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LEADERS & SUCCESS

## Actors Aid Executives With Public Speaking

Company Managers Work  
On Breathing, Diction,  
Projecting Presence,  
Injecting Humor

*First of two parts*

By Alexa Bell.  
*Special To Investor's Daily*

Speaking in public used to be painful business for Gary Thormodsgaard, ever though he does it more than 100 times a year. The day of the event, his hands would turn purple.

The 33-year-old owner of an executive training business says his suffering through sleepless nights before presentations ended when he entered a public speaking workshop run by a Los Angeles-based comedy troupe. And his hands stopped turning purple.

During a day of improvisational warm-ups and comedic coaching, he found the ham within. Thormodsgaard uses actor Bruce Willis as a role model and now thrives on public presentations. "I love it," he said with a convert's fervor. "It's instant recognition."

Executives like Thormodsgaard and major corporations are turning to performing artists to help them with a variety of problems. Some simply want to become better performers. Other seek out thespians to improve communication skills, reduce stress or even lighten up the corporate culture.

In Los Angeles, a popular improvisational comedy group called the Groundlings has spun off a series of communications-skills workshops for executives. This program, the one that transformed Gary Thormodsgaard, operates on the premise that all business

people are performers, but most lack proper training.

Program founder Cherie Kerr is a public relations professional and former Groundling who originally devised the workshops to help clients. "When I saw (clients) get up in front of audiences, I just died for them," she said. "I realized that they need training just like actors and actresses do."

The basic program, called Execuprov, consists of one-day workshops dedicated to breathing and diction exercises, improvisational games and videotaped presentations. The improv routines — a new experience to most participants — quickly break through executive formality.

In one game, for instance, two students hold a conversation while others try desperately to interrupt them. In

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another, participants pose as receptionists, explaining the function of oddly named firms to imaginary callers.

The serious business begins, however, when students go off to another room to give brief, videotaped presentations. Kerr and her helpers critique the performances, giving each participant a list of "secrets" that will improve his effectiveness. A nervous speaker may be told to imagine he's talking to his wife, a soft

speaker to pretend he's standing next to a loud dishwasher. Here, students are also asked to come up with a private role model, like Thormodsgaard's Bruce Willis.

The point of the secrets and the improv games, said Kerr, is to tap participants' natural spontaneity and humor. "It's my belief that everyone is funny, it's just that most people are funny in their own kitchens. When they really need the humor, to make a sale for

instance, that's when they lose their personalities."

But if too little humor is dull, the wrong kind of humor can be disastrous. That, at least is the message of Michael Sheehan, former director of the Folger Theater in Washington, D.C., who now teaches presentation skills to executives and politicians.

Sheehan uses "two acid tests for humor. Jokes must be short, and they must reflect a point the speaker is trying

to make. If they don't meet those criteria, he says, dump them.

"Everyone walks around looking for this great shaggy dog story to try to integrate into a speech. But it doesn't work," Sheehan said. "I usually spend more time taking humor out (of a speech) than putting it in."

Sheehan, who keeps an office at the Washington office of Ogilvy & Mather, tries to teach students to take command as they walk onto a stage — something thespians learn to do early on.

"Audiences take cues from the speaker, not the other way around," Sheehan counsels. "Audiences do not like tentativeness."