

## The Coach As Theatre Director

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### Abstract

This article presents an innovative approach to executive coaching. Based on improvisational performance, the approach is the hallmark of the consulting firm **Performance of a Lifetime** (POAL) in New York City. It grows out of several decades of psychological and educational discovery and practice in synthesizing elements of theatrical performance with elements of developmental psychology and psychotherapy.

In this approach, the art of improvising is connected to the art of coaching in order to help executives see and explore new opportunities.

### Introduction

As CEO and lead trainer for Performance of a Lifetime (POAL), I knew I wanted to present a concrete illustration of our approach in action. But rather than describe it or talk about it in the abstract, I wanted to capture and convey the life and the process of the work we do — and to do that in writing is a chal-

lenge! So I revisited one of our recent half-day executive trainings and fashioned it into a theatrical play (Part One — The Practice). You'll find some "theory" in the play, mostly spoken by the character Cathy (based on me). I'll then make some more formal comments on the most salient theoretical background in Part Two — The Theory.

**PART ONE**  
**THE PRACTICE**  
**(in the form of a two-act play)**

**Cast of Characters**

POAL Trainers:  
 Cathy, David, Adam and Margo

25 Workshop Participants, including:  
 Andrew, Barry, Jim, Nick, Teri, Walt

**Act One**  
**The Performance Challenge**

**Scene One**  
**Creating the Stage**

*It's 8 o'clock on a Thursday morning in a large meeting room at a corporate conference center in Chicago. Swivel chairs are arranged in a large semicircle facing a small stage. One by one, 25 senior executives from a Fortune 500 company enter the room with coffee in cardboard cups and large loose-leaf notebooks. They're men, and a few women, from 40-65 years of age, dressed in sweats or shorts or jeans. They are obviously nervous — and skeptical — about the “acting class” they've been drafted into.*

*The four actor-trainers from the consulting firm Performance of a Lifetime stand waiting to begin. Cathy, the leader of the group, steps forward to address the executives.*

**CATHY**

Good morning and welcome to “Directing a Performance.” This will be an experiential workshop in which we'll explore the relationship between the skills and talents of a theatre director and the skills and talents required for leaders in the organization to be

effective coaches and mentors. We're going to begin with a theatrical demonstration.

*Cathy motions to the stage, where Adam and Margo now sit.*

**CATHY**

In this scene, Rose and Christopher — portrayed by Margo and Adam — play a husband and wife who have been experiencing difficulties in their marriage. The setting is their summer home where they've just arrived for the weekend. Our director for the morning will be David.

*Cathy gestures to David, who stands near the back of the semicircle with a clipboard and pen and a copy of the script. He nods. Actors begin. The characters face each other tensely, sharing resentments and regrets. As the scene is performed, most of the executives are immediately engaged. A few are self-conscious of this fact, and look around to see if others are. Half-smiles emerge on their faces. After about four minutes, David stops the scene.*

**DAVID**

*(To Actors.) Good. (He approaches the stage.) How'd that feel to you?*

*Actors express a lukewarm response to their performances. David compliments them on their clarity and the intensity of their listening. His questions elicit their intentions at specific points in the scene — how is “Rose” viewing the interaction, what does “Christopher” expect, want, etc. David makes suggestions to build on these intentions.*

**DAVID**

When we do it again, go ahead and stand up when you want. Feel free to move wherever the impulse takes you. And it'll be your partner's challenge to accept and deal with

whatever you come up with. Okay? Let's try it again.

*Actors perform the scene again. The improvement is remarkable, the room is bathed in a palpable tension. Eyes widen in the audience, and several partners lean forward in their chairs. Silence follows the last moment of the scene. Then Cathy steps forward.*

### CATHY

*(Applauding; executives follow suit.)* Thank you! See the difference that a little direction, a little coaching makes? Think for a moment about the director-actor interaction we just saw. This was a conversation — in which together they came up with the “next steps.”

Being a good theatre director, and being a good coach, means that you are concerned with creating an environment for learning, for development, and for discovery — an environment for exploration. We're going to work to create that kind of an environment with you today.

Talented directors (and by the way there are many untalented ones!) create a rehearsal and performance environment that is a great place to work. They bring a strong vision to the table... *and* that vision is synthesized with their ability to create an environment in which people feel that what they have to give matters, will be respected, will be used. And that's the kind of setting where people do their best work.

Let's take a look at the Good Coach Chart, hanging up over there next to the podium. It identifies some of the key attributes of a good director, or a good coach. We're going to go on a creative journey with you this morning that will explore these attributes:

### A GOOD COACH

- Sees the real person, not who you think they should be
- Asks “what can I give to this person to take their performance further?”
- Sees more than the obvious
- Builds on people's strengths
- Asks, “What *is* this scene?” and “what *could* this scene be?”
- Pays thoughtful attention to her or his own performance style in giving coaching
- Becomes skillful in asking for help and direction from others

This workshop is deliberately designed as a creative, experiential journey, *not* a cognitive one. We're not going to give you a lot of information today, because this session is about the *art* of directing or coaching.

Now I don't know what you've heard about this program from some of your colleagues. I know that this is an unusual setting for you to be in — you chose financial services, not theatre, for your professional life. *(Laughter and murmurs including “damn right.”)* Well let me tell you right now — we're aiming for this to be the weirdest workshop that you've ever taken! *(Laughter is now loud and acknowledging — a few groans can be heard as well.)* Yes. In here, weird is good because we want to tap into some abilities and viewpoints that you don't get to work with a lot of the time.

We're going to relate to you as performers: as improvisers, directors and creative people. Because in addition to being senior executives, you are also performers. We all (we human beings, that is) have a natural

ability to perform — to pretend, to play, to create; to do what professional actors do; to be who we're not. We play different roles, different characters; we speak different lines, depending on our environment.

So today we're going to borrow from the activity of the acting profession. And we're also going to actively "reminisce" — we're going to borrow from the activity of children as well. Both actors and babies perform, you see. They both go through a process (either consciously or unconsciously, depending on which you are), a process in which they become somebody else. In the case of the actors, they become another character by reading a script, researching the character's history, by improvising, etc., etc.

In the case of the baby, you can see this in your own life, those of you who have kids or are around young children: when they learn to speak, they go from baby talk and making strange sounds to speaking the language. How does that happen? It happens because the big people around (you, me – aunts, uncles, older siblings, etc.) talk back to them — improvise with them — when they babble.

*Cathy starts to make gurgling sounds and then imitates how we adults respond by saying, "You want a cookie, don't you!" Then she responds with another gurgle, and another adult response. The audience laughs as they recognize the very familiar discourse.*

And it's these thousands and thousands of conversations — improvisational performances — that the child and the adult have together that enable the child to speak.

So what's happening here? The adult — the "coach" if you will — is relating to the child as a somebody who is "becoming." The

adult "coach" trusts and knows that the child is going to become a speaker — and relates to the child as such. And you know what? That learning environment makes it possible for the kid to talk. That social environment develops the child. Unconditional support: "Kid, I know you're going to make it from here to there."

Now, we're not children anymore — but we can still grow. And today, the world of acting and directing is going to help us tap into our ability to grow, and to help others to grow.

Now to be able to see what it takes to do that, to look through a director's lens — or in your case, a coaching lens — you have to go through some of that exploration yourself. If you want to help someone grow and develop and learn — to do what actors do, to be "who they are" and "who they're not" at the same time — you have to do some of that yourself. You have to tap into the performer in you.

That's hard. It's a different kind of work. It's actually a little bit more like play than work. We're going to do some playing and performing because we want to help you to act differently!

Why is that hard? Learning new things can be uncomfortable. Trying something a new way can be embarrassing, or scary. When you're really learning something new, you might not look good. Just like you might not look good when you're trying a whole different character than you've ever played on-stage. You make mistakes, you sound like an idiot...and that's how you discover what you can do! That's how you find out what you want to do. That's how a director or a coach can see new possibilities and help you to explore them. When you're coaching

someone you're guiding him or her to do things in a different and new way.

So we're going to play this morning. We're going to perform... act... improvise... make strange sounds, do weird things, bizarre physical movements and more. And you're going to play all the parts — you'll be a performer, you'll be a director, you'll be directed and you'll be the audience. We're packing two years of study at the Actors Studio into a half-day program, so we've got a lot to do. Let's get to work!

## Scene Two. The Warm Up

### MARGO

Thank you, Cathy. Let's all stand and make a big circle. You might want to push your chairs back to give us a little more room.

*Participants stand, some reluctantly, and push back their chairs. Their big circle includes a noticeable gap on either side of Margo.*

### MARGO

You can also stand near me. Nothing any weirder happens over here.

*A few isolated laughs. Participants fill the gap. Several have crossed arms, hands in pockets. Two run to put their cell phones on their chairs, and return to circle.*

### MARGO

We're going to dive right into the activity of changing our behavior. We like to use the term *performance* instead of *behavior*, since it's more flexible, creative — and positive. So we're going to change our performance right now, with an unusual warm-up that actors will sometimes do.

We're going to do that by doing everything very, very slowly over the next fifteen minutes or so. We tend to do things in our everyday lives at breakneck speed. Sometimes speed can be fine... and sometimes it can be problematic as well. When you're moving too fast, you can miss a lot. This is important if you want to be a good coach. We want to help you to slow down, and be more aware of setting your own pace.

Let's all take a neutral stance, feet a bit apart, weight evenly distributed, hands at your sides. And if you have to adjust your glasses or your hair, I'm going to ask you to do that very slowly as well. Now to start off, we're going to take a deep breath and let it out with a sigh, Okay? Everybody inhale...and exhale.

*A wispy sound fills the room.*

### MARGO

Okay...that was...not very convincing. Let's try it again. Inhale...and exhale.

*This time, there's a long heavy drone.*

### MARGO

Much better.

*Participants go through a series of everyday movements, all done in extreme slow motion. Each lifts an arm as if a puppeteer was pulling a string wrapped around a wrist, then brings the arm back down twice as slowly. They walk towards the center of the circle, breaking down the movement — first sliding a foot across the floor, then putting weight on it, then sliding the other leg forward, finally adding the arms in counterpoint. Most avoid eye contact.*

### MARGO

Good. Now as you get close enough to another person, I want you to greet that person,

silently. Imagine if you will that we're all at a cocktail party, and you're "working the room" silently.

*Greeting begins, with vigor. Margo reminds participants a few times to greet silently. They overcompensate with exaggerated gestures and handshakes. Margo instructs them to add funny faces to their greeting rituals and then gibberish. The volume and entertainment levels in the room rise in tandem. Margo has to shout the final instruction, which sends partners — slowly, very slowly — back to the perimeter of the circle.*

### **MARGO**

That was great; give yourselves a hand. *(All applaud.)* Let me hand things off to Adam.

## **Scene Three. The Non-Verbal Communication Game**

### **ADAM**

Thanks, Margo. The next exercise we're going to do is called "Passing the Imaginary Object." Here's how it works. Imagine that I'm holding a lump of invisible modeling clay. I'm going to take this clay and mold it into an ordinary everyday object. *(He does.)* Then I'm going to demonstrate using the object. *(He does.)* At this point it should be obvious to everyone what I have in my hands. *(Apparently it's a hammer.)* Okay?

Now I'm going to give the object to the person on my right. *(He passes it to Margo.)* She will take it from me and demonstrate using it also. *(She does.)* Then, she will transform the object into another one, pulling it, pushing it, reshaping it, whatever it takes. And she'll also demonstrate using it before passing it on to the next person in the circle, and so on.

A couple of guidelines: If you can't figure out what the object you're receiving is, you must give it back until the giver makes the object clear to you. Make your object something simple and easy to recognize, and something you're familiar with. This is not the time to unveil the underwater submarine launcher you've been working on in your basement for the past 15 years. Finally, try not to think in advance what your object will be. Let the object you receive inspire your choice of an object to make. As we say in the theatre, "be in the moment." Okay, let's start.

*The game proceeds smoothly. The participants pantomime with surprising precision, and a lot of humor. One player passes a football; the next does an elaborate end zone dance after an imagined touchdown. At one point, an executive named Walt makes a waffle iron, but the next person in the circle, Andrew, doesn't get it and passes it back. A ripple of laughter goes through the circle, mostly at the moment when Andrew stares at the invisible clay and does...nothing. Walt tries again, more methodically going through the process of shaping the object. Andrew doesn't get it, again. The group laughs again, louder.*

### **ADAM**

Okay Walt, that's fine... Now try conveying it differently than you have before. Use the object in a different way, and think about the weight and the specific size and shape of the object. See if you can show that to Andrew.

*Walt tries again, and Andrew gets it. There are various sounds of relief and isolated applause. The clay goes through a half dozen more transformations before making its way back to Adam.*

## Scene Four. The First Debrief

### ADAM

Good. Coaching requires thinking and acting in different and creative ways — sometimes without knowing exactly where it will lead you. Let's talk a little bit about what happened with Andrew and Walt. Often, in business — and in life too — when we communicate, we deliver our message and think that's the end of it. If the other person doesn't get it, it's because they're stupid or they're not listening. Maybe we don't even notice whether they understand or not. Walt, what was that like when you had to do it over?

### WALT

Oh, man. At first I didn't know what to do. I couldn't imagine why he didn't get it.

### ADAM

Right.

### WALT

A lot of the other people in the circle knew what it was.

### ANDREW

That was embarrassing.

### ADAM

You felt the pressure? (*Andrew nods.*)

### WALT

I did too.

### ADAM

When we're trying to communicate, it's important to remember that we have a creative responsibility to get our message across and help the other to hear and understand what we're trying to say — to be clear. An important aspect of the act of communicating is exploring and trying out different ways to be understood. We make choices — in act-

ing we call them performance choices — about how to be, how we communicate, and what we do and don't say and do. Certainly the listener has a role as well — an important one — but too often we blame people for not connecting. (“The reason they didn't understand me was because there's ‘something wrong with them.’”) Maybe we can work harder and more creatively to be understood, to make the connection, to get closer to where they are. This is key to good coaching and directing. Push yourself to find new ways to “perform” your conversation. Good job, everybody.

## Scene Five. The Performance of Your Life

### CATHY

Thank you, Adam. Let's reconstruct our semicircle.

*Participants bring chairs closer, joking about some of the objects they made in the previous exercise and the way they were used.*

### CATHY

To be a successful coach you need to increase your ability to reinvent yourself and thereby support others in doing that. To help others change and grow, you have to be good at that, too.

You also have to be willing to get to know them — not just on the level of what department they're in, or their history with the company — but to know some more about them as a human being. And that requires your ability to show yourself as a human being as well.

Trust — one of the key values of this organization — crosses into a lot of different territories. We want to push further the bor-

ders of creating trust, to go further than perhaps you think is possible — or even necessary.

This is all a big part of what the coaching (and directing) activity is: helping others to reinvent themselves, to grow and to change. That means helping your colleagues, your peers, your team, to be open about themselves, and that means that you, the coach, need to be more open about who you are. That's the hard part!

This next exercise is about doing something before you know how, and it's about you pushing beyond your current limits in a personal, creative way.

Here's what we're going to do. (*Indicates the training team.*) We're all from an organization called Performance of a Lifetime, and we get our name from this exercise. We're going to ask each of you to come up on stage, one a time, and perform your life in sixty seconds. What do we mean by that? Whatever you want to do. It can be your entire life in sixty seconds, it can be an important moment from your life, it can be a mundane moment from your life. It can be something that happened this morning; it can be something that happened five, ten, twenty years ago. It can be something that never happened at all. You can speak or not speak, you can sing, you can dance, you can play as many characters from your life as you want.

Do whatever you want! The only requirement is that we ask you to *perform* your life...not *tell us about* it! After you've done your one-minute Performance of a Lifetime, either David or I will be your director and set up another thirty seconds of performance with you and one of the four of us — maybe more — as your fellow performer(s). The aim of this direction is not to make a “bet-

ter” performance. It's to make a *different* performance, using what you create and building on it. In line with our “attributes of a good coach” chart, we're going to try to see more than the obvious, and to ask, “What could this scene be?”

Now we're going to show you two demonstrations. These are not to say, “this is how you should do it,” but to show you the structure, and show that it can be done! One last thing. The audience is very important. Every time a new person is introduced, they should be welcomed with tremendous applause and support. Okay? Here's how it goes: “Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to the stage for the very first demonstration of a Performance of a Lifetime, Margo Chapman!!!!”

*The group applauds wildly, encouraged by Cathy and David and Adam. Margo jumps on stage and does an abstract sort of piece, moving around with her arms above her head as if she is carrying something very heavy, talking to an unknown group of people whom she assures that it is fine for her to take on more work. She gets loaded down further and further, handling it with physical finesse.*

#### CATHY

(*Applauding; participants join in.*) Thank you, Margo. Adam, would you join us on stage, please? (*He does.*) Okay, let's see thirty more seconds. Margo, you have decided to open your own moving company — One Woman Mover — and you pride yourself on being able to do it all, in as few loads as possible. You've been hired by Adam to move his belongings to a new apartment. Okay, thirty more seconds.

*In the redirected scene, Adam is a bit of a sadist and takes pleasure in overloading Margo with articles to carry — couch, tele-*

*vision, piano, et al. — all in one load. There's a lot of laughter in the audience.*

**CATHY**

Thank you. *(All applaud.)*

*Cathy calls up Adam in a similar manner for his demonstration of a Performance of a Lifetime. He acts out trying to carry out his morning routine while dealing with his very large and very affectionate dog. In Cathy's direction, Margo and David play dinner guests who get treated the same way as the dog: baby talk, scolding and embarrassing rewards. Lots of laughter and vigorous applause follow the scene.*

**CATHY**

Okay, that's what it looks like. David, take it away.

*David calls the partners up to the stage in random order one by one. Every introduction is as enthusiastic as the one before, and most participants trot up to the stage, grabbing furniture or props they've decided to use on the way. Cathy and David alternate as directors.*

*Some themes begin to emerge, with a handful of participants performing variations on them: the awkwardness of being transferred to a faraway business post, whether it's breaking the news to a spouse or acclimating to a new situation or culture; scenes about balancing work and home lives. A few relive moments of glory, sports or academic, from their teens.*

*Then there's Jim. He jumps onto the stage and begins a conversation with an imaginary doctor, in which he incredulously asks why his wife is going to have to stay in the hospital — three months before the baby is even due.*

**JIM**

Well, when will she actually give birth? You don't know? What do you mean be strong for her and the baby? How can you "be strong" during something like this? I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do.

*The scene lasts for another fifteen seconds, with this inexperienced improviser and self-described (and Myers-Briggs analyzed) "left brain introvert" performing his heart out on stage in front of his colleagues about something very personal and most likely never shared with them.*

*Cathy ends the scene at what feels like a natural ending, and the group applauds. They seem somewhat taken aback, a bit exhilarated, slightly embarrassed, perhaps moved and now nervous, especially those who have yet to take their turns.*

**CATHY**

Thank you, Jim. Let's see another 30 seconds. Margo, would you join Jim on stage, please? (She does. They shake hands.) Margo, you'll be playing Jim's daughter. Jim, what's your daughter's name?

**JIM**

Sarah.

**CATHY**

Sarah. Okay, Margo you'll be Sarah. And the scene takes place several years from now. You'll be asking your Dad about what it was like when she was born early. Okay, thirty more seconds.

*Margo swings into improvisational action and becomes Sarah, Jim's daughter. In a childlike voice she asks Dad to tell her one more time what happened when Mom went to the hospital and gave birth to her three months earlier than expected. Jim tells her how special she was and how nervous he*

was. Sarah asks him to repeat the story several times, and the performance is now filled with humor. A touching sharing of Jim's "life performance"—now creatively expanded with the help of a complete stranger, in front of his colleagues—has taken place, at of all places, an Executive Education program.

The performances continue. There are golf games gone awry, early morning scenes with children getting ready for school and on the way to work, multiple conversations on multiple cell phones, catching that first big fish. All are redirected to be seen in another light, with another character, built upon and changed: "Let's see that in Russian," "from the viewpoint of a computer," "as a fish," "as a modern dance." Endless variations of direction, endless variations of improvisation, input from all involved, responded to in different ways by the audience.

The last partner to perform is Teri, one of only two women in the workshop. She's from Michigan, and tells and acts the story of visiting a plant for inspection and the difficulty in getting the employees (all male) to listen to and respect her. David directs.

**DAVID**

Thank you! (All applaud.) Okay, let's see thirty more seconds. Margo, Adam and Cathy, please come on stage. (They join Teri on stage.) Teri, Motown called, and they want to make a record of the " 'No Respect at the Plant' Blues." Cathy and Margo and Adam will be your backup singers. Let's hit it, thirty more seconds.

The three trainers position themselves behind and to the side of Teri. Teri protests, saying she can't sing...we didn't ask anyone else to sing...I don't know what to do...David urges to give it a try. Then Teri

swings into action. Every line she speaks/croons turns into a refrain for the "Teriettes."

**TERI**

I went to the plant on Tuesday...

**TERIETTES**

Tues-day.

**TERI**

I got oil on my new shoes.

**TERIETTES**

My new shoes.

**TERI**

So is it any wonder...

**TERIETTES**

I got the "No Respect at the Plant" blues...Ooooh.

**DAVID**

Thank you. (All applaud.)

**Scene Five. The Second Debrief**

**CATHY**

Great. Everybody give yourselves a hand. That was terrific. (She sits on a chair in front of the stage, facing the semicircle.) So what was that like? What was it like to see your colleagues perform in that way, and to perform in front of one another?

**WALT**

Scary.

**TERI**

It was scary waiting for my turn, I wanted it to be over.

**CATHY**

Uh-huh.

**WALT**

Yeah, but once you got up there—

**TERI**

I didn't think about it so much, and it was much easier when the real actors came in.

**CATHY**

Do other people agree with that? (*A chorus of assent.*) Was this harder, or easier than you might have thought?

**WALT**

Harder.

**ANDREW**

But I thought everybody else did a great job.

**JIM**

(*Half-seriously.*) Yeah, who knew we had so much talent?

**CATHY**

Say more.

**JIM**

I mean, I didn't know that we could be so creative. If anybody had told me that we'd all be acting on stage, uh, performing and doing all that movement stuff I would have said they were crazy.

**CATHY**

Well, what do you think about that? That you are all in fact performers — you *can* perform, you *do* perform — the things we were talking about at the start of the session. Let's talk about that: what's the relationship between this performing and your ability to coach and develop people?

**BARRY**

I can see that there is one. I never thought of it that way before this. I mean I thought it was amazing how you guys came up with these different directions for us... and when

you did that, I thought our performances the second time were better than the first.

**CATHY**

What about the environment we created here together? Going back to Jim's point earlier about how surprised he was to see people up on stage, performing, how he never would've imagined it. What was it about the environment that made that possible?

**ANDREW**

Oh...we were all equal. Equally bad!!! (*Big laugh in the room*) No, but in all seriousness, that made a big difference. We were all in it together, and we all didn't know how to do it. And that it was possible to make mistakes, or make a fool of ourselves. It was a big relief.

**JIM**

I was thinking when I was watching how good it is to laugh. I cannot remember the last time I laughed so much.

**WALT**

Yeah, we don't laugh very much at the office.

**CATHY**

Yeah, I can imagine that. (*She pauses and nods her head*) What do you want to do about that?

**WALT**

There's nothing *to* do. It's a question of time. There's so much time pressure we never laugh. And coaching's the same. I'd like to but there's never enough time to coach.

**CATHY**

Well, maybe coaching — and laughing — is not something that you *stop* to do, or *take time* to do. Maybe it has more to do with changing the total environment, so that

coaching, supporting — maybe even having fun — are things you do all the time, in an environment that you create every day. Maybe the way to think about it is as an on-going performance, it's built into the way you normally work. Coaching and mentoring are desired elements of the day-to-day environment in this organization. Now I know you're not going to ask the people that work for you to perform their lives in sixty seconds — although in my opinion, that wouldn't be a bad idea. But can you create an environment in which people feel supported enough that they'll try new things — and be rewarded and responded to for that? Can you yourself be more open, in your relationships with your peers and the people who work for you? Can you be more human? Think about how much better your coaching would be if you knew some more about the human being you're working with.

#### **TERI**

I think we can all be a bit more human. And I think that makes all the difference when you're coaching someone. I don't want to do what someone is telling me to do if they're really just criticizing me and dismissing everything I have to say. That's what I liked about the one-minute performances. You guys actually used what we said.

#### **CATHY**

Yes. In fact, that's what we're completely focused on. How can we work with and be creative with what you're bringing to the table — or the stage! Okay. Great work. We're going to take a break...it's 10:10; be back in here and ready to go at 10:20, when we'll unveil The Coaching Challenge.

#### **INTERMISSION**

### **Act Two. The Coaching Challenge** **Scene One. The Coaching Conversation**

*The executives spend most of the break on their cell phones. A few stay behind to quiz the POAL trainers about their work with other groups of executives, or about their professional acting projects. One partner has a daughter who wants to become an actress, and asks Margo for advice about acting schools. Another asks about breathing and slowing down — is that something we really recommend? At 10:25, Adam calls the group back to order. He sits on the front of the stage, consults his notes frequently and fiddles with his eyeglasses, which are in his lap. He doesn't seem entirely comfortable, or prepared.*

#### **ADAM**

Okay...uh, we started with a demonstration of directing a scene, then, um, Cathy talked to you a little bit about coaching and the importance...*(He looks at his notes.)*...the importance of creating an environment that allows people to try new things and to...*(He looks at his notes again.)*...make fools of themselves. Then we did the slow movement warm-up. *(He stops suddenly and calls to David, who's in the back of the room.)* How was that?

#### **DAVID**

*(Stepping forward.)* Not bad. That was a good start. Whenever you made eye contact, that made a huge difference. Good. Do you need your notes?

#### **ADAM**

Well...

#### **DAVID**

Can you speak without them?

#### **ADAM**

Yeah, I guess I could.

**DAVID**

You can always hold them. But try not to look at them unless you need to. The more eye contact the better. Now, what character are you playing?

**ADAM**

Well, I think I'm sort of like the authority figure...

**DAVID**

Is that the same as you were before the break, the actor/teacher...?

**ADAM**

No, no. It's more like a professor. An authority figure like a professor.

**DAVID**

Okay. Well, I see you have your glasses there. Why don't you try wearing them?

**ADAM**

You think...?

**DAVID**

Yeah.

**ADAM**

Okay. *(He puts on glasses.)*

**DAVID**

Want to try it again?

**ADAM**

Yes.

**DAVID**

Great. And stay standing. That's a lot more authoritative, too.

**ADAM**

Okay.

**DAVID**

Good. Try it again.

*David recedes. Adam tries it again, with marked improvement. He seems confident, has authority and relates to his audience. The glasses seem to reinforce his character choice, and he succeeds in speaking without consulting his notes.*

**ADAM**

Better?

**DAVID**

Much. I especially liked the part when you gesture and...

*They trail off the stage, in conversation that we can no longer hear.. Cathy steps forward to address the senior executives.*

**CATHY**

An example of a coaching conversation. Maybe a coaching conversation that was a little unrealistic...*(Participants laugh.)*...but I think you get our point.

## Scene Two. Coaching One Other

*(As Margo passes out laminated cards that contain the seven qualities of a good coach.)*

It's time to move into the Coaching Challenge, which is a competition. You're going to have a chance to coach and be coached by each other. First we need to break up into two groups.

*She divides the room into two randomly selected groups, one of which heads off with Margo and David to another room. Once they are gone...*

**ADAM**

Everyone, right now, turn to someone sitting near you. Good, that's your partner. You'll be working in pairs. Each team will select a yellow card from the ones Cathy is holding out in front of you now. Each card contains the name of a fictional product or service

that you're going to pitch. Okay, look at your cards. (*What they see on their card is an unusual product, such as Whistling Lessons, Clumsiness Counseling, Robot Pets, Taxidermy, etc.*)

Later on, you'll be preparing an oral sales presentation, but right now you have five minutes to brainstorm and flesh out the *specific* details of your product. (*A power point slide appears on the screen*):

- What is the name of your product and/or company?
- What's your competitive edge?
- Where are you giving/doing your sales presentation? And to whom? (Who is in the room and/or who is listening/watching?)
- Who are you? What character is each of you playing in the presentation? (They should be different and distinct from one another.)
- Decide the form of your presentation. It can be varied...and you can be creative!

Any urgent questions? Good. Please begin.

*Five minutes later, in the other room...*

### **DAVID**

Time's up. Here's the next step: You will now have about 20 minutes to prepare a two-person oral sales presentation of your product. The presentation can be no longer than five minutes, and the time should be evenly divided between the two of you. Each of you should have at least a one-minute block of speaking time at a stretch — don't organize it so that each of you does a sentence, alternating back and forth. That

would make it very hard to coach one another.

Now, we want you to work on this presentation in a particular way. Take the first couple of minutes, and only the first couple of minutes, to quickly map out your presentation: its structure, how you'll divide the content, what each of you is talking about, etc.

We are providing for only minimal planning in the way you might typically do it, or think about it. We are specifically instructing you to work on this as a *performance*, with each of you functioning as both an actor and as a coach/director. This means that you have to resist the urge to plan, plan, plan, and you will take the plunge and get up on your feet and rehearse, without having it all planned out in advance.

So, for most of this 20 minutes, you're going to improvise — as you've been doing all morning — and rehearse the presentation on your feet. No matter how long you plan — and we're not against planning — everything changes when you actually begin practicing your performances. This is also when you make discoveries that you never get to in the process of planning.

When one of you is "rehearsing" and/or "practicing," the other is functioning as a coach/director. This is important — we are asking you to literally coach your partner through his or her part of the presentation, and vice versa. As you work, Margo and I will periodically come over, politely interrupt you, and work with you on the coaching process.

### **MARGO**

One more note: Right now, in the other room, the other group is going through the same process as you. Ultimately, we're go-

ing to come back together, and one team from our group and one from theirs will perform their sales presentations in a final competition. To select the representative team in each room, we'll have a playoff in 20 minutes.

**DAVID**

Any burning questions? Good. You now have twenty minutes. Go!

*The pairs set to work. It's a chore to get them on their feet and rehearsing. If left alone, it's plain they'd spend the entire twenty minutes planning — that's in their comfort zone — and no time practicing. After three minutes, only two of the seven teams have begun the rehearsal process. After four and a half of the twenty minutes have passed...*

**DAVID**

If you haven't already, you should now get on your feet and start improvising the presentation.

*All but one of the pairs begin rehearsing. Margo and David walk up to that remaining pair, Nick and Barry. They rise.*

**MARGO**

Okay. How's it going?

**BARRY**

Fine. Good.

**MARGO**

What's your product or service?

**NICK**

Helicopter transportation.

**BARRY**

*(Smiling.)* We're Whirlybirders, Inc.

**DAVID**

Okay. What are your roles?

**BARRY**

I'm the money guy, and Nick's the pilot.

**DAVID**

Tell me more about that.

**BARRY**

He's a daredevil...

**NICK**

A former Green Beret.

**DAVID**

Uh-huh. So your character...

**NICK**

Is a tough guy. Very direct.

**BARRY**

Yeah. I think you can run in, and sort of whip off your sunglasses before you speak.

**DAVID**

*(To Nick.)* Does that work for you?

**BARRY**

*(A bit tentatively.)* Uh...yeah, yeah.

**DAVID**

Okay, let's see that. Let's see the first minute or so of your presentation, with Barry running in and whipping off his glasses.

*They practice. Nick coaches Barry, and vice versa. David and Margo visit the other pairs and work with them as well. Meanwhile, in the other room, Cathy and Adam are working with the team of Walt and Teri, whose service is Robotic pets.*

**CATHY**

So, Walt, if you're the mad scientist who in-

vented the robotic pets...Teri, what's your role?

**TERI**

I'm the sales director.

**WALT**

Yeah, talk about the price structure and the programming for home security protection.

**TERI**

Uh-huh.

**CATHY**

That's good. But those are content issues. Let's talk about Teri's performance outside of content. Talk some more about her character and approach.

*Cathy and Adam work with Walt and Teri for another minute or two, then visit the other group. After the 20 minutes have expired...*

### **Scene Three. Performing the Coaching Process**

**ADAM**

Time's up! Everyone have a seat. Now we mentioned before that we would have a playoff to choose our representative team. So now we're all going to see a performance by each of the teams, to help us make the decision.

**CATHY**

But there's a twist. What we want you to perform right now is not your sales presentation. Instead, we'd like to see a two- to four-minute performance of your coaching process! Perform what you've been doing for the past 20 minutes!

**ADAM**

Your performance of coaching might include some of the sales presentation itself, but we don't want that to be the focus. We want to see how you coached one another. And, if you didn't coach each other — well, you have a second chance!

**CATHY**

Now, like your one-minute Performances of a Lifetime, this is wide open: You can perform a key coaching moment that made a big difference; you could show us the entire process boiled down to four minutes; whatever you want. After every team has performed, we'll vote by a show of applause for the best coaching performance, and that team will be our representative in the Final Playoff.

**ADAM**

Since we've thrown you a curve, we're going to give you another few minutes to work on the performance of your coaching process. Please go ahead.

*After a few minutes to plan, each pair does their performance of a coaching. These vary widely. Some coach mostly on content and not performance, some don't. Some use flip charts and notes, some don't. Some have strong give-and-take in their coaching; some have a clear leader-and-follower dynamic. After all the coaching performances, the teams vote. Teri and Walt and their robotic pets business — Robopets — is chosen to represent the group in the playoff.*

*In the other room, the winning team is Jim and Andrew. Their service is clumsiness counseling. The winning edge is their spin on the service: Their imaginary service, Oafs "R" Us, teaches clients how to be clumsy.*

**DAVID**

Okay, now we have fifteen minutes for collective coaching. Let's see the entire sales presentation from beginning to end with no stopping, and the group can give notes.

*Jim and Andrew run through their sales presentation. It's a comedy of errors; the collective coaching focuses on a grab bag of schtick that makes it even funnier. When fifteen minutes are up, the entire group heads back to the main room, where Cathy and Adam and their group have been coaching Walt and Teri through Robopets. A lot of this involves tweaking Walt's mad scientist and Teri's slick sales director. Cathy reminds the "collective coaches" several times to build on what's been done — to be positive — and specific. (Their tendency is to be negative and general.)*

*The entire group watches the playoff with great interest and enthusiasm. Both duos "step up;" and in their final performances rise to the occasion and use the energy of the audience to raise their performance levels even higher. The final vote is a tie.*

**Scene Four. The Final Debrief****CATHY**

Terrific. Let's give both groups a hand. Good work everybody. Take a few minutes now to write in your journals, any thoughts, random or specific, about all the activities you went through today. What was it like to do? What did you learn about the other partners? How was it to be coached by each other? How are you as a director? What are some things you saw about yourselves and one another that you think are helpful or important? Take a few minutes and we'll debrief a little bit when you're done.

*Participants write in journals provided for personal reflection during their week of ex-*

*periences at the Executive Center. Margo circulates with additional pads and pens for those who've forgotten to bring them. After a few minutes, Cathy begins the debrief.*

**CATHY**

Okay. What do you think? Let's talk coaching and directing. What have you got?

**NICK**

I'm thinking about how you respect someone who doesn't ask you to do something that he wouldn't do himself. That fosters respect.

**CATHY**

Uh-huh.

**NICK**

You want to feel that somebody who's telling you what to do has already been through it and knows the ropes.

**ANDREW**

It's more than that. It's what you were talking about before, Cathy. Even if you have a specific way of doing things, it's establishing an environment that lets people know they can have input, and also maybe letting them do things in a way that's different from the way you do them.

**NICK**

Maybe. *(A few partners laugh.)*

**CATHY**

Okay, maybe. Why is it hard to support people to do things in ways that are different than your way?

**WALT**

Oh God — I don't know. Frankly, I don't even know if I've even thought about it!

**TERI**

Well we certainly haven't talked about it. I

think it's a big issue for us. I mean, we're not trying to turn people into automatons, are we?

### **CATHY**

I hope not — but that might be what passes for coaching sometimes. You know, it's a lot harder to work with the real person. It puts greater demands on you when you work creatively to support and connect and direct someone. It's easier just to tell people “do it this way.” But that doesn't grow anybody, doesn't invest in the company, and it doesn't access all of the wonderful talent and resources that you have in your midst.

### **WALT**

How do you get better at it?

### **CATHY**

Well, one thing is to consciously perform all the time. Even in everyday life. Start looking at everything as a scene, in which you are a character, an ensemble member, and a director. That gives us the framework to explore and make different choices. We're not just bringing in this performance stuff to give you a metaphor to work with. These are actual tools and a way of being that allows you to see more than what “meets the eye.” And, you should practice!

### **TERI**

Sometimes I think it's a time issue.

### **WALT**

Time is always a problem.

### **TERI**

But I think if we look at coaching as an environment issue, it shouldn't take any more time. It's a qualitative issue, not a quantitative issue. Isn't it?

### **ANDREW**

To me, this is all about being a human being. And it's about being vulnerable. I'm not talking about crying all day long at the office when the going gets tough — I just mean that we're human and that's part of it. It seems like if people we're mentoring don't have any idea of what it took for us to get to where we are — then they won't see in themselves the ability to move ahead as well.

### **BARRY**

That's a great point.

*The debrief continues for another fifteen minutes, covering (among other issues) trust, different styles of coaching, and what it means to see through “the coaching lens” all the time.*

### **CATHY**

Well, it's twelve-thirty. I'm sure everybody's ready for lunch. Thank you for a great morning, and enjoy the rest of your day.

*All applaud.*

### **CURTAIN**

## PART TWO THE THEORY

### A Practical Psychology of Performance

Performance of a Lifetime's innovative performing arts consulting is part of a new psychology, a new view of what it is to be a person. What is this new view?

### People are Social Beings.

In this new practical psychology, we don't look at people as self-contained, isolated individuals who "come together" when we need to accomplish certain tasks. We're social beings — we're relational, connected, and part of something larger than ourselves. We and the world we live in are continuously emergent, complex and not always predictable — because we and it are always transforming. Human beings are much less fully formed and fixed than we are characterized by fluidity, multiplicity, complexity and creativity. And from the business point of view, it's the relationality, the connectedness and the collaborative nature of human action that "gets things done."

### People are Performers.

An exciting part of the new psychology is its focus on people as *performers of their lives*. Those who call themselves "performative psychologists" believe that our ability to perform — to pretend, to play, to improvise, to be both *who we are* and *other than who we are* — is key to our emotional, social and intellectual lives. They prefer the language of the theater to psychological jargon because it does a better job of capturing the fact that people are socially connected and are always creating things together. For example, these psychologists see the world as a series of "stages" upon which "ensembles" (groups, teams) create the millions of "scenes" (scripted and improvised) of their lives.

For discussions of performative psychology and a dramaturgical approach to human life, see *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Gergen, 1994), *Performing Psychology* (Holzman, 1999), *Performance of a Lifetime* (Newman, 1996), *The Drama of Everyday Life* (Scheibe, 2000).

Even though theatrical performance has been a part of psychology for years, until recently it has been limited to traditional psychotherapeutic work. The idea behind psychodrama and drama therapy, for example, is that by "acting out" instead of "talking about" their lives, people will reveal things that they can't or won't otherwise. In addition, some therapists use drama techniques to encourage interpersonal relationships and group values as a way for people to learn how to express their problems with the group or a group member (Johnson, 1982). Emphasizing the *collaborative activity* of performance, as performative psychologists and Performance of a Lifetime do, is different from both traditional psychoanalytic and group dynamics approaches in that its focus is on the ensemble activity of creating the performance. It taps into our capacity to work and play, to learn from and teach, and to create well with others. In this way, the approach we use has similarities with some of the newer psychotherapies that emphasize the collaborative creation of the therapy itself. Some well-known examples are narrative therapy, social constructionist therapies and social therapy, the approach that has most strongly influenced Performance of a Lifetime.

See *Narrative Therapy in Practice* (Monk, Winslade, Crockett and Epston, 1997), *Therapy as Social Construction* (McNamee and Gergen, 19) and *Let's Develop!* (Newman, 1994).

The idea of people as performers comes also from child development theory, primarily from the theory of a Russian psychologist of the 1920s and '30s named Lev Vygotsky. He observed that very young children de-

velop because they are allowed to do things they don't yet know how to do — indeed, they're enthusiastically encouraged to do so! Vygotsky described it as “performing a head taller than they are” (Vygotsky, 1987). Children perform all the time, without a physical stage and without fear of making mistakes. They *perform their lives*: they play with words and sounds before they know the language, they creatively imitate who and what they are not — “flying” a plane, “reading” to their stuffed animals, “dancing” and “singing” along to a music video. And they couldn't do all that unless the adults around them participated in the ways that they do — with acceptance, support and creativity (in short, as good directors and coaches). This is the discovery that is so valuable about Vygotsky's work: that children develop so quickly and learn so well because they and we create environments in which they can *become*.

Recently, psychologists and educators who work with and study school-age children and adolescents have also begun to notice how valuable the performing arts are. Even though it rarely reaches the front pages of the newspapers or the nightly news, there is evidence that the single best predictor of success in school and life may be participation in some performing arts program, either in school or outside of school. According to this research, when young people are given opportunities to perform in new and different types of roles, they come to see themselves as capable of acting outside and beyond the expected, something essential for continued intellectual, social and emotional growth. Unfortunately, most young people have few opportunities to act outside the constraints of the expected role of student or outside the structure of curricular and extra-curricular requirements.

See the following reports and articles: *Involvement in the Arts and Success in Secondary Schools*, (Catterall, 1998), *Urban Youth Development-*

*Broadway Style* (Dutton, 2001), *Performative Psychology: An Untapped Resource for Educators* (Holzman, 2000), *Making Learning Work* (Heath, 2001).

What does all of this have to do with corporate executives? Here is how performative psychologist Lois Holzman (who serves as learning strategist for Performance of a Lifetime) puts it:

*If performing is how we learn and develop, then don't the “living organizations,” “learning organizations” and “passionate organizations” that business leaders are now speaking about need to recognize themselves as “performing organizations?” If creativity and growth come into existence when people together create stages for development in the home, the school, the theater, the community center, the ball field and the therapy office, can management and employees learn to create them at the workplace? If getting up on a stage puts you in touch with your “performing self” — teaching you that you can always create new performances of yourself — and has been shown to help adults, teens and children create better functioning and happier families and peer groups, might it not do the same for teams and workgroups? (Holzman, 2000)*

### **People are Improvisers.**

To most people, improvising means being spontaneous, dealing with the unexpected, breaking with a script and not following the rules. In this sense, all of us improvise some of the time. Sometimes we're okay at it, but at other times we become frightened or frozen, especially when we have already decided how things “should” go. That's when we can get into not listening and, worse, blaming others.

To professional performers, improvising has another, more complex meaning, which the Performance of a Lifetime approach has incorporated into its training and consulting. Improvising refers to the set of tools and methods that actors use to generate scenes, stories and conversations without a script. Skilled improvisers literally create action — they make things happen — on the spot. They create their setting, characters and plot by working off each other. In order to do so, they have to listen with an openness that is rare in other discourse situations. They have to listen in order to create; not to evaluate, assess or negate. Otherwise, the scene won't go anywhere.

In a way, good improvisers are doing with adults what the rest of us do when we speak with very young children. When a 10-month old says, “ba-ba” we aren't critical or negative, but rather we accept the utterance and keep “the conversation” going (saying, perhaps, “Yes, it's time for your bottle” or “Uh oh, you dropped your bottle, I'll get it for you”). But ordinary conversations, including those at the workplace, are rarely improvised in the theatrical sense. Ordinarily, people tend to listen very selectively to what others are saying — we listen in order to hear something we agree or disagree with, to assess the “truth value” of what is said, to size up the speaker, or to hear the pause that signals “it's my turn now,” etc. Practicing theatrical improvisation can help turn this around, because performing improvisationally is working with everyone and everything available in a continuous creative process. Just as children become speakers through this process, adults too can become more creative and collaborative communicators — and more effective teachers, mentors and coaches.

### **People Make Mistakes.**

In closing, I want to share one more thing about this practical psychology of performance. It's something Fred Newman, the founder of the Performance of a Lifetime approach and a psychotherapist and theater director, once said about making mistakes and having another chance. As an actor and a trainer, his words touch me deeply: “From our point of view, performance might have nothing to do with being on the stage. We think you can perform at home, at work, in any social setting. In plays, if we don't get it right the first time we can do it again and again and again. Why can't we do it again and again in life situations? Maybe we can.” (Newman, quoted in Dan Friedman, *Theatre InSight*, 2000).

To me, the essence of good coaching — seeing new possibilities and helping others to explore them — is conveying “Maybe we can...”

End Note - Discussions of performance in the sense of theatrical performance (rather than performance outcomes) are relatively rare in the business field, with the notable exception of Pine & Gilmore's *The Experience Economy — Work is Theater and Every Business a Stage*. At the same time, the number of firms using some form of theatrical performance and improvisation in their management consulting, organization development and leadership training is steadily growing and gaining media coverage; in recent years articles appeared in such publications as *Fast Company*, *Forbes, Inc.*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *the NY Post*, *the NY Times*, *the Atlanta Constitution and Journal*, *O the Oprah Magazine*, and *Harvard Business Review*.

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