

BUBBLES IN THE BOARDROOM: USING NON-TRADITIONAL TOOLS IN TRADITIONAL SETTINGS

Maggie Kolkena, *Third Thought Consulting*



A Cautionary Tale

The workshop participants, mostly engineers, dutifully listened as the workshop leader started the daylong session. "All right, everyone. Let's get started. My name is Jonathan and I'm your facilitator for the day. Before we get started I'd like us to break the ice with a little game. It's called *Two Truths and a Lie* and it's a really fun way to get to know each other."



Each person was instructed to create two truthful statements and one untrue statement. He or she would share the two truths and the lie with fellow participants. The group would then guess which statements were true and which were false. After some nervous laughter and groaning the group started in on the game. Some of the participants jumped right in and others needed some cajoling from Jonathan. The game felt a little awkward but most of the team was making an effort. Until, they got to Chip.

Chip had been sulking and when it was his turn he paused before speaking. Very slowly he said, "I like icebreakers. I like icebreakers. I hate icebreakers."

Painful Lessons

This really happened to a friend of mine. And when he told me the story I was thankful that it hadn't happened to me. "There but for the grace of God go I." I thought, because I often spice up my workshops with games and experiential exercises. Any of us who are willing to experiment and try new things with our clients run the risk of irritating participants. The risk is justified because non-traditional tools are a powerful way to access the intuition and subconscious in ways that enhance rational tasks. What, then, are some guidelines for introducing non-traditional tools in traditional settings?

Principles for Introducing New Tools

Over my career I have developed a set of principles that guide me in knowing when and how to use nontraditional tools. They are:

1. HAVE A DARN GOOD PURPOSE
2. MEET 'EM WHERE THEY ARE
3. SELL LOW, DELIVER HIGH
4. EXPLAIN AS LITTLE AS YOU CAN
5. MANIPULATE THE SPACE
6. OVERTLY RETURN TO PURPOSE

Principle #1: Have a Darn Good Purpose

My primary purpose in using non-traditional tools is that they take participants to new places. In most corporate settings we are so deeply into our heads that it's difficult to access our emotions and intuition. When I use comedy improvisation games and imagery exercises, it is to allow participants to inform their logic with feelings. There is an emerging body of work that explores the connection between the rational and the emotional. Emotions are not a luxury. They are essential to rational thinking.¹ I use non-traditional tools for four purposes:

- Beginnings and Endings
- To Spark Ideas
- For Team Development
- Instant Energy

Let's look at each of these.

Beginnings and Endings. The onsets of a team meeting or a long-term project are terrific opportunities to set a positive tone and to create an image of what the group wants to create. Imagery exercises are helpful in creating visions of the future and they needn't be elaborate. It can be as simple as asking the team to reflect a moment on the question, "What do you want others to say about your project when you've completed it?" This is a good example of an imagery exercise that is safe with an unknown group and, yet, it prevents a team from going straight to task in a purely rational way.

Endings also offer an ideal opportunity to use non-traditional tools because everyone knows one another better. One exercise, for use at the end of an all-day meeting, off-site, or project is this: Provide a box of toys and ask each participant to select a toy that symbolizes the efforts of the group. Using the toy as a metaphor allows imagination and creativity and is often a powerful way to conclude work.

¹ Descartes Error

To Spark Ideas. Linear thinking is not capable of opening the unconscious mind.² When a team is solving a problem or working on an opportunity they need more than brainstorming to explore possibilities. Creative Problem Solving³ uses a number of non-traditional techniques stimulate idea generation. Music and sound, scent, visual images and recall exercises all tap the intuitive and emotional chords of our minds.



For Team Development. Comedy Improvisation games are fabulous team development tools. On a superficial layer they help teams laugh together and build energy. At the same time, teams can reflect on the games to help them



interpret how they are working together as a team. "Tell a Story" is one game that helps teams understand how well they are listening to one another, how well they build on one another's work, and how successful they are in building something in an aligned way. To play it, one person starts telling a story. The facilitator points to another team member who picks up the same story mid-sentence until the facilitator points to someone else. A good debrief helps the team extract the lessons. Over time the team can develop increased skill in listening in order to build and align.

Instant Energy. Let's face it--energy droops after lunch and when processes are tedious but necessary. When a group needs a little pick-me-up I pull out a speedy game of "Bunny, Bunny." In two minutes everyone is laughing and alert again.

Principle #2: Meet 'Em Where They Are

As a cub consultant I really believed that it was important to hear equally and often from each and every team member regardless of his or her style. I still remember the deer-in-the-headlights look I got from "Brian" when I said, suddenly, "And, Brian, we haven't heard from you. What ideas do you have?" For all I know, Brian was perfectly content to listen to that part of the meeting. The only thing I remember is how uncomfortable he was. Since that day, I have worked to identify processes and techniques that appeal to multiple individual styles. The same is true for groups.

There are some tools I will never use with some clients. Top teams developing strategy just aren't ever going to be comfortable playing a quick game of "Bunny, Bunny." At least, not until we all know each other a bit better. And I reserve some non-traditional tools for only the most playful and trusting groups. It's vital to match the activity to the comfort level of the team.

Principle #3: Sell Low, Deliver High

As you introduce an activity, try to keep your editorial comments to yourself. If you are an enthusiastic extravert working with an introverted group of engineers, say, you will only create hurdles for yourself if you describe anything as "Fun". Simply describe the purpose of the exercise and the expected outcome. If you've used the activity before, mention that 'other



² [Living the Wheel](#)

³ [Creative Approaches to Problem Solving](#)

engineering groups have found this activity to be useful'. This will help you establish credibility. Another good way to establish credibility for an activity is to cite the underlying research.



Principle #4: Explain as Little as You Can

Sell them the steak—not the farm where the cow was raised. Most groups do not benefit from technical names for facilitation techniques nor the theoretic pedigree.

Ideally, you can call the exercise something simple. Even better, name an activity by its purpose. For example, "We're going to do an integration exercise now." Or "The next activity will help us identify what's important to this team." Or, "This game will sharpen our skills in listening to one another."

Principle #5: Manipulate the Space

This is shorthand for "When you move from a rational, linear task to an intuitive, emotional task it is helpful to change the space." This can be done in a number of ways. First, you can arrange to have a breakout room with comfy chairs. Second, you can push the chairs and tables out of the way. Third, you can go outdoors for part of the activity. When you change the space it signals the fact that we are going to do something different now.

Principle #6: Overtly Return to Purpose

Recently, I co-facilitated a two-day off-site with 38 engineers. We brought in a pair of comedy improvisation players who conducted a series of games in the afternoon. At the end of the day, the evaluations showed that 1/2 of the participants thought the improvisation games were the strongest part of the day and 1/3 thought it was the weakest part of the day. It wasn't until the second day when we asked table teams to interpret the experience that the teams were able to link the activity back to the core purpose of the off-site.

Always have objectives for a session. Always adhere to Principle #1 and allow groups the opportunity to reflect on the activity and extract the lessons that apply to their purpose. Then it will be easy to link non-traditional tools to group purpose.

Matching Your Tools to Your Essence

There is no limit to the kind of tools available to experimental facilitators. The non-traditional tools I use fall into two categories: Comedy Improvisation Games and Imagery Exercises. My background in the performing arts makes comedy improvisation a comfortable and useful tool for me to use with groups. They also match my delivery style.

I have a close colleague, however, that will *never* use comedy improvisation games. They just don't match her style. She's much more effective with a less wacky tool such as a prepared imagery exercise. She knows the value of touching intuition

and emotion to inform rational work and she chooses other inventive tools. Another colleague uses experiential exercises to great effect.

So, the final advice is 'Know Thyself'. Seek out and use tools that fit your style and your beliefs. Non-traditional tools are a marvelous way to expand your work and facilitate rich experiences for your clients.



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About the Author



Maggie Kolkena is the sole proprietor of Third Thought Consulting, located in Portland, Oregon. The purpose of her work is to increase group and organizational capacity to innovate.