

# THE DISRUPTORS

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*How Princess Diana  
Turned her Shortcomings  
into Strengths*

# How Princess Diana Turned her Shortcomings into Strengths

*Dr Rainer Zitelmann*

Some people can turn major disadvantages into major advantages. This is something we can learn from Princess Diana - don't try to do well in a field where you can never win. Dr Rainer Zitelmann believes that she was a genius in the art of self-marketing - she knew how important it was to be authentic, acknowledge her weaknesses and turn them into her biggest strengths. We hear his thoughts on the lessons we can learn from her below.





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By traditional standards, Diana was neither well-educated nor intelligent, but she possessed an extraordinarily high level of “emotional” intelligence. The term was coined by the psychologist Howard Gardner, who suggested expanding the traditional concept of intelligence to include not only linguistic and mathematical skills but also a range of other “intelligences.” Emotional intelligence can play a far greater role in building oneself as a brand than the kinds of skills that are measured in traditional IQ tests. And a lack of academic education need not be a disadvantage. It can even be an advantage.

Diana was admitted to Riddlesworth Hall Boarding School at the age of nine and while her siblings flourished at school, she was an average student at best. She didn't leave school completely empty-handed - she did win the 'Most Popular Girl' trophy and the prize for best kept guinea pig. From 1973, she attended West Heath boarding school. The modest aims of the school were no secret and the only condition for admission was neat handwriting. But even at this boarding school, Diana's lack of intellectual curiosity was striking. “The groundwork wasn't there,” said Ruth Rudge, the headmistress. “As with anyone with other things on their mind, she would go off in daydreams.”

Diana left her exclusive girls' boarding school, West Heath, at the tender age of 16, having failed every one of her exams not once but twice. Diana's schoolmates remembered her fondly, describing her as a helpful person and “awfully sweet” to her two hamsters, Little Black Muff and Little Black Puff. As her biographer Tina Brown wrote: “Turning over examination papers turned her over inside ... She did, in fact, have a talent that West Heath had already noticed. She had a keen emotional intelligence.”

Diana's favourite books were romance novels by Barbara Cartland, an extremely successful writer who wrote no less than 724 tear-jerking stories. By the end of

Cartland's novels, the shy, inconspicuous heroine has usually won the heart and affections of a dashing prince or gallant gentleman. “In those stories,” confessed Diana, “was everyone I dreamed of, everything I hoped for.”

Early on she dreamt of marrying a real prince, Prince Charles. And she was quite capable of systematic analysis when it counted most. For example, she painstakingly analysed the mistakes her sister had made during an earlier (failed) relationship with Prince Charles. Diana proved that big dreams can become reality if you focus entirely on a single goal – no matter how “unrealistic” it may seem.

But this is just one side of the story. It is also true that her later disappointment was perhaps, at least in part, because in her youth, the saccharine novels she devoured had created an expectation of a fantasy world that reality could simply never live up to. As Barbara Cartland put it: “The only books she ever read were mine and they weren't awfully good for her.”

Reading quality newspapers was also not her thing. At breakfast she read the emotionally charged Daily Mail, she was a “complete press addict” and devoured tabloid gossip about celebrities and royal families. From her point of view, this was entirely rational. Her precise knowledge of these media helped her a lot in what she was to become a master of self-marketing, which included a thorough knowledge of the press that was most relevant to her.

She was not only an avid consumer of tabloid news. To her, the journalists and paparazzi that had been stalking her everywhere since the beginning of her liaison with Prince Charles were not faceless snappers or hacks. Typically, journalists and photographers are interested in celebrities, but celebrities are far less interested in journalists and photographers. It was different with Diana. She knew precisely how to win over journalists and photographers. And she knew exactly which stories newspaper



readers most wanted to read and which photos they most wanted to see. Diana had made it her business to get to know the editors and chairmen of every important media outlet – just as, back when she was a young, unmarried woman, she had gotten to know the journalists who stalked her. She invited key newspaper editors to private lunches at Kensington Palace. “An encounter with the Princess on her own turf became a full-on multimedia experience combining all she had learned and wanted to project,” explained her biographer Brown. The chief editor of a society magazine reported: “Everything went into the performance of Being Diana.”

Expressing her desire to become a “Queen of People’s Hearts,” Diana had concisely and memorably formulated her key brand message – and had done so just as well as Steve Jobs did when he first marketed his iPhone.

So, how did Diana position herself? Of course, she could not just rely on her good looks. Diana – very astutely in this respect – recognised early on that it would have been completely impossible for her to try to shine in intellectual or political arenas. Why try to compete in domains where she could only lose and embarrass herself? Her positioning, her USP, was the “Queen of People’s Hearts.”

Psychologically, Diana was an extremely unstable woman with serious problems: she suffered from bulimia; after a fight with her husband, she cut her chest and thighs with a pocket knife; she was not able to develop a normal, harmonious or loving relationship with any of her partners, but was completely unable to have a functioning relationship; and normal friendships were also very difficult for her. The number of her outcast friends grew almost daily.

But this was only one side of Diana. Like many people with psychological problems, she was extremely empathetic to the needs of others, especially those she did not know. She probably suffered from what

the psychoanalyst Wolfgang Schmidbauer described as the “helper syndrome” in his book *Helpless Helpers*. The term refers to a pattern of mental problems that are often found among helping professions. As a consequence of their special personality, “helpers” try to compensate for their own feelings of inferiority by becoming fixated on their roles as helpers. In its most extreme form, their willingness to help can even lead to self-harm and neglect of family and other relationships, which can result in burnout or depression. She had difficulties in dealing with intellectuals. But she knew how to turn her deficit, namely her lack of education and conventional intelligence, into an advantage.

Diana, more than perhaps any other woman before her, was a master of self-promotion. Pretty much everyone can remember her impressive TV interview and the way she shone and formulated her messages, capturing the hearts of people all around the world in the process. She engineered ingenious public relations coups, such as a book about her relationship with her husband, which she claimed she had nothing to do with. In truth, the book was her idea and she read every word of it prior to publication and even added notes and corrections to the margins of the manuscript.

Everyone can learn from Diana: a lack of education and even conventional intelligence need not be a disadvantage if you have mastered the art of turning weaknesses into strengths and disadvantages into advantages.

#### *About the author:*

Dr. Rainer Zitelmann is a historian and sociologist. He is also a world-renowned author who has written 25 books, a successful businessman and real estate investor. His latest book: *How People Become Famous: Geniuses of Self-Marketing from Albert Einstein to Kim Kardashian* – (<https://how-people-become-famous.com>) was published in November 2021.