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REAP REWARDS: MAXIMIZING BENEFITS FROM REVIEWER COMMENTS

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You've submitted the manuscript to the journal. The waiting begins. Tick, tock, tick, tock. When the decision letter finally arrives, you almost wish you could postpone the moment that is finally upon you. Perhaps with trembling hands, you click on (or tear open) the mail. For a first submission, you know that the chances of an outright acceptance are slim to none, although you can always hope! What you really fear is an outright rejection, which is the ultimate fate, you are told, of 90 percent of all manuscripts submitted to a top-tier journal. You skim through the letter. You know that the usual platitudes precede the twist and almost wish that the letter started off with the decision in large, stamped letters. The suspense gathers momentum as you read how the reviewers were complimentary but raised many questions, how many of their concerns mirror the editor's . . . OK, yeah, yeah, but what is the decision??

Your eyes finally fall on the little, all-powerful sentence that lies innocuous and hidden. As soon as you spot it, the smattering of words surrounding the editor's decision takes on a life of its own. Jumping right off of the page, searing through your consciousness, and relegating the rest of the document to mere verbiage. An R&R—revise and resubmit! COOL! But wait a minute, it says "high risk," and the editor is not sure whether the concerns can be adequately addressed. Is it a usual disclaimer, or disguised advice to not even bother with resubmit-

ting? Your mind is going a mile a minute in many directions as you try to assimilate what you have received.

Undergoing the review process is both an emotional and intellectual endeavor. The emotional roller coaster begins when you open the decision letter. The intellectual process requires revisiting each thought articulated in your submitted manuscript, reexamining every argument made, tightening all the logical connections, checking the methodology, developing more robust tests for the proposed hypotheses, and making your key contributions to existing research stand out emphatically. So, how do you maintain your sanity while navigating this challenging and demanding process?

Sara Rynes has asked us to write about our experiences while undergoing the review process for our paper on spin-outs (Agarwal, Echambadi, Franco, & Sarkar, 2004). This particular paper was a particularly challenging one to write and revise, not only because of the complexity of the issues being investigated, but also because the author team consisted of four people geographically dispersed over three cities. In retrospect, the latter turned to be a benefit in disguise, since we had to develop routines and templates for communication and organization of the revision task. When asked to prepare this editorial, we found ourselves labeling our templates for the stages and subprocesses of our R&R and drawing a mnemonic from the first letters of these labels. "REAP REWARDS" aptly describes the process that enabled us to benefit from the reviewer comments received in each of three successive requests to revise and resubmit this paper. Each letter of this mnemonic stands for a stage of the process, and each stage is identified and described below.

All four authors contributed equally. The names are arranged in alphabetical order. The manuscript has benefited significantly from "reviewer" comments received from Sara Rynes, Janet Bercovitz, Amy Hillman, Glenn Hoetker, Duane Ireland, Marshall Schminke, Sonali Shah, and Rosemarie Ziedonis. Thanks to Persephone Doliner for copy-editing. All remaining errors are ours.

REAP REWARDS

Read the Reviews

The initial thrill of receiving an R&R was soon replaced by the realization that we needed to get down to task. We had gotten our proverbial foot in the door, but how to enter the hallowed edifice? Judging from the editor's intimidating warning that there was a high risk our revision would meet with rejection as well as the sheer volume of reviewer comments, this was going to be quite an onerous and challenging task.

The first stage in the process of revision appears simple, but often it is not. We not only had to *read* the editor's and reviewers' comments but, more importantly, we had to *understand* the true meaning of what they were trying to communicate to us. Every nuance had to be discovered, and not a stone was left unturned as we tried to make sense of the logic underlying the reviewers' concerns. With what did they agree? Who agreed with whom? With what did they absolutely disagree? We experienced considerable sensory overload during this stage, as emotional reactions interjected themselves among more intellectual responses. The initial reading and rereading of the reviews often required cooling-off periods, when we would put the comments aside to be reexamined at a later time.

Emote

At a fundamental level, research is about being creative. Research is also an immensely personal and individual experience. As a result, managing feelings and emotions is as important as cognition and rationality when it comes to undertaking research. We felt that we had shown due diligence in the originally submitted version of the manuscript. With the help of peer reviews and seminar presentations, we had invested much effort and thought in crafting each sentence. Yet here was a set of reviewer comments that seemed to find much fault with many aspects of the manuscript. By its very intent, the review process is geared toward ferreting out logical holes, potential inconsistencies, an absence of clarity, and a myriad of other faults that authors may have overlooked. And regardless of the thickness of the skin one has developed, accepting criticism is never easy.

In every round, the critique of our manuscript, and the resultant list of things-to-do, was daunting indeed. Rather than denying our emotions, we found it helpful to experience the feelings the reviewer comments evoked—hope, despair, anger, frustration and, less often, happiness. These “normal” reactions could not, however, become our

guiding spirits; instead of making the review process a test of our self-esteem, we needed to deal with it rationally and professionally. To do so, we permitted ourselves to feel the emotions and to express them in writing or in conversation—but not outside our “safe” circle of friends and colleagues, and definitely not to the editor. Expression enabled us to purge the emotions out of our system and progress to addressing the reviewer comments in an emotionless, logical, and coherent manner.

Arrange Reviewer Comments

To get down to task, we created a document entitled “Blocks of Reviewer Concerns.” At this stage, we found it helpful to organize the document in clusters of concerns, rather than in the sequential order of the three reviewers' comments. Creating the themed blocks facilitated identification of the key issues and helped us assess convergence or divergence of concerns among the editor and reviewers. For instance, the section on theory in “Blocks of Reviewer Concerns” contained subsections related to overall framing issues as well as subsections on issues related to each hypothesis. We developed similar sections on definitional issues, data, model testing, results, discussion, and so forth, with subsections as appropriate.

In each block of concerns, we also noted our thoughts and responses. The document was helpful in prioritizing the issues. Further, the initial ideas provided a road map for response. Thus, we developed a de facto log of our discovery process, intergroup communication, and progress with and resolution of issues. “Blocks of Reviewer Concerns” was a layered, eyeball-jarring confection in the end, replete with four colors (one for each author's stream of additions and deletions) and various codes and comments, but it nevertheless greatly simplified the later tasks of rewriting the manuscript and drafting the response to the reviewer comments.

Parse Responsibility

We were acutely aware that each of us had other obligations to attend to, and juggling schedules was essential for successfully revising and resubmitting the paper. Each of us authors was thus assigned to be the lead person for particular blocks of reviewer comments. We based these assignments on mutual agreement and our comparative advantages for accomplishing the tasks at hand. This division of labor enabled one person/team to take responsibility and be in charge of the initial changes.

To ensure timely task completion, one author

took on the role of project manager, taking care of the logistical details so that we all met the agreed-on deadlines. Depending on how charitable we felt, this coauthor was alternatively considered a nag or a hard taskmaster! Although the responsibility of being project manager can be a thankless (and even unpleasant) task, all of us agreed on this need for efficient organization of effort. Another coauthor, whom we affectionately called Dr. Phil, gave us regular pep talks and constantly goaded us to give the revision efforts 110 percent. In retrospect, we can see that the responsible undertaking by each coauthor of roles and tasks was crucial to our progress.

Revisit the Manuscript

This is the period in which we reread the manuscript many times with the reviewers' comments in mind. Intellectual immersion was critical during this time. Since it had been quite a while since the last reading of our work, we gained a fresh perspective at this time, reviewing it in the light of reviewer concerns. The rereading enabled an objective look at what needed to be done. The trick, we realized, was to consciously ignore ourselves in order to pay close attention to the reviewers. Paying attention is difficult but imperative. The key challenge before us then was to put aside our own emotions and analyze the text with dispassionate eyes. It was at this point that we finally began to realize that the reviewers were trying to help us! Slowly, the differences appeared less jagged, the suggestions more constructive, and the reservations well warranted. Clarity emerged as the contours of the forest began to materialize behind the shapes of the individual trees.

Evaluate Each Comment

An inevitable consequence of the review process is the emergence of differences among the philosophies, perspectives, and interpretations of reviewers and authors. In this context, it is important to learn how to *discriminate* among reviewer comments. We adopted a process of categorizing the comments into three bins: the critical, the contestable, and the tangential. Identifying the true nature of each comment is vital for success. Misclassification of a critical comment as tangential can jeopardize a paper's chances in the next round, while treating a tangential comment as "critical" can not only waste team resources, but also dilute the sharpness of the paper at a time when focus is essential.

The critical issues reviewers raised typically cen-

tered on clarity, contribution, and logic. Sometimes these comments helped us crystallize and more succinctly articulate our thoughts. For example, in our hypothesis relating to spin-out generation, a reviewer's verbalization of the contingency conditions that occur when there is an "abundance of underutilized knowledge," versus when "knowledge is put to good use," not only helped us express a core idea, but also enabled us to frame the paper more elegantly. Some concerns were on a more mundane level. For example, a reviewer called our argumentation a "fishing expedition" and called our writing style "convoluted, less precise, and . . . too pompous" (ouch!). Nothing that a good dose of humble pie and some salve to one's self-esteem could not fix! Of course, hiring a copy editor also helped.

The contestable comments represented a bigger challenge. These comments required us to seriously consider the merit of the argument but ultimately stand ground on our stated approach. For instance, we were advised to split up the paper into "several (two or three) separate papers." The tone was ominous and the timing, given that this was the second round of reviews, sensitive! However, we debated it through and stuck to our guns, maintaining that one good paper was worth several small ones. Thus, we consigned this concern to the contestable bin.

The third class of comments, the ones we categorized as tangential, consisted of reviewer concerns about issues that, though they might appear to some to be relevant, were in our view beyond the scope of the paper. For example, one reviewer raised issues related to incumbent inertia in the face of entrepreneurial opportunities, and issues related to learning substitution. The reviewer lamented that our study did little to answer questions such as, Why do successful companies fail to exploit apparently very successful business opportunities? Why do spin-out entrepreneurs succeed while the parent company does nothing? Although we agreed that these were interesting and important questions, they were *not relevant in the context of our intended contribution*. As such, we believed that they more properly belonged in the section containing our suggestions for future research. It was crucial that we made this call and that we articulated our reasoning to the editor and reviewers. Had we interpreted this as a critical comment, we might have pursued paths that were off-course, ending up with a loosely developed argument that pulled the paper off-focus.

Write Responses

Having revisited the manuscript and evaluated the comments, we returned to our master list, “Blocks of Reviewer Concerns.” Although we had already drafted some initial responses, at this point we buckled down and dealt with each and every comment. In this process, one’s view of reviewer comments can change upon thought and reflection. Since our response to each comment was contingent on how we evaluated it, we did not want to rush to manuscript rewriting. It was useful to first make notes next to the comments themselves, augmenting the notes made during the initial organization of the blocks of reviewer concerns. Thus, the results from additional data-gathering exercises or robustness tests were noted in our reviewer comments document, as were thoughts and citations that related to the theory development and hypotheses justification sections.

Argue among Yourselves—Play Devil’s Advocate!

This rubric describes perhaps the single most beneficial routine that we developed during the review process. Although our individual imprints are indelible in the manuscript, the team synergies blossomed most fruitfully through our intense bouts of argument. These intellectual debates were invaluable, particularly since we acted on the premise that it’s okay to disagree so long as the discussion is positive and people act reasonably. Each sentence that was ultimately published underwent a test of fire: arguing and explaining one’s thoughts to the other members of the team identified problems with each member’s thinking and forced all of us to examine our ideas more deeply. We also committed our ideas to paper as we talked among ourselves, which further helped us to recognize ambiguities in our thinking, as well as possible solutions.

We revisited each reviewer comment, our original evaluation of it, and the initial response by the lead person, and we listened to at least one person on the team take the “other side.” During these volleys, we would often find more than one way to interpret a reviewer’s comment, a discovery that would then lead to new and interesting ways to think about our paper. Thus, ideas became honed and focused, all the while having to pass the tests posed by various devil’s advocates. The resulting extensive revisions to our thought also meant that we ultimately argued about what had to be included in the manuscript, and those discussions determined how we handled the next, all-important step.

Rewrite the Manuscript

A fundamental decision we made early on was to eschew the cosmetic approach, instead going for a total overhaul of the paper each and every time we set about revising it. In each round, we started with the first sentence and worked our way through the manuscript. This “writing from scratch” approach enabled us to take a holistic view of the many fragments of new information that had to be incorporated throughout the review process. It also meant that we had to evaluate what needed to be changed and what had to be retained, so we did not risk throwing out the baby with the bath water.

We rewrote many times, focusing on taking the paper to the “next level” with every draft. A routine we followed was for one of us to redraft, say, the theory section, send it for reworking to the other authors, and then cycle it back to the author who had taken the initial lead on that section. By the time this round was over, the manuscript was an intellectual battlefield that had seen some serious creative action.

Direct Reviewer Attention to Responses

The exhilarating, if exhausting, process of incorporating reviewer comments had added value to the manuscript, but this augmentation needed to be emphatically communicated to the reviewers. Regardless of the tone of a reviewer comment itself, it was crucial that our response be emotionless, objective, and persuasive. This was particularly important where we disagreed with the reviewer(s) or thought that the comments raised tangential issues. How could we communicate the seriousness with which we had addressed the reviews and yet put forth our disagreement with certain reviewer comments? Crafting responses to reviewer comments may have taken as long as rewriting the manuscript!

Using our “Blocks of Reviewer Concerns” document as a guide, we reverted to the original ordering of the reviewer comments to maintain the coherency of their thought. Importantly, we refrained from duplicating text from the manuscript. Instead, we made the phrasing of each response a test of how precisely and succinctly we could describe our research journey in light of the reviewer comments. The responses provided the reviewers with a snapshot of the key changes in the revised manuscript. The focus was on providing executive summaries for each comment: reiterating what the reviewer who wrote it had said, interpreting his or her statement, and addressing the reviewers’ attention to how and where we had changed the manu-

script. The objective was to make it easy for them to reconnect with their thoughts and ideas while at the same time connecting them to the other reviewers, letting them see where they concurred with others and where they disagreed.

Submit the Revised Manuscript and Responses to the Reviewers

In a topical collection about developmental reviewing (Sanders, 2005), Beath suggests that the perfect image for an academic paper is Ouroboros, the mythical serpent that grips its own tail in its mouth. This ancient symbol is generally thought to represent creative destruction, or the cyclical nature of things. We concur with Beath's imagery. Although our paper was not the last word on spin-outs, we constantly strove to ensure that it not only communicated a coherent story, but also created new knowledge on the subject. This goal required us to circle back among the REAP REWARD steps several times.

Armed with the knowledge that we had presented the ideas as clearly as we could, addressed the highlighted weaknesses to the best of our abilities, and acknowledged the limitations of our research, this final step of submission required the painful process of letting the paper go, without torturing ourselves with the possibility of yet another round of rewriting and rethinking. Knowing that we had done our best, we hoped for the best. At this point, it was important that we develop an emotional buffer and adopt a strategy of detached attachment. Regardless of the review outcome, we knew that we had a more polished, higher-quality manuscript in hand. Thus, by engaging in the fruitful process of responding to the reviewer comments, we were one step closer to our final goal of contributing new scholarship to the field.

And once again the waiting began.

REFLECTIONS

Over the 24-month period between initial submission and final acceptance, our manuscript was with the editor and reviewers for only 8 months; the remaining 16 months were devoted to our addressing the detailed and invaluable reviewer comments. Although some of the processes that we have elaborated may be specific to team efforts, we believe that the basic concepts generalize to individual and dual-author efforts.

While REAP REWARDS accurately describes our "operational" approach during each successive round of revision for our paper, reflecting on this experience has also helped us identify a key mis-

step in the process, and a resulting philosophical takeaway. The misstep involved our going overboard in trying to accommodate reviewers' concerns during our first revision, and the key philosophical takeaway is "To thine own idea be true."¹ We elaborate below.

The first round of reviewer comments was detailed indeed, consisting of 15 single-spaced pages of concerns. Given the complexity and the newness of the research topic, and our three interrelated themes of spin-out generation, development, and survival, the wide span of issues our reviewers raised could not *all* have been addressed in a single manuscript. In retrospect, though, that is precisely what we tried to do. As a result, we spent intense effort in not only addressing each and every concern, but more importantly, in trying to incorporate them all as we "integrated across" a wide swathe of literature in order to create as comprehensive a story as possible. Treating every comment as critical, we lost coherence and focus. We gained considerable insight into each specific concern and learned immensely from the attempt to integrate everything, yet we ended up with a manuscript that was appropriately judged as "longer, less readable" and as "presenting arguments not relevant to the main story." It is clear in hindsight that we were *trying to do too much*. When commenting about the importance of delimiting the subject and theme of an article, Rand (2001) cautions against "attempting to cram everything [one] knows about the subject into one article," particularly if the theme is important. In trying to be as responsive as possible to all reviewer comments, we lost clear sight of our original idea and ended up making one of the reviewers more pessimistic about the outcome.

We had to rectify this weakness during the make-or-break second revision. This required us to step back and take a long hard look and create a focused and coherent story. We found it helpful to go back to our core ideas and critically evaluate each comment rather than single-mindedly follow through on every one. While one of the reviewers believed that the paper was a "patchwork" of ideas that might best be dealt with via multiple papers, we believed that the three parts (spin-out generation, development, and survival) connected to create a complete story. In evaluating this issue, we found it helpful to consult the comments by the other reviewers, and also to solicit feedback during peer presentations at conferences and university

¹ An e-mail exchange with Don Bergh and Sara Rynes helped crystallize this reflection; we are grateful to both of them.

speaker series. Was this a concern shared by others? We deliberated at length before deciding to retain our original framing.

The decision to provide a holistic view of spin-outs ranging from the characteristics that determine their genesis to those that determine their survival meant that we needed to get clear on what issues we believed to be focal and what issues we believed to be important but tangential to our paper. Thus, it was only in the second round of revision that we truly unleashed the power of our sixth step, "evaluate each comment."

The key philosophical takeaway from the experience is that authors need to take reviewers very seriously, but not in a manner that compromises the sanctity of their ideas. Reviewers are guides who may point you in different directions. You need to be able to decide which way to go and follow through unerringly. This may require authors to make difficult calls, to take a stand regarding ideas and vision, and possibly to disagree with a competing reviewer vision of what the "true idea" of a particular paper is. Our decision to keep our original framing was difficult, since it compelled us to assiduously examine and reexamine the veracity of our thoughts. It was also a risky decision, since we knew that we might further disenchant the reviewer and quite possibly invite a rejection, despite the considerable effort we had spent addressing all the comments. What helped us make the decision ultimately was our conviction that that we had adhered to a rational and logical process, leaving no stone unturned, both in arriving at the decision and in explicating it to the reviewers. That said, when we received our acceptance letter, we experienced a tinge of sadness that we had been unable to sway one of the reviewers, in addition to the elation that the editor, Don Bergh, had used his editorial discretion and made a stand, along with the other reviewers who had recommended acceptance.

At the end of the day, regardless of how we classified a reviewer comment, it bears saying that every reviewer comment helped us because we had to investigate the multiple facets of the complex issues at hand, hone our thoughts, and logically determine what was right and what fitted with our core idea and contribution. Thus, even though we may have not have implemented every comment,

we are indebted to all the reviewers for their painstaking input.

We share the honor of winning an award for our paper with our anonymous reviewers and the editor, Don Bergh. We dedicate this article to them, in gratitude.

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