CultureCase

# Instilling creativity at work using theatrical improvisation



This research was conducted by **Anna-Maija Nisula** and **Aino Kianto** at **Lappeenranta University of Technology, Finland**

## Summary

This paper sets out the impact of using theatrical improvisation techniques to develop creativity at a Finnish organisation of 6,000 employees undergoing a process of restructure and readjustment. The techniques were conveyed through ‘three collective improvisation workshops with two groups of participants over a five-month period’. The first workshop ‘focused on the basics of individual improvisation’ the second ‘concentrated on collective improvisation’ and the third was used ‘to recall and summarise the exercises and the lessons learned’. This sequence allowed participants to develop their own abilities to express themselves, to be attentive and develop enhanced listening. ‘Improvisational theatre is a collective activity in which a group of actors perform together – with no script or director – in a spirit of shared leadership, responsibility, mutual support and care’. The researchers analysed video and audio recordings, two workshop-feedback questionnaires, the participants' written diaries, a post-project survey (completed after 10 months) and post-project interviews (completed after 15 months). The paper concludes that ‘theatrical improvisation training can lead to sustainable changes at many levels of an organisation’.

## ‘Creativity cannot be taught but is rather awakened and enabled’

Individual training showed how ‘playful and positively surprising exercises, which radically differ from habitual ways of behaving, can release individuals from familiar settings and enable creative actions to occur’. Group improvisation training (such as playing around with ‘yes, and…’ responses

versus ‘yes, but…’ ones) caused people to appreciate how the quality of communication between them affected the chances of creative thinking.

## Organisational creativity is widely understood to be a key success factor in today’s economy

It does not merely refer to the ability to solve problems or produce new ideas but also the ability to approach issues from new perspectives and stay alert to new opportunities. It is about building and maintaining ‘a state of continuous awareness, sensitivity and responsiveness’ by ‘creating a social work environment in which people who perhaps never previously thought of themselves as creative are now empowered to use their creative abilities’.


### Keywords

**Finland** **interview** **focus group** **workplace** **theatre** **creativity** **organisational change**

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