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Silicon Valley's cure for awkward geeks? Improv

By Wendy Lee

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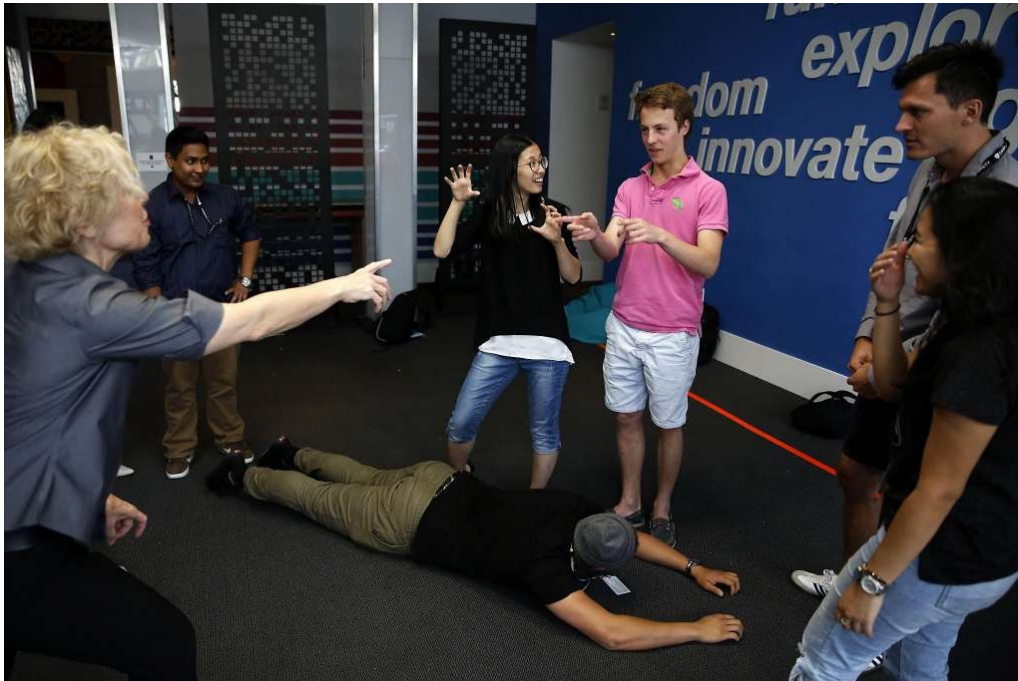


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Instructor Diane Rachel (left) directs as Ajmal Jackson (center) lies on the ground pretending to be a boat and other students create a scene around him during an improv class at Draper University in San Mateo, California, on Monday, June 27, 2016

When Jun Liu signed up for a \$12,000 training program, he expected to learn about raising money and marketing his idea for an entrepreneurship school in China.

It's funny how things work out.

Last week, he found himself pretending to be a bow as another student portrayed a dead deer — all part of an improv lesson from Draper University, a San Mateo tech boot camp.

“It teaches me how to anticipate unpredictable things,” said Liu, 25, a native of Wuhan, China.

Improvisational comedy, long a vital skill for aspiring actors, is fast becoming a fixture of the technology world. Much as comedians perform on a stage, entrepreneurs must learn to think on their feet when pitching ideas to venture capitalists, fielding customers’ queries and supporting teammates. Plenty of companies, including Twitter, Facebook and data-storage firm EMC, provide improv training sessions for employees. Local improv groups report increased interest from tech firms.

“Listening skills and being able to guess and add to other people’s ideas — it’s almost become a lost art in technology because you have to be caught up with what’s going on in the computer,” said Diane Rachel, an instructor for Bats Improv, which is based in San Francisco’s Fort Mason Center.

VIDEO

BATS Improv leads entrepreneurs at Draper University through some improv exercises.

Former Twitter CEO Dick Costolo once performed at Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre and was known for his improv skills. His background helped spur voluntary improv trainings at Twitter that began in 2011. More recently, he has helped suggest lines for HBO’s “Silicon Valley,” which has gotten the tech industry to take itself a little less seriously. The charming gaffes of Richard Hendricks, the fictional founder of faux startup Pied Piper, has shown entrepreneurs that they can fumble their way to success.

Matt Waxman, a Santa Clara vice president of product management at EMC, says improv helps staffers get better at using a conversational tone with customers. Engineers are great at creating apps that help solve problems, but their people skills can sometimes use work. “With a lot of people in tech coming from engineering backgrounds, that can be a challenge,” he said.

Stanford University’s business school includes a class called “Acting with Power” that helps students improve body language.

Improv experts often conduct general team-building exercises, but in some cases they are brought in to fix problems. Ceci Walken, director of Bats Improv's corporate workshops, recalls that the group helped one technology firm that was forcing two extremely competitive teams to collaborate. In another instance, improv exercises at a company that had just gone through an acquisition and layoffs encouraged employees to act silly and build stories on the fly, and ultimately feel more at ease.

Improv "builds a team quickly the same way it builds a theater ensemble," Walken said. The company has seen a 60 percent increase in monthly revenue from the workshops in the last 12 months, due in part to interest from tech firms, Walken said. Endgames Improv in San Francisco says 60 to 80 percent of its classes are made up of students from the tech industry. Another San Francisco improv group, Leela, also reports strong interest from tech.

Humor can make or break careers. Seventy-nine percent of chief financial officers surveyed said humor was important for employees to fit into a company's culture, according to a 2012 survey from staffing service Accountemps.



Photo: Connor Radnovich, The Chronicle

Ligia Maria Brabatti reacts to another student's expression during an improv class in San Mateo.

Improv can also help people recover after looking foolish. During the recent Draper University session, aspiring entrepreneurs stood in a circle and each tossed out a word to form a story. In another exercise, they reached out to the ceiling and, with a smile on their face, yelled out, "I failed!"

Nonie Kimpitak, who works at online credit marketplace Lending Club in San Francisco, said improv helped her become confident enough to say what she thinks at meetings. The 43-year-old took her first improv class at Leela about three years ago and performs improv in the Bay Area.

“It’s OK to fail, and that’s one of the big things I learned from improv,” Kimpitak said. “You just ‘do.’ If it doesn’t work, it’s still good because you learned something from it.”

Still, some people are skeptical. At the Draper session, one student pressed improv coach Diane Rachel on what the group was supposed to take away from the lesson. The pushback, from the skeptic and other students, was enough for Rachel to tell a reporter, “It’s a tough crowd.”

But there are plenty of loyalists. Fayez Mohamood believes so strongly in the power of improv that his New York business, Bluecore, which helps retailers use data to market to customers, has spent roughly \$15,000 since 2013 to train staffers. Each person takes eight to 10 classes. Mohamood, 35, took his first improv course five or six years ago, as part of his yearly goal of trying something new. The experience helped him become a better entrepreneur, he said, and more aware of his own flaws.

“There is a whole element of having to think on the spot, work with what you have,” Mohamood said. “You are onstage with somebody that might not be the best person you like working with, or the story that you intended to start with.”

Through improv, his collaborators told Mohamood he had trouble saying “no” to people. He would lean back and not make eye contact. Now, he leans in, and is OK with the uncomfortable silence that may come after telling someone you can’t do something.

“Improv has had as much of an impact on my life as my professional education or maybe even more in the long run,” Mohamood said.

Since offering the training to staffers at Bluecore, Mohamood says, he’s seen an engineer become a better listener. He also believes the training has created a playful environment at work that helps create a better team. His firm has grown to more than 90 people, and as it gets larger, he plans to bring improv coaches to the workplace, instead of paying for individuals to take classes.

“It might be hard to pin down the dollar amount it brings in,” Mohamood acknowledges. “I am a believer that the return on the investment is an order of magnitude even more than what we put in.”

Improv helped turn around a sticky situation for San Francisco resident Christopher DeJong. Within the last decade, he was an engineer and was told by a supervisor that he wasn’t meeting expectations. Instead of arguing his point, as he might have done without improv training, DeJong listened. He asked his supervisor what he could do to turn the situation around.

“She actually said she was impressed,” 47-year-old DeJong said. “She thought it was a nice pivot.”

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