A few years ago, Second City Communications worked with a young HR manager at a global technology company (we'll call her Katie), who was chosen to participate in the company's "High Potentials" executive development program. The program was two years long and required participants to rotate into new jobs within the company every six months, which, in turn, required participants to be comfortable networking and assimilating regularly into new groups of people. Katie was bright, skilled, and highly motivated, but also somewhat introverted and terrified by the prospect of having to join entirely new teams and make productive connections with new coworkers every six months. She was typically reserved in new situations and didn't consider herself a networker who could plug into new teams easily. Katie worried that her lack of networking skills would limit her success and ultimately hurt her career.
Until we were brought in to work with Katie and her colleagues, she didn’t know much about The Second City, and she certainly wouldn’t have described such an exercise in peer networking as an act of improvisation. But to us, looking at Katie’s situation through the lens of our stage work, the challenges that she and her peers faced were Improv 101. In improv parlance, Katie was having trouble initiating a scene because she was afraid she’d have to carry the scene all by herself. She was also intimidated by the idea of having to be interesting and compelling in each new situation right off the bat. She found herself in an improvisational situation, tasked with the responsibility of repeatedly creating something out of nothing, without the perspective or the tools to cope with it effectively.

So what did we have Katie do? Something very simple. We had her play a game called Exposure. The workshop instructor had Katie and half of the class go up and stand in a line on the stage while the rest of the class stayed in the audience, about 10 feet away. The instructor then told each group, “You look at us, and we’ll look at you.” That’s when the squirming started—and it wasn’t just Katie. The whole group onstage started to shift their feet. Some got red in the face while others fussed with their hands and clothing. As soon as everyone in the group was displaying some degree of discomfort, the instructor spoke. “Now I want you to count every brick in the wall that you can see.” Within seconds, the fidgeting stopped. Now everyone had a task to do. Each individual was concentrating. Within minutes, Katie and the rest of her group were smiling, completely at ease, as they attempted to count the number of bricks in the wall of the theatre.

What improvisation does, in its most simple form, is to take the focus off ourselves and allow us to dial down our personal judgment. When we’re concentrating hard and fully present in the moment, there’s no room for self-consciousness or shaky nerves. All your energy goes into the task at hand. This exercise allowed Katie to learn that even when she felt as if all eyes were upon her, if she just focused on getting her job done—in her case, networking and adapting to new divisions in her organization—she would be able to control her anxiety. In time, as she started to enjoy the fruits of her efforts, she would also realize that she was the only person judging her “performance,” and she’d get more comfortable with the process.

As Katie loosened up, we added games that focused on improving her listening, sharing, and exchanging—all beginning-level improvisational exercises that work like calisthenics for your social skills. As Dr. Mark Pfeffer, a psychotherapist and director of the Panic/Anxiety Recovery Center in Chicago, explains, “Every time you learn to be unafraid, your brain changes. [Improv is] the quickest way to get to the neural pathway change, because it puts [people] in a situation where they’re facing their fears.” Ultimately, Katie learned that she did in fact have all the communication and networking skills she thought she didn’t possess. She just needed a place to practice them.

Mostly, though, she learned how to Yes, And.

**What Is Yes, And?**

We’ve met a lot of Katies in our work, and over the years we’ve come to believe that no matter what title is on your business card, professional success requires the ability to create something out of nothing, which is in many ways at the heart of what it means to improvise. Katie was trying to create new, effective profes-
sional relationships out of nothing, but the list of things business professionals have to create out of nothing every day is endless. Here are some examples:

- Marketing campaigns
- New products and business lines
- Trusted partnerships with clients and customers
- Better processes and solutions to problems
- Job descriptions for new roles
- Employee policies, training curricula, performance management systems, and budgets (not to mention revenues)
- Thoughtful responses to customer complaints
- Names for the company softball team

Just about anyone who works in an organization is in the business of creating something out of nothing. The people who are able to create these somethings—out-of-nothing extraordinarily well approach the challenge with Yes, And. They may not call it that. They may call it extreme design or even conflict resolution. But in our world, it’s called Yes, And, and it is the secret sauce, the source code, the key that unlocks every door worth opening. It is the foundational tenet of improvisation that allows all the other improv tenets to exist.

In the context of improvisation for the stage, where there is no script to guide the direction of a scene, Yes, And goes like this: One actor offers an idea onstage and other actors affirm and build onto that idea with something of their own.

Someone might say, for instance, “Wow, I’ve never seen so many stars in the sky.”

The actor sharing the scene has only one responsibility at that point: to agree with this and add something new to it. So that could be something like, “I know. Things look so different up here on the moon.”

That simple statement affirms what the first actor offered and added another idea (i.e., they’re far away from the city—so far that they are actually on the moon). In turn, this affirmation gives the first actor some information to build on and opens up a great many possibilities for this scene.

If the second actor had negated the first actor’s offering with something like, “I can’t see a single star . . . it’s broad daylight,” the budding scene would have stopped in its tracks and left the first actor to scramble to find a response that could bring the scene back to speed in a way that an audience would find interesting. In our experience, audiences want to see something cool build onstage; they’re not really interested in watching actors squabble over the essential facts of a scene—that’s boring as hell.

Yes, And has a few synonyms in the improv world. You’ll hear us talk about “affirming and building” on ideas or “exploring and heightening” a scene. There are variations, but the central idea of accepting what’s offered and adding to it (regardless of what you may think of it), is absolutely foundational to everything we do at The Second City.

It’s how we create scenes; it’s how we develop rich, funny characters (think Wayne from “Wayne’s World,” created by Mike Myers originally on our stages, or Matt Foley, the dysfunctional motivational speaker that Chris Farley later made famous on Saturday Night Live), and it’s core to how we develop entire shows. Yes, And leaves such an impression that alums like Tina Fey and Jane Lynch talk about it when they’re writing memoirs or giving commencement speeches, long after they’ve left our stages. In fact, we’d say without hesitation that Yes, And is the lens through which we view our entire business and our place in
the world. We are here to affirm and build upon people’s ideas in a way that’s smart, thoughtful, useful, interesting … and usually, uproariously funny.

—YES, BUT … HOW DOES IT RELATE TO BUSINESS?

For many of our corporate clients, Yes, And is a relatively easy concept to understand, but much harder to commit to in actual practice. That’s because it requires you to trust others to support and build upon your contribution, and it requires you to do the same for them, whether you actually like the original idea or not. In the business world, support is almost always highly conditional: I’ll support you as long as I understand immediately where this idea is going, or I’ll support you as long as success is guaranteed, or I’ll support you as long as there’s something in it for me. “No” or “Yes, but” are popular in the work world because they allow one party to maintain control of an idea or conversation.

But if control guaranteed success in business, every business would be wildly successful, because most businesses place a premium on process, controls, models, and the like. We all know it’s not that simple. 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.

We call this principle Yes, And because in our exercises, we preface each statement with those words. But it’s the spirit of the principle that matters more than the words. To build a Yes, And culture, you have to model Yes, And behavior. You have to be supportive and committed to building on people’s individual contributions.

USING YES, AND IN YOUR WORK

There is no Yes, And recipe book per se, but there are many situations and scenarios where a Yes, And mind-set can be helpful to individuals and organizations.

In Interpersonal and Team Communications

Let’s go back to the case of our friend and client, Katie, the high-potential HR manager who had trepidation about assimilating into new teams. Katie felt especially shy about initiating conversations with new team members because she felt some self-imposed pressure in those situations to be a high-energy, life-of-the-party coworker. She thought that’s what it meant to be a good networker and she didn’t think her natural, more reserved personality would cut it in new team situations.

In the course of our work with Katie and her colleagues, we did a series of workshops that offered an improv model for communication that allowed Katie to be effective and comfortable. We had her perform another game called Doctor Know-It-All with two of her coworkers. They sat on the stage while the audience asked random questions, to which each of the three could reply using only one word at a time. We also played Take That Back, a game where people are prompted to change the last thing said, so that the scene onstage is ever changing and completely unpredictable, and the players have to scramble to adapt (as on a typical workday). We showed Katie that the best networkers are those who affirm and build on the ideas of others, not those who initiate and monopolize the conversation. Through fun, interactive exercises, she learned that the best way to connect and engage new colleagues is to listen deeply and build on their ideas, something that comes naturally when you’re committed to a Yes, And approach to communication. Katie could see that her
natural quiet style wasn’t a deficiency. Rather it was in every way compatible with good networking and teambuilding.

The best teams are made up of a variety of personality types with different styles, experiences, and strengths. As Katie gained the confidence to contribute to her group, her more assertive colleagues learned to give their more timid workmates space to contribute. They learned to encourage them to share their ideas rather than let them sit in silence on the sidelines. Katie was even able to get some pretty big laughs during her Doctor Know-It-All exercise because she was in full listening mode and made sense out of some pretty nonsensical situations. Her timing was perfect. After a half-day of exercises, you would never have pegged Katie as the shy one of the group. As long as she continued to practice and promote the concept of Yes, And she’d be a welcome member of any new team she joined in her high-potentials job rotation.

In Coaching and Feedback Sessions

Good interpersonal communication is vital in business, among peers, but also between bosses and those who work for them. And if you’re a boss, one of the most important responsibilities you have is to coach your people and provide feedback that will help them grow in their work. Yes, And is one of the best aids to improving interpersonal communications because of the three ways in which it can put everyday work communications in a more positive light.

First, Yes, And helps you acknowledge when someone does something good and gives you a chance to encourage that person to reach further. It also works well when people drop the ball, because it allows you to identify something redeemable about their work before commenting on mistakes or misjudgments, such as when the boss meets you after a particularly bad showing with,

“So we lost the account?” Yes, And allows you to respond truthfully, but not passively: “Yes, and I think I know why. We’ll break down what we did wrong this time so it won’t happen again.”

Second, adopting a Yes, And mind-set can be invaluable in motivating teams to reach for new heights when developing ideas and initiatives. During a collaborative leadership workshop with long-standing client Farmers Insurance, one of our more senior participants reflected elegantly on the challenge leaders sometimes face in staying open to ideas from their people, even when those ideas aren’t new or intriguing at first blush: “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.” It’s a terrific adage. Many of the franchises and products we have learned to love over the years didn’t start so promisingly: Seinfeld, the brilliant sitcom from Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld, really did have its origins in a pitch meeting with the network as “a show about nothing”; J. K. Rowling was turned down by a number of publishers who didn’t see how the boy wizard, Harry Potter, would ever capture anyone’s imagination; and Tony Fadell, the inventor of the iPod, shopped around that idea to a few companies—all of whom rejected the idea out of hand—before Steve Jobs said Yes, And. Sometimes you need to give the crazy idea in the room a second, third, and fourth look.

Finally, Yes And helps boss-subordinate communications by leveling the playing field of the conversation. 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. Dr. Hal M. Lewis, president and CEO of the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership, sees Yes, And as a vital leadership tool, saying, “Yes, And begins with the same fundamental principle that’s found in any classical understanding of leadership. Which is, none of us is as smart as all of us. As soon
as I give up the notion that I have to be the smartest person in the room, magic can happen."

Yes, And makes everyone feel heard and respected, and when you have mutual respect, it’s possible to work through any performance challenge.

**In Brainstorming and Ideation Sessions**

Finding the new “new” always seems to be the Holy Grail in business, politics, sports, entertainment, and education. Our world puts a high premium on innovation, no matter your line of work. The evidence is all around us in the day-to-day language of life. Packaged goods companies tout “new and improved” laundry detergent. Political challengers stump about, talking about how they represent a “fresh change” from the tired ideas of incumbents. Educators extol the virtues of new technology in the classroom. And TV networks say odd things in their show promos, like, “Followed at 8 by an all-new *Parks and Recreation.*” (This always makes us wonder what a partially new *Parks and Recreation* would be like. We love the show and think it would probably still be pretty cool.)

But for all the energy placed on creating new stuff, on innovating, there’s a lot of sameness in the world, a lot of copycats, and a lot of innovation initiatives that end in failure (we may or may not be talking to you, One Direction).

And it’s a real problem. According to an Ernst & Young study from 2010, only 47 percent of senior executives surveyed felt their companies were more innovative than their competition, 17 percent felt they were less innovative than the competition, and 41 percent felt they lacked big ideas to move their businesses forward.\(^5\) There are several reasons for this. People might think that innovation and invention are someone else’s responsibility, or they think that innovation is a separate discipline, a Skunk Works, that needs to stand apart from day-to-day work activity. Usually, individuals and organizations struggle with innovation because it’s hard to do consistently if you don’t have an underlying philosophy that values creators and the process of innovation. We think the lack of innovation has more to do with the persistent presence of khakis in the workplace, but couldn’t find any facts to support that observation.

So how can you boost innovation? By promoting Yes, And at every opportunity.

Probably the most obvious place you can apply Yes, And is in brainstorming or ideation sessions, where you and some teammates are trying to come up with a new product idea, marketing slogan, or creative theme. The creative process is actually similar to how we use Yes, And onstage. We’ve seen it work as an invaluable tool to help teams generate lots of ideas in a short period of time. In addition, we often see that it helps teams generate more unlikely or unusual ideas than they would in a traditional brainstorming approach. The reason is simple: When people are building and supporting each other’s ideas quickly, they tend to filter and judge less, and when you take off filters at the early stage of a brainstorm session, you allow ideas to go to new places, and you discover new connections that conventional wisdom doesn’t account for.

We are often brought in by clients to conduct innovation and creativity workshops at the start of a strategic planning process, at the kickoff of a new marketing campaign, or to set the stage for new and different ideas. In each case, we work hard to instill the Yes, And mentality into work teams. It’s exactly this kind of commitment to Yes, And that led us to co-create a very successful marketing campaign with client Leggett & Platt, a company that makes... wait for it... the springs and coils that go into mattresses.
Let's face it, the mattress business isn't glamorous, and the spring and coil business, even less so, but our clients at Leggett were creative folks, and in the course of one of our creative development brainstorming sessions with them, we landed on the idea of creating a funny rap video that satirized rap video conventions and highlighted a key virtue of mattresses made with springs and coils: The sex is supposed to be better. Not only did the video we created drive huge buzz for their business, we were also able to help them change how the category viewed their products, all while creating a fun piece that everyone could be proud of. There are many instructive aspects of this assignment, but the key point is that we'd never have made the leap between springs and sexy rap video had we not Yes, Anded each other to find unlikely connections between seemingly disparate ideas.

**In Problem Solving and Conflict Resolution**

Let's face it. When the shit hits the fan at work and we've got unexpected problems to solve, we're often tempted to lock up and focus on the blame, repercussions, and grief we're going to feel from the higher-ups instead of focusing on solving the problem at hand. We experienced this firsthand in a crisis moment, which became a fantastic model for using Yes, And when things are looking pretty bleak.

One of our colleagues—to protect the various parties involved, we'll call him Jack—had just become board president for a high-profile cultural institution. Jack had been in the position for a total of two weeks when he received a call late on a Friday afternoon from the director. “It’s an emergency. We need the whole board to meet us downtown right now.” Once everyone arrived at the designated location, a private conference room at the company of one of the board members, the director spoke: “We have just discovered that a longtime employee of our organ-

ization, someone we have trusted as a colleague and a friend for many years, has been embezzling from the institution.” As the details emerged, Jack was just as shocked as everyone else. Not only had someone they all trusted and liked completely betrayed that trust, but this individual had also left the institution in financial tatters. “We're broke, and we have to figure out how we're going to tell people and how we're going to rebuild for the future, or else this institution will cease to exist,” said the director solemnly.

The next words Jack heard came from a rather well-known political consultant, a friend of the institution who had been called in to help. The mood in the room, which had been stunned silence, turned in a second when the consultant said, “There is a quote in my business that you learn to live by.” He paused, then added, “Never let a good crisis go to waste.”

Winston Churchill, the author of that quote, knew how to Yes, And.

The next three hours were an exercise in Yes, Anding their way through the crisis. The group needed to break the hard truth to its members. They debated how the message should be communicated and who would do it. Jack offered that, as the new board president, it should be his responsibility. The consultant added that since Jack was brand-new, he would be the perfect spokesperson in this crisis; he had been uninvolved in possible past transgressions inside the organization and would be able to engender trust and set a path moving forward. All communication would be transparent. Not only would Jack speak to the organization’s members, the group would also create ongoing opportunities for conversation and informational updates each week for members, media, and sponsors.

As difficult as those days were for Jack and the institution, they survived, and they were eventually able to rebuild the finan-
cial sustainability of the organization. Without leadership in Yes, And mode, it's doubtful that would ever have happened.

Just as it is useful in extreme situations, Yes And is useful in day-to-day decision making and problem solving with your coworkers. Often, problems repeat themselves, because the usual solutions we come up with aren’t solving anything. In those situations, it's helpful to be able to enlist your coworkers to create new options and new solutions to these old problems. To achieve this, everyone needs to come from a place of Yes, And instead of No.

We like to say that when problem solving, even a bad idea is just a bridge to a better idea. Yes, And allows everyone to contemplate potentially useful but incomplete ideas before they get shut down. Creating a positive climate in the face of pressure and crises gives groups the confidence that they can solve whatever problem emerges. It happens all the time in our group huddles and executive meetings at The Second City. Like any business, we face our share of problems, but we tend to go into those problems with a can-do spirit because we have seen time and again that we will support each other until the problem is solved.

Our company’s commitment to Yes Anding our way through mayhem was never more apparent than in the fall of 2009. The Great Recession was wreaking the same havoc on our company as it was on so many others across the country, and we were feeling intense pressure to come up with some relief for our financial challenges. While the theatre business in Chicago remained steady, out-of-town tour dates and the almighty corporate dollar were diminishing rapidly. With the immediate economic future quite uncertain, the company went into belt-tightening mode. We put a hold on investments in new products and productions, we decreased the size of our touring ensembles, and we put a freeze on any new spending.

While we were laughing/crying our way through our financial crunch, an increasingly bizarre political melodrama was playing out in our city and state. Governor Rod Blagojevich, serving his second term in office, was under investigation for attempting to “sell” the Illinois State Senate seat that had been vacated by President Barack Obama. Political horse-trading is one thing, but this investigation shone a light on the Blagojevich power structure that had all the comic riches of a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta. There was the powerful father-in-law who had been the Blagojevich puppet master, only to be spurned by the son-in-law when his services were no longer required; tapped phones revealed the governor's wife had a mouth like a sailor’s; and the governor himself, holed up in his Northwest Side home in Chicago, spent more time jogging and brushing his hair than doing any actual governing.

It was at The Second City holiday party—after a few glasses of holiday punch—that a few of us, including Kelly, remarked on how theatrical this scandal was becoming. Off-handedly, Kelly said, “We should make a rock opera of the whole thing,” which caught the ear of writer/performers Ed Furman and T.J. Shanoff, who were in conversation nearby. A few minutes later, Ed and TJ approached Kelly. “We figured out your rock opera,” TJ offered. Then Ed added, “It’s called Rod Blagojevich Superstar.”

Everyone laughed, and then stopped.

“You’re serious, right?” asked Kelly.

“As a heart attack,” said Ed.

But how were we going to mount a new production in the middle of a spending freeze?

Enter some serious Yes, And.

The next day, Kelly walked into Second City co-owner and executive producer Andrew Alexander’s office.

“You know how we aren’t supposed to add more projects or
spend more money?” Kelly started. “Well, we were talking at the party last night... what if we rolled out a mini rock opera about the whole Blagojevich scandal? It’s called *Rod Blagojevich Superstar*. The guys think they can write it pretty quickly.”

Andrew paused maybe five seconds. “Yep. Go do that.”

That was Yes, And number one.

Now we had to figure out the logistics of putting up a show on virtually no budget. “Can we find a free theatre space?”

“Yes, the e.t.c. space (our second stage in Chicago) is dark on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. We can play there.”

“How do we pay people with no money?”

“We can get the writers and directors to work for a cut of the show’s profits and we can call the actor’s union to see if they will let us pay a little less to the actors in exchange for giving them a cut as well.”

“This governor could go to jail any minute. How quickly can we get the show written and rehearsed?”

“Will two weeks work?”

Yes, And was in heavy rotation that day.

Ed and TJ were on board. We called the Actors’ Equity Association. The great thing about a project like this is that when you mention the title, the person on the other end of the phone immediately laughs. With relatively little fuss, Actors’ Equity provided Yes, And number four—saying that as long as the actors we used were in agreement, they would work with us to defer the larger fees associated with putting up a union show in exchange for a piece of the back end.

Some ideas were meant to happen. In our world, lightning strikes when the work you put onstage speaks directly to the zeitgeist. When we announced the show, the media pounced. By the time we were ready to put on our first preview performance, tickets for the entire run were sold out.

Walking into the theatre for that first preview, longtime local political reporter Carol Marin pointed out to us that an entire block of seats near the side of the stage was taken up by Blagojevich’s staff members.

Needless to say, the show was a hit. Months later, we transferred the production to the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier. Probably the ultimate Yes, And came when the disgraced governor himself joined us onstage for a performance. *Good Morning America* and FOX, MSNBC, and all the national networks covered the appearance. We created a second company that took the show on the road to downstate Illinois—home of the seat of Illinois government—where audiences howled at a show whose script was taken almost virtually word for word from the various press conferences and wiretap recordings that were flooding our news feeds every day as the scandal widened and grew. The show changed every night based on new information.

The show played for more than a year, and all the people who said Yes, And got to share in the economic success of a production that otherwise would never have happened.

Sometimes, just knowing that you can count on your colleagues for support makes all the difference in finding solutions to high-stakes problems.

**In Overcoming Objections**

In business, people spend a lot of time, money, and energy persuading each other to do stuff. Whether you’re a salesperson closing a lunker deal, a consultant recommending a sweeping outsourcing program, or a marketing director fighting internally for a bigger budget, you know how hard it can be to get the person on the other side of the desk to go along with you. In any high-stakes decision, people are bound to have objections. You want to do everything possible to avoid creating an adversarial
atmosphere. Keeping a Yes, And perspective in these situations can help you validate the legitimate concerns of the other party and keep the door open for common ground.

We’ve seen clients lose out on a deal or recommendation not because the facts weren’t on their side, but because they failed to create the environment of trust that is key to any new agreement or partnership. This was true for a renowned management consulting firm that brought Second City Communications in to help them address feedback they’d gotten from clients that suggested the firm came across as arrogant and condescending. Clients respected and valued the analysis and recommendations they got from the firm, but had a hard time separating that from the unpleasant interactions they had with the company’s consultants. As a consequence, the firm was missing out on additional business from its clients, who wanted their experience to be more collaborative and less confrontational.

First, we had to find a way to help the consultants see where they were going wrong without putting them on the defensive. No one likes to be told they’re arrogant. We were able to help the consulting firm in a couple of ways. For example, we created funny vignettes to satirize typical interactions from the client’s perspective, such as the human interrupter—a character we created who would not let any other individual finish a sentence or even express a full thought. That one got a particularly rousing response by showing how the consultants prides being right more than connecting with clients. Then we conducted a series of workshops to help the consultants improve their listening skills, with an emphasis on creating a more positive tone, even when they were conveying difficult news or making tough recommendations.

In this case, as in most, Yes, And was the central idea supporting our work with the client. It wasn’t just about teaching them to utter those words specifically, though. More important, we encouraged them to communicate generously and collaboratively, and to look for ways to reach agreement, which is ultimately what is needed to make anything happen in business.

For us at The Second City, innovation is part of the day-to-day ethic in the building—to improvise is to innovate. While some of our inventiveness comes from the people we hire, who are inherently creative, it’s actually more than that. We choose to align ourselves around a specific Yes, And philosophy that leads us to a consistently great creative product, an expanding business and an ever-growing pool of like-minded talent who lead us into even more invention.

**YES, AND, BEYOND THE OBVIOUS**

The previous examples show how Yes, And can work as a management tool, but Yes, And influences the business world in less overt ways, too. In fact, we’d argue that improv ideas like Yes, And are alive and well all around us, every day. We just don’t recognize them as such.

Don’t believe us?

Two examples of Yes, And operating in the tech world are Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, and Linux, the open-source operating system that has gained great traction in technology over the past couple decades.

Many of you probably have some experience with Wikipedia, especially if you have a teenager who is working on a term paper that is three days late. Content is user generated, meaning anyone can create, edit, or add to content that is already written, whether the topic is radio waves or Radiohead. As with Yes, And on the stage, Wikipedia operates on what we call an Explore and Heighten model, meaning something is offered, then
built upon, deepened, and sometimes even redirected. Explore and Heighten is the improvisation tenet that comes after Yes, And. Once you’ve learned how to build together, Explore and Heighten lets you build something of interest and weight. It’s great to begin with a positive, but the path to success invariably comes when we go deeper. And even though this approach can lead to crazy Wiki entries and dodgy term papers, the strength of the underlying idea—Yes, Anding something that was offered by someone else—is readily apparent.

Another good example is Linux, which (according to Wikipedia!) is a Unix-like operating system assembled under the model of free and open-source software development and distribution.⁶ Now, we don’t know Jack about software development, and we won’t try to fake it, but we see this as another under-the-radar example of Yes, And in action. Developers can use and modify existing code and make it do cool new things . . . and they have. Linux is now the leading OS for servers and mainframes, and more than 90 percent of the world’s fastest supercomputers run some version of Linux. And just think, all this started with the Linux kernel, an operating system first developed in 1991 by Linus Torvalds. Thank you, Linus, for your brilliant initiation. Thank you, developers all over the world, for Yes, Anding Linux and creating such a useful system. In essence, you could say that Linux is the most powerful, benevolent, and useful expression of Yes, And the world has ever seen. Take a bow, Linus and friends. You’re world-class improvisers and you didn’t even know it.

Yes, And as Ensemble Maker and Mistake Eraser

There are some things to keep in mind as you go about applying Yes, And to your daily work.

Think about it. If you are Yes, Anding your way through a brainstorm or conversation in a typical work or social environ-

ment, your role is to support the ideas of others as often as you initiate ideas of your own. That can be hard, even for someone who believes in the power of Yes, And. Supporting actors are hugely important in business, but they’re not as valued as they should be in a culture that favors the rock star CEO, the billionaire VC, the larger-than-life entrepreneur, and stars and celebrities in general. It’s funny, in the old days celebrity was reserved for Hollywood stars and sports heroes. Now, in our 24/7 media culture, everyone gets a chance at his or her 15 minutes, thanks to shows like Undercover Boss, Shark Tank, and all the business news shows on cable TV. Clearly, Andy Warhol was right.

In this world, it’s tempting to go it alone and to aspire to hero status. That’s what seems to be rewarded most visibly, especially in the movies. It’s harder to remember the value of affirming and building on the ideas of others. But it’s also far more practical. Yes, And builds better ensembles which, in turn, make stars of everyone on the stage and in the workplace, as we’ll explore further in the next chapter.

If you’ve ever struggled against inertia or you keep making false starts, take hope in this: Most grand ideas don’t start grand, and many of the best inventions come from happy accidents and thoughtful pivots off mistakes.

- The pacemaker was initially supposed to be a device that lowered body temperature through use of a radio frequency.
- The Slinky was supposed to be a machinery part for a battleship (and where would we be without the Slinky?)
- Fireworks, legend has it, were the result of a kitchen experiment gone wrong.
Great improvisers know how to roll with miscues and goof ups. We are the ultimate lemonade makers. Mistakes can cause stress in the moment, but they also provide inspiration to new thinking and new possibilities if you're coming from a Yes, And mind-set. We say, "Make accidents work." These examples show the awesome potential of that approach if you can get beyond your fear of failure.

**Yes, And Affirms and Builds**

The beauty of Yes, And lies in the incremental way it allows ensembles to build one big, solid idea out of a multitude of smaller ones. We have developed an axiom at The Second City to explain to new actors and clients how we want them to approach idea generation: Bring a brick, not a cathedral. Sometimes an improviser will fall in love with one fully formed idea before a scene has had a chance to develop and force that idea on his ensemble mates, even when it doesn't make sense. He'll "bring a cathedral" to the scene when all the group really needs is another brick. A cathedral stops all creative movement short; bricks allow the innovative process to flourish.

We do an exercise in the beginning levels of our Training Center to illustrate the power of this idea. It's called One-Word Story and it goes like this: People gather in circles, usually of 6 to 10, and are asked to tell an original story. Each person is allowed to contribute only one word at a time toward the overall narrative. This is tough for many people, especially creative people used to working in their own silos, because they tend to get inspired or they want to control where the story is going. But they can't, because they can add only the most logical next word in the story when it comes to their turn. If you are a big brain in the room, you want to be able to use that impressive vocabulary. Indeed, sometimes the most logical word is big, unusual, and polysyllabic (e.g., rhinoceros). But sometimes the only logical word to contribute is and. It's a great exercise for Type A personalities to remember that each of us, at some point, has to play a supporting part—we can't always be the star pupil. The exercise plays out over several minutes, and, as you might imagine, a story developed this way takes hilarious and unexpected twists and turns. Individual participants affirm and build in their unique way to a far more interesting story than they probably would have come up with on their own.

Some people really struggle with the exercise. Many of us have the tendency to want to bring the big idea—the fully built cathedral—ourselves, probably so we can get all the credit. During the One-Word Story, these people will engage in all sorts of inadvertent power plays and control grabs. They'll break the rules of the game by offering full phrases instead of single words to shape the story; they'll ignore the words that come before theirs and jam their own idea in whether or not it makes sense; they'll criticize other people's contributions when they don't like the direction the story is going in, and so on.

Sound familiar? It's not a stretch to see parallel behaviors in our own organizations. People get an idea and by fixating on it, fail to seek the contributions of others. Sometimes great ideas emerge from this approach, but, more often, those initial ideas never fulfill their potential. When this happens in our workshops, the first thing we do is get these individuals to play the game by the rules by appealing to their intellect, their vanity, and their desire to get things right. Then we reinforce the lesson that the game teaches: We are all part of this storytelling, and the most creative of us, the most lone wolf, can continue to make important contributions even if he or she concedes to play a smaller part in the process. It's a message leaders should share with their organizations more often.
What does the exercise teach us? First, that every contribution matters, even seemingly small ones. Too often, businesses give that idea only lip service. The ones that don’t, however—the ones that fully commit to Yes, And—see their rates of successful innovation soar. You can get a lot more done in a lot less time when your ensemble works together to build a cathedral instead of waiting around for one individual at a time to do it.

Second, because every contribution matters, everyone has to engage and contribute. They can’t opt out or tune out, because they’ll hold the overall group back if they do. This exercise makes it clear to everyone, no matter how bold and brash or quiet and reserved, that they need to bring their best contributions or the group will suffer.

Last, 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. In this exercise and in business, there is truth in the idea that “all of us are better than any of us.”

**WHAT YES, AND ISN’T**

Obviously, we’re true believers in Yes, And; you could even say that our entire 55-year history is a living, breathing example of Yes, And in action. Our growth has really been all about affirming and building upon what works. Where we started with a single stage, we’ve evolved into a multifaceted entertainment and education organization that has gone beyond its Chicago roots to stretch around the globe. It’s gotten to the point where we use Yes, And as a verb. We’ll Yes, And our coworkers’ ideas in meetings, and we’ll Yes, And our way into new real estate, business ventures, partnerships, and programs.

**It Isn’t a Substitute for No**

But even we know that there is a time and place for Yes, And. In our public and private workshops, there is the inevitable moment when an individual registers her overwhelming cynicism toward the practicality of instituting a Yes, And approach inside a business culture. “But seriously, not every idea is a good idea,” she offers. “How can we do our jobs in any sort of productive way if we’re mired in supporting bad ideas?”

We’d never suggest that people or companies should just say yes to every idea they come across. We’re in the comedy business, but even we have some limits. There are times when people have to be told no. There are even times when Yes, And can be manipulative and counterproductive.

**It Isn’t a Replacement for Discretion, Quality, or Even Common Sense**

Yes, And is simply the best way to approach the beginning stages of ideation. It’s a way to allow individuals and groups to bring their best selves and, in turn, their best ideas to the room.

Just as players toss a baseball around on the field before playing an actual game, brainstorming requires the same warm-up for the part of our brain that’s looking for a spark of creativity. Installing a Yes, And approach at the beginning of a creative session primes the pump for a conversation in motion.

You parse, dissect, and, as often as not, throw ideas away. But not until they have been heard.

**It Isn’t Always Used for Good**

There are plenty of people so mastered in the art of saying no that they disguise it as saying “Yes, And.” In the 1997 revue *Paradigm Lost*, Tina Fey and Scott Adsit created a scene that illustrates that particular manipulation perfectly. In her time at
The Second City, Tina was nothing if not a keen observer of gender bias and politics. In this particular scene, Tina and Scott play professors who are meeting for the first time in preparation for a collaborative project. Tina is grading papers as Scott enters:

**ADSKIT**  Student paper?
**FEY**  Yes.
**ADSKIT**  What's the subject?
**FEY**  Kevorkian.
**ADSKIT**  Oh, Kevorkian. Dr. Death. What a monster. He should be put away forever, don't you think?
**FEY**  Oh, you don't like Kevorkian, huh?
**ADSKIT**  Oh, horrible man. Murderer.

At this point, Scott's professor has clearly laid down the gauntlet. He morally objects to the work of Dr. Jack Kevorkian and physician-assisted suicide.

**FEY**  Well, I think the jury nullification of his cases indicates that there is a gray area there.
**ADSKIT**  Really?
**FEY**  There's an ethical question being posed that our current laws don't account for. I mean, have you seen these people he assists? Their bodies are ravaged by pain, but their minds are completely lucid.

In response to Scott's character, Tina clearly disagrees—she adopts the opposite position on the matter of Kevorkian. Now watch how Scott's professor manipulates Tina's character's position to become his own.

**ADSKIT**  Well, they're in terrible pain, obviously. But these people are at the end of their lives, they don't want some stranger coming in and sitting at their bedside and telling them whether they should live or die.
**FEY**  No, they want to make that decision themselves.
**ADSKIT**  Exactly. That's my point. They should be able to make that decision. If they want to die, they should be allowed to die. I'm just glad there's someone like Kevorkian who's willing to do it. I'm surprised he even went to trial.
**FEY**  So we actually agree?
**ADSKIT**  No. I support Kevorkian.

As a nod to the target of their satire, Tina and Scott titled this scene "Yes, And."

The enemies of Yes, And are not always the loudest no in the room. Often, they are saying yes with their mouths while saying no with their actions. Just to keep things honest, we at The Second City have been just as vulnerable to these phenomena as any those in other business. A quick survey of our producing team at The Second City provided these moments of anti-Yes, And behavior inside the hallowed halls of the mecca of improvisation:

- Getting to No by Numbers: If you're the top dog and your team comes to a consensus but it's not to your liking, just add more and more voices to the room until you get the no you were looking for.
- Yes, And I'm Overstepping My Role: Yes, And can be a wonderful refuge if you want to stick your nose into other departments when you were never invited to do so. Yes, And becomes a very useful tool to
insert yourself into an area in which you are both unskilled and unwanted by simply proclaiming that you are Yes, Anding.

- Yes, And... Go Hang Yourself: Sometimes you can see when people's actions are clearly going to bring them to the brink of disaster. If you don't like them, simply Yes, And their idea. That way, you can ruin them without ever being blamed for not being a team player.
- No, but Yes, And It's Mine: How about when someone says no emphatically to an idea, only to adopt the same idea and collect the accolades for their brilliant thinking.
- Yes, And They Will Forget They Ever Brought This Up: Sometimes you just say Yes, And to shut people up for the moment, fully knowing that they will eventually forget they brought up the idea in the first place. It's a great tactic to avoid saying no.
- The Power in Saying Neither No or Yes: Maintain your power by never taking a stand on anything. No one can say you made a bad decision when you never make any decision at all.

In sum, there will always be reasons to say no, just as there will be individuals whom we interact with in our work lives who present ongoing challenges to a Yes, And model. Kick off your brainstorming with a reminder of how you want to Yes, And; give teams an opportunity to practice their Yes, Anding; and use all the tools at your disposal—language, physical cues, humor—to model inclusivity and make clear you expect others to make room for ideas other than their own.

In our experience with corporate clients, no is too often the default answer, and it's offered reflexively as a way to avoid risk and the possibility of failure. That's understandable, but it also exacts a high cost in the form of ideas that are never offered, new approaches that are shut down before they have a chance, and teams that never reach their potential because people hold back. It may be hard actually to quantify the adverse impacts of a no culture, but it comes out in lots of ways, including high customer dissatisfaction and a loss of employee engagement in their work and their companies.

What we're really saying in the end is that no cannot be your default response if you want to create a work environment that is fast, innovative, supportive, and high functioning over time. Yes, And gives the world pace, energy, and forward momentum. And it gives the people who practice it the confidence that, come what may, in business or their personal lives, they can create something out of nothing and make something wonderful out of it.