**DevOps is Improv: How Improv Made Me a Better Sysadmin**
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Improv Exercises / Team Building Activities

The activities on the following pages are often used as warm-ups by improv teams to build up the group’s energy and get everyone on the same wavelength as a team. There are many more improv exercises you can use, but these games are designed to help the group focus, improve listening skills, improve their teamwork, and learn to embrace failure.

Each of these games should be led by a facilitator, who will explain the rules of the game and determine when it is time to stop.

Improv Resources

There are many, many more improv games that your team can use. Many of these can be found at these sites:

http://improvencyclopedia.org/
http://learnimprov.com/

Almost every major city in the world has one or more improv theaters. Many of these theaters offer corporate training; this page may help you find an improv company in your community:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_improvisational_theatre_companies

The following are some improv books that I have enjoyed and recommend:

“Small Cute Book of Improv” by Jill Bernard (Huge Improv Theater, Minneapolis)
"Jill & Patrick's Small Book of Improv for Business" by Patrick Short and Jill Bernard
“Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out” by Mick Napier (Annoyance Theater, Chicago)
“The Upright Citizen’s Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual” by Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh (UCB, New York / Los Angeles)
“Truth in Comedy” by Charna Halpern (iO Theater, Chicago / Los Angeles)
“Improvising Better” by Jimmy Carrane

Finally, I wanted to put in plugs for the theaters that I have studied and performed at:

The Annoyance Theater, Chicago https://theannoyance.com/
The Comedy Clubhouse / One Group Mind, Chicago http://www.onegroupmind.com/
ComedySportz Chicago http://cspchicago.com/
iO Theater, Chicago http://ioimprov.com/chicago/
Westside Improv, Wheaton (IL) http://westsideimprov.com/

This document, and more information, can be found at http://devopsisimprov.info/
Zip-Zap-Zop

Exercise:

Form a circle. One person will make eye contact with someone else in the circle, and point to him or her while saying "Zip". That person will then make eye contact with someone else, point, and say "Zap". The third person will make eye contact with someone else and say "Zop". The cycle will then repeat. If at any time the cycle is lost, have everyone say "ah-OOGA!" while raising their hands, and then begin new cycle. Try to pass from one person to another as fast as possible.

Keys to Success:

Making eye contact with the person you are passing to is essential to confirm that they have acknowledged that you are passing to them. If you don't have that acknowledgement, it is easy to drop a cycle of “zip-zap-zop”, especially if multiple ones are going at once.

Variations:

• Have multiple cycles of "zip-zap-zop" going at once.
• Add emotions while passing the "zip-zap-zop" by passing it excitedly, scarily, worryingly, etc.
• Change how you say the words by saying things like "zippity-zappity-zoppity".
• If someone messes up, make them have to change to saying "bip-bap-bop", "clip-clap-clop", "dip-dap-dop", etc., while everyone else stays with "zip-zap-zop" (or if they had previously messed up, whichever version they should be saying). This is an advanced variant for teams that have gotten very good at the game.

Application to DevOps:

Zip-zap-zop is a game in which you must stay constantly aware of what is going on around you, and be ready to respond quickly when someone passes to you. In DevOps, you must always be ready to respond to issues and quickly get on the same page as your teammates.

Red Ball

Exercise:

Form a circle. One person will be holding an invisible red ball. They will make eye contact with someone else and pantomime handing them the ball, while saying "red ball". The person being "handed" the ball should reach out, and say "thank you, red ball". They will then make eye contact with someone else and continue the cycle. Try to pass the invisible ball as fast as possible.

Keys to Success:

Making eye contact while passing the ball and waiting for the acknowledgement is vital. If you do not have that acknowledgement, it is likely that something will be dropped, especially if multiple things are being passed at once. At the end of the exercise, the facilitator should verify that none of the objects have been dropped.
Variations:

- Pass multiple invisible balls at the same time. You can use multiple colors (green ball, yellow ball, orange ball, etc.), multiple sizes and shapes (pantomime passing a gigantic ball, a tiny one, one that is really heavy, etc.), or vary the way you pass it (basketball shot, throw it like a baseball, etc.)
- Choose random objects to pass around, such as "a regal crown", "a fishbowl", "an adorable puppy", etc. When you pass these objects, pass them like you actually would handle that thing.
- If your team is getting really good at this game, pass multiple objects that sound very similar, such as "red ball", "red bowl", "Red Bull", and "rubble". This will force players to focus more on the game.

Application to DevOps:

Like zip-zap-zop, this game requires you to be aware of what is going on around you, but you must also focus on the details and really listen to what your teammates are saying. In DevOps, you must always listen to what teammates, users, and others are saying and pay attention to the details.

Five Things

Exercise:

Form a circle. One person will turn to the person next to them, pick a topic, and say "<Name>, tell me five <things about a topic>", such as "Bob, tell me five flavors of ice cream". The person will then name off five things, and after each one, everyone in the circle should count "One!" "Two!" "Three!" "Four!" "Five! Five things!" after each item. The person who answered will then turn to the person next to them and continue the cycle around the circle. You should answer as quickly as possible, without worrying about if the items you named off are correct or not - if you can't think of anything, make up words or say something in gibberish, because every answer is correct.

Keys to Success:

Don't think too long about the answers to the question; it's more important to say something and keep the rhythm of the game rather than come up with the best answer. For the example above, a response could be "Chocolate!" "One!" "Vanilla!" "Two!" "Square!" "Three!" "Frog!" "Four!" "Rocky road!" "Five! Five Things!"

Application to DevOps:

This game helps you to learn to think and respond quickly, rather than trying to come up with the best answer. In DevOps, system administrators have a tendency for “analysis paralysis”, where the focus on finding the “best” answer sometimes prevents us from responding quickly to requests and the needs of our users and peers.
Mind Meld

Exercise:

Form a circle. Two people should each choose a word in their head. They will look at each other, and say "One, two, three, <word>!" clapping on each word. The last words will be different, such as "car" and "tree". One of these people will then turn to the person on the other side of them, and those two people will try to think of a word that connects the two words that were previously spoken. They will do the count again, and each say a word that they think connects the two previous words. As an example, to connect "car" and "tree", one person might say "curb" while the other says "accident". The team will continue around the circle until two people say the same word. Try not to repeat any words previously spoken.

Keys to Success:

Always base the word you are guessing as the connecting word only on the two previous words - not one said several rounds ago. This will help keep you in the moment and listening, because thinking too much about it will lead you to not listening to what is being said right now.

Application to DevOps:

When you are facing a crisis or exploring new opportunities at work, your team must be on the same page. If everyone in your group has a different idea of what needs to be done or is working on a problem in a different way, this may lead to chaos. This game will help you learn to focus, listen to your teammates, and learn to come to a mutual decision based on everyone's contributions.

One Word at a Time Story

Exercise:

Form a circle, and get a suggestion of a title of a story that has not been written. Going around the circle, the group will tell this story by having each person say one word. Eventually, the sentence or story will come to an end, at which point the facilitator should get a suggestion for a new story. Don't worry about adding in punctuation.

Keys to Success:

Don't think too much about the word you want to say - if you are trying to think of something, it's likely that it may not make sense by the time the story gets around to you. Listening to what is being said is much more important. If you accidentally say the "wrong" word or don't say an actual word, that's fine - embrace those "mistakes" and incorporate them into the story.
Variations:

- Instead of saying one word at a time, you can say one sentence at a time.
- A variant of this game is called "Conducted Story", in which the team forms a line rather than a circle, and the facilitator points at a person to tell a story. They will continue to talk until the facilitator points to someone else. The other person should immediately continue the story until the facilitator points to someone else. Continue this pattern until the story reaches a natural end.

Application to DevOps:

System administrators have a tendency to start thinking about solutions to a problem without listening to the person describing the problem. This game focuses on listening to your teammates and adding on to what they have said. If you are busy thinking of what you want to add, it may not make sense by the time the story gets around to you. In DevOps, you may miss vital information if you are not truly listening to someone when they are describing a problem.

Loserball (game invented by Jill Bernard of Huge Theater, Minneapolis)

Exercise:

Form a circle. This game is similar to "Red Ball", in that you will be passing an invisible ball around the circle, but there are only two rules that must be followed: 1.) You must not catch the ball, and 2.) You must be incredibly supportive of your teammates' inability to catch the ball.

Keys to Success:

This game is all about embracing failure and learning from it - always be completely joyful and supportive of your teammates, and feel no sorrow when you fail to catch the ball. Always find something praiseworthy in what they did, and cheer the fact that they did not catch the ball.

Application to DevOps:

Everyone makes mistakes. This game is about embracing mistakes, and learning to celebrate them rather than blame the person who made a mistake. In DevOps, every one of us will make mistakes throughout our career. Rather than punishing someone when they make a mistake, use it as an opportunity for growth by learning from it. In addition to helping us learn how to avoid that particular mistake in the future, mistakes often lead to helping us learn more about a particular technology, spark ideas about how to do things better, and can help reveal other potential problems that may not have been noticed otherwise.