



# Inviting an Elephant up the Stairs: Improving Communication through Improv

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## Goals of This Session

- Defining improvisation and understanding how use of it can apply in the workplace
- Understanding the benefits of improv for stress reduction and leadership
- Presenting tools and practices that leaders and workers can use to strengthen communication



Usher – please close & lock the doors.  
There is no escape from this point on ...



# How much experience do you have with improv?

- Zero
- A little
- Somewhat
- A lot





# Most Important Skills of a Good Manager

- Finance
- Psychology
- Improv





# What is Improv?

Improvisation at its core is about heightening communication and intensive listening and helping individuals work together to improve communication, enhance teamwork, increase creativity, and create more open and better leadership.



# What Improv is NOT

Standing in front of a brick wall in a speakeasy telling bad jokes.





# But ... I'm a Research Administrator, not a Comedian!

Research management is normally thought of as an intricate network of rules and regulations that must be followed. However, in research management we also:

- Must FACILITATE
- Mitigate ambiguity and complexity
- Be the ultimately communicators (translators) to our stakeholders (PI's)



# Benefits of Improv

- Improve listening skills
- Read body language
- Think on your feet
- Be at ease in situations you're unprepared for
- Exploring ideas and giving them a chance
- Avoid "no"



# Rules of Improv

- Start with “yes”
- Add new information
- Don’t ask questions – make statements
- Play it out
- Listen
- Take risks
- No mistakes – only opportunities



# A Few Common Improv Terms

- Accepting
  - Embracing offers made by other performers
  - Is about listening & building off of each other's ideas
- Blocking
  - Rejecting information or ideas offered by another performer
  - Shuts down the interaction
- Gift/Offer
  - Action or dialogue that advances the scene



**And ... Action!**

**Now it's your turn!**





# Debrief

- How did that feel?
- Hard, huh?
- What worked? What didn't?
- Note that communication was open!





# Communication: Building Trust

- Like any relationship, trust is important
- Trust is built through communication
- It can take time to build and take seconds to erode
- Ways to build trust:
  - Provide reliable information
  - Transparency



# Communication: Comprehension

- Are you listening / reading to respond OR to understand? (BIG difference)
- Comprehension is a key element of our job
- Communicating a response is much like responding to an RFP or Solicitation:
  - There are details we should review before responding
  - If you respond too quickly, you might receive an answer similar to an “RWR” (returned without review)
  - Consider the tone or language of the response. Is it defensive, passive, understandable? Are you speaking the same “lingo?”



# Communication: Consistency

- Consistent practices can help ease communication between Faculty and Research Administrators
- Standard procedures allows us to infer what the PI is thinking
  - For example, Graduate Research Assistants can have a set rate based on their FTE
  - Keep it simple, keep the FTE's at 25%, 50%, 75%, 100% and have corresponding dollar amounts.
  - The PI can communicate the GRA effort required on the project
  - From this information, we will know the budget amounts for GRA effort, fringe, and pending on your institution tuition remission.
- If you work consistently with another College within your University, it might be helpful to know their practices as well



# Communication: Speaking the Same Language

- We live in a world of acronyms and alphabet soup. Does everyone on the message understand the abbreviations?
- Different languages for different offices:
  - OSP: references the system wide proposal number.
  - College: references the College tracking number, if applicable
  - CGA: references the Fund, Organization, and Program number
- Research Administrators can be like the Rosetta Stone, helping to translate communications to various offices



# Communication Summary

- Who are you communicating with; who is the stakeholder?
- Find your communication strengths!
- Communicate with one voice (possible PoC) and with clarity
  - Avoid the telephone game and possible fishing excursions
- Some faculty will ask around (go fishing) until they get the answer they want.
- Bad communication leads to mistrust.
- Be adaptable!
- Engage in consistent practices.



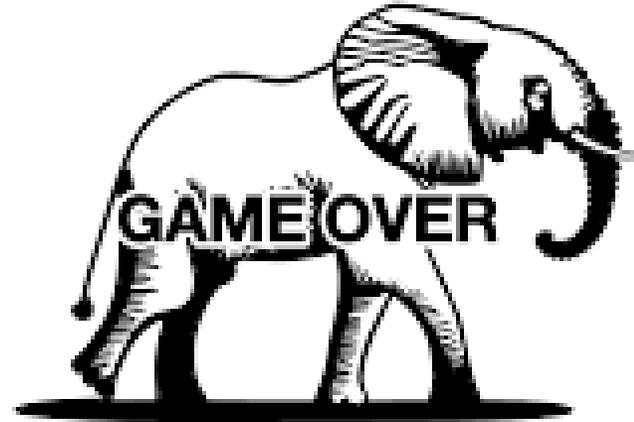
**Let's Play Again!**

**THE ELEPHANT GAME**

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**Do not look  
at the elephant.**

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# Debrief

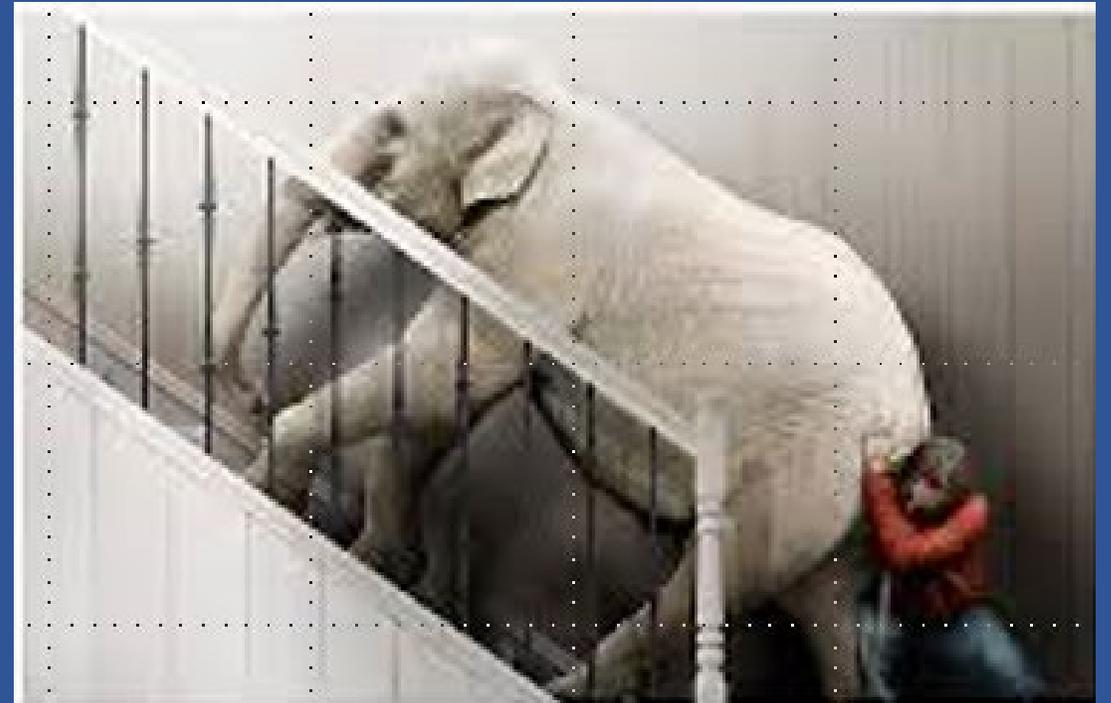
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# Let's Play Again!

Pushing Elephant Up Stairs





# Debrief

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# How does Improv relate to Research Administration?

- RA is a team sport – there are no stars
- LISTEN to what your colleagues and the PI are saying
- Don't anticipate a response – respond to what is said
- “Yes and” builds on what is offered
- Respect what others are saying
- Be part of the solution
- Mistakes are opportunities (to do better)



# One Last Time!

## Putting it all together

One person is PI and one person is Research Administrator

Scenario: PI is stressed because their first grant is due in a week and they have no idea what they're doing (but think they do). Research administrator wants to help PI but PI is just not understanding. Time to panic! Or...time to **improv**?

Use the tools you've learned for a "yes and" discussion to resolve.



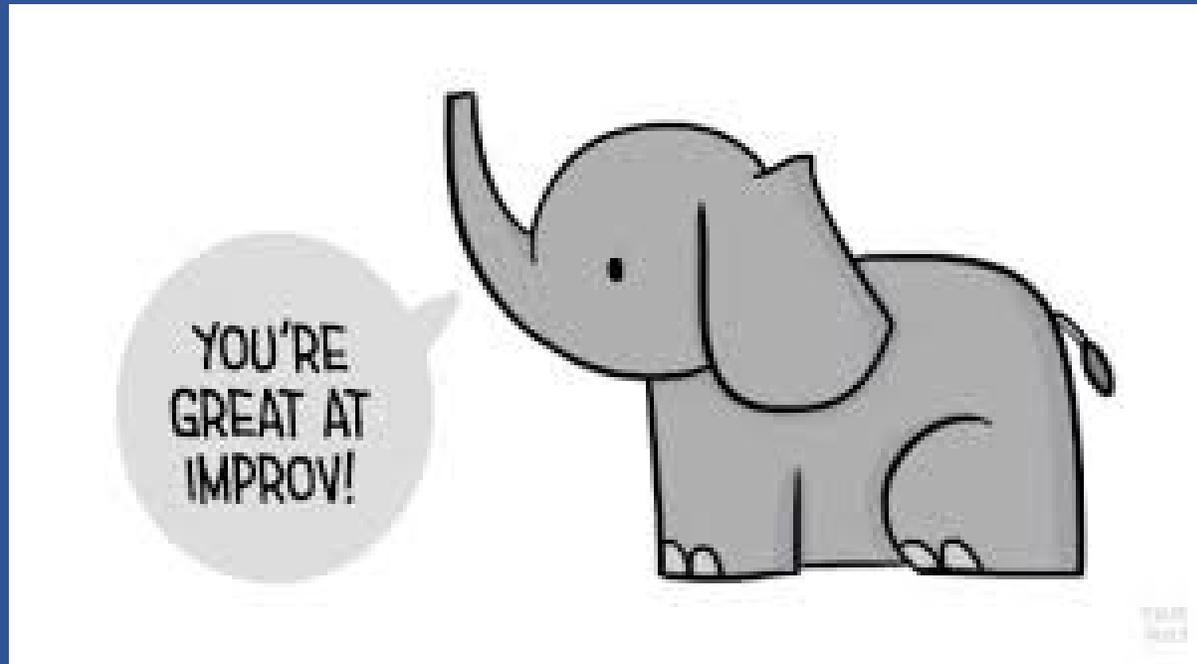
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Y'all!





For Fun, watch what not to do in Improv



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6wY9OwqJ2A>



## Resources/Articles

- Improv Encyclopedia: <http://improvencyclopedia.org/>
- Tina Fey's Rules of Improvisation That Will Change Your Life and Reduce Belly Fat: <https://kicp-workshops.uchicago.edu/eo2014/pdf/Tina-Feys-rules-of-improv.pdf>
- Saying No – Pumping the Brakes by Will Hines: <https://bit.ly/3eLFcbN>
- Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesleadershipforum/2014/06/27/why-improv-training-is-greatbusiness-training/?sh=4cb21d616bcb>
- Improv as a Powerful Clinical Tool: <https://www.oneruleimprov.com/2019/09/06/improv-for-anxiety-andmore/#:~:text=The%20most%20common%20therapeutic%20use,others%20can%20actually%20be%20enjoyable.>
- Getting to Yes And – The Art of Business Improv by Bob Kulhan: <https://gettingtoyesand.com/>
- Business Improv by Sarah Gee & Val Gee: <https://www.amazon.com/Business-Improv-Experiential-Exercises-Employees/dp/0071768211>



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*\* No elephants were harmed in the making of this presentation*