What can contemporary organizations learn from theatre improvisation?

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Many organizations operate nowadays in rapidly and unpredictably transforming environments and thus are challenged to master continuous change. Improvisation is one of the metaphors that has been used recently in organization studies to search for novel ideas on how to meet this challenge efficiently. This discourse has mainly relied on accounts of music improvisation (namely jazz), while theatre improvisation received less attention. The current study aims to address this gap by the in-depth exploration of the essence and peculiarities of the theatre improvisation from the managerial viewpoint.

Based on the interviews with improvisation theatre actors and directors in Finland and Russia, as well as the observations of improvisational theatre workshops and performances, the authors contrast the usage of improvisation in traditional, devised and improvisational theatre. From organizational perspective these theatre formats differ not only in the ways improvisational techniques are utilized, but also in the roles leaders and followers are expected to play and, consequently, the sets of skills required from these roles. The authors relate these models to contemporary organizations and argue that the model of the devised theatre might be the most useful source of learning for managers.