



# *BUSINESS IMPROVISATION*

*THE DIVING CATCH OF THE CORPORATE WORLD*

*RANDY SABOURIN*

*RECALL THAT MOMENT* when you were your most creative, aware, and tuned into the world around you. Imagine how valuable it would be to harness that state of mind and apply it at will to your most stressful and challenging business situations. To shine when others collapse or choke. To take a potentially disastrous circumstance and turn it into a diving catch worthy of any sports show highlight reel. Business Improvisation is the process of accessing and applying creativity to a situation in real time. It is the ability to converge composition, creativity and execution to achieve success. Business Improvisation is not “winging it,” nor does it have anything to do with comedy. The mystery that surrounds the ability to think on your feet is deeply admired in corporate culture. In the arts and sports we worship it. Unfortunately, it is not taught as a business skill in sales, customer service or leadership even though it is a learnable, process-driven competency. Successful business people improvise all the time.

This manifesto is about applying the skill of improvisation to performance in the business world. The skills are taught in several other professions, such as music, theatre, medicine, the military, and EMS. There is also a growing body of research to support the premise. This is your competitive advantage when it comes to thinking quickly on their feet.

**I clearly remember the first corporate situation where I realized my training as a jazz musician was a going to be an asset to my career.** Anyone who had access to my resume would have known I that should not have been part of the negotiation team. But there I was, sitting at the table with the heavy hitters of a blossoming high tech market. It was 1987 and early in my career. I had been sent to a corporate contract negotiation session in Schaumburg, Illinois for Motorola. I was the semiconductor buyer for a small division just outside of Toronto, Canada. I had no formal training in negotiation and for that matter I was not qualified to be a buyer at all—I had talked my way into the job.

I had studied Jazz several years earlier at Berklee College of Music, but I had never gotten used to being a starving artist. The job at Motorola helped make ends meet and support my new family. My assignment at Schaumburg was to deter the corporate negotiators from accepting price increases on my “big runners,” like 4K SRAMs and 16K DRAMs, in exchange for lower prices on their site parts. I remember being in awe of the whole thing: the dark wood paneling, the catered boardrooms, the serious and well suited corporate big shots engaged in a sport-like competitive atmosphere of negotiating with several suppliers simultaneously.

On the second day of watching and occasionally participating, I saw an opportunity to contribute. Although I was clearly 20 years younger than most of the participants, I had gained some respect by fighting for my parts when necessary and not saying anything that risked the negotiations. One

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particular session was not going well and had come to an impasse; I jumped up and started writing part numbers, quantities and prices on a white board. I didn't think about it. I saw an opportunity to resolve a potentially serious situation. I remember thinking to myself, in the midst of writing quantities and prices and juggling requirements from one plant and another, that this felt an awful like soloing in a jazz piece. The white board was my instrument and the members of the band where the business people on both sides of the negotiation. Like any improvising opportunity, it was critical to understand the rules of the game, listen to the various players, understand what they needed, and fit the pieces together. People often get fixated on the path to the planned result and

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leave no room for an alternate route to success, let alone an alternate, successful outcome. Improvisation opens up possibilities tempered only by your own creativity and the group's. Playing jazz in my music improvisation frame of mind was a matter of listening and understanding the song and applying the musical principles I had studied. In this contract negotiation situation I applied the same principles to part numbers, quantities and prices. So I stood there at the white board listening, adding, manipulating, and creating a contract agreement that sounded good to everyone in the room. The magic was in the moment. My willingness to improvise with the group's support made it possible for us to negotiate a resolution, one that gave almost everyone what they wanted.

The pieces of the puzzle were there and I was able to use my musical improvisation skills to help turn them into a successful contract. I sat down with a sense that I had a secret weapon. I was unsure what it was or how it worked—I just knew it had worked and it felt great. I knew my musical schooling would somehow be applicable to business; it turned out that my choice of music as a major was not as impractical as my parents first assumed. I got the same feeling from playing challenging music. As my career went on and moved across the desk to sales, I recognized that “high” when a deal closed. It also showed up when my team was successful as I made my way through management into executive positions.

*“LEARN EVERYTHING, THEN FORGET IT ALL.”*

*Charlie Parker*

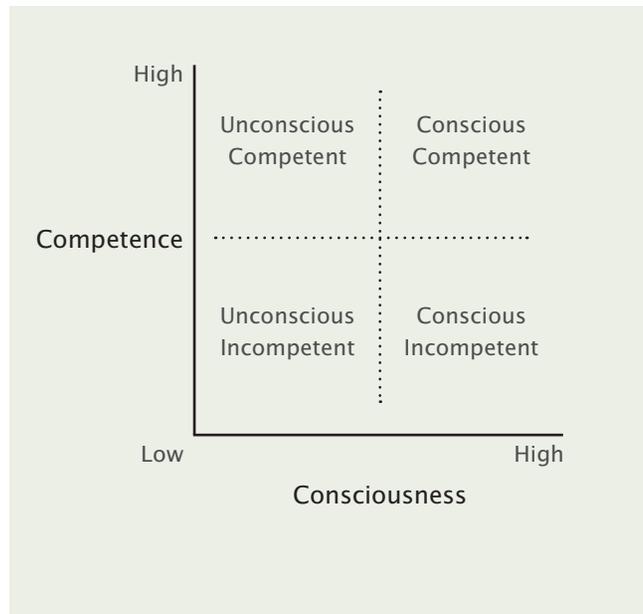
**M**usic has the ability to embrace the flow of time; it sweeps us along as ideas form and the creativity is revealed. Music lives in the moment. Songs are composed with a set of guidelines, and are planned to be appealing through the understanding of the rules of composition. And this art reflects life. We approach business in much the same way, as either an organization or an individual. We compose a plan or strategy and set up to perform it and realize success. But, many forms of music contain improvisation as a way for the musician to compose or solo, so that the mood of the situation is taken into account and changes the song to suit the moment—more akin to the performance of an unscripted situation like a sporting event. Brilliant performance under pressure makes improvisation one of music’s highest arts, and brilliant performance under pressure in a business situation can prove the difference in making the sale, creating a new product, resolving a conflict, or convincing a marketplace. As this manifesto will explore, it is one of business’s highest but untaught arts.

A jazz band can be beautiful and inspiring to listen to, and even more moving to participate in. Although it may seem free-form to the untrained ear, the musicians are following guidelines. They agree on what song to play, at a specific tempo (speed) and in a particular key. The song begins and the lead instrument plays the “head,” which is the recognizable melody that establishes the song. The head is played over a series of chord progressions, or “changes,” that support the melody. The song continues and one or more of the instruments take a turn soloing, or improvising, over the chord progression. The song is generally ended with the head being played again. There are variations in this format—jazz is nothing if not creative—but consider this a simplified explanation. The improvised solo is never the same twice; it is a real time creative interpretation of the song beyond the main melody. Studying great jazz improvisations will reveal the solo composition stays in the same tempo and key as the song, and generally follows the scales of each chord as they pass. Interestingly, part of learning how to improvise in jazz music is that truly great improvisers attempt to forget the rules and let the music speak to them through their instrument. After years and years of mastering an instrument, studying the melodic structures and chord scales, the true art can only be exposed when it is all forgotten. The real importance is learning the rules and the structures so well that they do not take any effort to recall—they become second nature and focus is solely on creativity. The art is discovered inside the structure. Improvising well in music is very difficult and an amazing feeling. Many describe it as being outside their bodies, or as not being present, yet connected to everything at once. This learning/forgetting process is also found in the study of spiritual enlightenment in many religions, particularly Zen.

In the business world, we often face situations where our execution within the moment determines success. The performance, much like a jazz solo, is the difference between winning and losing. Successful business people naturally improvise as a solution to those pressure situations. Business Improvisation is the ability to understand a situation, to access creativity and apply it to the circumstance. It’s thinking quickly, being confident and flexible enough to adapt your performance in real time to whatever gets thrown at you. Like soloing in jazz music, Business Improvisation can

be taught. Similarly, as with a jazz band or high paced team sport like hockey or basketball, improvisation can also be applied to a group. Developing a skill to increase success in critical performance situations is not only a sound strategy, but perhaps the next big competitive advantage.

Successful business people improvise all the time. In learning model terms they are considered “unconsciously competent” at improvisation. They are good at an activity but do not understand the process and therefore do not use it to its fullest potential. This lack of awareness also eliminates the prospect of developing the skill or analysis when things are not going well.



But, as I mentioned above, Business Improvisation is a skill that can be taught. It is a process that can be broken down into steps which can be isolated and then practiced. Because improvisation is typically woven into the unconscious, the steps in the process are simple and easy to understand, but can be difficult to execute correctly due to the environment they occur in. A perfect situation in which to apply the improvisation process is one with little time and resources available. These conditions cause stress, and demand performance under pressure and creative solutions. Performing anything under pressure is difficult; being creative under pressure is extremely difficult. When faced with stress we resort to our dominant attentional channel (Neideffier), often missing key social indicators and creative opportunities.

The improvisation teaching work of Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin and Del Close can be modified for business application. They have developed many group and individual exercises for theatrical improvisation (not comedic). Exercises and models can also be adapted from jazz theory and practice. Understanding the skills of improvisation is only half the equation. Recent research by Sabourin & Pratt explored the behavioural aspect of improvisation. They measured the differences between successful executives and professional improvisers with a focus on attention and distraction preferences, control, and interpersonal communication style. Self awareness of these behavioural attributes, contrasted with the same attributes of professional improvisers, can reveal the areas where exercises and learning can be applied.

Brilliant performance under pressure makes improvisation one of music's highest arts.

## “SPORTS IS HUMAN LIFE IN MICROCOSM.”

*Howard Cosell*

The huddle breaks and the quarterback steps up to the line of scrimmage. The ball is snapped and play begins with a rush of intensity. The play has been well designed, practiced over and over, and rehearsed to perfection. The quarterback throws the pass higher than expected, and a good plan is in jeopardy because of less than stellar execution. The receiver makes a split second decision to dive for the ball rather than give up on the plan. The difference between success and failure is now the receiver’s ability to react under pressure and gain access to the creativity that leverages his preparation and skills. Success depends on the “diving catch,” and not the quality of the plan. What qualities make the receiver able to adjust the plan in order to achieve the objective, despite the adversity of the bad pass? The combination of his athletic ability, hours of practice, creativity, and ability to focus his attention is what allowed him to think decisively. These attributes constitute the athlete’s ability to improvise under pressure. The receiver’s creativity is applied within the boundaries of the football game and the play at hand.

Sport and music analogies work well when describing Improvisation for several reasons. First, they clearly show the beauty of combining skill and creativity in real time. Second, there is nowhere to hide—the results are exposed and no circumstances, political leverage or smooth talking can change the outcome. Finally, I see no reason why improvisation in business cannot be celebrated at the same level as sports or music.

# “EXTRICATION IS LIKE JAZZ. IMPROVISATION BASED ON FUNDAMENTALS.”

*Daniel Furseth, DeForest, WI Fire Department*

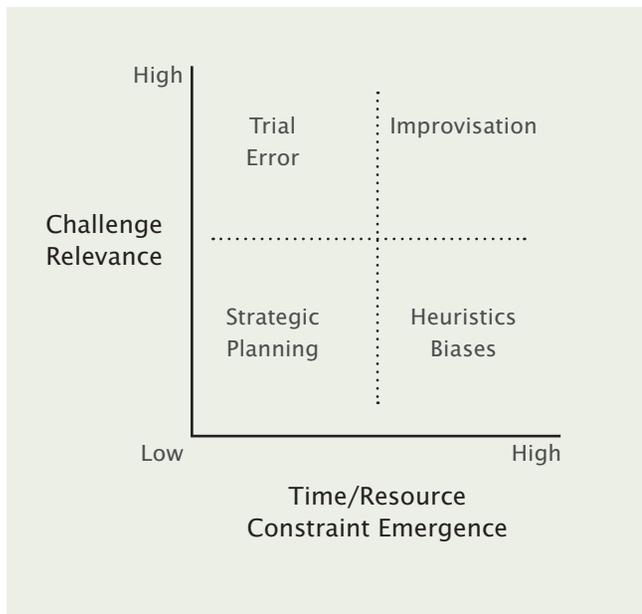
Jazz musicians, athletes, actors, firefighters, EMS workers and anyone else who requires success from a one-time performance understand that improvisation is not “winging it” or “bullshitting.” It’s evaluating a situation and making the best of it by combining materials at hand, practice and experience, and creativity. They become competent at their skills through study and practice so, that in the moment, they are not burdened with the details of process or content, but are free to access and apply creativity to the challenge.

Suppose a proposal has been prepared for a client and there is a meeting today to review the solution and costs with the executive team. The content of the proposal is clear and the features and functions are supported by research. Experience tells us that no matter how hard we try to control the situation, something unexpected will happen. It could be something small; spilled coffee on your shirt or a burnt bulb on the projector. Any small issue can quickly become a big issue if it is allowed to blur the focus. A large unexpected event could be problematic as well; the decision maker not showing or the opening statement from the client that they’ve decided to go with an unknown competitor. Not only are there new obstacles to overcome, fear and biological stress—such as fight or flight—influence reactions. The objective remains the same, but the plan is no longer viable, it is time to improvise.

Execution is critical in business, but for some reason there is not nearly as much preparation for meetings or presentations, or the same dedication to them, as an NFL football player has. We are frequently faced with solving problems in real time, and we reward those who are good at it. Although any successful leader will relay that learning comes from failure, not many organizations

tolerate mistakes that cost money. Today's employees learn from watching, reading and training, and there is little or no practice. They also learn that taking risks rarely pays off. It is unreasonable to expect highlight reel results without risk or serious practice and preparation—no other profession does.

Professions that utilize improvisation have accepted that they cannot control the future. The exception is the business world. I blame the good intentions of Dr. Demming and his continuous improvement cycle, Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software and the short term financial performance forced on public companies by the stock market. A predictable and controllable future represents less risk; a premise that works well for increasing quality in manufacturing, but does not take the human factor into account. The odds makers in Las Vegas understand risk and performance in the moment. The increased use of email represents our lack of confidence in engaging in free-flowing conversation. Instead, we choose our words very carefully.



Research by Hmieleski and Corbett shows that when a situation presents itself, we determine our course of action based on the time and resources available in conjunction with the challenge or relevance of the situation. If there is plenty of time to make the decision and the challenge/relevance is low, we generally implement a planning process. We have the luxury of being able to think about the situation. If the challenge/relevance is higher, we may engage in trial and error activities to test theories. If time and resources constraints are very high, we generally look to solve the problem the way we have in the past and apply the learning from a similar situation. If there is no time to think, the problem is important, and the challenge is high and unique—like a diving catch or problem during a presentation in front of the board of directors—we must improvise.

There is a multitude of literature on planning and strategy for business professionals to draw on. Books about other people's experiences are read with the hopes that we can increase our heuristic knowledge base. But, corporations and business leaders invest very little into the skills of critical performance.

*“HOW GOOD PEOPLE’S DECISIONS ARE UNDER THE FAST-MOVING, HIGH STRESS CONDITIONS OR RAPID COGNITION IS A FUNCTION OF TRAINING AND RULES AND REHEARSAL.”*

*Malcolm Gladwell*

Improvisation is the process of accessing and applying creativity to a situation in real time. It is the ability to converge composition, creativity and execution to achieve success. Creativity can be defined as the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, and relationships. In doing so, creativity brings forth original methods and interpretations. Improvisation is not ‘winging it.’ In fact, in order to access creativity, it is important not to be distracted by the content. If you are busy remembering figures, features and functions, or obsessed about some other event, your mind is not free to access the creativity needed to improvise.

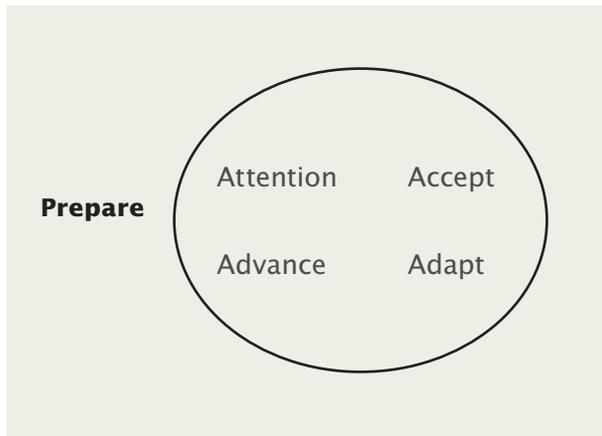
**Preparation is a key factor for successful Business Improvisation.** The process steps of improvisation are attention, accept, adapt and advance. The most important aspect of the process, however, is preparation. Preparation comes in two forms. The first is having a grasp of the content and skills of the situation. In a sporting analogy, learning how to skate would be a great skill to have mastered before you attempt to improvise during a hockey game. In business, this applies to understanding the rules, politics, product information, and the improvisation process itself. The critical preparation is the understanding of your own behavioral tendencies when faced with pressure. If you recognize that, when you are under pressure, you tend to become controlling or reduce your external awareness, you can avoid their influences. The best way to recognize your behavioral tendencies is to undergo a psychometric style inventory and put yourself into situations that you know will cause stress, and really observe your thoughts right before you reach your “stressed” point.

The four process steps for Business Improvisation are simple and really mimic, on a simple level, the give and take of a conversation. **Attention**—or as a subset, listening—is the simplest, most important step, and unfortunately the one most often neglected. Listening without distraction, judgment and “mind chatter” is very difficult. One factor that makes listening difficult is that we can comprehend speech at a rate between 300 to 500 words per minute while the average speaker talks to us at a speed of 150 to 200 words per minute. In the gap between what we hear and what we process, our mind wanders. This step is essential to gathering information about the situation in which you find yourself and being aware of what potentially useful information is in the conversation, in the room, or gathered from the audience. Do not engage your analytical processes at this stage, as it will only generate mental chatter and distract you with premature judgments.

**Acceptance** is the next step in the process. It can be difficult for some business people because it requires us to let go of judgment and control. This is counter-intuitive for many people, particularly those who tend to be “take charge” individuals. Be that as it may, accepting a situation for what it is—not attempting to control or judge it—and using the new information as an input into the revised decision-making process is essential to effective improvisation. The acceptance step also means

understanding and playing within the rules of engagement. In other words, there is an agreement amongst the players on the framework, the objectives and the ways in which people will work to achieve common goals.

**Adaptation** is the next step in the Business Improvisation process. Now is your chance to apply your cognitive and creative skills in order to achieve the objectives, in spite of the changes engendered by the current situation. By paying attention, listening and accepting the situational realities, we are now in a position to blend salient facts with creativity and adapt to the new situation. Holding onto old plans in the face of new challenges is counter-productive; letting go of outdated approaches and adapting to new solutions is the key to survive and thrive in the global economy.



The last process step, **advancement**, is about effective communication. It is offering something that moves the situation forward. A suggestion, an idea, or a change in body language can all advance the solutions created in the adaptive step of the process. The message is “I’ve listened, I understand and I accept. I’ve thought about it and here is what I think.” This is also the opportunity to move the situation into a new direction.

Here’s a great little exercise that helps demonstrate improvisation, and accessing creativity, without filtering the answer. You can do it right now.

Speak out loud 10 words that have no association with each other. Speak them out loud, no cheating. It makes it harder, and a lot more entertaining for those around you, unless you are at a funeral. And, in that case, why are you reading this at a funeral? Zipper, hand, gum, dog, cloud, jump, up—up being associated with jump, so try again. There needs to be a certain amount of trust between a writer and reader, so let’s try again. Saying the words out loud also adds pressure and makes it more difficult to be creative.

Another individual exercise to help with awareness and attention is watching a sitcom on television with the volume muted. Find the punch lines to the jokes by the character’s change in status, watch how they move and react. Starting conversations with strangers is another practice improvising. I like this as a warm up exercise before I go into a meeting. Focus on two things during the encounter with a stranger. First, really listen to the answers and second, find the edge of that uncomfortable feeling within you talking to a stranger. It helps to engage the person on something more detailed than weather.

Group improvisation exercises can range from 2 to 25 participants, and should be facilitated by someone with some experience in theatre improvisation. The exercises can range from drawing lines to make a picture together (Line at Time), or telling stories one word at a time, to “group mind” exercises that can have some amazing team-building results as a byproduct.

*“I USED TO THINK THAT RUNNING AN ORGANIZATION WAS EQUIVALENT TO CONDUCTING A SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA. BUT I DON’T THINK THAT’S QUITE IT; IT’S MORE LIKE JAZZ. THERE IS MORE IMPROVISATION.”*

*Warren Bennis*

**B**usiness Improvisation is the next “killer app” for leaders, sales people, or anyone facing situations where real time execution is the difference between success and failure.

Business Improvisation has been overlooked as a mission critical skill, but it will not remain that way for much longer. The tipping point is at hand. There is a growing body of research and an increased visibility in the media to support it as a sound strategy for success.

**First come: first serve. 📌**

# info

## RANDY'S BLOG

Visit [biz-improv.com/wordpress](http://biz-improv.com/wordpress) for more of Randy Sabourin's thoughts on Business Improvisation.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Randy Sabourin is the founder and President of Biz Improv Inc, an organization that delivers consulting and training services focused on helping executives and sales teams elevate performance through the application of Business Improvisation. Randy sits on the board of directors of the Strategic Leadership Forum. He is also the President of the Board of Directors of the Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada. Randy studied Jazz Composition and Improvisation at Berklee College of Music and has studied with Loose Moose Theatre Company which has helped him focus on creating learning experiences and practical applications for Business Improvisation.

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