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# Hollywood's Necessary Not-Niceness



By Marty Kaplan

The billion people who will watch the 2015 Academy Awards got a great gift last week from Amy Pascal, the recently fired co-chair of Sony Pictures, who said this to Tina Brown at a Women in the World conference in San Francisco:

“We all live in this weird thing called Hollywood. If we all actually were nice, it wouldn’t work.”

What prompted Pascal’s candor were questions Brown asked about her online candor in emails hacked and revealed — reportedly by North Korea — in retribution for *The Interview*, Sony’s gross-out comedy about the justifiable assassination of an actual, living head of state, Kim Jung-un.

Some of the juiciest exchanges were in emails between Pascal and producer Scott Rudin about director David Fincher, who was abandoning Angelina Jolie’s movie version of Cleopatra to helm (it seemed at the time) Rudin’s movie version of Steve Jobs. Pascal pleaded with Rudin to call Jolie to mollify her. Rudin replied that Pascal was as much behind the Fincher redeployment as he was, and that she suggested “masturbatory call is a wank I have no time for.” “Shut it down,” he ordered Pascal, “it” meaning Jolie. “Do not f—ing threaten me,” Pascal replied. “Watch how you talk to me,” responded Rudin, who called Jolie “a minimally talented spoiled brat... a camp event and a celebrity and that’s all.”

These hacked emails represent just the tip of the not-niceness iceberg that Pascal says makes Hollywood work. No doubt there will be some who are exceptions on view on Sunday at the Oscars. Some of the winners who’ll tell their toddlers how much they love them may actually be as lovely in their business lives as they are in their acceptance speeches, and some branches of the industry (agents and managers come to mind) are entirely sincere in sucking up to their clients and the people with the power to hire them. But I think Pascal’s take on the industry’s id is largely fair. Politeness is a bad business model for entertainment.

(Disclosure: I’ve known and liked Amy Pascal for decades. Her husband has been a friend for even longer. If that disqualifies me from arguing that she’s right about the weirdness needed to make Hollywood work, please do not f—ing read any further.)

For nearly four years I was an executive at Disney, a vice president of production for live-action feature films. I spent almost eight more years there as a screenwriter and producer. My first boss at Disney, Pascal's equivalent, was Jeffrey Katzenberg, and when I arrived at the studio from Washington, D.C., where I had spent most of eight years as a speechwriter, Katzenberg told me that the best way to learn my new job was to shadow him — to sit in on his meetings, listen to him on the phone, accompany him to breakfasts, test screenings, media junkets, negotiations, to see behind the curtain and learn how it's done.

I thought of that apprenticeship when I read Pascal's response to a question from Brown asking what was the most important thing she'd learned from the hacked emails: "Say exactly what you think directly to people all the time. In the moment, the first time."

At Disney, one of the first moves Katzenberg made when he arrived from Paramount was to make "overall" deals with producers, which gave them offices on the lot, paid for their development staffs and financed the cost of screenwriters to draft their projects, in exchange for their exclusivity to the studio. I was assigned as account executive on a number of these producer deals, and my job was to keep them happy and productive, while at the same time giving them the studio's notes when scripts came in. My mandate, as I interpreted it, was to give orders, but to frame them as friendly suggestions. My liability, as I came to realize, was caring about being liked.

One day, as the date approached for Disney's option to extend the deal of a producing team I tended, Katzenberg asked me to join his meeting with them. Disney had already invested millions in their production company; millions more were at stake. I was in his office when they arrived. Handshakes, hugs and Diet Cokes all around. Just as the producers were settling themselves on the couch, Katzenberg jovially shouted out, the way you might congratulate someone, "Divorce time!" No explanations, no recriminations, no regrets. The meeting was over a few minutes later, after some gossip about last weekend's grosses.

What struck me was how normal this encounter seemed to everyone but me. I should have learned the lesson by then, but the meeting finally drove it home: That's just business as usual in Hollywood. Niceness is an impediment to efficiency, and anyway, no one believes it. Sometimes profanity and meanness come with the candor, but to those on the inside, it's never shocking. It's actually a dog whistle to signal membership in a common culture of wealth, fame and narcissism. That's why Pascal's account of Jolie's reaction to Rudin's calling her "it," and worse, is so credible: "Angie didn't care." Why should she? Rudin's legendary contempt conveyed the same meaning as Sally Fields' Oscar: "You like me!" I'm in the club!

Hollywood isn't the only endeavor whose principals, as Pascal described its stars, can be "bottomless pits of need." Politics comes to mind, as well as Wall Street, Silicon Valley, the media, academia, organized religion and that bedrock of civilization, the family. I leap to exempt from this characterization anyone from Minnesota, plus everyone else whose niceness even behind closed doors attests to their exceptionalism. But as for most of the rest of the domains we human animals have created, I'll take Pascal's wager: Not-niceness is the weirdness that makes it work.