



Update

Getting In Sync

What Improvisational Theater has to Teach Co-mediators

By Ann McBroom

What do improvisational theater and co-mediation have in common? Both involve two or more people, both are guided by a structure and a set of principles, both occur “in the moment,” and both engage around previously unknown subject matter. Improvisational masters appear to shift seamlessly, blending with and moving between each other with such ease that the production might appear scripted. But it isn’t – and that’s the beauty!

Anyone who has been part of a co-mediation team, or has observed a co-mediator team, knows the potential pitfalls and challenges these teams face. It can sometimes look as though each mediator is mediating independently, or batting the lead between them like a shuttlecock in a badminton game. One mediator may dominate, and the other may remain silent. Or perhaps one mediator may head down a path that neither the co-mediator or the parties can follow. Even so, the benefits of co-mediation are great: two minds, two sets of eyes and ears, the balance of gender, race and age. Seamless co-mediation is possible, and when it happens the results are as amazing as an improvisational jazz concert, when everything goes just right.

As an improviser, you set out to create something with no preconception of how you might do it. Let’s look at the principles how we can apply those principles in our co-mediation teams.

Acceptance. Improvisational art is based on the idea that no matter what your partner hands you, you will receive it. When your fellow comic starts out with “You are a big green frog...” you might say “rrrbt”, and the show would go on. But if you say, “No, I am not!” or you be-

come speechless, the show stops. Acceptance means that no matter what comes your way, your response is always “yes...and.” “Yes, and...” adds to and multiplies the potential. A “no, but...” response, no matter how subtle, subtracts and divides. Acceptance does not mean giving in, but rather, surrendering to the idea that there are possibilities waiting to emerge.

Mutuality. Mutuality requires a symbiotic joining together. While each person maintains their own center, their own core, through give and take they develop a “third thing.” Imagine two people, each standing straight, breathing deeply, feeling their own center and gravity. Imagine a ball is placed between them, their bodies holding the ball several feet from the floor. Imagine one person begins to move, and in order to keep the ball pressed between their bodies and off the floor, the other person must also move. Each moves and the other follows in a dance of mutuality. The ball stays between them. The ball becomes their new core. This ability to “follow the follower” occurs through continual give and take, offer and acceptance.

Creativity. Creativity exists in every one of us. Remember when you were in kindergarten and your teacher asked, “Do I have any artists in the room?” How many five year-olds raised their hands? I bet you did! I know my shining moments as an artist occurred at age five. Now, let me ask you this...WHAT HAPPENED? The creativity still lies within you. Viola Spolin, the founder of improvisational theatre, describes creativity as “a greater capacity for experiencing your environment. Get out of your head, don’t let your pre-planned strategies interfere with your ability to accept the gifts your environment of-



fers.

Risk-taking. How often do you avoid stepping up, stepping out, taking a risk, because you are afraid of what you don't know, or because of the unknown outcome? If you are to practice mutuality, you must be willing to step out, accept, follow the follower. What if you are left on the stage, alone, holding the bag? Conflict is always risky, but can lead to amazingly creative outcomes. When two mediators take risks with each other, you can invite your parties into the creative process.

Trust. How would your relationship with your co-mediator change if you were able to trust that they would not leave you alone on the stage? What if you knew that they would follow you where ever you went? What if you knew that when you followed your co-mediator, they were taking you exactly to the place where you, and the parties, were meant to go? Trust is the glue that holds improvisation together. How would the mediation be different if you trusted your own instincts and the instincts of your co-mediator?

Awareness. Awareness is an illusive quality. Self-awareness requires continual checking in with our own responses. In improvisation, and in co-mediation, awareness involves all that is in our environment and it's affect on us as well as others. It requires breath, the quieting our internal "chatter," listening deeply, and the surrender to genuine curiosity.

How can you become a better co-mediator? Practice the principles of improvisation, and practice, practice, practice. It requires both intention and discipline. AND... you will love the results!

Ways to Deal with Your Worst Co-mediation Fears

*From "Improving Your Co-mediation Skills through Improv"
In-service Training*

Fear: My co-mediator is losing neutrality. Their biases are popping up all over the place.

Strategies:

1. Mediator caucus
2. Drop some large obvious hints (OK if parties notice your attempt)
3. "Interesting comment....Is that how you see things?" (Acknowledge)
Let your opinion go

Fear: My co-mediator is being disrespectful to the party and is losing rapport.

Strategies:

1. Mediator caucus:
 - politely reflect on observations from mediation
 - use open ended questions
 - possible time limits

Point out party's behavior in session, expand and hope co-mediator observes

Fear: My co-mediator is interpreting things that weren't actually said.

Strategies:

1. Check in with party for confirmation
Take a time out for a mediator caucus: say "It could be true, but I heard it a little differently."

Fear: I don't have the foggiest notion where my co-mediator is taking this... and it's going all over the place.

Strategies:

1. Caucus with co-mediator
2. Ask client "How do you think this relates to the original issue?"

Clarify -- be transparent with co-mediator: "Could you help us understand where you are taking this?"

Fear: My co-mediator is silent.....

Strategies:

1. Ask co-mediator what they are thinking
 2. Go silent
 3. Talk beforehand about splitting jobs
 4. Take a break; caucus with co-mediator
- Slow things down, slow your own speech

Fear: My co-mediator is dominating the mediation and I can't get a word in.....

Strategies:

1. Talk ahead of time about being OK to have times of silence
 2. Ask for caucus with co-mediator
- Adjust style to be more verbal