The "Yes, And..." Rule

Unlocking
the MAGIC of
FACILITATION
11 Key Concepts
You Didn't Know
You Didn't Know

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The"Yes, And..." Rule

"Say yes, and you'll figure it out afterwards."

- Tina Fey

There is an indispensable rule of improv comedy that also works wonders with facilitation: the "Yes, And..." Rule. Any improviser you meet will know it, and many will explain it to you with glee. At this point, the rule is less well known in the facilitator world, and we hope to change that. Using the "Yes, And..." Rule (YAR!) in your facilitation allows multiple things to be true at the same time, it allows you to disagree without destroying someone's reality, and it encourages participants to add their voices to the learning.

The way it works is simple: if someone says something, you agree and build onto it. Or you can think of it in the negative: when someone says something, *you don't disagree*, but instead find ways to see their truth, and add yours to it.

In improv, this leads to more energetic, complex, and funny scenes. Imagine a scene with two improvisers, where one person wants it to be set in orbit, and the other person is imagining it will take place on a beach. The first improviser might say, "It sure is cold out here in SPACE!" The second improviser can say, "No, it's not, but it sure is hot on this BEACH." (Womp womp…) Or, they can YAR and say "Yeah! And I thought we were spending the day at beach, so I'm bummed I only packed my bikini. But good thing I have this SPF 100, considering we're FLYING DIRECTLY INTO THE SUN."

The YAR can be tricky in improv, where we often have a particular narrative in mind and don't see how easily we can add it on top of someone else's. And it can be even trickier in facilitation.

You have a goal, or an intended outcome for the time with your group, and to get to that goal, people need to say certain things. Improvisers only have the simple goal of making people laugh, though that might not be *too* different from our goals as facilitators, which we'll explain at the end of the chapter.

First, let's make sure we're on the same page with what this rule is, isn't, and why we love it so.

WHY NO "NO"?

The simplest reason is that "No" often shuts down dialogue. If it's important to engage the people you're working

with in dialogue, to open up the conversation for more exploration and more idea sharing, a "No" in the room might signal to everyone that they should keep silent.

Think of the contribution a participant makes to a discussion as children's artwork: it may be crude, incomplete, lacking in expertise, unrepresentative of reality, and sometimes downright offensive, *and* there is almost always something beautiful about it. If you tell a kid "This sucks. You suck," they'll never paint again, they'll never get better, and it's simply not true: just the fact that they are painting is courageous and beautiful. Saying "No" to a participant can feel like telling a kid their painting sucks.

That's not nice. Let's play nice with others.

If you want people to share their ideas with the group, you need to treat them with the same tenderness, understanding, and sensitivity that you'd treat a kid who shows you their (terrible, ugly, *is that racist? I think it's racist*) paintings: acknowledge the good you see, encourage them to keep working, and maybe share with them something you've been working on. The YAR is a super easy trick to do all of that in the moment.

How "No" looks in action

"No" shuts down someone's thought without inviting further feedback. Consider the following exchange:

Participant: Abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies.

Facilitator: No, that's incorrect. Comprehensive sex education is best for preventing unwanted teen pregnancies, and abstinence-only education has more negative

than positive effects[1].

In this instance, the participant is likely to either disengage or start arguing—neither of which is ideal. And we've forced this ultimatum before learning so much: we don't know why the participant believes what they believe (e.g., what source?); we don't know why it felt important to them to share (e.g., are they motivated to lower teen pregnancy rate, or are they more motivated to end comprehensive sex education; and in both cases, why?); and we don't know how other people in the room feel about what the participant said (e.g., is this participant the only one who believes this, or is the facilitator the only one who doesn't?).

Knowing all of the above information would allow the facilitator to connect with the participant and have a more productive conversation. They could enter the conversation through a point of connection, and then create a space where the more accurate/inclusive/sensitive information is learned. And even if they don't use the information in that moment, it will offer them more perspective in the future— it's one of the many moments in a training when the facilitator can learn from a participant.

If the facilitator's goal in this moment is to help the participant see that abstinence-only education is not an effective way to prevent teen pregnancies, then creating an argument, or pushing the person out of the discussion, won't likely do this. The facilitator can attempt to teach the partic-

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1 Something we can't do in a live discussion: cite our source. For those curious, many studies show that abstinence-only education does nothing to lower the rate of teen pregnancies or delay teenage sexual activity, and a federally-funded survey of these sex education policies has shown that they may make teens more resistant to using contraceptives when they do become sexually active: http://bit.ly/UTMaose

ipant, but facilitation works wonders to achieve learning in controversial situations, as we discussed before. And in this particular moment, YAR is the key to creating more learning, instead of more controversy.

WALK THE PLANK INTO YAR

A lot of concepts in this book don't feel natural at first. If a participant says something you're uncomfortable with, or that you don't think is right, it's tough to say the "Yes" part of the "Yes, And..." Rule. We get that, and we experience it on a regular basis, and even with all that discomfort and difficulty, we are still diehard "Yes, And..."-ers. Being a YARer comes with a set of expectations.

If someone presents a reality to you, you will validate that reality. If someone shares their opinion with you, you will validate their opinion. You'll validate their thoughts and beliefs—however ridiculous, offensive, or just plain *different* they may be from your own (or from "reality")—even if it just means you'll validate that they *have them*. You are willing to accept that someone else's worldview is different from yours, or from the "ideal" in the sense of the training goals, and that you can build on their reality instead of demolishing it.

This requires discomfort (both yours, and your participants'). It requires courage (you have to be willing to explore things you may not have wanted to, nor been prepared to, explore). It requires patience (it is often the least direct path to learning). It requires you to harness the power of subtle language (particularly the difference between "But" and "And"). And it requires trust (in the process of facilitation, because though indirect, the learning that's achieved will be

more powerful).

A kid will show you their painting of your house—where the trees are blue and the people in the house are yellow and the sky is green and you're not sure (but you're pretty sure) the house looks like it's on fire—and you'll say "Yes! That's a painting. And I love that you made it, even if I would have painted a version of our house that wasn't a dystopian hellscape burning down with us inside."

How "yes" looks in action

When you're in total disagreement with someone, starting with "Yes" creates a healthier dynamic. Think back to the previous chapter on the energetic difference between "But" and "And." When you say to someone, "Yes, and..." what you're also saying is "I hear you. I see what you're saying. Your voice is valued."

Even if what you say next is totally different from what they think, they'll at least feel heard. For facilitation to work, it is important for participants to know they are being heard. This enables discussions to foster more genuine curiosity, instead of predatory listening[2], where folks are just waiting for their turn to attack an idea that's put forth, instead of truly considering its merit.

The YAR also helps you model one of the prickliest parts of great facilitation, which we'll discuss in the last chapter

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2 Meg first heard the phrase "predatory listening" at a keynote given by Caprice Hollins at the Association of Experiential Educators International Conference in 2015. Caprice cited Peggy McIntosh as being the one who introduced her to the concept. It's a phrase to describe something a lot of us have experienced (or practiced) that so perfectly sums it up. We love the phrase so much we knew we had to include it in the book somewhere, and it fits well here (as well as it would have fit in so many other chapters).

of this book: it will enable participants not to see you as the sole expert who has all the answers, and instead recognize the knowledge and expertise we all bring with us to any setting.

Let's revisit the example from earlier, this time replacing the "No" with a "Yes, and…"

Participant: Abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies.

Facilitator: Yes, it totally makes sense that teaching kids to avoid having sex would lead to them not having unwanted pregnancies, and I had that same belief when I first started doing sex education. Are there any reasons you all can think of that might lead abstinence-only sex education students to having more unwanted pregnancies, instead of fewer?

The "And" we used here was one of past-tense agreement, which, in at least Sam's case, is totally honest. As a sex educator, he's able to draw on his first reactions to sex ed, one of which had him in agreement with that participant ("Of course encouraging kids not to have sex will lead to fewer unwanted pregnancies," said Younger Sam).

The second dimension of the "And" we have above is one that asks others, and even the first participant, to provide their own evidence to the alternative in a safe way. After hearing these perspectives (and, usually, waiting for a few keywords), the facilitator can then summarize with the same sentiment they led with in the "No" version of this example earlier. And the facilitator can do this in a way that doesn't shut down the first participant, but uses what the participant said as part of the learning—and best of all, the facilitator is doing it in a way that models growth, changes of perspec-

tives, and being willing to learn tough things ("Of course *only* encouraging kids to not have sex will lead to more unwanted pregnancies," says Right Now Sam).

It's not always a "Yes" and an "And"

The sentiment of the rule is more important than the specific language. You can YAR without ever uttering a "Yes," or an "And," and still have the same effect on the group.

To be as flexible as possible, let's replace the exact language with the two sentiments that we're hoping you'll evoke in your language: (1) I hear your perspective; and (2) I'd like to invite you to witness another perspective.

Instead of saying "*Yes, and…*" you might find yourself saying "*I hear what you're saying, and…*", or "*I appreciate you sharing that perspective. Would anyone like to add to it?*", or any other combination of sentiments 1 and 2 above. There are countless ways you can utilize the YAR; we want you to know that "Yes, And…" is just one of them.

You can likely already see how nifty a tool we have at our disposal with YAR. You might also be thinking, "Wait. Above, you said there were so many more things we could have learned by not saying 'No,' but the facilitator didn't really learn them in that example." Good catch, astute reader. (Five points to Gryffindor!) Now let's look at how digging for more information might have played out.

YAR for more Information

YARing can be an effective way to curiously dig for more information. Finding out where your participants are coming from, who else shares a belief, and what concepts or theories are at play supporting their beliefs are all important. The more information you have, the more you can connect

ideas together to facilitate learning.

Revisiting our initial scenario, let's YAR to find out a little more about what our participants are thinking:

Participant: Abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies.

Facilitator: I appreciate you sharing your perspective, and I bet there are other people who feel the same way. Would anyone else who believes that abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies care to share more about why they believe that?

In this deployment of the YAR, rather than putting it back on the participant who first shared the comment, we've used it to invite others into the discussion and to provide additional perspective on that comment. This lets others who agree also feel heard, and lets the first participant off the hook from feeling compelled to defend themselves (a feeling we're trying to avoid).

But sometimes you do want to know more about what that particular person is thinking. Maybe you suspect they are the only one that holds that perspective, or, more likely, the only one who may be willing to speak more to that perspective. Here's how that might look:

Participant: Abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies.

Facilitator: I appreciate you sharing your perspective, and there are a lot of possible reasons for that perspective to make sense. Can you tell me more about why you believe that abstinence-only sex education is the best way to prevent teen pregnancies?

It is important when digging for more information that

the person feels that you're genuinely curious about why the hold that belief of perspective. Without that genuine curiosity they may feel attacked or like you're about to use whatever they say against them. If you can't muster a genuine curiosity, we advise against this deployment of the YAR.

PICK THE CHOCOLATE OUT OF THEIR TRAIL MIX

The different examples we've covered so far have been when our participant has made a short statement we disagree with. If you've ever had who we in the biz sophistically label a "talker" in your training, you know that isn't always how it goes down. Often, participants will make less of a "statement" and more of a word-vomity, tangled-spaghetti rant of opinions, "facts," and/or fortune telling—sometimes all three merged together presented as "I'm just saying how things are."

When a participant makes a statement that is more expansive, we can have more to work with right off the bat, and that's where picking the chocolate out of their trail mix comes in.

When you are eating trail mix out of someone else's bowl, it's rude to pick out the good stuff (the chocolate, gummies, chunks of sugar, etc.) and leave all the peanuts and giant brown crunchy discs behind, sad and lonely. This is decidedly *not* rude in facilitation. If someone says a bunch of things, and most of them are anything but sweet, pick out and repeat the sweet part and leave everything else in the bowl.

To see this trick in action, imagine you're facilitating a training with staff of a residential school, many of whom have been there for a long time, and the school is thinking of changing their residential facilities from all being single-gendered to at least one all-gender hall. You're job is to help the

staff understand the change, and you get this comment:

> **Participant:** "You know, I have been here a long time, before many of you were even born, and I've seen a lot of changes, but this is one I just don't get. Our kids need to be safe, feel comfortable, be taken care of in their halls, in their homes, and I just don't think we can do that if we allow both sexes in the same residence halls, I just don't know if all this transgender business is a good idea."

You got a lot to work with here, lots of chocolate in that bowl. Let's get to picking.

> **Facilitator:** "Yes, I couldn't agree more on how important it is for you to for our kids to be safe, feel comfortable, and be taken care of; this place is their home. And this change will help the school be safer for transgender and gender non-conforming students, who, right now, are some of the most vulnerable and at risk."

Or, another pickable piece would be the two times this participant [bravely] expressed a lack of understanding:

> **Facilitator:** "I appreciate you sharing your concerns. I heard you say a couple times that you just don't understand this change, and I want to applaud you for essentially saying "I don't know." That's hard, and it's exactly why we're here having this conversation, so we can all figure this out together. What are some specific points you're struggling with?"

And the list goes on. YARing actually gets easier, not more difficult, when you have a really talkative participant. In a long rant, you don't have to affirm every point they make, and can instead pick out only the ones that will help the group accomplish the learning you're charged with.

PRACTICE MAKES (MORE) PERFECT

What is truly wonderful about this concept, and many concepts in this book, is that it is not just an in-facilitator-mode skill. Practice this at home! We have found it useful in all areas of life. Whenever you disagree with someone who is saying something, you can release your facilitator skills into the wild and practice your "yes, and...." When we practice in our daily lives, it makes those pressure situations all the easier to navigate when you've got a couple of good, yes-and-I-totally-disagree-with-you-and-I'm-going-to-leave-your-reality-intact-while-I-disagree moments.

It's easier to shut someone down if they misspeak. It's easier to say no. It's easy to tell someone why they were wrong for thinking something, and to curb "bad" thinking with quick corrections. But we're not here for easy. We're not here for "no." It's not easy to create a space where everyone truly feels like they can explore freely, able to be themselves and share their experiences, and know that they won't be shamed for what they're bringing to the table. But that is what facilitation is all about, about creating and holding that space for everyone to bring their voice to the table: and "yes, and..." will help you do just that.

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