

business issues

BETTER PROJECT INTERVIEW PERFORMANCE

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Does your team really behave like a team?
Use these exercises to strengthen
your presentations.

YOUR FIRM has been shortlisted for a new project. Now, the prospective client has requested that your “team” prepare a formal presentation as the next step in the selection process. At this stage, it’s possible to overlook one element that could be the difference between winning the contract or walking away empty-handed. When representatives of your firm are out there making a presentation to win new business, are they behaving like a true team? Do the decision-makers and influencers they are addressing believe your team is credible and effective? Do they experience an overall chemistry?

As AEC business development and marketing professionals, we know by the time we’ve gone through the selling cycle—relationship-building, due diligence, proposal submissions and site tours—the shortlisted competitors are *all* well-qualified. Some might even argue that once we’ve received the invite to interview for the project, the playing field is completely level.

Wow. After all that effort. A completely level playing field. That stings. What can you do to get your firm to stand out from your shortlisted competitors? Naturally, you’ll prepare a team presentation strategy that tightly addresses the buyer’s topmost concerns. Of course, you’ll assemble relevant, eye-catching visuals. It’s certain that you’ll aim to engage client participation throughout. And no doubt you’ll rehearse not just the presentation, but also your management of questions and answers.

But guess what—your competitor is doing everything you’re doing. And their stuff will likely be good. Very good. So now you need another way to set your firm apart. How about underscoring—through actions and behaviors, rather than just

idle words—how dynamic, communicative and committed your team really is?

For some firms, this portrayal of “team” is easy. For example, a multi-disciplined architecture/engineering firm with a low turnover rate may be able to put forth an interview team with a proven track record of successful projects, along with a family-esque demeanor. But often, our interview presentation teams are composed of disparate professionals. Perhaps we’ve strategically included outside sub-consultants, entered a joint venture, or simply created a brand new team from our internal staff based on their areas of expertise (makes sense), yet with little to no experience actually working *together*.

How in the world can *that* team come across as compatible, innovative and easy-to-work with? If you have an open mind, the answer is simple: team building through improvisation (improv) exercises.

Improv exercises are not just for comedians. Savvy business professionals recognize that mastering improv skills will result in myriad team-building benefits: confidence; on-the-spot thinking; high energy; collaboration; creativity; authenticity; high performance; the list goes on.

Scores of improvisation exercises can be found on the Internet. One good collection of free resources is the online Improv Encyclopedia (www.improvincyclopedia.org). In addition to material, though, make sure that the facilitator of these exercises is articulate, motivational and fun. You may not think “fun” is relevant to your prospective client, but “fun” often translates into “easy” and “have-a-sense-of-humor.” Even the driest or most complicated of projects will benefit from these attitudes.

Below is a sampling of improv exercises that address priorities typical of a prospective client. Variations exist for every exercise, so feel free to adapt them to attain your specific communication goals.

Consistent message; listening skills: *Conducted Story* gives team members the opportunity to build a cohesive story together. My version: Three to seven participants form a line in front of the room. The audience provides a main character, a location, and a “mood”/emotion. The Conductor starts the exercise by pointing to a participant, who begins telling a story. At any point, the Conductor can switch to another participant, who needs to continue the story flawlessly, even if the switch happened in the middle of a sentence (or the middle of a word)! After one trial run, we do a second round. Here, participants are



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asked to incorporate delivery skills that they will use in a business pitch context: body language to demonstrate listening to one another; taking a step out in front of the group when speaking; maintaining proper vocal tone and gestures to match their words; etc. And yet another variation: participants that hesitate or have grammatical errors will be asked to sit down until there is just one participant remaining.

Synergy and idea-generation: The *Yes, and* exercise involves building upon one another's ideas, while simultaneously demonstrating wholehearted support for one another. This one works well, since a core component of a high-performance team is its ability to respect one another and to produce outcomes that are greater than the sum of the individuals put together.

Innovation, and keen on-the-spot thinking: *What are you doing?* offers a way for participants to think quickly on their feet and separate visual from oral interpretations by asking participants to act out one action, while stating that they are doing something completely different. *Translator* is another opportunity for creative in-the-moment expression, as one participant is responsible for translating another participant's gibberish talk.

Trust: *Siamese Twins* forces two participants to anticipate what one another will say in response to audience questions, so that they can say it in complete unison. *Mirroring* is a similar follow-the-follower exercise that can build both trust as well as non-verbal rapport by requiring participants to synchronize one another's movements in complete silence.

Conflict resolution: *Yes, but* depicts conflict that can circle back to agreement. This is similar to *Yes, and*, but the group experiences conflict first. When they have exhausted their 'but' statements (resulting in unproductive tension!), they proceed to ease around to agreement. This simulates the release that's felt when a team resolves a disagreement. Further, it underscores the priority of conflict management.

Articulation; concise communication: *I'm an expert* enables participants to practice fielding questions. The participant gives a one minute spiel on why he/she is an expert at something specific, then invites questions from the audience. This is one of my favorites, as I find the delivery skills really stick. My version requires the "expert" to point their feet at the asker; rephrase the question in their response; confirm understanding; share eye contact with the room then return to asker; etc.

Enthusiasm and real-ness: There are a plethora of improv exercises (many categorized as 'WarmUps') that increase enthusiasm, build comfort, and eliminate barriers. Some are high energy and physical, such as *Pass-the-Clap* and *Samurai*.

Further, virtually every improv exercise involves a "better-be-in-the-moment" and "united we stand, divided we fail" mentality. In short, improv exercises demand the very essence of "team."

Now let me be clear—I'm not suggesting that your team assume that honing their improv skills will give them permission to deliver off-the-cuff interview presentations. On the contrary, the more the team prepares and practices its presentation content and delivery, the more that same team will have the freedom to deliver in a tone that sounds conversational and natural.

But, what I am suggesting is that practicing one's ability to be in-the-moment through improv has the added benefit of equipping the team with the flexibility to adjust from the planned presentation in response to (perhaps unexpected) audience input. Equally important, improv skills will strengthen the team's overall synergy and rapport. And, believe me, this will be well-received by the audience—your future client. MSC

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