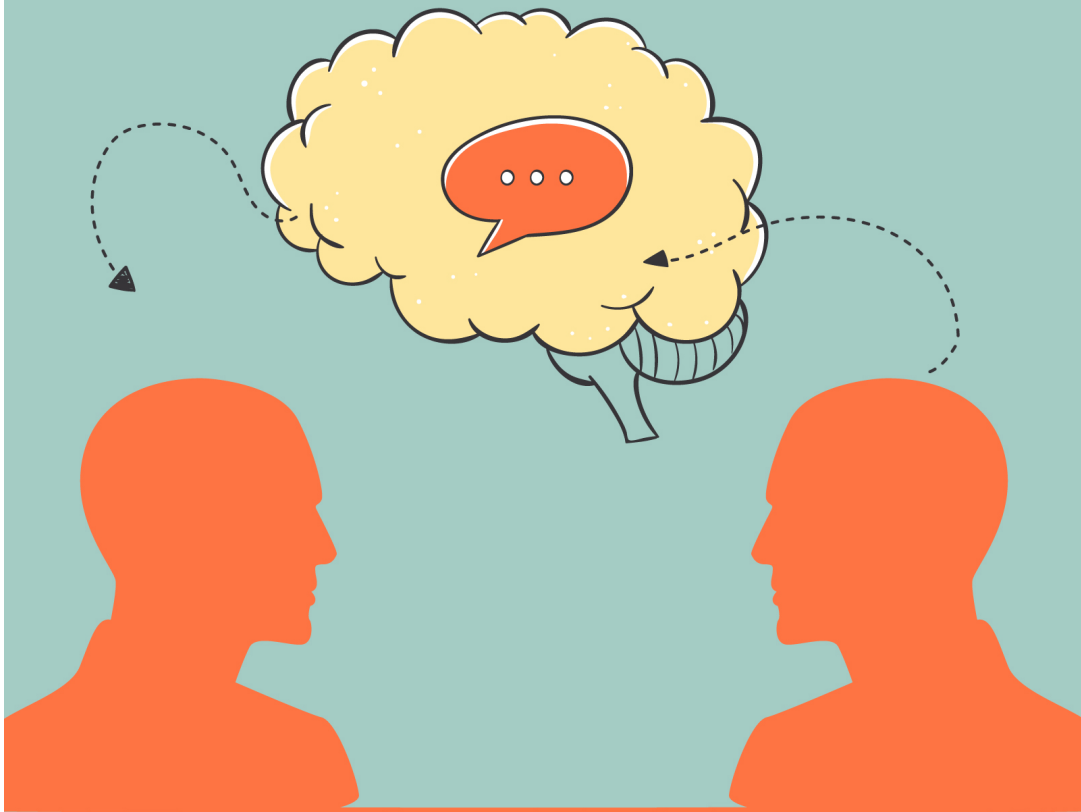


SUMMARY

YES, AND

KELLY LEONARD & TOM YORTON



Summary of “Yes, And” by Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton

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Learn how improvisation and “Yes, And” thinking improves creativity and collaboration in business.

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Introduction

The Second City, the world's premier comedy theatre and school of improvisation have trained some of the best actors in the industry including Tina Fey, Mike Myers, Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, and Gilda Radner. Now, executives from the company reveal how their improvisation techniques can be applied to the world of business. You see, The Second City doesn't just train some of the best improv actors around, they also provide leadership training for cutting-edge companies, non-profit organizations, and public sector organizations. Their training focuses on increasing creativity, collaboration, and teamwork.

What once worked for businesses a few decades ago no longer works today. Instead, successful companies banish the traditional hierarchies of business and apply strategies that foster creativity and success. Based on the eight principles of improvisation, *Yes, And* helps companies develop the necessary skills to boost productivity and creativity from employees, and can teach any business or organization how to develop the leadership skills needed for success today.

The Power of Yes, And

Do you find yourself wondering about the key to success? According to authors Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton, the improvisation technique of saying “Yes, And” can be applied in both acting and business. You see, success requires the ability to create something out of nothing as the list of things business professionals have to create out of nothing each day is endless. For instance, businesses create marketing campaigns, new products, new roles, employee training, responses to complaints, and more. So how can the improvisation technique of Yes, And lead to success?

First, you’ll need to understand what the Yes, And strategy is. When it comes to improvisation, actors on stage have no script and must guide the direction of the scene. To do this, actors use Yes, And. For example, one actor may offer an idea on stage and say something like, “Wow, I’ve never seen so many stars in the sky.” If the second actor ignores the Yes, And strategy, he might respond by saying, “I can’t see a single star...it’s broad daylight.” In this case, the scene stops in its tracks and the first actor must figure out a way to make the scene more interesting. Instead, the second actor should agree with the first actor and add something new and, therefore, respond with something like, “I know. Things look so different up here on the moon.”

This simple statement uses Yes, And to affirm what the first actor said and even opens up many more possibilities for the scene. This strategy is how actors create scenes and develop rich, funny characters and, ultimately, develop entire shows. Similarly, a Yes, And mindset can help open many possibilities in business. For instance, the insurance company, Farmers Insurance, believes that using this strategy allows leaders to stay open to new ideas from their employees. One participant stated, “Yes, And showed me that you’re not going to love every idea, but it helps to love it for at least a little while.”

In fact, many franchises and products weren't always initially well-received. For example, *Seinfeld*, the sitcom created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld struggled to pitch "a show about nothing." J.K. Rowling, the author of *Harry Potter*, was turned down by a number of publishers who couldn't see how a boy wizard could capture people's imagination. And even Tony Fadell, the inventor of the iPod, was rejected by several companies before Steve Jobs said Yes, And. At the end of the day, it's important to give even the craziest ideas a second, third, or fourth look.

Adopting a Yes, And mindset is a vital leadership tool. Not only does it open up the possibility for creation and new ideas, but it also makes everyone feel heard and respected. And when companies have mutual respect, great things can happen.

Build an Ensemble

In the business world, we see the term *team* used often. We hear about the importance of team-building and businesses seek to strengthen individuals for the betterment of the team. However, The Second City points out the drawbacks of using the term *team*. Instead, they use the term *ensemble*. You see, the word team implies competition, usually with another team. An ensemble, on the other hand, implies that the members are working together as one.

Teams imply that there is a hierarchy of some kind. Take a look at a high school basketball team, for instance. You have starters and bench players, which conveys a clear message that some team members are just not as important as others. Ensembles, however, are free from hierarchies and competitions and members are free to chip in whenever they want.

So how can you begin to build a strong ensemble? First, you'll need diversity. Imagine a baseball team that only hired right-handed sluggers, would that team be successful? Probably not. The Second City applies a similar concept and believes that building a great ensemble begins with looking for a variety of individuals. Each should possess strengths that will be enhanced within the group, and weaknesses which will be minimized by it. Businesses can apply the same strategy by "hiring different."

Take the ensemble at The Second City in the 1970s and 80s in which their ensemble began to form a predictable pattern. They had the straight man, the funny fat guy, and the innocent. Additionally, for three decades, The Second City's cast consisted of almost all caucasian straight males. Finally, the company decided to make its touring companies gender-equal. Because of that decision, actresses like Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, and Jenna Jolovitz all became successful actresses and writers for shows like *Saturday Night Live* and *Mad Men*.

Today, more women take classes at The Second City Training Center than men, all because of the years in which the women on their stages were equal to the number of men. There was still one problem, however. The casts were still all white, a problem that became apparent during the race riots in Los Angeles when the actors chose to perform a set that brought humor to the tragedy that was unfolding on the West Coast. That summer, the company sought to add diversity to their casts and created programs for talented people of color.

Building a diverse ensemble is important for opening yourself up to new ideas and opportunities. Diversity leads to creativity and is the key to building your strongest possible ensemble.

The Importance of Co-Creation and Collaboration

In 1998, The Second City performed a practice scene that began with a robbery at a vault containing “all the gold in Metropolis.” Before the thieves could make their escape, Superman entered; however, instead of flying in with his famous red cape, he entered the scene in a wheelchair. The reaction from the audience was one of immense disapproval. You see, just a few years prior, Christopher Reeves, the actor best known for his portrayal of Superman, became paralyzed in a horse-riding accident which left him confined to a wheelchair.

In this case, the reactions taught The Second City an important lesson about listening to the audience. Luckily, the scene was just practice, so the director sought a way to make the scenario more attractive to the audience to avoid alienating them. Therefore, the director added a song for Superman to sing to the audience which transformed the scene into one of the most talked-about pieces of that era. So what can businesses take away from this story? The importance of co-creation.

Co-creating within your ensemble means learning how to collaborate with one another to find out what works. An example of successful co-creation comes from the development of The Second City’s televised sketch comedy show, *SCTV*, similar to *Saturday Night Live*. Beginning in 1976, the show became a great example of collaboration and used ideas from people including hair, makeup, and wardrobe personnel. The show became a roaring success and in 1981 it was picked up by NBC.

SCTV would go on to be nominated for fifteen Emmy Awards and launch the careers of stars like John Candy and Eugene Levy; however, NBC began to take more and more control of the creative process which led to resentment from the show’s cast and crew. No longer did they have the collaboration they once relied on, and the show ended its run in 1984. You

see, the key to collaboration is allowing everyone to have a voice, but one of the main roadblocks that many people encounter is fear.

People fear many things including failure, looking foolish, or even the unknown. Fear, however, is detrimental to creativity and no organization or business will ever become successful or creative when governed by fear. In the face of fear, people turn to aggression and yelling and make themselves louder than anyone else in the room. Unfortunately, this tactic stifles collaboration and creativity. Instead, keeping calm and avoiding yelling and aggression is the key to successful collaboration and co-creation amongst ensembles.

Comedy in the Workplace

When it comes to a place of business, there is always room for humor and comedy. In fact, humor can be a useful tool to ease tension, especially in the face of major change. However, it's not enough to simply be funny. Instead, it's important to use comedy *effectively*, and in order to do that, you first need to understand what comedy is. So what is it?

Well, there are three essential elements of comedy: recognition, pain, and distance. An example of effectively using all three of these elements is through a scene during the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the late 1990s. The scene begins in silence, two actors are seen in the kitchen communicating non-verbally. As the audience recognized the behavior of a married couple in an argument, they began to laugh. Finally, the male actor pleaded, "Hillary..." in the unmistakable southern cadence of Bill Clinton. Immediately, the audience recognized that the two actors were, in fact, the two involved in the political scandal that was dominating every news outlet in America.

Not only did the audience recognize the storyline of the Clinton sketch, but many could also feel the pain and awkwardness of two people dealing with infidelity within a marriage. In other words, "You can't have comedy without something just a little bit uncomfortable." Additionally, the sketch was successful because of the distance between the Clinton family and the average audience member. You see, the sketch may not have produced many laughs if performed at the White House; however, considering few audience members would have personal relations with the Clintons, the scene was a hit.

So how can you use these elements in the workplace? Let's begin by dealing with change. Change is hard for many people, and when businesses begin to fail, it usually means that difficult changes need to be made. In these instances, comedy can be used to talk gently and humorously about what isn't working. Take, for example, Andrew Mason's letter announcing his

departure from Groupon. He begins with, “After four and a half intense and wonderful years as CEO of Groupon, I’ve decided that I’d like to spend more time with my family. Just kidding-I was fired today. If you’re wondering why...you haven’t been paying attention.” He then went on to list the downfalls of Groupon over the past few years and how he was responsible for those failures as CEO.

As you can see, Mason used humor to cut the tension of announcing his departure and created a light-hearted spin on being fired. Mason was honest, transparent, and authentic which is important for business in today’s world. Additionally, people still respected him. While Mason may have failed as CEO, he didn’t try to place blame on others or cover-up his wrongdoings. Instead, Mason took responsibility and people respected him for that.

Through comedy and improv, you can create an environment that fosters open communication, trust, support, and respect. Change is inevitable and you will certainly face obstacles and dilemmas that will be difficult to overcome. However, comedy makes those times more manageable and opens up doors for conversation and communication. Once those doors open, those conversations become a whole lot easier to have.

Embrace Failure

While many people fear failure, it's important to remember that failure happens. In fact, some of the most successful companies have failed at something dozens of times! For instance, The Second City shares some of their worst failures, including a new menu item at a Toronto restaurant they once ran. The new item was called the Royster Oyster and it was a hamburger with an oyster on top. Soon, however, ambulances began lining up to take dozens of customers suffering from food poisoning to the hospital. That menu item was a failure. The company also decided once that improvisation didn't always have to be funny. So they rented a storefront near Wrigley Field where people gathered for a night of improv; however, actors improvised dramatic scenarios rather than comic ones. Turns out, dramatic improv was both pretentious and boring, even Second City alums rushed out of their seats to avoid the disaster!

Of course, despite the many failures, the company has seen even more successes. They've learned from their mistakes, and now they embrace failure. Failure means that you're taking risks and willing to do the things that others aren't. Accepting failure is the first step in creating a workplace that sees an increase in production, morale, and innovation. So how can businesses foster an environment that praises failure? First, employers need to create low-risk opportunities for their employees to try new things. Once you lower the stakes, you can sit back and watch what happens.

Take the Chicago-based software company Basecamp, for instance, which created a popular project management app that allowed employees to call out flaws in product designs without fearing retribution. Executives took it a step further, and at a company-wide meeting, they hosted a "product roast" to identify the failings of products under development. This strategy helped all parties as execs were able to learn about the flaws of their designs, and employees were able to share their concerns in a safe space. In other words, Basecamp created a safe space to fail.

Additionally, it's important that when failure happens, you have one another's backs. Simply put, there should be mutual trust and respect among everyone in the workplace. The Second City takes respect seriously, they even have the phrase "always take care of your partner" to remind them of this concept. They even go so far as to give one another hugs before performing on stage and they tell one another, "I got your back." These verbal and physical cues are a simple reminder that they are not alone and that they are supported. At The Second City, they believe that when you learn to fail together, you learn to succeed together.

Follow the Follower

When it comes to leadership, how do you think a typical business should be run? Many think that a successful business structure is one that follows a hierarchy; however, management consultant Peter Drucker believes that these structures need to be replaced with “flatter” ones where companies treat their workers as assets, not liabilities. The Second City applies a similar concept, so how can businesses follow suit?

First, Drucker believes that the most effective leaders never say *I*. Instead, they use terms like *we* and *team*. “They understand their job to make the team function. They accept responsibility and don’t sidestep it: *We* get the credit. This is what creates trust, which enables you to get the task done.” One way a business can begin adopting this team mindset is through Viola Spolin’s exercise called Follow the Follower. Here’s how it works:

“A group of individuals sit in a circle facing each other. On a facilitator’s cue, each individual starts making sounds and movements. However, at the same time, each person is to mimic the sounds and movements of others. No one leads, and no one follows - everyone in the group is constantly shifting their attention to see what the other group members are doing. If one person decides to shake his head, the whole group will shake their heads. However, when done right, an outsider would not be able to identify the original head-shaker. It’s as though the group is in a total mind-meld, able to anticipate the slightest change in direction with all the precision and instantaneity of a school of fish. The leading and the following are constantly in flux.”

Follow the Follower is a great exercise for learning how change is constant and a great leader is able to prepare for those changes. Additionally, a great leader knows when to intervene and when to step aside. When it comes to the creative process, forcing people to share their ideas can be detrimental which is why a great leader gives space. At The Second City, for example, the producer must get permission from the director to preview a show and

provide notes. Because of this rule, directors have the freedom to try new things without fear of judgment and they are able to create and change the show as they please.

Follow the Follower allows leaders to understand that there is a better way to lead. Managers don't need to control everything to achieve the greatest results. In fact, as we've learned, the opposite is true. When managers allow their employees to work free of judgment, they have the freedom to experiment and hone their skills which gives businesses a strategic advantage.

The Importance of Listening

One of the biggest problems in the world is that we fail to listen to one another; however, listening is one of the most important skills that we can master. You see, according to *Forbes* columnist Glenn Lopis, 85 percent of what we know we learn through listening, and 45 percent of our workdays are spent listening, yet humans only listen at a 25 percent comprehension rate. But when it comes to improvisation, listening is at its core. Actors must affirm and build on each other's ideas, and in order to do so, they must listen.

In improvisation, the cost of bad listening is humiliation on stage. Audiences become bored when actors don't listen and support one another, but what is the cost of bad listening in business? Well, when you don't listen to customers, you create products that no one really wants. There are several examples of products that no one ever wanted including the McDonald's Arch Deluxe, Harley Davidson perfume, and New Coke. Coke drinkers weren't actively telling the company they no longer enjoyed the taste of Coke, so why change it? Similarly, McDonald's believed that customers were looking for a more "sophisticated" item on their menu when they weren't. Had these companies just listened to their customers, they would have never wasted money developing something that failed.

Luckily, listening is like a muscle and can be improved upon with practice. One listening skill exercise is called Last Word Response. In this exercise, people are paired up and instructed to have a conversation about anything, business-related or not. The rule is that participants must begin whatever they say with the last word spoken by their partner. The conversation doesn't have to make sense, it's actually more fun when it doesn't! The exercise simply demonstrates how poorly we listen to others in everyday conversations. You see, in this exercise, you cannot check out halfway through, you must listen to the whole statement which proves to be harder than it sounds.

Another exercise is called the Gibberish Game in which two people have a conversation using made-up words and sounds. A third person listens intently and must try to translate the gibberish based on body language cues and tone of voice. When The Second City first tried the exercise, they were predictably met with laughter as the third person made up hilarious nonsense. However, when told to truly listen to the gibberish, the third person was able to successfully translate the conversation. This simply shows the power of paying close attention and listening to others.

Listening is one of the most important skills that we can practice. When you actively listen and maintain eye contact, the results can be astounding. Listening results in fewer misunderstandings and leads to less conflict. It shows that you truly care about what others think and feel. At the end of the day, when businesses learn to listen, they begin to accomplish great things!

Final Summary

The strategies implemented in the world of improvisation have proven to be a great tool in business. The key to success is as simple as saying “Yes, And.” By saying “yes, and,” you can begin to build mutual relationships of trust and respect and build your ensemble. Additionally, it’s important to listen to others, collaborate with one another, and remember that leadership doesn’t always mean staying in control. Some additional words of advice from authors Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton include:

- Look people in the eye when you meet them.
- Smile.
- Don’t check your texts or e-mail when someone else is talking.
- 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.
- Make your partner look good.
- Listen to the whole person.
- Share the conversation.
- Say *we* rather than *I* whenever possible.
- Consider that you might not be right.
- Be an improviser.



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