the ART of CHANGE

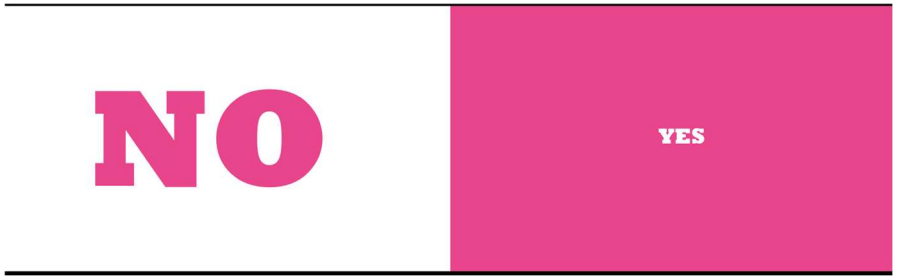
Michel Verheijden

My name is Michel Verheijden, and I'm an improvisational comedian. This means I step onto the stage every day without preparation and improvise a story on the spot, constantly responding to surprising suggestions from the audience and the most bizarre ideas from my fellow performers. And when you do that, like I have for some time, you learn a lot about dealing with change.

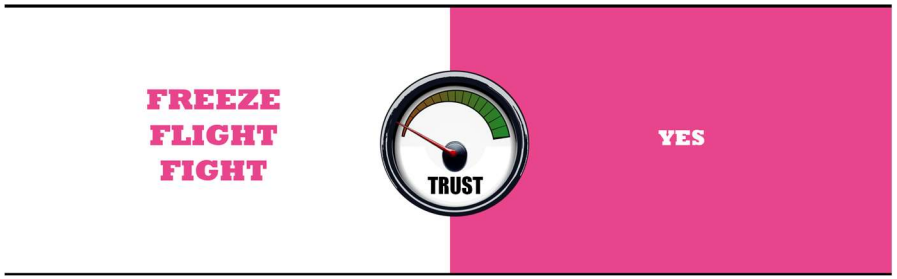
Since you also deal with a lot of change, I'd love to share with you what I've learned. What is the most challenging change you're facing right now?

My most important conclusion is that our brain doesn't like change—we are often our own biggest obstacle. While improvising, I discovered three instinctive reactions that significantly block change. And if you'd like to discover those for yourself, why not try improvising?

So, who wants to play a scene with me?
(*silence*)



No one? I was kind of hoping for that. This is exactly how we instinctively respond to change. When there's a lot of uncertainty and little trust everyone immediately shifts into a *No* mode with a freeze response—one of the three fear reactions our brain uses to seek certainty.



By instinctively fighting, fleeing, or freezing, you're indirectly saying *No* to every change, and in improvisation, the scene quickly falls apart. The same happens in your environment—these fear responses unconsciously block many desired changes. Instead of being a solution, they become a new problem.

The real question is: how do you stay in the *Yes* mode during change? How do you remain open to desired changes? How do you help your team shift into *Yes* mode? And how do you prevent your own behavior from unintentionally pushing your team into *No* mode?

I'll take you into my world and show you, through experience, how I deal with change.

1.

Think

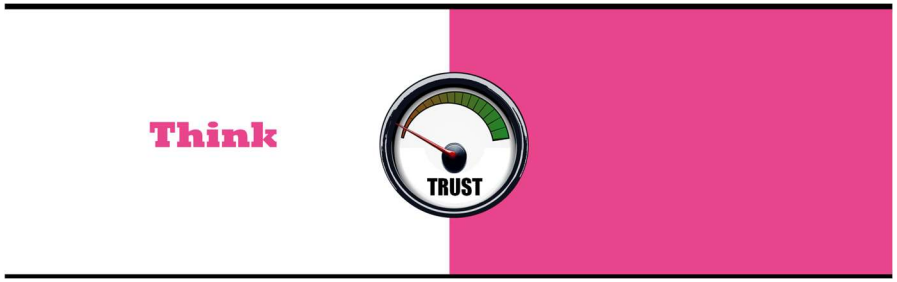
(for the sake of certainty)

At this point in the workshop, I ask for a volunteer to join me on stage to improvise a scene. I give (intentionally) a very brief explanation:
"I'll set up the scene, and you finish it."

Then, I deliberately begin setting up a very vague and unclear scene. The result is always the same—the volunteer, uncertain about what to do, stays on the sidelines, thinking and searching for clarity.

When I stop the scene—because the volunteer is clearly struggling to join in—I provide some context:
"What we've just seen is the first natural tendency I want to discuss: Thinking!"

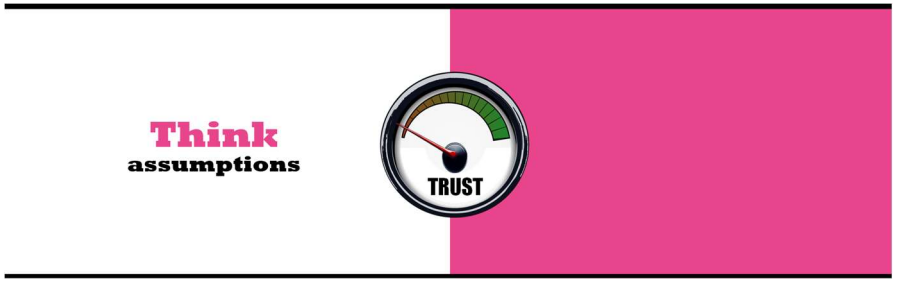
When we're faced with change that brings a lot of uncertainty, our natural response is to start thinking. We freeze for a moment and hold off on communicating until things become clearer. This is completely normal and very familiar to most people. It's a clear *freeze* response, where our brain is searching for certainty.



The first instinctive response to uncertainty is *thinking*. When faced with change, we don't immediately say *Yes*—we freeze for a moment, searching for some sense of certainty. And while that might seem like a smart move, it has its downsides.

In this demonstration, as long as the volunteer is searching for certainty, it creates more uncertainty for me, because I'm left alone on stage. And the lack of communication adds even more uncertainty. In this way, the *freeze* response unintentionally spreads fear and uncertainty to others.

And how does our brain handle this growing uncertainty? With assumptions.
What did you think I was doing?
(The audience responds with a variety of different answers about what they thought I was doing in the unclear scene.)



Wrong Assumptions
Everyone thought something different, showing how quickly our brains jump to incorrect assumptions. The more we think about the change, the more false assumptions arise.

Here's the first problem we need to address:
When change brings uncertainty and communication is lacking, false assumptions grow. These assumptions distort our view of the change. We don't see the objective reality—we see our assumptions about the change.

And that's a missed opportunity. Based on these assumptions, we often say *No* to changes that could actually be amazing opportunities.

Can you imagine how often you've felt resistance to a change that was mainly based on assumptions?

Nadenken is geen oplossing maar juist het probleem. De vraag is: hoe voorkom je bij elke verandering dit soort verkeerde aannames over wat de ander bedoelt? Wat had de vrijwilliger kunnen doen om aannames te voorkomen? Wat had ik in de opzet kunnen doen om aannames te voorkomen? (De zaal antwoord: communiceren en vragen stellen)

Communicate

(for the sake of change.)

When I asked who wanted to join me in a scene, I intentionally communicated too little, which caused everyone to shift into *No* mode. Similarly, when I gave the scene explanation, I deliberately communicated too little to ensure a *freeze* response from the volunteer. You can immediately see the effect of insufficient or unclear communication. When there is uncertainty, employees shift into *No* mode.

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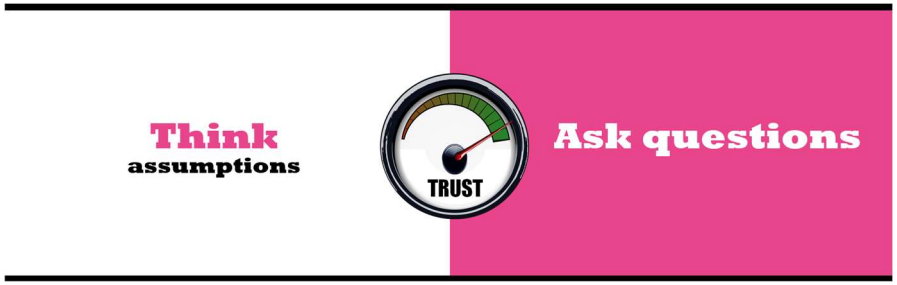


That's why I've trained myself to say everything I'm thinking during improvisation. This creates maximum openness, minimal ambiguity, and minimal assumptions. It fosters a safe environment, making it easier to move into *Yes* mode. Connection is, therefore, an essential prerequisite for development.

What can you do with this?

Communicate more during times of change—ensure maximum openness to prevent resistance caused by false assumptions within your team.

The first thing that comes to mind during change is usually questions. Ask these questions to avoid making incorrect assumptions. Don't get stuck in your head—stay curious! The most common question during change is usually: *Why?* Why was this decided? Ask that question.

Demonstration Part 2:

(At this point, I finish the scene with the volunteer, advising them to ask as many questions as possible. The scene always flows smoothly, and through the constant questioning, everything becomes suddenly very clear.)

And if you want to get your team on board with a change, answering the *why* question is essential to bringing everyone along. Name the *WHY* (to use Simon Sinek's terms). Only when everyone understands the deeper *why* behind a change will there be a willingness to embrace it.

Extra Session

(If desired, we can organize an additional session with your team or even with your entire organization for one hour to formulate a shared mission or Why. Nothing is more unifying than a collective mission. And when you create it together, you instantly gain buy-in.)

Exercise: one word at a time

An exercise for all participants where they pair up to improvise a story by taking turns saying one word at a time. The first sentence is:
I – am – on – a – deserted – island – and…
(This exercise lasts for 2 minutes.) Try to think as little as possible during this exercise.

During this exercise, we'll notice that everyone still ends up thinking, and the tendency to seek certainty through thinking proves to be quite persistent.

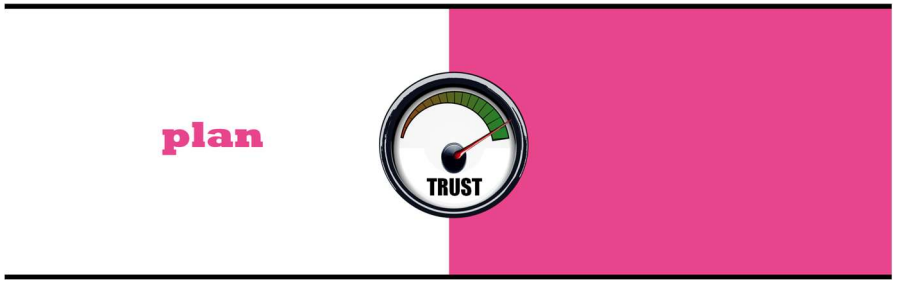
2.

PLAN

(for the sake of certainty)

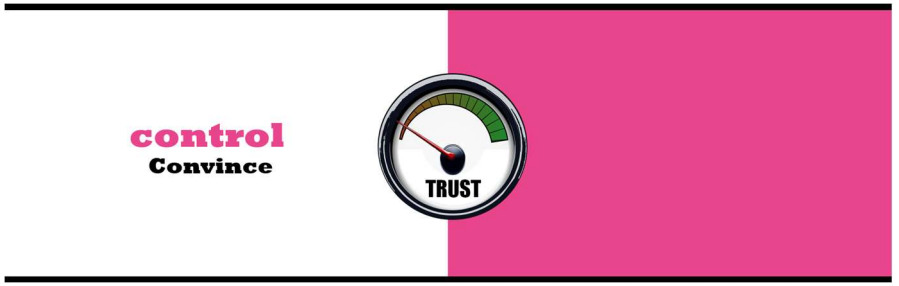
The second instinctive response to change, as we search for certainty, is holding onto a plan. A plan gives us something to rely on during change. In this exercise, it wasn't a formal plan, but rather your own idea.

Of course, it's great to have an idea, but the downside is that our brain always seeks safety, so it wants to cling to that secure idea. And that causes friction when the other person has their own idea.



Who felt in this exercise that the other person was getting in the way of your idea?

We crave certainty so much that we'll do almost anything for it. *Who ended up using two words at a time instead of just one? Who ended up with awkward sentences?* These are the real control freaks, who keep wanting to return to their own idea, even ignoring grammar.



When both of you hold onto your ideas at the same time, it clashes. If you try to convince the other person to adopt your idea, you're taking away their freedom to move. Freedom to move is the second essential condition for growth and development. A lack of freedom increases uncertainty and pushes the other person into *No* mode. And this is where many change processes go wrong.

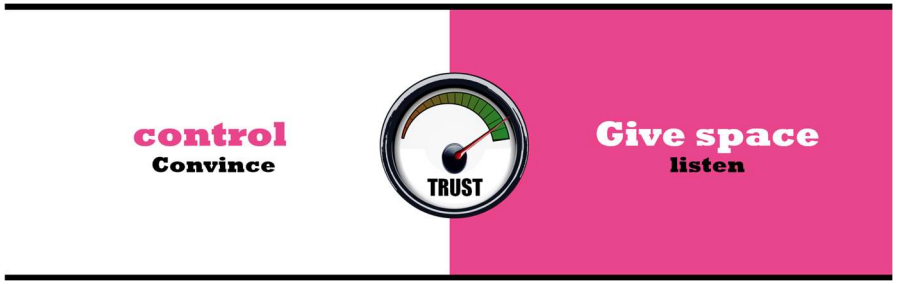
Furthermore, due to the brain's selective perception, tunnel vision develops around your own idea. We all see our own idea with the belief that it's the best one. But is it really? Maybe the other person's idea is much better, but during this exercise, you probably didn't even listen to that.

The harder you try to convince the other person to go along with your idea, the less safe it feels for them, and the more likely they are to cling to their own idea in response. Convincing each other is often what we do during change.

So how do you break free from the tunnel vision around your own plan? Because by holding onto your plan, you're not just limiting the other person's freedom, but also your own. You become rigid, and the plan becomes sacred.

Give space

(for the sake of change)



I've trained myself to always create space and focus on listening. This gives others the freedom they need and helps them shift into *Yes* mode. By listening, I also gain new inspiration and free myself from my own idea.

So, once again, be curious about the other person's idea.

What can you do with this?

You can apply this insight as well. We often think we can quickly get a team on board with a convincing plan. But when there's a lack of space for others to contribute, people go into *No* mode.

So, come up with a half-plan that leaves room for input from your team. With a half-plan, your team will add to your idea instead of attacking it. By involving them in the thinking process, you immediately create buy-in and enthusiasm.

Which guiding change plan triggers resistance for you? What space do you see to create plans together? What obstacles do you, as a leader, encounter when it comes to letting go of control?

Exercise: One word at a time with Listening
We'll do the same exercise of taking turns saying a word, but this time with a focus on listening. Instead of both starting with your own idea and trying to convince each other, you don't think ahead. You listen carefully to the other person's word and then add just one word, without knowing where it's going.

Only at the end of the sentence you've truly created together will you understand what you've said. This process feels different from the first exercise, where you were trying to convince each other.

Truly listening is very difficult as long as you bring your own beliefs into the conversation. Our brain selects and hears what it wants to hear. To demonstrate this, I have an exercise where you listen to a sound, and you'll discover that you hear what you want to hear. The implications of this exercise are far-reaching.

In all cases, you hear what you want to hear and believe what you want to believe. It's like a placebo: if you believe it works, it works. Similarly, if you believe that a change won't work, then it won't.

The only way for an employee to truly give change a chance is by letting go of their beliefs and becoming genuinely curious about the content of the change.

The quickest way for a manager to get their team on board is by letting go of part of the plan and giving the team space to contribute their ideas.

EXTRA SESSION

If desired, we can add an extra session where we, as a whole organization, search for "the best idea..." In two hours, we will gather the best ideas from employees to help move the organization forward.

3.

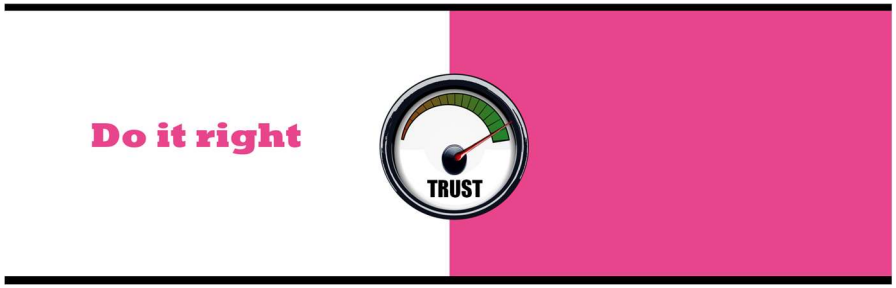
Do it right

(for the sake of certainty)

The third instinctive response is, after we've thought things through and made a plan, to execute the change as well as possible.

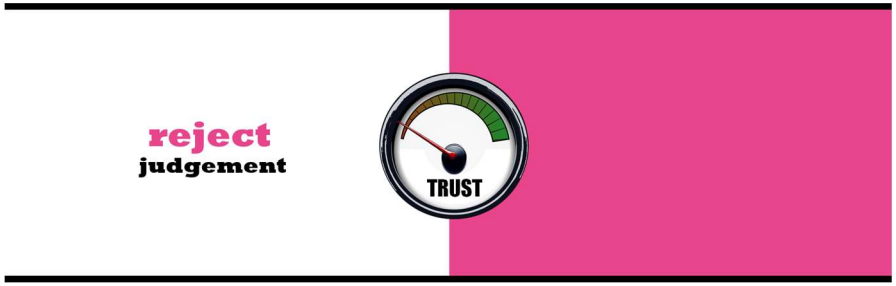
Who had a judgment about your partner's ideas or your own during the exercise? To survive, our brain judges constantly to avoid mistakes. It focuses primarily on identifying errors.

The more important you think it is that something goes well, the more focus you place on mistakes. For example, if you find having a tidy home very important, you'll notice every bit of mess.



The downside of this focus on mistakes is that you quickly come to a negative judgment, rejecting many of your ideas, which becomes a huge block to your creativity. And that's a shame, because creativity is essential for coming up with new solutions for change.

When you dismiss someone else's idea, it undermines their confidence and sense of competence, pushing them into the *No* mode. In many organizations, all the protocols and quality standards can be a massive hindrance to the development of new ideas.



The question is whether change truly gets a fair chance if you focus primarily on mistakes. Because when you focus on errors, you miss the opportunities.

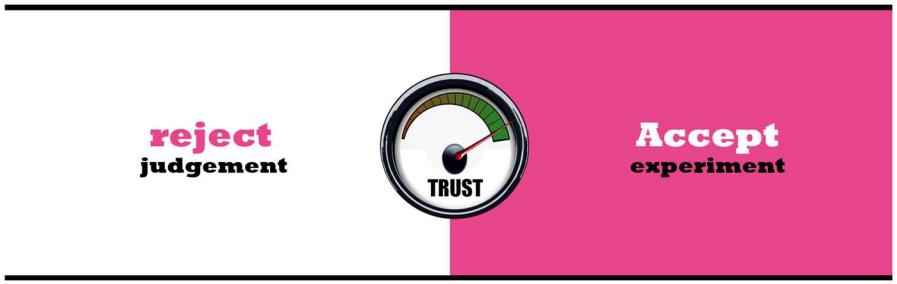
How do you prevent yourself from judging new changes too quickly?

Accept

(for the sake of change)

In improvisation, we solve this by doing the opposite: we don't judge, and we say yes to everything. Saying "no" is forbidden, which means there's no right or wrong. This creates a very safe environment for your scene partner, where they feel free to say anything. This gives a huge boost to their development.

By saying "Yes" immediately, you're essentially jumping into the unknown, and your brain no longer looks for objections. To survive, your brain starts searching for opportunities, triggering an incredible flow of ideas.



What can you do with this?

Turn your plan into an experiment. The benefit of an experiment is that it's allowed to fail, which lowers the threshold for saying "Yes." When you announce a change as an implementation, your team knows there's no turning back, and everyone becomes extra critical upfront.So, make it an experiment. With an experiment, you only judge afterward. The big advantage is that our brains tend to look back at the positive aspects and what we've learned, while, before the change, we mostly focus on what could go wrong.

Once people participate in the experiment, they jump into the unknown, and even the biggest critics on your team will start looking for ways to make the experiment a success. Companies like Google regularly allow their employees to experiment, which helps them develop quickly. So, be curious and try something new.

What experiment would you be willing to undertake? What experiences have you had with pilots? What obstacles do you see when it comes to conducting experiments?

EXTRA SESSION

If desired, we can add a session where we consciously focus on each other's 'strengths.' In the rush of daily tasks, the focus quickly shifts to putting out fires and solving problems, causing us to lose sight of opportunities. By intentionally exploring each other's strengths and practicing giving compliments, your team can shift into the Yes mode.

Exercise: Yes, Indeed

In this exercise, participants in pairs recall a made-up memory together.
The first person starts with a random memory: "Do you remember that evening at the bus stop?"
The second person replies, "Yes, indeed," and jumps into the unknown.
The second person then repeats the last thing the first person said: "Yes, indeed, that evening at the bus stop," which prevents overthinking and ensures they keep listening.
Next, the second person adds something: "When it rained so much."
The first person responds with: "Yes, indeed, when it rained so much," and adds something: "When the bus splashed us all completely wet..."

This exercise encourages deep listening, spontaneity, and collaboration without overthinking.

Summary:

1. Avoid limiting assumptions by overthinking and under-communicating: Ensure open communication and ask as many questions as possible. This strengthens trust. **Be curious!**
2. Avoid tunnel vision from rigid plans: Leave space for input and collaboration. This strengthens trust. **Be curious** about others' plans.
3. Avoid quick judgment due to fear of mistakes: Postpone your judgment and start experimenting. This sparks a flow of ideas and strengthens trust. **Be curious** and try something new for a change.

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