



Choose Your Mirror Wisely

Mirror Neurons & the Company You Keep



When we aren't performing at our best as writers/artists, we tend to blame it on ourselves (I'm blocked, I don't know what to write/create, I lack will power, discipline, talent, ambition, etc.) or on the circumstances of our lives (I'm too busy, I'll get it to later, I have other responsibilities, etc.) In short, we see it as the result of some form of resistance.

Rarely do we consider the possibility that maybe we aren't resistant as much as we are under-assisted.

According to the Gallop Organization, the factor that most clearly predicts the performance of an employee is her or his relationship with her or his supervisor. Obviously, a bad boss is one of the worst things that can happen for your ultimate success as well as your job satisfaction. And though I wouldn't have believed it back when I worked in corporate America, it turns out that a mediocre boss is better than no boss at all. A good boss is a great gift. A good supervisor:

- Creates positive expectations
- Provides accountability
- Recognizes and rewards performance
- Defines the parameters of a project
- Gives direction and sets priorities
- Challenges, encourages, coaches and collaborates
- Provides feedback

At the most basic level and yet the most significant level, a supervisor sees you in the position and expects you to do the job. Is there

anyone in your life that sees you as a writer or artist and expects you to write or create?

For many freelancers and nearly all aspiring writers/artists, the answer is "No one but me, and sometimes not even me." No one else sees you as a writer/artist and so it's harder to see yourself as a writer/artist. No one else expects you to write/create, so you don't write/create the way you truly want to.

If you're employed as a writer/artist, you have a supervisor, but if you're like most employed writers/artists I know, you also have a personal project – a novel, a memoir, poetry, pottery, a series of paintings or sculptures – that your employer isn't paying for and doesn't care about. This personal creativity languishes, in part because no one else sees you as a novelist, a memoirist, a poet, a potter, a painter, a sculptor. No one sets expectations, defines the parameters and holds you accountable.

It's true that we have to take the initiative. We have to motivate ourselves and regulate our behavior. We are our own supervisor much of the time. But we can't give ourselves everything a good supervisor can – even the most gifted surgeon hesitates to operate on herself.

You may have several people in your life who play some of the roles a good supervisor plays, but chances are you aren't getting all the key benefits. It helps to identify what's missing and consider who could give you what you need if you asked.

Who's Got Your Back?

It matters what company you keep. You don't want just anyone to be your creative supervisor. Or your creative buddy.

You've probably heard about the research that shows that if your friends are overweight, you are over 50% more likely to be overweight, too. I wouldn't be surprised if future research showed that if your friends are creatively blocked, you are more likely to struggle with your creativity.

I'm convinced that having connections with other writers and artists is a great benefit. I'm also convinced that being part of a dysfunctional or ineffective writer's or artist's community is worse than being alone.

Consider your own creative connections. What kind of creative company are you keeping? Where and how do you connect with other writers/artists? Are you part of a writer's or artist's group? Where and how do you connect with creative colleagues: at readings, galleries, classes, forums, salons or via magazines, blogs, Twitter or other social networking? What percentage of your connections with other writers/artists are in-person and what percentage are electronic or remote?

How do you feel and what do you think connecting with your creative colleagues? Are you enthusiastic, engaged and excited about your writing/art? Are you motivated and eager to get back to your work or are you left with a vague sense of dissatisfaction and discouragement? Do you get new ideas, perspectives and strategies or is your thinking unchanged? Are you optimistic, if not about art/publishing as a whole, at least about your ability to respond to the changes and challenges you face?

Most importantly, what do you do after connecting with other writers/artists? What actions do you take? What challenge are you more likely to embrace? What risk are you less likely to take? Is the time you spend with other writers/artists (in-person or electronically) worth the time you're not focused and acting on your own creative projects?



Mirror, Mirror, On the Wall

The company you keep as a creative person has such a significant impact on you because of a newly discovered part of the primate brain: mirror neurons (visit <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/3204/01.html> to watch an informative and engaging video).

Like many scientific breakthroughs, mirror neurons were discovered accidentally. Daniel Goleman describes the fortuitous fluke in *Social Intelligence* (2006, p. 41): "Neuroscientists stumbled on this neural WiFi by accident in 1992. They were mapping the sensorimotor area of monkey's brains by using electrodes so laser-thin they could be transplanted in single brain cells, and seeing which cell lit up during a specific movement... But the truly unexpected discovery came one hot afternoon when a research assistant came back from a break eating an ice-cream cone. The scientists were astonished to see a sensorimotor cell activate as one monkey watched the assistant lift the cone to his lips. They were dumbfounded to find that a distinct set of neurons seemed to activate when the monkey merely *observed* another monkey – or one of the experimenters – making a given movement."



These "monkey see, monkey do neurons" allow us to learn by observing. For some parts of the brain, mentally rehearsing what you're going to do – practicing what you're going to say in a presentation or in my case, imagining how I'll run an agility course – is the same as doing it.

But remember the "monkey do" part of the expression. Practicing is vital. You can't lose weight just by watching someone else exercise, for example; you have to respond to the mirror neurons' prompts and take action.

A "monkey do, monkey see" flipside may also be true. When you've practiced what you're seeing, you get more benefit from observing others. In a study comparing the mirror neurons of

ordinary people with those of professionally-trained dancers while both groups observed a dance performance, the professionally-trained dancers had significantly more mirror neurons firing. And more mirror neurons fired when the dancers watched dance moves they had practiced than when they watched moves they hadn't learned.



The full implications of how mirror neurons specifically influence writers/artists haven't been researched yet. We do know that all primates have mirror neurons and that humans have a lot more than other primates. While I don't think that writers/artists have more mirror neurons than people who don't recognize and practice creative expression, I do suspect we may be more attuned to our mirror neurons.

We also know that mirror neurons have been discovered near the language centers of the brain and mirror neurons may prove to be essential in our ability to acquire language. So I think we can safely assume that mirror neurons are at least part of what's going on when writers get a boost from writing in a group.



For example, students in my Enter the Flow and Writer's Workout classes (where we do a lot of in-class writing) frequently tell me it's easier for them to write in class and that they get more out of the in-class writing sessions than they do when they're writing alone. Just being with other writers/artists creating can activate the neurons you use when you create.

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Because mirror neurons are the foundation of empathy – we feel what we observe others feeling – being with other creatives who are excited about

their creative work is going to make you feel more excited about your own work. Being with writers/artists who are discouraged and giving in to their resistance is going to make you feel discouraged and make you more likely to give up.

Be choosy about who you spend time with – and whose neurons you want to mirror.

My students also suggest there may be a cumulative effect in the boost they get from writing in the company of other writers. While the writing they do in class is often easier and more productive than their solo writing, those solo sessions are easier and more productive than the solo sessions were before the students took the class. Moreover, the solo writing they do after the class ends continues to be easier and more productive than it was before they took the class.

I also believe mirror neurons are involved in the benefits artists get from studying art produced by the masters in their craft and writers get from reading and studying good writing. As Stephen King says, "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time or the tools to write."

Studying great art and reading great literature can be a mental rehearsal that activates your mirror neurons and prepares you for your own creative effort. Again you want to be choosy: filling your brain with "junk art" or "junk literature" (admittedly two oxymoronic phrases) probably makes you more likely to create junk.

As writers/artists, we give ourselves the benefits (or limitations) of a good (or bad) boss by selecting the creative company we keep. Let's choose wisely.

Entering the Flow got me writing! This class provided a structure to go in deep and churn out ideas and pages.

Rosanne taught me to make writing a habit, and I write every day now, and have for two years. She helped me discover my heart. I would recommend her classes and services to anyone.

Newsletter or Blog?

I hope you're subscribed to both this Imagination InkLinks newsletter and my blog at www.BaneOfYourResistance.wordpress.com.

In case you're wondering if you should choose between the two, let me clarify that the newsletter is longer, more in-depth and comes out less frequently than the blog, which gets a new post at least once a week. The blog is written exclusively for writers and is focused primarily on understanding and resolving writing resistance; the newsletter is written for artists in all forms of creative expression and explores a wide range of topics related to creativity.

Sometimes a newsletter, like this issue, may be a blend of a couple of related blog posts. Sometimes a blog post may be a condensation of a previous issue of Imagination InkLinks. But most of the time, the content of the newsletter and blog are completely different, so I recommend subscribing to both. Visit my website (www.RosanneBane.com) to subscribe to the newsletter; visit the blog to subscribe to it.

Please contact me to talk about coaching or classes
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Find Great Creative Company in Upcoming Classes

The Writing Habit (choose one of three different sections) at Oakdale Washington County Library (Thursdays, 1 to 3 pm, Oct 29 thru Dec 10), the Open Book (Wednesdays, 5 to 7 pm, Jan 27 thru March 3, 2010), or Eagan Wescott Library (Fridays, 1 to 3 pm, March 19 thru April 23, 2010). You'll be encouraged and supported as you develop sustainable writing habits, become accountable to yourself and take action to achieve your writing goals. Students in previous Writing Habit classes have formed writers' support groups that continue to meet for years.



Writing Our Way Through Shadow at the Open Book (Wednesdays, 5 to 7 pm, Oct 28 thru Dec 9) All writers have a shadow side that can show up as a missed deadline, censoring yourself, a lack of energy or engagement with your writing, feeling blocked or afraid. It can be a bit intimidating to think about the shadow issues specific to writers all by yourself; this class provides a safe and supportive community that makes the exploration a lot less scary and a lot more interesting.

Writer's Workout at Eagan Wescott Library (Fridays, 12:30 to 3:00 pm, Jan 29 thru March 5, 2010). Get your mirror neurons firing as you write for 2 hours in the company of other writers. We'll start with writer's warm-ups that use creative play to propel you into the writing. The writer's aerobics and conditioning program will encourage you to explore your own character and story ideas in response to directed exercises. Co-taught with Paula Granquist.

Writer's Resistance at the Open Book (Wednesdays, 5 to 7 pm, March 17 thru April 21, 2010) Weekly check-ins with other writers working to overcome resistance will inspire you and help you recognize when and how you resist your writing. We'll explore the neurology and psychology of writing resistance and how to respond appropriately to it so you can achieve your dreams and goals.

For more information or to register for Loft classes, go to www.loft.org or call 612-879-8999.