

# Operating on the Creative Edge: Applying Improvisation Techniques in Agile

## **Facilitators:**

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## **Format:**

3 hour workshop

## **Outline:**

### **--Start in a circle--**

### **--Statement of Intent--**

Drawing from the art of improvisation, the facilitators encourage the participants to explore healthy and innovative ways of communicating and collaborating. Many Agile teams suffer from dysfunctional interpersonal communication born of learned “bad” behaviors. These stifling exchanges keep individuals entrenched in old ideas and inhibit forward progress. In this session, participants learn and practice improvisation techniques to help them find creative ways to discover and deliver customer value.

Participants learn how to generate a collaborative space, building upon one another's ideas in a creative and innovative fashion. They experience the power of positive feedback, emergent design and even failure, and understand how to heighten their own awareness and understanding during an exchange so that they can respond with agility and purpose.

### **--Slogans--**

#### **Context:**

In a circle. We are protesters holding imaginary placards on sticks, which have contact with the ground. We will chant slogans to announce our cause, loudly, passionately rhythmically. Our cause is anything and everything. This exercise is intended as a warm up, to set the tone of the session and to introduce the idea that we create things collaboratively.

#### **Action:**

Go around the circle using a word-at-a-time technique, each person in turn says the first word that comes into his or her head; once four words have been uttered the whole group chants those words three times. This gives us four bars of 4/4 time. Immediately following that the next person in time starts off with a new word to create a new slogan. And round and round it goes.

#### **Example:**

person 1: Fish  
person 2: Legs  
person 3: Explode

person 4: Whiteboard

whole group: "Fish legs explode whiteboard. Fish legs explode whiteboard. Fish legs explode whiteboard."

person 5: Marble

person 6: Scrambled

... and so on

Notes:

It is very important to stay in the rhythm and to chant with verve and passion.

Keep this up until it finds its own conclusion. Stay focused and listen, and that conclusion will be apparent.

## --Failure Bow--

Description from Matt Smith's notes: *'This is an exercise practiced by many improvisers to help them embrace endless paradigm shifts as a matter of course. It takes us out of "cringe mode" at times when we might ordinarily be overwhelmed, so that we can remain present enough to take action to serve our best interests, and the interests of the team or project.'*

Action:

On your feet. Think of a time in your life when you encountered failure. This could be a work situation, a social one or a relationship one. You screwed up. How did it feel? recapture that feeling in your mind. Take a moment to be in silence. Now... at the count of three show that feeling in a physical shape -- twist your body into a shape that shows everyone here what that failure feels like. 1-2-3-Go. Now, move around the room and greet people in that shape. 30-60 seconds. How did that feel? ...ridiculous, stupid, embarrassing, awkward, shameful... Yes. Failure puts us into self-obsessed mode. It takes us deep into ego. We feel shame. We become unavailable to our team, our friends, our loved ones, concerned only with ourselves.

It doesn't have to be like this. Here is an alternative response: the Failure Bow, aka the Availability Bow. In essence, it works like this: When you feel the urge to physically diminish yourself, you override that urge with a deliberate physical action. The action is to throw your arms in the air, like a trapeze artist taking a bow, palms out as if in surrender. Put a big, dumb-ass grin on your face and say something that will get you out of your head and back into the moment. Something like, "Thank you I failed", or "Opportunity for spiritual growth", or "Unexpected results". Practice this in two groups. Group One: get into that failure feeling again, only this time execute the bow, rather than the cringe. Celebrate! Group Two: applaud them, clap, cheer, laugh. We are celebrating the fact that something new was attempted, someone went out on a limb, tried a new way of doing or thinking. It didn't work, but so what? Next time maybe. We laugh, acknowledge the screw up and move on. Quickly, smoothly. Agile celebrates fast failure. It is the path to growth and new ideas.

## **--Go--**

Action:

In a circle. One participant points across the circle at another participant and waits for that participant to say "Go." On this invitation, the one who pointed begins walking towards the person who said "Go." Now the one who said, "Go" points to another participant and waits for that participant to say "Go." The pointer may not begin walking until the person who they point to says, "Go." The object is to get the individual that you point to to invite you by saying "Go" in time for you to vacate your spot in the circle before the individual you invited arrives to take your place.

This deceptively simple exercise is extremely hard in execution. The intent is to heighten awareness of the subconscious power of conventional interpretation of words and actions. The act of pointing, a command gesture, becomes a request for permission. The word, "Go," a command word, becomes a granting of permission. Successful completion of this exercise helps to loosen the "hardwiring" of the participants' association of words, actions, and meanings.

## **--Statues--**

Action:

In a circle. A participant enters the circle and strikes a pose. Another participant enters and strikes another complementary pose. A third adds a caption. Repeat for a few cycles. Start adding more people in subsequent cycles, ending each cycle with a caption. If a pose doesn't make sense, invite participants to "repair" the statue by removing a participant and striking a new pose in their place. Always end a cycle with a caption.

## **--Word-at-a-Time Letter--**

An important letter needs to be written

This exercise trains improvisers to stop thinking ahead. It rewards absolute attention to the ideas of others and punishes "pre-determinate listening".

Write a letter, out loud, with another person, alternating words as you speak. This exercise re-enforces the idea that diversity feeds creativity. We have to release our own agendas and go with the flow. Collaboration requires careful listening, and the embracing of another's ideas. It is important to not let this letter just ramble; return to previous ideas and tie threads together. The letter should find its own natural conclusion. Listen for it.

## **--Story Spine--**

Context: Participants collaborate on telling a story using the following format:

Participant 1: Once upon a time...

Participant 2: And every day...

Participant 3: Until one day...

Participant 4: And because of this...

Participant 5: And because of this...

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. .  
.

Participant n-1: Until finally...

Participant n: And ever since that day...

Action:

Participant 1 begins the story. Now, Participant n provides an ending that has no connection whatsoever to the beginning. For example:

Participant 1: Once upon a time there was a fairy princess who was CEO of a large corporation.

Participant N: And ever since that day the whales no longer come to the shore.

Now the remaining participants pick up the story at participant 2 and attempt to connect the beginning to the end:

Participant 1: Once upon a time there was a fairy princess who was CEO of a large corporation.

Participant 2: And every day, she wore her magic sneakers to work.

Participant 3: Until one day, she decided to treat her employees to an off-site retreat.

Participant 4: And because of this she used her magic sneakers to transport her entire staff to a mystic mountain.

and so on...

The story should flow naturally. If it isn't working, participants may refactor the story, by removing and replacing internal elements.

More advanced forms of this exercise:

- Tell the story backwards,
- String of Pearls: Tell a beginning and an ending. Add a middle segment that also has no connection to either the beginning and ending. Have participants fill in the gaps until the story makes sense.

Encourage participants to become comfortable with not knowing where the story is going. Let the story emerge. Guidance from the word-at-a-time letter applies here as well.

**--End in a circle--**