

Lessons From the Field: What Improv Teaches Us About Collaboration

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Abstract

In this article, we delve into the ways that our working relationships benefit from techniques derived from improvisational comedy. This is not as unusual as it might seem at first glance: major corporations have long used consultants from Second City, Upright Citizens Brigade, and other established improv centers to foster collaboration, improve communication, and increase resilience among staff. These techniques help us navigate the shifting landscape of library partnerships, as well as through changing roles and responsibilities, promotions, and reorganizations. We share our techniques through an immersive workshop, and offer a few of its take-away lessons here.

Introduction: This Is the Thing

When I was starting out...doing improvisational theatre...there was really only one rule I was taught about improv. That was, "yes-and." In this case, "yes-and" is a verb. To "yes-and." I yes-and, you yes-and, he, she or it yes-and.

-Stephen Colbert, *Commencement Address to Knox College*¹

“Develop Strategic Partnerships” may as well be a mandate at most institutions of higher education these days. But while it is something that librarians have always done — partnering with faculty, administrators, colleagues in the library, community stakeholders, and students — it would be disingenuous to claim that it’s ever been easy. Libraries are siloed organizations by their very nature; asking staff to support evolving models of scholarship is a challenge in its own right.

Interdisciplinary collaboration means that academic librarians must partner with a wide range of domains and expertise, beyond what passes for subject or area studies knowledge. Specifically, when we collaborate within the library, we must draw upon the functional and technological capacities of staff who are not always public facing. Some of us know how to

teach, others how to code. Failing to account for the interpersonal tools needed to bridge these domains simply creates additional barriers to collaboration.

Our own working relationships have benefitted immensely from the application of techniques from a seemingly unlikely source: improvisational comedy. While this was borne out of our own longstanding experiences with theatre, speech, and improv, the choice was not entirely arbitrary. In fact, the business world has long relied on outside consultants from Second City, Upright Citizens Brigade, and other established improv centers to lead workshops and retreats with the explicit aims of fostering collaboration, improving communication, and increasing resilience amongst staff.² We ourselves use these tools to navigate a shifting academic landscape where priorities are constantly being realigned. In this case, it is hardly a stretch to understand that improv can apply to situations where everything is changing, as there quite literally is no script at all.

But to back up for a moment, we need to address some misconceptions about what improv actually *is*. For one, improv is decidedly not stand-up comedy, nor is it stepping alone onto a stage to be blindsided by audience suggestions. When we suggest that librarians incorporate improvisational techniques into their workshops, teaching, and meetings we explicitly do not mean trying to crack jokes for an hour in front of a roomful of students!

While there is a time and a place for some of the techniques stand-up comics use, we take it as a given that improv and stand-up start from entirely different premises.³ Improv is at its heart, a collaborative exercise rather than a solo one. And like the best stand-up, it's not so much about "telling jokes" but more about forging connections — between characters, the audience, and the narrative threads. In stand-up, by contrast, the connection is a direct one between the comic and the audience, whereas in improv, the connection is between the players themselves. The laughs are secondary, and in fact matter a lot less than you might think.

Our primary takeaway from reading, classes, and experimentation with the form is that improv by its very nature cannot be a solo endeavor. Any single person cannot do improv alone. It depends on having, at minimum, a scene partner. In practice, this means that the improviser already has everything they need for support onstage with them. Props, scenery, costumes are all unnecessary as long as one has a supportive partner. Good improvisers do not leave their partners stranded, and in fact put them above all else, including the audience and their reactions.

We've found that the following suggestions from the *Almanac of Improvisation* can serve as foundational jumping-off points:

- *Make your partner look good.*
- *Accept what your partner does or says as a gift, not as a challenge.*
- *You have only what you have discovered in the improv. Try to stay out of your head and in the space.*
- *Know each other. Share an assumed past.*
- *Playful, direct, co-developed ideas will always outshine one person's alone.*
- *In improvisation, it is not a matter of setting out to "make things," but of letting the improvisation determine what it will become.⁴*

The Doing Is the Thing

And yes-anding means that when you go onstage to improvise a scene with no script, you have no idea what's going to happen, maybe with someone you've never met before...And because, by following each other's lead, neither of you are really in control. It's more of a mutual discovery than a solo adventure. What happens in a scene is often as much a surprise to you as it is to the audience.

-Stephen Colbert, *Commencement Address to Knox College*⁵

Early in 2015, we began developing a workshop for librarians that explored some of the fundamental themes of improvisation. This was borne out of our own backgrounds: speech and debate and sketch comedy and improvisation, respectively. We saw a need for this kind of workshop specifically based on our current job responsibilities as a liaison librarian and a digital initiatives librarian, especially as we were each being asked to negotiate the messy, shifting boundaries of digital scholarship and instruction with limited administrative guidance.

Our workshop is structured to explore the five thematic tenets outlined above through a combination of improv activities and group reflection. At the outset of the workshop we ask our participants to open up about what they see as barriers to collaboration within libraries, and tailor the semi-structured follow-up questions to those which emerge out of this initial discussion. Through the course of the workshop we encourage participants to expand upon how the emergent principles can be applied to broad concepts of collaboration and leadership. More specifically, we ask them to use the exercises and activities to foster a discussion that organically arises from the particular needs of the group and the people in the room.

All we require of participants is complete commitment to the practice itself — this means no live-tweeting, no hanging back, and no excuses. In return, we offer an empty room and the opportunity to explore issues without fear or judgment. Like any good improv scene, each workshop session has been unique unto itself. This means that wildly different activities, discussions, and even conclusions emerge from participants each time. As we continued to develop and conduct the workshop, our subsequent sessions were informed by the feedback of previous participants, though always tailored to the particular and immediate concerns of the individuals in the room with us. Overall, we have found that this workshop has given us a loose, working framework for connecting with librarians of all stripes — from teaching and learning staff to liaisons to directors to programmers.

Our driving motivation is to help our participants come to understand the ways that their own work in libraries can benefit from these techniques. Of course tension naturally exists insofar as librarianship is a profession driven by standardization and best practices, yet the nature of improv is to be intimate, specific to a unique set of circumstances and participants. The discussion will ultimately circle back to these tensions, and surface ways that we can use to address them productively. Furthermore, though improv principles are inherently flexible and the workshops reflect this mutability, we have found that five core themes emerged consistently from our explorations. These have the benefit of being directly applicable to the work we each do day-to-day, and are explored more fully below.

One: Listen, De-Center, and Check Your Ego at the Door

Being ‘clever’ wasn’t rewarded. It was about being in the moment and listening and not being afraid.

-Amy Poehler, *Yes Please*⁶

Like the mandate to collaborate, it seems easy enough to encourage workplace listening (especially active listening!) without any real indication of how this might play out in practice. And it is almost a truism to state that listening is important, whether in work, on-stage, or in one’s personal and professional relationships. In an improv setting, active listening requires dropping ego, abandoning the rush to judgement, being in the moment, and learning to recognize patterns. All of this sounds familiar enough, but how does it transfer to doing work in the library?

Members of the Upright Citizens Brigade tell the story of a performer who's so engrossed in trying to interject their favorite stock character into a scene that they completely miss the activity going on around them. Their scene partners are engaged in doing the work of improv — accepting, world-building, sharing focus — while they are waiting for the right moment to play to their own ego.⁷ To us, this sounds almost exactly like the kind of co-worker who has their “bit” that they trot out even when it's not appropriate for the situation. What is the best way to deal with that person, whether co-worker or scene participant?

While we all have a go-to comfort zone, active listening in improv requires that the participants do not simply repeat themselves without actually taking stock of their circumstances. There is a difference between talking *at* and talking *with*, especially if the subject has been covered before. You see this in improv as well: there are certain relationships (couples, parent-child, boss-employee) or situations (workplace, sporting event, first date, spaceship) that get trotted out very frequently, either as audience suggestions or from one of the players. The key to keeping these ideas fresh is to listen to the person across from you and fully participate without derailing. Commitment is key. If one player sets the scene and takes control of the command deck on a spaceship, then the next participant cannot deny that base reality by claiming no, the spaceship is really a robot factory, a call center, or a poultry farm, in order to score a cheap laugh.

Many of us within libraries pride ourselves on our listening skills, particularly those in public services positions. Skilled reference librarians have honed the ability to detect patterns in requests and research, to accept and absorb information immediately, and provide a set of resources for a researcher that is so thoughtful it seems like witchcraft to non-experts. Yet to flip the script, how many of us have heaved an internal sigh when approached by the student who already has what they need? Who has not heard the following plea: “I need three references for my assignment. I already did my assignment, so I just need the references and don't have to read the articles,” then flipped the monitor around and settled into the familiar script of the stock reference interview? Engaged listening requires a level of emotional commitment and abandonment of ego (“this undergrad is wasting my precious cat-viewing time”) that requires practice and skill to develop.

For librarians who are not public-facing, listening skills are deployed in the conference room more often than at the reference desk. Many of us bring an encyclopedia of domain expertise, and set approach the “way things must be done” to the room. Often, these frameworks and guidelines are essential to making progress and continuing the mission of the libraries — where would we be without subject headings? — but, they can also impede the de-centered, highly-focused listening required for truly interdisciplinary initiatives. We suggest that the next time you find yourself in a project or committee meeting, pay attention to what other people are putting on the table. Ask yourself if their contributions meaningfully move the conversation forward or are the workplace equivalent of a ‘stock character.’ Are they simply waiting for an opening so as to interject their own monologue — what we think of as the professional analogue of turning to the audience and telling a joke during a scene? More importantly, we ask you to apply this test to your own contributions as well. Listening in this focused way is essential for the next step in our workshop, which is building ensemble.

Two: Build Your Ensemble, Support Your Team

Improvisation is like the military. You leave no man behind. It's your job to make your partner look good and if you are afraid to look stupid you should probably go home.

- Amy Poehler, *Yes Please*⁸

As they listen without judgment, improv practitioners immediately accept ideas as the collective property of the group, not as belonging to certain individuals. This is in part because all players have equal stakes in the outcome of the scene, and so are all responsible for how it unfolds. In improv, it does not matter who originates a suggestion. Once the idea is put forward then it has to be accepted as part of the base reality. This is done to keep audience confusion to a minimum but also serves to keep the players honest. Trusting that your partners will help out is what permits improvisers to make bold choices. Put simply, when ego drops out of the equation then it becomes much easier to elevate the best ideas, regardless of where they come from.

In libraries, the stakes are obviously quite different than on-stage. Clearly, accepting all ideas unconditionally is untenable as a long-term strategy. Priorities have to be set, for one. Time and money are not infinite resources. Administrators and supervisors cannot

greenlight every single idea that gets put to them, no more than any regular staff member can accede to saying “yes” to piled-on responsibilities. More to the point, some individuals very clearly do have more power than others in the workplace. They have clout, status, position, and (crucially) *funding* to push their ideas forward.

An environment where *yes* is the default builds trust and ensemble, but it is more difficult to establish than you might think. For instance, it may mean letting go of pet projects, stock characters, or the preconceptions that accompany ego. Beginning from a place where agreement is unconditional allows everybody to contribute, not simply the same old voices. An environment like this demands that each participant listen as much as they talk, and that people who are normally silent contribute equally.

However, in our experience, working groups benefit when good ideas float to the top and are not subsequently attached to any one person. This runs counter to many prevailing ideas about what it means to be a leader or a good employee. When performance is tied to innovation, for instance, everyone wants to be the one to receive credit for their new and exciting ideas. But improv simply cannot work this way. Any one person’s idea becomes part of the environment that everybody else builds upon. It is through commitment, expansion, and follow-through that improvisers “give credit” to an idea. This represents a fundamental rupture from many of our ingrained work habits, and can be difficult to overcome without conscious and ongoing efforts.

For supervisors and managers, this is often especially challenging to negotiate when department budgets are subject to external perceptions of individual productivity and innovation within collaborative initiatives. However, we posit that in the long run, successful completion of innovative projects carries more weight than ineffectual idea-generation. Whether running a meeting or a division, encouraging and demonstrating a culture of affirmation, egalitarianism, and partnership is vital to accomplishing anything at all. With an ensemble of team members who are focused on trusting one another, we will think about ways that heightened communication can help us work towards common goals.

Three: Bring More than Yes

You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house. You wouldn't bring in your entire house and slap it on top of mine. Together, moment by moment, we build a scene.

- Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*⁹

A large part of our in-person workshop is about getting people comfortable with saying *yes* unconditionally, so that *yes* becomes more reflexive than *no*. Participants have told us that they find it incredibly freeing to be in an environment where agreement is the expectation. This means that they can throw out any wacky idea which occurs to them without fear of judgement or refusal. And hearing *yes* is a great place to start, but the work does not simply stop there. *Yes* as a tool for ensemble-building is undeniably powerful, but ultimately unsustainable in the workplace.

Before we move on, however, we should make one distinction clear. There are many ways of saying *yes*, and not all of them are supportive or advance ideas in a meaningful way. For one, *yes* can come burdened with what we refer to as stop words: *but, however, whatever, because*. These variations of *yes* can be destructive rather than constructive. For example, consider:

- “Yes, however/but...” — this *yes* is a *no* in disguise
- “Yes, because...” — this *yes* lets the speaker participate, but does not advance the idea
- “Yes, whatever...” — this *yes* is the calling card of groupthink
- “Yes, why?” - This *yes* makes the suggester do all the heavy lifting of justification, without any effort on behalf of the speaker

It is important that we differentiate these from one another, for they do not all function the same way, nor do they have the same effect on our work. To draw on an improvisational analogy, Halpern and her co-authors compare building an improv scene to that of building a house: step by step, one brick at a time. This means that every player is responsible for bringing something to the table and furthering the scene, not simply commenting on the action.

Improv *yes* is more than agreement, because agreement in and of itself has no forward momentum. Think back to what Stephen Colbert said about the importance of “yes, *and*...” where the *and* represents the next piece, the next brick in making the house.¹⁰ *Yes-and* is the mantra because it doesn't leave your team hanging with an idea. It moves the idea to the next

stage, and by building on, makes it better. Again, consensus is key in keeping the process moving forward, but even more crucial is commitment to making choices.

Many participants in our workshop characterize their workplaces, fairly or not, as places where *no* is commonly deployed explicitly and implicitly. This *no* may come from within the library, from the greater campus administration, from the community, or from boards or governments. Institutions can have extremely long memories, and as a result, past experiences can condition us to have a perpetual fear of failure. Similarly, the past is always near for those who have been in the same place for a while. Think of an idea you proposed that was met with “well, we tried that idea {x} years ago, but it didn’t work.” Perhaps several come to mind without stretching your memory. Rejection of ideas that may have been proposed years ago can still hinder current willingness to try something new. In this respect, institutional knowledge can be both a blessing and a curse. In these instances it seems altogether easier to bring up those stop words and continue on with business as usual.

In chronically negative environments, some individuals with influence may perpetuate *no* as a mechanism for self-preservation and promotion, ultimately at the expense of the organization. Halpern et al describe an evening when Joan Rivers shut down an improv scene in order to score a big laugh for herself at the expense of the scene’s reality, and so disrupted the audience as well as her scene partners. It is easy enough to draw parallels to any meeting where someone at the table used their “no” to make themselves look better at the expense of the group, or used it to send a chilling signal to others in the room.¹¹ *No* has tremendous power, especially in organizations where individuals themselves have little. Stop words are often rooted in fear or egotism, and other places of internal resistance. Words like this can do lasting harm to collaborative initiatives and morale.

For many supervisors, it may sound well and good to promote affirmation and mutual commitment over negation. But with a real budget and a real staff, neither of which can ever be large enough, putting this concept into practice is challenging. Conflict is not intrinsically about denial, in the sense we are using it here, for otherwise there would be no scenes about cops and robbers or couples having fights. Creating the space for an idea to develop into its best instantiation does more to make it possible to say yes. When a team member’s idea is now *everyone’s* idea, then everyone — manager, employee, colleague — must work to advance it together.

To give an example of this principle in action, imagine a scenario where a team member comes to their manager asking for a large sum to purchase a software suite. Now, the manager cannot simply rebuff the request outright if they want that person to feel like they can return with other ideas. Refusal once means that people will be too afraid to speak up, even when the ideas and stakes are not the same. By the same token, the manager cannot simply write the team member a blank check. However, if the manager listens to and accepts the base reality being offered (the need for a whizbang software suite), then the *yes-and* is a confirmation of the environment that everyone is operating in: “Yes, we need the whizbang software, and we can...try to get more information...sell the benefits...look for compromises in budget...and so on.” Now, the idea is actively developing with both manager and team member having a stake in that progress. The ultimate answer may still be that the initial request is too expensive, but the affirmative, collaborative approach to finding a solution does far more for solidarity and innovative thinking than an outright “no.”

Four: Learn to Speak a Different Language

Experienced performers learn that their dialog isn't about their activity. Instead, the lines should be saved for the relationship with the other player.

-Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*¹²

True collaboration is unpredictable, just as people are unpredictable. In improv, players must be ready to embrace any suggestions given by the audience, or the pieces of the scene offered up by their partners. Spontaneity is key, as is listening for opportunities to make a meaningful contribution rather than to interject a joke or a simple comment on the action. Players who are clearly engaged, and thus ready to run with an idea or embrace the unpredictability of improvisation are successful; those who want to get laughs, insert their stock characters, or draw focus for attention are not.

Working and managing in libraries brings many people to the table. Each of these individuals has something to valuable contribute, but often their knowledge is by its very nature narrow in scope. Different specialties have their own languages; speaking these can obscure common goals and objectives rather than elucidating them. Finding a point of common language and shared knowledge is difficult, but essential, given that the expertise

of the group is a very different thing from the knowledge of the individual. By the same token, there is a strong tendency to make assumptions about what “everyone knows” in our profession and beyond it.

Distributed expertise is absolutely vital to the accomplishment of shared goals in a library environment. In our workshop, we ask participants to collectively describe a simple concept that may be familiar to some people in the room, but about which nobody is an expert. Invariably, the descriptions take on a life of their own, as group members shift from individually thinking up the “right” keyword to say and instead work toward coherency in their definitions. In this activity, there is no objectively correct thing to say. Even more importantly, there is no way that any one individual can serve as the designated “expert” and do all the intellectual heavy lifting. One word can redirect the flow but it cannot truly dictate what will come next.

Only the group’s collective product matters, even if that result is unexpected or flat-out wrong. In working groups, we have often witnessed individuals deferring to the person who “knows everything”, who at the very least talks a good game, or speaks the loudest. This behavior can be problematic for many reasons. First, it assumes that a single person is an all-knowing expert. By giving the floor over to one person the group leaves little room for deviating from that individual’s preconceptions or set ideas. If others in the group cannot find a common language to express their own contributions, then we cease to be talking about collaboration at all.

It also gives cover to disengaged colleagues who would rather default to *yeah, whatever* over *yes, and*. Finally, it places a disproportionate amount of responsibility onto that “expert,” who may not be the all-knowing expert her colleagues think she is. By being singled out in this way, the final product will not be collaborative in the slightest. When collaborators develop a common language to enable different and equally valuable perspectives, the result is inevitably more creative and engaging than what is really one person’s project but with six names attached to it.

Five: Fearless Failure is the Source of Creation

If everyone justifies everyone else’s actions, there are no mistakes.

- Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy*¹³

Not everything works on a stage. Any improviser who has “died” while performing, and any librarian who has “bombed” a one shot have this in common. These are not actually failures — they’re opportunities. Chances to learn, to iterate, adapt, and continue forward. Failure only comes from shutting down and refusing to grow. Now, in an organization like a library, this can be a difficult thing to acknowledge. When a working group is tasked with making, doing, or fixing something, there is usually an administrative directive to go along with it, and the desire to see what was originally envisioned is extremely clear. Yet not every group succeeds in doing what they were set out to do. Administratively, this may be considered a failure, yet something intangible is often created in the process. We might call this team spirit, camaraderie, or even trust. Regardless of what the nomenclature might be, it is both ineffable and vital to the creation and maintenance of a successful group endeavor.

In our workshop, we build on this idea by having our participants do a couple of exercises that require them to co-create without having any prior knowledge about what they are about to do. Some are physical, others are narrative-driven. One in particular, called “Conducted Story” drives home the point that creating together can be a messy and complicated process. We ask our participants how to negotiate uncertainty and to incorporate the contributions of others into a greater narrative. In this activity, participants start with a fairy tale or other simple story, and are each asked to seamlessly transition the telling of this story from one person to the next, their participation being orchestrated by one person who serves as the “conductor.”

When we practiced this activity ourselves, one of the authors conflated “Little Red Riding Hood” with “Goldilocks,” while the other mashed together all three of the original *Star Wars* movies into one story. All this goes to show that we can never assume what “everyone knows,” professionally or otherwise. However, for the duration of this exercise, all our participants have to *accept* that Little Red Riding Hood is now shopping for a new mattress or that Ewoks are suddenly on the Death Star, rather than stopping the game and saying “Whoa, that’s not the way this story goes!” They should also avoid subtly editing the previous contribution and taking control of the story. Similarly, the original contributor cannot try to “walk back” something she identifies as not working within the scene. Doing so essentially turns a person’s best contribution into “The Mistake,” which thoroughly disengages the contributor. It destroys the scene for participants and those who are observing.

When a group is divorced from the concept of individual expertise and is instead committed to working from a place of shared knowledge, then there are no mistakes, only different contributions. “The Mistake” only surfaces when a participant denies the group’s shared reality. The parallel in library working groups might be the colleague who says, “Well, *that* section of the report was written by *Zeke*, and the rest of us didn’t have anything to do with it.” Poor Zeke is being set up as a sacrificial lamb for a perceived problem with a group product, and that colleague is deliberately undermining the end-product of the group to anyone who will listen to her. Instead, if the colleague had said, “Zeke suggested that idea, and it is our best recommendation for this problem, so we incorporated a refined version in the report,” Zeke’s contribution is thereby elevated to outside observers, and the work is reinforced as the best recommendation possible by the group tasked with creating a solution. Whether that recommendation meets some imaginary standard of “most correct” idea is irrelevant, if the group is working with the principles we outline above.

Conclusion: Why It Matters

Making connections is as easy as listening; remembering, and recycling information. When patterns in scenes are noticed and played they create continuity in the scene. A player must first listen to what his fellow players are saying, which he can't do if he's busy inventing jokes and trying to force the scene in one particular direction. The audience members make the connection for themselves, and respond much more enthusiastically than if they had just heard a punch line.

-Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson. *Truth in Comedy*¹⁴

So far, we have mainly focused on what improvisation means for each person in the organization, whether as an individual or part of a working team. As should be clear by now, improv does not support superstars: people who are happiest when the spotlight is only on them tend not to thrive in improv environments. That being said, sharing focus, listening intensely, and recognizing patterns are things all of us can do in our everyday work. In conclusion, we want to turn focus to the concept of audience and address it briefly.

Audience is where we find our impact, and can be broadly defined depending on the set of circumstances. It could be your immediate co-workers, your department, library administration, a roomful of students, a faculty senate meeting, or countless other configurations. Just as in performances, the boundaries between audiences and participants can be hard to define, and difficult to maintain. Indeed, it is not a stretch to think of the

comparison between a heckling audience member at a sketch comedy show and the interrupting faculty member seated at the back of the room during a library instruction session.

Improv audiences are delighted by *agreement*, first and foremost. They tend not to see “mistakes” — because as we discuss above, “mistakes” should be woven into the greater narrative seamlessly. If the ensemble is working together, then every mistake is really a new opportunity for commitment, a chance to reaffirm the fundamental principles of improv. As we see it, our audiences think of groups that operate in this way as being cohesive. They deliver creative proposals for ambitious projects and find solutions to challenging problems as a group, starting from a place of acceptance, support, and excitement.

This invites in more potential participants, much in the same way that success breeds success. A group with forward momentum, agreement, and positive reactions to their work is a successful one. Even more importantly, though, being the colleagues other people *want on their team* is vital to workplace success. When you think of the people you seek out as your own collaborators or those you assign to work together on a project, ask what kind of collaborators they are, in addition to what they know. Do they feel compelled to dominate and have the final word on every project? If so, do not expect others to enjoy co-creating with them. Much better to leave the know-it-all to work solo, and assemble teams of bright people who listen, share, and contribute in equal measure.

So here is our challenge to you. Consciously look for places to say *yes*, *and* to your colleagues, and reflect critically on what that means in your work life. Check out some of the books in the references below. Sign up for an improv workshop if your city or town offers them. Learn what it means to be in that completely ego-free space. And please, if you happen to be interested in our workshop, let us know. We challenge everyone equally, ask great questions, and still manage to have a lot of fun.

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