

# **Improvisation as a response to complexity**

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# First ... a bit of myth-busting!

- Yes, Jazz musicians and comedy improvisers ARE highly skilled in their particular “instrument” (be that musical, or verbal)... but they are rarely, if ever, “untutored geniuses”, free of all structures and rules who simply turn up and “make it up as they go along”.
- Being able to improvise in the moment is a skill, an art – and one that CAN be learned. It is a combination of relentless learning, even more relentless “unlearning”, and **disciplined imagination** ... It is not a “gift” only available to the few.
- Improvisation and innovation are not “lone acts”. Great jazz musicians and comedy improvisers are not calling up novel and previously unheard melodies, notes or phrases out of “thin air” or from inside their own heads – they are stealing, copying, taking and twisting, building on and responding to, and ultimately breaking what already exists around them.
- But... many of us think “I can’t do that”... without realising that we already do .... Every day! Read on!

# Who can improvise?

- Learning a language
- Cooking with whatever is in the fridge
- Conversation
- Life as an ongoing improvisation

**We all can, and do,  
all the time!**

# My impro heros ...

- The work on these pages is a combination of my own discoveries over 15 years of experimentation .. AND very much “standing on the shoulders” of mentors and collaborators, past and present
- Amongst those, the most influential and represented in the work of this paper are:



Dr Frank Barrett



Keith  
Johnstone

Neil  
Mullarkey  
(Comedy  
Store  
Players)



Alex Steele  
(Improvise)



Suki Webster  
(Comedy Store  
Players)


# Neil Mullarkey's (Comedy Store Players) guiding principles of improvisation – the quick guide!



<b>LISTEN</b>	Really listen, whole body listening, stilling yourself and your inner dialogue, full attention, in the here-and-now, suspending planning what you might say/do to really watch and listen what others are saying/doing
<b>ACCEPT</b>	Fully accept the “offers” of others – what is there is the only thing that can be there. Suspend wishing for something else. Use everything that is offered. Be prepared <b>to be altered by</b> the offer of the “other” or the circumstances
<b>GIVE</b>	Make fully fledged “offers” of your own. You are not a passenger. Use your expertise, advocate, give others something to work with
<b>ENERGISE</b>	Be energised and energetic, be big, clear, confident, even when you don’t know what will happen next
<b>REINCORPORATE</b>	Look out for opportunities to bring back “offers” that were dropped, or missed

**LAGER (for short!)**



A photograph of a jazz band performing. In the foreground, a man on the left is playing a silver saxophone. In the center, a man with glasses and a grey blazer is smiling. On the right, a man in a dark suit and hat is playing a gold trumpet. In the background, a double bass is visible. The text is overlaid on the image.

Seeking new models of  
innovation, change and  
organisation leadership

Going deeper into the “simple  
rules” that enable complex  
innovation and change

A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a man wearing a black fedora and a dark suit. He is looking down and playing a trumpet. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his face and the instrument, and deep shadows elsewhere. The text "Say 'yes' to the 'mess'" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif font across the lower part of the image.

**Say 'yes' to the 'mess'**

# Say “yes” to the “mess” – the ability to be altered

- “**YES** I fully accept your offer ... **AND** I build on it with my own offer” – (more of the “and” later...)
- Keep the space open – resist certainty and the temptation to resolve anxiety prematurely or to regain balance if you feel disturbed, let it touch you, allow yourself to be affected, sink in
- Explore and monitor the zones of your own comfort and the edge of the unknown
- Play something new, grown from something already present
- Go with the roller-coaster of feelings – anxiety and emotional turbulence are an **inevitable part of transformation**
- Resist falling back on lamenting what you WISH you had, or what OUGHT to be here. What you have is all you have. If all you have are eggs and cheese, make omelette!
- Resist slipping into victim mode, or seeing others who are challenging you (to let go of self-limiting beliefs) as if they were persecutors. Be wary of rescuers, they only support you in staying the same!



# A little more about “saying yes” – the ability to allow yourself to be altered

- Improvisation is an act of “fully engaged surrender” (my words!). This paradox brings us to life – it is an experience of being fully present, responsible, adult, while at the same time giving up on our illusions (or delusions) that we are either in control, or single-handedly accountable for the accomplishment of the whole “group” (whoever, in your world, that is). The core of this is allowing yourself to be altered, taken “off course” ... changed.... Without giving up responsibility for YOUR “gestures”, your participation and offers.
- What helps?:
  - Listen to what is being said, REALLY! – If you are listening to the self-conscious voice in your own head, or searching for inspiration wildly in the upper reaches of space (or at least the corner of the room where the wall meets the ceiling) you aren’t really LISTENING to what is being **gifted** to you by your co-players (workers). But of course, if you really listen, you risk BEING ALTERED
  - Know a good “tilt” when you see one – Keith Johnstone describes a “tilt” as a gesture (or offer) from another that destabilises us, literally “tilts” us off balance, introducing the opportunity to become different, altered. When we want to facilitate or support change we are acting as “tilt agents” to those around us – and we hope that they will be “altered” by the tilt – ie change! But our own instinct (for all of us) is to resist the tilt, to restore our equilibrium. We see this in the “yes...and” game all the time... one person offers something that requires the other to take on a shift in their identity or accept something their “oughts-and-shoulds script” is saying “no” to – and so it is gently rejected or smoothed away. Hanging in there when **tilted** is the essence of being altered
  - Ban “politeness” and political correctness – not only are we (all humans) passionately committed to defending ourselves against being altered by others, but we conspire to ensure that we don’t offer anything useful to anyone else, that might alter them! Politeness overload (aka rescuing, avoiding etc) is the enemy of improvisation (innovation, learning, change – being altered). I encourage co-workers and participants to get used to saying “*you made my life easier when you ....*” and equally “*you made my life harder when you ...*”. Failing to trust someone to cope with a simple piece of feedback is a way of keeping them small. Not asking for it yourself is a way of keeping yourself unaltered!



**Embracing difference (and errors)  
as a source of learning**

# Embrace difference (and error) as a source of change and innovation

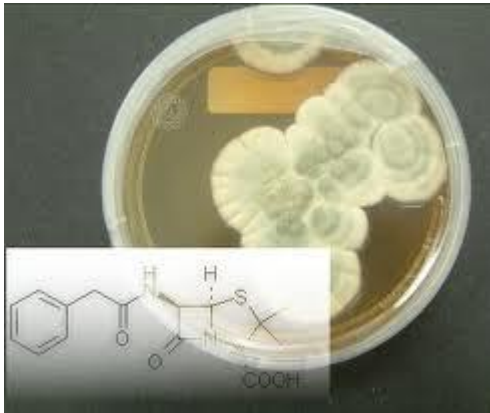
- Cherish your anomalies – newcomers, visitors, outsiders, oddballs, mavericks, unexpected outcomes
- Import and nurture difference – new blood, external links, exchanges and placements, external visits, secondments, bring the “unusual suspects” into the conversation, give them power. Encourage “outsiders” to participate on the “inside” – who might bring a fresh perspective to familiar activities?
- Support the risk takers – provide political and emotional support, show interest, encourage learning from difference
- Look out for “weak signals” – find and amplify “ideas from the edge”, mistrust consensus and easy agreement.
- Seek out your “positive deviants”, make heroes of them
- Errors are incorporated as part of the ongoing action – repeat it, amplify it, develop it further – until it becomes the “right thing to do”

## A little more about “embracing error”

- Frank Barrett recalls one of his favourite musicians, Miles Davies – *“If you are not making a mistake, it’s a mistake”*
- In organisational life we treat mistakes as “learning opportunities” sure, but in the “wrong” way (if you take the whole AI/CRP/Impro way of seeing seriously at least). When faced with a mistake we typically wring our hands, make sure everyone knows a mistake has happened and then set about a deep inquiry into the causes and implications of the mistake, to ensure (of course without blaming anyone as no company has a “blame culture” do they!!) that it doesn’t happen again. The problem with this approach is that the better and more often this routine is run the more stultified, fearful and risk averse the people become
- At the very least, Frank suggests, we should be able to distinguish between errors caused by slovenly laziness or systemic patterns and those caused by caring deeply, taking risks, pushing the boundaries, which he describes as “noble failures”
- What helps?:
  - The beginner’s mind – how often do you find yourself walking into something and thinking *“I recognise this... I have just the thing for this ...”* Our expertise and knowledge, our ability to recognise objects, patterns etc is absolutely essential and inherent – but it blocks innovation, causes us to “trot out” the stuff we are used to, are good at. What does a “beginner’s mind” look like for you? Practice pointing at things and calling them something else
  - Imperfection and forgiveness – having the capacity to say *“I wonder where this will lead”* rather than *“I wish that hadn’t happened”*
  - Take advantage of error – see what you can make out of it
  - Make it safe to keep trying – paradoxically, this is not created by being tentative or rescuing as this just teaches people to be wary. Treat people as if the error doesn’t hurt, and instead concentrate on creating safe conditions AROUND them. Even then, accept that learning is a choice that each of us has to make ourselves



*"When life gives you mold – make penicillin"* (or in other words, a few of the many errors which came good ...)





A photograph of a jazz band performing on stage. In the foreground, a Black man in a dark suit and tie is playing a double bass, looking down at his hands. In the background, a white man in a tuxedo is playing a trumpet, and another Black man is playing a saxophone. The scene is lit with blue and purple stage lights, creating a moody atmosphere. The text "Provocative leadership" is overlaid in white at the bottom center.

Provocative leadership

# Provocative leadership

- “**YES** I fully accept your offer ... **AND** I build on it with my own offer” – (... so this is the AND part!)
- Become **passionately unattached** to your own personal way forward AND ...
- ... when it is “your turn”, act with passion, courage, conviction and accountability – **make clear bold offers** – simply asking questions OR “swallowing” your contribution, makes others have to find all the answers (or innovation) – that makes their lives harder not easier!
- Disturb the familiar – introduce new contexts, direct contact, “poke”! Create incremental disruptions to patterns, assumptions, routines, rules and norms that upset habits and demand openness – encourage multiple experiments and radical incrementalism
- Seed provocative questions, challenges, irresistible invitations – what if? How can we? Experiment with “pulling change” – invite collaboration, creativity and contributions
- Trust as a state of mind – not earned through knowing the other person. “*If you want to ruin a jazz band, take them on a team-build event*” Frank Barrett.
- “*I know they will be able to do this*” – high performance is anticipated - but cannot be predicted
- Care more about the growth of the other, than whether they like you

# A little more about “provocative competence” – the assumption that others are “up to it”

- Both Frank Barrett and Keith Johnstone are very clear about this – that performance of the “other” is “made to happen” by the anticipation of those around them (the appreciative assumption). People can only be as good as your expectation of them – as a facilitator or leader, if you are tentative, or apologetic on their behalf, they will learn fear or anxiety in relation to their own practice
- This means, as a leader of an improvisation process (whether it be on stage, or in a change team etc in an organisation) it is **an appreciative act** to EXPECT that others ARE big enough, bold enough, adult enough to step in
- People can help with their own inner “provocative competence” through what Keith Johnstone constantly reaffirms in his own Impro Workshops:
  - Be average – This isn’t advocating that you should “care less” about your performance, it is about caring for the “whole” social accomplishment MORE than caring about your own individual brilliance or need to be a star. As Keith puts it *“When you feel uninspired, be efficient. If you try your BEST, you’ll be unable to cooperate with anyone”*. *“Trying harder”* claims Keith, *“can’t make you spontaneous; it’s like trying to slam a revolving door”*. Allowing yourself to be average allows much faster, more gifted, **automatic** parts of the brain to take over, much more suited than the overly socialised, learn-ed, thinking, worrying “self” and the scripts that go with it...
  - Say (or play) the obvious thing – search constantly for what is being “called for” right now – being deliberately clever, funny etc in a disconnected way often destroys the performance of the whole because it breaks from what is emerging and is needed in this moment. Keep it simple, allow it to come to you ....
  - Fail happy – or as Suki Webster (Comedy Store Players) puts it – *“die big”*. If you try something new, the chances are you WILL fail sometimes! So what!? If you fail “miserably”, then you will be pitied and you will simply reinforce your own inner critic, if you can fail “happy”, people will love you anyway and it is often the best bit of the show! (Or learning)



A close-up photograph of Miles Davis playing the trumpet. He is wearing a black shirt and a colorful, striped scarf. He has a large, ornate watch on his left wrist. The background is blurred, showing other musicians and warm stage lighting. The text "Composing and performing at the same time" is overlaid on the right side of the image in white, bold, sans-serif font.

**Composing  
and  
performing  
at the same  
time**

# Composing and performing at the same time – stopping is not an option

- Creating “vision” as we go – constantly projecting into the future but as a co-created act of constant movement in the here and now
- A new view of what “visioning” means – less like pre-written orchestral score to be performed later by others, and more like a constant, collaborative search for meaning and purpose, dream and destiny, design and form – at the same moment as stepping into it
- Strategy evolves through iteration and is only known after the event, everyone participates
- Different skills are needed, but roles are flexible
- Working “live”
- Rapid prototyping – look to the designers like Ideo
- Approach leadership and strategy tasks as experiments
- Boost information processing in the midst of action





Leading and following,  
'soloing' and 'comping'

# Leading and following – “soloing” and “comping” (accompanying)

- Foster shared leadership – taking it in turns to lead, helping others to excel
- Be great at “comping” (supporting) – complementing, elevating others, build on their ideas, uplift their performance. When we “comp”, we MAKE the soloist “happen”. There is enormous power in the hands of the “comper” at any time, a low energy (or disinterested, or distracted) “comper” destroys performance
- Find ways of (as Frank Barrett puts it) “*celebrating comping to create a culture of noble followership*”.
- Be courageous in your own leadership – when it really is your turn to “play/lead” make your voice heard – you serve no-one by holding back
- Give one another room to experiment, to develop themes
- Attentive listening (rather than brilliant playing/speaking) enables exceptional performance

# Why do we only reward soloists?

- The legacy of Freudian psychology and the “scientific” approach to organisations and management, has left us with a view of performance that elevates moments of “solo-ing” or “leading” into our awareness as the highest form of performance. This builds on a dominant masculine psychology which assumes the ultimate goal of adult maturity to be independence and autonomy.
- From Mary Baker Miller (1976) and host of other feminist and relational psychologists (Fletcher, Gilligan et al) that have followed, we now hear a call to start to value what is “disappeared” by this one sided view of what performance and maturity means, ie:
  - connectedness and interdependence as fundamental human strengths rather than weaknesses
  - attributes such as empathy, interdependence and vulnerability
  - a care for the “good of the whole” and the “relationships between” rather than the individuation of the individual
- Bakan introduced the two fundamental modalities of human beings as being “agency” and “communion”. What he refers to as “communion” we might, in impro terms, refer to as “comping”
- The price we pay? Organisations adopting models based on “firing the bottom 10% annually” as a fix for poor performance risk long term damage to innovation. It is most likely that the top 10% of their “soloist performers” are being “comped” (supported, accompanied, “made happen”) by any number of people who SEEM to, themselves be poor performers. This strategy might support short term efficiency of today’s performance, but is unlikely to support radical transformation
- Can we have a more nuanced approach to the very notion of performance management?



Minimum structure -  
Maximum innovation



# Minimum structures that allow maximum innovation

- *"You can't improvise on nothing. You gotta improvise on something"*  
Charles Mingus
- *"Jazz improvisation is a complex system. Information flows freely yet is restrained, members are diverse yet conform and remain richly connected, constraints are minimal, and feedback is non-linear..."*  
Frank Barrett
- Limited structures, light constraint – co-developed principles that coordinate action through time
- Innovation requires constraint and freedom to co-exist – resulting in "guided autonomy"
- Impersonal (ie not related to individuals and therefore do not rely on interpersonal trust), minimal constraints (agreed basic rules) – invite detached, impartial trust as an assumption, embellishment and transformation at individual level
- Choose to break the rules sometimes – even they are subject to transformation





**Drachten, The Netherlands – share space,  
no traffic lights**





**Hanging out**

# Hanging out (or jamming)

- Promote informal gatherings – get together, conversations, web chat, off-line discussions, maximise the chance of random connections, create office spaces that enable chance encounters, design in opportunities for serendipity
- Practice hard (eg the impro games as skills, like doing your “scales” on the piano, or learning the “standards”) but don’t rehearse specific performances!
- Adult kindergarten – having time, energy and space to hang out with people with similar passion and desire to learn – eg the Google 20% contract
- Convene conversations – max mix, frame quality questions, model good listening and responding, broker connections
- Participate in the dialogue – experiment with not knowing, let go of pet ideas, listen hard, take risks, be a learner
- MBWA – go visit, sit in, be curious, interested and open
- Assume now is all you have – change occurs in the “here and now”
- Visit unusual places – and meet unusual people
- Give up the illusion of the lone genius – EVERYTHING is created in relationship

A close-up, low-angle shot of a man wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is also wearing a dark fedora hat that casts a shadow over his face. He is playing a saxophone, with the mouthpiece visible in his mouth. The background is a deep blue, textured surface. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of his face and the instrument.

**Finding a 'groove'**

# Finding a “groove”

- Pay attention to what is emerging – getting clearer, inquire into what is working, look for the “positive deviants”
- Be present in the “here and now” – with an appreciative eye and ear
- Notice successes – and build on them
- Look for what energises and excites – what connects people? Nourish excitement, blow on the embers of possibility
- Capture emerging clarity – and new questions as they arise. What do we know and not know? What are we learning, what is getting clearer?
- Assumes now is all we have – you only change in the now, there is no future in this context
- No sense in “*I wish I had done ....*” We live in the real world – not a planned one – life is not a rehearsal
- Negotiating a shared “sense of the beat”
- Expressions of connection and ecstasy: sailing, gliding, grooving, receptivity, openness, fluid connection – renewed sense of hope



# Presence, energy and status



# Why be interested in power, presence and status?

- Helps us to connect with others and with ourselves
- Empowers others when we are grounded and aware of how we use status
- Empowers ourselves
- Keeps us alert and safe
- Is the natural process of imposition and submission that makes up transactions between us
- Transformations in power relations accompany other forms of transformation (Johnstone)

# Our relationship with power

- Has negative connotation
- Fear of our own misuse – lack of empathy, tolerance and humanity
- Equality is not the same thing as equal power
- Power dynamics are an inevitable part of human relating
- Shifts in power relations create energy, innovation and novelty to arise
- Extreme differentials in power repress the potential for something new and effective to emerge
- The rise and fall of high status is at the heart of comedy and tragedy in human archetypal stories

**“Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power”  
Abraham Lincoln**

# Overview of how power and status considered in improvisation work (after Stacey, Elias, Mead and Johnstone)

- Processes of communicative interaction (for example improvisation) constitute relations of power (Elias)
- Power is not something possessed by an individual, but rather is a characteristic of human relating BETWEEN people.
- In order to form and stay in relationship with others (which all human beings are highly desirous to do) we need to simultaneously get “enough” of what we want and to comply “enough” with others/society norms.
- Therefore in order to stay in relationship, we are both enabled and constrained AT THE SAME TIME.
- It is perfectly normal human behaviour to use emotions such as shame, envy, jealousy, empathy, acceptance etc as ways of enabling and constraining each other – Elias referred to this as “the civilising process” through which we learn to “fit in” and meld our “internal” identity with the group. It is through these processes that we “teach” each other how to adopt and work along with norms and values of the dominant group.
- In working together we are constantly negotiating and renegotiating processes of imposition and submission between us – resulting in higher or lower status relations between “actors” in the work.





## Working with status

- Normally we only pay attention to status when conflict involved
  - Status relations is at the heart of all transactions
  - Allow the weakest possible of motives
  - Attempt to get close to others' status without ever matching it
- 
- Can achieve status change in two ways:
    - Lowering or heightening your own status
    - Lowering or heightening others' status
  - In facilitation terms is more constructive to do the former!

# Power and status

- Awareness of natural style and behaviours in groups
- Can you express yourself across the continuum of low to high status?
- Most effective when we are as close as possible to the status of the other person/persons
- But be choiceful whether it is useful to be slightly higher or slightly lower – what do they need? (May not be the same as what they want!)

# How we convey status



	High status	Low status
Body Posture	Fill up as much space as poss Arms out or up – think Hitler, Evita, Christ images	Be small Take up little space
Eye contact	Not making any contact or choosing to break first Making full and intense contact	Glancing and looking away, shifty Breaking contact but then looking back again
Head	Still, no jerky movements, relaxed, not touching own head area, patting other's heads	Jittery and lots of head movements, touching the head, hair, neck, face
Feet	Planted firmly, not moving, relaxed knees, feet hip width apart	Shuffling about, rigid ankles and knees, feet touching, or crossed
Speech	Slow, low, deep, easy, long pauses	Fast, high pitched, stuttery, lots of "ers", faltering
Breath	Slow, deep breathing	Shallow, rapid breathing

# Facilitator high status

## NEGATIVE IMPACT

- Group projects own accountability onto facilitator, and remains in “child” mode – fails to “grow up”
- Leaders are replaced by facilitator instead of being “replaced” by group becoming more “leading” in itself
- Group is bullied, or overled
- Facilitator does job FOR the group

## POSITIVE IMPACT

- Anxious group/client feels in safe hands
- Trust established
- Feel cared for
- Provides minimum and “good enough” structure and support for “good play” to occur.



# Facilitator low status

## NEGATIVE IMPACT

- Group loses confidence in Facilitator's capacity to "hold it all together"
- Group freezes in absence of enough rules and structure
- Formal leadership become too anxious and take back control by acting into high status leadership behaviours again
- Anxiety levels rise to point where nothing new can happen, fall into routines, games and established patterns of interaction

## POSITIVE IMPACT

- Normally "disempowered" voices are able to express themselves
- People are held to the task of stepping into the "power void" which is opening up
- People have to own their own process and learn to live with discomfort and anxiety
- People learn to not expect to be rescued from their accountability
- Organisation learns new model of "all in it together" working

**“Group improvisation is a further challenge. Aside from the weighty technical problem of collective coherent thinking, there is the very human, even social need for sympathy from all members to bend for the common result”**

**Bill Evans, Jazz pianist**

## Further reading

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