

*“Rebel Talent”*  
*Why It Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life*  
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Most businesses are all about following the rules, not breaking them. Rebels are grudgingly tolerated, or, if they become too annoying, they are shown the door. There are people who are “deviants,” but in a positive and constructive way. Over the years, I saw how much rule breaking is associated with innovation. This connection—between rule breaking and passion for one’s work—was not one I had made before, and yet it seemed powerful. The two so often go together.

In my observations, I have also come to identify five core elements of rebel talent.

- 1. Novelty**
- 2. Curiosity**
- 3. Perspective**
- 4. Diversity**
- 5. Authenticity**

It’s not rebels that make trouble, but trouble that makes rebels ~ Ruth Messinger

Terms like rule breaker, nonconformity, and deviance make us think of subversive, even dangerous, individuals. Shared rules make society run smoothly, but something very powerful happens when we act in ways that are unconventional or unexpected. We can actually bring more joy into our lives by being rebels: by behaving in ways that defy conformity. Studies show that over-imitation actually increases as we age, with adults performing irrelevant actions with higher levels of fidelity than preschoolers.

As often happens in real life, most team members accepted the nonsensical process without protest. The traditions and rituals you encounter in your organization and in society often endure out of routine, rather than as the result of thoughtful deliberation. We are born with a strong drive to seek novelty, but this drive fades over time.

Novelty increases our job satisfaction, our creativity, and our overall performance. It also increases how much we grow in both confidence and ability. Surprisingly, novelty is even more important than stability. Their job felt “more or less the same every day,” their satisfaction suffered, and they were more eager to move on. The value of novelty at work (and in relationships) seems pretty universal. “Improv” teaches that it’s okay to be uncomfortable. Comfort is overrated. It doesn’t make us as happy as we think it will.

Children absorb information like sponges, and they learn at a rapid pace. But as they grow, they become more aware of how others—adults in particular—see them, and they begin to rein in their curiosity, but rebels learn to hold on to this childlike curiosity, and they never stop asking “why.”

Dyke explained that he wanted to shift the BBC's goal from being "the best-managed organization in the public sector," as his predecessor had suggested, to being the "most innovative and risk-taking place there is."

When we interact with others by asking questions, our relationships grow stronger, because we are showing genuine interest in learning about them, hearing their ideas, and getting to know them more personally. People think of us as being smarter when we ask questions than when we don't. Asking for advice increases rather than decreases how competent we are perceived to be.

Rebels fight their fears and are willing to push past the discomfort of showing others that they need their help. How we react to the exploration and experimentation of our colleagues or subordinates is likely to directly influence whether they feel comfortable exploring their curiosity. A workplace with failure parties is going to yield a lot more creativity than one where efficiency is celebrated above all else. By following rules and orders in executing the work, employees lose the sense of wonder that could lead them to approach the job differently.

One leader believed that people perform at their best not because they're specialists, but rather because their depth of skill is accompanied by an intellectual curiosity that leads them to keep exploring. Curious people often end up being star performers in their organizations. Curiosity encourages new ways of thinking, challenges long-held assumptions, and fuels transformative change.

One observed that we run this company on questions, not answers. It's easy to work to finish assigned tasks without questioning the process or asking about overall goals. Rather than celebrating curiosity, our leaders often discourage it. Only a minority (about 24 percent) reported feeling curious in their jobs on a regular basis. The concept of "psychological safety"—a shared belief that members can take risks. In a group that is psychologically safe, you would not fear being embarrassed about raising unorthodox questions, ideas, or doubts.

When we are motivated by learning rather than performance, we do better on tests, get higher grades, reach greater success in simulations and problem-solving tasks, and receive higher ratings after training. As we climb the organizational ladder, our ego inflates, and we tend to feel even more threatened by information that proves us wrong. If we're not careful, being in charge can, over time, close us off to what others have to offer. When we (whether "we" are top executives or college students) feel powerful, we are less open to the perspectives of others. When we take too much "airtime," we demotivate those around us.

Rebels recognize that it is more important for the team to work well and get the job done than it is to display their power or respect some formal hierarchy. Too often, power is viewed as a license to raise one's voice without listening to the voices of others.

When we feel powerful, research shows, we are more inclined to express our attitudes and opinions in groups, and we also come to devalue the perspectives, opinions, and contributions of others. Rediscovering the experience of inexperience is a way to counteract the misleading—and potentially life-threatening—feeling of knowing. Breakthrough solutions are more likely to be the result of investments of time and effort than of expertise in a field.

It can be easier to approach problems from fresh perspectives when we are not experts. Outsiders can bring a fresh perspective to new and old problems. But it may take years, or even centuries, to recognize their brilliance since, as experts, we are often too focused on our own points of view. Intellectual humility, is the ability to acknowledge that what we know is sharply limited. Wisdom means rejecting the feeling of knowing.

Rebels do not thoughtlessly accept the social roles and attitudes that society promotes. Rebels understand that conflict can lead to growth and that disagreement is a feature rather than a flaw. We find it hard to relate to people who are highly competent, but we tend to warm to those who are flawed—because we know that we are, too. Vulnerability helps us create stronger connections with others.

Part of freedom is expressing oneself honestly. Having a safe space to express real feelings can make a big difference. When we give feedback to others, we often focus on the problems that performance reviews identify, rather than on words of praise or encouragement. When we think about self-improvement, we tend to focus on weaknesses.

We improve faster in areas where we are strong than in areas where we are weak.

Some of the greatest gains in human development may come from investing in what people naturally do best. According to Gallup research, people who use their strengths daily are six times more likely to get satisfaction out of their job and report less stress and anxiety. Self-reflection can have significant effects over time.

According to data collected by Gallup in 2016, only 32 percent of U.S. employees feel involved in, enthusiastic about, and committed to their jobs. Almost 20 percent are “Actively Disengaged,” the label Gallup uses to refer to employees who are not just unhappy at work, but are busy acting out their unhappiness. According to Gallup’s 2016 survey across 142 countries, only 13 percent of workers feel engaged with their work. We are facing a crisis of engagement in our lives.

In his ten years with the company, Conant sent more than thirty thousand handwritten thank-yous, which recipients hung in their offices or above their desks. Managers account for at least 70 percent of the variance in employee engagement. In Conant’s first three years, he pushed out over 300 of the company’s top 350 leaders.

When we feel that the work we do matters, our dedication deepens. In this book, I’ve introduced you to the talents that we see, again and again, in rebels: novelty, curiosity, perspective, diversity, and authenticity. They are all paths to engagement. At their core, rebels are engaged.

When people are free to make choices at work, they feel more authentic and in control, my research finds. We feel engaged when we are encouraged to be authentic by leaders who exhibit the same freedom.

One hallmark of a healthy creative culture is that its people feel free to share ideas, opinions, and criticisms. Candor is key to effective collaboration. The whole idea behind the “Braintrust” is that members should speak freely, arguing without fear of conflict, with the interests of the company in mind

The company, Catmull told me, has always recognized that conflict is a key aspect of creativity. In the creative process, tension and conflict need to be embraced for good ideas to emerge. when expressed constructively, conflict allows us to explore new possibilities, arrive at surprising solutions, and gain important insights into ourselves and others. Innovations seldom arise when we’re feeling satisfied with the status quo.

When you give freedom to employees, Newell believes, you liberate their talents and creativity. According to a study of over 800 employees, those with a strong sense of ownership in their organizations are more committed, satisfied, and productive.

By flattening the power structure, ownership of problems and ideas becomes shared, rather than concentrated in the hands of a few, and workers thrive. Rebels know themselves and are aware of these limitations, but they don’t believe there are limits on what they can accomplish.

The Eight Principles of Rebel Leadership:

### **1. Seek Out the New**

### **2. Encourage Constructive Dissent**

These changes, Kennedy believed, would stimulate debate, challenge assumptions, and clear a path for the best plan to emerge on its merits. “Groupthink”—the tendency for members of a group to agree with one another, which quiets dissent and suppresses alternatives. The rebel understands that a certain amount of tension is healthy, that discomfort leads to striving. A study of seven Fortune 500 companies revealed that the most successful top management teams were those that encouraged disagreement in private meetings.

### **3. Open Conversations, Don’t Close Them**

At Pixar, Group leaders encourage a technique they call “plussing.” The point of plussing is to improve ideas without using judgmental language.

Rebels solicit honest feedback and new knowledge by sparking new conversations—even difficult ones—and sticking with them even when the going gets tough.

### **4. Reveal Yourself—and Reflect**

**5. Learn Everything—Then Forget Everything**

**6. Find Freedom in constraints**

**7. Lead from the Trenches**

**8. Foster Happy Accidents**

The rebel realizes that a mistake may unlock a breakthrough.

You should always keep the door open to the unexpected. —Massimo Bottura, owner and chef, Osteria Francescana

The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing. —Walt Disney

Rebels go about their work and life a bit differently: They break rules and bring about positive change in the process. They smile at life and feel fulfilled.