Tina Fey's Rules for Improv and Life

Rule #1. Agree

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. 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. But if I say, “Freeze, I have a gun!” and you say,
“The gun I gave you for Christmas?!” then we have started a scene because we have
AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun.

The Lesson: Respect What Your Partner has Created

Tina Fey obviously doesn’t think you’ll agree with everything you hear, but the real lesson
is in “respecting what your partner has created.” The benefit of “agreement” is an open
mind, an environment where ideas can thrive and innovation is welcome. We all know
what it’s like working with the guy who breaks rule #1. You’ve heard him, he’s the guy who
says, “No, it won’t work,” “That’s impossible,” “Nope, we can’t do that.” Not so much fun
working with them, is it?

Rule #2. Not Only Say Yes...Say Yes And

The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed
to agree and then add something of your own. If I start a scene with “I can’t believe it’s
so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” we’re kind of at a standstill. But if I say, “I
can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “What did you expect? We’re in hell.” Or if
I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “Yes, this can’t be good for the wax
figures.” Or if I say, “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we
shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we’re getting somewhere.

The Lesson: Contribute Something

When Tina Fey says, “Say yes and” it means to contribute. Don’t be that guy in the group
who has nothing to add to the conversation. Take what your team has created and add
something to it.

Rule #3. Make Statements

This is a positive way of saying “Don’t ask questions all the time.” If we’re in a scene
and I say, “Who are you? Where are we? What are we doing here? What’s in that box?”
I’m putting pressure on you to come up with all the answers.
Lesson: Don’t Ask Questions All the Time

Statements are about confidence. Asking nothing but questions is draining. It’s excluding yourself from being part of the solution and building obstacles instead of bridges.

Rule #4. There Are No Mistakes...Only Opportunities

If I start a scene as what I think is very clearly a cop riding a bicycle, but you think I am a hamster in a hamster wheel, guess what? Now I’m a hamster in a hamster wheel. I’m not going to stop everything to explain that it was really supposed to be a bike. Who knows? Maybe I’ll end up being a police hamster who’s been put on “hamster wheel” duty because I’m “too much of a loose cannon” in the field. In improv there are no mistakes, only beautiful happy accidents. And many of the world’s greatest discoveries have been by accident. I mean, look at the Reese’s Peanut Butter Cup, or Botox.

Lesson: Stay Positive, Learn to Adapt

If you do work of any meaning, mistakes are going to happen. Imagine the difference one simple change in attitude like this can make on having a positive classroom environment. Just like improv, not every project will go as planned. You can take the amateur approach; stop the scene, destroy the momentum, and start over. Or you can be a pro; adapt to the change, make it your own, and do something greater.

In Drama, it pays to have the qualities of an improvisationist...