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Controlled Eccentricity

Review of 'Rebel Talent:
Why it pays to break the rules at work and in life'
by Francesca Gino

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In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limits it discovers within itself. – Albert Camus

How can we be creative, successful, and happy? These are questions of instant and lasting appeal. Pop psychology and the self-help industry presume to provide answers (Krueger, 2014), and so does the still thriving enterprise of positive psychology (Heck & Krueger, 2016a). The business literature is not far behind, being interested in effective leadership, strategy, and innovation. When we ask how we can be creative, successful, and happy, we are asking how our life can be good. It is a rather broad question, which makes it unlikely that a simple recipe can be found, especially one that has escaped thinkers and researchers since Aristotle (Bragues, 2006). If one endeavors to make a significant contribution in this direction, it is wise to manage expectations. Or not. Perhaps boldness and (over)confidence are part of the rebel's appeal.

Francesca Gino has many of the professional and personal qualifications that give her a voice worth listening to. She is a professor at the Harvard Business School, and her professorship is a named one, in recognition of her meteoric rise in the fields of organizational and economic behavior. Her scholarly contributions are numerous and excellent. Gino finds time to teach and coach students and executives, consult with the corporations that rule our world, write case studies, and raise a family. She has achieved all this as an immigrant woman with an accent (in her own telling). Gino knows a thing or two about how to go against the grain in order to succeed, and it is not all book knowledge.

'Rebel Talent: Why it pays to break the rules at work and in life' is, in part, a midcareer account of how she got there. The blending of business with biography works well. It embodies the story being told. It is an act of rebellion against the parade of staid business books and jaded memoirs. Gino spices her business and science narrative with personal experiences without indulging herself. Many of her experiences open a window into how she found some of her fascinating research ideas.

Gino's advice on how to live well, that is, how to be creative, successful, and happy, is to rebel. She seeks to show *why* it pays to break the rules. Now this is a bit of a sales pitch

because Gino knows that untrammelled rebellion will not end well. She does not advocate chaos, randomness, or pigheaded contrariness. Rebellion requires vision. It needs a stance of controlled eccentricity. Yet, Gino offers us little guidance on how to modulate our rebellion. We have to read her script closely and carefully, with attention to what she is not saying. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let me begin with a more traditional, non-rebellious, sequence of review and evaluation.

The character who looms larger in *Rebel Talent* than Gino herself is Massimo Bottura, owner and operator of la *Osteria Francescana* in Modena, in the Italian region of Emilia Romagna. An *osteria* is a humble eatery catering to unpretentious locals who wish to stay away from the pricier *trattorie*, let alone the fancy *ristoranti*. Now, la Osteria Francescana “took first place in the World’s 50 Best Restaurant awards in 2016” (p. IX). The first part of the name, then, would have to be the understatement *de l’année*. The second part rather delightfully evokes the author herself. As for Massimo, he not only dominates his kitchen and the new ways of *la cucina italiana*, he also purveys fodder for Gino’s narrative of rebellious innovation and the pleasures it brings.

But Massimo is asked to do more than he can deliver. To help illustrate the principles of rebellion, Napoleone Buonaparte, Harry Houdini, Gino herself, and Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger, *inter alii*, tally their tales of triumph in the face of stifling normativity. None of them – only Massimo comes close – incorporates all five of the rebel’s virtues, which are: novelty, curiosity, perspective, diversity, and authenticity (p. xvi). Breaking with the norm of starting with ‘novelty,’ Gino inserts a Napoleonic take on the paradox of rebel status as a second introduction, and this is, in my opinion, the book’s essential chapter. Napoleon was a hero, a visionary, an innovator, and a military genius (for a time), but he was also a tyrant and egomaniac; and let’s not forget, in the end he lost and died abandoned on the island of St. Helena, 1,200 miles off the African coast. Twelve hundred miles of isolation! In his ascendancy, Napoleon did daring deeds by breaking with military tradition and expectation. The siege of Toulon made Napoleon’s name. The crucial ingredient of victory – among many

necessary ones – was Napoleon’s way of getting cannoneers to man a battery exposed to enemy fire. He used words, and thus psychology; he called the battery “The battery of men without fear.” With this, the men flocked to the guns and Toulon fell. Napoleon prevailed by replacing the conventional methods of command and coercion with the subtlety of psychological suggestion. This made him a rebel and victor – for a while.

Gino segues into her most evocative personal story and the data of one of her most compelling study: the red-sneaker effect. Having delivered a 90-minute lecture, she replaced her conservative leather shoes with red sneakers and gave the lecture again. It worked. “The red-sneaker class seemed more attentive and thoughtful, and they laughed more” (p. 16). Gino speculates that this was, in part, because she felt and acted more confident. But the truly surprising ingredient, which she went on to test in a series of experiments, is perceptual (Belleza, Gino, & Keinan, 2014). Setting aside possible changes in the actor’s mood and behavior, the audience will interpret a break with convention as represented by the shockingly informal red sneakers as a signal of power. As only a genetically fit peacock can afford a glorious tail, or only the rich can afford to burn money (Veblen, 1899), only a competent and self-possessed professor can afford to dress down. Even without having evidence of greater competence or confidence, the audience loves it. But, as Gino notes, “the perception that an individual is *consciously choosing* not to conform is critical” (p. 15, italics in the original).

The last point foreshadows the significance of authenticity, which is, and I now we rebelliously depart from the given sequence – the fifth element of the rebel’s success. Gino notes the intersection of authenticity with nonconformity. Rebels can do their best when they dare to be themselves. If you want to wear the red sneakers to a lecture or the red bow tie to a black-tie affair, you should do it only if you mean it, that is, if it reveals your true preference and not because you want to signal for effect. In chapter 6, Gino makes several excellent points to place authenticity above conformity. Authenticity is liberating and healthy. The idea that one can fake it until one makes it, so desperately promoted by Gino’s erstwhile HBS

colleague Amy Cuddy, is now in a shambles (Simmons & Simonsohn, 2017). Mum's advice to just be yourself wins the day. People like those who don't pretend (Heck & Krueger, 2016b). But spilling coffee during a job interview is an authentic act only for the few thoroughbred klutzes in the world. Gino disinters the classic pratfall experiment to argue that good but imperfect people are liked best (Aronson, Willerman, & Floyd, 1966). An awkward moment can be humanizing. "When we own our blunders," Gino concludes, "people are impressed" (p. 143). So it's not the blunder *per se*, but the rebel's credible acceptance of it. Leaders can leverage authenticity by hiring talented and skilled people, and then getting out of the way to let them do what they do best (see also Murnighan, 2012; reviewed in Krueger, 2013). In other words, authenticity is not the leaders' prerogative.

What of the other four core elements of rebel talent? In chapter 2, Gino argues that the human need for novelty and variety languishes underused. A greater variety of challenging tasks makes workers happier and more productive, and entrepreneurs more entrependering. The exploration-exploitation dilemma may just be the mother of all dilemmas, and there is an issue when individuals and organizations seek too much exploitation, thereby exhausting resources and putting people in a state of tedium even before exhaustion sets in. In chapter 3, Gino argues that successful rebels are curious. They *want* to explore. Curiosity begets liking, respect, satisfaction, and engagement with a world. Alas, curiosity is often discouraged in the workplace. Traditional managers don't like rebels. In chapter 4, Gino has us take a look at perspective, and here things get murky because it is difficult to see how seeing what others fail to see is an act of rebellion. If it took Sully Sullenberger only 208 seconds to land flight 1549 on the Hudson River, it takes Gino 6.5 pages to tell the story. Rebels with a sense of perspective continue to learn, eschew routine, and stand above egocentrism. The concrete psychological advice is to cultivate counterfactual thinking. Recalling Stephen Wright we wonder: What if there were no counterfactual questions? In chapter 5, the last one before authenticity, Gino champions diversity. Rebels, she says, fight stereotypes, overcome bias, are inclusive, and they ultimately succeed, although the journey

brings toil and pain. This chapter is the only one where Gino lapses into preachiness and self-congratulation. I think this is forgivable in light of the value she puts on the table (in this Osteria Francescana).

In chapter 7, after reviewing evidence for the value of authenticity in chapter 6, Gino introduces engagement as element five-plus-one. The tedium of routine and conformity is still the barrier to clear. This may have been mentioned. Schopenhauer saw boredom as the source of our unhappiness when we don't happen to be in pain, and Russell saw zest (i.e., engagement) as the key to happiness. Ironically, this chapter is the most boring of the lot, with Gino lingering on the only mildly enlightening stories of Southwest Airlines and Pixar. The denouement takes three chapters (chapter 8, the conclusion, and the epilogue) to reach a soft landing. A review of the five (or six) elements of rebellion would fit on a page.

Besides handing Massimo Bottura an order he could not fill, *Rebel Talent* does not rebel enough against the formula of the banal business book. As an admirer of Professor Gino's theoretical and empirical work I feel oddly unfulfilled by the book's conservative list structure. There is no integrative theory, and Signore Bottura cannot make up for that. A strong theory of rebel talent would make its elements cohere and it would show their boundaries. Nothing brings the need for an understanding of boundary conditions more into focus than the exploration-exploitation dilemma. Telling the inspiring story of Italian innovator and industrialist Adriano Olivetti, Gino finds that he "was able to get the balance exploration and exploitation just right (p. 60)." But this begs the question of how he did it. Exploration at all cost cannot be the answer. Being a rebel is risky business. For every Napoleone, Massimo, and Adriano who graces the pages of a business book, there are those who dared and failed. A full theory of rebel talent must also be a theory of risk. It must explain Waterloo and the downfall of the power pose.

Finally, there is the interpersonal and strategic side to rebellion. Rebels don't just sit and rebel. They act in environments where others also wonder whether rebellion might be the right choice. Entrepreneurs know this – or at least they should (Bolger, Pulford, & Colman,

2008). By the lights of game theory, rebellion amounts to defection. The world, that is, the society and the economy, needs rebels but not too many. There must also be those who do the routine work. For every Napoleon, there must be those who man the batteries. Even rebels need an equilibrium state to do well (Krueger, 2019).

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