

Handling Rejection - The Single Most Important Skill of Great Innovators



No matter how smart or creative you are, understanding how to handle and benefit from Rejection is the one skill that sets great innovators apart.

Innovation is often thought of strictly as an act of creativity. The more creative you are the more innovative you will be. Not so. We are all creative. Yes, some more so than others, but in my experience in working with hundreds of startups, small businesses, and large companies I've found that the determining factor in how innovative a person or a company is has little to do with how creative they are. If that was all that was needed innovation would be washing over everyone and every organization like a tsunami. It's not. Some people and companies are just better at it than others. The reason is that the overwhelming momentum in any organization – corporate, social, political, non-profit or otherwise – is always pushing against innovation and the disruption it causes to the existing metrics for success.

In short, innovation is distracting and unwelcome. The result is that innovators always encounter a mountain of rejection; their ideas are too outlandish and impractical within the current capabilities of the organization and the needs of the market, or the resources can't be taken from other profitable products, or customers aren't even asking for the innovation, or the idea is wrong for the current target market, and so many more rational well-considered reasons why the innovation just isn't right. When you consider the overwhelming odds against innovation you have to wonder how we ever innovate at all !

That's where I've seen one consistent skill that true innovators all share; it's a complete and almost unnatural ability to be impervious to rejection. I know what you're thinking, "Wait, that's not a skill, it's a personality trait!" You're right some people just aren't dissuaded by what everyone else thinks, but that doesn't mean it can't be learned as well. So, how do you learn to deal with rejection and to become impervious to it ? Start by recognizing what I call the Six Responses to Rejection - The things you need to be thinking about whenever you or an idea of yours is being rejected. Keep in mind that I'm not giving you carte blanche to do whatever you want. This isn't about marginalizing or being ignorant to the opinions of others, it's about dealing with the momentum that pushes innovation back into hiding.

To get past these issues, it's important to understand –

1. Rejection Isn't Personal

The first intuitive response to rejection is to take it personally. If I tell you I don't like you or your idea it's only natural that you are going to take that as an assault on you. Guess what ? It isn't. Rejection is an act of the " Rejecter " and most often it is based on their fears and constraints. It has little if anything to do with you. Knowing this, try your best to separate yourself from the rejection and instead focus on understanding the Rejecter's context and using it to better understand how you can move forward.

2. Rejection Almost Always Comes From A Place Of Fear

Most rejection is a response to a threat. We reject most what we fear most. There is nothing abnormal about this. New ideas can threaten everything from our bank accounts to our behaviors. It's not that people don't want to innovate, but they don't want to leave the predictability of the past behind when they do. Trying to address the fear rarely works. Instead try to paint a picture of how the future will be better, simpler, more valuable than the present.

3. Rejection Is Mostly Perception

The simple act of rejection is based on our perception of the new idea and its impact. Since there is little to go on other than the patterns of the past, we cling to these in defining the patterns of the future. But the future doesn't work that way. It doesn't care much for the patterns of the past. Changing perception only happens through experiencing the future not by talking about it.

4. Rejection Is An Opportunity To Learn

When we are rejected we have a clear choice, to retreat and go on the defensive or to learn something from it. But wait, didn't i say you have to be impervious to rejection? Yes, but impervious doesn't mean ignoring the rejection, it means hearing it and taking away from it what you need to understand about the challenges you're facing. Knowing why you're being rejected gives you the opportunity to better plan out how you'll get through.

5. Rejection Can Validate

When Akio Morita, Sony's co-founder and CEO, first introduced the Walkman the industry and consumers thought it was an absurd device. Why would anyone want to walk around with headphones on ? He even tried to partner with competitors to create a new product category - to no avail. What he realized was that the industry was ignoring an incredible market niche. It validated his vision of the opportunity and Sony stepped into a wide open market with amazing success. Ironically, Apple did the same to Sony with the iPod.

6. Rejection Can Motivate

Lastly, there are few things more motivating than rejection. If you follow the advice on the first five responses to rejection then it can become the best fuel for your passion. Look at it as a challenge to your ability to bring your idea to market. Find ways to channel the rejection into positive thoughts about how you can better yourself and your idea; strengthen your resolve and commitment by proving yourself to yourself, then you may stand a chance of proving yourself to others.

June 4, 2018 - by Tom Koulopoulos is the author of 10 books and founder of the Delphi Group, a 25-year-old Boston-based think tank and a past Inc. 500 company that focuses on innovation and the future of business.