



Consulting made extraordinary

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FROM THE FRONT LINES:

BossaNova and Booz Allen Use

Improv Comedy as a Bona Fide Business Tool



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In February 2007, BossaNova teamed with Booz Allen Hamilton's Chief People Officer and his People Services Team (PST). The mission: to create an extraordinary fifth annual all-hands retreat --- an event attended by over 300 U.S.-based staff. Specific goals were to celebrate accomplishments, expand relationships, share key business initiatives for the year ahead, and create a personal sense of commitment and accountability for the success of the team.

BossaNova created and facilitated the day-long design, including a two-hour improv comedy workshop for all 300 people. Only one person in the room claimed to have prior improv experience, other than BossaNova's Improv Guru Shawn Westfall. Under Shawn's capable guidance, BossaNova's **Work Can Be Fun(ny)** workshop transformed *everyone* attending into improv comedians for an afternoon of laughter, fun, and camaraderie. Every single person participated, and over 60 professionals volunteered to join Shawn on stage to showcase talents they never knew they had.

What follows is an excerpt from an interview that Andrea Howe, BossaNova's President and Founder, recently conducted with Ina Gantcheva, PST Strategic Operations Manager. Ina led the planning of the annual meeting.

Andrea: What words would you use to describe the Work Can Be Fun(ny) program -- what comes to mind immediately?

Ina: Energizing. Breakthrough. Collegial. Team spirit. Light. Surprise. Unleashing. Transformative.

Andrea: You've integrated a variety of experiential activities into the all-hands in prior years. What was different about Work Can be Fun(ny)?

Ina: This one clearly stood apart. Here are my initial thoughts:

- It was *truly* experiential; everyone participated. It removed barriers such as organizational hierarchy, age, department -- everything. It really leveled the playing field.
- It was creative and invited people to try out a different type of thinking. It wasn't stiff and intellectual, even though it was very intelligent.
- It invited people to participate in a dramatically different and safe way, through humor and the ability laugh at and with your colleagues.
- The entire day was led by professionals with diverse skills and a lot of flexibility. The three-person BossaNova team knew their stuff very well. At appropriate times, they were great presenters as well as strong facilitators -- they knew how to work with a large crowd and to create a feeling of intimacy and closeness in such a large room. During the improv segment, Shawn's obvious skill in interacting with people created a spark from the beginning, and set a tone of creativity and learning immediately.

Andrea: What's different in your organization now as a result of the experience?

Ina: Without prompting, our staff immediately began using "Yes and!" and the other improv techniques they learned, both with each other and their



clients. We didn't have to assign them action items to make that happen; it was a natural outcome. Laughter creates a buzz. Our Work Can Be Fun(ny) experience created a shared memory and shared history from that buzz. People I don't even know still approach me to talk to me about how great the meeting was -- a month later.

Andrea: What would you say to people who might be concerned that something like this might be fun but doesn't have real business value?

Ina: I'd say it was a way to build camaraderie and yet have a business-relevant outcome like no other I have experienced. We laughed together and created together in a way that was safe and fun, which built personal connections and broke down barriers. It has created conversations where a way to connect didn't exist before. This is especially essential for a group of people who don't have a lot of first-hand experience with each other because we're spread out all over the country. And it's exactly the kind of collaboration that's needed to get business results.

Improv comedy as a team tool gets you more than team building; it builds strong team cohesion and creativity. You can do a lot of team building and never achieve cohesion and creativity.

Andrea: What kind of groups would you recommend this to?

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Ina: I'd recommend this for an extremely wide variety of organizations and groups -- for intact teams, very senior groups, large groups -- even larger than our group. I see this working for teams or organizations at all stages: just starting out and wanting to get to know each other, already working well together but need more buzz or want the next level of creativity/connection, looking for a new way to navigate through conflict, wrapping up and reflecting on accomplishments. It's really a catalyst.

Improv comedy is also a natural culture-builder. For example, if you want to create a culture of openness and where people are treated as equals, this experience makes it possible for your entire organization to practice walking the talk.

Andrea: What do you want to tell me that I haven't already asked about?

Ina: You really delivered top-notch value that had a huge impact on our organization. **Everyone** thought it was a great day. People are still talking about it, including our senior leadership. Thank you!

ABOUT BOSSANOVA

BossaNova Consulting Group, Inc. works with professional services firms that want to stand apart from their competition by being extraordinary in their client relationships. BossaNova's learning programs teach the art and science of building trust – with a minimum promise of four to five times the typical return on training investment.

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