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Learning to Lead, Unscripted: Developing Affiliative Leadership Through Improvisational Theatre

Suzanne Gagnon¹, Heather C. Vough¹, and Robert Nickerson²

Abstract
We argue that improvisational theatre training creates a compelling experience of co-creation through interaction and, as such, can be used to build a distinctive kind of leadership skills. Theories of leadership as relational, collaborative or shared are in pointed contrast to traditional notions of an individual “hero leader” who possesses the required answers, and whom others follow. Corresponding thinking on how to develop these newer forms has, to date, been relatively rare. In this article, we draw on recent research to identify three core principles for learning affiliative leadership. We then apply literature on improvisational theatre and its main skill areas to build a model of developing affiliative leadership, and illustrate the model through an improvisation workshop in which participants learn the skills and principles that it sets out. The model and workshop may serve as useful tools for those searching for methods to develop leadership in contemporary organizations.

Keywords
leadership development, improvisation, improvisational theatre, leadership skills, affiliative leadership, collaborative leadership, leadership ontology

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Improvisation is too important to be left to chance.

Paul Simon

That contemporary organizations face high levels of complexity, a rapid rate of change and increased ambiguity has become, perhaps, a truism. Corollary links to a heightened need for collaboration may be less well established (Bloch & Whiteley, 2007; Simonin, 1997; Wheatley, 2006). Developments in leadership theory have begun to reflect the contextual changes; scholars increasingly emphasize the role of collaboration and relational factors for effective leadership (Crevani, Lindgren, & Packendorff, 2010; Raelin, 2006; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and note that organizational leaders need to have the necessary skills to lead under these conditions (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009; Zaccaro & Klimoski, 2001). Although classic theories of leadership focus on top-down models in which an individual leader provides a vision and motivates employees to work toward that vision (Bass, 1993; Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; Howell & Avolio, 1993; Judge & Bono, 2000) emerging theories call for “post-heroic” models that stress relational and social dynamics in leadership, and learning, adaptability and an ability to work collectively through change (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Cunliffe, 2009; Fletcher, 2005).

Despite the emergence of such theories, literature on the development of these forms of leadership remains relatively rare. Rather, the tendency has been to focus on a single, dominant “leader” and thus on individual-level competencies and outcomes within leadership training (Lord & Hall, 2005). Although there may be relational aspects within traditional views of leadership, these are often not what are trained, in preference of individual skills and knowledge sets reflecting top-down, individualized models (James and Ladkin, 2008). Leadership scholars note that the constitution of both leadership and of its development continue to be subjects of contested debate (Parker and Carroll, 2009), and others point to a general lack of scholarly work on leadership development and training (Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008). Others critique further a stress on surface-level, technical skills within leadership development practice, rather than the tacit and embedded learning necessary for adaptability and change amid uncertainty (Grint, 2007; Parker & Carroll, 2009).

In this article, we work from a premise that teaching and learning leadership requires significantly different approaches to development, in method and in pedagogical philosophy. We suggest in particular the promise of improvisational theatre training, marrying its key skills with leadership skills for the current organizational environment. The article develops a conceptual model of how the skills that can be gained through improvisational theatre help to address the gap in approaches for developing what we refer to as affiliative leadership. Improvisational theatre skills are directly aligned with those suggested in newer leadership theories—adopting an external focus, developing adaptability to changing conditions, optimizing curiosity and responsiveness, and honing abilities to listen, interact, collaborate, and co-create with others. More broadly, the training embodies collaborative and collectivist norms. To develop this argument, we review literature in alternate understandings of leadership.
and propose the notion of affiliative leadership based on three core principles. We then combine the principles with key concepts in improvisation to introduce a conceptual model of the development of affiliative leadership. To illustrate the use of improvisational theatre for leadership development, we describe a workshop that our third author has delivered in many business contexts, to explain how improvisation articulates the principles and develops the identified skills of affiliative leadership.

Our main contribution in this article is the creation of this model, extending theory in leadership development for alternative ontologies of leadership. We hope that through highlighting its components and elements, the article encourages future research interested in understanding how to develop skills in social and collaborative forms of leadership.

Leadership for Collaboration and Adaptability in Organizations

Recent literature introduces a range of emerging perspectives that understand leadership as post-heroic, that is, as having shifted in significant ways from models and discourses in which leadership rests within an individual at the top of hierarchy, to leadership as a collective or shared capability within an organization (Fletcher, 2005; Kramer & Crespy, 2011). A number of related theories expressing a non-hierarchical, non-position-based notion of leadership have emerged. Each conceptualizes leadership, either normatively or critically, as a highly social and outward-focused process or set of practices, rather than residing in an individual “leader” with particular traits, who holds an authority position (James & Arroba, 2005; Pearce, 2004, 2007). Accordingly, each calls for decision-making that is a shared process rather than a question of vertical influence of leaders on members. For example, in her relational leadership theory, Uhl-Bien (2006) has defined leadership as a set of actions or practices that bring people together in pursuit of a common purpose. Such practices may exist anywhere in an organization. Indeed, organizational, and effectiveness depends on the distribution of such practices across individuals rather than on the actions of a small group. Fletcher (2005) emphasizes that post-heroic, post-individualist theories see leadership as a social process or set of interactions—a dynamic, multidirectional collective activity, and moreover, that leadership is viewed as learning, centered on outcomes related to growth for the community, rather than on control or individual results for the leader. Similarly, from the education field, Elmore (2000) outlines a distributed leadership theory in which leadership is redefined “away from role-based conceptions and toward a distributed view” where many actors in the organization, in this case teachers, create through their shared expertise the leadership necessary for action and change (p. 35).

Critical scholars have similarly emphasized a process ontology for leadership as co-produced among organizational members, both “leaders” and “followers” rather than belying a sharp distinction between the two (Collinson, 2005; Crevani et al.,
As organizational members construct notions of direction, co-orientation and space for action, leadership occurs in everyday processes (Crevani et al., 2010, p. 84). Thus, the presence of leadership is a function of social practice and interaction; it does not “exist” within a single person. Such socially constructed understandings of leadership understand organizational members as interdependent, intersubjective or “selves-in-relation-to-others,” shaping and shaped by a web of relationships (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 95; Geertz, 1973). At the same time, while leadership may in practice, as well as theory, be distributed across and throughout hierarchies, this will not necessarily signify an end to enduring power relations and power asymmetries that cut through and animate such distribution (Collinson, 2005). Any normative calls for new leadership practices should be understood within this context.

Highlighting the centrality of social connection for leadership, and linking this closely to climates of organizational complexity and change, Raelin (2006) sees contemporary leaders as learners who understand the adaptability of the organization as dependent on the contribution of myriad organizational actors. Within his normative model, four “operating perspectives” should characterize the practice of collaborative leadership. First, it is concurrent—more than one person can be a leader at any given time, leaders naturally share power with others, and collaborative work increases the power and ability to bring action. Second, it is collective—emerging not from individual influence but from processes of people working together toward a common objective. Third, it is mutual—all are responsible for the action, and all members count and have a voice. Fourth, it is compassionate—preserving the dignity of others within the collaborative process. Scholarship at an institutional level of analysis underlines similar principles for collaborative leadership. Face-to-face dialogue, trust building, and the development of commitment and shared understanding have been found in governance research to be crucial factors for cross-institutional and intramural collaborative leadership (Ansell & Gash, 2007). The deepening of trust, commitment, and shared understanding form a “virtuous cycle” of collaboration based on incremental or “small wins” among the implicated actors.

Goleman (2000) used the label affiliative leadership previously to denote a position leader’s capacity to build relationships in the workplace. We use the term to capture the range of perspectives reviewed above and to highlight specifically the character of leadership as arising in social practice or processes. To affiliate is to connect, partner, associate or join with others (Oxford English Dictionary, 2010). Individuals can develop and enact affiliative leadership which draws power from interactive processes that embody collaboration.

**Learning Principles of Affiliative Leadership**

Based on our reading of extant theories of leadership, we identify three core principles that we believe are core to learning affiliative leadership. These are openness to multiple perspectives, learning how to create trust, and learning to set aside individual control for shared control. To identify the three principles, we asked, what are the
underlying dimensions or abilities that form the foundation of such leadership with respect to behaviors and skills? What do people need to do in their own practice and interactions with others to enact affiliative leadership?

First, following Cunliffe (2009), Crevani et al. (2010), and Raelin (2006), developing leadership that is affiliative requires building an ability to see multiple views and future possibilities—to have an openness to multiple perspectives. Curiosity and openness to multivocality and diverse ideas requires learning to adopt a focus that is directed outward, outside of oneself and toward others.

Second, affiliative leadership involves learning how to create trust with others in a particular context (Heckscher & Adler, 2006; Jameson, Ferrell, Kelly, Walker, & Ryan, 2006; Vangen & Huxham, 2003). This relates to Raelin’s call for compassion as an operating principle for collaboration, and Cunliffe’s assertion of an essential sociability and thus ethicality within relational models of leadership. Learning skills in trust building is fundamental to developing this form of leadership; a person who is able and willing to build trust engenders trust, creating a collaborative environment.

Third, affiliative leadership requires learning that control is shared. This can be accomplished by relinquishing the need for individual control over the process and outcomes of social interactions. Rather, control should be shared, based on an acceptance that in problem-solving contexts, joint working and multiple inputs often results in better outcomes than working alone (Cooke & Kernaghan, 1987; Miner, 1984). Relinquishing of individual control over the creative process may be difficult to learn for many individuals practicing leadership, and contrasts plainly with traditional models of leadership. However, it is critical if the promise of affiliative leadership is to be borne out (Huxham & Vangen, 2000). The task is to come to an acceptance and understanding that the other person’s or persons’ input has equal import to one’s own.

Although there is a fair amount of agreement about what such forms of leadership require, there is much less known about methods for their development. New innovations and approaches are called for, and one argument is for greater attention to rich experiential and action-based learning (James, Mann, & Creasy, 2007). “Learning that occurs in the midst of practice” as a “concurrent by-product of practice” is essential for the development of collaborative leadership (Raelin, 2006, p. 157).

Leadership Development: Moving Away From Individualist Methods?

Recent development literature distinguishes leader and leadership development (Day, 2001). Leader development focuses on a person and her or his personal qualities; leadership development is more, ambiguous, and stems from understanding leadership as collective rather than individual, and as a process rather than a person (Parker & Carroll, 2009). The two are not incompatible. However, it is important in the practice of development to avoid the construction of “leader” in a way that undermines possibilities for collective leadership capacity (Gemmill & Oakley,
Following Parker and Carroll (2009), we assert the importance of leadership development which “develops individuals’ capabilities to work with others in consciously connected and collaborative ways,” and “introduces an ethos of integration where the focus is on shared networks, meaning and achievement” (p. 264). Seen in this way, the role of an individual “leader” thus lies in an ability to engage with others to cocreate leadership in particular settings.

Thus emerging theories of leadership imply a need for renewed approaches to how leadership is developed. Nonetheless, and despite a range of problems associated with the design and delivery of traditional leadership programs (Simmonds & Tsui, 2010), “heroic” development models still tend to prevail in practice (James & Arroba, 2005; James et al., 2007; Reynolds & Vince, 2004). Individual evaluation methods such as competency frameworks geared to the self and to personal traits, individual coaching and other individualized assessments are still common in development programs. Self-focused development may also be particularly detrimental to individuals in “future leader” roles in flatter or more distributed structures, as the programs can unduly raise expectations that success in the program will bring practical effectiveness, and promotion, neither of which then materialize (James et al., 2007). Development programs may equally reproduce a narrow or homogeneous model of the ideal leader, along with engendering a need to conform rather than generating capacity for new ideas and innovation desired by the employer (Gagnon, 2008; Carden & Callahan, 2007). James and Ladkin (2008) argue simply that the types of leadership needed in many organizations today cannot be achieved through traditional development activity focusing on individual development. In the following section, we introduce improvisational theater and explain how it may be a particularly effective tool in helping train affiliative leadership behaviors.

**Improvisational Theatre and Leadership**

Scholars have theorized that developing an ability to improvise may be effective for enacting a range of tasks, for example, interpreting the environment, creating emergent strategies, fostering teamwork, undertaking psychological risk, listening, and communicating (Crossan, 1998). Scholars have also proposed that improvisation be used as a tool for training. Sikora et al. (2004) suggest that training individuals in improvisational skills leverages “employees’ innate tendency to adapt and adjust, rather than forcing behaviors that are out of sync with the flow of organizational life” (p. 31). Crossan and colleagues (Crossan, 1998; Crossan & Hurst, 2006; Vera & Crossan, 2004, 2005) have proposed that training in improvisational theatre, in particular, can promote innovation and effectiveness in the face of change in organizations.

However, despite such statements as “In [the current organizational] context, leadership is an improvisational and experimental art” (Heifitz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009), the relationship between improvisation and leadership has rarely been directly studied, though it has been suggested. For example, Pruetipibultham and McLean (2010)
describe improvisation as a tool that helps managers understand and respond to a given situation without prejudgment or preset plans. In Barrett’s (1998) theoretical examination of how jazz improvisation can inform organizational learning, he asserts that learning to improvise involves gaining provocative competence, “a leadership skill that involves challenging habits and conventional practices, challenging members to experiment in the margins and to stretch in new directions” (p. 618). In addition, discussions of the role of improvisation for leadership have suggested how, through improvisation, individuals learn to distribute leadership such that sometimes they are in the spotlight, and sometimes they are in the role of supporting others in the spotlight (Barrett, 1998; Newton, 2004). In this way, an “accompaniment” role can be seen as part of the position leader’s job, fostering the input of others, and practice in improvisation can facilitate individuals recognizing the appropriate times to lead in a more traditional sense, and when to “follow” (Mirvis, 1998).

Improvisational theatre, arguably the most collaborative of all the arts (Thomson, 2003), consists of an “ensemble of actors accepting suggestions from the audience and creating a scene onstage without any script” (Vera and Crossan, 2004, p. 729). Its goal is to construct new thinking, ideas and other creative outcomes through a commitment to collaboration and “thinking inside the box.” The latter involves using the resources one has at hand in new ways, but more than that, pinpointing current resources and seeing these very much as a pathway to creative solutions rather than a restriction.

Improvisational theatre is highly egalitarian; there is no single, formal leader, and responsibility for the outcome is wholly shared. Every participant or actor is responsible for every other participant (Crossan, White, Lane, & Klus, 1996; Sawyer, 2000); success relies on actors being highly attentive and responsive to each other (Johnstone, 1987; Spolin, 1999): “What professional actors do to be better improvisers is to learn techniques, games, and principles that help them to focus on the moment and to embrace the moment of collective creation” (Vera & Crossan, 2004, p. 736). Their heightened awareness assists with cocreation of the “story,” which in organizations may serve several functions, including replacing the need for a coordinating plan (Moorman & Miner, 1998; Vera & Crossan, 2005).

The lessons learned from improvisational theatre in particular, in contrast to other forms of improvisation such as jazz, are directly transferrable to organizations because “resources” used to convey meaning in improvisational theatre (words, posture, facial expressions, and tone of voice) are the same as those used in organizations (Vera & Crossan, 2004). In this section, we discuss the skills that can be gained through training in improvisational theatre, and ultimately can be used to develop affiliative leadership. As will be described, central skills in improvisational theatre include maintaining an external focus, openness, listening and responsiveness, and an ability to create trust and “action space” for collective development of new ideas, approaches, methods and outcomes “inside the box.” The following section then presents our model for how the learning principles of affiliative leadership can be developed through learning and practicing of these skills.
Two manuscripts that we are aware of that directly investigate the relationship between leadership and improvisation: Cunha and colleagues (2003) and Newton (2004). Cunha and colleagues (2003) find that certain leadership behaviors, such as creating minimal social and task structures and convincing employees of the importance of the task, encourage individuals to improvise in turbulent environments. Here, the focus is on how those in leadership positions can create the conditions in which others can improvise. Newton (2004) focuses on how practicing improvisation can be used to develop leadership skills. He writes,

Changing circumstances require the ability to adapt immediately. Improvisation is the development of a skill set that allows for exactly that type of automatic adjustment. Those interested in leadership should pay close attention to the pedagogy of improvisation. (p. 98)

Thus, the significance of dynamic and uncertain environments for much contemporary leadership underpins Newton’s recognition of an important connection between leadership and improvisation. In addition, similar to Cunha and colleagues, the ability to set the context or climate for improvisation by others (“followers” in more traditional terms) is seen as important for leadership, and within a leader’s skill set.

We extend this work by arguing that the core skills of improvisation, and in particular of improvisational theatre, are intricately related to the ability to enact affiliative leadership. Below we describe “being in the moment,” “whole listening,” and “focusing on the other” as three skills that can be taught through improvisation. While each of these interrelated skills has been alluded to in the previous literature, here we seek to deepen an understanding of these skills and how their development through training in improvisation creates affiliative leadership.

First, to improvise well requires the willingness to act spontaneously and “be in the moment.” To be in the moment an individual must allow him or herself to switch from habitual to active thinking (Barrett, 1998). By allowing oneself to be in the moment, one fosters the ability to be mindful (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Being in the moment allows an individual to release her or himself from thoughts of the future or thoughts of the past and fully address the “here and now.” Vera and Crossan refer to awareness and alertness and, with reference to Crossan et al. (1996), write that improvisation “requires individuals to give their full concentration and attention to the moment, rather than being preoccupied with what happened before or what could happen later” (p. 741). By not being in the moment, the individual may lose the opportunity to discover something new and potentially generative.

“Whole listening” is the act of paying complete attention to the environment that one is in, without the distraction of future plans, past mistakes, or interpersonal concerns. Whole listening transcends auditory perception and involves awareness of and attention to all forms of sensory information. An individual absorbs cues from the environment without judgment about the self or other, and is able to both more fully comprehend the meanings and intentions of others, based on actions as well as words,
as well as to react quickly and generatively (Barrett, 1998). Hatch (2002) describes the importance of listening within improvisation in terms of “opening space for others’ ideas” (p. 81).

A third and related skill developed in improvisational theatre is “focusing on the other,” be it an individual or a team of individuals. Improvisers “develop a remarkable degree of empathic competence, a mutual orientation to one another’s unfolding; they continually take one another’s (musical) ideas into context as constraints and facilitators in guiding their choices” (Barrett, 1998, p. 613). As such, the focus is not on the self but on the others in the context. When one focuses on the other, the action and creative process become not a property of the individual but of the dyad or the group with whom one is interacting. Extrapolated to leadership, and consistent with alternative ontologies of leadership such as that suggested by Crevani et al. (2010), the interactive process itself constitutes leadership, rather than the actions of a particular formal or position leader. Accordingly, leadership is not a property of an individual but rather of the process of empathic collaboration and interaction.

A Model of Developing Affiliative Leadership Through Improvisation

In this section, we draw together the different threads of theory presented to build a model of the development of affiliative leadership through improvisation. Figure 1 presents a model that introduces the major skills of improvisation and the process through which their development can lead to the three major learning principles of affiliative leadership. These skills appear in the improvisation literature, as discussed in the previous section. Here, we present them within an integrating model to understand how they work together and how they connect to the learning principles of affiliative leadership.

In the model, the process begins as individuals learn the main skills of improvisation—being in the moment, whole listening, and what we call “taking care of your partner(s).” We group these three skills under an umbrella term that we label an external focus. An external (or extrinsic) focus means taking one’s attention off of the self, of self-oriented goals and concerns, and of a desire to protect self, all of which block creativity and the potential for collaboration.

The model posits that through learning and practicing these improvisation skills, an individual can begin to enact the learning principles that can lead to affiliative leadership. It does so in the following ways. First, through practicing enacting an external focus with interaction partners, participants see how openness to others’ ideas and inputs can lead to productive results, jointly setting a direction. Linked to this, participants’ progressive recognition of their interdependence through using the skills within an external focus, allows trust to build between individuals, allowing them in turn to be more open and willing to take risks (Edmondson, 1999). Scholars emphasize the close connection between trust and conditions of risk and interdependence that characterize improvisation (Vera & Crossan, 2005). Trust can grow out of the experience
of improvising together, as individuals interact and support one another in an uncertain situation. We theorize further that for individuals to use these skills in the workplace and thus to build processes of affiliative leadership, they must continue to practice using them with colleagues, which in turn builds trust and willingness to take risks. Moreover, the trust further develops the principle of openness to multiple perspectives, giving the individual an ability to welcome different voices and views. The third learning principle, the ability to share control, is also developed through continued practice as the individual learns that personal control is not necessary and is in fact counterproductive to the collaborative and relational processes that underpin affiliative leadership. Principles of openness and sharing control thus combine with trust building and willingness to accept risk to enable the individual to enact affiliative leadership with others. The processes work together to create the collective capacity and agency that constitute affiliative leadership.

It is worth highlighting the major brackets in the bottom and top of Figure 1. Above the bottom bracket “learning the principles of affiliative leadership” we argue that through training in improvisation individuals begin to learn to take an external focus and, through practicing with others in the improvisation workshop, they can begin to
see how applying a learning focus translates into openness, trust, and the willingness to share. Through the top bracket, building relationships, we argue that if individuals go through improvisation training with those with whom they will ultimately be working, the characteristics of the relationships that they begin to build through the training may follow them to the workplace. As such, improvisational theater helps to both train specific skills as well as build relationships, both of which can be translated into behaviors at work. In the next section, we illustrate the how the skills and principles can be taught through a workshop in improvisational theatre.

**Affiliative Leadership Development in Action: A Sample Improvisation Workshop**

This section describes an improvisation workshop for leadership development, emphasizing how the skills discussed above are progressively taught and layered on one another through activities or improvisation “games” (Spolin, 1999). The overall objective of the workshop is to teach the foundational skills of the improvisational actor that can be applied to the workplace, across hierarchical levels and organizational settings. We argue that the workshop is applicable to almost any setting where people wish to build leadership skills that give life to fundamental interdependence and interconnectedness for organizational conditions of change and complexity. The workshop described here would run over a period of 4 hours, in two sessions, and would ideally involve around 25 participants, allowing for one-to-one interaction between the instructor and the participants. The room where the workshop is held would be flat and open, and furnished with portable chairs only, one per person. This, or similar, workshops have been run successfully by the third author, a professional improvisation actor, teacher, and consultant in myriad corporations over more than a decade.

A number of guidelines are important in framing the workshop as a learning session, to help build receptivity to the learning. In delivering the improvisation activities, the instructor works to enact the trust building that he or she is teaching. The training itself thus ideally serves as a safe or backstage space (Goffman, 1956) or holding environment (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2010; Winnicott, 1965) for learning. Three guidelines used by the third author to create this climate are (a) full participation of all in the room, (b) having all participants work with a range of other participants, and (c) fun. Full participation and interaction is essential because actively doing the exercises makes possible an understanding of what is being taught on a visceral level. Moreover, it assists in creating the backstage space in which no participant is being evaluated in any sense outside of the immediate moment of cocreation with one’s peers. Thus, the instructor and the format aim to create conditions where power dynamics in the setting are reduced or ideally, nonexistent. It is a safe environment for learning. Working with a wide variety of other participants in the room for the first several exercises encourages learners not to become tied to one relationship. It teaches that anyone with whom one is interacting is their “partner” in that situation and therefore must
receive similar attention. Switching groups and interaction partners helps participants to see that the concepts being taught are transferable across interactions or relationships, and that different people produce different results within the collective creative process. Finally, fun provides energy, allowing the participants to be more open to considering new thoughts, feelings, and activities. From the beginning and throughout the workshop, the instructor creates an atmosphere of fun and humor. The cues given to start activities, for example, are always lighthearted and absurd rather than serious. In this way, the instructor works to release pressure, again making the activities not about individual “performance” but about collective learning. The humor rooted in this dialogue and in the activities themselves is viewed as important in helping participants to engage fully.

The workshop finds foundation in principles of experiential learning, through which experience can be transformed into knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Fry, 1975). Action learning theory (Pedler, 1997; Revans, 1982), focusing on learning through resolving “real” problems or issues, is relevant when participants are co-employees in an organization. Trends within human resource development (HRD) emphasize the place of experiential and action within efforts to increase employee capacity and potential (e.g., Buus & Saslow, 2005; Cho & Egan, 2009). In the workshop described here, participants experience physical, affective, and cognitive engagement to absorb the lessons connected to the core skill areas through intensive experiential learning. The workshop methods aim for learning that is affective as well as cognitive; for example, participants may feel the “joy of collaboration” as described below and can take their feeling from that moment and bring it into their relationships in their own work and organizations. Furthermore, the method of development is itself egalitarian, plurivocal and participative, matching the leadership principles it aims to teach.

First Session

The first session of the workshop unfolds through a series of games that become increasingly demanding and require participants to attend to more and more stimuli, including being highly conscious of what others are doing. For example, in “apples and oranges,” a variation on musical chairs in which participants move around a set of chairs when they hear cues for either apples or oranges, after a few rounds the instructor adds a chair to the circle of chairs, meaning that all participants could conceivably have a chair. However, few participants notice this addition because they have been so focused on auditory cues (e.g., a colleague shouting “apples” or “oranges”), and on finding a chair for themselves, that they ignore some of visual cues that could provide valuable information. The instructor then explains to the participants the importance of being in the moment and paying attention to what is going on around them, with an emphasis on whole listening.

Once participants have practiced being in the moment and whole listening through a series of exercises, a new layer of complexity is added to the games. Now, they are also asked to begin “taking care of their partner.” As explained above, taking care of your partner means fully attending to your partner’s (or partners’) words and actions,
building on these, and adapting to them to move a scene or a story forward. For participants to take care of their partner(s), they must be attentive to that person or persons, help them out when they begin to struggle, and actively avoid putting them in a difficult situation where they might become stuck. The overall goal is to have the collaborative effort continue so that a joint creation—the story—results.

For example, in “word-at-a-time,” participants are divided into groups of four, and each person says only one word as the story progresses either clockwise or counterclockwise around the group. Through several rounds, the instructor encourages people to stop trying to control the story, to “take the focus off of yourself,” to “put your ego on hold,” and to understand that “your only responsibility is to make your teammate’s word work,” that is, carry the story forward. The impact is clear in that groups who achieve this type of listening and building are able to keep their stories going, while others are not. In this way, “word-at-a-time” teaches whole listening which allows the participants the liberty to be creative and to begin to see the results of collaboration.

A third activity, “story line/pop-up,” tends to bring the biggest change in participants as they increasingly use and embrace the skills being taught. In this game, six to eight people stand on a line in front of the whole group. The instructor gives them a title. One person voluntarily steps forward to start the story. This volunteer continues telling the story until someone else steps off line to tap him or her on the arm. The first storyteller then steps back to the line as the second person assumes the role of storyteller. Participants are told that the sole rule in the game is “take care of your partner.” This is emphasized in subsequent rounds. The audience watching learns what happens when a storyteller runs out of ideas and is left in front of the line with nothing to say. The participants on the line learn to subvert their own personal fears and self-consciousness because they must take care of their partner to keep the story going.

In “pop-up,” the same basic exercise is conducted, except the team sits in a circle and individuals pop-up to be the storyteller, instead of stepping forward. This is often the first moment when participants fully let go of their internal focus and allow themselves “the sheer luxury of sitting there and being creatively inspired by the words of others,” as the instructor tells them afterward. This “joy of collaboration” is experienced not only cognitively but also emotionally and even viscerally. These feelings and sensations in turn have an impact on participants’ understanding of leadership in that they experience collaboration as producing results which they could not achieve on their own. They experience that there is power in this ability to combine one’s capacity with others’, without regard to ego.

Second Session

The afternoon session of the workshop moves participants from learning how to take an external focus to applying that learning as a position leader, and to relationships that may continue beyond the workshop. In particular, building trust and focusing on rela-
tionships and their central role within successful collaboration are key themes in this session.

“Story choir” is a fundamental game that incorporates all of the lessons that participants should have learned up to a point and gives the opportunity to experience how having an external focus can lead to trust. This is also the first game in the improvisation workshop to include a formal (or position) leadership role, which is rotated among participants, and in which, perhaps fittingly, the “leader” must stay silent. The game starts as one member of a group of six to eight participants is chosen to play the role of conductor and is given a pen. The other people in the circle are asked to get up and stand in a semicircle directly opposite the person with the pen, forming a small choir. The goal of the collective is to create a story by listening and building on the work of the group members who have gone before, similar to the earlier games. The goal of the conductor is to support and protect his or her team. To get an authentic performance from the leader, this latter point is not made until the end of the experience. The instructor asks the conductor to begin by pointing at one person in the choir. That person begins to tell (create) a story and must continue to do so until the conductor moves the baton (pen) to another person in the choir, who picks up the story where the first person has left off. That person continues on with the story until the conductor moves the baton again, and again. Thus, the conductor determines who speaks, when, and for how long. After a few rounds, the instructor asks the conductor to switch places with one of the choir members. Once all of the participants have each had a chance to play conductor, the exercise ends.

The instructor now tells the participants that the purpose of the exercise was to investigate leadership as displayed by the conductor. The instructor asks, “What are the types of things that the conductors in your group did that made it hard for you as an individual, and/or you as a creative collective, to achieve the goal of building a story?” The instructor also asks the opposite question, “What are the things the various conductors did to make it easier for you and your team to be successful?” Some of the responses participants have given are as follows:

One of our conductors would tip you off with a little glance if she was going to point at you next. That made me comfortable.

We had a conductor that would point at you and if you went blank or had nothing he would just keep pointing at you. He wouldn’t move on. It was very unsettling.

Some of the conductors would let you finish a sentence and others would switch in the middle of a word.

At this point, the instructor points out that all of the behaviors that helped the teams be successful had a common thread: they engendered trust between conductor and choir. The results of this exercise can be dramatic. The players can see how much
easier the story is to create when the conductor is protecting and supporting the choir members, but even more importantly, participants feel what it feels like to work in an environment where the leader can make your teammate nervous, apprehensive and perhaps, speechless. The final question before the exercise ends is “What kind of conductor do you want to be?”

A second game in the second session of the workshop is “storyteller and assistant.” Here, a key goal is building relationships, again tied to building trust. This time, two individuals sit facing each other. One individual begins telling a story. It is the job of the assistant to listen to the story being told and if the storyteller ever appears to have difficulty continuing with the story, the assistant is responsible for either giving them a cue to help them continue the story, or to continue the story for them for a short period. In the words of the instructor, the storyteller and assistant exercise allows participants to “re-ignite the creative” when the other person falters. In this way, the story should be continuous and the storyteller is able to rely on the other person whenever he or she begins to falter. There are a number of outcomes of this exercise. Participants playing the role of assistant feel how much easier it is to be creative when they are externally focused. Through focusing all of their attention on the storyteller, they are able to take care of their partner, and collaborate in the story while not blocking. Continuing the theme of experiencing the impact for trust and relationship building, if the assistant supports the storyteller when in need, the storyteller has the opportunity to actually feel the impact of trust on their ability to be creative. A further valuable lesson from this exercise is that storytellers learn that they do not have to create the story all by themselves; rather the best stories arise when the assistant provides the storyteller with cues.

Table 1 summarizes how the games build improvisation skills.

**Significance of the Workshop**

Through the workshop, participants have worked on each of the core skills central to affiliative leadership. By the end of the workshop, they begin to cognitively understand and viscerally feel both the creative and affective benefits of using the skills. We argue that they also begin to enact the principles that we view as central to affiliative leadership. Participants thus take away from the workshop an introduction to the skills and how to use them, as well as a heightened awareness of the core learning principles.

This knowledge can then contribute to organizational and HRD through transfer to the workplace in a number of ways. For example, if a team of colleagues engages in the training, their skills for an enhanced ability to surface and develop their collective creativity and agency are improved, and could bring a range of benefits to their work. The training develops individual managers’ skills in eliciting the full potential for idea generation and collective leadership in his or her group. The workshop can build an executive’s competency to engage in joint decision making and thus engender new types of outcomes, through bringing multiple voices to difficult problems and change initiatives. More generally, HRD is aided through building the collective creativity and problem-solving ability of the leaders and employees already in the organization. The
training serves to build their confidence, resourcefulness and flexibility—a partner-first, team-first mind-set that builds trust within the organization and leads to the creation of a collaborative environment.

Returning to the three learning principles, the first, openness to multiple perspectives, is developed in the first part of the workshop where the training is designed to raise individuals’ awareness of their own creativity, through increasing their attention to what prevents them from being more creative within the collective setting of the workshop. The training does so by encouraging participants to be less concerned about their egos and needs for self-preservation or protection, that tend to act as barriers to participation, an instead take an external focus. The activities in the first part of the workshop, centered on “word-at-a-time” in various group sizes, progressively show participants that the “danger” or risk to self involved in such collaborative storytelling, is in practice an illusion. In fact, the danger actually lies in the insistence on being focused on one’s own ideas and priorities. Stories become “stuck” when individuals predetermine what they want to say, holding back the entire group. In this way, individuals learn that for the group to proceed, each individual must listen to and respect the words of the others. Awakening or unblocking of participants’ collaborative capacity involves, then, taking the focus from the internal to the external, away from self and toward others, the context, and the shared task at hand. This openness to multiple perspectives is necessary for the practice of affiliative leadership. Individuals cannot engage in the collective practice of taking action, generating ideas and exercising collective agency without the ability to express and enact this principle.

Successful collaboration does not eradicate individuality or individual creativity, but rather increases the chances that it is optimized. In one improvisational theatre scholar’s terms: “collaboration does not diminish, but rather releases and expands what is unique to any artist” . . . (Thomson, 2003, p. 119). This principle of openness to multiple perspectives reflects the capacity of improvisational skills to require all voices within the collaborative process. Thus, individuals’ ability to express ideas is increased and fostered in improvisational theatre rather than thwarted.

The second principle, learning how to create trust and build an environment of trust, is achieved in the workshop through highlighting the contrasts between experiences of “followers” where there is little trust, with those where trust is given and thus established further through the interactions. As discussed above, participants learn through the “story choir” game how their own actions in the formal leader role can contribute to or detract from trust building within a collaborative process. Moreover, from the beginning of the workshop, participants are encouraged to contribute—this is the basis of the games. They are encouraged to express ideas, no matter how odd, in an environment where all are focused on the same task. Taking the risk of trusting one’s collaborators or partners, and seeing the productive results of that attitude of trust, then helps to develop it further. This “virtuous circle” is underlined by previous research on how trust is developed for example through others fulfilling promises (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Heckscher & Adler, 2006; Jameson et al., 2006). It is doubtful whether the
practice of affiliative leadership could occur without individuals exhibiting an ability to create trust.

The third principle, sharing control and setting aside a need for individual control over process and outcomes, begins to be built early in the workshop with the storytelling games. Letting go of a focus on self (internal focus) is again part of the process. This principle is then developed further through activities such as “story choir” in which the conductor, to develop a good story, must follow rather than lead his or her choir members’ flow of ideas. Trying to control the outcome is anathema to the creation of a good story. Rather, the most effective conductors share control with the choir members, recognizing that it is their ideas that will help to move the story forward. The principle of relinquishing individual control relates further to the notion of accepting what is “inside the box”—accepting that such restrictions serve to assist with collaborative problem solving, rather than detract from it. Sharing control is an individual capability central to the practice of affiliative leadership. With additional practice and attention following the workshop, participants can continue to develop each of these capabilities and reap their benefits in their work context. Table 2 sets out each of the games and their learning outcomes for affiliative leadership.

Discussion

Affiliative leadership and its development using improvisation contribute to new leadership theory through identifying specific skills which we argue are closely linked to the practice of these forms of leadership. We have argued that the core skills of the improvisational actor can be applied directly to the development of affiliative leadership, challenging conventional top-down leadership models. Both critical and normative scholars have deconstructed such popular assumptions about leadership and effective leadership, arguing that leadership does not “exist” as a function of an individual’s traits or position as formal power-holder, but emerges through co-construction or social construction in practice. The processes of co-construction, then, may be viewed as key to understanding what is inside the “black box of leadership” (Conger, 2004); it is here that our theory of affiliative leadership development aims to make a contribution. Working in the field of educational leadership, Elmore (2000) has argued that distributed leadership is an emergent property of a group or network of individuals. Our ideas take this thinking considerably further in proposing that the capacities required to achieve such distribution in practice are affiliative capacities—they connect individuals and build affiliation in order that leadership can be produced through interaction. While distributed theories tend to focus on structure and pooling or sharing knowledge, our work helps to specify the individual capabilities and social mechanisms that can act as the enablers for making the structure (i.e., multiple actors) work to produce collective leadership.

In this article, we have pin-pointed elements that we see as related to developing or reconstructing leadership—focusing on its attendant skills—within the theoretical context of these emerging theories. We believe that highlighting such skills provides a
starting point from which to develop innovative methods through which these foundational skills can be developed. One such method is the use of improvisational theater. We would not argue that training in improvisational theatre is all that is needed to bring affiliative leadership into practice, nor that affiliative skills are the only skills relevant for leadership. We would hope, however, that our model may spark further thinking and research about how to develop new forms of leadership. In this regard, we join development scholars who have argued that the types of leadership needed in many organizations today cannot be achieved through traditional development activity focusing on individual development. Our model aims to develop a collective capacity for leadership, and skills that are geared toward generating this capacity, rather than toward competencies that develop only the individual. Understanding leadership as a process rather than the property of an individual, our model aims to build the skills that organizational members require to enable and construct that process. Two further points are important within this argument.

First, through emphasizing the learning of principles and building relationships, our model includes an important role for continuing to build affiliative leadership over time, in context. The learning principles represent the development of more enduring attitudes or beliefs consistent with the main skills of the model, and which the skills serve to introduce and bring awareness. For example, learning to be open to others, opinions and perspectives is not developed only within the training context of course, but continues afterward through continuing to practice the skills in interactions. Having been trained in

Table 1. Summary of How the Main Improvisation Games Build Improvisation Skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Type</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word-at-a-time</td>
<td>Encourages participants to listen (whole listening), to shift in focus from oneself and own thoughts and individual interests, for a more successful story/collaboration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story line/pop up</td>
<td>Asks participants to be in the moment and take care of their partners, and subvert their own fears/internal focus, experiencing fruits of collaboration—seeing the results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story choir</td>
<td>Demonstrates how a position leader who has an external focus and wholly listens to their group is more successful than one who does not; Understanding why this is so—development of climate of collaboration through taking care of your partner; position leader’s key role in influencing and shaping climate through creating trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller and assistant</td>
<td>Demonstrates to assistants how their external focus makes creativity easier and how taking care of your partner enables collaboration in the story while not blocking. Allows experience of the impact for trust and relationship building: If the assistant supports the storyteller when in need, the storyteller has opportunity to feel the impact of trust on their ability to be creative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games</td>
<td>Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apples and oranges</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word-at-a-time</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story line/pop up</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Games</th>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Learning outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story choir</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>A group of six to eight participants stand in front of one “conductor” or choir master who holds a pen and directs who should begin telling the story. The conductor has the power to move the pen whenever he or she likes, and this has a key impact on the story and on choir members’ ability to be creative. The conductor’s actions can serve to create trust or to deplete it entirely, for example, if they move the pen too quickly, without warning, or hold the pen on one person regardless of whether that person has run out of ideas. Each person has a turn playing conductor; the debrief then focuses on what the conductor(s) did to facilitate others’ storytelling, and what the conductor did that had an opposite effect, and why/how.</td>
<td>Building trust from an external focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storyteller and assistant</td>
<td>Second</td>
<td>Participants sit in groups of two and decide who is “A” and who is “B.” “A” begins by starting to tell a story and continues to tell the story as long as he or she can. When A’s flow of ideas begins to wane, B (who has been listening intently) adds some new information or a new direction which serves to reignite their partner’s story. The game is then repeated with the roles reversed. In the final iteration of the game, the players begin playing with one as storyteller and the other assistant, but this time the instructor periodically calls out “switch.” When they hear this, the players switch roles while maintaining the same story. The players realize that by being externally focused on their partner (either as the one telling the story or the one listening), they have a much easier time accessing their own creative capacities. The storytellers learn that having an assistant ready to help at any moment allows them to travel further afield creatively. They trust that help will be there.</td>
<td>Building relationships from an external focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
the improvisation skills, participants are more able to work on this principle, further
developing their ability to do so through practice. Similarly, learning how trust can be
built with others in a particular context enables one to continue to do so over time, con-
tributing to the creation of a collaborative environment. The third learning principle
involves sharing control. Again, the training provides heightened awareness of the ben-
efits that this can bring and the confidence to practice further, in addition to concrete
skills connected to this ability. There is thus a strong tie to HRD with respect to capacity
building and organizational development in the work group and potentially, more
broadly (Werner & DeSimone, 2008).

The building of relationships spurred within the training is another element within
the model that is transferred into the workplace and thus continues over time. In this
case, the improvisation workshop serves to jump-start relationship-building and appli-
cation of the improvisation skills within workplace relationships, in a way that would
be unlikely to occur otherwise. The potential for transferring relationships into the
workplace distinguishes this type of training, we believe, from much normative work
on the development of leadership skills (London & Maurer, 2004). The workshop and
indeed follow-up workshops or training can be used to initiate a high quality relation-
ship between colleagues and within teams. In turn, this links to HRD in assisting orga-
nizational members to continue to build the relationships connected to affiliative
leadership within the regular day-to-day business of the workplace (Crevani et al.,
2010). In this sense, possibilities for further relational learning that occurs through
social connectivity, dialogue and inclusion (Cunliffe, 2002; English, 2006), should
transcend the workshop context.

Second, our model along with the nature of the training illustrated here envision that
participants will be enabled and encouraged to transfer the broader philosophy of collec-
tive learning into their own work settings. For example, collective learning through
action and experimentation, as well as humor and a nonevaluative environment, help to
construct a philosophy of learning that participants can work to develop in their own
workplace. Such collective learning and collaboration are not easy to accomplish and
should not be confused with amiability or cooperation (Thomson, 2003). Not a mere
reference to possessing “a generous and modern spirit,” rather:

. . . collaboration (in improvisational theatre) is a verb not a noun, a process of
engagement, a map more than a destination. The process fosters a community
of makers, who engender a shared vision, which in turn fuels individual cre-
ation. A single (artist), working alone, cannot achieve that same vision and the
accompanying discoveries. (p. 118)

This philosophy, embodied in the training, further helps to show participants
how leadership may be practiced as a function of everyday processes in which organi-
zational members interdependently construct direction and space for action, and where
the potential for leadership in every social interaction is emphasized (Crevani et al.,
2010; Fletcher, 2005). Unlike role-play or other forms of experiential learning in
workshop settings, improvisation training requires more rapid and frequent responses
to stimuli, in a fully “unscripted” sense. In role-play, there is most typically a script for
the players to follow, at minimum in the sense of guiding who they are in the role, as
well as a particular expected outcome or resolution to the scenario being played out.
In improvisation training, the scenario itself is in construction, there is no script what-
soever beyond a brief scene description, or merely a word, from which the participants
are then asked to create a story. Although both are action learning methods, improvisa-
tion is more spontaneous and open-ended, and thus more fully dependent on collabora-
tion of those engaged in the activity. In the words of the third author, “It’s not about
‘me’, it’s about ‘us’; and not only some of us, but all of us.”

More generally, the use of improvisation acting to enhance leadership teaching is
consistent with the emerging stream of research that emphasizes how art can be a valu-
able tool for improving the understanding and practice of leadership (e.g., Bolman &
Deal, 1991; Harrison & Akinc, 2000). For example, Callahan, Whitener, and Sandlin
(2007) point to the art of storytelling, as found in popular cultural artifacts including
film and fiction, to be highly promising in teaching leadership. Other HRD scholars
have made close links between the arts and organizational development, for example
in its ability to facilitate culture change (Pruetipibultham & Mclean, 2010). The link to
rapidly changing contexts and individuals’ ability to improve “powers of perception
and creativity” is also invoked in this work. An increasingly turbulent environment,
along with global interconnectedness and decreasing costs of experimentation, all sug-
gest the timeliness for leadership of skills that artists rely on for innovation and adapta-
tion to change (Adler, 2006). Arts-based methods have the potential to enhance
leadership training by providing transferrable skills, fostering reflection, aiding in
identifying universal essences or truths, and enabling one to flourish through creating
something (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009). If improvisational theatre is indeed the most col-
laborative of all the arts, we suggest that it has a key role to play within the different
arts being brought to bear on the building of contemporary leadership.

The leadership which improvisation can assist in developing, is egalitarian and
democratic in orientation. New ontologies of leadership emphasize that leadership
dynamics are no longer understood as between leader or power-holder on one hand,
and follower on the other. Leadership is not fixed within the individual but is con-
tained in social interaction. We have aimed to demonstrate that improvisation skills
can greatly improve the quality of that social interaction, and thus the likelihood that
multiple voices will be brought to bear on the creation of direction and space for
action, that is, on leadership (Crevani et al., 2010). Future research could examine
these relationships more closely, through empirical study of leadership processes
within particular contexts, following training in improvisation. Such research could
further explore the connections in practice between the different elements within our
model of developing affiliative leadership.

In closing, we draw attention to a key caveat within our argument. As eloquently
argued by Fletcher (2005), the transformational power of post-heroic leadership forms,
embedded in a logic of effectiveness that is relational and interdependent, will not
flourish in organizational structures and systems built exclusively on principles of
individualistic meritocracy. In posing a radical challenge to more conventional work practices, structures, and norms, the new forms may in practice be co-opted or brought into the traditional discourse on leadership in ways that will silence their potential (Fletcher, 2005). We hope that our model of the development of affiliative leadership assists in giving practical weight to the potential of these newer forms of leadership through identifying core learning principles and skills, and proposing a method for their development. We hope further that this work spurs additional research into how best to build skills for affiliative, “unscripted” leadership.

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