

Improv-ing work culture: What conservation communicators can learn from improv

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What do conservation and improv have in common? Communication. At the core of both practices is the goal of connecting with wider audiences. James Wasilewski, founder of *HaHa to Aha*, a traveling improv organization for professional development, brought his workshop to the 2024 ACI conference to teach conservation communicators about improving their work with the help of an improv mindset.

After breaking the ice, Wasilewski led ACI attendees through various improv exercises, including a thrilling conference-wide tournament of rock-paper-scissors. Under his instruction, there were no “losers” in the game; rather, each attendee that was knocked out of the tournament became a cheerleader for their round’s winner, until the whole room erupted with the same decibel of laughter and shouts as a football stadium.

As if that wasn’t enough excitement, Wasilewski’s final exercise for attendees brought them even more out of their comfort zones. They faced the hypothetical scenario of an overzealous colleague’s statement of a new idea: “We’re going to plan a project!” Attendees engaged in three rounds of project planning, starting each sentence with three different sets of words: “no, and,” “yes, but,” and “yes, and.”

We’re going to plan a project. The projects that weren’t planned in the first round hinged on a series of rejections: *No, and you’re forgetting about the budget decrease.* The half-baked projects that never came to full fruition were devalued: *Yes, but we don’t have the resources.* The final round of enthusiasm brought about the most detail-oriented projects that made use of each group member’s skillset: *Yes, and we will accomplish our shared goal with everyone’s expertise!*

After the exercises, Wasilewski provided analyses of the open communication attendees had shared with one another throughout the workshop session that they could infuse into their work:

- **Suspend your judgment.** Everyone’s ideas are valid, regardless of the obstacles that might be found in the implementation phase. Allowing room for others to speak their mind freely increases morale and promotes positive thinking.
- **Be present and serve the scene.** It’s okay for ideas and discussions to shift and change topics. Sometimes letting go of your own agenda allows for creativity and spontaneity to take charge.
- **Listen and build on the ideas you receive.** What progress can be made if there are no opponents to the cause? The beauty of “yes, and” is its relentless pursuit of moving forward with an idea.
- **Make everyone else look brilliant.** It may not be a part of your job description, but it’s every working person’s duty to be kind towards their coworkers. Going a step further and making sure that they feel supported in their goals—whether it’s new programming or a presentation to the board—supports a culture of care in which everyone looks good *and* feels good.

While many conservationists wouldn’t think about mixing improv into their work, Wasilewski’s workshop at the ACI conference proved that the combination can be an important step in further

promoting a culture of care at conservation agencies. The next time you're in a meeting, and an ideating coworker says, "I have an idea," take a deep breath and practice having an improv mindset—maybe your help in their brainstorming session will be the support your company needs to accomplish their conservation goals.