

IMPROV IMPROVES: How Games Can Grow Your Business

by Bri Kilroy • photo by Two Eagles Marcus



Author Mary Jane Pories with her new book, *Yes, And!*

Successful businesses are perceived to run sans distractions or conflict, but running a business isn't as easy as it looks. There's something that binds seemingly negative situations to opportunity, turning the unexpected into positivity with simply an attitude to make do with what's given. For those familiar with the quick-thinking comedy style exhibited by improv troupes like River City and Pop Scholars, you may think improvisation belongs in the theatre and not the office.

Rather than say "no" to the unplanned opportunities that present themselves, *Yes, And!* author Mary Jane Pories challenges us to not only say "yes," but to proceed with "and."

In her book, Pories explains that saying "yes" is a start and shows you're listening. Following with "and" allows you to consider other options that may not be obvious. Responding with both creates a comfortable atmosphere where ideas are welcome and people are respected.

At an early age, Pories was forced to practice what she now preaches. Born in Rochester, New York, her father's position in the Air Force had her moving a lot, putting the family's dwelling in various states and countries. "I feel like I learned to improvise as an Air Force brat because we moved every two years," recalls Pories. "So, I had to say 'yes' to reality and find ways to make friends and have fun. The little things."

Even Pories' story with religion shows her openness to new ideas and experiences. Growing up a Russian German Jew whose dad survived the holocaust with his sister and her grandparents, Pories' best friend was a Christian in Shaker Heights, Ohio. Enjoying Sunday conversation over brunch every week, Pories noticed the two faiths have a lot in common in terms of family, education and values.

"Even my father ended up going to a Methodist college," she laughs.

After four years of slowly merging the faiths together, Pories converted and attended Calvin College where she studied English and art. After graduating in 1978, she worked as a graphic designer for a small magazine but soon missed the energy of being around other people. Coming from a family of teachers, she returned to Calvin and got her masters in teaching.

Pories spent the next several years teaching at various high schools. It was at this time that mutual friends suggested she audition for the local improv troupe, River City Improv. "It sounded terrible!" says Pories who liked to rehearse and be prepared rather than, what she thought was "to jump out and do whatever." Pories went to that first rehearsal and learned that this "jump out and do whatever" is a rigorous discipline full of preparation, talent, quick-thinking, and self-awareness

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that shared many of the same principles and tools found in the visual arts.

Pories had previously done some stand-up and traditional theatre, but being unable to see herself matching the performers' clever intelligence and creative energy, she found more comfort observing from the sidelines. She then asked the leader of the theatre troupe how the actors were so quick on their feet; the leader explained how the actors agree to any suggestion and launch a story by adding to it, no matter how bizarre. Pories learned that to "yes, and" is the foundation of improvisation.

Giving her hardly a moment to process the new information, he pushed Pories onto the stage, putting

her face-to-face with an actor who was looking at her with open hands and an excited smile. "I'm standing there looking at this other person," recalls Pories. "My heart's pumping and the person in this scene is looking at me so excited like I'm going to do something amazing."

Not wanting to let the actor down, Pories knew she had to give improv a try, get over her fear and play. She learned that good improvisers allow themselves to be vulnerable. "It's really about gift giving," she says. "It's about making the other person look great and building off each other."

With that, Pories was instantly hooked and performed with River City for the next three years until auditioning for Second City, an improvisational comedy enterprise with a collection of alumni including Amy Poehler, Tina Fey and the late Joan Rivers.

Pories joined the mainstage cast, securing a membership with the Actor's Equity Association. She and her Second City cast worked tirelessly writing and performing seven shows and five improv sets per week with 22 hours of rehearsal.

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—MARY JANE PORIES, AUTHOR OF YES, AND!

"It's like getting a Ph.D in comedy and writing and human nature," says Pories. "You're immersed in that for two solid years and that's all you do every day."

Pories performed with Second City for the next two years before founding Fishladder Inc. in 1999. Knowing successful companies harness the power of improvisation in the workplace, Fishladder Inc. teaches companies to use the same tools to help their business grow. Pories' goal is to help others be intentional about how they face the unexpected and making improvisation more traditional so they can realize they are doing it and learn to do it better.

Pories remembers her most recent opportunity to use "yes, and" during a trip to Tanzania, a country in East Africa where the locals greet each other with "Jambo" and actually advise "Hakuna Matata." However, even with phrases she'd picked up from The Lion King, Pories' biggest challenge was not knowing the Swahili language.

Finding a way past the barriers, Pories and her travel partner put trust in their guide and the Tanzanian people, gaining intelligence and understanding based on experience and sharing rather than a common language. The trip presented plenty of opportunities to say "no" for Pories, whether it was trusting someone she'd never met or relying on someone to carry her when she got sick.

"Either you say 'No' to the experience or you say 'Yes, I will trust this person and build on it,'" says Pories.

Living the life of "yes, and" doesn't guarantee she always receives the same from others. When faced with another who is closed off, Pories is more interested in finding out the reasons why the blocking is happening, examining her original expectations and allowing the other person to be human. "In a workplace, it really means you stop pushing your agenda and instead pause and listen," she explains.

Embrace the opportunity to say "yes" and incorporate Yes, And! into your thought-changing, innovation-boosting reading list. The book, available as an e-book or in print at www.lulu.com, is filled with personal and relatable stories that Pories shares, exercises that will help you transform your life and work, and further details on what it means to "yes, and."

"It may take time and it may be messy," but Pories reminds us "the discoveries are worth it."



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