# Leading Academic Groups With 'Yes, And'

Instituting the first rule of improvisation can set the stage for not only a more positive work culture but also important social change, write Michael Paul Nelson and Thomas H. DeLuca.

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We all interact with negative colleagues, people whose first reaction to a proposal or idea is to say no or something equally deflating and pessimistic. No, always followed by a reason: already been done, not necessary, not important, lack of funding and so forth. Sometimes negativity appears as a falsely affirmative response that starts with "Yes, but" or "Interesting, but," leading to a deflating environment.

While a certain amount of criticality makes academics good at what they do, such negativity can become a default. Normalizing or celebrating that default can create a larger programmatic climate of negativity, stifling meaningful programmatic change and growth.

In any academic setting, it is easy to experience negativity. Perhaps by disposition and certainly by training, we are professional naysayers. Our training teaches us to examine the work of others—and our work as well—constantly and critically. We should be able to flip the switch on that disposition and avoid introducing negativity into a departmental or research group meeting, but at times, the academy seems to have a propensity for hiring and even promoting individuals who consistently lead with negativity.

We know negativity can spill over into group settings. We all participate in groups that gain a reputation for closing doors, squashing ideas and people, and being exclusive. From serving on research review panels or promotion and tenure committee meetings, we know how easy it is for a single loud and negative voice to shift an otherwise positive perspective on a proposal, idea or tenure case. Unfortunately, the negativity can even be infectious or intoxicating to a group hungry to show their knowledge by tearing down another person's ideas or perspective. At times, having a single negative individual in a group is like having a single fly in an otherwise tasty bowl of soup.

We each lead academic programs and experience naysaying regularly in our professional lives. We have seen this negativity in groups we have led and participated in throughout our long academic careers. We try to remedy this negativity with our own generally positive attitudes. However,

it is often challenging to create an air of positivity in a group by the force of our generally upbeat personalities alone. Instead, we have found that it must be an explicit and intentional ground rule for interaction.

Earlier in our careers, we separately and distinctly encountered improvisational workshops led by professional actors. The actors offered a way to affirm our own otherwise accidental positive approaches to leadership and offered an intentional way to change the direction of group dynamics.

Believe it or not, improv, perhaps ironically, has rules. The first rule of improv is always to say "Yes, and …": "Wow, that's an ugly shirt you're wearing …" "Yes, and it smells bad, too." In improv, they teach you to affirm what someone says and build on to it. Such an approach to leadership has several clear advantages.

- **It is optimistic.** It opens the door for conversation and creativity, change and growth. It creates opportunities for risk taking and sharing openly and honestly. The first rule of improv response avoids creating immediate tension, defensiveness and the squelching of the imagination and forward progress. We suggest that the meaningful change we need to make in the academy in response to social justice issues, linked environmental crises and navigating a highly uncertain future requires new questions, new ways of thinking and new approaches. That, in turn, involves novelty, risk taking and radical imagination—all of which require the optimistic context we describe here.

- **It creates an opportunity.** It is forward-looking without committing you to something you cannot or do not want to do. (Think of the 2008 Jim Carrey movie, *Yes Man*.) "Yes, and …" is a starting point for a conversation, yet it is not a decision or a promise. If a proposal has limitations, they will become organically transparent as you have the "and" conversation.

Say a faculty member or graduate student comes to you with an exciting idea and proposal. You affirm this idea. In the ensuing discussion, you both might discover that such an idea needs funding or laboratory space that is not currently available, but you then come to ideas about how they could become available. Or you might discover that something like it already exists on campus and explore a partnership. The main point is that you didn't squash the person's idea. You allowed limitations or directions to flow naturally after you affirmed the idea and had the "and" conversation. You have also created a positive relationship with a faculty member or graduate student who will feel affirmed and willing to come to you again. Further, this affirmational approach can lead to new ideas for collaboration and outreach that can benefit both parties.

## Three Examples

Academic leaders who lead with no sometimes earn the nickname Dr. No. In our experience, those negative individuals will often refer to themselves as the "realist" or the "voice of reason" in the room. Eventually, inevitably, no one goes to them with new thoughts or ideas. As a result, stagnation ensues. The unit makes no forward progress and attains no positive identity.

In contrast, leaders who lead with "Yes, and ..." are sometimes derogatorily referred to as pleasers. People criticize them for trying to make everyone happy, as if something's wrong with making people happy. That is an unfair summation of positivity. Instead, the affirmative, followed by the additive conjunction, builds opportunity and trust, yielding the gift of abundance thinking. Here are a few examples.

1. An early-career researcher comes to a research group with an idea for a project. Instead of saying, "We've already done that" (even if you think we have), you might say, "Yes, that's a great idea, and your idea would be able to be situated within a larger body of work that's been done in this area. Let me point you to those resources." By affirming the research idea, you affirm the person ("Yes"), and by pointing to other work done in this area of research ("and ..."), you've created a context that will allow the researcher to discover for themselves where their work might fit or whether it is redundant. You did not simply shut the person down. You did not create negativity, defensiveness or dismissal. You were positive, supportive and affirming. Most likely, you have started to build trust in a budding relationship.

2. A leadership team wants to create a subcommittee for some specific purpose, but you have your doubts about the scope and effectiveness of their idea. Instead of saying, "I don't think that's going to work, and here's why," you could say, "Yes, that's a great idea, and you might begin by clearly defining your scope, purpose and what will constitute success with your subcommittee." If your doubts are well-founded, the group will discover that for themselves.

3. As the new leader of an already established group, you are now leading meetings that have been contentious in the past. Instead of allowing that contention and related negativity to persist, or believing you are somehow going to get to the bottom of the problem by enabling all to air their grievances before you, you could overtly institute the first rule of improv, where you require everyone to start with "Yes, and," forbidding negative openings. Since negativity is a hard habit to kick when someone opens with negativity, you can simply ask, "How can we rephrase that as a 'Yes, and'?" In our experience, this changes the whole dynamic of the meeting. Even if it does not solve the problem at hand, it will improve the discourse and set you on the path toward more productive meetings in the future.

We suspect you can also apply the first rule of improv in a broader sense—as a life strategy, as a coping mechanism for the dramatic changes coming our way. But starting with codifying it into how an academic group does business, making it an obligation to call out negativity and naysaying, seems a reasonable first step to creating a more positive academic culture.

For instance, amid the current and long-overdue social and racial reckoning our society is confronting, colleges and universities have committed themselves to various expressions of diversity, equity, inclusion and justice (DEIJ). We suggest that affirmation, positivity and "yes, and" thinking is critical for fostering our DEIJ goals. It seems complicated to imagine enhancing D, E, I or J by being Dr. Nos or naysayers. We suggest the enhancement of DEIJ is as much the creation of a culture as it is the institution of certain specific initiatives like finding funding for tuition waivers for underrepresented students. Without the former, the latter will be ultimately unsuccessful.

As environmental scholars, we are concerned about creating negative contexts. We need new ideas. We need to unlock our thinking to imagine a new future, a future worth wanting. This requires that we take chances and push boundaries in our work, in turn requiring trust and positivity and support.

In academe, we often tout our desire to address the big problems of the world. Many of our departments or colleges make such claims in our mission, vision and values statements. We want to address systemic racism, climate change, the global biodiversity crisis, human inequities and so on. It is difficult to believe that we will collectively make adequate progress on resolving some of the world's most pressing problems if we lead with the kind of negativity that often has a toehold in the academy. Negativity, naysaying and discouraging seem to solidify our current trajectory and guarantee a bleak outcome—or, at a minimum, a dull, uninspiring and unhappy workplace.

Going forward, the academy must avoid appointing negative, dismissive leaders; the rippling impacts and the squandered opportunities will be too significant a loss. Indeed, given our current social and environmental challenges, we cannot afford "no."

# Bio

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