

DESIGNING YOUR LIFE

APPENDIX 1: DESIGNING YOUR LIFE IMPROVS AND WARM-UPS

THE FOLLOWING WARM-UPS AND IMPROVS are great ways to start a class, a brainstorming session, of any group exercise that needs energy and connection among the participants. We often explain that these warm-ups are essential because people at work have their rational left brain highly stimulated by budget meetings and emails. These exercises help move them to use their more visual and creative right brain. This is essential if you want to have high-quality and innovative ideas.

"LOW-THREAT" WARM-UPS

This first group of exercises are what we call "low-threat" warm-ups. They are used to warm up participants and get them in the mood for some creative behaviors and thinking. They don't ask the participants to do anything that is too risky or embarrassing. Use these improv exercises to warm up a new team or to introduce novices to some of the core concepts in design thinking.

MESSAGE GAME

- **DURATION** ~3 minutes
- **SIZE** 5–10 is optimal, but the line can be any length because no one is "waiting to play."

It is important to give the instructions to this exercise in this order. Do not say, "Okay, now we are going to give one another massages." "Massage" is a very high-threat word and many people will opt out of the warm-up if you do not sequence the instruction, as follows:

- **IMPACT** this is a great exercise to get a group grounded and "in the room." It causes some laughter, and the sense of touch opens some people up. It's a good way to start a workshop or a creative work session.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** It's good for improving the mind/body connection and shows the value of relaxing before you start problem solving.

YES, AND . . .

- **DURATION** 2–5 minutes
- **SIZE** This exercise is done in pairs, so the size of the group doesn't matter.

Ask people to stand up and get into pairs. If you have an odd number of people, no problem, some teams can be threesomes. You can start the pairs with a prompt about an event or they can pick their own starting points if they have done this exercise before. Good starting points are: "Let's plan a birthday party!" (or an anniversary party, a Fourth of July party, a barbecue, etc.).

One person starts by making a declarative statement about the prompt, such as "We will have hot dogs at the barbeque!" Their partner says, "Yes, *and . . . ?*" and then adds something to the idea. In this example it might be, "Yes, *and* we could make s'mores for dessert." From that point on, the partners exchange ideas, always starting with the phrase, "Yes, *and . . .*"

It is important for this to go on long enough, 2–5 minutes, so that the participants run out of obvious statements and the ideas have to get a little goofy or crazy. After an appropriate amount of time, end the warm-up with an affirmation such as "nice job" or "good work." Follow with a short round of applause.

- **IMPACT** This is a great improv to use with brainstorming beginners. The "Yes, and . . ." format forces positive, noncompetitive behaviors and gives the participants a format and process that ensures some wild ideas.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps develop empathy (for yourself and others), "curiosity," and "radical collaboration."

SOUND BALL

- **DURATION** ~5 minutes
- **SIZE** 5–8 is the best size for each group. Do not try and do groups larger than 10; otherwise participants will spend too much time waiting for the ball to come around to them.*

***In general, design thinking novices get bored and disengage when the group gets too large, because they are not practiced at staying focused and "in the moment."**

Ask everyone to stand and form a circle in his or her group, or in groups of 5–8. Explain that there are two roles in this game: the *Thrower* and the *Catcher*.

The instructions for the *Thrower*: Hold an imaginary "ball" in your hands. Act as if the ball has a specific size and weight. Also assign a weird sound to the ball. Make eye contact with someone, the *Catcher*, and throw him or her the "ball" while making the weird sound you have selected for the ball.

The instructions for the *Catcher*: Be prepared to catch the imaginary sound ball. Make good eye contact with the *Thrower* and indicate that you are ready to catch the ball. As the ball is thrown to you, catch it and repeat the sound associated with this ball as you catch it.

Then the *Catcher* becomes the *Thrower*. The *Thrower* gives the ball a new size, weight, and sound. He or she selects someone to be the new *Catcher*. The *Thrower* throws the ball to the *Catcher*, and this process of throwing and catching, changing the sound each time, repeats for 3–5 minutes. After an appropriate amount of time, end the warm-up with an affirmation such as “nice job” or “good work.” Follow with a short round of applause.

- **IMPACT** This exercise improves nonverbal communication in groups, improves communication, teaches “targeting” of information, and increases one’s awareness of group processes.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps foster group cohesiveness and being “mindful-of-process.”

ALPHABET GAME

- **DURATION** 5 minutes or longer
- **SIZE** Teams of 3–4 work well; larger teams are possible if the participants are good listeners, but can get frustrating if they have to start over and over and never complete the task of reciting the alphabet.

Ask everyone to stand and make a circle in a group of 3–4 participants. The goal in this exercise is to complete reciting the alphabet, one letter at a time, from “A” to “Z.” The rules are:

- 1 Everyone has to participate and say letters.
- 2 Each person can say only one letter at a time.
- 3 The next letter has to come from someone new.
- 4 If two people say a letter at the same time, the group has to start over again from “A.”
- 5 You are not allowed to go around the circle in order.

As a group gets closer and closer to “Z,” the cost of speaking over one another (i.e., having to start over again at “A”) goes up and up and the tension rises. After an appropriate amount of time, end this warm up with the question “How many teams got through the alphabet once?” “. . . twice,” “. . .three times?” Then give an affirmation such as “nice job” or “good work” and end with a short round of applause.

- **IMPACT** This exercise improves a group’s ability to listen to one another and take turns. It often identifies people with poor listening skills or people who tend to dominate conversations, and can be used as a skill-building exercise or a diagnostic for the instructors.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with active listening, “radical collaboration,” empathy, and being “mindful of process.”

PROVERBS

- **DURATION** 3–5 minutes
- **SIZE** Groups of 5–8 are the best size. Do not make groups larger than 10; otherwise, participants will spend too much time waiting for their turn.

Ask everyone to stand and make a circle with his or her group. The goal in this exercise is to complete a proverb, which is made up of single words uttered at random as the “proverb” goes around the circle. One person starts by saying the first word that comes to mind, then the person to their left says the first word that comes to mind based on the word they just heard, and this pattern repeats. There is no fixed formula for making a proverb; the group will just know when one has been completed. Once the proverb is complete, the sequence stops and everyone in the circle puts their hands together in a prayer position, finger to finger, and says, “Yes, yes, yes, yes . . .” for a few seconds.

End with a short round of applause.

Encourage participants to be in the moment, to speak their word quickly, to think about sentences, and to not cache words for later use, but to respond to the word just spoken.

- **IMPACT** This is a great exercise to improve a group’s ability to listen to one another and build off other’s ideas (words). It is an especially good warm-up before brainstorming sessions.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with active listening, “radical collaboration,” empathy, and being “mindful of process.”

STOKING EXERCISES— FOR GETTING THE ENERGY UP!

These next exercises are all about getting the energy up in the room, with your team, or for your project. They involve high-energy behaviors and taking some personal risk. Use these with teams that are already comfortable with the idea of improv and understand the importance of working on the mind/body connection. It is always a good idea to let the participants know that they do not need to follow the instructor if they are not willing to perform the physical tasks. We often say something like “Participate in these exercises in a way that feels comfortable to you. If you are feeling out of breath or off-balance, stop and regroup.”

THE PSYCHIC GAME *or* SAY THE SAME THING

- **DURATION** 3–5 minutes
- **SIZE** This exercise is done in pairs, so the size of the group doesn't matter.

The pairs count off to three and then simultaneously say a word. This first word is whatever comes to mind and is essentially random. Then each person tries to find the word that links the two words just spoken to one another. The pairs count to three again and then simultaneously say the word that they think is “in between.” If those words do not match, they repeat the process. Eventually they say the same word.

Once that happens, they should shout out and hi-five each other and the facilitator should shout out “We got a match!” The pairs keep going until a majority of them have found a match.

It is not uncommon for some teams to find a match two, three, or more times, while other teams struggle to find one match. Some pairs will get better and better at this and some will even be able to “match” on the first try. (Bill had a team of women who, after some practice, simultaneously matched their first word three times in a row! Statistically, this is highly unlikely.) End the exercise with a short round of applause.

- **IMPACT** This is a great exercise to generate energy in the room and connection among teammates. It often becomes quite noisy as teams succeed. It also tends to surprise people when it works.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with being “mindful of process” and learning to rely on alternative modes of perception (intuition, body language).

8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

- **DURATION** 3–5 minutes
- **SIZE** The group can be any size; this is an individual exercise. All you need is the room for people to spread out.

Make sure that everyone has some space around them so that no one accidentally bumps into someone else. Demonstrate the counting-down process first, and then have people follow your example.

- First, put your right hand in the air and shake it while you count down from 8. Say out loud: “8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” Then put your left hand in the air and shake it to the count of “8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” Then lift your right foot and count down, then your left.
- Second, put your right hand in the air and shake it while you count down from 7. Say out loud “7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” Then put your left hand in the air and shake it to the count of “7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Then lift your right foot and count down, then your left.
- After that demo, get everyone on their feet and walk them

through the sequence.

- Be careful when you get to the low numbers—the activity becomes very animated and the jumping motions very fast.

End with a big round of applause and laughter!

- **IMPACT** This is a great exercise to get people moving and to get the blood flowing.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with the mind/body connection and understanding how our energy state impacts our creativity.

MACHINE GAME

- **DURATION** 3–5 minutes
- **SIZE** “Machines” can be any size, but this exercise tends to work best with teams of 4–6. That way, people are not left waiting a long time for the “machine” to come to them.

Participants make a line and stand side by side, next to one another. The first person in line starts the “machine” by (1) making an imaginary part in their hands, and (2) making some robotlike gestures and some wacky machine sounds with the part, as if they are making or building the part. They then hand off the “thing” they have made to the person in line next to them. They make sure that the person next to them has received the part and then they repeat the process, making robotlike gestures and sounds again. They keep repeating their sound and motion until the end of the game.

The second person in line receives the part and starts their element of the machine. They make new sounds and gestures and then hand the part to the next person, and then keep going. This continues until the last person has run their element of the machine four or five times or until you run out of time. A large round of applause completes the exercise.

- **IMPACT** This is a great exercise to get people moving, communicating with one another, and being creative with their bodies.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with the mind/body connection, group dynamics, and helps to eliminate self-censoring behaviors.

RADIATION/MAGNETISM GAME

- **DURATION** 3–5 minutes
- **SIZE** This is a good large-group exercise, and you need a group of at least 20 to make it work. The exercise requires a large clear space. There can't be tables or chairs in the way or someone could get hurt. We often step outside the classroom to an open parking lot or field to do this improv.

Assemble your group in a large, clear area with plenty of room to move around. There are two versions of the game, each designed to provoke a different kind of movement and “emergent behavior.”

VERSION #1: RADIATION Instruct everyone to silently pick someone else in the group and designate that person the imaginary source of fatal radiation. The goal of the game is to keep a neutral person, basically anyone else in the group, between you and the source of radiation that you picked. If your radiation source person touches you, you are dead and out of the game. You must freeze in place. Give each participant about fifteen seconds to silently pick a radiation source. Stress that it is important that no one knows if they have been picked. In practice, almost everyone will be simultaneously a person trying to avoid radiation and a source of radiation for someone else. After everyone has made his or her selection, stress that there should be no running or pushing during the game. Count down “1, 2, 3, Go!” and let the players start moving around. After about a minute, or whenever the game achieves a static equilibrium, say “Stop.” Debrief the players on their experience. Then end with a short round of applause.

VERSION #2: MAGNETISM The magnetism game is exactly the same as radiation, but the instructions are reversed. Instruct everyone to silently pick someone else in the group and make that person the source of a magnetic attraction. The goal of the game is connect with your “magnet” while keeping a neutral person, basically anyone else in the group, between you and anyone that is attracted to you. If you connect with your “magnet,” you win the game and must stand still with your arms around your magnet. If someone connects with you (you were their magnet but didn’t know it), you lose and have to stand still. Give everyone about fifteen seconds to silently pick their magnetic attractor. Stress that it is important that no one knows if they have been picked. In practice, almost everyone will be simultaneously a person trying get to their magnetic source and a magnet for someone else. After everyone has made his or her selection, stress that there should be no running or pushing during the game. Count down “1, 2, 3, Go!” and let the players start moving around. After about a minute, or whenever the game achieves a static equilibrium, say “Stop.” Debrief the players on their experience. Then end with a short round of applause.

- **IMPACT** This is a great exercise to get people outside, up and about, and moving and laughing a lot. It is a great stoking exercise right after lunch or an afternoon break.
- **D.THINKING CONCEPT** This exercise helps with paying attention, empathy, mind/body connection, and “radical collaboration.”