

# OUR CULTURE COMMITMENTS



## Practicing Empathy & Curiosity Through Improv

with a focus on listening and building upon the ideas of others

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The roots of improvisational theatre are found in the games developed in the 1920s by Viola Spolin, a social worker helping immigrant children communicate with each other on Chicago's South Side. Viola's son, Paul Sills, was a co-founder of The Second City – home to comedic legends such as Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, Steve Carell and Keegan-Michael Key.

Great improvisers continually practice empathy and curiosity through simple improv games that focus on listening and building upon the ideas of others. But you don't have to get on stage to build practice these skills and have fun in your home or workplace.

### Two Easy Improv Games

While these games are a bit easier in-person, they can be played virtually with a little preparation.

If you have questions, or need any help, feel free to contact Jay Gerhart with the Innovation Engine at [Jay.Gerhart@AtriumHealth.org](mailto:Jay.Gerhart@AtriumHealth.org). If you had fun and found the games helpful, let him know!

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## YES, AND

Have the group split into pairs. If virtual, use breakout rooms or have each pair go one at a time. Don't tell the group the name of the game up front.

As facilitator, tell the group that they are going to plan a party or vacation. Any kind of party or vacation is fine; could be a birthday party, dinner party, work holiday party, family vacation, work retreat – take your pick.

- For the **first round** of the game, have one person start with a suggestion about the party. The second person will say **“Yes, But”** and add a suggestion. Have the pairs go back and forth for a couple of minutes, with each suggestion being preceded by **“Yes, But.”**
- **After the first round**, have the pairs plan a different party or vacation. The rules are the same – except each suggestion must be preceded by **“Yes, And.”**
- **After the second round**, here are some questions and talking points to help the group debrief and learn from the game:
  - How did you feel during each round? What was different?
  - If you observed the group as facilitator, comment on the different in energy and facial expressions that you witnessed.
  - When you're at home or at work, how do you feel when someone say **“Yes, But”** to you? (people often feel rejected, shut down, like they aren't being heard)
  - Saying **“Yes, And”** is not only about accepting what the other person said – it's about building upon what they said. We **affirm** and **contribute**, in order to **explore** and **heighten**.
  - Often, a **“Yes, But”** is just a No, with a bow tie!

**[Click here for a short video of the game if you want to see it in action.](#)**

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## ONE WORD STORY

If your group is more than 12-16 people, we suggest splitting into two groups. Have the group stand and form a circle if there is space. If you are around a conference table – stand up, don't sit around the table!

This one is a little bit harder to do virtually, but it's doable. **If you are using Zoom**, have each person change their screen name to add a number before their name – count off so everyone has a different number. **If you are using Teams** and can't change screen names, post a list in the chat, giving each person a number so the order is clear.

Ask the group to tell an original story, each contributing one word at a time (going around the circle or in numerical order by Zoom or Teams) No more than one word! This game will play out over several minutes, with the story usually taking funny and unexpected twists and turns. Depending on how much time you have, play the game 2 or 3 times.

It's helpful to give the group an idea for the story. Here are **two ways** to do that:

- Pick a single simple word, preferably a noun – dog, dragon, sports car, turtles
- It's even more fun to ask a question, which you would like answered in the form of a story. Feel free to make up your own, but here are some suggestions:
  - Why are women better drivers than men?
  - Why is the sky blue?
  - Why is there so much water on Earth?

Let the game play out – feel free to stop at a funny or natural point, and say, “And that's a great story!”

**Here are some questions and talking points to help the group debrief and learn from the game:**

- How did you feel playing the game?
- Did you find yourself thinking way ahead what you might say? Did that help?
- The most important thing to playing this game successful is to LISTEN. It's really hard to contribute productively if you don't hear what the person before you said.
- Sometimes the best contribution you can make is a word like “and,” “but,” or “or.” It's not always about the most clever or funny word – it's about keeping a good story moving and giving the rest of the team an opportunity to shine.
- There are no mistakes, only gifts.
- It doesn't help you to figure out what the story should be. When you come into a room to solve a problem with others, bring a brick, not a cathedral.

**Click here for an example of improvisers playing One Word Story.**