data-driven information to get support from an employee. A leader who understands an employee's needs and values may appeal to those to get them to perform in a particular way. Commonly referred to as inspirational appeal, this is a more emotionally driven tactic. A leader may employ consultation, which involves including an employee in the development and execution of a project to obtain support and drive completion. A leader may offer to collaborate to drive results; this involves working together toward a target (Yukl, 2013). Cutis (2018) found, "… three of the four core influence tactics (rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, and consultation) plus apprising best aligned with transformational leadership…" (p. 11). Appraisal refers to a leader who knows an employee's needs and goals and highlights what is in it for the employee to influence them in a direction (Yukl, 2013). Collaboration aligned most with transactional leadership (Cutis, 2018).

Employee-Focused Leadership
Employee-focused leaders may be more in sync with employees to better influence their employees. Leaders are cognizant of their behaviors to assess when to maintain or adjust approaches to meet the needs of their followers (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Lind & Sitkin, 2007). This type of self-awareness impacts in-time decision making. One method for employee-focused leadership is to postpone judgment to assess a given situation thoroughly. Though leaders suspend judgment, that does not mean they abandoned it. They are open and understanding of the verbal and non-verbal information provided by employees. Here a leader self-manages to thoughtfully consider the information provided and assess how he or she affects others and the organizational goals. They

may not act on every piece of information shared, and the key component here is seeking true understanding, so employees feel represented (Lind & Sitkin, 2007). Social-awareness and empathy among team members and leadership motivate rapport and trust as leaders become aware of how behaviors influence others (Goleman et al., 2013).

The path taken by effective leaders to achieve organizational goals bears reviewing as this involves capitalizing on the skills and knowledge of a workforce. Considering business is rarely straightforward and consistent, a leader's roles are to provide guidance to followers and drive performance objectives within an ever-changing environment (Johnson, 1976; Leonard, 2017). As discussed, though documented trends exist, no one single style of leadership or collection of traits succeeds in every situation. Each situation and each employee are different and require a variety of everchanging interactions to achieve potential (Nelson & Squires, 2017). The social, influencer, and adaptability skills discussed in the literature infer that leaders need to be flexible enough to assess a situation, connect with different employees, and relate the organizational vision (Allen, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Yukl, 2013). These skills and attributes align with improvisational tenets and approaches. The application of improvisational tenets appears to be a resource to cultivate adaptability and interpersonal communication skills.

Applications of Improv in the Workplace and Business Curricula
The applications of improv in the workplace center on the value of incorporating improv tenets and exercises (Bernard & Short, 2012; Crossan, 1997; Koppett, 2013; Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017, Leonard & Yorton, 2015). Bernard and Short (2012) worked with employees on the tenets of listening, team building, interpersonal communication, and status work. Koppett (2013) outlined improv principles that apply in business, such as "trust, spontaneity, accepting offers, [and] listening and awareness" (p. 6). Many of the improv concepts applied to organizational development, identified by Bernard and Short (2012), are included in Koppett's (2013) skills.

The above list includes trust, yet trust is a large part of all the other tenets. It is important to understand the components of trust to appreciate the development of effective relationships in improv and the workplace. Maister et al. (2000) and Koppett (2013) explained that one's credibility influences trust between members. Credibility refers to the competency needed for quality results (Koppett, 2013; Maister et al., 2000); Maister et al. (2000) further clarified that credibility also happens when someone believes in another person. Another component involved in one believing in another person includes whether that person is reliable. Intimacy is important between members, and this represents the strength of the social connection between members and being able to open up and to communicate honestly with one another. Also, to enhance social connection, one's social orientation needs to center on the other person. All of this promotes social support (Koppett, 2013; Maister et al., 2000) achieved through respectful authentic communication (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015).

Effective communication involves active listening and contributing to the information received. Koppett (2013) discussed "Accepting offers" (p. 45) as well as "listening and awareness" (p. 63), both of which represent the embodiment of the core improv philosophy yes, and. Yes, and involves actively listening to group members, then adding to their contributions to construct a scene (Halpern, Close, and Johnson, 1994) or move a dialog forward (Koppett, 2013). Koppett (2013) explained, in training teams to listen, one must move beyond the initial acknowledgment of information. To truly listen, one must hear beyond what someone verbally and nonverbally shared. Improv skills help make individuals more attuned to physical reactions and to mental responses in addition to honing an ability to adjust communication with team members from followers to upper management (Koppett, 2013). The goal is to try to understand the reasoning behind the communication so one can assess the accuracy of comprehension and then appropriately add to the dialog.

Trust and effective communication support spontaneity in improv and organizational development, and spontaneity is the deliberate engagement in unplanned activities (Zaunbrecher, 2011). To facilitate spontaneity in business, which fosters creativity and innovation (Koppett, 2013), one must feel safe to develop and share ideas.

At a one-on-one employee and organizational level, all these skills hold value (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997). Duke University (2014) highlights some similar topics and areas of examination discussed by Bernard and Short (2012) and Koppett (2013). Duhart (2014) echoes these topics in the following course description: "573. Workshop in Managerial Improvisation. Effective improvisation entails active listening, teamwork, risk-taking, adaptability, spontaneity, focus, intuitive decision making, rapid problem solving, and the ability to keep a cool head in a crisis" (pp. 77-78).

In 2000, Duke University was the first university in the United States to offer college credit for a course aligning improv to business. Since then, a number of schools have incorporated improv into business curriculums as a

non-credited standard, such as UCLA Anderson School of Management; Columbia University Business School; University of Florida, Hough Graduate School of Business; UMass Amherst, Isenberg School of Management; Arizona Thunderbird School of Global Management; Indiana University, Kelly School of Business; University of South Carolina Moore School of Business, and Yale School of Management. The literature surrounding the integration of improv in higher education business curricula represents an emerging area (Aylesworth, 2008; Huffaker & West, 2005; Kulhan & Crisafulli, 2017). The growing applications provides an opportunity to examine the uses of improv in business. This study centers on one area within business education, and that is the role improvisation can play in developing up-and-coming business professionals.

Research Design
Considering this study examines and describes learners' meaning-making and applications of content from a weeklong course titled Workshop in Managerial Improvisation, we employed a basic interpretive qualitative approach. Aligning with constructivism, which centers on how individuals develop understanding through internal and social experiences (Carlson & Wiedl, 2013; Vygotsky, 1993), a basic interpretive qualitative approach is "…interested in (see Appendix A) how people interpret their experiences, (see Appendix B) how they construct their worlds, and (see Appendix C) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). In embracing a basic interpretive qualitative approach, this research employs several forms of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), such as participant observations, reflective writings, and course materials.

Data Collection and Participants
Data collection took place from January 11-29, 2016. We examined participants in the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation at Duke University because the program is well-established in educating learners around using improv skills to enhance leadership effectiveness. Duke University (2017) includes over 21,000 alumni and enrolls approximately 950 students a year. These learners center their studies in various areas of domestic and international business administration, management, and analytics.

The weeklong intensive from January 11-15, titled the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation, began before learners and facilitators meet. Learners reviewed literature centering on leadership and organizational development and improvisation in business. The intensive involved four and a half all-day classes, an evening performance called a JAM session, and a capstone performance at the end of day five. The students were also required to respond to three writing prompts. Class sessions centered on creating a culture of acceptance for engagement in improv exercises and reflective discussions. The JAM session provided learners an opportunity to perform improv before the capstone. The capstone performance culminated the development with learners in a large auditorium, now in front of an audience consisting of classmates, families, friends, and Duke University staff and faculty.

We completed the Institutional Review Board process, and we sought a purposeful sample due to the in-time examination of students' in the 573. Workshop in Managerial Improvisation. The subject populations included one hundred and twenty Duke University students. On the first day of class, all students in the course were asked to participate in the study. We informed the learners that this was completely voluntary and that they were in no way obligated to participate in the study to participate in the course.

Additionally, we informed them that in completing the writing assignments, they could refuse to have their responses to any or all prompts included in the study by noting this in their writings. Participation or non-participation in the study did not affect learners' experiences, grades, or credits in the course. We did not access data from student writings until after the posting of grades. Nineteen students either did not agree to participate or did not submit a consent form. One hundred and one students consented to be in the study. Researchers removed participant identifiers from the data and assigned pseudonyms.

The Duke University staff randomly divided the students into groups; participant observations and the review of writings focused on one group of twelve learners' experiences during class sessions. Participant observations involved students engaging in a variety of exercises, discussions, debriefs, and demonstrations of learning. Observational field notes documented the experiences, and one of the researchers produced memos following the events. Learners completed reflective writings developed from prompts. Participants engaged in daily reflective journals (Appendix A) following each session from January 11-15; additionally, learners submitted an experiential learning journal (Appendix B) and a strategic memo (Appendix C) by January 29. The experiential learning journal and strategic memo provided them the opportunity to reflect on past experiences and consider future applications of learnings to their practices. In sum, we conducted observations on twelve participants, and we collected responses to the writing prompts from one hundred and one participants.

Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data analysis primarily centered on the participant observations and writing prompt responses of twelve learners' experiences. However, to further inform the understanding of student learning in the course, the researchers analyzed the additional 89 participant responses to the writing prompts. Following the initial data collection, posting of grades, and immersion into the data, researchers conducted several rounds of open coding.

The open coding led to the identification of several core concepts, such as using yes, and, the identification of individual agenda, promoting collaboration, the mindful adjustments of actions, moving toward authentic engagement, embracing spontaneity or the unknown, striving to adapt and react, and others. Open coding included dividing and reorganizing data into major descriptive parts. Codes were then examined thematically across cases and categories to capture participants' understanding of engaging in improv and transferring improv applications to their practices. Focused coding was employed to get to the core thematic patterns (Saldana, 2016). Three themes emerged: 1. the improvisational tenet yes, and motivated participants moving beyond a personal agenda to promote collaboration, 2. improvisation facilitated the assessment and mindful adjustment of energy to inspire authentic engagement with others to build trust, and 3. learners embraced spontaneity to hone the ability to adapt and react in time to change.

The researchers' role includes the understanding of positionality (Merriam, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001; Simon, n.d.) to determine insider or outsider status. We considered the researcher as a device to gather information in a study (Simon, n.d., p. 1). The authors acknowledge deep immersion in the improv performance and practitioner communities. One author began studying improvisation in 2003-2004. The other author began studying improv in 1994, and at the time of the program had over twenty-one years of experience teaching, producing, and performing improvisation internationally. He co-created the academic course, is the on-site lead, and is a facilitator in the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation; additionally, he also represents a researcher, author, and subject.

The researchers' involvement holds value because it provided access to the site and participants (Merriam, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001). However, it is also important to note that researcher bias could influence the study. To minimize this threat, we used multiple sources of data and immersion in the field (Merriam, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001). We also employed outside auditors and developed an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

Some learners discussed entering the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation course skeptical about improv's applications in business. A few remained uncertain about the uses of improv in environments that are not constructed to embrace the underlying tenets, such as yes, and, collaboration, and learning through failure. However, learners quickly began to consider future applications of improv in their careers. For example, Keith (pseudonyms were assigned for all participants) stated,

> Full disclosure, when I entered the workshop, I was a bit skeptical in terms of the usefulness and effectiveness of improvisational skills. All I believed was involved in improvisation was thinking creatively and trying to be humorous. Boy, was I wrong!

Brent also echoed this sentiment and further explained,

> I expected the class to be focused on humor and becoming a good improviser... However, I now understand and value the class to be a focused effort at generating self-awareness in terms of energy, message delivery, and message receipt all in the vein of building emotional intelligence (EI) so as to become more effective and efficient communicators.

By the end of the course, the majority of learners richly forecasted the applications of improv tenets and approaches in business. Furthermore, though not a focus in this study, learners also strategically elaborated on improv's uses in finishing their program of study and in their personal life.

The findings addressed the research questions by capturing the learners' experiences and perceptions around the potential application of improv tenets, strategies, and exercises to their professional life. The major themes included: 1. yes, and motivated moving beyond a personal agenda to promote collaboration, 2. improv facilitated the assessment and mindful adjustment of energy to inspire authentic engagement to build trust, and 3. learners embraced spontaneity to hone their ability to adapt and react in time to change.

Yes, And Motivated Moving Beyond a Personal Agenda to Promote Collaboration

Learners discussed how using yes, and in conversations facilitated moving beyond one's agenda to promote collaboration. Students became deeply aware of how often individuals negate information. Shan explained,

> I realized how easy it was to say yes, but instead of yes, and. When I use yes, but, I simply put forth my opinion and not listen and embrace the other person's idea. It is easy to prepare my agenda and say the same thing regardless of the other person's response. Nevertheless, yes, but does not help to build up ideas and promote collaboration.

This powerful realization for learners motivated them to be mindful of how often they reply to others with no or yes, but. Together these two words undermine rapport, team building, and productivity. In this context, replying with yes unauthentically acknowledges what the other party shared and the use of but disregards the contributions. The reply of yes represents a formality of recognition. The receiving party was not truly open to the information provided. Instead, they were focused on their agenda and mentally framing a reply, which undermines the authenticity of the yes.

Moving beyond focusing on one's agenda can be a challenging undertaking. The American business culture centers on individualism and competition (Crossan, 1998). Anton shared an area of growth for him in the course was "…learning how to walk away from competitive energy towards collaboration energy." Some learners expressed challenges with relinquishing control for the overall benefit of the team and organization. Robin explained this struggle by sharing that she had "…trouble delegating in the past (especially when I think my ideas/execution will be great), so working on being open, letting go of control, and brainstorming with others was very beneficial for me."

Engaging in improv assisted learners in being present and open to receiving information; more narrowly, yes, and promotes active listening and contributing information on what others provide (Halpern et al., 1994). One must slow communication and focus on presence. Multiple times during the course, learners engaged in yes, and conversations while being challenged to apply yes, and throughout course activities. Arrav explained, "The most important thing that stood out for me during the improvisation workshop was accepting the gifts given by the team and then molding them into something that adds to the overall value or meaning." Learners found that these exchanges led to deeper, more meaningful dialogs inside and outside the course context. John spoke of this shift in understanding:

> At school, we are taught that the diversity of perspectives leads to better ideas and outcomes. Many, including myself, have taken that to mean we must challenge each other's ideas rather than build them up. The course, however, has taught me that the opposite is often true. Building off each other's' ideas drives stronger collaboration and better outcomes.

Learners engaged in improvisational exercises that promoted development as a collective. Tom reflected on some past work experiences,

> I frequently saw situations where improvisational skills were neglected. During most brainstorming or creativity-related meetings, I noticed the presence of negativity and constant convergent thinking. Ideas were often shot down, and many employees were driven by individual agendas.

Individualist and competitive environments can result in disengaged employees (Jones et al., 2015). Tom realized the distinct contrast between his past work environments and the improv course; he concluded that those workplaces "… most likely led to poor idea generation and contributed to a negative environment across the firm."

Similarly, a director role in improvisational performance is, "The group trumps the individual" (Ronen, 2005, p. 111). Protecting the team and their larger objective is imperative, and the learners developed skills in creating more than an individual agenda. Leaders have an agenda to drive results (Leonard, 2017); however, the ones with secure attachment that connect with employees at an individual level working toward a shared vision are more effective (Curtis, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Underwood et al., 2016).

Yes, and does not mean consenting to every idea, concept, or argument. Rather, this approach is a device for understanding, creating an open dialogue, and engaging in thoughtful, respectful disagreements. Even if an idea is not used, waiting to place judgment to consider an employee's contribution and analyzing the complexity of a situation, demonstrates to others that they are valued and part of organizational culture (Lind & Sitkin, 2007). Additionally, instant negating and dismissal can lead to the rejection of an innovate idea or a concept one can cultivate into something great (Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997).

Moving beyond linear communication and being open to more employee-focused methods creates inclusion. Yes, and techniques appear to underlie aspects of transformational, affiliative, democratic, coaching, and servant leadership approaches (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Goleman, 2000; Goleman et al., 2013; Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Learners truly embodying the yes, and philosophy understand that it involves not only saying the terms; it is also about truly giving another person their full attention and committing to understanding what the other person is sharing on their terms. Then contributing to show support and moving the dialog forward. After Anton discussed planning to incorporate yes, and into his career, he shared the importance of moving beyond yes, and being buzzwords. He explained striving for the:

> … mechanical elimination of yes, and from my speech would be helpful too. This way, I will be able to build bridges between the thoughts of people in conversation. [And,] this way we in my teams we will be able [to] generate products of collective, not individual thinking.

Anton addressed moving beyond using yes, and superficially and truly embodying the underlying tenets of "listening and awareness" (Koppett, 2013, p. 63) and "accepting offers" (Koppett, 2013, p. 45) to enhance collaboration and support.

Building upon the challenges of authentically adopting yes, and in the course, some participants reflected on challenges in potentially applying this into their daily corporate work. For example, Keith shared, "Individual/team members I interacted with were not of the same mindset. For example, there were several instances in meetings where 'yes but' was constantly used." Even though yes, and can assist in instilling trust within a group (Maister et al., 2000), it can be a significant cultural shift for an organization that operates less collectively (Crossan, 1998). Keith further explained how he will need to be an agent of change at his company and how his daily interaction "…taught me to just be patient and understand that all lessons were not going to implement perfectly."

Improv Facilitated the Assessment and Mindful Adjustment of Energy to Inspire Authentic Engagement and Build Trust

Yes, and prompted learners to be aware and open to others' contributions. Learners also shared that engaging in improvisation motivated internal mindfulness on personal energy and actions. Arrav explained engaging in improv in the course, "… it required us to be aware of ourselves and the surroundings." Learners honed skills of being deeply in tune with how others received their verbal and non-verbal contributions. They then developed skills around consciously transferring energy and connecting behaviors to impact team objectives positively.

Learners addressed becoming thoughtfully aware of the words they used and the body language they communicated during improv exercises. They further expressed how the assessment and adjustments of their energy could impact individual and group relationships. Tom explained the application of these skills to his job, "I felt that just by being conscious of what I was saying, I was able to deliver my feedback more positively overall." Lauren summarized her learning and addressed how she perceived improvisational skills would influence her future work.

> I think that this course helped us to become more aware of our environment and ourselves. Several of the exercises helped us to understand how small changes in our body language, tone of voice, and vocabulary can have a large impact.

Effective leaders adapt their style to motivate, engage, and develop their people toward a common vision (Curtis, 2018; Goleman et al., 2013; Nelson & Squires, 2017).

Participants explored the intensity and direction when adapting energy. They spoke of the positives of heightening and focusing energy when working with others. They explained that positive, heightened energy demonstrates passion, commitment, and enthusiasm. It also motivates others to exhibit similar responses. However, a note of import is that mindfully adjusting one's energy, can be poorly received. Anton highlighted past experiences that exemplify the need for strategic, mindful adjustments; "... my vision of high energy may be sometimes mistakenly associated with loud chat, expression, and active physicality." He further emphasized that "… high energy may be sometimes harmful for productive teamwork." The goal here is to mindfully control the direction and intensity of one's energy as a group requires to guide the direction of the project.

Learners developed skills in self and social awareness and how to focus energy on authentic engagements. Keith explained, "I learned that just being natural and authentic in all interactions was extremely important." Improvisation is a communication-based art that forces one to be present and in the moment. Julie explained, "I recognize the importance of improvisation to making interactions with others more positive and meaningful, finding opportunities to build upon others' thoughts, and being 'present' in my interactions with others." To authentically respond to somebody, one must be mindful of one's mental and emotional state while processing the conversation from the other participant. One should not lose focus of the present thinking about what needs

doing in the future or what one should have been doing in the past. Karen shared in the past

> Sometimes I would have checked out of a conversation because it was a person's opinion I did not value as much, because my mind was on a different subject matter, or most often because I was more focused on executing the delivery of my own ideas.

In building relationships with people in improv, the workplace, or other areas of life, one has to be right here, linked to the people in the communication. Karen further discussed her learning around being intentionally present,

> Ultimately, I have to make a choice to actively listen, as it is not something that I do naturally. It is so easy to get lost in one's own thoughts and ideas but listening and responding to others requires a conscious decision and unconditional acceptance and acknowledgment.

Crossan and Sorrenti (1997) explained that for an organization to incorporate improv into a culture, employees and the company must be supportive, be engaged, and be receptive to trying unconventional approaches. The course preparation materials outlined course cultural parameters before the course began, and the learners wrote in-depth about coming together as relative strangers, quickly developing deep connections, and building trust and community through engaging in activities. They reported bonding by lowering social barriers and engaging others in improv exercises.

Engagement in improv, such as yes, and conversations, mirroring each other's non-verbal motions, and assuming characters slightly outside of oneself took most out of their regular behavior and conversational styles. Lian explained, "I found myself constantly out of my comfort zone because being goofy or talking about being an 'underwater mammoth scientist' [an observed role played during an exercise] does not come naturally." Some noted that they were initially afraid to engage in the activities. The group bonded because they realized others were also being vulnerable, and they concluded they were there to support one another, and everyone "looked silly together."

When a group engaged in work that risks them looking odd and the individuals in the group feared other peoples' perceptions, the engagement resulted in enhanced intimacy in the group, and it instilled trust between members (Koppett, 2013; Maister et al., 2000). Learners reflected on transferring these processes to their current and future places of work. Robin noted, "I'm a firm believer in being authentic and bringing one's whole self to work." Learners shared how authentically engaging will bring more intentional positive exchanges and create a space where team members are open to share ideas and support one another. Robin continued by explaining, "the most beloved and influential leaders are actually those who strive for authenticity and aren't afraid to be vulnerable."

Cultivating an internal presence that actively focuses attention toward authentically communicating with the person one is engaging with enhances trust (Maister et al., 2000). Strong leaders meet an employee where they are and "…drive emotions of those they lead in the right direction" (Goleman et al., 2013, p. 6). The participants learned to create an environment where the barriers to communication and collaboration are eliminated and replaced with open and honest exchanges. A leader can more effectively understand an employee's needs, goals, motivators, and values when barriers are not present; in response, this information can then assist in influencing an employee toward a performance objective (Yukl, 2013). The primary consideration of one's employees can be a useful leadership strategy. The servant-leader literature echoes this idea (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018). Mindfully adjusting to focus on building trust and authentic support for one another represents a critical component of organizational collaboration and innovation (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015).

Embracing Spontaneity Honed the Ability to Adapt and React in Time to Change
To facilitate spontaneity in business, one must feel safe to develop and share ideas (Koppett, 2013). Once the organization establishes the foundation of support and trust, individuals can embrace spontaneity. Learners participated in guided activities in which they were required to respond to ever-changing prompts. In response, the learners discussed the importance of being able to adapt and react in-time in the workplace. Keith explained, "Reacting and adapting is constantly used in my professional life." He reflected that being flexible represented a critical attribute to success as a consultant to Fortune 500 companies. He reflected on times where he worked with leaders where their needs "…were constantly changing based on market and business conditions. Being able to adjust to their needs and provide the correct strategy was crucial." Nelson and Squires (2017) argued that even though there are numerous leadership approaches one may assume, being able to adapt as a leader best serves employees and the organization.

Businesses exist in chaotic, volatile, and unpredictable conditions (Crossan, White, Lane, & Klus, 1996). Cheng shared, "New technologies are constantly emerging at every corner and assert [a] disruptive effect to traditional business models." Businesses experience more difficult times in the present day with consistent advancements in technology and economic changes (Akdere & Conceicao, 2006; Crossan, 1997). Leonard (2017) expounds on the benefits of full back-and-forth conversation in leadership, eschewing the one-directional method of leadership from leader to follower. Researchers examining the business curriculum also noted that the corporate world is not linear, and every decision cannot be strategically planned (Cherlariu, Johnston, & Young, 2002; Crossan et al., 1996). However, the majority of business curriculums, such as marketing (Cherlariu et al., 2002) and leadership-development programs are linear.

Beyond solely higher education, Ishaan shared "formal education is teaching not to be creative/spontaneous." Moreover, most of the early education programs include prefabricated curriculums that limit creativity (Sawyer, 2004). Matt reflected on this realization, "I remember how angry a teacher got at me when I told her I thought it was really odd that the textbook made us learn fraction [and] multiplication in a certain way." He further shared that "teachers would get furious with me" when he did not follow a specific process. Matt emphasized, "I wish I'd been stubborn enough to keep more of my artistic and creative tendencies;" he further explained that this made him ridged and "made it harder to uncover similarities with people and get people to like me." Instead of a formulaic approach to grooming business professionals and leaders, Leonard (2017) recommends using conversational tools to teach the desired traits of leadership. Through debriefs, skills practice, and immediate feedback, leaders can acquire information from followers while simultaneously disseminating information to the followers. It is through these two-way conversations that participants add to the overall knowledge base to better adjust (Nelson & Squires, 2017) and serve (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018) the followers developing into a successful leader (Leonard, 2017).

Beyond the classroom, to address the ever-changing world of business, Cheng further shared, "The ability to respond, adapt, and evolve fast are key to remaining competitive." The learners discussed the importance of honing the ability to adapt and react in the workplace and how one can use improv to support this ability. Anton shared:

> During the improv course, I discovered that creativity and innovation are dependent on the freedom of mind, i.e. on free and instantaneous flow of ideas. In business, we are taught that bright idea[s] should be a result of thorough preparatory work; however, [the] improv course demonstrated how creative people can be by unlocking their personality and generating spontaneous ideas.

Weick and Quinn's (1999) found that, even when a company strategically plans, it does not guarantee desired results. The continuous organizational change represents a constant process of revisiting and adapting. In this frame, improvisational elements present an intervention where members influence change (Orlikowski, 1996; Vera & Crossan, 2004). A core philosophy of improv involves embracing new information and change quickly (Bernard & Short, 2012). Celio concluded, "…It is all about reacting, adapting, and communicating. If you ace these three steps by applying improvisational skills, you will gain trust and succeed in your personal and professional life."

The core of the course centered on participants learning to be present within the moment, accepting information presented, reacting, adapting, and responding in real-time. Learners engaged in exercises that aligned with improv techniques employed in business curricula and the workplace. The exercises included short-form games lasting 2 to 7 minutes that represented self-contained exercises performed in improv comedy theatres. The facilitators used these short-form games in combination with real-world and scenario-based exercises. This practice echoed other uses of improv in business curriculum to create a context of experiential learning (Huffaker & West, 2005). Focused debriefs and informal reflective dialogs challenged learners to employ and connect improv tenets to professional situations. These approaches replaced traditional frames of discussions (Aylesworth, 2008; Huffaker & West, 2005). Cheng reflected on the application of improv, "in real business meetings with clients and partners, negotiations can get tough, and we may be asked unprepared questions, the improvisation skills we practiced in this class really prepared us well to these kinds of unknown situations." One cannot strategically plan for every question or situation. Cheng further explained,

> In my last position…, we had a hierarchal approval procedure because of heavy regulatory hurdle and were used to take [the] conservative solution. This culture slowed down the decision-making process. There were a couple of times when we lost contracts to competitors because we were not able to address [the] client's concerns in a timely manner.

Improv hones the ability to accept new information and adapt and react timely (Ronen, 2005). Employees can engage in structured "what if" scenarios which facilitate exploring numerous possibilities to gauge potential

benefits and disadvantage (Crossan, 1997). Cheng concluded from her experience, "If we had incorporated improvisational skills, we should have had cooperated better within the team to manage client's expectation, be adaptive while not deviating from the company's business norm, instead of blindly waiting for the green light from senior management."

The inability to adapt can lead to loss of business or an organization not responding to industry change. Many businesses fail due to an inability to adapt and change (Crossan et al., 1996). Blockbuster, Kodak, Toys R Us, and Radio Shack are all examples of successful companies that suffered because they did not embrace change. Learners addressed the competitive importance of being spontaneous. Change and uncertainty are inevitable. Failure will occur. Rather than resisting failure build a culture that embraces change, explores chaotic situations, and recovers from the inevitable unexpected events, which leads to developing the ability to adapt (Nelson & Squires, 2017) and cultivate skills in thriving in unforeseen and unknown circumstances (Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Crossan & Sorrenti, 1997). In finishing the course, learners shared that they were inspired to embrace improv techniques to become agents of change in the workplace.

Discussion

Improvisational tenets and structured activities have a place in leadership education. In this study, we examined students' experiences in an improv graduate business course. Additionally, we explored students' perceptions around integrating improv tenets and strategies to their professional life. Even though the literature review did not reveal a sole checklist of desired leadership approaches (Allen, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017), non-linear employee-focused leaders appeared to be equipped to connect with and influence their employees. The ability to influence can drive achieving organizational objectives (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Goleman, 2000; Lind & Sitkin, 2007).

The literature review revealed that desired leadership traits included leaders that are adaptive, employee-centered, and influential (Allen, 2018; Nelson & Squires, 2017; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015; Yukl, 2013). Participants in the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation richly addressed these traits and highlighted how organizational success involved collaboration, trust, and the ability to innovate. They shared that embodying the improv tenet yes, and in their professional life challenged them to move beyond personal agendas and competition to embrace partnerships. They engaged in activities that challenged them to be mindful and truly give other members in the course their full attention. They then committed to understanding what others contributed. In group and personal debriefs, participants identified their personal agendas and addressed strategies to divert and collaborate.

As mirrored in the literature, the participants highlighted that shifting from individualism to inclusive partnerships presented challenges because Western business tends toward the former (Crossan, 1998; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015). Even though the shift toward authentic collaboration was difficult for many in the course, they discussed numerous benefits to promote relationships between team members and clients. They also addressed how the skills developed in the course will help them in navigating dynamic interpersonal relationships and the leader and subordinate hierarchy.

Participants explored how presence and mindfulness were foundational to establishing trust between members. They further discussed how recognizing one's energy and another's energy can provide valuable insight into navigating development sessions. Participants unpacked how recognizing energy and strategically adjusting energy can inspire creativity and drive organizational objectives. Rather than having one or two highly successful team members, in improvisational theater, often individual performers and teams are recognized. A leader's ability to meet employees where they are and help them navigate to meet their personal goals and organizational objectives represent effective leadership (Goleman et al., 2013; Yukl, 2013). In this context, the employee, leader, and organization achieve success.

Participants determined that the skills learned in the course provided a competitive advantage. The improv tenets and techniques discussed by participants build on each other and are interwoven to support one another. For example, yes, and supports collaboration, trust, and creating a safe environment for innovation and spontaneity, and these are trends in effective leadership (Gandolfi & Stone, 2018; Paxton & Van Stralen, 2015). Participants considered how collaborating, adjusting energy, engaging creatively, and embracing spontaneity can be advantageous in job interviews, in obtaining and maintaining clients, and in providing the skills to adapt to the ever-changing world of business.

Suggestions for Future Research

Structured improv techniques can provide a modality to address core competencies in leadership education curricula, but this study narrowly explored student learning in one graduate business course. Further research is needed to continue the dialog around the application of improv in business, and more narrowly, in leadership development and improv's applications to teachable approaches. This study centered on one session of the Workshop in Managerial Improvisation. There is an opportunity to examine more sessions to determined if other learners have similar or different experiences and perceptions.

We also recommend further investigation beyond Duke University. Several other institutions, such as UCLA Anderson School of Management, Columbia University Business School, and Yale School of Management incorporated improvisation into existing business and leadership curricula. Their inclusion of improvisation provides the opportunity for further examination into learner experiences' in these courses and their perceptions around the application of improv into their practice.

This study's data collection included participant observations and document analysis; as a result, there is an opportunity for additional research approaches. We recommend interviewing professionals before and after being exposed to improv tenets and exercises. A longitudinal study interviewing the learners after completing a business course incorporating improv at various stages of their career may provide additional insight into potential applications of improv in leadership development and organizational development.

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Appendix A

Daily Reflective Journals

Participant Name/Code: _____   Date: _____

Participants are requested to compose a response of the length of his or her choosing to the below prompts following each day of the course titled, 573. Workshop in Managerial Improvisation.

Prompts: What stood out to you about the class? List specific exercises or experiences you engaged in during the session which resonated with you. Discuss why said encounters resonated. Describe your strengths during the session. Discuss your weaknesses during the class. Describe your growth in the class. How can you be more effective in your strengths and weaknesses (i.e. describe your areas for improvement.)? Describe the applications of the course content and experiences to life outside the course.

Indicate in writing in parenthesis any information you want withdrawn for the study.

Appendix B

Experiential Learning Journal

Participant Name/Code: _____   Date: _____

Participants are requested to compose a response of three (3) to five (5) pages double spaced to the below prompts following the completion of the course titled, 573. Workshop in Managerial Improvisation.

<u>Prompts:</u> List three (3) specific actions you will take to put the lessons of this course into practice at Fuqua. State specifically how you will achieve each action item. Do you think improvisational skills are important? Explain your rationale. Discuss instances when these skills were used or neglected in your professional life. Discuss your strengths and weaknesses as within improvisational decision making. Describe how you will improve your skills moving forward now that the class has concluded. What struck you as particularly interesting or noteworthy from readings, discussions, or exercises? Explain your rationale.

Indicate in writing in parenthesis any information you want withdrawn for the study.

Appendix C

Strategic Memo

Participant Name/Code: _____   Date: _____

Participants are requested to compose a double-spaced response, with a length of his or her choosing, to the below prompts following the completion of the course titled, 573. Workshop in Managerial Improvisation.

Prompts: The Strategic Memo should focus on how you will apply improvisational techniques to the field in which you intend to enter upon graduation. How successfully did you apply the three (3) specific actions referenced in your experiential learning journal? Describe how you took the lessons of this course into practice at Fuqua. Discuss your learning from challenges and successes experienced. Will this learning help you outside Fuqua? Explain your rationale. Consider the entire course, from January 11-15, 2016: What worked? What did not work? What did you learn that will help you to apply it again in the future? Describe current practices in your intended field of work. Address barriers to the improvisation in this area and how can you overcome them. What are the limitations of improvisation in this setting? What are the areas of opportunity using improvisation in   this   setting?

Indicate in writing in parenthesis any information you want withdrawn for the study.