

# SUMMARY HAPPY ACCIDENTS

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# **Summary of “Happy Accidents” by David Ahearn, Frank Ford, and David Wilk**

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Learn how the principles of improv comedy can enhance your personal and professional life!

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# Introduction

We tend to think of comedy as a respite from the stress of our everyday lives rather than a guide for how to live them. After all, most people gravitate towards funny things because they want to laugh or feel better, but you rarely hear anyone say, “I’m going to watch this comedian because I want to glean some insights on personal development!” But if we take a moment to delve beneath the surface, we find that comedy offers more than a good chuckle. In fact, being a comedian actually requires many of the same skills that are necessary for becoming a successful entrepreneur! For example, both professions require you to be bold, creative, able to handle criticism and willing to think on your feet! And in both cases, you should also be spontaneous, open-minded, and comfortable with public speaking.

But the best part is that these skills aren’t limited to the stage or the boardroom. In fact, if you can master the tips and tricks of improv comedy, you’ll be better equipped to succeed in whatever you do, and you can apply these skills in your personal and professional life. So, over the course of this summary, we’ll take a look at the authors’ top tips from their 20 years of experience in improv and learn how you can use them to succeed!

# The Power of Positivity

Have you ever stopped to think about how many times per day you say “no?” No, you can’t meet up with your friends for drinks; no, you don’t think you should apply for that promotion; no, you’re too nervous to talk to that cute guy. Most of us don’t mean to be overly negative and we probably don’t intend to say no to everything. Instead, we might view it as being realistic or aware of our own limitations. But no matter what our reasons are, we can always benefit from the added boost of positivity we will gain from employing a standard principle of improv comedy: “Yes, and.”

“Yes, and” is one of the golden rules of improv because of its impact on motivation and creativity. This principle is used when performers are running improv scenes that invite them to take suggestions from the audience. For example, performers might call out to the audience, “Give me a job!”, “Give me an object!” and “Give me a location for the scene!” If the audience suggested, “A clown walks into an executive board meeting with a microwave...!” that would be a pretty wacky scenario. The performer might wonder how to come up with such a scene. They might even feel like it’s a little too weird for them to be able to pull off. But applying the principle of “Yes, and” invites them to accept the suggestion by saying, “Yes” and then figure out how to build on that suggestion. This is a great principle to apply in almost every facet of your life because it helps you open yourself up to new experiences and cultivate creative problem-solving strategies. And as you teach yourself to think outside the box, you’ll find that your life will be more interesting and you’ll solve problems much more easily!

The authors’ comedy troupe saw this first-hand when they partnered with a large US hospital in 2016. The troupe was called Four Day Weekend (because who doesn’t love a long weekend!) and they had started out with nothing when they tried to break into the comedy scene in 1996. In fact, at the beginning, they were nothing more than a group of kids with a dream; they had no money and no experience. But they did have passion and a willingness to grow and learn. And that mindset led them to discover the

life-changing benefits of “Yes, and.” Once they put it into practice, they found that applying that principle to every aspect of their troupe would generate success beyond anything they had imagined. That’s how they became successful enough to give other organizations advice, including one notable hospitable.

To help the hospital in question, Four Day Weekend organized a workshop to show the hospital’s entire staff how to succeed by implementing the principles of improv comedy, starting with “Yes, and.” Their aim was to help the hospital improve its attitude and customer service practices after a survey found that they were ranked last in customer satisfaction. One of the primary complaints the patients reported was that they didn’t feel welcomed, appreciated, or valued by the staff who served them. So, Four Day Weekend worked with the staff to help them cultivate a “Yes, and” attitude that would encourage them to be open and welcoming in their approach to life and their patients. Considering the flip side to “Yes, and” was one strategy that helped the staff to adjust their mindset. That’s because the reverse of “Yes, and” is “No” or “But.” Both of those words are confrontational and close doors to new opportunities. But as we’ve already seen, a “Yes, and” approach opens doors and allows creativity to flow freely!

Encouraging participants to embrace a childlike attitude is another facet of Four Day Weekend’s workshops. They often tell participants to consider the fact that, as adults, our confidence and spontaneity often decreases; we feel constrained by the pressure to fit in and to be productive. We might also feel as though our former childlike confidence was unrealistic; as adults, we might reframe a negative self-image as a realistic assessment of our own abilities. But Four Day Weekend cautions people to avoid such limiting estimations of ourselves. Instead, they advocate that participants in their workshops approach life with the openness and creativity of a child. When asked if you can do something, say yes first! When asked if you want to try something, say yes! Embrace new opportunities and watch your creativity and confidence follow.

# Take the Plunge

How would your life really look if you lived into a “Yes, and” mentality? Now that we’ve learned how a “Yes, and” attitude works, let’s take a closer look and observe how it functions in practice. Four Day Weekend’s origin story is a perfect example of “Yes, and” success. As we discussed in the previous chapter, the comedy troupe started out with nothing, but they were determined to keep trying. Unfortunately, however, you can only go so far on willpower alone; you also need money if you want to run a business! Four Day Weekend knew that and they also knew that if they wanted to get the money they needed, they had to take a risk. But taking risks isn’t always an easy thing to do; as human beings, it’s natural to want to protect ourselves. We don’t want to look silly or be embarrassed or fail and sometimes it feels as though avoiding risks is the best way to prevent those things from happening.

But performing in a live improv comedy show is already a risk! That’s because it taps into two of the most common human fears: spontaneity and public speaking. We’re often afraid of surprises because they could result in us looking stupid or being embarrassed and we fear public speaking for roughly the same reasons; what if we say the wrong thing? What if we can’t say anything at all? What if everyone laughs at us? These fears are already inherent in the improv comedy process and every performance invites you to tackle those fears head-on! So, when it came time to take a risk with their business, the performers of Four Day Weekend were already experts in the feelings most people want to avoid. And they knew “Yes, and” was the key to taking more risks and embracing new opportunities.

So, with that attitude as their guide, they decided to pool their money together, banking every member’s life savings on a costly and experimental move to Fort Worth, Texas. And once they arrived, they dove right in! Their first attempt at pitching their act to a local comedy club resulted in a contract for a six-week show. They even forged a strong relationship with the club’s manager through their contagious “Yes, and” approach! And



although that story might sound as though everything was coming up roses for Four Day Weekend, offering proof that “Yes, and” is the only definitive approach for taking life by the horns, the troupe acknowledges that this approach comes with a caveat. That’s because “Yes, and” doesn’t work unless you know when to stop saying “no.”

While there’s no question that knowing your boundaries and refusing to do certain things can sometimes be helpful, it’s also important to remember the flip side. Because if you get in a pattern of saying “no” too often, you’ll soon find yourself living a “No, but” life rather than one guided by “Yes, and.” So, remember that saying “no” is often an attempt to retain control of a situation and thereby, to prevent yourself from taking risks. Although our desire to say “no” might be operating on a subconscious level, it’s important to be aware of our bias and acknowledge it whenever possible. Because if we can think about it that way, we can bear in mind that, in addition to being a controlling response, “no” is often a reactive response as well. When we’re challenged with information that destabilizes or scares us, it’s easy to give in to our instant reaction to say “no.” But if we remember that “Yes, and” is the opposite of that, we can practice being more considerate and less reactive listeners.

For example, if someone comes up with a new solution for solving a problem, your instinct might be to resist it and say “no” because it’s different or scary to you. But a considerate, “Yes, and” listener would take a minute before reacting and seriously consider the information that’s being presented. Thus, putting the “Yes, and” principle into practice will make your conversations more inclusive and productive and allow creativity to flourish in your thoughts and your interactions with others.

# Believe in Yourself

This might sound a little corny, but it's a principle that Four Day Weekend embraces wholeheartedly. The troupe acknowledges that there's a reason so many songs and movies center on themes like "don't stop believing": that reason is because it's a vital message for humans to internalize! Four Day Weekend has seen the value of this message first-hand because it's integral to every facet of their business. Even when they had no money, no resources, and no connections, they had a passion for spreading joy and making people laugh. But that passion would have fizzled out if it hadn't been backed up by an earnest belief in the value of what they were doing.

The belief that they were doing something important-- and, most importantly, the belief that they could and would succeed-- was what elevated them from a lowly local act to an international sensation. That's why, in this chapter, we're going to take a closer look at the relationship between passion and belief and learn why you can't succeed without both. You may have heard the saying that "a goal is a dream with legs" and that's exactly the principle that's at work here. Because a dream on its own is awesome; it's great to have dreams and be passionate about them! But until you take practical steps to put your passion into action, your dream will always remain just that: a dream. Belief is the secret ingredient that enables that transformation. In fact, it's absolutely necessary for progress, and here's why.

Think about the things you commonly do every day, like going to work or going to school or paying your bills. You probably don't want to do those things and you're probably not passionate about them, but you keep doing them because you have to. We can think of these activities as your responsibilities or the mundane necessities of life. But passion is different. If you're passionate about something, it will be the reason why you get up in the morning, the reason you keep pursuing a goal even when it's tough. Your passions are the things that give your life meaning. But why are you motivated to pursue your passions? What makes you chase your dreams

when it stops being fun? That's where belief comes in. The simple answer is that you keep pursuing your passions because you believe in them. You believe they have value, for example. You believe you can succeed. You believe you can make the world a better place. Whatever your passion is, your belief in it is what motivates you to make it reality.

And that's how Four Day Weekend achieved international acclaim! Even though they started out with nothing and their first performances were only attended by their family and their friends, they knew they had what it took to create something meaningful and real. And even when no one came to their shows, even when they didn't sell a single ticket, even when money was running out, they kept believing. And because every single member of the troupe whole-heartedly believed in their passion, they were able to keep going even when no one else believed in them. To this day, they credit their success to the combination of their shared passion and their "Yes, and" attitude. And they want everyone to know that, no matter what your dream is, you can apply the same principles to achieve success of your own!

To get started and cultivate your passion, they recommend asking yourself these questions: Why am I doing this? Why am I passionate about this? And what drives me in life? Once you uncover the answers to these questions, you'll be able to attack your goals with a new sense of self-awareness and you can allow that understanding to guide your choices. But once you've cultivated that self-awareness, don't stop there! Use your new knowledge to fuel your belief in yourself!

# Final Summary

Comedy is about a lot more than just being funny. In fact, as we can see through the example of improv comedy troupe Four Day Weekend, the principles of improv comedy also teach you confidence, self-belief, and the power of a “Yes, and” attitude. Having examined these values at work in the life and success of Four Day Weekend, we can see the importance of implementing them in our own lives and remembering that no matter what our passion is, we can find a way to draw strength from these principles.

So, as you cultivate your “Yes, and” attitude, remember that the reverse of “Yes, and” is “No, but” and that these words create barriers and shut down creativity. These words also prevent you from surrendering control and taking risks, so be aware of that when it’s time to make decisions! Even if you have to say “no,” a “Yes, and” listener will listen first and react later, ensuring that their reaction is balanced and constructive. And lastly, remember that a goal is a dream with legs; if you want to make your dream a reality, you have to believe in yourself!



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