

Improv for Improvers: Creative Facilitation Activities

A collection of improv-based activities for process improvement facilitation

1. Hello Game

Objective

Break the ice, energize the group, and create physical and emotional connection among participants.

Instructions

Participants mill about the room and begin greeting each other with handshakes. After two minutes of standard greetings, the facilitator adds "endowments" to each greeting: specific relationships or emotions that transform how people interact. Examples include: long-lost friends, ex-lovers, someone you have a crush on, someone you're afraid of, someone you love, or a smelly person. Additional variations can include emotions (greet angrily, happily, secretively) or character types (greet like a Scottish Chieftain). Keep greetings short and superficial. The goal is variety and energy, not deep conversation.

Why This Works

This activity works because it bypasses intellectual barriers through physical movement and play. By embodying different relationships and emotions, participants practice flexibility, reading social cues, and adapting quickly, all critical skills for collaborative problem-solving.

2. Nickname Activity

Objective

Help participants learn names while building team cohesion through mirroring and matched energy.

Instructions

Participants form a circle. Each person creates an alliterative adjective paired with their first name (e.g., "Vivacious Vivian") while making a full-body gesture. The entire circle repeats the nickname in unison, matching the individual's energy and gestures. Once everyone has introduced themselves, the first person says another participant's nickname while mimicking their gesture. That person then picks up the chain, repeats

their own name and gesture, and selects the next person. Continue for several minutes until everyone has been selected at least three times.

Why This Works

Matching energy and gestures creates neural mirroring that builds empathy and connection. This technique helps participants remember names through multisensory encoding while establishing a playful, supportive atmosphere that reduces status barriers often present in healthcare teams.

3. Free Associate

Objective

Help participants access unfiltered thinking and become comfortable with spontaneous contributions.

Instructions

Arrange the group in circles. One person says any word, and the person to their left immediately shouts out the first thing that comes to mind when they hear that word. Continue around the circle with no pauses to find "something funny" or edit thoughts. Emphasize that this is not psychoanalysis but rather an exercise to lower barriers to creative thinking by accepting whatever emerges.

Why This Works

This exercise short-circuits the internal critic by demanding immediate responses, training participants to trust their first instincts. It normalizes "silly" or unexpected contributions, which is essential for generating breakthrough ideas in process improvement work.

4. Let's Plan a Party

Objective

Demonstrate the dramatic difference between "Yes, but" and "Yes, and" mindsets in collaborative work.

Instructions

Divide the room into even groups of at least 5 people each. Ask each group to select one leader. The facilitator takes both leaders outside and tells them their job will be to plan the best party ever. Meanwhile, the facilitator instructs the team members: one group is told they must start every sentence with "Yeah, but" before giving their ideas, while the other group(s) are told they must start each sentence with "Yes, and." When the leaders return, they work with their teams to plan the party, experiencing firsthand how the different response patterns affect collaboration.

Why This Works

This exercise creates a visceral experience of how language patterns shape collaboration. Leaders quickly feel the frustration of "Yeah, but" blocking while experiencing the generative energy of "Yes, and." It's a powerful, memorable

demonstration that negativity kills momentum even when team members are trying to help.

5. Collaborative Story Activity

Objective

Demonstrate that leadership is shared and that every voice can contribute to creating something unique.

Instructions

A small group stands in front of the room and forms a circle. Participants collaboratively tell a story, with the narrative morphing based on each person's contributions. There's no predetermined direction—the story emerges organically. Encourage participants to make eye contact with each other to stay in tune with the group's mood and energy. The goal is to show that even though some people may be natural leaders, everyone can meaningfully contribute to the creation of something new.

Why This Works

This activity teaches participants to build on others' ideas rather than competing with them: the core principle of "Yes, and..." thinking. It demonstrates emergent leadership and helps quieter team members recognize their ability to influence outcomes.

6. Story and Stretch

Objective

Practice active listening and retention by requiring participants to genuinely attend to others rather than rehearsing their own contributions.

Instructions

In a circle, each person chooses a physical stretch and the whole group performs it together. During the stretch, that person tells a story about the most interesting thing that happened to them in the past week (or during the improvement event). After everyone has shared, each person must select someone else's story and stretch, retell that story, and lead the group through that person's stretch again.

Why This Works

By requiring participants to retell others' stories, this exercise forces genuine listening rather than mental rehearsal. The physical component (stretching) creates a memorable anchor that aids retention and provides a natural rhythm to the activity.

7. The Sequel

Objective

Reframe project closure as momentum and help teams envision their next horizon with creativity and enthusiasm.

Instructions

Prompt the group: "If this project were a movie... what's the sequel called?" Encourage creative, playful titles. Examples include "Phase 2: Now We Actually Scale," "The KPI Strikes Back," or "PDCA Reloaded." Then ask follow-up questions: What would the sequel focus on? What must change for it to be better than the original? Use this framing to transition from endings to new beginnings.

Why This Works

Movie sequel metaphors transform closure into anticipation. This playful framing helps teams avoid post-project letdown and instead build excitement about continuous improvement. It also surfaces lessons learned ("what must be better") in a non-threatening, creative format.