

# FOCUS

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Q+A  
**More  
than  
Funny**

With its Creative Outreach training sessions, the Brave New Workshop team uses improv principles to help you be better at business. >>

INTERVIEWED BY AMANDA FRETHEIM GATES

■ The Brave New Workshop team in its new space on Hennepin Avenue. Pictured (from left front): John Sweeney, Caleb McEwen, Eric Rislove, Elena Imaretska and Dawn Hopkins. Not pictured: Jenni Lilledahl.

Meetings  
podcast



>> To learn more about the Brave New Workshop team, its Creative Outreach branch and its new Minneapolis venue (plus, hear some pretty funny stuff), find the entire interview in *Meetings: Minnesota's Hospitality Journal's* podcast on iTunes or at our website, [www.mn-meetings.com](http://www.mn-meetings.com)

**Many may think of the Brave New Workshop (BNW) as a hole-in-a-wall theater on Hennepin Avenue in Uptown,**

a place where a bunch of silly actors put on some hilarious performances. The fact that this self-funded organization has been doing that for more than 50 years (longer than any other comedy theater in the nation) is often overlooked. The fact that they do a whole lot more than just act silly? Well, most probably didn't know that either. But you know who does? The folks at corporations like Microsoft, Hilton, Hewlett-Packard and Facebook who have been using the BNW's Creative Outreach team to train their employees (and throw knives at their CEOs) at meetings and conventions around the world for the past 10 years.

John Sweeney and his wife Jenni Lilledahl bought the BNW in 1997. Soon after, times got tough for the theater community and the couple started looking at ways to continue to support the theater and its improvisational school. They developed a line of products—everything from keynote speaking to customized training to brainstorming sessions—they could sell to businesses. This part of the business, now called Creative Outreach, grew year after year with more people and more products and now represents nearly 70 percent of the organization's gross revenue. This fall, the BNW moved into the former Hennepin Stages space in Minneapolis' theater district, which not only allows for a better theater, but also for a brand-new event space. We sat down with a few members of the Creative Outreach team and learned what they offer to meeting planners.

**Q Tell us how a bunch of improv actors can add value to meetings and events. Why is laughter important, and how can those improv techniques help employees learn and thrive?**

**A. Caleb McEwen, artistic director, trainer, writer, actor, emcee and knife thrower:**

Everything that goes into successful improvisation is about behavior and creating a specific environment. Those are very practical, pragmatic, easily implemental things that any organization can do without throwing a whole bunch of money at it. Because of that, it's something that is very immediate and very effective. When I first started working in improvisation and theater, I didn't see it going in this kind of direction, but after having done it for 15 years and working with a lot of different companies all over the world, it has really shown me that ironically, the thing that you would think was least connected to what the business world was trying to accomplish is actually one of the most practical and effective solutions that you could come up with.

**John Sweeney, keynote speaker, author, trainer and owner:** One of the things that's important is the function to give people the ability to practice behaviors. In athletics or any art form, we spend most of our time practicing. In the business world, we are told that our co-workers, our custom-

ers and our competitors need us to increase our skill set each quarter, yet I'm wondering when practice is scheduled. What I think as a consumer or as a shareholder is that we tend to introduce new skills and behaviors in a large organization and then practice is in front of our customers. I don't think that's fair to us as customers.

**Elena Imaretska, vice president of client services:** We have found that laughter is incredibly important because it creates an environment where people are able to let their guard down and truly be themselves and also truly listen. Oftentimes when you're in a training environment, maybe you're a little bit cynical or you approach it with an attitude of, "Eh, I have other things to do." But when you're able to laugh, you're more likely to open your mind and try something new.

*"It's not just the fact that it's a pragmatic system that works, it's also the way we're able to present it. People will actually pay attention." — Caleb McEwen*

**Sweeney:** Not to be cynical of the classic large work environment, but when you ask for descriptors of that environment, laughter, smiles and fun certainly don't migrate to the top of the list. Yet when you ask those same human beings to describe other aspects

of their life where they're high performing—those environments with their children, doing their hobbies, when they're singing in their church choir—some of the first descriptors will be 'I love it,' 'It's fun,' 'I smile a lot,' and 'We go out for coffee afterwards.'

**Jenni Lilledahl, executive director of the Student Union and owner:** Maybe the misnomer is, 'Well I'm not funny, I'm not an actor, I'm not verbal,' and that's incorrect. We're really good at engaging every person in the room. We've taught people unable to speak, we've taught people in wheelchairs.

**McEwen:** It's not trying to teach someone something new that they don't know—it's trying to change a person—it's trying to change the environment. That's a very positive thing. We can affect our environment very quickly as opposed to trying to change

an individual, which is a very difficult process and with some, absolutely impossible.

**Sweeney:** One of the simple things that we set as a ground rule in any of our corporate brainstorming sessions is: you will make eye contact and stay physically engaged with the



human beings you're brainstorming with. You won't open your laptop; you won't look away; you won't fall asleep; and you won't make that culture feel less than safe by disconnecting. In a brainstorming session when someone might just be disconnecting, the rest of the group might think that they're judging. It's a simple basic behavior. Sometimes it's a bit shocking for us to walk into those environments and say, 'Oh my goodness, I know you're not trying to be disrespectful, but this poor shy person from accounting is trying to come up with a great idea and in the middle of it, you took a call and you decided to go to the bathroom. Come on!'

**McEwen:** You could have the greatest system for change that the world has ever seen, but if you can't present it to a group of people and have them pay attention and get excited about it, then it's never going to take hold. It's not just the fact that it's a pragmatic system that works, it's also the way we're able to present it. People will actually pay attention. That's a huge benefit.

**Tell us about the process of working with a new client. How do you learn and then present their message to their employees?**

**Sweeney:** The beginning of our process is to understand what they need. Because we have a comedic slant, we can sometimes be a little bit more provocative than the average consulting firm. We very aggressively and curiously figure out what they need and only then do we start giving prescriptive advice to what we might be able to do to help them.

**Dawn Hopkins, vice president Creative Outreach marketing:** I believe we have to make that distinction when we meet with a client that improvisation and comedy is an engagement mechanism. It's not the end result. A lot of people think, 'Oh improv actors are just going to come in and entertain us; how does that translate to training?' It's the laughter that greases the wheels of the learning.

**Eric Rislove, vice president of business development:** Clients will come to us and say, 'We really want to have a fun event. It's going to be different than other meetings we've had. But also we have very serious business challenges and we have to accomplish some very important objectives. But we want to have fun.' After the event, we hear back that people were having a good time and they were talking about what was presented and they are using those tools going forward. It

was because they were involved and participating and experiencing all those things.

**Lilledahl:** One of the things people can't tell right away, and another thing that makes us unique, is that we all have some business background. We speak both languages. We're able to be intelligent and understand the really subtle nuances that exist in a corporate environment.

**What do you say to a local meeting planner checking out your website, sees you've worked with Microsoft and thinks, "Well, I can't afford them?"**

**McEwen:** One of the reasons that we are affordable for groups that are local is simply the fact that we're here and now have a facility here that can be used for corporate events. No one should ever be afraid to contact us because they're afraid they'll be priced out of the game. We take a consultative approach to your event. Because we're a team with so many different things we can do, there's almost always something we can offer you in just about any price range.

**Sweeney:** In the last 12 months, Caleb and I have probably done keynotes in 20 or 30 different convention centers around the globe. And not one of those would've been

the Minneapolis Convention Center. The only thing that would've been different about doing the keynote here, as Caleb noted, is the \$3,000 worth of travel that we wouldn't have to charge our client for. Sometimes it's tough to be a hero in your own hometown.

**You have the new space, for the theater and for a new event center, at 824 Hennepin Avenue. Why was this the right time and how will it expand business?**

**Sweeney:** It's been a very intentional thing and we're really grateful for the opportunity to have this building. For the first time in 52 years, we own the facility that we occupy. This event center will be the perfect place to hold an event for 300 people or less, it will have state-of-the-art webcasting equipment, it will have great acoustics, it will have great equipment, it will have wonderful caterers. So, why will you be able to hire the Brave New Workshop? One, you can just walk over. That's going to allow us to increase our

local business. From a personal standpoint, it's good for Caleb and me because we both have wonderful wives and adorable children and getting on an airplane four times a week is not an easy thing to do.

**McEwen:** The theater has been at 2605 Hennepin since 1965. We started to look at our lives and the goals we had for the theater and we wanted to be able to do more—more for our corporate clients and more on the stage for our theatrical performances. If we were going to do that, we needed a facility to support it. Not owning the other building, also just the physical limitations of that building itself—it certainly wasn't designed to be a comedy theater—we've used it up. This is a great opportunity to take everything we do to the next level.

**In this new space, you're going to make philanthropy easy with Project 824, offering up the space at no charge 824 times to local non-profits. Tell us about that.**

**Lilledahl:** It goes back to one of our improv principals, 'We always have what we need.' It's easy for us to open our building, have our actors take a bus from their houses to the new theater on one of their nights off. So we thought let's do what's already easy for us, what doesn't cost us much money, but could have a huge impact on another organization. It's another way to be sustainable.

**Sweeney:** Three and a half years ago we decided to go through a branding process to learn what we mean to our customers and to perhaps go from a storefront brand to a national brand. That led to a great process of understanding who we are. And maybe we are a little more than a group of improv actors. 

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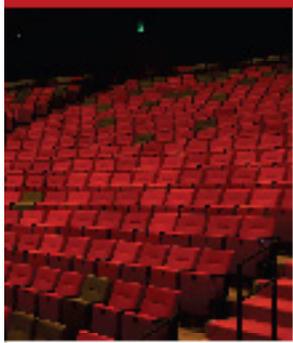
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