

GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVE

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A Comic's Way to Better Listening

An improvisational comic will tell you that listening is critical to success on stage. Comedians who don't banter with their audiences tend to bomb because they aren't connecting with people or touching them personally. Good comics don't miss a beat. They throw out questions to get people involved—and then use audience responses as fodder for their skits. When they are on stage, improv comics are all eyes and ears, constantly on the lookout for interesting material to turn into humor. Comedians are expert listeners.

But listening—a learned skill—is vital in every profession. Who better to learn it from than the pros? Comedians like Cherie Kerr, founder of ExecuProv, a consulting firm in Santa Ana, Calif., are teaching improv techniques to executives in every profession who want to improve their communication skills and learn to hone their powers of concentration.

In her book—*'When I Say This . . . , 'Do You Mean That?'*—Kerr sets out improv comedy techniques to enhance workplace communications. The most critical rule in improv, Kerr writes, is *be here now*. "This means that when you're engaged in a scene, you cannot be in the past, nor can you be projecting forward into the future," she writes. "Without exception you must always *be*; in other words, you must remain in the present moment. As the scene unfolds, you unfold with it. It's like riding a wave. You want to stay in the midst of the momentum."

It's tough to apply this improv rule to everyday business activities, Kerr acknowledges. When people sit in meetings, talk on the phone or attend lectures, their minds often are elsewhere. Improv actors can stay in the scene because they have a lot of practice. In her book, Kerr sets out exercises readers can do to learn to listen and to react spontaneously and advises readers to do one or more of them every day:

- Make a daily commitment to focus intensely on something you do—making a phone call, having a conversation with a co-worker, chopping salad ingredients. Notice how easily you get distracted and how hard it is to regain your focus. Every day you exercise your "Be here now" muscle, Kerr says, you'll increase your ability to stay immersed in the present.
- Focus on how you feel when you are paying attention to something (say, counting money, watching a movie) and compare that to how you feel when you do tasks mindlessly, like getting dressed or washing the car.
- Concentrate on what someone is saying to you, without thinking about how you'll respond.
- Do an activity (like putting the laundry into your washer) in slow motion so you can stay focused on each and every second of the task.