

# Improv and Improve!

*The Leadership and Life Lessons of Yes, And*

Improvisation encourages receptivity and the rapid formation of ideas. By honing skills like active listening, cooperation, innovative thinking, risk taking and decision-making, improvisation transforms the way people and teams perform.

Improvisation improves how you think, helping you to ‘tune in’ to communication that you may not have noticed. Improvisers **think on their feet** and **recognize opportunities** as they arise. Most importantly, improvisers learn how to be **flexible**, constantly adjusting to the situations in front of them and truly being in the moment. The ability to be creative, flexible and intuitive is essential to success in every organization.

## Tina Fey’s Rules for Improv

- The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES.
- The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND
- The next rule is MAKE STATEMENTS. In other words: Whatever the problem, be part of the solution.
- THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities.

–From *Bossypants* by Tina Fey (Reagan Arthur Books; 2011)

## Improvisation – Lessons for Work and Home

The lessons of **Improv** apply broadly to your daily life. As you reflect on the workshop, be mindful of the gifts of improvisation:

- Improv **takes us out of our social media, device driven, virtual-reality world**, and drops us into a wondrous world of high-energy, immediate, **person-to-person interaction**.
- Improv teaches us to **soften our focus and heighten our awareness, so that we can respond well to unexpected circumstances**.
- Improv **teaches us to listen more patiently** and to respond more slowly than we may be accustomed.
- Improv provides one of the few opportunities in life where you have **permission to genuinely “fail” without fear**.

The benefits of practicing Improvisation:

- Improved listening; hearing what is said—to understand and respond appropriately
- The empowering and multiplier effect of saying “yes”, along with “Yes, and I will \_\_\_\_”
- Learning the limitations and chilling effects of “yes, but” and “no “
- The ability to live in the moment
- Confidently making big choices
  - Making them often
  - Making them early

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## The Power of AND

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We tend to underestimate the power and significance of an easily overlooked word: **AND**.

When we have two contrasting messages to deliver, one positive and the other negative, we often begin with the positive and conclude with the negative, linking them by saying "but":

*I'd love to see you, but I'm so busy right now.*

When we do this we send a subtle but distinct signal suggesting that the negative message is more important or more true than the positive, and the impact of the positive message on the recipient is diminished or cancelled out. This poses a particular dilemma for leaders, who often have a complex mix of positive and negative feedback for their employees:

*I know you're trying hard, **but** it's not enough.*

*I love working with you, **but** we can't tolerate mistakes like that.*

*I care about you as a colleague, **but** I'm I'm really frustrated with you right now.*

These messages can fail to have the desired impact because all that's heard is the second idea:

*It's not enough.*

*We can't tolerate mistakes like that.*

*I'm really frustrated with you right now.*

in some relationships, some organizations, and [some cultures](#) such bluntness is expected. But even in those settings leaders can underestimate the [impact of their language](#) at a given moment and its potential to be [perceived as threatening](#).

A simple remedy is to substitute "and" for "but" when we're looking to convey a complex message that includes both positive and negative elements:

*I know you're trying hard, **and** it's not enough.*

*I love working with you, **and** we can't tolerate mistakes like that.*

*I care about you as a colleague, **and** I'm really frustrated with you right now.*

This suggestion isn't foolproof, of course—people may still miss the positive message and focus on the negative. Nor should it be followed in a rigid or inflexible way—sometimes we *do* want people to focus exclusively on our negative feedback, and any attempt to soften its impact would be unhelpful.

And yet In my work with leaders and in my own experience, I've seen how this formulation can allow us to deliver a very tough message with empathy and compassion. I was recently reminded of this by Douglas Merrill, CEO of ZestFinance, who told me that earlier in his career a CEO he reported to called him into a board meeting after a high-stakes failure, and said, *"I love you, and that can't ever happen again."* The impact on Douglas? He felt an even stronger sense of loyalty and commitment.

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