THE RULES OF IMPROVISATION

**1. Don’t deny offers and ideas:** Denial is the primary reason negotiations get stalled. It causes you to have to regroup and try again, and it builds frustration in all parties including your audience.

**2. Say yes, and!:** Every negotiation is a communication process built on a story. To begin with, the players have to agree to the basic set-up; the who, what and where have to be developed so that the stage is properly set for the negotiation. After that, each idea should be met with “yes, and.” By saying “yes, and” we are not necessarily agreeing with the principles presented by our partners. We are simply developing the scene. First we accept the reality created by our partners, and then we add new information, so that we can ultimately determine what realistic options are available for settlement.

**3. Avoid questions:** Asking questions is a form of blocking. Questions force our negotiation partners to stop whatever they are doing and produce an answer. You put the burden of producing something “interesting” on your partner, which means you are no longer doing a scene together, but forcing that person to do more work than you are willing to do. On a more subtle basis, questions can be used to add information or tell your partner the direction to go.

**4. Be aware of status:** Status refers to pecking order. The person who is lower in status defers to the person who is higher in status. This is established partly by social position, e.g., boss and employee, but mainly by interaction. Either person can play low or high status. If you act in a way that says you are not to be messed with, you establish high status. If you act in a way that says you’d rather follow than lead, you establish low status. Either way, the other player must adjust to you. Status is established in every line and gesture and changes continuously, and different behaviors can be used to raise or lower another person’s status.

**5. Listen:** Pay close attention to everything that happens in the scene. What you hear is the raw material that goes into your story line. Once you have registered enough info about the people in your scene, you can lead folks back to your idea or agenda. The good standup comic asks the audience questions and riffs on their answers to lead into the next preplanned punch line.

**6. Spontaneity:**Trust your imagination without doubt or question; let a scene move forward without preconceptions or a fixed idea of where it should go.

**7. Make the other person (or people) look good:** You don’t get anywhere by putting the other person down or leaving them out to dry or making them feel stupid. The better you make your partner look, the better the scene is going to be, and, as a direct result, the better outcome you are going to achieve.

**8. Tell a story:** Storytelling is probably the easiest rule to remember but the hardest one to do. In a negotiation, you must take unrelated elements and bring them together to be interesting.

**9. Look beyond the words:** Become sensitive to reading nonverbal communication so you can ask clarifying questions and sense what the real subtext is. Words are tools to accomplish goals, and character goals are often quite different from the dialogue spoken. **10. Don’t waffle:**Some people like to babble in the hope an idea will pop into their heads. Waffling is a way of postponing making a constructive offer when you lack an idea. **11. Don’t try to be funny:** Humor will naturally come out of a scene without any effort.

**12. Make the active choice:**Improvisational negotiation is about the doing. People are drawn to action. When there is the opportunity to do something (show rather than tell) always go for the active choice.

**13. Enter and exit with purpose:** Entering, exiting and staying put should have a reason, be justified. Don’t just say “Ok, bye” and walk out of a scene. Give a reason. Unjustified exits tend to be a problem.

**14. Create a game within a scene:** Every scene is like a skit and involves a game between the participants. In the famous Monty Python “argument” scene, the characters play a game in which everything that is said is denied, which becomes the agreed upon behavior of the players.

**15. Allow ideas to form in the progress of the scene:** Do not go into a scene with all of the beats worked out. Allow time for new ideas to arise. Do not panic when things do not happen when you want them to happen.

**16. Be courageous:** If we do the same thing the same way every time, it gets old. Try something new! If it fails; it fails. But people will remember that you tried. And every other person here has failed at something as well. So, they’ll understand.