

How the experience of almost winning impacts the performance of nominees

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The 80th Golden Globe Awards this week kicks off Hollywood's annual awards season, which culminates with the Academy Awards in March.

The nominees who are left empty-handed on awards night face the emotional letdown of almost winning. It's the sting felt by anyone who almost had the win—think France's World Cup team, any Olympic silver

medalist, and the countless stellar employees nominated for their organization's awards program who didn't get the prize.

Those almost-winners are very valuable to organizations, and with the right encouragement, can continue to contribute and collaborate to become winners next time, says Hui Liao, Smith Dean's Professor in Leadership and Management at the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business.

In new research in the *Academy of Management Journal*, Liao and her co-authors, including Smith Ph.D. candidate Olivia Zhishuang Guan, look at how the experience of almost winning impacts the performance of nominees, specifically their collaboration with others.

Right after the awards are announced, nominees who didn't win lost motivation to respond to and collaborate with the winners, the researchers find. This was especially true when the non-winning nominees worked in the same department or in other proximity to the winners. However, in the long run, the non-winning nominees collaborated with other employees better. They got over the loss, picked up and became even more responsive collaborators than they were before the awards were announced, says Liao.

She says previous research has looked at the effectiveness of company-wide employee awards programs, which are very prevalent and often include a monetary reward and public recognition.

"Companies set up these programs not only to recognize those who have done well, but also to reinforce the organization's culture, goals and critical behaviors of all employees," Liao says. "They want the award-winners to be role models for the rest of the organization."

This is the first research to look specifically at the non-winners nominees

as a separate group from others who didn't receive the award. Having almost won, they have a much different psychological experience than other non-recipients, says Liao. "Lumping them together could prevent us from really understanding how these two groups of people will react to employee awards differently."

And though nominees might be a small number of employees, they are very important to an organization.

"Being nominated itself is an indicator of a high level of capability, skill and performance relative to those who did not get nominated in the first place," Liao says. "That's why understanding how an awards program is motivating—or demotivating—for non-winners nominees is very important."

Liao and her co-authors specifically looked at employees' collaboration responsiveness, or how promptly or not an individual responds to a request for information or a meeting from colleagues. Collaboration in teams, across units and even with other organizations is considered a critical component for success for many businesses.

The researchers analyzed data from an online collaboration tool from a large organization in the two months before a big company-wide award was announced and in the six months after. They focused on the collaborative responsiveness of non-winner nominees to other people in general, and to winners.

"We found that compared to non-nominees, the non-winner nominees have lower collaboration responsiveness to winners following the awards announcement," Liao says. "When they have a higher structural proximity to the winners—for example, they were on the same team or worked in the same office—then the negative impact on their responsiveness was even bigger."

However, in the long run, the researchers found that non-winner nominees have higher collaboration responsiveness to others in general.

To figure out why, Liao and her co-authors surveyed the employees immediately after the awards announcement to capture their emotions and motivations.

Like many near-winners, the nominees who missed out on awards felt frustration, disappointment, anger and resentment—all the emotions that go along with the "it-could-have-been-me" thinking.

"This is why immediately following the award announcement, we see the non-winner nominees decrease their collaboration responsiveness to the winners," Liao says.

But, she says, the research also shows how losing can also be a great motivator for nonwinner nominees. "We found from Study 2 that right after the announcement, they experienced simultaneously higher negative emotions and higher motivation. "On one hand they feel frustrated, angry and disappointed that they didn't win, but on the other hand that becomes motivation to do better to win next time."

In general, because the negative emotional impact is canceled out by the positive motivation impact, in the short run, there is no overall impact to non-winner nominees' overall collaboration responsiveness to others in general, says Liao.

But six months later, the positive effects prevail, she says, because negative emotions subside and people realize that if they didn't win this time, they have potential to win next time..

"The non-winner got over it and became more rational," Liao says.
"That's why we found in the long run, losing increased nominees'

collaboration responsiveness."

She says there are things managers can do to encourage the best outcomes.

"It is very important for managers to be mindful in promoting collaboration between non-winner nominees and the winners because that's where the tension is the strongest, especially immediately following the award program. They should recognize that this shock to the non-winner nominees will generate strong negative emotions and that could impact their [collaboration](#) with others, especially the winners."

"Managers can help non-winner nominees curb such [negative emotions](#) through showing appreciation for their contribution and providing support such as encouragement, feedback, and resources to help them pursue higher performance and better chances of winning in the future."

For the near-winning employees, Liao has this advice: "Though you may feel terrible right after losing out to others, you will get over those feelings. Believe in yourself and believe that good efforts will prevail. Have your eyes on the prize, keep trying and you may have a good shot at it."

And the advice goes beyond award programs, she says.

"This can be applied to not only the situation where you got nominated but didn't win the [award](#), but to any situation where you really consider yourself very, very close to 'getting it,' but lost out."

More information: Hui Liao et al, The Award Goes to... Someone Else: A Natural Quasi-Experiment Examining the Impact of Performance Awards on Nominees' Workplace Collaboration, *Academy of Management Journal* (2022). [DOI: 10.5465/amj.2021.0662](https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2021.0662)

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