

Building High-Performing Teams through the Principles of Improv

Sue Orchard, Psy.D.

Vice President of Student Services, Lower Columbia College

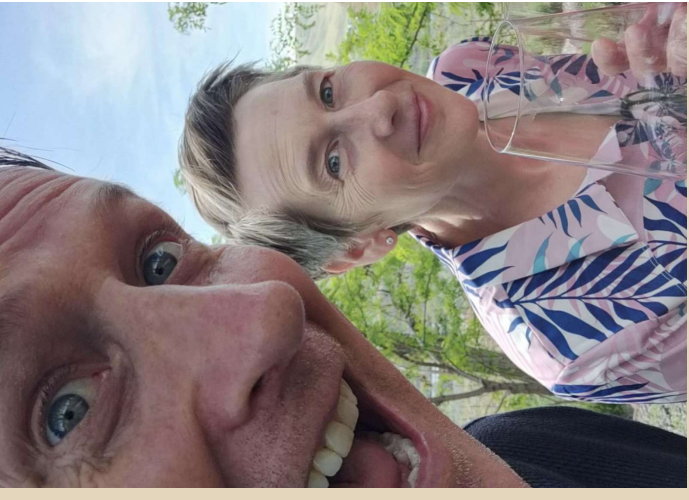
&

Keith Orchard, LCSW

Mental Health Coordinator, Coeur d'Alene School District

May 8, 2025

Welcome & Warm-up



An improv mindset



Listening
for *what's*
possible

Keith Orchard, LCSW

bkorchard@gmail.com

www.coachorchard.com



Welcome & Warm-up

My new best friend! - pair and
share

Name, where you work, and
what are you “listening” to/
“listening” for?



Objectives

1. **Listening**
2. **Vulnerability & Trust**
3. **Embracing Mistakes**





‘Yes’ I accept what you have said and I am actively listening

‘And’ now I am going to build on what you just shared

Yes, *but* exercise

Brainstorm ideas for a group party at the end of the year:

- Partner A offers an idea.
- Partner B, “Yeah, buts” and explains why it won’t work then offers a new idea.
- Partner A “Yeah, buts”, and shares why it won’t work, then offers a new idea.
- Repeat.

Problem Solving Team Protocol

Keep it tight to not
get stuck admiring
the problem



1. **Presenter:** Describe the challenge and your guess at the need behind the behavior (3 min)

2. **Group:** Ask clarifying questions (3 min)

3. **Group:** Determine importance and brainstorm strategies - LIST (5 min)

4. **Presenter:** Prioritize strategies based on the students need (2 min)

5. **Presenter:** Choose one strategy to try and one idea of how to track success (1 min)

6. **Group:** Schedule follow Up with presenter



Presenter is
silent... No
“yeah...but”.



‘Yes’ I accept what you have said and I am actively listening

‘And’ now I am going to build on what you just shared

Deep Listening



Last Word Listening Exercise

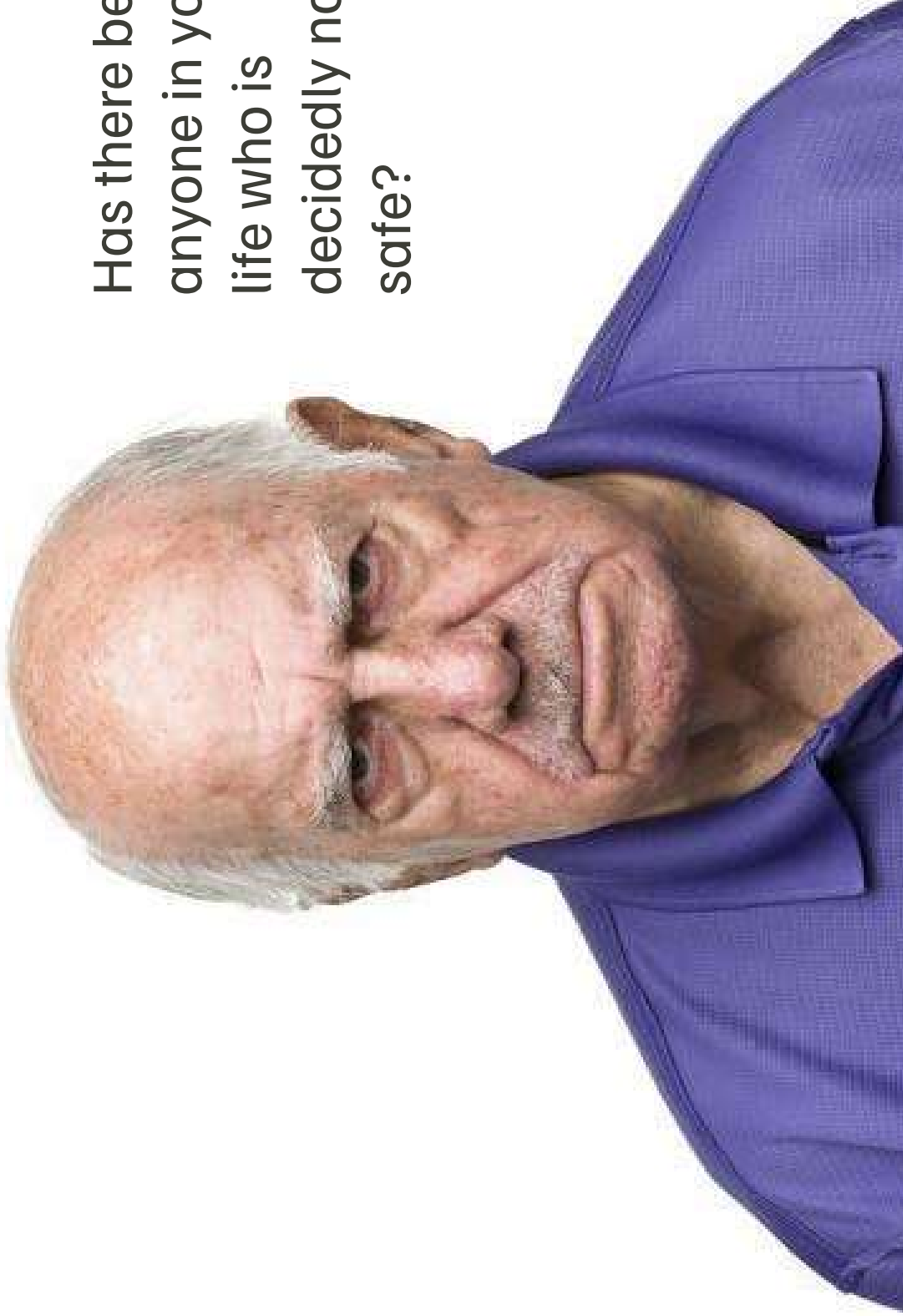
Partner A: Talk about what you like best about spring using 2-3 short sentences.

Partner B: Respond with what you like about spring, starting your sentence with the last word said by partner A.

Repeat and continue



Has there been
anyone in your
life who is
decidedly not
safe?



- ▶ “I should be reclassified. I work just as hard as staff in financial aid.”
- ▶ “This is ridiculous. Carol barely shows up for work and everyone has to cover for her.”
- ▶ “Student workers today don’t know what it means to work hard or show any accountability.”
- ▶ “I know you get it, but does anyone else on the executive team understand the student experience? They don’t know how to make decisions that lead to results.”

Statements that will shut a person down

“There are other employees who work just as hard or harder who don’t make as much as you do.”

“I’m sure it isn’t as bad as you are making it.”

“You’re just tired. Look on the bright side, at least we have some extra support in the office.”

“Oh, it’s not that bad. Quit being so dramatic.”

Dismissing feelings

Statements that will shut a person down

“You should speak to HR about this.”

“If I were you, I’d confront Carol about her behavior”

“Why don’t you just quit talking to her. I have this great podcast you should listen to...”

“How about if I speak to ____ about the situation and try to resolve it.”

Giving advice, Solving the problem

Statements that will shut a person down

“Adversity builds character!”

“It could be worse.”

“This is all part of God’s plan.”

“There are other jobs out there.”

“Everything happens for a reason.”

Platitudes

Statements that will shut a person down

“Why did you do that...?”

“Well, if you hadn’t done that, you wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“You should have listened to me the first time.”

“Can’t you ever say anything positive?”

Judgements

Statements that will shut a person down

“When I started at [college], I didn’t make even close to how much you’re making right now.”

“It used to be so much worse before you started here. I used to work in a tiny office and we had to ...”

“I know the exec team decisions don’t always make sense, but trust me, I’m in there fighting for you all, doing my best. You have no idea what I’m up against.”

Making It About You

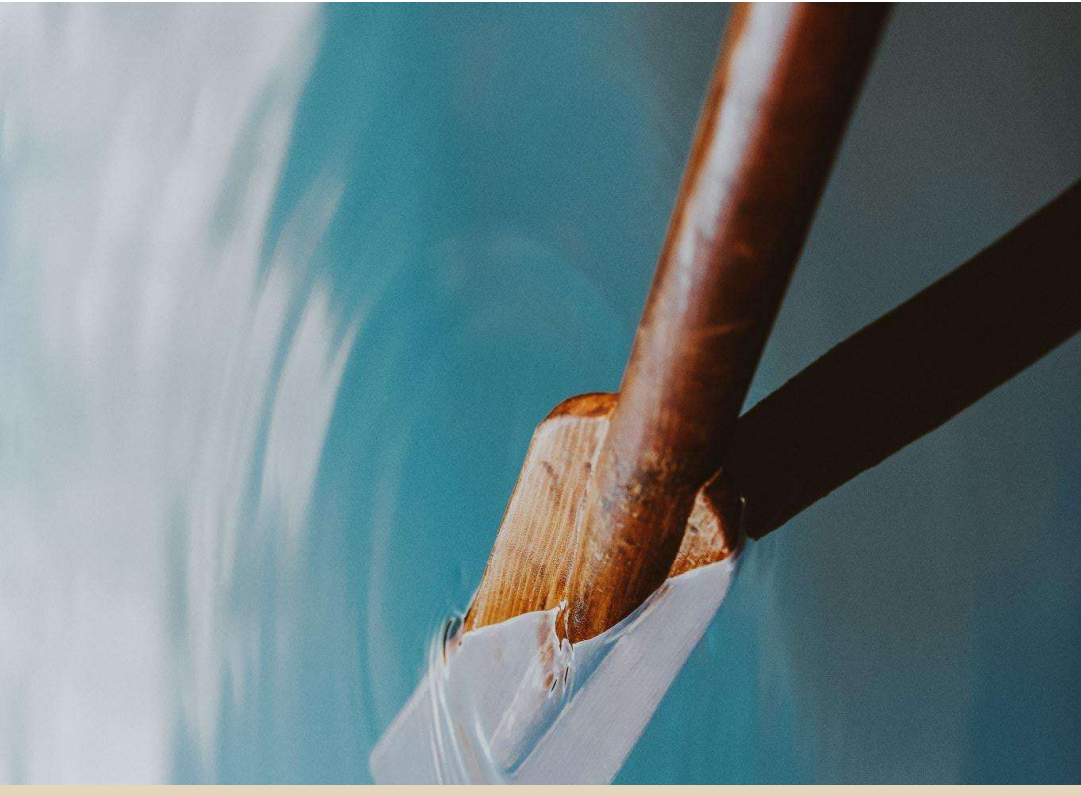
Which of these habits could you work on to improve your safety?

- Dismissing feelings
- Giving advice/ solving problems
- Platitudes
- Making it about you
- Judgements



Specific Skills

- **Open-Ended Questions** - Questions that can't be answered in a 'yes' or 'no' response. Keeps the person talking.
- **Reflections** - Tell them what you heard so they know they have been heard and understood.
- **Empathy** - Anything that acknowledges the feeling behind the problem or that they have been heard
 - I'm sorry to hear that
 - That's rough
 - Yeah, I'd be angry too
- **Silence** - It's ok to just sit and be present

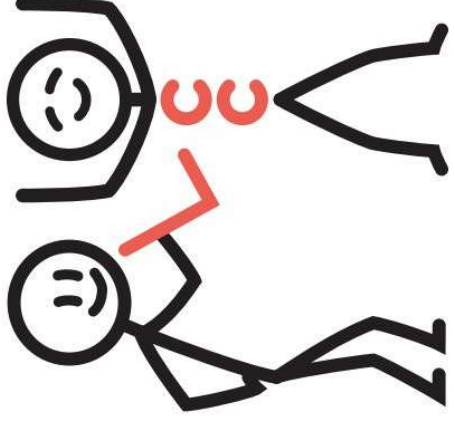


Discuss a Problem of Practice... Without Fixing Anything



Building and Maintaining Trust

**LCC STUDENT
SERVICES**



I've got your back!

Why Establish Group Norms?

Cultures thrive when there is a shared language and commitment to a set of behaviors that align with the stated values.

This process allows teams to get clear on the specific behaviors that are expected, encouraged, and rewarded within their culture.

- Does your work team have agreements?
- What are they?
- Are they explicit?
- Do people follow them?
- What happens if they don't follow them?



How we do the work
(how we show up)

How we make
decisions

How we celebrate
each other

How we manage
conflict

We Can't Have Community if We Can't Resolve Conflict



Usually, when people have a conflict the first thing they tend to do is....

COMPLAIN ABOUT IT.



OMG, YOU ARE NOT
GOING TO BELIEVE WHAT
JUST HAPPENED...

Is Venting Helpful?



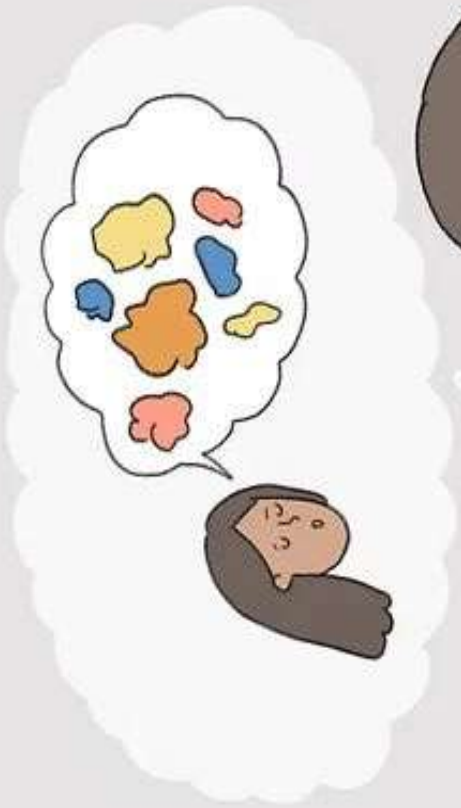
Is Venting Helpful?

In study after study, subjects who vented anger against inanimate objects, who vented directly against the person who induced their anger, who vented hostility by playing football or who vented verbally about an employer - all showed **MORE** resentment (anger, hostility, aggressiveness) than those who had not vented. In some experiments, venting led to aggression against innocent bystanders.

**If Venting
Doesn't Work
then What Do We
Do Instead?**



Process



Possible Norms - Rules for Fair Fighting

1. Solve Problems at the right time
2. Solve Problems with the right person (No colluding)
3. We don't allow anger and frustration to boil up. Instead of venting, we process.
4. Assume the best - Start the conversation in a safe way by assuming the best of the other person. Instead of asking, "what's the matter with that person?" Ask, "why would a reasonable, rational, and decent person do that?"
5. Start with a "Check In"
6. Be specific about what is bothering you. Vague complaints are hard to work on.
 - a. Use an "I Statement"
7. Solve one problem at a time and avoid past issues – Deal with current problems only.

How we do the work (how we show up)

- We are fully engaged, prepared to offer my point of view and take ownership for all
- We ask for help
- We choose courage over comfort
- We practice gratitude and respect
- We are accountable

How we make decisions

- We stay **ALIGNED** with our values when making tough decisions.
- We challenge or question the status quo or traditional way of doing things and are open to new ideas even when things are going well
- We seek out and listen to customers needs in order to develop ideas and solutions

How we take care of one another

- We assume positive intentions and stay positive
- We practice gratitude by making the time to do extra kind and generous things for my colleagues
- We are willing to ask for and give help without judgement
- We are thoughtfully engaged and committed to our school community
- We notice and celebrate strengths

How we manage conflict

- We choose courage over comfort by facing difficult tasks and conversations rather than avoiding them
- We have direct, honest conversations with people rather than talking about them to others, relying on back channel conversations or pretending that I agree in the name of being polite.
- We are able to reset after setbacks rather than staying stuck in emotion

What
happens
when team
agreements
are not
met?



Workplace agreements demo



Determine which conversation are you having

Content, Pattern or Relationship (CPR)

State Clear Intentions

“My goal here is...I don’t think/want/mean...”
“My intent in having this conversation is...”
“I care about you and your success. That’s why...”

Share your facts & story

“I noticed that...I saw...I heard...”
“We agreed on... and I’m seeing...”
“I’m beginning to wonder if...”
“It’s starting to appear that...”

Inquire

“How do you see this?”
“What’s your perspective?”
“What’s your point of view?”
“Can you help me understand?”

Workplace agreements demo



Conflict Avoidance...



Embracing mistakes



Activity - *Questions* *Only?*



I must be perfect?



How Do We Do Mistakes?

- **Me:** Do I model making mistakes, owning up to them and learning from them?
- **Team:** How do coworkers and supervisors respond to mistakes?
- **Culture:** What is the culture of vulnerability and willingness to take risks?

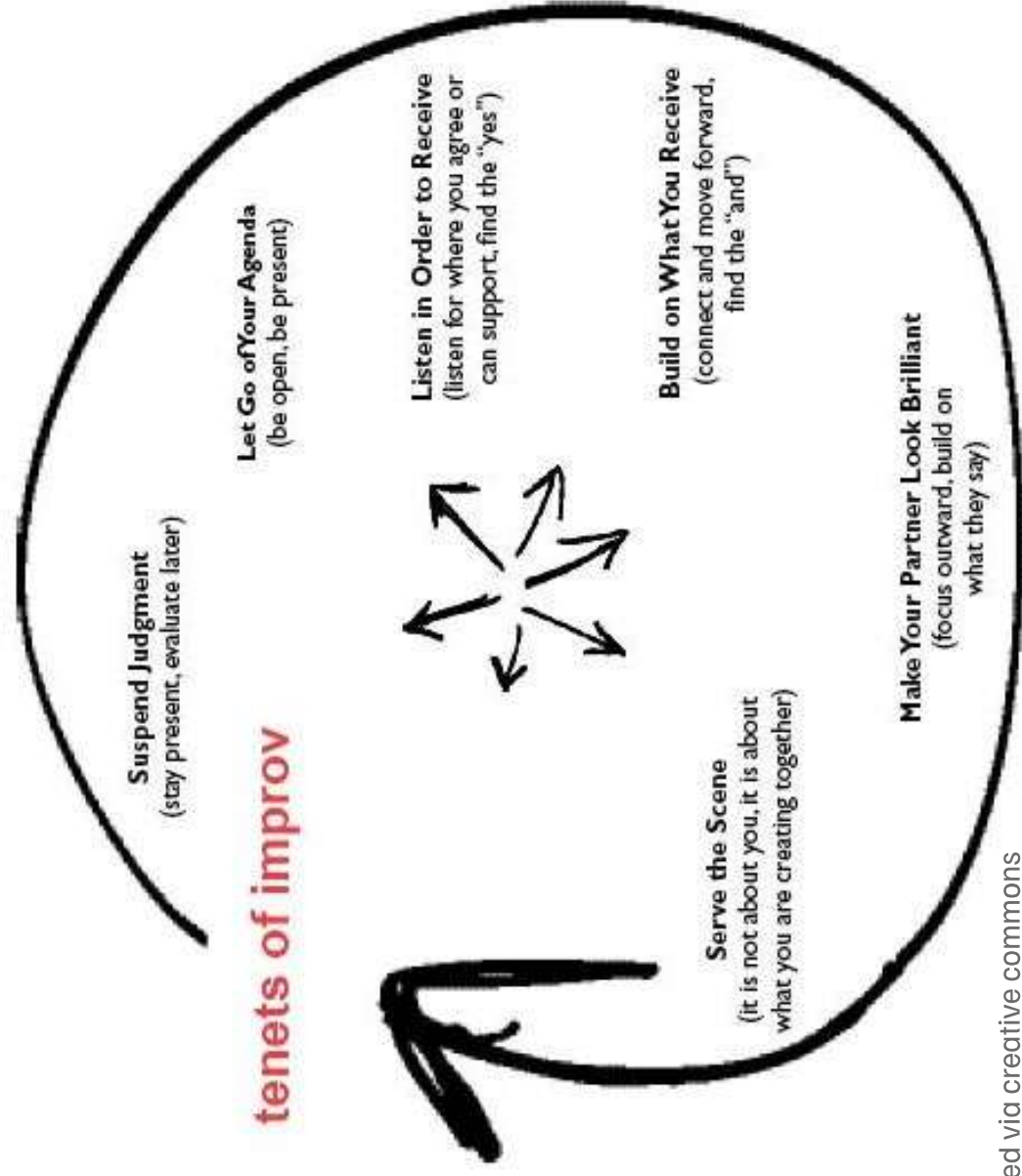
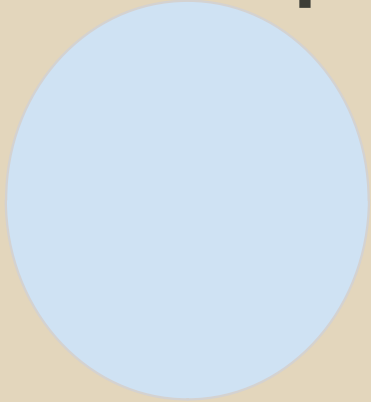
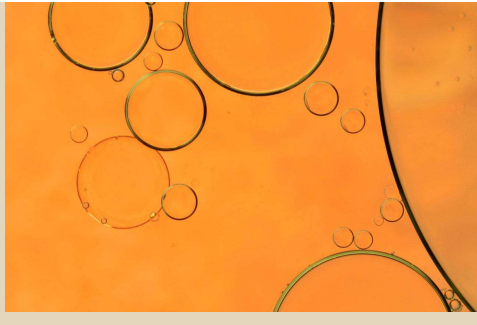


Illustration by [ISKME](#), used via creative commons



Takeaways

Jot down 1-2 takeaways and share with a partner



Thank you!

Sue Orchard, Psy.D.
sorchar@lowercolumbia.edu

Keith Orchard, LCSW
bkorchar@gmail.com
Orchard Consulting, LLC <https://www.coachorchard.com/>

