Negotiation

Negotiation and Decision-Making Strategies That Deliver Results

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THE MIND OF THE NEGOTIATOR

What Negotiators Can Learn from Improv Comedy

The same three principles that help performers think on their feet can improve your outcomes at the table.

BY LAKSHMI BALACHANDRA AND MICHAEL WHEELER

YOU'RE ONSTAGE WITHOUT A SCRIPT, relying on your mind and wits to come up with lines and actions that advance the game. Should you trust your fellow players? It seems you have no choice. You have to say something and hope you achieve the desired reaction from your audience.

Such is the task of a negotiator—and a comedy improvisation performer. Like improv performers, great negotiators have a knack for being quick on their feet. They seize unexpected opportunities and respond swiftly to sudden threats. They sense instantly when they've stepped on someone's toes, and they have the grace to make just the right apology. For many of us, such moments of recognition come too late; only after we've left the meeting do we think of the perfect response.

The good news: Quickness can be learned, whether you have abundant natural talent or only a little. Comedic improvisers learn fast thinking by following certain rules. By mastering them, every performer has the chance of earning laughs.

Improv differs from negotiation in important respects, of course, so its rules and techniques can't be borrowed uncritically. Members of a comedy troupe have the common goal of entertaining an audience; they share norms about how to relate to one another. By contrast, negotiating parties may seek agreement but have conflicting ideas about what the outcome should be. And diverse backgrounds or experiences may lead negotiators to very different views of what's appropriate behavior and what's not. Yet these differences make improvisational skill all the more relevant to negotiation. After all, the less parties know about each other, the harder it is to script the process. Discovering how to engage and persuade the other side is a process of trial, error, and adjustment.

Three rules from improv comedy can help negotiators connect more effectively with their counterparts: 1) "Say 'yes, and…,' not 'yes, but…'"; 2) "Don't ask questions"; and 3) "Maintain eye contact." In this article, we adapt these principles to fit the bargaining table.

1. "Say 'yes, and…'"

A cardinal rule of improv comedy is acceptance, which includes not negating what your counterpart says or does. If someone begins a skit by shivering and saying, "Gosh, it's

continued on page 2

INSIDE

cold up here at the North Pole," it's bad form to respond, "What are you talking about? We're in the middle of the Sahara." Improv comics accept each other's "offers," even if they're unexpected or unwanted. Without the "yes, and…" norm, players would battle each other to define the scene and their relationship.

In negotiation, when the other side makes an unrealistic proposal, a firm no can be essential. But you'd often be wise to follow the "yes, and…" rule. Suppose a contractor interested in remodeling your office suite floats this proposal: 1) a floor plan that's tricky to implement but perfectly suited to your team's needs; 2) a price quote that's slightly higher than you'd like; 3) completion in 10 months rather than your desired six-month time frame. If you're not careful, you might immediately rattle off all the reasons why the third item is unworkable.

Before yielding to that negative impulse, consider where a "yes, and…" approach could take you. You might say, "I appreciate your willingness to accommodate our floor plan, which allows us to reciprocate on price. Now let's figure out how to meet your need for extra time without causing us big headaches." They may push back, but the "yes, and…" approach solidifies your progress and avoids painting your counterpart into a corner.

Saying "yes, and…" isn't easy in negotiation. When you're on the receiving end of an unworkable demand, you may feel your only choice is to cave in or fight back. If you're quick on your feet, however, you may identify an alternative: accepting a glass that's half full and then coaxing your counterpart to top it off.

PRACTICING TO BE SPONTANEOUS

In both improv and negotiation, confidence often comes from having fallback routines. Improv performers buy time by resorting to "physical business"—pouring an imaginary glass of beer, for example. Seasoned negotiators use similar gambits to slow down the clock and get their bearings:

- **Make others responsible for their words.** Negotiators can borrow this common therapeutic technique to buy time to think. Suppose you're selling a valuable antique desk. A potential buyer says to you, "That old desk is ratty and run-down. You can't possibly think it's worth much." Rather than escalating matters, you might merely repeat, "Ratty and run-down?" to mark your counterpart's outlandish statement.
- **Don't feel obliged to answer every question.** Shifting to another issue or making a process suggestion can give you time to reflect on an offer or demand. "Let's step back for a second," you might say, "and review what we've already agreed to."
- **Role-play before important negotiations.** Instead of merely asking a colleague to model the other side's expected behavior, ask him to throw in some surprises—an unexpected compliment, an insult or two. With a little practice, you'll be better prepared to improvise.

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About this publication

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About the Program on Negotiation

The Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School is a world-renowned interdisciplinary center focused on negotiation and conflict resolution. Founded in 1983, PON is a consortium of faculty, students, and associates at Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Tufts University, and other Boston-area schools. Drawing from numerous fields of study, including law, business, government, psychology, economics, anthropology, and education, PON connects rigorous research and scholarship with a deep understanding of practice.

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2. "Don't ask questions"

For improv performers, this second rule makes good sense. Imagine a show in which the comics can only ask questions:

Frick: "Aren't you feeling well?"
Frack: "Why do you ask?"
Frick: "Do you think I'm being nosy?"
Frack: "What gave you that idea?"

By this point, the audience would be stampeding for the exit. Nonstop questions stall scenes. Because questions rarely add new information, they don't give the performers the material they need to build a story and their relationship.

Though a cardinal rule of improv comedy, "Don't ask questions" might seem less applicable to negotiation. After all, without questions, how can you fathom the other side's underlying interests and strike an agreement that pleases you both? Yet consider that even good questions can have costs. For one thing, they put the ball in the other party's court. In improv, this is called "making the other guy do all the work." When one comic says, "What are we doing here?" someone else has to invent the setting, roles, and action.

The less parties know about each other, the harder it is to script the process.

In negotiation, asking "What do you propose?" cedes control to the other party, at least temporarily. That can be a disarming gesture if you're confident that your counterpart will respond with a realistic offer that lays a foundation for collaborative problem solving. If he instead makes an aggressive proposal, you've let him anchor the process on his desired outcome and launched a game of haggling.

The wrong kind of questions can also backfire if the other side feels you've put him on the spot. "Is that *really* your bottom line?" is unlikely to get this desired response: "Well, not really. I just wanted to see if I could dupe you into settling cheap."

When you do ask questions, keep them open-ended while offering a sense of direction. Better still, contribute to the conversation. Asking "What do we need to do to create more value?" can encourage fresh perspectives and ward off a knee-jerk no.

Studies suggest that some negotiators seldom ask questions, though probably for the wrong reason—the fear that inquiries will signal poor preparation and oblige them to answer potentially awkward queries. Such negotiators are often so wrapped up in their own sales pitch that they don't recognize that the other side probably has its own point of view.

The trick is finding the right balance between inquiry and advocacy. Questions can yield important information, but the act of questioning also creates an interpersonal dynamic that can be either positive or negative. Avoid the kind of cross-examination that wins minor debating points at the cost of creating an adversarial relationship.

3. "Maintain eye contact"

Here's another improv comedy rule that negotiators should observe in principle, if not literally. Eye contact is essential among performers, allowing them to send and receive physical cues that may be far more expressive than mere words. More fundamentally, it's how they display deep engagement. If a comic lets his gaze wander over the audience, he's playing to the audience, not his partner. Improv can succeed only if it's done together.

Maintaining eye contact isn't always possible or even advisable in negotiation. In certain cultures, looking a business associate straight in the eye is considered rude. Hierarchy also comes into play; those in high-power positions feel less need to engage subordinates by looking at them directly. And, of course, negotiations are increasingly conducted by telephone, fax, or e-mail—forums in which eye contact isn't an option.

All the more reason for negotiators to find other ways to stay connected. Negotiators and improv performers alike must be accomplished listeners. This means more than spouting the tired scripts of active listening, such as "If I hear you correctly…" or "What I think you're trying to say is…" Deep listening isn't just *acting* as if you've been paying attention; it is doing nothing but listening when your counterpart is speaking. That means resisting the impulse to formulate what you'll say next while she's still talking.

Improv comedians understand that the world is full of surprises—some pleasant, some not. Similarly, your negotiation counterparts may turn out to be more or less aggressive than you anticipated. Either way, be sure to respond to acceptable demands with "yes, and…" Avoid acting like a prosecutor when you ask questions. Finally, successful improvisation requires listening with full attention. ✧

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