

book club synopsis

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

Kelly Leonard and Tom Yorton

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Yes, And: How Improvisation Reverses “No, But” Thinking and Improves Creativity and Collaboration draws upon the expertise of The Second City, the Chicago-based improv comedy company. Founded more than 50 years ago, The Second City has trained numerous comics, including Elaine May, Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Martin Short, Gilda Radner, Mike Meyers, Stephen Colbert, Tina Fey and Amy Poehler. While the theater ensemble is best known for its performances—consisting of short scenes, songs and improvised comedy sketches—The Second City also provides corporate leadership training designed to increase creativity, collaboration and teamwork.

Author Kelly Leonard is executive vice president of The Second City and president of Second City Theatricals, and his co-author Tom Yorton is CEO of Second City Communications.

Leonard’s career began at The Second City in the 1980s when Mike Meyers was a virtual unknown on the stage and Leonard was washing dishes and seating audiences. By the time he assumed his current title in 2001, he was recruiting talent—including Colbert and Fey—and developing new artistic and business opportunities with companies like Norwegian Cruise Lines and the Lyric Opera Chicago. Yorton’s expertise is in advertising and marketing, and since joining Second City Communications in 2002, he has helped develop innovative applications for The Second City’s core competencies of improvisation.

Leonard and Yorton believe that the qualities of an improviser can be learned: “Practicing improvisation is like yoga for your professional development—a solid, strengthening workout that improves emotional intelligence, teaches you to pivot out of tight and uncomfortable spaces and helps you become both a more compelling leader and a more collaborative follower.” Using the skills set out in *Yes, And*, Leonard and Yorton explain how improv helps “build effective teams, break down silos, foster creativity and spark innovation,” even in business. Because despite all the planning, processes, controls and governance, business is really one big act of improvisation.

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“I know one of these guys, so at least half of this book is pretty good. *Yes, And* is for anyone looking to be more creative in their work and in their life.”

– Stephen Colbert

chapter one:

the business of funny

For the past 13 years, The Second City has come to Leesburg, Virginia's Lansdowne Conference Center to help Major League Baseball rookies adapt to the new challenges they face. In comedy drawn from real-world situations, the actors work with rookies to learn how to deal with veterans in the clubhouse and insatiable media and autograph hounds; how to manage their new-found wealth; and how to avoid the temptations of performance-enhancing drugs and offers from organized crime. The Second City's goal is to bring serious topics to life through comedy. Whether you're dealing with difficult personalities, disgruntled employees or relatives asking for a loan, "improvisation at its most basic level lets you respond more quickly in real time—and when practiced, also allows you to use comic relief to ease a potentially awkward confrontation."

Make 'em laugh. Make 'em think :: Using quips like, "My wife will buy anything marked down. Last year she bought an escalator," comedians of the 1950s—such as Henny Youngman, George Burns and Lucille Ball—based their skits on the amusement of relationships and family dynamics. Later comics like Lenny Bruce and Dick Gregory specialized in stand-up and talked openly about sex, race and politics and didn't hesitate to use profanity. The Second City founders pioneered a new comic form called ensemble-based comedy, which is rooted in improvisational games and uses comedy to poke fun at the status quo. "The comedy they were creating was rooted in truth, rather than broad parody or exaggeration; the behavior they portrayed onstage was real and recognizable."

Consider this classic 1961 scene titled, “Family Reunion,” where the main character, Warren, welcomes his parents to the apartment. The space gives every sign of being lived in by a couple; Warren has shared the apartment with his roommate Ted for 12 years.

WARREN: There’s something I want to tell you about myself. I hope you want to hear something about myself. I’m—I—Ted is a homosexual.

FATHER: Well, Warren. I’m glad to see that living in the city has taught you tolerance.

In an improvised art form, the actors are also the writers; they create their content in concert with their fellow ensemble members and in an ongoing dialogue with their audience. In addition, they abide by an old saying in the field: “It’s funny because it’s true.”

Laughter can also be an important component to building interpersonal skills. This is certainly something that Elliott Masie, founder of the corporate learning think tank The Masie Center, believes. “The one piece they don’t teach in business school is the role of laughter and humor, [yet] I can’t think of a single important contract, acquisition, sale, event—for that matter, any hiring or firing that I’ve done—where there hasn’t been some humor in it, or some laughter,” he says. Professional success in the business world depends upon the same pillars as that of successful ensemble comedy: creativity, communication and collaboration.

The seven elements of improvisation :: Certain soft skills—a willingness to listen, forge trusting relationships, take and support responsible risks, adapt to change and stay positive in the face of adversity—are essential to helping people and businesses respond. These skills, which are critical to improv performers, can be learned:

1. **Yes, And:** These words are considered the foundation of all improvisation, the starting point for all creativity and innovation. With the usage of “Yes, And,” ideas are heightened and stretched to levels that may even seem absurd. But as Leonard and Yorton say, “You don’t have to act on every idea, but you do have to give every idea a chance to be acted on.”

2. **Ensemble:** The pre-eminent focus of everything in The Second City's business is the ensemble. Learning to work in groups is vital, with attention paid to building, maintaining and developing ensembles.
3. **Co-creation:** Dialogues push stories further than monologues and The Second City ensembles create both among themselves and the audience, seeking suggestions, monitoring feedback and transforming material.
4. **Authenticity:** Laughter often comes from the audience recognizing the shared truth in the room. A corollary to this is "Dare to offend." Leonard and Yorton say performers should not be afraid to question the rules, speak to those with more power or challenge conventions. After all, "Comedy and irreverence are lubricants that encourage people to reconsider long-standing beliefs that may be holding them back."
5. **Failure:** When a mistake occurs onstage during a performance, the actors and the audience realize it. "Failure is something we actually practice when we improvise," Leonard and Yorton say. By acknowledging it and working it into the narrative, the actors create something new and unexpected—and maybe even great. The biggest threat to creativity is not failure, but fear of failure.
6. **Follow the follower:** A group has greater flexibility when it permits different members of the group to become the leader for as long as his or her expertise is needed. When the group needs a change, shuffle the hierarchy.
7. **Listening:** Deep listening is vital for improvisation. You need to understand the difference between listening to understand and listening while waiting for the chance to respond. "Listening keeps you in the moment not looking backward or jumping three steps ahead."

Here's your takeaway :: The seven elements of improvisation are at the heart of The Second City and its success. The following chapters will teach you the tools of the improviser, how to communicate honestly and openly, and how comedy is a craft that requires technique and methodology. You will find fresh, unconventional and inspiring ways to:

- Generate ideas more quickly
 - Communicate more effectively
 - Create ensembles that rise to every occasion
 - Create open dialogue with employees and with customers
 - Break down organizational silos that threaten collaborative success
 - Make something out of nothing
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yes, and: how to make something out of nothing

This chapter focuses on how to change the focus from “No” to “Yes, And.” Leonard and Yorton say, “No is too often the default answer, and it’s offered reflectively as a way to avoid risk and the possibility of failure.” With a “No” response, the cost is high because new ideas are not offered, new approaches are not experimented with and teams don’t have a chance to reach their potential and hold back. “Yes, And” takes the focus off individuals and forces their concentration on the here-and-now, where energy is directed solely to the task at hand.

To create a work environment that is fast, supportive and high-functioning over time, you need to embrace a “Yes, And” approach. In this chapter you will discover a pathway that, whether in your business or personal life, will enable you to “create something out of nothing, and make something wonderful out of it.”

What is “Yes, And”? :: In the business world, you are often asked to create something out of nothing—whether it is marketing campaigns, new products, job descriptions, training manuals or responses to customer complaints. Likewise, in the improv world, there is no script to guide the direction of a scene. An actor offers an idea on stage, and the others affirm it and build on it. For example:

ACTOR ONE: Wow, I’ve never seen so many stars in the sky.

ACTOR TWO: I know. Things look so different up here on the moon.

Actor Two's affirmation gives Actor One information to build a scenario on: "They are on the moon and ... " Now imagine a different conversation.

ACTOR ONE: Wow, I've never seen so many stars in the sky.

ACTOR TWO: I can't see a single star. It's broad daylight.

Actor Two's response this time is a showstopper that leaves the budding scene dead in its tracks with Actor One floundering to find a response and the audience wondering what could come next.

The concept of "Yes, And" is all about accepting a central idea and adding to it, regardless of what you think about the idea. It is a fundamental principle of The Second City.

Yes, but ... how does it relate to business? :: In the business world, support is frequently conditional. For example, "I'll support you as long as I understand immediately where this idea is going." With the concept "Yes, And," you are asked to trust others and let them build upon your contribution. Leonard and Yorton say, "Yes, And can often take you to unexpected places, and that makes some people nervous. But it's only when businesses let go a little and are willing to be surprised that they hit innovative gold." In order to have a "Yes, And" culture, you must model "Yes, And" behavior by being supportive and committed to building on others' contributions.

Using "Yes, And" in your work :: Here are work scenarios where the "Yes, And" mindset can be helpful:

- **Interpersonal and team communications:** Some people are uncomfortable assimilating into new teams, particularly if their personality is more reserved, and they worry that they will not be a good networker. The best teams are made up of a variety of personality types with different styles, experiences and strengths, and the best networkers affirm and build on others' ideas rather than initiate or monopolize conversations.

- **Coaching and feedback sessions:** When you acknowledge an individual or a team that performs well, you motivate them to reach higher. The crazy idea in the room could turn out to be the next best thing when you give it a second or third look. “Yes, And” also levels the playing field in boss-subordinate relationships. Leonard and Yorton say, “By committing to listening and building on ideas, you tend to focus more on the merits of the idea, not the rank of the person who generated it.”
- **Brainstorming and ideation sessions:** While there is much discussion about the importance of creating new things, it’s very hard to do. A 2010 Ernst & Young study found that only 47 percent of senior executives believed their company was more innovative than their competitors, while 17 percent felt they were less innovative, and 41 percent said they lacked the big ideas to move their companies ahead. The concept of “Yes, And” provides a path forward, allowing ideas to flow with more support and less judgment as people build and support the ideas of others.
- **Problem-solving and conflict resolution:** In a crisis, hearing what the entire group has to say and being transparent can be useful for everyone. Co-workers may come up with new options and solutions to old problems. The inclusive approach also allows everyone to think about potentially useful but incomplete ideas before they are discarded.

Consider events at The Second City in 2009: The company was caught in the financial meltdown with belt-tightening, a hold on new shows and products, and a freeze on spending. Simultaneously, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich was under investigation for attempting to sell the Illinois Senate seat that Barack Obama had held. At a Second City company holiday party, someone suggested Blagojevich’s antics could make a great rock opera: “Rod Blagojevich Superstar.” The Second City staff ran with the idea, in spite of the financial crisis. Actors agreed to work on the show at less than union rates since there was no budget to pay for rehearsal space.

“In our world, lightning strikes when the work you put onstage speaks directly to the zeitgeist,” Leonard and Yorton say. “When we announced the show, the media pounced. By the time we were ready to put on our first preview performances, tickets for the entire run were sold out.” The show, which changed nightly based on new information, played for a year and spawned a second company to perform elsewhere in the state. The disgraced governor joined a show onstage one day, and it was broadcast on the national TV networks. “Sometimes, just knowing that you can count on your colleagues for support makes all the difference in finding solutions to high-stakes problems.”

“Yes, And” beyond the obvious :: “Explore and Heighten” is the improvisation tenet that follows upon “Yes, And.” Wikipedia and Linux in the business world are “world-class improvisers,” exemplifying collaborative cooperation, even at the risk of taking a wrong turn.

- **“Yes, And” as ensemble maker and mistake eraser:** Many grand ideas start small or may come out of accidents or mistakes. The Slinky, for example, was originally designed as a tension spring in a battleship engine horsepower meter, not a toy. Great improvisers work with miscues and mistakes, making accidents work.
- **“Yes, And” affirms and builds:** An axiom at The Second City is “bring a brick, not a cathedral.” Building in increments allows ensembles to develop a big, solid idea from numerous smaller ones.

What “Yes, And” isn’t :: “Yes, And” isn’t a substitute for “No,” nor is it a replacement for discretion, quality or common sense—nor is it always used for good. “The enemy of ‘Yes, And’ is not always the loudest ‘No’ in the room,” Leonard and Yorton say. “Often they are saying ‘Yes’ with their mouths while saying ‘No’ with their actions.”

Exercises for this chapter ::

- **Exposure**

Setup: Divide your group into two lines, facing each other, about 10 feet apart. Have the two groups stand looking at each other. Give this some time, and once there is noticeable discomfort, have them look somewhere else in the room and complete a counting task (e.g., bricks on the wall, ceiling tiles, etc.) The fidgeting and discomfort will stop, with everyone concentrating on the task at hand.

Point of focus: This exercise helps participants discover that focus can help rid them of fear and being in their heads. Dr. Mark Pfeffer of Chicago's Panic/Anxiety Recovery Center says, "Every time you learn to be unafraid, your brain changes. Improv can be the quickest way to get to the neural pathway change, because it puts people in a situation where they're facing their fears."

- **Word at a time**

Setup: Gather six to 10 people in a circle, and ask them to tell an original story, each contributing one word at a time. The first participant commences with a single word, the action moving in one direction around the circle. Each successive player contributes one word toward the overall narrative. The exercise plays out over several minutes, and a story develops that takes hilarious and unexpected twists.

Point of focus: Individual participants affirm and contribute in their unique way to a far more interesting story than they would probably have come up with on their own. This exercise gives people a safe way to practice ceding control to the group and illustrates how breakthroughs happen when people stop trying to control every outcome.

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how to build an ensemble

This chapter focuses on why it's critical to build ensembles throughout a business. Leonard and Yorton begin by differentiating between teams and ensembles:

- **Team ::** A number of persons forming one of the sides in a game or contest. "Team" implies that there is competition because of hierarchical structure.
- **Ensemble ::** All the parts of a thing taken together, so that each part is considered only in relation to the whole. Leonard and Yorton say that an ensemble "is only its true self when its members are performing as one." While there may be a first, second or third chair, all the participants appear on stage in a performance and play in every movement.

The ensemble, which is at the heart of The Second City, is a finely tuned unit that is able to come up with and execute ideas autonomously but is also in sync with the entire business. Individuals benefit by working in an ensemble since they interact with people who are as good as or better than they are. "An ensemble lifts you in direct relation to the diverse skill sets of those you are working with," say Leonard and Yorton. Stars do emerge in ensembles, but they cannot sacrifice the greater needs of the group. To build an ensemble you need to understand:

- The kind of individual DNA that leads to the best ensembles
- The barriers that can prevent cohesion
- How to use specific exercises to change your current teams into ensembles

Reasons to build an ensemble :: Most jobs are not solo acts and depend on individuals interacting and engaging with others. When businesses ask individuals to innovate, they typically ask the individuals to form teams and task forces to move the initiative to the next level.

- **Collaborations can create synergy:** Individual differences—even divergent points of view—can be incorporated into the ensemble in a complementary way so that the ensemble is greater than the sum of its own parts.
- **Ensembles preserve talent:** While talent will inevitably leave (as has happened numerous times at The Second City), the ensemble creates a system where it can continually refresh itself. Everyone carries the weight and feels important.

“Rather than being forced to rely on one creative voice to guide the entire organization, you create a chorus of creative voices who have skin in the game, feel responsible for its success and take it upon themselves to protect, sustain and grow the business.” The ensemble, while it experiences the revolving door of talent, may actually slow down the talent drain since members understand their importance to the whole.

Ensemble work is really hard ... but it's worth the effort :: The more complex an organization, the greater the temptation can be to avoid the demands made by collaboration. But tight-knit, high-functioning ensembles are able to create things that no individual could personally achieve.

- Effective individuals within an ensemble must find a way to get others to listen to their ideas—as well as embrace their ideas.
- Ensembles must shift in reaction to the changing group dynamics, and flexibility is key. Former Chicago Bulls coach Phil Jackson once observed, “Basketball, unlike football with its prescribed routes, is an improvisational game, similar to jazz. If someone drops a note, someone else must step into the vacuum and drive the beat that sustains the team.”

A diverse ensemble :: The foundation for a great ensemble starts with its talent, and as The Second City learned years ago, that depends upon having players who make the whole greater through the diversity of their skills and personalities. The Second City's diversification strategy harkens back to April 1992 when the improvisers at The Second City Mainstage in Chicago tried to act upon the audience suggestion that they focus on the race riots taking place in Los Angeles. "Being the good improvisers that they were, the cast took that suggestion and valiantly attempted to use improvised humor as a way to talk about the tragedy that was unfolding simultaneously on the West Coast," write Leonard and Yorton. "There was one significant problem: The cast was all white."

At The Second City, the ensemble mixes diverse skill sets, joining writers, actors and improvisers together, but that also means equal parts men and women. As Leonard and Yorton say, building an ensemble that also considers socioeconomic background, age, sexuality, gender or race "might result in a group dynamic whose collective perspective might be capable of generating far more powerful and significant contributions to the culture at large than an ensemble where everyone is male, white and straight." The company's satire—whether it is about the first African-American president, immigration issues or LGBT issues—has been strengthened by its diverse members who offer their own perspectives on hot-button issues.

Help your team become an ensemble now :: How do you shape the people you're working with into an ensemble? How can you as an individual help make greater contributions to your team?

- **Be in the moment ::** Concentrate on the work and the person in front of you. When you are talking with co-workers, discuss what is at hand and don't dwell on previous mistakes or successes. Don't check emails or answer calls. Keep meetings short and focused. This is particularly critical in group meetings: "The minute one colleague sees you slipping off, it gives everyone permission to disengage and start building silos," Leonard and Yorton say.

- **Give and take:** At The Second City, the belief is that, “You’re only as good as your weakest member.” Give and take requires that everyone on a staff show respect for others and assume responsibility for the business, whether it’s learning the names of everyone in a room, washing dirty dishes found in a break room or attending the special events of fellow employees.
- **Surrender the need to be right:** One of the biggest barriers to creativity and innovation, whether it involves individuals, institutions or organizations, is the need to be right. It’s often hard for the individual with authority to hold back and see oneself as part of the group. “In the course of improvising with an ensemble, you quickly learn that nothing works if you cling to what’s right, true or funny. Improvisation demands that you surrender to the greater needs of the ensemble,” say Leonard and Yorton. When you do this, you may discover possibilities that you never imagined.

Exercises for this chapter ::

- **Talk without “I”**

Setup: Pair participants up and instruct them to have a conversation about anything at all—without using the word “I.” After running the exercise, talk about what it took to complete it successfully and how it might help participants when sharing ideas or evaluating the recommendations of others.

Point of focus: This exercise forces people to be other-directed and comprehend how they filter information through their own perspectives. In doing so, they must frame things in a way that is accessible and comprehensible to their colleagues.

- **The mirror**

Setup: Split participants up into pairs facing each other. Assign one person the job to lead by making small movements with her face and body; the other person is to mirror every action of the first. Then, have the pair switch leaders. Finally, see if they can mirror each other when no one is assigned to lead.

Point of focus: The exercise gives people a chance to know what it feels like to tap into all their powers of observation and focus with a partner.

- **Give and take**

Setup: Have your group spread out in the room. Starting with one person, ask them “to give focus” to another team member, using a simple physical cue (e.g., looking them in the eye, pointing at them or touching them on the shoulder). Next, ask the group to “take focus” in the same manner (e.g., by standing in front of them or waving their arms while standing next to them). Finally, challenge the group to do it all: Give focus, take focus, then give it back.

Point of focus: This exercise teaches how to share focus, helping team members become adept at giving and taking focus in equal measure, which can help make brainstorming sessions more fruitful and loosen up strategy meetings. Failure to give and take results in individuals in the room becoming disengaged, rendering collaboration difficult, if not impossible.

- **Parts of a whole**

Setup: With the group spread out in the room, suggest an item that they can organize themselves into (e.g., an animal, a truck, a printer, a pond or a tree). Have the participants use their bodies to create that shape, each individual forming a different part. Next, suggest something slightly more complex (e.g., shoppers in a grocery store, fish in an aquarium, people in a restaurant, including someone posing as a busboy or waiter, etc.).

Point of focus: The exercise stresses the point that individuals seeking to succeed while working in a group must be willing to cede control and play their part.

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chapter four:

the co-creation story, or audiences want in on the act

The Second City creates its shows as it communicates with the audience. This co-creation process involves listening to the audience's reaction—their laughter, but also silences and groans—and then editing, refining and changing the material to make it as strong as possible. “You’re always giving your customers what they want even if they are unable to tell you it’s what they want,” Leonard and Yorton say.

This chapter discusses co-creation and offers suggestions on how businesses can apply these models to:

- Improve the communication loop with your customers
- Thrive among your internal ensembles
- Explore how successful improvisation can be used to measure your brand essence and customer loyalty
- Use practical exercises that can be applied to both internal and external co-creation

Improve co-creation in-house: There are three keys to co-creating successfully with your business or ensemble:

- **Find the idea, not your idea:** Ensembles willing to co-create are ultimately better and more consistent in finding the idea than the most creative individual. Ideas belong to the group, and the group is free to run with them.
- **Cede control ::** Top creatives are often unwilling to yield control. The best creative should be able to generate ideas quickly on their own but should also have the ability to listen

to all ideas presented by others in order for good ideas to morph into better ideas.

- **Eradicate fear:** Fear may keep people safe but impedes group creation. It's impossible to live in the moment when you are wracked by fear.

Tactics people use to hide their fear—and how to overcome them ::

People who externalize fear are particularly destructive to performers and subvert a group's ability to create. People express fear in the following ways:

- **Asking questions:** When improvising a scene, you're supposed to be in dialogue to create together. While there is a time for questions, they can be a creativity killer. The business scenario below demonstrates how a question hinders the dialogue when the respondent puts the responsibility on the partner to provide the content:

Good marketer: "OK, everybody, our client has introduced a new craft beer. It's aimed at men ages 25 to 35, living in urban markets and with disposable income.

This is a clear initiative to start the brainstorm—naming the product and the audience.

Fear marketer: "Well, who would actually buy their beer?"

Good Marketer has already established the audience for the beer. With this question, Fear Marketer undermines the validity of the information already put on the table.

Good marketer: "This demographic is pretty specific: young men who live in the city. But we don't need to pigeonhole our creative ideas to sell the product this early in the brainstorm. Any idea is a good idea at this point."

The Good Marketer has restored order to the meeting without challenging the negativity of the fear marketer, and the room has been reopened to all ideas.

Fear marketer: "Really? I only want to hear great ideas."

The paths to open and honest creativity are shut down. Fear marketer is usually using questions to hide this fear of not being creative enough and being unable to provide a great idea.

- **Aggression:** People who are afraid often lash out as a means to control their feelings. “Dictate the code of behavior that you expect from all your team members—a code that mandates sharing the stage and co-creating with respect,” Leonard and Yorton say.
- **Yelling:** To cover up their fear, people may speak louder than others or bulldoze their way through interactions until others do what they want them to do. “Management by me” rather than a “culture of we” destroys a sense of collaboration, permeating the business and leading to poor morale.
- **Waffling:** Fear causes some people to freeze and avoid taking positions, making declarative statements or offering opinions. Leonard and Yorton say, “Waffling is merely a delaying tactic, something you do when you are too afraid to leap into the unknown.” Practice is the key to building confidence.

Improve co-creation with your audience :: Co-creation involves moving beyond the ensemble and reaching out to the larger group. The Second City refers to this as “being in dialogue.” Dialogue is promoted over monologues and the timing of a dialogue is important. In businesses, just like in performances, consumers now expect a rapid response, and you’ll profit from real-time feedback. When a skit doesn’t work, the improvisers know instantly and so will you when you hear back from the audience. “While there is absolute value in a considered response that may take hours or even days, there is a different kind of value in an instant reply. It may be a bit more challenging than taking your time, but the energy and fast, creative thinking a quick response requires can compel you to perform better,” Leonard and Yorton say.

Case study

Clorox laughs through ick with parents on Twitter: The Clorox company, in partnership with The Second City, created the “Clorox Ick Awards,” featuring messes that parents shared on Twitter using the hashtag #Ickies. People developed sketches in real-time for reaction and voting, and #Ickies

winners were chosen in categories like #HorrificMess and #EpicMess. During the four-hour-long live award show, #Ickies was a trending topic on Twitter, and Clorox saw more than 160 million social media impressions from more than 16,800 tweets. Key takeaways from this experience:

- The funniest stuff is grounded in truth.
- Audiences respond when you invite them to join the act.
- Social media has led to new opportunities for companies to co-create with people who use their products.
- More companies are exploring inventive ways to get audiences into the act.
- Rapid prototyping is likely to work in product development, and improv can help inject speed into the business.

Improv Sets and making the world safe for co-creation :: At The Second City, the Improv Set is the company's research and development arm. The actors, musical director, stage director and director spend weeks creating a new revue during the day and then try it out for free late in the evening before an audience. The Improv Set takes place after the main show and anyone can come in to see it.

The audience already in the theater is cued (e.g., the actors from the main performance have taken their bows) so that they understand that the next performance is in development. The Improv Sets are a safe place to co-create: Expectations are lowered and the audience understands that it has been asked to bring a new perspective to this aspect of the performance.

Co-creation sometimes requires caution :: Here are a few lessons to follow when co-creating:

- **Some words are funny, until they are not:** The meanings of words evolve over time and some jokes aren't funny or are in bad taste. "Broad communication requires that you understand the power of your own words. Leave the comedy to the professionals and engage with your own young staffers to assess the ever-changing vernacular," Leonard and Yorton say.

- **Talking about religion means trouble:** The Second City often depicts liberals and conservatives; pretends to shoot people onstage, explores drug use, prostitution and war, but even this comedy group approaches religion with a great deal of caution.
- **Tragedy today, comedy tomorrow:** Gunplay has figured in many Second City performances. But following the December 2012 shooting of students at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut the ensemble cut every scene with a gun in it—and as of early 2015 had not brought guns back. Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, mentioning airplanes in a skit caused the audience to gasp, which resulted in cutting out lines and skits for a period of time. The formula for comedy is “tragedy plus time” and at Second City it’s “tragedy plus time plus distance.”

Leonard and Yorton offer this concluding advice about co-creation, “Engaging in rapid co-creation works best in the ideation stage and requires you to create a safe platform where everyone knows you’re just riffing and the occasional gaffe won’t get anyone (or everyone) in trouble. Then, as the stakes rise, you can slow your co-creation down, taking more time to carefully shape your communication in a way that highlights your unique and authentic brand identity.”

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change is hard: comedy and improv make it easier

This chapter explores how comedy can be a tool to capture your audience's attention and get your foot in the door, especially when your business culture is experiencing change. Improvisation can be a tool for managing internal and external challenges. "Comedy makes it possible to identify and talk honestly about problems, and improv builds the key skills people need to deal with the problems that come with any enterprise-wide change agenda."

The respect/revere dynamic :: Reverence for an institution or an idea, whether by a company or an individual, may hamper its ability to laugh at itself and change. Replace that with a respectful attitude and the dynamic changes. "Respect is like the rules of the road—it's how we're constantly not crashing into each other at intersections. Respect demands that you consider the other," say Leonard and Yorton. "Reverence, however, turns respect into a thing so perfect that it can't be touched."

- The best satire maintains a respectful disposition despite its irreverence, and comedy allows people of lower status to level the playing field by giving them a voice to call out the failings and inadequacies of their leaders.
- If you're too reverent toward your product or service when you are trying to innovate, you'll be reluctant to attempt substantial change.
- Most innovations—whether in product design or the theory of how to put together a winning baseball team—take place by changing the status quo.

Through the looking glass :: At The Second City annual holiday party, the staff puts on a revue, often using skits from current revues, to parody the experience of working offstage and out of the limelight. The skits poke fun at unpopular business decisions or propose change; a few years ago one satire showed the need for insurance for part-time employees in a highly amusing manner. This sketch focused attention on a critical employee concern and ultimately led to new corporate policies.

Skits are just one way to work toward creating a culture that is open to change. Other examples include:

- Internal newsletters highlighting senior management mistakes during the year so that the corporate atmosphere is safe for identifying mistakes.
- Product roasts that point out design and production flaws so that employees can take what they have learned and apply it toward improvements.
- Regular “if we could do anything” ideation sessions where people can exchange out-of-the-box thinking.

The goal is for management to create an environment and rituals that allow imperfections, mistakes and disagreements to be exposed without fear of retribution by the organization.

Respect, reverence and authenticity :: In today’s corporate world—with the Internet and social media taking center stage—organizations can’t hide from the audiences and customers they serve. This new reality is forcing transparency, candor and sometimes, irreverence. At The Second City, hate mail is often framed and displayed. “It reinforces an essence of the brand that is important for the audience to understand prior to a Second City show. It shows audiences, authentically, who we are,” say Leonard and Yorton.

Exercises for this chapter ::

- **Take that back**

Setup: Players improvise a scene based on a suggestion. Each time the leader rings a bell, the actor speaking must replace

his last sentence, phrase or word with a different one and continue the scene from there.

- **Sample dialogue:**

Player: I have a dog.

Ding!

Player: I have a cat.

Ding!

Player: I have a rash.

And so on ...

Point of focus: To focus on the here-and-now and to get the players out of their heads. This exercise helps you learn to deal with the unexpected and encourages you to take the initiative to bring about new and useful solutions.

Variations: It can be played without a bell, with the instructor simply calling out “Take that back!” or “New choice!” In this variation, the leader may occasionally ask a player to replace an action rather than a phrase; for example: “Take back that accent!” or “New dance move!”

- **Thank you statues**

Setup: Have the group form a large circle. Ask for a volunteer to go first. Have the individual step into the middle of the circle and strike a pose, any pose. Once he is set, another participant will step into the middle, tap the first person out, and assume her own pose. The first person will say “thank you” and take his place back in the circle. After a couple of rounds of this, the group picks up the tempo so that things move more quickly. Eventually, they stop tapping out the person posing in the center, and just go one-by-one to the middle and take a pose that builds on those of the others already there, ultimately creating a statue. When only two people are left in the circle, ask them to name the statue that has been created.

Point of focus: Co-creation: The exercise helps participants embrace their ability to put ideas out there without fear of judgment by peers or co-workers. Focus in on supporting one another's ideas and not getting caught up in their own. The exercise reminds people how much they are dependent upon each other for success.

- **Emotional option**

Setup: Divide the group into pairs. Have the pairs start a conversation about anything at all. As they talk, begin to shout out different emotions at various points. Once an emotion is cued, the pairs must continue the conversation in the tone of that emotion.

Point of focus: This game can teach how to better deal with change and how to communicate more effectively with your peers. It sharpens their ability to read and recognize the different emotions people express in conversation, helps you match your own tone to what you want to achieve and reminds you that communication is more than the words you speak.

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using failure

The Second City falters from time to time in its attempts: failed training videos, a promised theater in Montreal was announced but never opened, an actor who fled the theater when he learned what the topic was and much more. “We know that failure is not something to be feared; in fact, it’s something to embrace,” say Leonard and Yorton. “If you’re good at what you do, you’re going to fail, because it means you’re out there taking risks. As people who have failed will often attest, failing isn’t that bad; it’s the fear of failure that can be paralyzing.” This chapter looks at how companies can help their employees overcome the fear of failure through:

- Creating low-risk opportunities and safe spaces where people can experiment, flounder, speak out and not fear the consequences
- Providing platforms, such as The Second City’s Improv Sets, that promote experimentation and reward people for thinking outside the box
- Banishing the belief that failure is a zero-sum game and accepting that failure is a part of life and tiny failures are part of every day activity

Why should we fail?

Here are reasons that The Second City embraces failure—and fearlessness.

- **Failing in order to create:** The Second City is always fiddling, revising and experimenting with rough drafts shown to hundreds of people nightly, and some scenes fall flat. “Sometimes, you have to accumulate a series of failures in

order to finally succeed. When you get the client's feedback in the process of creation, you create with a decided advantage," Leonard and Yorton say. That feedback can result in going back to the drawing board until you get things right.

- **Planning for failure and embracing it:** In 2012, The Second City partnered for the first time with the Lyric Opera of Chicago to create a one-of-a-kind gala: The Second City's Guide to Opera. At the preview, one person commented, "Well, maybe other people will find it funny." Rather than replace the director and the creative team, The Second City continued, and when actor Patrick Stewart finally joined the troupe, he agreed to improvise with the ensemble. But the true moment of success came right before the show began when a team member had the inspired idea to have snow fall during the show's finale since the production was taking place in the Lyric Opera's house, which had elaborate sets and stage effects. The audience gave the production one of the longest ovations that The Second City troupe had ever experienced. "When creating wholly original products, there will be many failures along the way, making it an absolute priority that you plan for those failures to occur in ways that won't put the entire enterprise at risk."

Understanding failure

Here are some questions to ask when confronting a business failure that can enable you to find ways to an eventual success.

- What are the parts that make up a failure in your line of work?
- If a new product didn't sell well, think about the steps along the way in the product's design as well as the marketing strategy. What might have contributed to its weak sales?
- Was there enough attention focused on beta testing the product itself and the marketing?
- Could you have poked more holes in the product or were there other promotional plays that could have been used to get people to buy into what you were trying to sell?

The six ways The Second City chooses to fail

Understanding failure can give you the tools to use it to your advantage.

- **Fail in public:** Failure is kept in perspective; the public attempt might be a failure, but it could also be a success. Society as a whole often embraces people who fail. How many flawed public figures—whether a president, a pop culture star or an actor—have picked themselves up and then moved on to new heights, with the public recognizing the flaws and then granting the individual a second chance?
- **Fail together:** At The Second City, minutes before the ensemble goes on stage, cast members hug each other and say, “I got your back.” This reinforces the group effort and the belief that all share the risk of failure.
- **Fail fast:** Speed is a critical part of the improv equation. When a mistake happens, the ensemble takes the failure in stride, quickly moving on to the next new idea without stressing over what had just gone wrong. An actor might say, “Well, that happened,” and laugh, letting the audience know that it is OK to laugh at the mistake. Simply acknowledging the failure with a quick joke dissipates it. “In any work environment, imperfect people—i.e., everyone—will screw up. If you can maintain an open and healthy attitude about your imperfections, you’ll get higher employee morale, more engaged staff and an organization that is more willing to reach for greatness instead of holding back out of fear of making a mistake.” And who knows? A kernel of a great idea might just be embedded in the failure.
- **Fail without judgment:** The actors and director rehearse with the expectation that others will not be visiting for a sneak peek. A judgment-free zone is established and maintained until the participants are ready for it to be lifted.
- **Fail with confidence:** Ensemble members face creative challenges confident that they will ultimately succeed. What does your corporate culture look like? Is it a confident one, and if so, where does your confidence originate? What does your organization draw on when it wants to innovate? Does

the company have a culture of creativity and innovation that people believe in? Has your organization ever had to tear down some existential threat, or has it been relatively smooth sailing for the business? Asking these questions can give you a sense of your organization's appetite for risk and failure.

- **Fail incrementally:** The best improvisers don't feel that they have to bring fully formed ideas to a scene, nor is any actor carrying the whole burden of creation. Employees need to understand that their ideas are just one step along the way and should be encouraged to abandon the better-safe-than-sorry mindset, which they may have if the organization has frowned upon failure and risk-taking.

"Imperfection is more interesting than perfection," Leonard and Yorton say. "We owe a huge part of our current success to the many specific failures we've suffered in the past, and the positive can-do spirit that comes from aiming for innovation instead of instant perfection during the creative process. Fail early and often, and you'll have a much better chance of achieving the ultimate goal—a perfect final product. As Winston Churchill once said, 'Success is not final, and failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts.'"

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follow the follower

This chapter focuses on leadership, emphasizing that managers need not control every aspect of the workplace to get the best results. Rather they should rely on the best ideas and initiatives of the individuals they oversee.

Getting out of the way :: The Second City CEO and co-owner Andrew Alexander has said, “Build the right sandbox, hire the right people and get the hell out of the way.” This dictum lies at the heart of how The Second City creates and defines how the creative process should work in other organizations as well. Whether it’s a new business plan, a brainstorming session or a new advertising campaign, leaders and managers should:

- Set parameters and then go away.
- Create timelines and schedules that people feel they can meet.
- Ensure that the group has the required resources to accomplish the task.
- Check in during the creation process from time to time so that the team knows it has outside support when it needs it but not as an everyday intrusion.

Listening and talking to others

For years The Second City had a “first come, first served” seating policy. But it actually wasn’t since some customers could reserve ahead of time, seats were held for groups and certain metrics were used in seating—short people up front, taller in the back, special seats for military visitors. The house staff knew that the seating wasn’t democratic, but management never asked them for their observation.

“If you embrace a “follow the follower” approach to your work, you should be able to avoid those kinds of missteps. You talk to your staff, you talk to your managers, you talk to your audience—and since the conversation is always changing, you don’t stop talking.”

Reading the room :: Effective leaders know how to read people’s body language and how to use their senses. Exist in the moment. One of The Second City’s adages is “Leave the action onstage.”

Twitter and the context reminder :: Twitter’s CEO Dick Costolo trained in improv comedy when he lived in Chicago and has said that he draws on this for how he manages the company. He says:

“A fundamental principle of improv is listening and accepting any initiation that’s made on the stage. If you start improvising that you’re washing the dishes, and a minute later I walk over and turn on the TV where the sink is supposed to be, the audience feels that the scene’s been ruined. Similarly, I want my managers to listen and respond to their employees’ perceptions, not ignore them. Managers have to be open to accepting any kind of initiation. When they deny there’s an issue and reflexively defend the status quo, it creates misery for people.”

Twitter itself is short-form content, analogous to a short-form sketch, and operates in a constant dynamic, where information builds upon itself, is in motion and doesn’t become a final product. The problem, however, is that there is no context and that can lead to problems as words can be misconstrued.

You need to know who your audience is at any given moment, “Dick Costolo talks about making sure managers are listening to those who work for them, which is absolutely critical,” Leonard and Yorton say. “We’d also extend that advice to listening to your clients, who are a different kind of audience.” The authors also believe that business leaders need to ensure that their employees have training in the different platforms in which they are communicating:

- Does your company talk to employees about how they are expected to discuss their work or represent their work life when using social media?

- Do the people in charge of talking to the media engage in regular sessions together to hone and align their talking points?
- Does your company teach people the etiquette required when talking to different audiences, whether it's boss to boss, boss to employee or employee to customer?

Leadership 2.0 :: Leaders must know when to lead and when to follow, how to get out of the way, trust their teams and talk to their audiences. Leadership is not just top-down; it's often sideways and even reversed. "If you have to demand respect, you never had it in the first place and you aren't going to get it through ultimatums."

Recent research has shown that women outscore men in leadership effectiveness as women are good at collaboration and teamwork, inspiring, motivating and developing others, championing change, communicating powerfully and prolifically, and practicing self-development. Many of these skills, often referred to as soft skills, are also the ones that improvisation serves to support, such as communicating, adapting to change, empathizing and following instincts.

"Follow-the-follower teaches us that there is a better way to lead. Managers don't need to control every aspect of their workforce in order to achieve the greatest results. In fact, the opposite is true. When managers can access and reply the best ideas and initiatives of the individuals they oversee, they gain a strategic advantage."

Exercises for this chapter ::

- **Follow the follower**

Setup: Have group members sit in a circle. On the leader's cue, everyone in the circle should start to make sounds and movements; however, at the same time, they must also mimic the sounds and movements of the others in the circle.

Point of focus: Ensemble Leadership: This is practice for focusing attention on the others in the group so that, ultimately, they learn to work together as one unit.

- **Who's the leader?**

Setup: Have the group stand in a circle, with one member in the middle, eyes closed. The rest of the group then silently chooses one member to be the leader, whose body language and movements they slowly and silently begin to mimic.

Point of focus: Leadership and observation: This helps individuals understand that leadership works in a dynamic that is always changing. In the business world, is your boss transparent or is leadership primarily an art of obfuscation? Do you focus on what your boss wants? Both the leader and the follower have a part to play: Leadership doesn't exist in a vacuum.

- **Silent organization**

Setup: Have the group line up according to age, oldest to youngest. To do this, the players are allowed to communicate, as long as they don't use words: They can use only eye contact, noises, gestures, etc. Have them repeat the exercise, organizing members by increasingly abstract characteristics (e.g., most pessimistic to sunniest outlook; fewest siblings to most numerous, etc.).

Point of focus: Leadership: This helps teach deeper and more effective communication and observation, especially relating to organizing a group of people to complete a task. In teams where people have worked together for a while, it may reveal how some have a natural ability to communicate while others don't, leading to further understanding of each other.

- **String of pearls**

Setup: Have the group stand in a line facing forward. The person at one end of the line is given the first sentence of a story, and the person at the other end, the last sentence. The first person speaks the given opener, and then, going down the line, each participant improvises a succeeding line of dialogue until the last, who says the line he was given—the point being to make the progression from first to last as logical as possible.

Sample dialogue:

First line: “One day, a cheetah delivered a pizza to my door.”

Last line: “I got a promotion at work.”

Second line: “I was amazed, so I snapped a photo with my phone.”

Third line: “I sent that photo to my boss.”

Fourth line: “My boss is the photo editor of a wildlife magazine that was doing a feature on pizza.”

Point of focus: Listening: This is an excellent exercise to help people listen more closely and think harder about what others are saying before speaking themselves.

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listening is a muscle

Consider these statistics that appeared in a 2013 *Forbes* magazine article: 85 percent of what people know comes from listening, yet they only have a 25 percent comprehension rate. Only 2 percent of professionals have had any formal training in listening skills. This chapter examines listening in improv and offers ways to build your skill.

The importance of listening in improv :: Active listening is the “Yes” in improv and to excel at improvisational listening the actor must provide the “And.” Every word that scene partners speak is a gift because it offers a lifeline to the ensemble, a chance to build something that can make a scene funny and watchable. The cost of bad listening is creating bad products—think of Harley Davidson perfume—where business created products that their customers had no interest in. “Deep, practiced listening is really a form of meditation,” Leonard and Yorton say. “It is a skill that enables you to turn off the judgment part of your brain and allows you to interact with individuals and groups in a seamless way.”

The practice of listening :: Think of listening as a muscle that needs exercise in order to see improvement. People have a tendency to listen halfway through a conversation and check out or formulate a response without waiting for the conclusion. In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R. Covey referred to this as “listening to understand and listening to respond.” When your listening is inattentive, you don’t hear everything, you may respond inappropriately, offer a response that’s irrelevant, or even worse, that contradicts what the first speaker said.

Listening for intent :: Words aren't the only way we communicate. Our body language and the tone in which we speak offers cues, and there is sometimes a gap between what we say and what we feel. Psychologist Paul Ekman helped to broaden the explanation of why "microexpressions" occur. Microexpressions are extremely brief facial expressions that appear for a fraction of a second when people conceal their emotions. Ekman research group identified these universal microexpressions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, contempt, surprise and happiness. Good face readers can be attuned to these microexpressions. "When you understand how someone is feeling in addition to what they are saying, you receive multiple insights into their whole psyche," Leonard and Yorton say.

Says Ekman, "Improving your ability to recognize others' emotions will increase the intimacy and understanding with which you connect with other people. Research has also found that people who learn to spot microexpressions were better liked by co-workers." Improvisation can enhance your skill of listening and empathetic listening.

Exercises for this chapter ::

- **Repetition**

Setup: Break your group into pairs. Have each pair sit or stand, facing each other. Have the two begin a conversation, each speaking one sentence at a time. The first person initiates with any random line of dialogue, but before her partner can answer, he must repeat the line she just said. This continues throughout the exercise.

Sample dialogue:

Person 1: "This new boss really knows how to dress."

Person 2: "This new boss really knows how to dress. She's putting my pajamas to shame."

Point of focus: Listening: This exercise is designed to practice listening all the way through to the end of a speaker's thought before starting to form or express a response. It's OK for the dialogue not to make sense—in fact it makes for greater comic value—but it forces people to listen all the way through.

- **Last word response**

Setup: Divide your group into pairs. Just as in the prior exercise, Repetition, have the pairs begin a conversation about anything at all, speaking one line at a time; however, instead of repeating the entire preceding sentence, they must start with just the last word of their partner's sentence.

Sample dialogue:

Person 1: "Boy, I love hot summer days. Can't wait to go for a run and jump into the pool after work."

Person 2: "Work has been hard lately. I'm really struggling to connect with my new boss."

Person 1: "Boss is a title I've never liked much. I like to collaborate more than to give orders."

Person 2: "Orders get clogged up all the time in our procurement system."

Problematic sample dialogue: Contrast these opening lines with those previously used. When you're generous and other-directed in your speech, it's easy for people to respond. Individuals who frame their comments as questions or end their statements in prepositions make it difficult for others.

Person 1: "I pushed my idea pretty hard, but I wasn't sure where he was at."

-OR-

Person 1: "How about you?"

Point of focus: Listening: An exercise like Last Word Response is a great way to demonstrate how poorly we tend to listen to colleagues in every day conversation.

- **Touch to talk and eye contact to speak**

Setup: With your group divided into pairs, have two members start a conversation. Neither individual can speak without first making physical contact or strong eye contact with the other.

Point of focus: Listening: This exercise shows that people need a partner in order to talk. It's a way of setting a foundation for real communication and enforces the need to pay close attention.

- **Gibberish games**

Setup: Select three group members. Two of them will have a conversation entirely in made-up words and sounds—gibberish. The third person “translates” the exchange for the rest of the group. Rotate parts and repeat.

Sample scenario:

Person 1: Speaks gibberish in a trembling voice with her body shaking.

Person 2: “I’m cold, I need a jacket or you need to turn up the heat.”

Person 3: Has his head held high, his chest puffed out and has assumed an air of grandness.

Person 1: “I’m the boss. I’m in charge. Someone get me a coffee!”

Point of focus: Listening and paying attention: The participants learn to focus on the whole person rather than the words alone in the course of communicating. It helps listeners interpret the feelings behind spoken nonsense.

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What Happened When We “Yes, Anded” The Writing of This Book

Improvisation is about making discoveries when you start with absolutely nothing and by the time you are done, have created something. Leonard and Yorton believe that there is no one definitive path, nor one right way, but that improv can give you critical skills to enable you to excel at your work, to better collaborate, create and communicate. Leadership is about building strong ensembles where participants build on their strengths and support each other's weaknesses. Failure needs to be destigmatized, fear of not being right cannot hold people back, and everyone must fully listen. “No, but” needs to give way to “Yes, And.”

“The world is shifting, accelerating, and demanding more of us. Keeping up can be a challenge, whether you're trying to ride the waves of change and innovation, or make the waves yourself,” Leonard and Yorton say. “Regardless, there's no need to be afraid—improvisation is the perfect tool kit for navigating the unknown.”

summary by lois gilman

Lois Gilman has written for a variety of magazines, including *Corporate Board Member*, *Money* and *Time*. She has worked on the program development of numerous business conferences, including the Fortune Global Forum and the Wall Street Journal CEO Council. Gilman was a head researcher at Time Life Books; a senior reporter at *Time Magazine*; a program research manager at Fortune conferences; and the Web files editor of *Business 2.0* magazine. She is also the author of *The Adoption Resource Book* and *The New York Parents' Book*.

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