

The Psychology of the Shortlist

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Imagine this scenario: A plum job has opened up, one that you really want and feel well qualified to hold. So you go through the rigorous process of applying. You line up references, write essays, and finally get an interview. The interview goes well and you're feeling confident, and indeed you get a call saying you've been shortlisted for the job. Out of a pool of a hundred applicants, you are among just three who are highly and equally qualified. Would you come back in for another round of interviews?

You can almost taste victory now. So you do the interviews, and again all seems to go very well.

Then the job goes to someone else.

How do you feel? Well, common wisdom says that you're feeling lousy, totally deflated. It's widely believed that winning is motivating, and that losing saps our motivation. But what about that shortlist? Does it help that you came close, or does that make it worse?

That's the question that Monica Wadhwa and JeeHye Kim, marketing experts at INSEAD, in Singapore, have been exploring. They had the intriguing idea that the experience of *nearly* obtaining a reward might lead to an intensified—but unsatisfied—motivational state, which near-winners might then try to satiate by seeking other rewards. In other words, losing but being shortlisted could actually be motivating in surprising ways.

The scientists tested this idea in a series of studies using laboratory versions of this common scenario. In one, for example, they asked volunteers to test and evaluate a game being developed as a phone app. Each of sixteen tiles covered either a diamond or a rock, eight of each, and the goal was to uncover only diamonds. The game was rigged so that everyone lost, but the losses were not all the same. Some lost decisively, finding only one of the eight diamonds, while others came close, uncovering seven diamonds. Among these near-winners, some missed a diamond only on the last pick, while others missed a diamond—uncovering a rock—on the second pick. The idea here was that some near-winners would anticipate the reward throughout the game, while the other near-winners would have their anticipation sabotaged early.

The scientists wanted to see who—which kind of loser—was most motivated following the gaming experience. They measured motivation by timing how quickly the volunteers walked to pick up a chocolate bar that was being offered as a gift. And the results were clear: The losers who anticipated the win and reward until the very end, and barely lost—the lab version of the shortlist—these losers were much more motivated than those who lost early and those who lost badly. That is, nearly winning was more motivating than losing badly or having one's hopes dashed early on. It seems that motivation grows as long as we approach (and anticipate) a possible victory, but it loses steam once a loss becomes imminent.

Wadhwa and Kim ran other versions of this study, in order to rule out mood and arousal as explanations for the near winners' subsequent behavior. In one, using the same game, they measured salivating rather than walking speed as a proxy for heightened motivation—and got the same result. In another, the near winners made a greater effort to earn money after losing, while in another—a real-life version—the near winners followed a lottery loss by purchasing more in the way of consumer goods, in effect rewarding themselves. In all cases, as described in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Psychological Science*, the combination of coming close, yet losing, boosted motivation in ways unrelated to the original competition.

In some of these studies, quite remarkably, being shortlisted was even more motivating than winning. It appears that winners may experience all kinds of positive emotions that accompany success, but they lack the unfulfilled hopes that come with being shortlisted—and push us onward and upward.

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