



Yes, And

How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration

Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton

YES, AND: How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration - Lessons from the Second City by Kelly Leonard & Tom Yorton. Copyright © 2015 by Kelly Leonard & Tom Yorton. Published by arrangement with HarperBusiness, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

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Rating

9 9 Applicability
9 Innovation
8 Style

Focus

Leadership & Management

Strategy

Sales & Marketing

Finance

Human Resources

IT, Production & Logistics

Career & Self-Development

Small Business

Economics & Politics

Industries

Global Business

Concepts & Trends

Take-Aways

- Chicago’s Second City improvisational theater troupe uses techniques that can help you and your organization become more creative, less fearful of failure and more nimble.
- All “improv” springs from two words, “Yes, And.” When someone presents an idea, respond, “yes” to welcome the idea and say “and” before adding your reaction.
- This attitude opens your consciousness to many possibilities. When team members greet ideas with “yes, and,” they can work together with openness and lack of fear.
- An effective ensemble is always smarter and more creative than any one member.
- The larger the firm, the more it resists supporting functional ensembles or teams.
- A competitive organization must take itself with a grain of salt and be willing to challenge assumptions about itself.
- In any ensemble, the tiniest selfish act can produce a major rift.
- Fear of failure stifles creativity; creating safe times and forums for failure fuels it.
- Improv reduces self-consciousness and negativity by focusing on the “task at hand.”
- Follow the advice posted on the door at Second City, including: “Dare to offend,” “respect, don’t revere,” make people laugh and “make ‘em think.”

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How the Chicago improvisational troupe Second City uses the “Yes, And” tactic to spur collaboration and creativity; 2) How to apply “improv” techniques to personal and corporate growth; and 3) How Second City’s strategies for listening actively and responding fluidly can help you in any situation.

Review

Many comedy stars performed at Chicago’s renowned improvisational theater company The Second City, and went on to fame and success. They include Mike Myers, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Bill Murray, Bonnie Hunt, Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and many more, including the late Gilda Radner, John Candy and John Belushi. Second City also has trained managers, marketers, teachers, lawyers and leaders. The executive vice president of Second City Inc., Kelly Leonard, and the CEO of Second City Works, Tom Yorton, weave funny anecdotes into this clear-headed, practical guide to applying improvisational techniques to personal and organizational growth. Their storytelling, as you might expect from their improv foundation, rambles, and not all of their examples line up with the points they try to illustrate. Yet the authors demonstrate rigor and concision when they discuss the core of their approach. Their simple, applicable exercises can heighten your awareness and help you be present, listen actively, respond to a crisis, face failure fearlessly, trust your co-workers, collaborate effectively and get out of your own way. *getAbstract* recommends their time-tested, commonsense system to executives, managers, HR officers and anyone who works with other people.

Summary

“Improvisers are usually extremely quick-witted and nimble, able to think on their feet and adapt seamlessly to changing environments or circumstances.”

“The Second City improv-based training approach was a potent way to build the essential skills that separate the stars from the also-rans in the corporate world.”

Second City

Chicago’s Second City theater troupe presents ensemble-based, improvisational comedy. Its actors team up to co-write every performance in spontaneous collaboration. Second City also teaches its cooperative, improvisational – or “improv” – techniques in its corporate consultancy work. Nissan, Motorola, Google, Nike and other firms send employees to study its improv collaboration, fast responses and active listening methods. As hierarchies prove increasingly less effective and businesses grow more fluid, only the most nimble and creative will prevail.

The “Seven Elements of Improv”

Mastering the pivotal factors of improv can help you and your firm “generate ideas,” improve communication, establish effective work ensembles, fuel candid dialogue, dismantle silos and spark creative solutions. Second City teaches these strategies:

1. **“Yes, And”** – Improv springs from two words, “yes, and.” When someone offers an idea, respond “yes” to welcome the concept. Then say “and” before reacting. This attitude opens your consciousness to infinite possibilities. Saying “yes, and” means exploring every idea that arises, including ideas in danger of being “judged, criticized and rejected too quickly.” This lets you explore potential new paths without self-consciousness, fear or embarrassment. When people say “yes, and,” they can work together openly.
2. **“Ensemble”** – The stars at Second City first learned how to improvise as part of a team by working in groups. Improv does not celebrate individual glory; it celebrates an ensemble of people pursuing a common goal. Few businesses sufficiently prioritize “building, maintaining and developing ensembles.” A corporate culture that

“The...organization that takes itself too seriously and doesn't know how to question its own beliefs is at a strong competitive disadvantage.”

“With ‘Yes, And’ you don't have to act on every idea, but you do have to give every idea a chance to be acted on.”

“Your ensemble is only as good as its ability to compensate for its weakest member.”

“Laughing at minor mistakes and well-intentioned setbacks helps create a high performance culture where...greatness is possible.”

- de-emphasizes team performance will fuel competition and self-aggrandizement. This denotes a leadership style that is quick to claim success and to dodge accountability. People in ensembles do not vest in being right, hog the spotlight or pretend to “be in control.” Developing a strong team consciousness helps individuals perform better.
3. **“Co-creation”** – “Dialogues push stories further than monologues.” Co-creating involves accepting recommendations, noting everyone’s opinion and encouraging everyone’s input. The dominance of online interactions in today’s business world shows the power of co-creation worldwide and demonstrates how easily people adopt co-creation in practice. Co-creation weakens hierarchies in the most productive manner possible.
 4. **“Authenticity”** – Candor drives great organizations. Smart executives recognize the persistence of error and acknowledge that they make mistakes. Thriving cultures encourage people to “question the status quo” and “speak the truth to power.” Second City actors recognize the need to balance “respect and reverence.” Respect – for leaders, for culture, for co-workers – is healthy and productive, but reverence locks people into one way of thinking and doing. “Comedy and irreverence are lubricants that encourage people to reconsider longstanding beliefs that may be holding them back.”
 5. **“Failure”** – Improvisers face failure every time they perform. In fact, they could face a roomful of strangers staring in silent disapproval. When you make a mistake, “incorporate it into the narrative” to drive positive changes. Fear – especially fear of failure – stifles creativity. If you can weaken the power of failure, you can make everyone around you less fearful and more willing to dare. Every organization fails. Embrace failure as part of your process and part of your journey to success.
 6. **“Follow the follower”** – Any ensemble member can become the leader for however long the team needs “his or her expertise.” Leadership rotates to put someone with the needed skills in charge. “Shifting status” among team members is an art, not a science. Consider personalities, circumstances, goals and how people handle responsibility. True leaders don’t worry about “maintaining status.” In global, web-driven firms, professionals consult, work together, disband and go work elsewhere. Their world is fluid, as is their hierarchy. Leaders empower team members to apply creativity to finding solutions.
 7. **“Listening”** – Improvisation depends on listening. People think they listen, but most folks only wait for their turn to respond. They don’t practice “listening to understand.” To listen, stay “in the moment” without rushing the person speaking. When you and your conversational partner both listen actively, you unleash your mutual creativity.

The Ensemble

The basic unit of improv is the ensemble. An effective ensemble is a collection of people who respond positively to one another. Ensembles that practice “yes, and” judge less, embrace what they see and hear, and add to it. Improv teaches that an effective team is always smarter and more creative than any one member. Anyone in a company must deal with other people in almost every task or decision. Accepting the ensemble nature of modern work and workplaces can generate “a chorus of creative voices” striving for excellence without striving for pre-eminence.

Both the online encyclopedia Wikipedia and the open-source operating system Linux depend on collaboration and spontaneous change. Both thrive on staying open to new ideas and saying “yes, and” to their contributors’ suggestions. To stay relevant, they respond quickly to change. Their ability to adapt to new information is crucial to their success.

The best ensembles feature a mixture of personalities with individual strengths and weaknesses. Ideally, an ensemble will nurture team members’ best traits and mute their

“It’s natural....to think of large corporations as change-averse, humorless, and too reverent of their products, history and leaders.”

“When the status quo is no longer working, organizations and leaders need a way to change the conversation and get people to reconsider the assumptions that are leading them astray.”

“If you’re too reverent toward your product or service when embarking on innovation, you’ll be too timid to make a substantial change.”

“Agencies in the advertising, PR and design worlds are increasingly moving toward a model that favors ongoing co-creation with clients versus grand reveals of fully formed creative campaigns.”

shortcomings. The most potent, creative and resilient ensembles are always the most diverse, so make each team a mix of genders, backgrounds and company rank. To spark new ideas, expose members to new perspectives and strategies. For an ensemble to function at its peak, everyone must be fully present. When you discuss work, don’t rehash errors or triumphs; just stick to the project at hand. During meetings, members shouldn’t “check email, their phones or tablets.” For “engaged conversation,” look each speaker in the eye. Hear what others say and consider what they choose not to say. Set specific times for thoughtful consideration, planning, creation and innovation.

“Give and Take”

In groups, some people are “Givers” and some are “Takers.” John Belushi, Bill Murray and Chris Farley were Takers. “The minute any one of those performers stepped on stage, they took the focus, whether they wanted to or not.” Every office has a Taker, someone who needs to be heard all the time. The most effective team members can hold their own in either role; they are both Givers and Takers. Studies found that the most productive engineers were those who helped their colleagues the most. The same held true “in medicine and sales.” The give-and-take process manifests in such behaviors as being respectful to your colleagues, shouldering more than your share of small chores or learning the name of every person in your office.

Being a member of an ensemble requires relinquishing the “need to be right.” Insisting that your way is the only way frustrates your colleagues and blocks innovation. The fastest way to create an unbridgeable “chasm” between ensemble members is for someone to insist that only his or her way is best. If each person gives up the need to be right, ideas can flow from every member more fluidly and with less fear. Ensembles can truly become teams of equals striving for the best idea, and not for the idea that gives one person the most attention.

Like breaking eggs to make an omelet, offending someone seems to come with writing effective comedy. Second City’s leaders learned early on that its actors must “dare to offend” and have the courage to speak against the status quo. Worthy organizations encourage this attitude from all stakeholders. Respect for the company’s culture holds people together, but excessive reverence blocks new ideas and assures that those in command positions remain Takers. A healthy level of irreverence fuels creativity, makes everyone less fearful and brings joy to work.

Improv-Based Exercises

The following exercises teach team members to trust, to listen and to use the power of collaboration:

- **“Word at a time”** – Six to 10 people stand in a circle. They tell a story, each person adding and contributing in turn, but each player can only say one word. The next person adds a word, and so on. This exercise should last only a few minutes; everyone becomes attuned to the group while thinking ahead and seeking to further the tale.
- **“Talk without I”** – The group breaks up into pairs. Each pair talks about anything they like – the weather, sports, what they had for dinner, anything – and neither ever says the word “I.” Discussion follows about how never saying “I” fuels the sharing of ideas.
- **“Mirror”** – People form into pairs. The leader slightly shifts his or her body or face. The other person “mirrors,” or mimics, each movement. They swap roles. After a few minutes, they attempt to mirror each other without either person being the leader.
- **“Emotional option or Emo OP”** – Again, pair up. Begin a conversation about anything. During your chat, the group leader shouts out an emotion, like “Frustration!”

“Defusing the tension with comedy is one great way to get people to change their attitudes more quickly so you can get on with...effective transformation.”

“The more critical the message, the more you actually need comedy to cut through the clutter, grab attention and make the issue safe to talk about.”

“In full improviser mode, we become better leaders and better followers; likewise, we hear things that we didn't hear before because we are listening deeply and fully.”

Everyone now talks in “the tone of that emotion.” When the leader calls out a new emotion, everyone shifts to that one. This helps to build communication intimacy and emotional openness.

- **“Who’s the leader?”** – Encircle a person whose eyes are closed. Without speaking, the circle designates a leader. The group mimics the leader’s movements. The encircled person looks and tries to guess who is leading. This shows how leadership can shift and how group members who pay attention can work together.
- **“String of pearls”** – The group stands shoulder to shoulder. The moderator tells the person at one end the first sentence of a story – like, “I went to the doctor today” – and tells the person at the other end the last sentence, “Then my candy bar talked to me.” Each person in line speaks one sentence to move the tale from one end to the other in a “logical” way. This teaches listening and helping each other use imagination to achieve a common purpose.
- **“Last word response”** – Pairs converse, each person saying one sentence at a time. Each sentence must start with the last word of the other person’s sentence. Person 1: “Today I got stuck in traffic.” Person 2: “Traffic downtown is such a mess.” Speakers must enable their partners to create a coherent sentence. This makes everyone conscious of how what he or she says can help or hinder a colleague’s effort to move an idea forward.
- **“Repetition”** – Two people converse while facing each other. They say one sentence per person at a time. One person says the first sentence, which the other person must repeat verbatim before speaking. They take turns, learning the rare skill of truly listening and the deep sense of appreciation that comes from being sincerely heard.

“Open the Door”

Second City often works with other companies. For example, it has a long partnership performing aboard Norwegian Cruise ships, but it maintains its irreverent attitude at sea – like making jokes about the bad weather ruining a cruise – and where ever it helps clients deal with change. The troupe doesn’t hesitate to tackle generally unfunny jobs, like running change workshops. It uses improv to support corporate change by fostering agility, creating an atmosphere of trust and supporting “open communication.” Second City publishes training videos, “RealBiz Shorts,” about corporate issues and ethics. The videos are popular tools for “making hard-to-understand topics relevant.”

Improve your firm’s awareness, collaboration and performance by heeding the advice on a list taped to the wall at Second City: “Look people in the eye when you meet them. Smile. Don’t check your texts or email when someone else is talking. Be curious. Try to eliminate the word ‘no’ from your vocabulary for just one day. When you are wrong, acknowledge it, say you’re sorry and move on. Forgive yourself and forgive others. Lead as you would want to be led. Be on time. Excel at preparation. Ask yourself, what is the problem you are trying to solve. Make your partner look good. Respect, don’t revere. Listen to the whole person. Read the room. Share the conversation. Love your work. Applaud others. Say ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ whenever possible. Consider that you might not be right. Open your door. Try not to work out of fear; work from a sense of possibility. Understand the audience you’re trying to win over, and give them a role. Be an improviser.”

About the Authors

Second City Inc. executive VP **Kelly Leonard** has been with the troupe since 1988. Second City Works CEO **Tom Yorton** teaches businesspeople how to use comedy and improv to improve their performance.