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# Intensive on-your-toes comedy training can be a boon business

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BY MARY CORNATZER - STAFF WRITER

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CARRBORO -- "Be present in the moment," Zach Ward tells about a dozen people standing in a loose circle inside the DSI Cor

Then he shouts "Zip," and points at a woman in the circle.

"Zap," she answers, pointing to another.



"Zop," is the answering call. And so it goes, words f

Next, after a few deep breaths, they take turns thro

This is the way Ward, head of DSI, starts the day fo workshop.

The warm-up exercises begin the process of rewirir attention - be in the moment - and then to process i

"You can't plan ahead; you have to be able to react

Flexibility, thinking on their feet, adapting and reacti not just to aspiring improvisational actors and stand business world.

That theater, and improv in particular, can make a company or employee more competitive is not a particularly new idea. But w during the recession.

Ward has taught corporate and professional classes for 10 years. The recession has not been easy, but he points out: "I'm a fo three of the worst years I've seen in my lifetime."

Indeed, there appears to be enough demand to go around. Transactors Improv Co., also in Carrboro, has long offered what Gr executive and artistic director, also teaches the class at UNC's Kenan-Flagler Business School for MBA students.

Kenan-Flagler also offers improv and other nontraditional training (think NASCAR pit crew) in its nondegree executive developr

Susan Cates, president and associate dean of Executive Development for Kenan Flagler, says her program has grown substar clients.

"When you're asking people to do more with less, you need to arm them appropriately," she says. "You need to give them the b fighting alligators to stretch their mind."

### **Many pluses**

The value of improv, say those who teach it as well as those who have taken the classes, is multilayered.

Heather Jones, executive director of Durham Cares, a nonprofit that manages volunteer services, says Ward is training her bra

"I'm find myself listening more carefully to details," she says. "I'm an operations person. ... I'm very linear. I work with a guy whc that scenario. I can sit back and take in his creativity. ... I'm able to let it flow."

Ward says 25 percent of the people who take DSI's classes want to be on stage. Most are doing it for personal or professional

Nathania Johnson of Raleigh has some comedic aspirations but the freelance writer says her improv lessons are applicable to l to repeat what she's said) and work.

Writing, after all, is about listening, and freelance writers must adapt to what their client wants.

### **Improv on stage**

Basic to improv is the idea of "yes, and ..." - that's the second exercise for Ward's workshop on a recent day.

Participants sit in chairs, side by side, on stage. The rest of the class shouts out roles: bull riders, singers, dentists, super villain

The two on stage role play, answering each other by repeating what was said.

**Super villain No. 1:** *"So I finally put the finishing touches on my death ray."*

**Super villain No 2:** *[Enthusiastically] "Yes, you did finally put the finishing touches on your death ray, and I'm jealous you have*

Kim Andrews, who works for a software company and recently took on the improv role of bull rider, says she was in a meeting r Her improv training kicked in.

"I thought 'hmmm, you just killed the idea,' " she says. "Let's hear the idea out. Maybe the first part wasn't so good, but the secc

### **Skills for the job**

Andrews, who lives in Durham, just finished her second round of intensive study with Ward. (The first time was to mark someth

On the surface, improv can seem most applicable to sales, but the skills are good for anyone whose work requires listening, sh

"I have to listen to my client's needs and react to what my client needs, and I have to be on the same page as my partner," And

Improv, she says, has taught her not to do mental grocery lists in meetings and to have her colleagues' back. No one-upmansh

Ward says that idea - that everyone is on the same team - is the No. 1 thing he tries to get people to remember. On stage, that looking for the patterns laid out by your partner so you know what role you need to play make the scene a success.

The same principles that work on stage can play out at the office when you're trying to work as a team to meet company goals.

That, says Hohn with Transactors, is more important than ever given the economic downturn. "When things get tight, get more people who are flexible intellectually and emotionally; people who can adapt and think on their feet, who aren't wed to plans.

"Improv has a powerful relevance to what's going on in our world."

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### TRY THIS AT WORK

If you want to improve your memory, stretch your mind and boost your confidence, an improv class can go a long way toward helping. But to get you started on your own, try this:

- 1. Listen.** Concentrate on the person talking and repeat what you hear them say.
- 2. Watch body language and tone.** It isn't just what a person says but how they say it and what they do that can give you clues to their meaning.
- 3. Be flexible.** A meeting (or conversation) may not be going in the direction you had hoped, but rather than trying to change direction, go with the flow.
- 4. Be positive.** The next time someone expresses an idea, don't be so ready to throw in a "but." Accentuate the positive and run with the idea.

### IF YOU WANT TO TRY IMPROV

The cost of workshops, classes and corporate training varies. Corporations can receive a customized training session.

DSI Comedy Theater: 200 N. Greensboro St., Carrboro. 338-8150;  
[www.dsicomedytheater.com](http://www.dsicomedytheater.com)

Transactors Improv Co.: 300-G. E. Main St., Carrboro, 824-0937;  
[www.transactors.org](http://www.transactors.org) or <http://thefiz.biz>

ComedyWorx: 431 W. Peace St. Raleigh 829-0822; [comedyworx.com](http://comedyworx.com)

For information on Kenan-Flagler's Executive Development programs go to [www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/execdev](http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/execdev) or call 919-962-5327.

### DSI COMEDY THEATER

The theater traces its start to a comedy festival Zach Ward organized in 2001. Ward was working in Chicago, where he had gone after graduating from UNC-Chapel Hill.



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