Why Your Next Failure Is Actually Your Secret Weapon

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Stephen King wrote his best-selling novel *Carrie* on his wife's portable typewriter.

Fresh out of college, King had been working on a short story for a popular magazine.

His wife found the first three pages of the story in the trash, then pressed him to keep going. Those three, crumpled pages turned into his first book, but not without a fight.

Before *Carrie* was published, King had been rejected 30 times — devastating for a writer as educated and talented as he was. Rumor has it, his wife encouraged him to try one more editor, a small bit of encouragement that ultimately helped launch King's career.

His initial rejections paved the way for a story of monumental success. Doubleday accepted the manuscript in 1971, and the book sold a million copies the first year after publication.

Reframing rejection

There's no way around it: Rejection stings. Whether you didn't land the job offer you were banking on or the proposal you worked on for months wasn't accepted, being rejected can feel profoundly personal.

To make matters worse, we're also hard-wired to resist

rejection and the feelings of failure that come with it.

That’s because, thanks to dopamine, the anticipation of success can feel just as exciting as achieving that success. When we’re anticipating a desired outcome, our brains behave as though that outcome has already occurred — which is why hearing “no” is so alarming and, for some of us, overwhelming.

In my career, I’ve experienced my fair share of rejection. I know what it feels like to lose an advancement opportunity or be taken off a project I’m passionate about. I can recall the exact humiliation that comes with spending months on a proposal for a prospective client, only to lose to the competition.

But there’s one thing I’ve learned through all these tough moments: Rejection is not failure. It’s an opportunity to learn and to grow, and ultimately, to succeed.

Here are some of the lessons I’ve gleaned over the years about why it’s so important to re-frame rejection.

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Rejection is rarely personal

I remember the day like it was yesterday. I was working full-time at a tech company while attempting to build my new business, JotForm.

At that point, I was the only official JotForm employee — but I had my eye on a software developer I’d known for a while. I was hoping that once I sat down to explain my startup’s vision, he’d jump at the opportunity to leave his job and join me.

Instead, across from me at the cafe table, he told me he wasn’t interested in ditching his job to work for me. To be

honest, he didn’t seem all that excited about what I was building.

He rejected me, but even worse, he rejected the product I’d worked so long and hard to create.

I dwelled on that “rejection” for a few weeks. Did he think I’d make a bad boss? Did he think my venture was a terrible idea?

Only recently did I realize that what I perceived as the most personal of rejections wasn’t personal at all. His answer had much more to do with him than me.

Today, if someone came to me and offered me a job, I’d answer with a resounding “no.” But it wouldn’t have anything to do with that individual or the company. I’d say “no” because I’m passionate about my work.

Next time you get a “no” that feels hard to accept, take some time to be curious about other possibilities. Maybe your boss doesn’t have the budget to give you the raise you want. Maybe the person who got the promotion you were after just had more experience than you.

In any scenario, remember: Rejection might *feel* personal, but there’s probably a logical reason something didn’t work out the way you planned.

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Rejection is an opportunity to hone your skills

A few years ago, I read a story that stuck with me. Within three years of her promotion, the president of a popular restaurant chain got fired because revenue tanked during her

tenure. Ouch.

In the six years following, she started consulting and served on the board of another big fast-food restaurant. It couldn't have been easy, but she used her rejection to learn and grow — and it paid off. She was eventually hired as CEO of that company.

Instead of wallowing in the humiliation or pain of being fired, this woman chose a humble alternative. She used the time she had to make herself an even stronger candidate.

Being rejected can feel like the worst thing in the world. But if you see it as a chance to try something new or gain new skills, you can leverage those things toward a future opportunity that might be even more rewarding.

Rejection is an opportunity to ask important questions

Along with setting you up to learn new skills you can transfer to a different opportunity — and make connections that could benefit your career — the sting of rejection also positions you to ask questions that will shape your future.

I experienced a similar growth path after the software developer shut down my offer. After a few weeks of feeling discouraged, I flipped the script and decided to use the rejection in a more productive way.

What could I do to make working for JotForm more appealing to candidates? How can I create a work culture that attracts and retains talent? And, just as importantly, why did I take that rejection so personally?

Wrestling with these questions has been far more beneficial to me — and my company's growth — than wallowing in defeat.

How to move forward from rejection

With the right attitude, it’s possible to move forward from rejection. It’s just a matter of changing perspective. If you see a rejection as a personal failure, you’ll lose momentum and won’t get any closer to your goals. If you see rejection as an invitation to learn new things and ask important questions, you’re more likely to bounce back.

Moving on after a failure might never be easy. But don’t think for a minute you’re moving on empty-handed, or that you got the short end of the stick. Rejection puts a new secret weapon in your back pocket: your own resilience.

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