How Rejection Breeds Creativity

In 2006, Stefani Germanotta had hit a turning point in her career. She had quit a rigorous musical theatre program at an elite college to focus on her musical passion, and after a year of hard work and little income, had signed a deal with Def Jam records. But this promise wouldn’t last. Just three months after signing, Def Jam changed its mind about Stefani’s unusual style and released her from her contract.

Rejected, Stefani went back the drawing board, working in clubs and experimenting with new performers and new influences. These experiments produced a new sound that was drawing positive attention from critics and fans. Within a year, there was another offer; this one from Interscope Records. Nearly two years after her initial rejection, Stefani was finally able to introduce her sound and her self to the world – as Lady Gaga.

Rejection happens and, when it does, how we respond to it matters. Lady Gaga responded by experimenting with new influences and making her sound more unique. Just as Gaga experienced, recent research suggests that when most of us experience rejection, it can actually enhance our creativity, depending on how we respond to it.

In a series of experiments, researchers led by Sharon Kim of Johns Hopkins University sought to examine the impact of rejection on individuals’ creative output. In the first experiment, participants were given a series of personality questions and told they would be considered for participation in several group exercises in the future.

When the participants returned to the laboratory a week later, some of them were asked to complete a few tasks before joining their group (inclusion), others were told that none of the groups had chosen them and they would need to complete their tasks independently (rejection). The tasks in the experiment were a series of rapid associative tests (RAT), a common measurement of divergent thinking. A RAT question works by presenting three seemingly unrelated words (e.g. fish, mine, and rush) and asking participants to think of a single word that can be added to all three to create a meaningful term (e.g. gold; goldfish, gold mine, gold rush). The RAT question is a useful measurement because it requires both elements of creative thinking: novelty and usefulness.

When they calculated the results, the researchers found that “rejected” participants significantly outperformed those included in a group. But that wasn’t all the researchers found. Embedded in the personality questions was a measurement of how individualistic or collective participants viewed themselves (called independent or dependent self-concept). Those who had test results that labeled them as independent showed even greater gains in creativity after feeling rejection. Consider the difference between those who respond to rejection by sulking versus those who respond by rolling up their sleeves and thinking “I’ll show them.”

CREDITS

Thanks for your contributions. Future articles & photos can be sent to: wozzop@gmail.com by Thursday evenings. We love hearing from you!!

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The researchers wanted to know if this independent self-concept could be manipulated. Could people be put into a mindset that dealt with rejection in a way that enhanced their creative output? To answer this, they reran their experiment with a slight tweak. Instead of embedding the self-concept measurement in their personality questions and examining correlations afterward, participants’ self-concept was altered or “primed” through a simple activity designed to focus participants either on themselves or on how they fit into a larger group. Remarkably, even a task as small as circling the singular “I” or plural “we” pronouns in a story was enough to alter their self-concept and affect their response to rejection.

As they expected, participants primed with an independent self-concept solved significantly more RAT problems following rejection than those primed to think collectively. The results were conclusive: rejection breeds creativity, especially for those who consider themselves highly independent. In a final follow-up study, the researchers found the same trend using a different measurement of creativity.

Taken together, these experiments hold interesting implications for responding to rejection. While it is never a comfortable experience, the feelings of rejection can actually help us access our more creative selves. Free from the expectations of group norms, we can push the limits of novelty. Moreover, we can enhance that ability by changing the way we respond to rejection. Instead of dwelling too much on the pain of being turned down or turned aside, consider the freedom you now have to explore new possibilities and less mainstream options.

Being rejected is often a statement that you (or your ideas) are too far from the current mainstream to be considered safe or comfortable. This could actually be a good thing. You’re ahead of your time. While the group or client may not believe they need you right away, the world probably does. If you’re too far from the mainstream, you could be the one pushing progress forward.

Consider how Lady Gaga’s work was too unique for Def Jam, but was an international hit just two years later with Interscope. Decades before Gaga, George Bernard Shaw, the Nobel Prize winning writer, weighed in on the same phenomenon, saying “The reasonable man adapts himself to the conditions that surround him. The unreasonable man adapts surrounding conditions to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Author: David Burkus  
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CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS IN SWEDEN

It is dark, cold, and snowy in Sweden in December. The days are short and the nights long. Families begin the Christmas season by attending church on the first Sunday of Advent, which is the fourth Sunday before Christmas. The children count the days from the first day of December until Christmas with an Advent calendar. Each morning, they open a flap in the calendar’s Christmas scene to see the charming picture behind it.

But the Christmas festivities really begin on December 13 with St. Lucia’s Day, which celebrates the patron saint of light. The eldest daughter gets up before dawn and dresses as the “Queen of Light” in a long white dress. She wears a crown of leaves and lighted candles. Singing “Santa Lucia,” the Lucia Queen goes to every bedroom to serve coffee and treats to each member of the family. The younger children in the family help, too.

Many families go to the Christmas market in the old medieval section of Stockholm to buy handmade toys, ornaments, and candy. Gift-givers like to seal the package with sealing wax and write a special verse that will accompany the gift.

The whole family helps to select the Christmas tree just a day or two before Christmas. Then they use papier-mache apples, heart-shaped paper baskets filled with candies, gilded pinecones, small straw goats and pigs, little Swedish flags, glass ornaments, and small figures of gnomes wearing red hats to decorate the tree.

The delightful smells of gingerbread cookies in the shape of hearts, stars, or goats fill the house. Many families set out a sheaf of grain on a pole for hungry birds.

At the midday meal on Christmas Eve, families follow the tradition of “dipping in the kettle.” To remember a time when food was scarce in Sweden, the family eats bread dipped into a kettle of thin broth.

After this modest beginning, they enjoy a bountiful smorgasbord of lutefisk, which is dried fish, Christmas ham, boiled potatoes, pork sausage, herring salad, spiced breads, and many different kinds of sweets. It is said that whoever finds the almond in the special rice pudding will marry in the coming year.

After dinner, the Christmas tree lights are lit. Then the Jultomten, the tiny Christmas gnome, comes on a sleigh drawn by the Christmas goat, Julbokar. In some families, a friend or family member dresses up in a red robe and wears a long white beard to bring toys for the children. In other families, the Jultomten’s gifts are left beneath the tree. After the gifts are opened, the family dances around the tree singing a special song.

In the predawn darkness of Christmas Day, candles illuminate every window. Bells ring out, calling families to churches lit by candlelight. Back home again, the parents kindle a blaze in the fireplace to light the darkness. The following day is Second Day Christmas, a day of singing carols.

On January 5, the eve of Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, young boys dress up as the Wise Men and carry a lighted candle on a pole topped with a star. These boys go from house to house singing carols.

Then on St. Knut’s Day on January 13, there is one last Christmas party. The grown-ups pack away the Christmas decorations while the costumed children eat the last of the wrapped candies left on the tree. Then out goes the tree to the tune of the last song of Christmas.

No two countries celebrate Christmas exactly the same way. But while people around the world might have different traditions, Christmas is always observed with a sense of wonder and reverence, with friends and family gathered. That’s a Christmas tradition we all share.