EFFECTS OF IMPROVISATION TECHNIQUES ON LEADERSHIP DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

Prior studies as well as the present study indicate that improvisation in leadership decision-making transpires in organizations 75-90% of the time. However, little research has explored the development of this skill-set in leaders. The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of a new workshop applying a Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model on leaders 6 different groups from various regions, industries, and organizations across the country. Primary findings revealed that leaders gained better listening skills, noted a heightened sense of mindfulness of others' actions and their influence on others, reduced stress level, and an improved ability to collaborate with other leaders and their staff, which resulted in an enhanced ability to make effective spontaneous decisions.

INTRODUCTION

This study explored the impact of improvisational techniques in leadership decision making by applying a holistic model of improvisation to leadership development. Utilizing this framework and Hiatt-Michael Model of Curriculum Development (2008), adult learning (Knowles, 1984), and experiential learning principles (Kolb, 2000), the Improvisation for Leaders Workshop was designed and developed. Best practice adult learning and facilitation skills were incorporated into the framework to enhance learning, and the impact of the workshop in different intervals was evaluated. The presentation will report on the application of these models in workshop design, research design, and the findings from surveys and in-depth interviews of 67 leaders. The presentation will conclude with the revised model and tools that can be utilized by organizations seeking to promote OPTIMAL spontaneous decision making in their leaders (for this study, OPTIMAL stands for Open to the Present Thought and Intuition, and Mindful in Action and Leadership) and promote a more nimble and adaptive organization.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess the effects of a pilot workshop by applying a holistic model of improvisation to leadership decision making. This study explored the skills leaders acquired during the workshop, application of those skills immediately, in two weeks to one month, and in three months following the workshop. This study also investigated which instructor facilitation techniques effectively supported this learning transfer.

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical framework used for this study centered on a Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model. Additionally, Hiatt-Michael's Theoretical Model of Curriculum Design (2008) was employed to develop the Improvisation for Leaders Workshop utilized in the study.

First Generation Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model. The theoretical framework for this study centered on a Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model that was initially influenced by Crossan's (1998) areas of improvisation and then integrated with the latest research on improvisation. This model consists of six key interrelated areas that link improvisation to effective leadership including Perception of the external environment; Tolerance of risk and ambiguity; Realized strategy; Shared

leadership; Active listening, and Collaboration. When the six areas are brought together holistically, the result is the organizational capacity that can bring about creativity, innovation, and adaptive problem solving. During an iterative process of applying grounded theory, the themes found as a result of qualitative analysis were utilized to revise the model after each collection of workshop data, leading to the final version of the Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model.

Hiatt-Michael's Theoretical Model of Curriculum Design. The second theoretical model utilized in this study was the Hiatt-Michael's Theoretical Model of Curriculum Design. This model was used as a roadmap to ensure all stakeholders' interests had been taken into account in the design and delivery of the leadership decision making workshop. The primary decision making tool for this study occurred at the instructional level.

Methods

The study employed a mixed methods design by gathering both qualitative and quantitative research data (Creswell, 2007) to serve as a descriptive evaluation of a pilot training program. To maximize the cross verification and validity of data, five types of triangulation were used in this study. A nonproportional quota sampling design was used for this study to ensure that the sample size included a minimum number of elements in each category of the target population of leaders. The study was pilot-tested on six different groups of leaders from various regions, industries, and organizations.

Data Sources

The data collection methodology included pretests and posttests conducted after the workshop and follow-up interviews of workshop participants two weeks to one month after the workshop, exploring the three months impact of the study, in addition to observation, field notes, and informal conversations. The interview questions aimed at gaining information regarding the participants' learning, behavior change, and impact on the organization as a result of attending the workshop.

Summary of Findings

The quantitative data were comprised of 67 participants in total, spread across six workshops of 3.5 hours each. The qualitative data were derived from 67 pretest, posttest, and interviews of the workshop participants, which included a cross section of the population with a variety of positions, degrees, and ethnic backgrounds.

Research Question 1. In what ways, if any, did participants' perceptions of improvisation as a learning tool change as a result of attending the workshop?
Pretest results indicated 91.0% of leaders in the study reported that they did not know the percentage of time in which they used the principles of improvisation to make spontaneous decisions. Furthermore, at pretest, 94% of participants, even those with knowledge of improvisation, indicated they did not know what the relationship between improvisation and leadership could be. At posttest, 100% of leaders in the study indicated they could now see the benefits of using improvisation techniques in business. Other responses to the relationship between improvisation (improv) and business included better communication skills (75%), team building (65%), and effective meeting management (33%).

Research Question 2. What changes, if any, did the participants perceive in themselves and others by attending the workshop? Participants were asked a series of five questions pertaining to the benefits they received from participation in the workshop. All five of the benefit ratings were at least 5.0 on a 6-point scale. Participants indicated they had received the most benefit from the workshop in the top two areas of *working with others in your organization* and *ability to lead others*. The aggregate benefit score indicated that most participants saw the workshop as *likely beneficial* to *highly beneficial*

to them. Participants who had positions higher in their organizations reported significantly greater benefits for four of the six indicators, including total benefits from the workshop, listening skills, ability to lead others, and working with others in your organization. Additionally, there was a significant positive correlation between the participants' level of education and the benefit of *make you aware of how quickly you trust others* (rs = .35, $p < .005$) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Spearman Rank-Ordered Correlations for Benefit Scores with Demographic Variables

Demographic variables [a] / Benefits ratings	1	2	3	4	5
Total benefits score	.21 *	.07	.10	.13	.17
5. Personal benefits	.04	.22 *	-.11	.08	.02
6. Make you aware of your listening skills	.26 **	.10	.16	.18	.05
7. Make you aware of how quickly you trust others	.12	-.17	.11	.08	.35 ****
8. Ability to lead others	.28 **	.21 *	.15	.14	.10
9. Working with others in your organization	.23 *	.15	.03	.03	-.07

Note. $N = 67$
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$. **** $p < .005$.
[a] Demographic Variables: 1 = *Organizational Level*; 2 = *Gender* (1 = *Female*, 2 = *Male*); 3 = *Age*; 4 = *Years in Organization*; 5 = *Education Level*.

At posttest, ninety-one percent of participants were able to correctly recall the four principles of improv in their own words, in addition to reciting ways in which they could use improvisation techniques in their meetings, brainstorming sessions and team building efforts.

Research Question 3. What facilitation techniques did the participants perceive to be the most effective in enhancing their learning? Participants indicated that the instructor had modeled the concepts taught, such as bringing her own examples of starting out with improv and being afraid, explaining the cognitive and productivity benefits of having *just enough anxiety*, competent risks and failure. Participants also stated that a vital reason for the workshop's effectiveness was the well-designed, interactive exercises which built on one another.

Research Question 4. In what ways, if any, did the participants' awareness of their spontaneous decision making change because of attending the workshop? The percentage of spontaneous decisions and the reasons behind the change were measured from pretest, posttest, and interview. For all three tests, significant gains in spontaneous decision-making were noted. At the final interview, leaders admitted to making 71% of their decisions spontaneously, indicating a 27% increase in the number of spontaneous decisions from a pretest mean of 56%. When asked what the reason was for this increase, the study showed that 46% increased their admitted percentage of SDs from the pretest because they were not aware they made so many SDs in a given week, or they did not have the comfort level to admit to making such a high percentage of SD. Thirty-one percent of leaders admitted that as a result of learning the tools at the workshop, they were able to make more OPTIMAL spontaneous decisions, and

20% indicated they were able to make their spontaneous decisions with more confidence and trust their intuition.

Research Question 5. What changes, if any, did the participants identify in their level of stress by attending the workshop? At pretest, 80% participants had moderate to severe stress, with an average stress of 5.14 (moderate to severe), while at posttest 100% of participants had mild to moderate stress at 2.45, indicating a 52% decline in stress.

Research Question 6. What other factors influenced the participants' learning?

Participants indicated they were delighted that the facilitator did not use PowerPoint slides for the whole workshop. During the second half of Workshop 6, participants acknowledged that one of their teachers had a heart attack earlier that week. Thus, this event had left workshop participants in a drained and distraught state. Additionally, for the same workshop, the class was divided into two 1 hour and 45 minute classes. The result was less observed engagement in the material and the activities.

Research Question 7. How did the participants' learning affect their own or others' behavior and business results in their work environments? Eight total qualitative themes were found by coding qualitative data from pretest to posttest and at the interview, after 1 month at their work environments. The eight themes included responsive listening and expression, collaborative creativity, lowered level of stress and mindfulness, competent risks and celebrating failure, OPTIMAL spontaneous decisions (OSD), affirmative competence, OPTIMAL strategy and performance, productivity, retention, innovation, and shared leadership.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this topic is threefold. First, the study of the application of improvisational techniques in organizations is still in its infancy, with minimal existing empirical research. In addition, much of the evaluation of the impact of improv-based training has been metaphorical in nature with little supporting empirical data (Leone, 2010; Vendelø, 2009; Vera & Crossan, 2005). Moreover, the subject of leadership and improvisation has received even less attention within the improvisation and organizational literature, with only one article (Cunha et. al., 2003), and one master's thesis (Bilsen, 2010) completely devoted to it. Second, most studies to date have mainly adopted a qualitative methodology (Leone, 2010), with a few empirical quantitative. A literature gap still remains for a mixed method study aimed at holistically understanding improvisation in leadership. Third, the existing research on improvisation frequently follows the jazz model, and is not holistic due to it being primarily used as a metaphor. Furthermore, only a few studies exist that describe the development of such transferable skills through improvisation training and development. This study was used to fill this gap and augment the body of knowledge related to the impact of developing theatrical improvisation techniques, using a holistic yet practical model to facilitate learning.

Tabaee's Final Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model

The findings from the study led to the final revision of the Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model for OPTIMAL performance and strategy. Utilizing grounded theory, and based on the findings and Whetten's (1989) requirements of a complete theory, Tabaee's Final Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model was created as depicted in Figure 1.

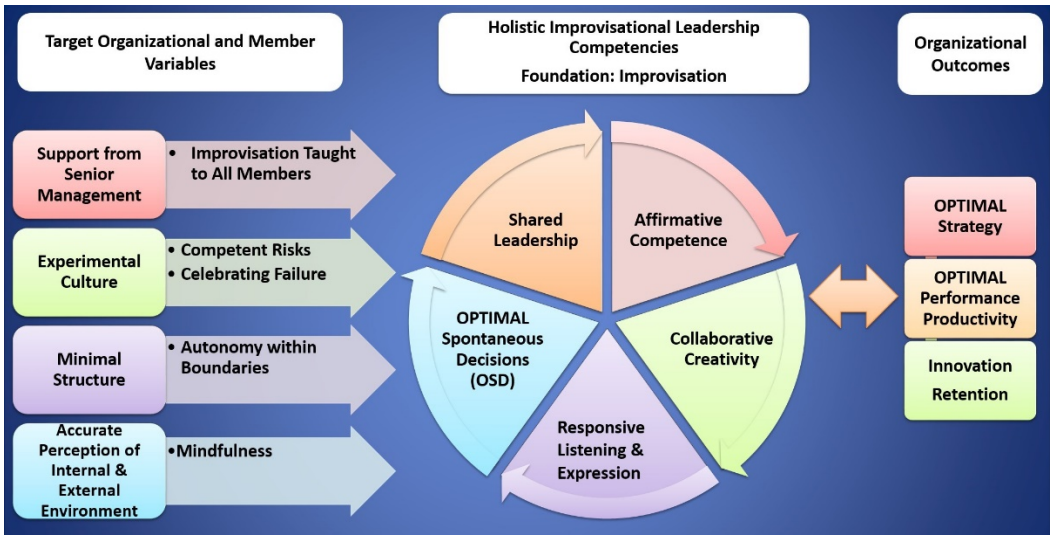

Figure 1.Tabaee's Final Holistic Improvisational Leadership Model for OPTIMAL Strategy and Performance.

This model depicts the progression of improvisation and change from Organizational and Member Variables to Competencies and Organizational Outcomes within an organization. For ease of representation, the model is illustrated in a linear fashion, the double arrow between outcomes and competencies, and arrows throughout the model indicate the nonlinear relationship between the four elements and the interconnectedness of drivers of change within organizations.

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