Embrace the Unexpected to Drive Change

Karen Hough
More Praise for This Book

“Evolution and growth is always on the mind of a leader, and this book provides practical advice on how to adjust and improve in the midst of change.”

–Kurt Tunnell
Managing Partner, Bricker & Eckler

“Throughout my career, I’ve managed the unexpected. Go With It gives anyone great ideas to improvise and be effective.”

–Dan Creekmur
President, Columbia Gas of Ohio, a NiSource Company

“The speed of innovation is reliant on the people who drive change. This book allows any team to up their game, collaborate radically, and improvise. That means faster to market with better outcomes!”

–Ben Verwer
Vice President, Strategic Initiatives, BD Diagnostics

“Real life is all improv! Go With It outlines usable skills that allow professionals to engage in behaviors that increase success, and get us all comfortable with discomfort.”

–LaChandra Baker
President, Columbus Chapter, International Association of Business Communicators

“This practical little book offers fresh and powerful insights into how anyone can learn to make themselves more creative and to help others by leading them to much more creative and superior outcomes. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it!”

–Alan Robinson
Co-Author, Ideas Are Free and Corporate Creativity
Embrace the Unexpected to Drive Change

GO
WITH
IT

KAREN HOUGH

ATD PRESS
To all the people who were ever slapped upside the head, caught unawares, tripped up, or blew it. And instead of crying or hiding, they got up, started over, learned something new, or laughed. You are my people. We’re the ones who never get to learn lessons the easy way. And that’s a good thing. That means we’re improvisers.
Improvisation is the bedrock of my life. It affects how I behave, work, parent, communicate, and create. It wove itself into my DNA because the moment I learned about improv, I realized that anything was possible. And my serendipitous life path is a reflection of that improviser’s belief in every possibility.

I’ve lived several lives, and all of them have been in the midst of innovators. Whether I was creating theater in the moment on the improvisational stage, working on the front lines of the Internet revolution, or developing scientists and engineers as a consultant, I’ve had the good fortune to watch innovation happening. And what struck me, over those decades of observation and participation, was that innovators behave in special ways. When I was immersed in teams of innovators, I admired their utterly natural ability to deal with dichotomy, prepare, play, and think upside down. However, when I would move to a group or corporation bound up in old patterns of thought and action that quality vanished; I found the difference alarming.

The good news is that even those groups who were not working well together could learn. They could grow, develop, and change their patterns of behavior to be more creative and innovative—and those changes came from embracing improvisational techniques. I’ve worked with pharmaceutical scientists who wanted to accelerate their fuzzy front-end work on new drugs, technologists who needed to get their breakthrough idea
to market, and executives who had to get their teams working and innovating together. This book is the outcome of those many experiences across myriad industries and teams.

My company, ImprovEdge, has created training and development for Fortune 1000 employees and executives since 1998 using the principles of improvisation, paired with research in psychology, human behavior, and neuroscience. Corporate leaders and teams have applied those practices to great success, becoming more flexible, creative, and innovative.

I first learned to improvise as an undergraduate at Yale. Soon after, I trained with the Second City of Chicago, performed and started my own troupes, and had a wonderful acting career in TV, film, radio, and the stage. I zigzagged at one point, taking eight years to stretch and challenge myself by working in the network engineering industry. I'm not kidding! Yes, a liberal arts-educated actor can go to work in IT. (And if I can do that, then I'm sure you can improvise.) I helped startups go public or be acquired, and although I was taking tech classes and cramming every night, I continued improvising during the day. Those techniques allowed me to be flexible, creative, collaborative, and more successful than I ever imagined possible.

These incredible experiences also led me to create content—from narratives of what is possible, of what works best. The Yes! Deck is a toolkit I developed comprising 29 cards full of tips, ideas, and exercises for trainers and managers (you'll see examples of these exercises at the end of many of the chapters in this book). I also wrote two books, The Improvisation Edge: Secrets to Building Trust and Radical Collaboration at Work and Be the Best Bad Presenter Ever: Break the Rules, Make Mistakes and Win Them Over, which is an award-winning book published in four languages. Those books allowed me to dive deeply into team dynamics and personal development. They've inspired thousands of people to behave differently, take risks, and throw out old conventions to emerge as more effective individuals and teams. And that theme kept driving me to wonder, “What's the next, most important application of this work?”

We must innovate. And I believe that the behaviors of improvisation can directly drive our ability to continue to evolve and improve. There are such pressing issues of global technology, science, health, and welfare at stake as we fly into the 21st century—and with everything moving so
quickly, we have to approach this with flexibility, humor, and focus. We need to innovate as improvisers.

This book on innovation came about through my relationship with ATD, which has hosted many of my presentations on innovation and improvisation at conferences and encouraged me to share my blog posts and webcasts with its members. That excitement led to this book, in which I intend to inspire you to engage in improvisational behaviors to drive innovation in your life and work.

So where does innovation come from? The front lines—the everyday interactions that create small “Eureka!” moments. But many companies and individuals struggle with managing those early ideas. For example, my company once worked with an insurance client that realized great ideas from its call centers weren’t bubbling up. Many of those front-line professionals had unusual ideas about how to serve customers better and more quickly. Unfortunately, whenever they tried to introduce those ideas, they received negative responses from their managers: “We’re too busy right now.” “No, we have to follow the scripts and protocol.” Or worst, “That’s above your pay grade—could you get back to work?”

The alarm bell for this company really went off when one frustrated employee took her idea to a competitor. It saved the competitor between two and 10 cents per call, which over thousands of calls is a significant savings. The idea had been formed in my client’s call center, but because the employee received no support and didn’t feel valued or like a real member of the team, she left, taking her innovative idea with her.

If her manager had only improvised a bit when she introduced the idea, that story might have ended differently. The innovation could have stayed in house. And more important, a valuable member of the team could still be working there.

There are many methods being touted out there to drive innovation, so what does improv bring to the table? By changing the way we interact with our teams, so that we wrap in the simple rules and behaviors that come from the improvisational stage, we can effect incredible change and innovation in our work and lives. Innovation comes from positivity, acceptance, a willingness to take risks, and the courage to apply creative ideas. Those obvious behaviors that affect corporate innovation are the same that apply to improvisation.
We are all improvisers. Although we may believe that we are set in our ways and don’t handle change well, we actually all have to improvise every day. With this book, you will not only understand how improvisation works, but also be able to use its techniques, secrets, and behaviors to be more innovative in your own life and work.
Innovation is a learned behavior. And improvisation is your guide.

Improvisers arrive onstage without a script with the goal of creating entire one-act plays on the fly. It sounds terrifying to some people, yet improv has clear guidelines that allow troupes to be collaborative and innovative in the moment.

The reason an improv troupe can create scenes out of thin air is because of the foundational principle “Yes, and.” No matter what I contribute on stage, my troupe immediately does two things: agrees with me (yes) and adds to my idea (and).

So if I declare, “I’m a Warrior Queen!” a fellow improver may say, “Yes, you are my Warrior Queen, and I’m your shield bearer!” and so the scene is off. You see, the yes is the acknowledgment that we agree and we’re here to play. The and is the building block. We can’t just simply agree, then hang our scene partner out to dry by making him come up with all the ideas. We have to say and to add to it—increase the possibility, get onboard, spice it up, move forward.

There’s a real magic to those two simple words, and they are surprisingly revolutionary to some corporate cultures. Our natural inclination is to say no to new ideas. We’re actually wired for it, and our immediate skepticism acts as a sort of defense mechanism. Researchers have found that in multiple cultures and languages, 50 percent of our emotion
words are negative, while 30 percent are positive and 20 percent are neutral (ABC News 2005). Our overuse of negative words also affects our communication and relationships, making it difficult to build trust and work together effectively. And negativity is anathema to improvisation.

On the improv stage, it’s called denial and it kills good improv. My favorite example is the apple scene, which we use during training workshops with our corporate clients. This simple scene shows corporate audiences what can happen if you deny everything onstage. Here’s how it works: I ask a volunteer to join me onstage. The person is usually excited, very nervous to be in front of her colleagues, and very brave, as she is usually the first volunteer. I instruct her to improvise with me by opening up the scene with the simple line, “Here, I brought you an apple!” However, instead of playing along, I immediately deny: “That’s not an apple.”

I’m always impressed by how creative and tenacious my volunteers can be—they describe the apple, insist that it’s a gift, try to get me to smell or taste it, and yet I just keep saying, “No. It’s not. No.”

Sometimes after so much denial, the volunteer will finally say, “What do YOU think it is?!” She is clearly frustrated and doesn’t know what to say next. The audience, while pulling for her and starting to hate me, is confused and getting bored because nothing is happening in the scene.

After I end the scene, we discuss what happened: How did it feel to hear no so much? What was your response when you just kept getting shot down? Answers range from frustration to anger to retreat. I have a sad memory of one man actually admitting, “This is what it felt like my first week on the job. I haven’t contributed an idea since. I just do what I’m told because who wants to feel stupid or unvalued every time they try to contribute?” Yikes.

And that’s the rub. Negativity is a serious problem for innovation, and words are powerful. Once most people hear no, they are statistically less likely to contribute again.

I’ve had people monitor their language use and report on the number of negative versus positive words they use. They’re often surprised by what they discover. I had one shocked general counsel sit down with me after only half a day and say, “I need some coaching here. I’ve been frustrated by the lack on involvement on my team for two years, and I just realized I haven’t said a positive sentence all morning.”
The key, too, is that we may not understand how little it takes to lose a team member. Again and again, we hear corporate participants report that it only takes a few instances of no for them to cease contributing.

Meanwhile, back to my improv partner onstage. I apologize for my negativity and promise to be a better improviser. This time, when she offers me an apple, I respond with something like, “Yes! It’s a gorgeous apple and I bet you picked it in your grandmother’s orchard!”

It’s incredible where they go from there. Volunteers who have never improvised before start adding onto the scene and it takes off in the most humorous, unexpected, and creative ways. I had one scene partner (who had never improvised before) get the entire audience to sing an apple pie song and pretend to pick apples off of an imaginary orchard over their heads!

This “yes, and” behavior is critical to innovative teams because it allows all ideas to be contributed. And it allows people to feel heard. Even if a contribution isn’t used in the end, the process of listening, agreeing to hear them, and discussing an idea is monumentally affirming.

The key to “yes, and” is that it encourages contribution. Some managers are afraid it means they have to accept anything their team says. On the contrary, “yes, and” is about saying, “Yes, I hear you. And let’s discuss this idea and please continue to contribute.”

Many scenes on the improv stage are dumped if they end up not being funny or working, but at least we tried them out. The same thing happens in corporate teams. An environment of acceptance, discussion, and addition allows ideas to be vetted, rather than trashed before even being tried.

This improvisational behavior is key to creating innovative environments and teams. How we choose to behave can either foster innovation or shut it down. There are also a lot of stereotypes and misconceptions about innovation that are getting in our way. We think innovation is reliant upon huge undertakings, gigantic creative efforts, and blinding feats of change—it’s got to be big, expensive, and world-changing. We believe we have to be Renaissance people who seamlessly write symphonies while penning novels and programming groundbreaking smartphone applications.
That’s a lot of pressure and we need to get over it. We need to realize that we all have the capability to innovate. And the behaviors we need can be learned. By anyone.

Many meaningful innovations are actually a series of small steps that come from ordinary people working together in extraordinary ways. When a call center pro figures out how to fix a customer’s problem in one minute rather than three, or a group of managers sees a way to improve a product and save a nickel in every transaction—that’s innovation. And those little eureka moments add up to big advantages for organizations.

But how do we make sure those small, good ideas bubble up? How do individuals become more innovative and how can managers and leaders engage their teams to tease out the solutions that may be hiding in plain sight? It all has to do with how we interact, how we choose to collaborate and communicate, and whether we are willing to play.

How we choose to behave has much more influence on innovative outcomes than a million strategic initiatives; that is because strategic initiatives only happen, and only work, when every person is working to drive that strategy. The little things we do every day at our desk or in our home are the tiny wheels that push big changes forward.

Behavior drives innovation. So how do we learn to think and behave differently? What model for behavioral innovation exists that can guide this change? Get ready—the answer is: Improvisation!

I know, the exclamation mark worries you. Just hang in there—this is exciting news! The behaviors improvisers use in every performance to create shows out of nothing are the same behaviors that great innovators put to use. Our choices about how we interact, live, question, play, and think are the building blocks to every innovation we could ever hope for—and a very simple way to approach very big problems.

We all have the ability to engage in behaviors that can change the way we work, live, think, and innovate. And yes, your brain can be trained to think more creatively and you can engage in behaviors that will allow you to innovate. And the same is true for your colleagues and family and friends. We tend to believe that creative ability is something we are born with, or not; that in the nature versus nurture argument, we come up short if we aren’t born to a creative family. Yet, when researchers
studied more than 110 pairs of identical and fraternal twins they found that only about 30 percent of creative ability is attributable to genetics. This means nurture is responsible for more than two-thirds of a person’s ability to solve problems and be creative, innovative, and playful. In other words, if people want to be more creative, they can engage in behaviors to boost their creativity, especially if they grow up around other people who behave collaboratively (Reznikoff et al. 1973).

Carol Dweck (2006), in her brilliant narrative Mindset: The New Psychology of Success, discusses people’s ability to change how they think and behave. She even admits that she had to undergo a significant change in mindset and behavior after she earned her PhD. It took intentional work; she was not only capable, it set the path for her life’s work. Change isn’t always easy, but the human capacity for growth throughout life is extraordinary.

In three independent studies tracking creativity training by the University of Oklahoma, the University of Georgia, and Taiwan’s National Chengchi University, researchers found that the effects of improvisationally based creativity training radically improved subjects’ abilities to think, reason, and create novel solutions. By integrating the processes of improvisation, subjects taught themselves to use divergent thinking to come up with many ideas, and then use convergent thinking to combine all those ideas for novel results (Bronson and Merryman 2010).

I was having a rowdy conversation with my family one night, asking for their opinions about innovators. What makes an innovative person? My 11-year-old son, Trey, who had been quiet up to this point, suddenly answered, “They innovate themselves, Mom.” His comment was so unexpected, the entire family stopped and considered. And I realized he nailed it. Almost every account of innovation and innovators that I had been gathering was about the person’s ability to become—to improvise in the face of uncertainty or difficulty and write his own score. Just like a jazz musician, he created a new type of music that had never been heard before.

Lisa Seacat DeLuca changed from a frustrated outsider at college to IBM’s most prolific inventor with more than 420 patents. Bessie Coleman, born to sharecroppers in 1892, went from impoverished girl to the first Native American–African American woman to earn a pilot’s license. Hedy
Lamarr (yes, that Hedy Lamarr) may have been a femme fatale in movies, but she was bored offscreen and wanted to contribute to the World War II effort. So she tinkered around with machines and finally patented a technology that laid the groundwork for Wi-Fi and Bluetooth. Steve Jobs created technology that didn’t sell; then he tried and failed again and again before he finally got to the world’s most recognized technology, Apple computers (Jacobs 2015; Singh 2016; Griggs and Grinberg 2015).

They all went through years of learning, tinkering, failure, and effort to become the innovators they are and were. That is exactly how improvisers behave—they are constantly stretching, trying, failing, succeeding, and starting over. DeLuca, Coleman, Lamarr, and Jobs all innovated themselves. So can you.

About This Book

Go With It: Embrace the Unexpected to Drive Change will show you the methods, mindsets, and behaviors that drive improvisers. These techniques can be learned and nurtured, which in turn will nurture your ability to be an innovative person. And then you can model and teach those behaviors to others.

The first four chapters explore four major improvisational concepts that lead to behavioral innovation and change: embracing the unexpected, preparing like an improviser, playing in the moment, and thinking upside down. Each category is critical to putting on a good improv show—and critical to driving innovative behaviors. Then, the final chapter discusses how you can shape the future by managing change through improvisation. Additionally, each chapter features a case study based on real-life examples, an exercise for you to try with your team, and an improvisational sketch presenting Improvisation and Innovation as human characters.

Go With It is about changing, embracing the unexpected, and innovating—like an improviser. This cycle of growth is lifelong, and will allow you to be flexible, adaptable, and innovative, no matter what comes your way. This book will introduce you to the cycle that improvisers live in (Figure I-1):

- **Prepare.** We’re constantly practicing, preparing, and setting the foundation. You never know when you’ll need to perform.
• **Play.** We engage in play, exploration, and experimentation. Play tests the limits of our preparation so we can learn where we hit the mark and where we need more work.

• **Think.** We have to look at things upside down, in weird ways, and with diverse groups. We're always pushing the boundaries of our play and preparation.

• **Change.** When all that up-front work pays off, we have to embrace the change we discover. We have to evolve. And once those new skills are mastered, it's time to start again.

So enjoy! Everybody improvises. Even you.

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Figure I-1. The Improv Cycle
A man goes down on his knee onstage and proposes to a woman. We (the audience) expect her to be thrilled and say, “Yes!” And although the actress may do that, it’s far more interesting if she adds a look of shock, glances behind her back furtively, and seems to be accepting under duress. That creates tension. We wonder what is wrong, and why she seems so worried when the man is obviously happy. Now the troupe has a huge amount of room to play with, explore the scene, and try to uncover dramatic improv gold.

On the improvisational stage, if everything is wonderful and perfect all the time, the audience will get bored. We may accept everything as improvisers, but we also know that good theater comes out of dramatic conflict and character tension. While the acceptance and openness of “yes, and!” is critical to improvisation and innovation, things don’t always go smoothly and much of the best improv and innovation grow out of surprise, problems that must be overcome, and tension.
Chapter 1

Improvisers like to explore the uncomfortable and the unsaid. Comedy often arises from saying things no one else will say or exploring interactions that we all have but choose to ignore or avoid. Discomfort is an excellent marker of good improv and good innovation. It means you’re leaning into the tension of the unknown. That takes courage.

Every night, improvisers get up onstage willing to meet the unexpected every moment of the show. We literally do not know what’s going to happen from one moment to the next. And it’s not always good—there are a lot of “off” nights in improv.

One misconception about improvisation is that we can hide problems from the audience. If something goes wrong, people assume we’ll be able to cover and no one will be the wiser because we can improvise anything. Wrong! When a scene is out of sync, a character is called by the wrong name, or if two people are doing different things at the same time, everybody knows—the troupe, the audience, the sound and light pros up in the booth, sometimes even the ticket taker in the hallway.

That being said, some of the best and funniest moments in improv happen when things go horribly awry on stage. They are funny because the improvisers acknowledge that everything has gone off the tracks. Audiences love the moment when the performers realize their mistake, give each other a look or almost crack up, and figure out where to go from there. They might make wild, hysterical explanations or launch into utterly new story lines based on the surprise. In fact, some of the best shows I’ve done came out of a moment of uncertainty.

The “oops” is the obvious moment when anyone realizes something is off-kilter. How we choose to respond and act determine whether that oops remains awful or has the potential to become a eureka. In improv, we are bound by our guidelines to acknowledge the issue to the audience, use it in the scene, and keep the show going. In fact, if we act as though nothing unusual occurred, the audience gets disappointed because they know something was weird. When we share the oops and bring the audience into the moment of discomfort, the entire theater becomes one team. Everybody is in on the joke! We can all enjoy the funny discomfort, and lean in and pull for the performers while they figure it out.

It takes courage to acknowledge a mistake. You may feel stupid, wonder if you’ll get into trouble, or try to blame someone else. One of
the unfortunate legacies of risk-averse, hierarchical organizations is that people are afraid to speak up, try something new, or make a mistake. Yet innovation and change come out of experimentation. It comes out of failure, learning from mistakes, and realizing that your new knowledge has led to a eureka.

Michael Jordan’s meme on failure states, “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot, and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

**Welcoming Diversity**

Are all these surprises and issues easy? No! Tension, problems, and the unexpected are scary, even for improvisers. One of the most obvious ways to avoid tension is through lack of diversity. Diverse groups can be uncomfortable, but we undermine our ability to be innovative when we lean toward comfort and familiarity.

Many industries struggle with a lack of diversity in their ranks. Theatrical improvisation is no exception. Comedy has been stocked with funny white dudes for decades, which may have seemed fine for a while (and no knocks, they are really funny!), but it left no room for innovation. As a matter of fact, back when I was improvising in Chicago, major improv theaters capped their troupes at two women only. A director once looked at me in confusion when I questioned the practice and replied, “How many wives and girlfriends do we need on one stage?” My blood still boils to think about it. He could only envision me playing a female foil to the stars of the show—the men. The irony was how hard he laughed whenever I played against type, insisting on being the CEO or the gross, belching football fan in the scene. Comedy came from surprise—from changing up the obvious choice, which I loved doing with my troupe members.

So I set out to find and create troupes that had a wider range of people and ideas. It’s not so much that I was angry. The comedy coming out at the time was fabulous. But there were so many opinions, ideas, and perspectives that weren’t being explored, leaving a lot of potential untapped. I knew that at some point following the same formula would become boring for audiences.
Chapter 1

Fortunately the comedy genre is evolving. Some of today’s most impressive new material is coming from diverse comedians who are making us reconsider assumptions about race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. They are bringing new formats, plot lines, characters, and perspectives to the psyche of the audience; it’s untapped, risky, and above all, funny.

The research is in. Racially diverse teams outperform non-diverse teams by up to 35 percent (Hunt et al. 2015). And the employment website Glassdoor reports that almost 60 percent of employees wish their work environment was more diverse. Diversity is also important for workplace culture. When companies promote and train for inclusion, they solve problems faster and more creatively, which is reflected in their revenue. Teams where men and women feel equal earn more than 40 percent more revenue, and bilingual employees earn 10 percent more than single language employees no matter what the language (Badal 2014; White 2014).

A lack of diversity may help you achieve results on a standardized, simple operation, because the comfort, familiarity, and sameness of more homogeneous teams keep outcomes consistent. Diversity, on the other hand, breeds innovation. To innovate is often uncomfortable; it makes you question what you thought you knew, and introduces divergent concepts. It’s not always fun, but improvisation and innovation are about challenge and pushing outside preconceived boundaries.

To be more innovative, resist your ingrained survival instincts, which you’ve honed through years of being right, avoiding risk, working with people just like you, and wanting to feel safe. Move toward the new behaviors slowly if you need to; try failing in a safe environment first. Learn something new and engage in the frustration of being a beginner before you put your job on the line at work.

This is tension, in all its glory. An individual, team, or organization’s ability to integrate innovative behaviors and thinking may at first seem like an elusive goal. But it’s critical that we explore the interplay of improvisational and innovative behaviors. There is enormous tension in the process of going from a creative idea to innovation.
Tension as a Driver

Creativity is the ability to envision anything and see the impossible working; innovation is the application of creativity. In its empirical form, creativity is basically the theory, idea, and vision—it must be applied. The moment that you paint on a canvas, write notes on a score, or design a building, creativity is transformed into innovation. That’s what changes everything—that’s innovation.

Simply put: **Creativity + Application = Innovation.**

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**Creativity:**

The ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like, and create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, and interpretations. Also known as originality, progressiveness, or imagination.

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E. Paul Torrance, an American educational psychologist, is well known for his research on creativity. He challenged the importance of IQ tests as the single indicator of intelligence, believing in the importance of creative thinking skills, which can be increased through practice. Torrance defined creativity as the ability to alternate between divergent and convergent thinking. In divergent thinking, we come up with many ideas and see unusual connections and endless possibility. In convergent thinking, seemingly unrelated things suddenly connect, allowing us to envision brand-new solutions.

In 1958, Torrance performed a series of creativity tests on more than 400 Minneapolis children, and then tracked them over their lifetimes. He found that the children who continued to think and behave creatively won patents, founded businesses, performed in artistic and corporate leadership, won awards, designed buildings, and wrote books, music, and public policy. They were creative improvisers, yet they also achieved through innovation. They accessed both sides of the behavioral coin: the ability to come up with interesting and novel ideas as improvisers and the tenacity to do something about them as innovators.
Like any good coin analogy, creativity and improvisation versus innovation and execution offer two very different sides. (And the discussion around which is heads and which is tails will be held after hours.) They rely upon each other and are symbiotic in many ways. They are also highly different, and often clash in the corporate environment.

We must allow room and space for creativity and improvisation, which entails positivity, “yes, and,” oops to eureka!, openness, and craziness. However, once we start to execute on those ideas, we desperately need the organization, detail-orientation, and drive of a project manager crossed with a financial editor. There’s inherent tension there—let the rule-followers in too soon, and ideas are squashed. Leave the execution to the dreamers and nothing will ever get done.

Vijay Govindarajan, of the Harvard Business School and Dartmouth’s Tuck School of Business, researched the intrinsic issue in innovation and found that it is not that organizations lack creativity; rather, they:

• don’t go bold enough on their ideas—they shut down the dreamers and the crazy talk way too soon
• cannot execute—they become overwhelmed or cannot figure out how to bring ideas to life.

So how do we bridge that gap? How do we address the behaviors necessary for both sides of that behavioral coin? We must encourage creative people to speak up and build good ideas, while simultaneously giving everyone the resilience and courage to hang on through a difficult execution. From a behavioral standpoint, we must not only be champions of both styles, but protectors of very different processes.

One of Govindarajan’s most compelling examples of that tension is from his research on reverse-innovation, a term he coined with his colleague, Chris Trimble. In developed countries, we tend to see innovation as new, high-end, and technological. We assume that greater levels of wealth and education lead to better innovation, so we rarely look for it in underdeveloped places. However, if you think like an improviser, you realize that interesting ideas often come from a dearth of resources or a need to create solutions with very little. A reverse-innovation (also known as trickle-up innovation) is an innovation that is either seen first or likely to be used first in the developing world before spreading to the industrialized world. The following story is a great example of the
improvisational behaviors in this book. Let’s explore how Harman International used improvisational behaviors such as “yes, and,” engaged diverse teams, and dealt with the tension of innovation.

Harman International is a U.S.-based company that uses German engineering to create the world’s most sophisticated, specialized, and expensive dashboard audiovisual systems. When Dinesh C. Paliwal became CEO in 2007, Harman dominated 70 percent of the luxury car market, which accounted for two-thirds of the company’s revenue—not much growth potential there. Paliwal saw a huge opportunity in emerging markets, where Harman’s products were virtually nonexistent. However, instead of doing what most high-end companies did, which was simply strip down their existing technology to try to sell at lower cost (which would still have been too expensive, not to mention hardly functional), Paliwal put together a team to reimagine how to deliver a great experience at a low cost for new customers. A natural improviser, Paliwal might have said of emerging markets, “Yes, that’s a possibility, and I wonder how we could serve them.” He also turned over the stereotype that better is more expensive, and challenged his team to change their point of view.

The initiative was called Saras (which in Sanskrit means “adaptable”), and it was entirely different from anything Harman had done before. The new team was small and cross-functional, rather than highly specialized like Harman’s other large, singularly focused engineering teams. It mixed skills, education, and nationalities, and was located in an emerging market rather than an industrialized office in the United States or Germany. The team also set ridiculous goals, such as creating an infotainment system that had all the functionality of their luxury systems at half the price and a third of the cost.

Sounds gutsy, right? And craziest of all, it ended up working. That was thanks to Paliwal’s flexibility and improvisational capability to nurture the creative front end of development despite lots of mistakes and restarts, and the tenacity to support the difficult process of getting the innovation manufactured and out to market.

It’s difficult to imagine the resistance the Saras team met along the way. Suspicious engineers hated the work and said it would ruin the company’s reputation as a high-quality provider. They refused to contribute, so the Saras team hired new, highly diverse engineering talent who
didn’t have preconceived notions of what could and couldn’t be done. They threw them together as a team—and the difficulty galvanized them.

Once the product was ready, salespeople balked and refused to sell the systems because they feared it would cannibalize their commissions. At one point, the chief technology officer even led a coup to kill the entire project and unseat Paliwal. He was unsuccessful and was rousted himself. Through it all, Paliwal and his team kept exhibiting the behaviors of great improvisers. They said “yes, and” to ideas, learned from their mistakes, understood that innovation is an arduous process, and stayed open and supportive. By late spring 2011, Saras had generated more than $3 billion in revenue and set new standards for serving both ends of the market successfully (Govindarajan 2012).

The irony is that the very term reverse-innovation implies innovation can only come from a developed market and flow downward to an emerging market. The ego inherent in expensive, developed ideas is that “we are the best.” Or that a company must reverse their thinking to get out of their assumptions that “high quality” and “customized” is best. Yet Saras, the low-end, scrappy innovator, redefined what could be delivered. The creativity of lower-end, emerging markets taught the developed markets a thing or two. You don’t have to be rich and own a luxury car to get a great sound system in your vehicle. By reversing our assumptions and letting go of ego and hierarchy, we can innovate in the most unexpected ways.

The story of Paliwal and Harmon is a testament to the victory of improvisation and innovation. It wasn’t easy, but they didn’t give up. That tension between creativity and execution is daunting. But it doesn’t mean we can’t do this. We can integrate and exhibit the behaviors of improvisation, leading to greater innovation for ourselves, our teams, and our companies.

“The greater the contrast, the greater the potential. Great energy only comes from a correspondingly great tension of opposites.”

—Carl Jung
Case Study: Law Firm in the Southwest

My company, ImprovEdge, was once hired to consult with a law firm that realized there was a problem in its initial client engagements. It was losing cases to other firms or discovering key information late in the legal process because clients weren't sharing everything the lawyers needed to know.

The managing partner, who was about to tear out his hair, told me: “We cannot afford to learn critical information about a case two weeks before it goes to trial! Not to mention I just found out another law firm, which is not nearly as qualified as we are and is more expensive, just won out over us! What is going on?”

The situation was becoming critical, and no one seemed able to figure out what was happening. We decided to look at the most tactical possibilities: Could it be caused by their communication style?

When we attended those critical first meetings and observed the attorneys, we were astonished by the clients’ body language. While they began the meeting leaning in or speaking quickly, they slowly drew in on themselves, sat back, and crossed their arms. Although the attorneys were there to uncover information, they brought an internal and verbal critic with them. As the clients disclosed details about their problem, the attorneys often jumped in, telling them what they had done wrong. Their responses were peppered with negative words. The clients were there to find solutions to extremely emotional situations, but instead felt as though they were on trial.

I surveyed some of the potential clients who had met with the firm. As I spoke to one man leaving his first meeting, he whispered to me, “They certainly are tough, which is something I’ll need. But I just don’t think they care about how difficult this is for my family. And I had no idea I’d been so dumb about my document preparation. I’m not an attorney! I did the best I could!” He did not hire the firm.

These well-meaning attorneys were bringing risk-aversion, negativity, and a need to show their superiority to their initial client meetings. But their clients wanted a partner in something as scary as a legal battle. They wanted to know someone had their back, understood their mistakes, and had answers.
We took the attorneys through improv sessions that focused on “yes, and,” leaning into discomfort, and having creative, collaborative conversations. After that, the firm instituted a five-minute, improvisational “yes, and” period for all first meetings. The attorneys were asked to listen and respond to the client’s comments with, “Yes, I bet that was really hard! And then what happened?” or, “Yes, I understand why you chose that action. And I’d like to know more about the other person’s response.” Those positive, open-ended comments drew in the clients and allowed them to feel heard without criticism.

Once that initial listening and encouragement period was over, the attorneys and clients were able to enter into a collaborative conversation and brainstorm about next steps. We found that the amount of time the client spoke in these new meetings more than doubled. One small office of the firm won $750,000 in extra work in the first six months of instituting this simple, straightforward improvisational technique.

If attorneys—who are intentionally educated to fear risk, apply the brakes, and say “no” as often as possible—can do this, you can too!

**Exercise: How We Learn**

This exercise is meant to get you or your team out of the comfort zone. Patterns can be stifling, and the simple act of changing a few small things can refresh your viewpoint and allow you to start experiencing things in a new way. This is a first step to taking on larger changes in behavior to drive innovation.

Children’s brains are fantastic sponges. They learn with color, music, gooey clay, pets, and constant interaction. Ironically, adults struggle to learn new things and yet we choose less engaging ways to learn. Neuroscientists are also finding that failing to challenge our brains may increase our risk of serious consequences, such as late-life dementia. So let’s move away from our sterile lecture environments, interject creativity into our professional lives, exercise our brains, and try new things. After all, it’s good for our health and our careers.

- Think about the materials and modes that you use to work and learn. Are they the same ones you’ve been using for years?
- Acquire things that will force you to document your work differently, such as an artist’s notebook, colored pens, books about other industries or interests, a camera, or crossword puzzles.
Consider how you express yourself. Do you always write in paragraphs, speak in statistics, or present in PowerPoint? Try a completely different tactic such as mind-mapping, telling stories or anecdotes, or engaging in a group exercise rather than a lecture. If you use social media a great deal, take a full day (or week) off. What happens? Conversely, if you don’t understand or avoid social media, get an account and spend time learning how it works.

Integrate different ways to learn into your everyday life. Take lessons on an instrument, go on a field trip with your work group, or try playing a new game. It may be uncomfortable at first, and it probably won’t be perfect. But you will start to see things differently and find new talents in yourself. You’ll also give your brain a much-deserved workout.

Adventures With Innovation and Improvisation

It’s fun to think about the personification of concepts, and that's what we're doing in the comic strip that runs at the end of each chapter. Improvisation embodies many of the aspects of the art form I love: He’s goofy, rough around the edges, and open to play. On the other hand, I see Innovation as a smart, sharp, incredibly effective leader.
Chapter 1

Improvisation walks into an elevator.

And there he sees Innovation! He’s been wanting to meet her forever, and can’t believe this opportunity just fell into his lap.

So he takes a deep breath, smiles, and extends his hand.

Hi there! I’m Improvisation. You know, the funny, creative guy who’s sort of rumpled most days but way smarter than anyone expects?

Surprised, she looks up from her engineering plans and extends a perfectly manicured hand.

Why yes, I think I’ve heard about you. I’m Innovation.

They exit on the same floor, still laughing. It was so fun!

Oh yeah! I remember that one!

It came to me after I’d been playing around in the glass factory. I’d never been there, so I asked people both inside and outside the plant a lot of questions. I experimented on a few things. The first seven tries were disasters.

Yes, yes! I shared those disaster stories with our manufacturing team. We realized that although it didn’t work for glass, Disaster #4 would actually help create a stronger backing for a cell phone.

He belly laughs at the memory. Innovation starts laughing too.

And there he sees Improvisation! He’s been wanting to meet her forever, and can’t believe this opportunity just fell into his lap.
Embracing the Unexpected

I’m the driver of revenue, solutions, cures, and jobs. You know, I think I used one of your ideas to create a new process for manufacturing. We saved about $2 million and cut down on overtime.

Oh yeah! I remember that one!

It came to me after I’d been playing around in the glass factory.

I’d never been there, so I asked people both inside and outside the plant a lot of questions. I experimented on a few things. The first seven tries were disasters.

Yes, yes! I shared those disaster stories with our manufacturing team. We realized that although it didn’t work for glass, Disaster #4 would actually help create a stronger backing for a cell phone.

They exit on the same floor, still laughing.

He belly laughs at the memory. Innovation starts laughing too.