

Thinking on your feet

The art of improvisation
in the workplace

RADA
BUSINESS

Royal Academy of Dramatic Art



The art of improvisation

Definition of improvisation: the activity of making or doing something not planned beforehand, using whatever can be found.

Cambridge English Dictionary

Improvisation is a skill often associated with artistic performance, an act of spontaneity or unplanned creativity. In music or acting, great improvisation is the ultimate demonstration of confidence, skill, and technical ability; to act on instinct and still produce an end result of merit and worth.

The artistic world has embraced this skill to great effect. As film director, writer and RADA graduate Mike Leigh said, using the technique for character development helps to “liberate” the actors and “give them immense scope to be creative”⁽¹⁾

However, the art of improvisation is just as powerful an ingredient in business and one that is often undervalued, overlooked or simply seen as superfluous to the world of work.

Improvisation skills help us to listen, share, empower our teams and help people to respond naturally and powerfully to every issue, incident and interaction, especially the ones that happen spontaneously like a customer complaint, or a last-minute invitation to discuss work with your boss.

These skills apply across all areas of work. Whether you're working as a leader in sales, healthcare or engineering, or if you are on the front line dealing with customers in your shop, hospital or local authority, the ability to improvise is what marks the great from the good - in any sector.

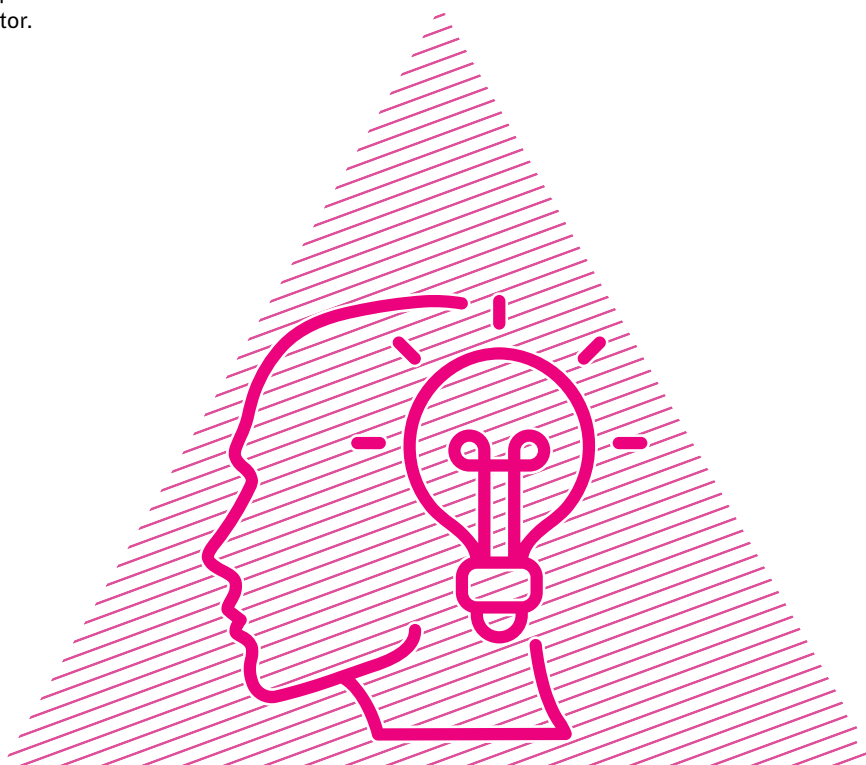
Organisations that wish to create a culture of excellence also need to foster a spirit of improvisation. It's important to set the vision and values that need to be consistently applied, but then give people the freedom, trust and confidence to find the best way to an end goal in any situation.

In such cultures, workers thrive by feeling empowered and in control. They're able to be themselves and act on what they know to be right, rather than feeling fearful when deviating from the normal path.

As customers too, we want the people who serve us to be able to think creatively, respond and to be present in the moment. Applying the human touch, being able to connect and be empathic to customers' needs and concerns are skills that shouldn't be underestimated.

When we are the customer or consumer, if someone assisting us is unable to cope with being in the moment or making a tricky last-minute decision, it creates tension.

We may feel that they are being unhelpful, impatient or inattentive. The impact on a company's brand and customer experience is directly related to their ability to master the art of improvisation and build relationships.



¹www.bfi.org.uk, May 2017

RADA Business

At RADA Business we work with senior leaders, organisations and business people across the globe, from a wide variety of industries and backgrounds, to teach the skills required to improvise effectively.

We focus on the importance of creating a culture that supports creative thinking and behaviours.

The same techniques learnt by our leading actors can help unlock these skills in others. With practical training and advice, it's possible to harness these artistic improvisation tools to improve your performance and that of your organisation.

Thinking on your feet report

In this report, we explore the importance of improvisation in more detail.

We interviewed 1,000 people from workplaces across the UK, covering all ages, levels and experiences, from interns to CEOs. These people came from businesses large and small, in fields as diverse as agriculture, law, healthcare and transport.

This resulting report explores how great improvisation benefits the individual, the organisation and the customer.

To learn more about how RADA Business can help you or your organisation please visit radabusiness.com.

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Using improvisation to unlock our potential

Can improvisation really improve our performance, wellbeing and satisfaction at work? This is something that we wanted to understand from our research into the experiences of workers.

One of the benefits of improvisation is helping us to feel confident in rolling with whatever the day throws at us.

Rather than the unknown making us tense or worried, if we know we have the skills to improvise, we can feel relaxed, confident and trusted to find the best solution in any circumstance.

We asked people: how would developing this skill change your effectiveness in the workplace? 93% of people felt it would improve their performance in a significant way.

The most common area where people believe improvisation improves their performance at work is decision-making. Many people mentioned that it would help them to think more quickly (42%), adapt better (31%), or be more creative (19%) and flexible (16%).

Many people also said that it would improve how they felt, by giving people greater confidence (41%), making them happier (31%), or helping them to avoid losing their temper (20%).

People also said that this skill would significantly improve their ability to communicate effectively. This included making themselves better understood (34%), listening more effectively to what others are saying (33%), or engaging better with their audience (26%).

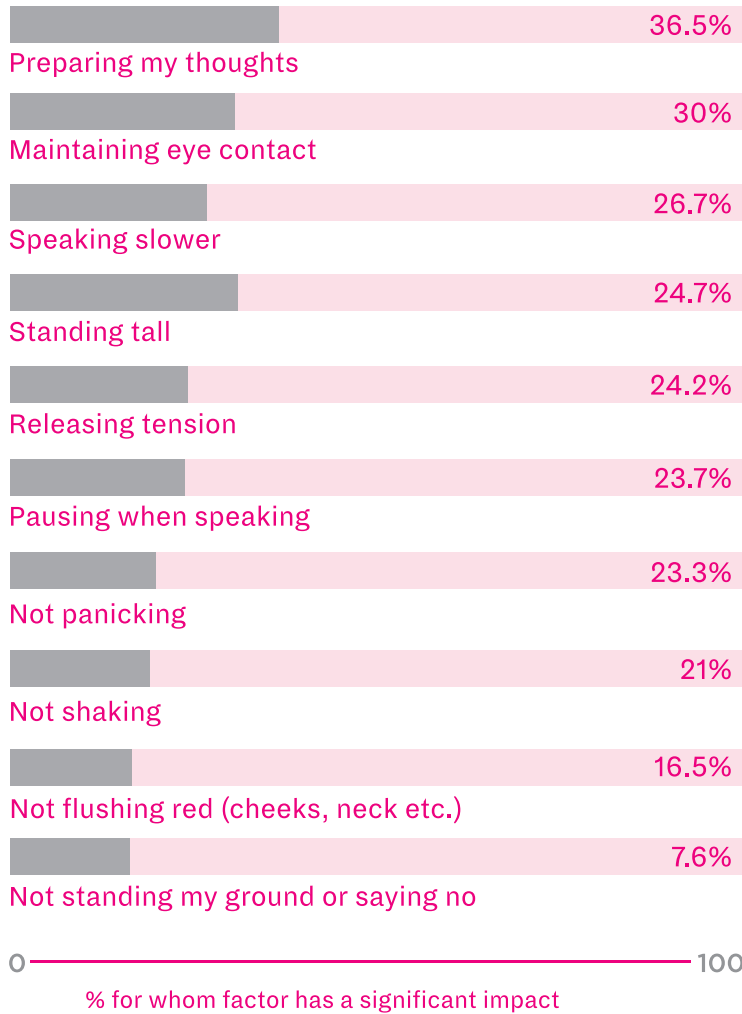
In terms of reaching our potential at work, lacking this skill can hold us back. According to our study, the biggest pressure points when we find it hardest to be in the moment are raising an issue at work or asking for more flexible working hours.

When you feel more relaxed at work, in what way are you able to communicate better?



Learning to improvise is critical for leaders

What do leaders struggle with most when feeling tense and under stress?



Improvisation is an especially critical skill for leaders because there's an expectation that they hold all of the answers at all times. Yet the pace of work means they simply cannot plan or prepare in advance for every meeting and conversation that happens each day.

It would be comforting to think that as we become more senior and experienced, we also gain more confidence and naturally evolve our ability to remain calm, grounded and present in those unexpected moments when someone needs our help, our guidance or we need to stand our ground.

However, it seems that the pressure to perform is even greater for leaders and can exert pressure on even the most experienced of us.

Leaders working with RADA Business often describe the physical effects of pressure as inhibiting their performance. Knowing that people's futures depend on how well they steer the business can be overwhelming if not managed properly.

81% of senior leaders from our research said that they were often placed in situations where they found it difficult to remain relaxed, and that this stopped them from thinking freely.

Leaders also said that they were highly likely to have their performance negatively affected through an inability to perform in the moment.

Over a third of senior managers, directors and C-Suite said that the pressure they felt made it harder to prepare their thoughts (37%). They also found it hard to exhibit an air of calm and were likely to avoid eye contact (30%), slouch (25%) or physically shake (21%) when put under pressure.

Improvisation can help us with this – allowing leaders to remain clear and focused when seeking to reassure, negotiate, compromise or assert their view.

30%

of leaders say they found it hard to exhibit an air of calm and were likely to avoid eye contact

When is our ability to improvise most put under pressure?

Our respondents described a number of situations where they felt it was hardest to use improvisation skills - times when they found it hard to relax, think clearly in the moment, respond and act naturally.

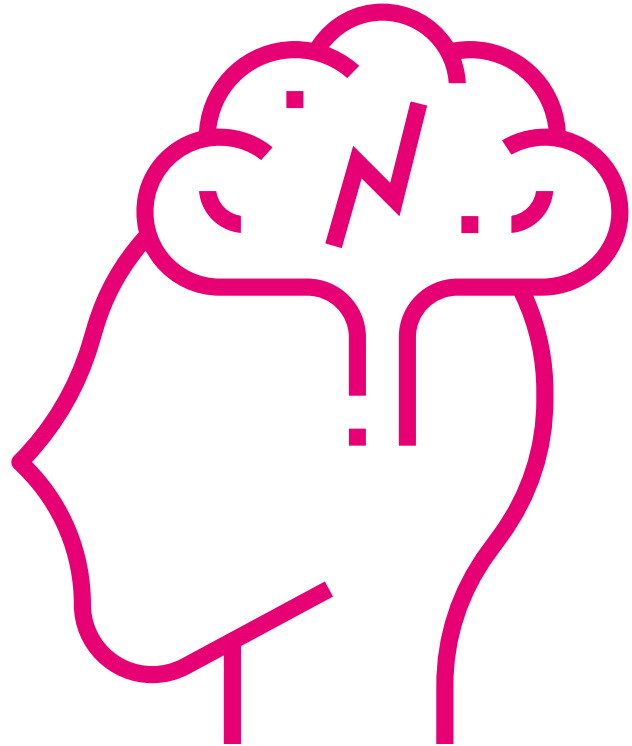
Most common are large group meetings (31%) and in meetings with very senior colleagues (30%) or managers (26%). In these situations, our ability to think quickly and creatively and make good decisions is severely tested. This is especially true when we are asked to do something like present without having any time to prepare.

Another common scenario was during an interview (27%), a high-pressure situation when we want to give the best possible impression of ourselves.

Further to this, women found thinking on their feet more difficult than men, with 33% of women admitting they found it difficult to relax and improvise compared to 22% of men.

Similarly, many of our panel felt their ability to think on their feet is compromised when giving presentations to colleagues (20%), or at external events (19%).

What is striking is how often we feel it is more difficult when being judged by our own team. For example, we find it over twice as hard to relax and think freely with our managers (26%) than potential customers during a pitch (10%).

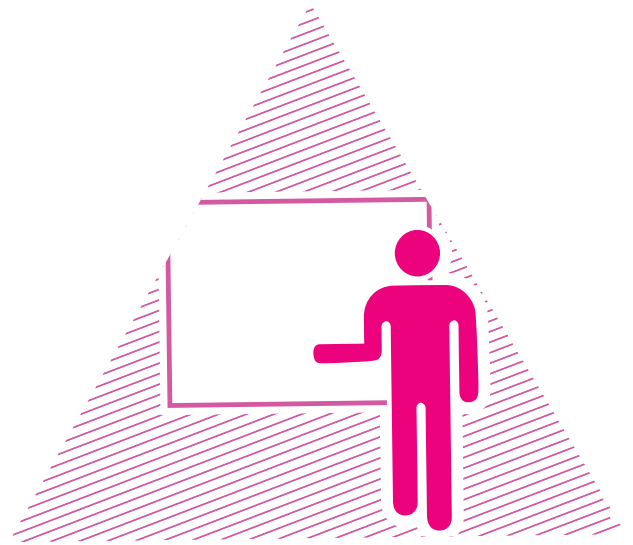


Why is it that the people we work with every day should inhibit us more than strangers? Whatever the reason, this highlights the importance of creating more positive internal cultures – workplaces where we feel empowered, free to relax and think creatively.

In which situations do workers find it hardest to relax and act naturally?



0 ————— 100
% for whom factor has a significant impact



What happens to us when we lose our ability to perform in the moment?

The effects on the individual can be quite dramatic when we lose our ability to perform in the moment. 86% of employees acknowledged feeling severely compromised.

First to desert us is our ability to prepare our thoughts properly (34%). Our mind races and we struggle to make a clear case or rational argument. Many also said that it reduced their ability to stand their ground or say 'no' (12%).

As a result, we might lose ground in a negotiation or say or agree to something we later regret. How many times have you looked back and thought 'if only I'd said...' when in a calmer, clearer state of mind?

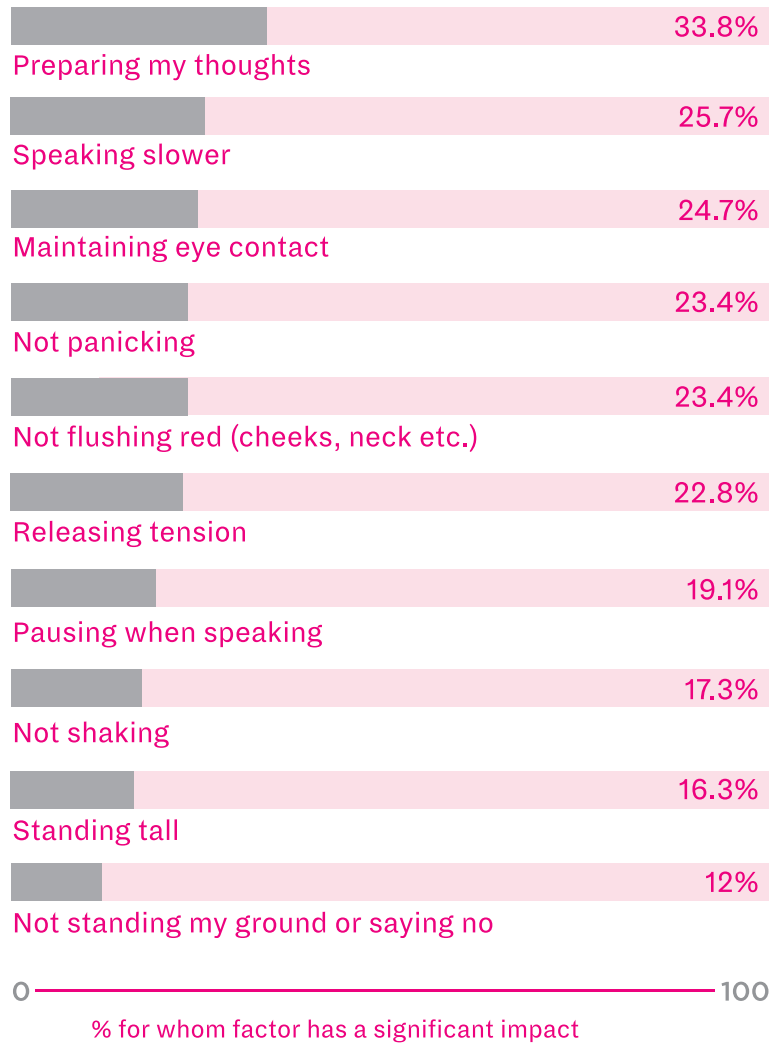
Our ability to make a good impression is also reduced when we feel we can't improvise. We can look much less confident and in control. Many reported finding it harder to maintain eye contact (25%), or that they flushed (23%), physically shook (17%), slouched and made themselves look smaller (16%).

Many also said that it caused them to talk too quickly (26%), or fail to pause while speaking (19%), making it harder to communicate clearly or give other people an opportunity to speak or engage in the conversation.

These situations also have significant physical impact. People talked about not being able to release tension (23%), or feeling a rising sense of panic (23%).

Age and lack of life experience can also affect our ability to perform and has an impact on our physical reactions. 25% of workers aged 18-25 admitted that they would physically shake under feelings of stress compared to only 8% of those aged 55 and over.

The situations where you feel tense and under stress



Further to this, 28% of those aged 26-34 found it difficult to stand tall when they felt tense in a workplace situation. As we teach at RADA Business, aligning the body and using a strong posture helps you to feel more confident in challenging situations where you feel put on the spot.

What techniques can we use every day to help improve our ability to improvise and perform in the moment?

Techniques used to manage feelings of tension and enable relaxation



Our panel reported a number of techniques that helped them to counter feelings of tension, enabling them to relax and use their ability to improvise and think clearly.

Preparation and practice were a popular method to think in the moment (33%). This may seem at odds with the spontaneous spirit of improvisation, but the more you understand your brief, or ask questions about why you've been called into a meeting or presentation, the easier it is to be creative and think quickly.

When you're sure of why you're doing something, you can stand your ground and state your ideas and intentions with confidence, making it much harder to feel like you've been knocked off balance by an unexpected question.

Many people also spoke about techniques they used to get 'in the zone' of brainstorming and improvisation. Whether that's having a hot drink (20%) or practising meditation or mindfulness (14%), giving yourself the space to prepare and get in the right frame of mind is critical.

Effective workplace cultures will give individuals the flexibility they need to do what is right for them. Allowing short breaks, creating quiet spaces or even flexible hours and working from home, can allow for better preparation for more effective delivery.

Breathing was mentioned by many. A favourite solution to managing feelings of tension is taking a deep breath (51%). A key part of RADA Business' training and techniques involves connecting to the breath as a way to boost our ability to perform better. It is something actors learn, not only to help manage nerves, but also to help give the voice greater power and gravitas, which aid delivery.

51%

say that their favourite solution to managing feelings of tension is taking a deep breath

There were also some regional variations that emerged from our findings. Time and deadline pressures were found to have the biggest impact on workforces across the UK, with those in Yorkshire feeling most affected by this (52%), followed by the North West (47%) and the East Midlands (46%).

Identifying the triggers of pressure is important so we can look at an effective way to deal with the associated emotions.

When asked how they tackled feelings of tension and stress, 78% of workers in Blackpool choose to take a deep breath as do 52% of Londoners. 67% of people in Aberdeen find it helps to prepare for certain workplace situations ahead of the occasion and almost a quarter of Mancunians (24%) find it helpful to get some fresh air.

People in Exeter would aim to relieve their stresses with a hot drink, whilst 50% of those working in Durham believe the way to tackle tension and stress is to take a walk.

Fortunately, there are tried and tested techniques that are easy to learn - and when employed deliberately and consciously, can be very powerful tools.



Tutor insight: Kate Walker-Miles

Preparing for challenging situations

Trusting yourself to cope with the unknown helps you to relax and feel confident at work. Relaxing enables you to respond to the situation thoughtfully, rather than react instinctively. It allows you to really listen and to think laterally and creatively in the moment.

Many of us struggle with the voice of doubt in our heads. The one that tells us we are rubbish, that we've got no ideas, that we can't risk speaking spontaneously.

By releasing physical tension, you can quieten this negative self-talk.

- ▶ Start by squeezing your shoulders up to your ears.
- ▶ Hold for a few seconds, then release.
- ▶ Turn your head slowly over each shoulder.
- ▶ Drop your chin to your chest until you feel a stretch in the back of your neck.
- ▶ Gently let the head drop back, with your mouth open, before letting it float back into place.
- ▶ Finally, breathe. Empty your lungs and let the fresh air fill your belly. If you free your body, your mind will follow.

Creating the right culture for improvisation

Building a workplace culture and environment that fosters successful improvisation is a delicate balancing act.

From our research interviews it is clear there are a range of factors that influence our abilities to relax and think on our feet. All of these need to be considered and managed successfully.

It's critical to give people sufficient time to pause and think. 41% of people said that being overloaded with work severely affected their ability to think creatively, as did coping with unrealistic expectations (33%) or targets (21%).

Leaders and line-managers who use pressure tactics to try to elicit better performance may find that people make poorer decisions, as their effectiveness decreases when they feel unsupported.

People found it easier to improvise to meet challenges when they were in a familiar role and supported with training. Many people highlighted the importance of being given roles and tasks appropriate to their experience (14%) and for employers to invest in good quality training (18%).

Our research also identified what men and women find most important when strengthening their ability to improvise and think on their feet. 24% of women admitted that a lack of support and guidance would affect them compared to 15% of men.

Making workplaces a safe, supportive space where people have the freedom to experiment to succeed – and sometimes fail spectacularly – is crucial. Many of our interviewees talked about the importance of a positive workplace culture (25%) and being confident in having the understanding of a boss or manager (21%), as well as supportive colleagues (21%).

This can also be undermined by more toxic cultures, such as workplace cliques (20%) or confused decision-making processes (19%).

Which aspects of the workplace impact your ability to relax and think on your feet?



Companies need to create a positive work culture and relaxing environment, which supports their workforce no matter where they are based, so they will feel more capable to think on their feet.

Tutor insight: Matt Bannister

Creating a safe space for improvisation

The difficulty with using the phrase 'there are no bad ideas' at the beginning of brainstorm sessions, is that it's not true. By saying this, we're trying to reassure people that the humiliation associated with rejection will be withheld, yet it draws attention to the pressure of coming up with ideas and switches on our critical voice.

Instead, get everyone to agree to join in with a game of treating other people's ideas as if they're all good, and finding ways to build on them. The team will concentrate on other people, which reduces self-consciousness and introduces the essential factor to creativity - playfulness.

Prove that bad ideas are acceptable by opening the meeting with one of your own: 'Here's a bad one to start with, let's see what you can do with this'. It's more effective than asking others to test the 'no bad idea' hypothesis at the risk of losing their dignity.

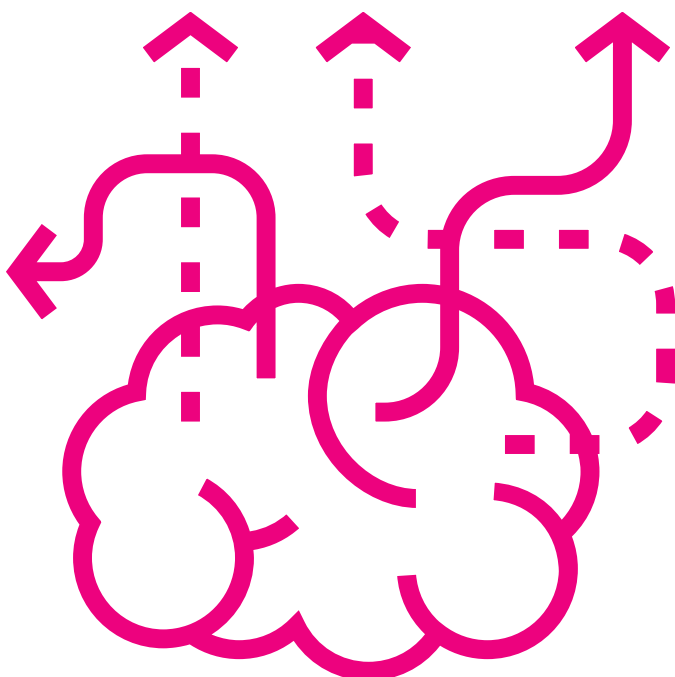
There are bad ideas and good ideas – but they'll all be treated the same.

Are workplaces thinking creatively?

Our research shows a very mixed picture across UK workplaces. Our panel were given a range of factors and asked if these were undermining or supporting the ability to improvise and think on their feet.

Practices in an average of 41% of workplaces were found to be having a detrimental effect on empowering their workforce, whereas only 25% were creating the right environment for improvisation to thrive.

Time pressures, poor workplace culture (such as high-pressure work environments where new ideas or original thought aren't valued) and lack of training were the negative factors most likely to be having a detrimental effect on the performances of teams and their ability to think creatively.



The impact of leaders and managers

Similarly, we asked about the ways leaders and managers have a positive or negative impact on the people in their charge.

The vast majority of people said that the actions of their managers and leaders didn't support a culture of improvisation and creative thinking. 36% said that they actually made it harder, while 37% were said to have no impact.

This compares to just 27% of leaders and managers who successfully fostered people's ability to improvise.

The most common failings were when leaders put workers under the spotlight in meetings (53%), ask them to give presentations to a group (48%) and during performance reviews (44%) without sufficient preparation.

In such circumstances, effective leaders and managers should go the extra mile to help support and encourage by providing better training, more time and additional coaching to allow people to adequately prepare and perform at their best.

The biggest contribution leaders and managers can make to promote effective improvisation is to trust their teams. Workers said that they were more likely to relax and think creatively when they were empowered to make decisions (38%), or when trusted to manage in their leader's absence (34%).

Socialising and building a personal rapport to support the professional relationship can also be effective, with 37% saying that this had benefited them.

23%

However, it's also clear that if the right team-building or staff away day isn't chosen, this can backfire, with 23% saying that badly conceived and poorly executed work social events actually increased levels of stress and tension in the workplace.

Tutor insight: Claire Dale

Improvisation and leadership

With the pace of change so fast, leaders today need to be agile to thrive amongst relentless restructuring and refocusing activities. Flexibility, creativity and innovative thinking are critical instruments for leaders to have in their toolboxes.

If we are stuck in the past, our choices of action will be too late and not connected to the current situation. Improvisation teaches us how to achieve the mental, emotional and physical state where nothing phases or scares us – there is a constructive response to everything that life throws our way. We can say yes to difficult, unwanted and unexpected challenges, embracing the pace by letting go of just enough control to unlock new possibilities.

When an actor improvises, they strive to be open, flexible and highly responsive in the moment. Making quick decisions and committing to them, without worrying about the endgame. Leaders can learn the skills to do this too.



Delighting customers with creative thinking

The clearest effect of good improvisation is the positive impact it can have on customer relationships.

Nothing is more satisfying than when an organisation listens and is empathetic to our needs, going the extra mile to ensure we are satisfied with a product or service.

Equally, it is extremely frustrating and damaging to customer relationships when people stick to narrow processes and rules without seeing the bigger picture – or adapting when necessary.

Seeing your organisation from the perspective of your customer is the biggest motivation to encourage a positive culture of improvisation.

How customers see ‘narrow’ thinking

While an employee may be sticking to their organisation’s rules and procedures, customers can interpret this behaviour very differently. It can create conflict and tension if there is an opportunity to flex or innovate in the moment, but this opportunity is not taken.

91% of people say that they regularly experience situations where employees, who are clearly tense and under pressure, have acted inappropriately by not being able to think creatively and respond naturally – often due to a lack of empowerment in making a difficult decision.

Most commonly this is expressed as impatience (46%), unhelpfulness (45%), poor communication (38%) or rudeness (37%).

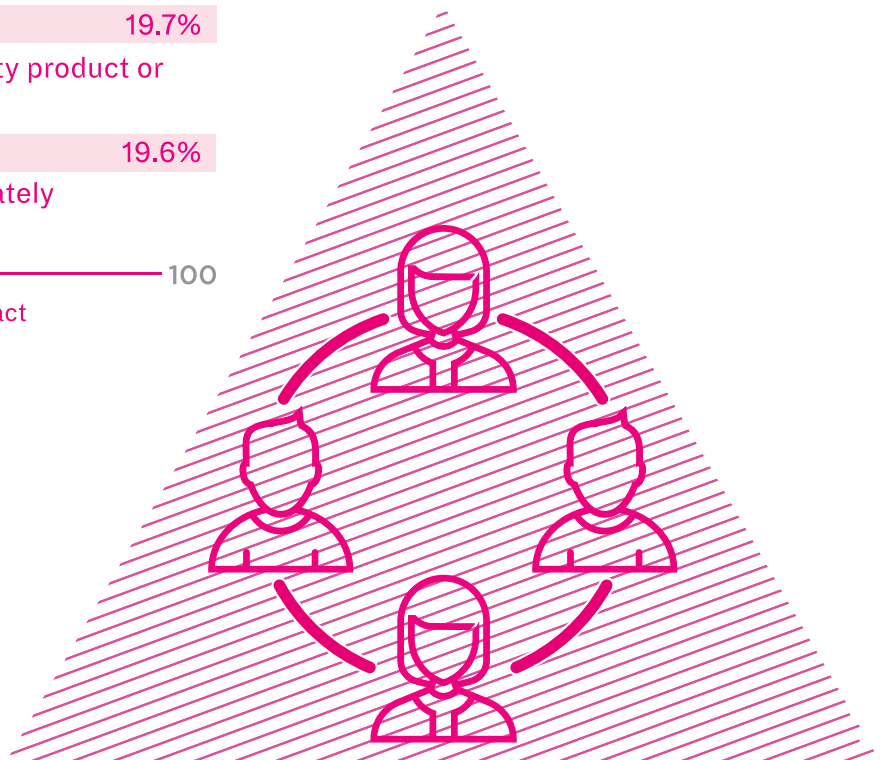
In such circumstances, the vast majority of customers (88%) say that they make negative assumptions about the organisation as a result of staff behaviour.

This assumption may be a belief that an organisation doesn’t provide adequate training (37%), is poorly organised (36%), or that it is failing to support its workers (34%).

It may also affect perceptions of business leaders, with 25% of people concluding that the organisation doesn’t have strong leadership (25%), or that it is poorly run (23%).



What does a tense employee make you think about the organisation?



Which types of workers have the best improvisation skills?

From our research it is clear that there are wide gaps in ability levels between different sectors. Some have already embraced the need to support their workers to be confident, independent thinkers. In others, the opportunity is there to increase these skills to unlock the organisational benefits that better improvisation brings.

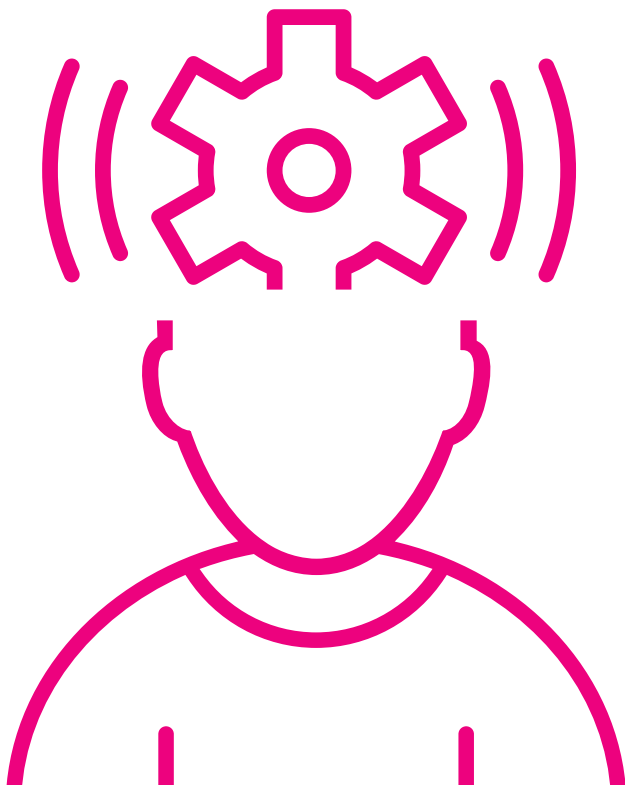
Our study identifies that improvisation skills are often strongest amongst those working in the healthcare sector. In such circumstances, the ability to keep calm and create the best outcome, whatever the situation, is crucial.

At RADA Business we have worked extensively with the NHS and other health organisations for exactly this reason: empowering health workers through training and teaching of improvisation techniques to enable them to deal better with whatever situation occurs.

In such an emotionally-charged, face-to-face working environment, it is easy to understand why the ability to improvise is a critical skill.

Our research further identifies that our panel found encounters with chefs and postmen were often more natural, as they showcased an ability to improvise and think effectively in certain situations.

Although health, food and postal services are very different sectors, it highlights the common importance of being able to use these skills in various circumstances to gain the best outcome.



At the other end of the spectrum are those working in contact centres. It is this group where our panel said that they were most likely to encounter poor improvisation or creative thinking.

Interestingly, estate agents and shop workers were also identified as groups who struggle to think quickly and were more likely to find situations which required improvisation challenging. Although both sectors require the ability to speak to customers and make positive impressions, it's clear that often this isn't always delivered effectively.

When interacting with people in a company who lack the skill to improvise, it can be easy to make judgements about the business and their overall organisation. It creates the question: are staff being supported, and are they being given enough training? This can affect how a company is perceived overall.

This is a challenge for companies to consider how they could better embrace improvisation skills to unlock the true potential of their workers and delight their customers.



Tutor insight: Charlie Walker-Wise

Dealing with difficult customers or situations

Dealing with difficult customers or situations is a challenge few of us relish. It can seem like an assault when someone who doesn't know us decides to treat us in a way we wouldn't tolerate from anyone in our personal lives.

The first thing to do is breathe.

Very often, when we feel we are being attacked, our body's first response is to prepare for a battle or to run away. It's our fight or flight reflex. You will notice your muscles tense and breath leap into your upper chest.

Here's the simplest and most valuable tip you can remember: breathe out, not in. Get rid of the 'negative air' before allowing a 'breath of fresh air' in. Once you've done this, you might find you can deal with the challenge with more confidence and authority.

It can also be helpful to remember that at some point we may have been that difficult customer, with a need that wasn't met. You might be the one person who can meet their need and make their day.



The power of improvisation is clear

Our professional performance, personal wellbeing, service to our customers and ability to lead are all enhanced when we are truly at ease with rolling with what life throws at us.

This is a learned skill, not an innate ability that you may or may not be born with. It is something to be practised and developed.

Improvisation can also be fostered and encouraged (or conversely, crushed) by our work environment and culture. Companies should see creative thinking as a key to success and seek to unlock the improvisational skills of those they employ.

Based on this report, we have distilled three key lessons for organisations seeking to release the potential of effective improvisation:

▶ Learn to embody improvisation

The body is the most powerful tool we have to move others, especially when we're in the spotlight and highly visible to our colleagues and customers. The techniques outlined in this report show that effective improvisation comes from an ability to enhance clear thinking through physical techniques.

These techniques – which build upon those used by actors seeking to give their best performance – help us to manage nerves and negative thoughts whilst, at the same time, giving those around us a sense that we are flexible and capable of living in the moment. Encourage employees to learn and practise the physical techniques outlined in this report, test them in trying situations and observe how it changes both how they feel and their ability to perform.

▶ Invest to create an improvisation culture

Effective improvisation will bring greater success through better decision-making that's not based in rigidity, helping us to empower our team members and satisfy our customers' emerging needs. However, this culture requires investment and nurturing. For example, creating the space and time for people to think fluidly may require a change in systems or how effectiveness is measured. People also need investment through training to develop improvisation and leadership skills, giving individuals and teams the knowledge and ability to take measured risks.

▶ See improvisation as a key leadership skill

We live in a fast changing world and those leading organisations are at the front line of meeting new challenges that arise. It is wrong to assume that leaders don't have doubts and fears, despite having risen to the top of their profession. Arm them with the ability to release their potential to make clear, rational and creative decisions in stressful situations. This ability will also help them foster a positive improvisation culture, setting the tone for others to follow.

About RADA Business

RADA Business helps people at work become brilliant communicators. We build on the work of one of the world's most respected drama schools to deliver world-class training programmes and coaching for organisations and individuals.

Everything we do is grounded in an understanding of business - and the varied needs of people within organisations.

Whether you're leading a company, managing teams or taking the first steps in your career, we can help you deliver your very best performance.

Since 2001 we've worked with some of the world's best-known employers in more than 30 countries, including law firms, retailers, media companies, universities and governments.

We're convinced that organisations work most effectively when everyone has a voice - and we're committed to giving people the skills to get themselves heard.

All our profits support the activities of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, helping to develop the next generation of actors and technicians.

Please get in touch if you would like to discuss what we can do for you or your organisation by contacting ask@radabusiness.com or +44 (0)20 7908 4810.