

What do you do if the company rejects you?

by Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

What we would like to do is climb in our crib and wail, or go downtown and give that interviewer a piece of our mind. But we're adults, so we don't do things like that. There we sit, with a painful hole where our stomach used to be, where the cannonball of rejection hit us, while our drill-sergeant spouse or self-appointed cheerleader friend is telling us to get up off our keisters and get going.

I believe, especially if it was a job you particularly wanted, it's important you take a day to be sad about it. Stay in bed with the covers over your head. Be mad or sad, or both. Say all the horrible things you want to say about the company. Draw pictures with black crayon of the boss you might have had, and cut it up into tiny pieces, while cackling gleefully. Just Mope.

As the day goes on, however, and you've said all the childish "I hate you, I hate you" chants that are within you, gradually return to the grown-up world. Sit with a pencil and paper and go back through the interview. Write down where you think you did well and not so well. Try to see it from the company's vantage point. How do you think they saw you? What did they seem to be looking for?

This is probably no consolation to you, but it's true nonetheless. The fact that you got to the interview meant you had the basic qualifications. It is also true that the person who got the offer may have had a slight edge in qualifications, but it is overwhelmingly probable that the one who got the job was viewed by the company as "a better fit for us." Companies will deny it because they're supposed to hire on the basis of qualifications or face discriminatory charges, but the fact remains. They hire someone based on a subjective, almost indefinable something that tells them this is a match.

It isn't a question of gender or racial bias, as activists have claimed, although tall-white-guy companies and mostly-women or mostly-minority companies are known to hire only the "like-me" candidates. What companies want are a shared value system in the organization, and many of them don't care if it's packaged in a male or female body, light or dark complexion. It's an easy way out, to feel you were discriminated against, but the greatest likelihood is you didn't get hired because they felt someone else would work better with them.

You can rail at the injustice and say companies should be different, just as companies will say I'm wrong in saying what I did. Companies will point to their diversity-producing efforts; this social conscience is a luxury for business. So is the time it takes to build a diverse work force, to bring together values systems that don't match and make them mutually productive. And real interest in these efforts fly out the door when times get tough. Business just wants to get a job done, and often takes the easier route, reasoning, "Someone who likes and sounds like me will work like me and with me. I like the guy!"

In any case, it's beside the point here. You didn't get the job, and it's more than a waste of your time to pout about discrimination. You're not helping yourself figure out how to improve your chances of getting the next job, and that's what your focus should be.

My best hope for you is that you have more than one job in the pipeline and tomorrow you'll be ready to rumble again, armed with more self-knowledge about how to increase your job-getting chances.

Can you call the company and find out why you didn't get the job?

No, and yes. In companies where Human Resources control the hiring process, hiring managers are often trained to refer calls to HR, where you will only be told that someone more qualified was hired. End of phone call. The concern is that you might take some action against the company if you decided in the conversation you were more qualified, and you had their words to go by. So, they don't get into the conversation in the first place.

On the other hand, you can often get information if the hiring manager's company has a different HR approach or if you ask the question in the right way. Never, never refer to the other guy who got the job. Never ask for comparisons of skills. Red flags will fly through those phone wires, and any sensible manager will tell you nothing.

State that you want to learn from this interview session about how to better prepare yourself for the next one. What should I emphasize as my strengths next time? Where did you see areas where I can grow? Are there ways I could improve my interviewing skills? You could still get the cold shoulder or the referral to the HR black hole, but you have a better than even chance of finding out why you didn't get the job.

How can you turn this rejection into an opportunity?

You've heard the old saying, "It ain't over till it's over." You shouldn't hold on to vain hope, but you never know what can come of a "ding" letter.

No matter how wrong you think the company was not to hire you, you must be a 100% good sport about it. Send your thank-you letter. Say you're sorry you didn't get the job, and express the hope of being considered for another opening. You may have been the Number Two draft choice; Number One might not finally take the job, and you could be the one they hire, particularly if you're a nice guy and qualified.

If you thought this job truly was for you, and it appears hopeless with the company you just interviewed, then think about approaching its competitors. Maybe they need someone like you. At the very least, you should have gained self-knowledge that will help you do better and make fewer mistakes in your next interview go-round.

You know, it's funny. The pain of rejection is just awful, even if you weren't that interested in the position. We want to be wanted. But I've worked with hundreds of people who've had that experience, and in almost every instance, as time went by and other opportunities came along, the person didn't feel lasting regret about not getting the job. Maybe we all have boundless ability to kid ourselves, but the job we didn't get offered turns out in the end not to be the job we truly wanted.

Take whatever learning you can from this rejection experience, and move on.