Exercises for Foundational Improv Skills

- Builds foundational improv skills, such as listening, accepting ideas created by others (“yes”), contributing information to support the ideas created by others (“and”), and performing space work
- Important because all other improv exercises are built on foundational improv skills
- Introduces new improv learners to improv

Title of Exercise: Yes
Key Skills Developed: Listening Actively

Description of Exercise
Up to 16 participants stand in a circle. Person One makes eye contact with anyone around the circle (Person Two), says his/her name. Person Two may only respond, “yes,” giving Person One permission to slowly move into Person Two’s position. While Person One is moving into Person Two’s position, Person Two will make eye contact with anyone else around the circle (Person Three), say his/her name, and Person Three will respond, “yes.” And so on.

Inquiry Strategy
At the conclusion of the first round (every participant moves at least once), ask participants about the challenges of this exercise. Listen for awareness that people tend to move before fully listening for the ‘yes.” Ask how this tendency plays out in the workplace. Ask how this tendency may impact work relationships.

The facilitator may wish to perform a second round of this exercise, during which time the facilitator can encourage participants to increase the speed by which they perform the exercise. At the conclusion of round two, ask participants what strategies they employed to ensure their feet stayed firmly planted until they heard the “yes.” Ask how these strategies can be used in the workplace.

Title of Exercise: Red Ball
Key Skills Developed: Listening Actively, Communicating with Clarity

Description of Exercise
Up to 16 participants stand or sit in a circle. Person One makes eye contact with anyone around the circle (Person Two), announces “Red Ball”, then passes an imaginary ball (size and weight of a basketball) with a chest pass. Person Two receives the ball, says, “Thank you, Red Ball,” makes eye contact with another person around the circle (Person Three), and repeats process.

Once mastered, the facilitator will introduce a second ball, Green Ball (size and weight of a ping pell ball and is passed underhand), which will be simultaneously passed with the Red Ball. Note, two balls will be passed the same time; however, both balls do not need to
be passed together.

Once round two has been mastered, the facilitator will introduce a third ball, Grey Ball (size and weight of a bowling ball and is rolled on the floor), which will be simultaneously passed with the Red Ball and Green Ball. At times, participants may end up with multiple balls at the same time. This is perfectly acceptable, and the multiple balls can be passed to separate individuals.

**Inquiry Strategy**
At the conclusion of the first round of “Red Ball” being passed (before another ball is introduced), ask participants about how easy it was to “receive” the red ball. Probe for the importance of eye contact for both sender and receiver in passing the ball. Ask how this relates to communication, specifically the sending and receiving of messages. Point out if participants seem to hesitate when receiving or passing the ball and encourage them to heighten awareness so that they can keep the ball moving.

After the “Green Ball” and the “Grey Ball” are added, ask about the challenges of having simultaneous balls circulating. Probe for the difficulty of having multiple “projects” to juggle. Ask how participants kept their focus. Ask how participants dealt with distractions. Probe for how these strategies relate to the workplace, particularly in team projects and in communication.

**Title of Exercise:** Yes, And Story
**Key Skills Developed:** Listening Actively, Accepting the Ideas of Others, Contributing Information to Support the Ideas of Others

**Description of Exercise**
Up to 12 participants stand in a circle. The facilitator will provide the name of the main character and a simple activity the character performed. Person One will turn to the left, make eye contact with the Person Two, and provide the first sentence in the story. Person Two will respond with, “yes,” to Person One, turn to Person Three, start with, “and,” and provide the second sentence in the story. Person Three will respond with, “yes,” to Person Two, turn to Person Four, start with, “and,” and provide the third sentence in the story. And so on.

The facilitator will end the story on a high note in the story, and after every participant has contributed at least one line to the story.

Examples of stories to be provided by the facilitator: This is the story of the time Pat went to the zoo; this is the story of the time Zaden adopted a hermit crab; this is the story of the time Morgan climbed Mt. Haleakala.

**Inquiry Strategy**
At the conclusion of the exercise, ask participants about challenges to telling a group
story. Probe for difficulty in refraining from individual agendas and “steering” the story to achieve an individual storyline. Ask participants for distractions that made concentrating difficult, including environmental distractions and thinking too much for a contribution instead of listening to others.

Point out that starting each sentence with “yes,” is an immediate acknowledgement of the previous participant’s contribution. Point out that “and,” allows participants to then add their own unique perspective.

Ask participants how Yes, And Story might strengthen collaboration in the workplace. Probe for appropriate times when a team may have multiple leaders. Direct participants to reflect on how they felt knowing their contribution would be supported by the entire group, and how this can be translated in the workplace. Ask participants how “yes,” might look in an organization, particularly in group-decision making processes or brainstorming processes.

**Title of Exercise:** The Martha Game  
**Key Skills Developed:** Accepting the Ideas of Others, Contributing Information to Support the Ideas of Others

**Description of Exercise**  
Up to 16 participants form a circle. Person One will enter the center of the circle, announce, “I’m a____,” choose an object to be, and then take on the physicality of the object. Person Two will join the center, announce, “I’m a____,” choose to be a new object that might be found with the first object, and take on the physicality of the second object. Person Three will join the center, announce, “I’m a____,” choose to be a new object that might be found with the first and second objects, and take on the physicality of the third object.

Once three are in the center, Person One selects either Person Two or Person Three to stay. Person One and the other person not selected will return to the circle. The remaining person will not start with the exact same object he/she was previously, still announcing “I’m a____.” Two others will join. And so on.

**Inquiry Strategy**  
Point out that when they took on the physicality of an object, they got a lot of laughs, because it is always fun to see an adult pretend to be an object. But that when two others joined, the stage picture became more complete, which is the concept of synergy. Ask how synergy relates to the work place. Ask how collaboration supports synergy. Probe for how synergy changes, usually in a positive manner, group dynamics. Specific probe may include how synergy allows all to feel supported.
Exercises for Specific Improv Skills

- Builds specific improv skills, such as demonstrating empathy, justifying responses, applying story structure, and developing characters
- Should be selected to align with an organization's learning objectives

Title of Exercise: Eight-Line Story Structure
Key Skills Developed: Developing a Point of View, Applying a Story Structure

Description of Exercise
Eight participants form a circle to tell a story together, one sentence at a time, and using the following structure:
1. Once upon a time...
2. And everyday...
3. But one day...
4. And because of that...
5. And because of that...
6. And because of that...
7. Until finally...
8. And ever since that day...

Steps 1 and 2 paint a current situation. Step 3 is the first turning point, where a new situation breaks the current situation. Steps 4, 5 and 6 contrast the new situation and create the opportunities for change. Step 7 creates the second turning point, where resolution occurs. And Step 8 is the learning lesson.

The facilitator may wish to illustrate with:
1. Once upon a time, there was a young girl named Dorothy who lived on a farm in rural Kansas.
2. And every day, she performed her chores while longing for a different life, and singing about rainbows and a more perfect word.
3. But one day, she was caught in a tornado.
4. And because of that, she was transported to a new and unknown land.
5. And because of that, she met new friends, including a scarecrow, a lion, and a tin man.
6. And because of that, she and her new friends traveled to the Emerald City to meet a wizard who promised to grant all of their wishes.
7. Until finally, Dorothy clicked her heels three times and returned to Kansas.
8. And ever since then, Dorothy realized that home is where the heart is, with her family and friends.

For the first round, the facilitator has participants use the 8-line structure to tell a familiar story that all participants know. Common stories include fairy tales, fables and Disney movies.
For the second round, the facilitator has participants use the 8-line structure to tell the story from the first round, this time from the perspective of another character.

**Inquiry Strategy**
At the conclusion of this exercise, ask participants how using the eight-line structure impacted their storytelling. Ask how turning point is used to move a story forward. Point out that in this story structure, there are actually two turning points: the first turning point changes the current situation which leads to disruption, and the second turning point where resolution is achieved.

Ask participants what improv skills they used to tell a group story. Probe for how “yes, and” creates a culture where all ideas are valued. Ask participants about how difficult it was to not control the outcome of the scene. Ask how this might apply in the workplace, and how teamwork might be different if the leadership role is shared by all instead of just one.

Ask participants how this story structure might be used in the workplace. Point out that storytelling is often used to coach employees, strengthening the values and expectations of the organization through narrative and illustration.

Specific to the third round where storytellers are asked to recount a commonly known story from a perspective of another character, ask participants how they derived their viewpoint. Ask participants how this might relate to the workplace, probing for how situations can be seen very differently depending on viewpoint.

**Title of Exercise:** Instant Expert  
**Key Skills Developed:** Responding with Spontaneity

**Description of Exercise**
Up to 12 participants stand in a circle. One person will enter the middle of the circle and instantly become an expert in an esoteric subject. The remaining participants around the circle will ask, one at a time, questions in rapid-fire on the subject matter. Questions should be open-ended to elicit a response that requires more than one word. Questions should be a combination of technical information on the subject matter, and personal information on the expert’s background and history with the subject matter. The expert should respond to each question without hesitation. After five questions, a new participant will enter the circle to be an expert in a different subject matter.

Examples of esoteric subjects to be provided by the facilitator: Inner workings of combustion engines; childhood influences of Amelia Earhart.

**Inquiry Strategy**
At the conclusion of the exercise, ask participants what assisted them in providing a confident response on a subject matter, which they knew little information. Ask how
participants how they established credibility in their responses, probing for physical attributes (standing up right, making eye contact, responding without hesitation) as well as informational attributes (reference training, education or research, citing presentations and papers). Ask for examples of times when participants were posed with questions they were not anticipating. Ask for strategies that would make answering unanticipated questions easier.

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