

What Vet Medicine Can Learn from Improv

Adam Little, DVM

Working in a veterinary practice is filled with unexpected challenges. Each day your staff is faced with everything from managing upset or frustrated clients to resolving complex medical cases. While it can be incredibly rewarding work, it does come at a cost to individual well-being and team health. Burnout rates in veterinary medicine continue to be problematic and the suicide rate for veterinarians is multiples of that of the general population. Equally concerning: 41% of practicing veterinarians would not recommend the profession to the next generation of graduates... Clearly, there is an opportunity to help ensure the longevity of not just veterinary practice but the professionals who work in those environments. What if there was a way we could take lessons from other fields to help us manage ourselves and our teams more effectively? What if doing so didn't force us to suppress the emotions we experience in practice? Instead, we could utilize those experiences as fuel to better understand ourselves, our teams and our clients.

Improv is a fascinating medium that allows individuals to explore their creativity, strengthen their ability to work with others and develop a greater appreciation for the world around them. The core premise of improv is the ability to not just imagine, but construct rich, engaging and humorous worlds that help us explore the lighter sides of issues. It's a collaboration, not just between those performing in the scene, but the entire audience. By absorbing new ideas and information, it forces performers to adapt, create and grow characters and storylines.

In some ways, the "muscle memory" that is built up by talented improv performers consists of the same skills that can make someone a fantastic veterinarian. While we don't necessarily see it through that lens, breaking down some of the core tenets of improv demonstrates how useful learning improv can be in strengthening the abilities of a veterinary team.

Yes, And...

One of the most well known and important principles of improv is the idea of constantly building upon the ideas of others. It wouldn't be very enjoyable if every performer just said "no" all the time and the scene likely wouldn't materialize whatsoever. It's as much a mindset as it is the words themselves: *I will take whatever I am given and add to it and provide something back for people to add on.* This is also critical for business teams as it opens up channels for ideas to flow more freely through the organization. For example, Amazon devised a technique to ensure new ideas weren't being blocked as they flowed upward through middle management. The first reaction to a new idea had to be "Yes" or the manager would have to write a 2-page memo on why it was such a bad idea and post it publicly.

No Mistakes - Embrace Failure

Veterinarians are human and because we are human, we make mistakes. Unfortunately, especially in medical fields, mistakes are embraced, understood and discussed. Instead, discussions about mistakes are often suppressed, which further reduces the ability to have constructive conversations about what caused these issues and how to improve them in the future. In improv, you have to work with what you are given and constantly push through to take the scene or activity forward. If someone screws up, the show can't stop; you have to work with what you're given. Developing approaches to handling mistakes and shifting towards a more positive mentality of how to handle them is critical.

Trusting the Process

One of the unique aspects of improv is the ability to trust the process as opposed to trying to manufacture particular outcomes. Performers instead lean into every opportunity to continue to grow the story organically through the scene, the funniest moments emerge. It's probably almost impossible to predict how a scene will end up when you look at how it starts. Humor can be useful to release tension and develop new pathways to overcome frustration. The exercises themselves can be cathartic will reinforcing the value of teamwork, etc.

This is a very valuable approach for medical professionals as well. Especially as we mature in our careers, it becomes easier and quicker to make false assumptions. Our pattern recognition abilities evolve and, at times, may overcompensate for committing to the process. Think of gathering a patient history as an example. If you have seen 100's of pets for the annual vaccinations and exams, it can become routine. Perhaps client or patient biases seep into your analysis which can lead to you missing critical findings or actively listening to clients.

In this workshop, we will leverage the experiences, creativity and passion of the participants and work through a number of improv activities. Our goal is that through these exercises, we can create an outlet for some of the anxieties facing the veterinary community and use the perspectives to develop a fun, energetic and eye-opening approach to working through them. After each exercise, we will evaluate our learnings and share in a discussion about the deeper importance of each situation.

What Vet Medicine Can Learn from Improv Worksheet

Adam Little, DVM

OBJECTIVES

- Attendees will learn about the principles of improv and how they apply to business
- Attendees will participate in improv exercises which incorporate experiences, challenges and perspectives from veterinary medicine
- Attendees will evaluate scenarios from fresh perspectives and work on developing mental models that can help them tackle everyday challenges
- Most importantly, attendees will be able to relax, have a laugh and use this session as an outlet for the day to day frustrations, anxieties, and challenges that emerge from the practice of veterinary medicine.

TOOL KIT

WHAT'S IMPROV ABOUT?

- Here is a short video on the principles of improv which provide a great, high-level, introduction
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFO5PWrcGw>
- Looking for how improv can translate to business success? One of the most difficult things a person or business can do is embrace failure. This approach is key to improv and here are two resources that may help shed on a light on what can be achieved by being open about & learning from your failures.
 - How Google Embraces Failure to Deliver Moonshots:
ted.com/talks/astro_teller_the_unexpected_benefit_of_celebrating_failure?language=en
 - Post-Mortems from Founders of 300+ Failed Startups:
cbinsights.com/research/startup-failure-post-mortem/

IMPROV AND BUSINESS TIPS AND TRICKS

- Adopt “Yes, And” - Accept and Add to Situations
- Embrace Your Character and Commit
- It's OK to Fail
- Commit to the Process Instead of Trying to Engineer Outcomes
- Lift Your Teammates Up

LOOKING FOR IDEAS FOR YOUR TEAM? HERE ARE USEFUL RESOURCES WHICH COVER A NUMBER OF EXERCISES THAT YOU CAN RUN WITH YOUR TEAM

- theatrefolk.com/blog/improv-games-for-collaboration/
- improv.ca/training/exercises/
- secondcity.com/network/family-friendly-improv-games-road-trips/
- <http://improvcyclopedia.org/games/>
- Want to see it in action? Check out improv theatre in your area! It's a great way to support your local community, meet talented performers, and have a good time.
- Want to take it a step further? Lots of programs offer either classes or drop-in sessions. It can be a great way to continue the fun post-workshop.

KEY POINTS

- Veterinary practice requires individuals to be adaptable, empathetic and creative
- Veterinarians don't have a lot of readily available outlets for their frustrations
- Improv is a great way for people to develop teamwork skills, hone their creative and learn to embrace and cope with failure
- While the activities themselves can be fun, the process of improv has a lot of value in developing skills which transfer to other disciplines
- Improv is already being used across Fortune 500 companies to educate and grow leaders

