

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Value of Saying No

Garner Simmons · Thursday, February 9th, 2012

In March of 1982, Warren Beatty, along with his co-writer Trevor Griffiths, won the Writers Guild of America Award for Best Original Screenplay for the film *Reds*. In accepting the award, Beatty did a remarkable thing. He began by thanking all those who had had the courage to tell him “no.” While the line got a laugh, Beatty was serious. It wasn’t the “yeses” that made his film great; it was the “nos.” The challenges to what he had written that made him dig deeper. He learned the value of saying no.

A couple of years earlier, I had stood with legendary composer Jerry Fielding at a screening of a film that really didn’t work. People kept coming up to him to offer congratulations to which Jerry invariably replied: “Thank you. It’s shit.” Looking over at the gaggle of studio executives drinking and laughing, he shook his head. “I’m not on speaking terms with half of the people here because I tell them what they don’t want to hear while they stand around like a bunch of glad-handing, back-slapping jackasses congratulating each other on what they don’t understand to begin with.” Fielding and Beatty shared the same creative ethos: great art demands rigorous rebuttal and cross-examination. If you can’t defend it, you need to tear it down and do it again. Merely acceptable is unacceptable. If you can do better, you must.

In a remarkable article titled “Groupthink” appearing in the *New Yorker* (1/30/12), writer Jonah Lehrer (author of *Proust Was a Neuroscientist*, *How We Decide*, and the upcoming *Imagine: How Creativity Works*) challenges the widely held belief that the best ideas come from brainstorming. Lehrer begins with a brief history of the evolution of this concept as the product of Alex Osborn, the “O” in the powerful ad agency B.B.D.O. The key to brainstorming’s success, according to Osborn, was the elimination of negative input. It was his belief that the only way to channel our creative juices was to banish criticism. Every idea was equally valid. Nothing should be excluded for out of this abundance of ideas would inevitably come brilliance. The assumption is that if people fear ridicule for saying something stupid, they simply won’t say anything at all. The only problem with brainstorming, in Lehrer’s opinion, is that it actually does not work.

As evidence of this, Lehrer offers numerous examples. But among the most interesting is one that comes surprisingly from the Broadway stage. Brian Uzzi is a sociologist at Northwestern University with a Jones for musicals. As he notes, “Nobody creates a Broadway musical by themselves.” It takes a composer, a lyricist, a librettist, a choreographer all working in collaboration with a director who must, in turn, work with the producers. In other words: a team of creative talent. Attempting to understand how this collaboration works, Uzzi decided to find out which worked better: a team comprised of close friends who had worked together before or a team of relative strangers. To answer this, he studied every musical between 1945 and 1989 spending literally years analyzing some 474 productions. Clearly Broadway involves an inbred system with many creative interconnections.

Attempting to quantify this, he developed a system reducing everything down to a figure he refers to as “Q.” Simply put, musicals crafted by teams that had frequently worked together receive a high Q score; those created by artists who had never worked together received a low Q score. It was no surprise that those with a low Q score invariably failed (obviously it takes time for creative partnerships to meld). However, those with too high a Q score also failed. In Lehrer’s analysis: “The artists all thought in similar ways, which crushed innovation.” The most successful collaborations, therefore, came from the middle where the discussions were vibrant and not everyone was saying “yes.” As an example, he cites *West Side Story* where Jerome Robbins, Leonard Bernstein and Arthur Laurents, all legends of musical theater combined with a then unknown talent, a 25 year-old lyricist who had never worked on a Broadway musical – Stephen Sondheim. The result was simply brilliant.

The point is that surrounding ourselves with those who only agree with us reinforces both the positives and negatives. The result frequently fails to stand on its own merits because we have willingly blinded ourselves to what isn’t working by seeing only what we wish to see. Candor is the only rule. Tell me what you really think, not what you think I want to hear. If you challenge my ideas and I can’t adequately defend them, perhaps I need to rethink them and find better ideas. Creativity demands courage and a fearless devotion to the truth however disagreeable it may be.

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