



Tina Fey's Advice on Communication and Innovation

Author : Mike Smith

Categories : [Featured Posts](#), [Organizational Change](#), [Strategic Planning](#)

Date : June 17, 2011



Tina Fey's new book, [Bossypants](#), is smart and funny, which is not surprising. In the unlikely event she wants to pursue a different career, she has great potential as a management consultant.

In a section titled "The Rules of Improvisation That Will Change Your Life and Reduce Belly Fat," Fey describes four rules that are important for effective communication in any context. They apply just as much in the workplace as they do in an improvisational skit for *Saturday Night Live*.



1. ALWAYS AGREE AND SAY "YES"

"When you're improvising, this means you are required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we're improvising and I say, "Freeze, I have a gun," and you say, "That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me," our improvised scene has ground to a halt."

Fey recognizes that people aren't always going to agree, "[b]ut the Rule of Agreement reminds you to 'respect what your partner has created' and to at least start from an open-minded space." Substitute "colleague" for "partner" and you have a rule that will improve communication in any organization.

2. SAY "YES, AND"

The idea here is that you agree and then add something of your own. This means "don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile."

3. MAKE STATEMENTS

"This is a positive way of saying 'Don't ask questions all the time.'" "Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don't just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles. We've all worked with that person. That person is a drag." This reminds me of David Kelley's point about the organizational harm done by people who insist only on playing the Devil's Advocate.

4. THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, ONLY OPPORTUNITIES

"In improv there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world's greatest discoveries have been made by accident."

I was struck by how much Fey's advice aligns with a new book called [Little Bets](#), by Peter Sims. The book is about how innovators develop their ideas gradually through little bets rather than all at once. He outlines how improvisational techniques can "free us up from the risk aversion and emphasis on rigid procedures that predominate in so many workplaces."

Sims describes how Pixar uses those techniques in a concept they call plussing. "The point of plussing is to build upon and improve ideas without using judgmental language." "Instead of criticizing the sketch and saying 'no,' the director will build on the starting point by saying something like, 'I like Woody's eyes, and what if we . . . ' Again, notice the use of the word 'and' rather than a word that implies a judgment, such as 'but.'"

Effective communication makes everything else possible. The basic rules of improvisation offer a



guide for all of us. Listen actively. Encourage and respect the ideas of others. Contribute your own ideas. Following these rules will improve our communication, and it may also encourage us to take risks that will lead to greater innovation. I'm not making any claims about reducing belly fat, however.

I am glad that improving communication emerged as one of our strategic priorities, and I believe that the time we are spending with Peg Carlson will pay many dividends. Thank you for doing it.