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ICFNE December Newsletter Article

Finding the *Yes* Within *No*

By

Daena Giardella

Let's face it, the holiday season is a continuous improvisation. It's a festive but stressful time, when heartfelt gatherings sometimes give way to unexpected emotional curveballs. Glossy ads, TV commercials, and radio jingles paint a picture of the way we should look and feel, while the true spirit of the season can be blurred amidst the obligations of buying and doing. Our best intentions for a joyous and meaningful experience often bump up against unresolved family dynamics. Holiday gatherings provide a collection of colorful characters who challenge our ability to be in the moment as we earnestly attempt to dodge potential psychodramas. These characters become our unexpected scene partners in "life theatre" enactments where everyone plays their old roles. The outcome might be a home for the holidays comedy, a soap opera melodrama, or a Greek tragedy. As we yearn for the third act to finally arrive at its denouement, many can be heard musing aloud: "If only the egg nog could be mixed with a sprinkle of emotional intelligence along with the nutmeg."

Coaching sessions take on a new dimension in this season. On top of the usual fears, blocks, and confusion, an added layer of feelings can often show up. For some clients this might present itself as depression, emotional upheaval, or anxiety. Others might experience difficulty focusing on goals, increased pessimism, or anger about where they are in their life. Some people feel lost, sad, distracted, or overwhelmed, while others turn to rebellion because they feel controlled by circumstances. As coaches, our job is to see beyond these various holiday reactions and emotional states by recognizing what they are: *Resistance*. One of the most common defenses, resistance is an inevitable stage in personal growth and creative process. I have noticed that the holiday season seems to send our resistance mechanisms into high gear.

When coaches are confronting the many manifestations of resistance, the skills of improvisational acting can be invaluable. Improvisations thrive when all of the players are saying "Yes" to the unexpected offers of each moment. Master improvisers instinctively take an idea and run with it -- without stopping to analyze why or where it might go or whether it's brilliant enough. But resistance continuously arises for both beginners and advanced improvisers. Why? Because we're human, and we humans are capable of digging in our heels even as we endeavor to make great strides forward. Resistance is a symptom of inner or outer conflict. Resistance can be passive (procrastination) or active (argumentativeness). When we resist, there is a heat produced by the friction of competing feelings and wants rubbing against each other. When coaching someone through this terrain, it's vital to remember that the sparks of our creativity, passion, and motivation are ignited in the heat of this friction.

Here is a tip that comes right out of the improviser's handbook: "Use it!"

When we're resisting, we're saying "No" to the offers of the present moment. Try entering and owning the "No," in order to find the hidden "Yes." There is always a "Yes" somewhere behind the resistance, and it's usually concealed in a vault labeled: "What I *Want*, But Don't Think I Can or Should Have." The improviser finds ways to use the resistance as a source of character information or scene ideas. For instance, if the actor feels resistant to being cast as the mother in a scene, the best approach is to incorporate the feelings of resistance into the creation of the character. Maybe she can be played as a woman who is ambivalent about motherhood. Or she might employ the resistance by making a character who is trying to avoid telling her graduating daughter that she has cancer. *The key is to look at the resistance as a doorway to truth.* Embrace what you're feeling, uncover the buried "Want," mine the powerhouse of energy that it contains, and make a choice that moves you

forward.

Recently, I had a client who was subtly resisting following up on some agreed upon actions goals that involved researching new career directions and calling old contacts. Each time we checked in, he had a different variation on the theme of: *"I didn't do it yet, because..."* I shared my perception of his pattern of resistance and asked him to write a stream of consciousness piece from the point of view of the inner character who didn't want to do the tasks. I asked him to fully enter the resistance, identify with its voice, and give it unfettered expression.

After 3 pages of justifications and reasons for saying "No" (that began as resistance to doing the exercise), John discovered a tiny "Yes" voice in his concealed "want vault." He wanted to get away from his family and friends for a weekend alone to go fishing at his cabin in Maine. He needed to sort out his thoughts in the quiet stillness of the lake. He felt he couldn't make steps toward his new career project until he cleared his mind and released the stress and disappointments of his present job. He wanted to unplug. Pure and simple, right? But he could not bring himself to admit this feeling because he felt it would be "selfish" to leave his wife at home with their two young children. He also felt it was "just an avoidance of the important goals" he should be tackling. So he fell back into a familiar passive resistance character he had watched his father play for years.

After a couple of conversations with me, John made a groundbreaking decision to approach his wife about the weekend trip and help her find assistance for the weekend. He came home from those three days at the cabin revitalized, focused, and ready to roll. He had revised his action goals to include some excellent new ideas, including a plan to have some conversations with past mentors and professors who had supported and guided him in the past. One of the professors was a prominent leader in the field John hoped to enter. It was heartening for him to realize that by embracing his resistance he had discovered his motivation again. His "No" held a secret key to the vault of his abandoned wants and dreams.

In improvisation, the scene is driven by the actor's discovery and pursuit of what the character wants. These "wants" are also called "intentions." In this season of hyper-drive gift giving when children and adults are madly making lists of everything they want, the irony is that many of us have lost our connection to what we truly want in life. Our deepest intentions and aspirations often end up in the back seat behind the immediate demands of work, children, money, family, or bursting schedule books. When people reach out for coaching, they are really stretching to touch those unrealized intentions. Our job is to help them reconnect with their dreams and life purpose so that they might create the life and work they envision.

As January approaches with its ritual of New Years Resolutions, I've noticed that people often feel two parallel sets of feelings: First, they feel excited and hopeful about making new resolutions to begin the year with clear commitments and goals. The list commences: Lose 20 pounds, exercise at least three times a week, buy a new house, get a new job, etc. Soon, the second set of feelings arises when they happen to discover last year's list tucked away in a journal. Deflation and defeat set in when they notice that many of the same items appeared on last year's list. *"Oh well, maybe this year will be different..."*

The strategic coaching opportunity is found in helping our clients explore their relationship to their intentions by uncovering the hidden resistance and beliefs that block the fulfillment of these wants. By inviting them to learn why they might be unconsciously resisting the accomplishment of their own goals, a deeper realization about self-sabotage may arise. There is a silver lining in the pressure of this time of year: As we make our champagne toasts, everyone's churning emotional material is usually bubbling to the surface and ready to be engaged by savvy allies who can reframe the apparent resistance by revealing the unexpected gifts of understanding it might hold. (I devoted an entire chapter to resistance in my book, *Changing Patterns: Discovering the Fabric of Your Creativity*, co-authored with Wren Ross.)

But perhaps the most important tip for coaches during this time of year is this: Remember to take care of *yourself* as you navigate through the twists and turns of your holidays! It's difficult to be effective in our improvisational dances with clients if we're caught up in a stew of our own unexamined resistance and emotional states. Experiment with taking a look at where themes of resistance play out in your life. Try engaging the energy of your resistance through free writes, painting, dancing, music, singing, or monologues. This is a perfect time of year to reflect upon our self-care habits and take the pulse on our creative process. A potent remedy for "helping-professional burnout" is the ongoing cultivation and expression of our creative spirit.

I will be offering a special workshop called *Coaching from the Moment* on Monday, January 7, from 3:30 -5:30pm at the ICFNE meeting. This is an experiential workshop for coaches who would like to expand and deepen their coaching skills by practicing improvisation exercises that will help you bring more immediacy, confidence, spontaneity, authenticity, imagination, and insight to your work. You'll also explore the stages and

cycles of your creative process as a vital source for your coaching impulses. And we'll surely be looking at how to work with resistance as well as the inner critic.

I hope to see you there!

Daena Giardella

This workshop is designed as an introductory experience for my upcoming one-day workshop, *The Improviser Coach*, which will be held in January or February 2008. For more info, contact daena@daenagiardella.com or visit <http://www.daenagiardella.com>

DAENA GIARDELLA is an actor, creativity coach, teacher and author. She is frequently invited to give keynote presentations as a motivational speaker and humorist. She has dual backgrounds in the performing arts as well as in organizational development and coaching. Daena has worked with many prominent companies as a communications consultant, media coach, and executive coach. She recently gave a leadership innovation seminar entitled, *Improvisation & Influence* at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and she led an advanced training in *Negotiation Improvisation* for the European Commission in Brussels. She also custom designs original performances to fit the themes and goals of conferences, annual meetings, and other events. Daena was featured as a creativity coach on *The Cheryl Richardson Life Makeover Show on Oxygen TV* and she also appeared on the PBS series *Discovering Psychology*. She was also co-founder of *TheraVision*, a video/role-play process for training family systems psychotherapists at the Kantor Family Institute. For over twenty-five years, she has taught hundreds of improvisational acting workshops for people from all walks of life, and her popular improvisational acting workshops have helped stimulate a thriving improvisation community in the Boston area. Daena also offers ongoing *Your Creative Process* workshops, which began as an outgrowth of her book *"Changing Patterns: Discovering the Fabric of Your Creativity"*, co-authored with Wren Ross.

Daena's numerous one-woman performances have garnered kudos and enthusiastic responses across the USA and abroad. Daena's new comedy-drama, called *"What Can I Say?"* explores the life of a harried radio talk show host who is dealing with her inner voices of censorship, a micro-managing boss, and her fear that she might be a closet misanthrope.

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