



Rebel with a Cause

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Most organizations are wary of rebels, but they shouldn't be, says Francesca Gino, Harvard Business School professor and author of *Rebel Talent: Why It Pays to Break the Rules at Work and in Life*. Join Francesca and William Blair's Hugo Scott-Gall for a discussion of the complex problems organizations face in 2022, and why we need people to embrace their rebelliousness in order to solve them.

Comments are edited excerpts from our podcast, which you can listen to in full below.

https://media.blubrry.com/the_active_share/b/content.blubrry.com/the_active_share/The_Active_Share_Francesca_Gino

How did you start thinking about being a rebel?

Francesca: I wanted to shift the way we think about rebels. We tend to think of them as troublemakers—colleague in our offices who are jerks or contrarians. But there are rebels out there who are breaking rules in a way that is positive and constructive. Let's learn from them. Why is it that so often we take things for granted rather than embracing this rebel spirit of pushing the boundaries in a way that is constructive and creates innovation and positive change?

Can you give me an example?

One of the people who inspired me is an Italian chef, Massimo Bottura, who owns a 3-Michelin-Star restaurant that became the best in the world in 2016. He reinvented traditional Italian dishes. That requires a lot of courage, because as an Italian, I can say we have lots of rules when it comes to cooking, and we definitely cherish our

traditions.

So your definition of a rebel is someone who changes things in a reasonably dramatic way, but also in a positive way?

Francesca: Absolutely. Rebels do not break the rules just for the sake of breaking the rules. They break rules that hold them and others back. And they do so, as you said, in a way that is positive and constructive.

What are their common characteristics? Is it the environment they grew up in? Is there any correlation with what or where or even if they studied? Are there any sort of predictive patterns?

Francesca: In a sense, we are all born that way. The talents we see in constructive rebels is a matter of having the courage to embrace them.

In my work, across industries, across organizations, using all sorts of research methods, I identified five qualities that these rebels tend to have.

The first one is a desire or a thirst for novelty. So, rather than sitting with what's familiar and comfortable, rebels enjoy the new.

The second one is curiosity, so rebels are people who have this sense of awe and wonder that we all used to have when we were little kids.

They also have perspective, so rather than looking at problems from just one angle, they consider all sorts of views and are more open to what others think about a certain decision or issue.

They also have a talent for authenticity, so they don't tend to conform or nod their heads and go with whatever others are saying or doing, but they bring their contributions forward.

And finally, they have what I call a talent for diversity. So, they push back on stereotypical views or other biases that society so easily puts on us.

It's more than being an extrovert. It's more than just having a growth mindset. It's more than just having a bit of grit. It's something extra, right?

Francesca: Exactly. In fact, some of the examples I use in the book are of people about whom you would say, "Wait a second, why do you call him or her a rebel?"

The one that comes to mind is Captain Sully Sullenberger. In 2009 Captain Sullenberger found himself on a plane that had no thrust in the engine. He had 208 seconds to make a decision. Rather than going where most of us would have gone in that moment of tension, he came up with a rather innovative solution, which was land in the Hudson River.

If you look at what he did in that moment, he kept broadening his view, his options, his alternatives—eliminating them quickly, but really demonstrating this broad perspective I see in rebels.

What I was surprised by, when I had the privilege of interviewing him, is that he had a ton of experience but always

looked at his expertise not as a signal that he knew it all, but as a signal that there was more to learn. So, he's a very curious person.

How do rebels fit into organizations? How do organizations come to terms with the fact that they need rebels?

Francesca: Pre-pandemic, I would go into organizations and pay attention to processes, systems, ways of working that made little sense in the eyes of a person who didn't work there. I would ask people why they did things that way, and the answer was always the same: We've always done it this way.

So we need rebels in organizations. We need people who don't sit with what is comfortable and familiar, but think about why we follow certain processes. I would argue, especially in 2022, where the problems that organizations face are pretty complex, that we truly need more people to embrace their rebelliousness. In fact, I would go as far as saying we need 100% rebels in organizations.

Well, some organizations have to prioritize things. For some of them, safety might really matter. But I think what you're saying is that almost any organization can benefit by someone asking why.

Francesca: Absolutely. The U.S. Air Force is all about safety, but a new leader came into a group a few years ago and said, "Look, if we want to be ready for combat, which is our mission, we need to do things differently." He asked people to bring out their curiosity, have a broad perspective, contribute. He was allowing for rebelliousness. But he was clear on the boundaries. He asked everyone to study regulations to make sure that every innovative idea was within them. The number of innovative ideas that came out of that group in the last three or four years is pretty impressive.

If you were head of human capital at a big U.S. company, how would you communicate that we need to start looking for rebels, and how to do it?

Francesca: First you have to at least consider the idea that rebelliousness is beneficial. I think a lot of leaders struggle with that because it means giving up a bit of control.

When looking for great talent, I wouldn't stop at a person's resumé, but actually try to understand whether I can see signals of curiosity and authenticity.

It's not that difficult. For example, to assess individuals' curiosity I would ask what kind of companies they're following. Or I would ask them what they do after arriving in a new city for a work trip—stay in the hotel or explore?

To assess authenticity, I'd ask them what one of their weaknesses might be. If they tell you they're too much of a perfectionist, that's not authenticity.

It's similar for the other traits. Walk them through a problem that the company's experiencing. How are they reasoning through it? Are they considering multiple perspectives or are they stuck on one particular view?

From what you've seen of the corporate world, are companies close to doing some of the things you just outlined, or do they have a long way to go?

Francesca: Some companies and some leaders are definitely better than others. But I wish there were more of it.

It's interesting that we're speaking at a time when we're still in the pandemic. I'm hoping, given the experience that we've had over the last two years, that there is more of an appetite for this type of rebelliousness, because it helps organizations react to moments of crisis and stress with more resiliency.

Do companies that try to attract rebels suffer consequences—cultural tension or volatility—because non-rebels feel threatened or don't like the change?

Francesca: I often work with people who are trying to be effective in their rebelliousness and think that they're failing at it. I make sure they don't forget about perspective in the way they push boundaries, suggest ideas, or challenge views. That allows them to come into the interaction with respect.

I think many of us grew up thinking that either we are honest in the way we talk to each other or that we are generous. Often rebels find themselves being honest, but in a way that shows their frustration with existing ways of working. There is a better choice, and that choice is to come with our opinions in a way that is respectful and understanding of what is there.

One of the reasons I find the story of Massimo Bottura so inspiring is that he took a lot of care in understanding traditions. But he wants to move them forward. As he always says, traditions are well-received experiments. Traditions were built to be rebuilt. What a fantastic way of thinking. I don't think that is so common in organizations in 2022.

Before we started recording, we were talking about someone we've both enjoyed meeting—Brunello Cucinelli, founder of the eponymous Brunello Cucinelli, who [came on our podcast to discuss humanistic capitalism](#). He talked about the way his company treats his employees and suppliers, and how that ethos flows through everything he does. But I didn't come away thinking, "I've just met a rebel." Do you see him as a rebel?

Francesca: Absolutely. Had I met him before I wrote the book, he would be in it. He reminds me of Adriano Olivetti. When he became the CEO of the first manufacturer of typewriters in Italy, the first thing that he did was spend some time in the manufacturing plant, because he thought there was a need to recognize dignity in the work that they were doing. He also brought more curiosity by creating a library with over 10,000 magazines and books, and he made the lunch break from one hour to two hours. He used to say that the first hour is to eat lunch; the second hour is just to eat culture. He understands that part of being rebellious is seeing your work as a source of joy and satisfaction rather than a source of frustration.

Why aren't more people doing that then?

Francesca: I think that part of the answer comes back to the way we think about curiosity. Curiosity and judgment can't coexist.

Part of the reason we lose the innate curiosity we had when we were kids is that we start worrying about what others think. When it comes to asking questions or doing things differently or challenging the common ways of thinking, we fear negative judgment. So, we stay in the safe zone. I think that explains part of the why we don't see more rebels out there.

As a leader making courageous decisions that show curiosity, you might embrace and show your rebelliousness,

but you do so because you're not worried about what others are going to think.

Do you think this is changing as expectations of millennials and the generation behind them come into the workplace? And what they want from work is more about being oneself than fitting into a corporate culture?

Francesca: I think your hypothesis is a good one, and I bet we're going to see some of that. I was recently looking over some data explaining the great resignation, and one of the points that stood out is that toxic culture is 10 times more predictive of people leaving than compensation issues are. And toxic culture does not refer just to people treated poorly in their work. I think it's that people don't have a sense that they can really be who they are; that they can bring out their contributions in the work that they do.

You have a way for us all to work out what type of rebels we are, and it's at rebeltalents.org. I really wanted to be a pirate, but I'm a traveler. What am I talking about? What type of rebel are you?

Francesca: I was the person who created the test, so I've never taken it, because I thought I knew too much. But it's been a couple of years, so maybe I'll try it out and see what I find out about myself.

The thing I do know is that I'm still learning. I'm on the journey of more consistently embracing my inner rebel. It takes intention and a bit of thoughtfulness.

There's still a lot to learn, but I'm on my way. I'm on my way.

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