Could Envy Be The Key To Advancing Your Career?

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Summary

Stacy Kim, author of the new book *ENVY: Why Wanting What They Have is the Key to Getting What You Want*, explains that envy can be a useful tool for career success. Although envy is typically suppressed as a negative emotion, Kim argues that it acts as an alarm bell revealing important information about our hidden ambitions and personal brands. She introduces the acronym S.I.Re.N. to describe the four components of envy: similar target, intangible desire, relevant comparison, and negative emotion. By examining these components rather than hiding the feeling, people can identify skills to practice, clarify what they truly want, and turn discomfort into actionable career growth.

Envy gets a bad rap. We're taught that comparing ourselves to others is unhealthy, that envy is something to suppress, and that wanting what someone else has is a character flaw. But what if envy isn't something to be ashamed of? What if it's actually trying to tell you something important about what you want, who you want to become, and where you want your career to go? Used thoughtfully, envy can become an unexpected tool for career growth. It can reveal ambitions you haven't acknowledged, point you toward people you can learn from, and even help you clarify your personal brand.

This New Book About Envy Could Hold The Key To Your Career Success

I sat down with the envy emissary Stacy Kim, author of the fascinating new book *ENVY: Why Wanting What They Have is the Key to Getting What You Want*, to learn why this much-maligned, misunderstood emotion may be more useful than we think, and how to turn those feelings of envy into fuel for career success.

William Arruda: Let's start with the basics. What is envy and why does it matter?

Stacy Kim: Envy is simply wanting something that someone else has. It's a negative emotion. It makes us feel bad about ourselves, behind or lacking. So most people hide it or suppress it. But, the thing about negative emotions is that they are trying to tell us something. And, when we ignore or deny our envy, we're missing out on some important information. Envy shows us what we want that's important to us and gives us a guide to emulate. It can also motivate us. And, because it helps us understand ourselves better, it can also help us develop our personal brands.

Arruda: What made you want to study envy?

Kim: I spent my adolescence in Korea, back in the late 70s, early 80s, and long before K-pop, K-drama, and K-beauty were things. It was a country that was backwards and striving. One thing that stood out to me was that Koreans were constantly making comparisons. They did this openly and would even say aloud, "I envy you." They would say, "부러워," which not only means "I envy you" but also "I wish to be like you." It was a conversation starter, one where the envied would give tips to the envier. But, here in the US, no one talks about envy, it's considered a "deadly sin."

Arruda: But, isn't envy bad? What about "comparison is the thief of joy"? Isn't that often why we feel so bad after scrolling on Instagram or LinkedIn?

Kim: Yes, of course. I feel bad after being on social media all the time. But, if we stop there and don't take it a few steps further to examine our envy, we don't give ourselves the

opportunity to feel better and learn from it. We just get stuck in shame. If you spend a little more time examining your envy, it can give you hope.

Arruda: How do we do that?

Kim: There are four key components of envy. I give it the acronym, S. I. Re. N. because it's an alarm bell trying to tell us something important. S is similar target. We envy people who are close to us or just ahead of us. This tells us that what we want is within our reach. And that can be hopeful. I is intangible desire. At first we think we want money, beauty, the promotion, the vacation, etc., but what we truly want is the feeling we think those things will give us. It's usually something intangible. And, once we consider that, we can see that there are many other ways of getting that feeling we desire. Re is relevant comparison. This shows us the domain or area that is important to us. Finally, N is negative emotion, again the signal to pay attention. It's also a gauge. The more negative we feel or the longer the envy stays with us, the more important it is to us.

Arruda: How can envy help us uncover our career desiderata, the goals we have for our career that we may not have acknowledged?

Kim: When we look at the four components of envy, we can often see that perhaps there is something we're not doing that we could do to get what we want. Or maybe there is a skill we need to practice. As a coach, I ask my clients to try to use their envy to help them figure out a small "skill-building micro action" they could test out in the next week.

Arruda: Can you give an example? How about taking us through someone you envy?

Kim: OK. I admit I used to envy Gretchen Rubin. She's a brilliant writer and has a massive personal brand now. But, way back when she was becoming successful for the Happiness Project, I couldn't bring myself to read the book. Looking back, I wished that I had come up with that project. The intangible desire was that I wanted to do the kind of writing she was doing. But, for a very long time, I couldn't even admit to myself that I wanted to be a writer. When I finally did start reading her book, my envy quickly became admiration. I realized that she had done so much work to get to where she was, and I had not even tried. The more I learned about her, the more I realized I was much farther behind her. But, it wasn't discouraging, it was somehow encouraging, because I could tell myself, maybe if I do the work, I could do what she does. I also used her as a guide. And, as I started doing the same for other writers I envied, I realized what was similar and different about each of them. That helped me figure out what kind of writer I am and what I could be.

Arruda: We often envy the outcome without seeing the work that produced it. How does learning more about the person we envy change our envy?

Kim: The best thing to do is to ask the person what they did to get to where they are at. Sometimes that isn't safe or possible, so studying that person's work or behavior can help. Another way to do it is to find someone else who's like the person you envy and to ask them or study them. I don't think people realize that most people enjoy the opportunity to talk about themselves and share what they've learned with someone who can ask a very specific question. This is where studying that person before talking to them helps.

Arruda: Can envy reveal something about our personal brand that we haven't recognized yet?

Kim: Yes, there are times when we don't realize something is important to us, or we are unaware that we are not allowing ourselves to go after what we want. For example, I have a number of clients who don't give themselves permission to pursue or develop a more creative side. They're so focused on their careers that they think pursuing a hobby or maybe a side hustle they enjoy is frivolous or a waste of time. When they start envying other friends who do those things, it helps them to see they want that too. And when they go after those things, they become part of who they are, something that makes them stand out.

Arruda: What should someone do the next time they have that little stab of envy when a colleague gets promoted, lands a big opportunity, or posts an accomplishment on LinkedIn?

Kim: First, acknowledge that the stab or discomfort, notice it, feel it. Instead of pushing it away, simply label it and remind yourself that it's normal. Then, after that discomfort subsides a bit, try to identify the SIReN, or the four components of envy. It helps to write them down. Journaling is wonderful, but it's not always easy to do. This is why I like 3x5 index cards. By writing it down, it's like you're physically getting the thoughts out of your head, and you're processing the information. It helps you think and study your envy. Then, come back to it a few days later. Does it still bother you, or have you already forgotten about it? If it's the latter, great. But, if it nags you, see if there's something you might do to get you closer to that intangible desire.

Turn Envy Into Career Opportunity

Envy may be uncomfortable, but it can also be instructive. It can reveal what you value, illuminate what you want, and point you toward what's possible. Instead of asking, "Why do they have that and I don't?" ask a more productive question: "What is my envy trying to tell me?" The answer could become a roadmap for your career.

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