

Lessons in perseverance and creative leadership, inspired by Mamma Mia!

The story of how Judy Craymer turned a no into a yes is a case study in the use of entrepreneurial thinking to build a dream team and global success.



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Since its West End debut in 1999, over 70 million people have seen the feel-good musical *Mamma Mia!*, a sunny mother-daughter story featuring the greatest hits of ABBA. A firm audience favorite, it has been performed in 450 cities, translated into 16 languages and was made into a record-breaking [film franchise starring Meryl Streep](#). It works because it serves a heady cocktail of hummable tunes in a story about love, second chances, and the beauty and unpredictability of life.

Although *Mamma Mia!*'s success might seem inevitable in hindsight, producer [Judy Craymer](#) only managed to get it made by being relentless in pursuit of one little word — yes — and being just as willing to sometimes say no.

The story of how *Mamma Mia!* came to fruition is the subject of a three-part case study co-authored by IESE's [Nuria Chinchilla](#) and [Kandarp Mehta](#) with Arturo Gomez-Quijano. This is the story of perseverance and the importance of that never-say-die attitude in eventually making sure that “the winner takes it all.”

Knowing me, knowing you

Craymer studied at the [Guildhall School of Music and Drama](#) in London. In 1978, she began working at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, a small English city with outsized connections in musical theater — it often served as a testing ground for new musicals before they went on tour.

In the arts, who you know can be as important as what you know, and Craymer was making the early connections that would lead her to collaborate on some of the great productions of the 1980s, including *Cats*. She also worked with some of musical theater's key players. Most notably, she became the production assistant to Tim Rice, the songwriter and Andrew Lloyd Webber collaborator. Through Rice, she met Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson, the male half of the ABBA pop quartet.

[ABBA, with their earworm harmonies, were the voice of 1970s pop](#). But by 1982 the group was on hiatus, and Ulvaeus and Andersson were interested in making a musical with Rice. That musical became *Chess*. As Rice's assistant, Craymer went to Stockholm for the recording of the *Chess* album. There, she fell under the spell of the original ABBA songs, particularly “The Winner Takes It All.” It was a lot like the songs she was used to working on in musical theater: timeless, melodic and with a strong narrative arc.

This gave her a simple yet extraordinary idea: to create an original musical using ABBA's

greatest hits. Since she had a direct line to Ulvaeus and Andersson, she asked them for the rights to use their songs. She was 27, with no major backing. Perhaps inevitably, they said no.

If you change your mind, I'm the first in line

It took Craymer 10 years of persistence to turn that no into a conditional yes. By 1995, the ABBA founders had struck a deal: If Craymer could bring them a good story — one that didn't tell the story of the group itself but integrated their songs into a fresh narrative — she could use their songs.

Overnight, Craymer essentially became an entrepreneur, though she likely didn't think in these terms. She was a creative in pursuit of a dream. She quit her job, sold her apartment and founded her own company to pour her resources into the project that had consumed her for a decade. Wasn't this highly risky, for what was only a conditional yes?

IESE's Mehta says show business is an industry where the "signaling effect" holds a lot of sway; a conditional yes represents valuable currency that you can spend, as it influences others' perception of a project.

As an example, Mehta cites the 1974 film [*Murder on the Orient Express*](#). Director Sidney Lumet wanted to assemble an all-star cast. He decided to woo the biggest star first, and got a conditional yes from Sean Connery. He ran with that to eventually reel in Albert Finney, Ingrid Bergman, Lauren Bacall, Vanessa Redgrave, Anthony Perkins and many other stars.

As a producer, Craymer didn't write, direct or choreograph — but she knew people who could. Faced with assembling her own team after so many years joining the teams of others, Craymer pitched her idea to the big names in musical theater. They all said no.



Producer Judy Craymer (pictured) wouldn't take no for an answer

But one friend recommended a writer: single mother [Catherine Johnson](#), who had won a playwriting competition at the Bristol Old Vic and badly needed a paycheck to support her children. Craymer made her pitch (which she had honed after all the no's): Would Johnson write a story for her that would be the structure to hang ABBA's songs on?

Mehta says, "So often leaders or entrepreneurs make the mistake of waiting for the perfect product. But what Craymer needed was a script in order to advance her project. She needed to make a start, even if it wasn't perfect."

Johnson and Craymer hashed out the initial concept — a mother and daughter singing ABBA songs on a Greek island — and Johnson eventually came back with a Shakespearean romp of a script, in which a daughter invites her mother's three exes to her wedding, hoping to find out which one is her father. The story provided ample scope for ABBA's two main song types: upbeat anthems and reflective ballads.

Next, Craymer chose the rest of her team, including choreographer Anthony Van Laast, lighting designer Howard Harrison and set designer Mark Thompson. This was unorthodox: In the theater world, it is usually the director who assembles the team. But Craymer didn't have

a director until a friend recommended [Phyllida Lloyd](#). This was another unusual choice. Lloyd was known for opera, not musicals. But she was looking to expand into new areas.

“The core team that made *Mamma Mia!* such a success was composed of three women with entirely different motivations,” says IESE’s Chinchilla. “For Craymer, it was a dream; for Johnson, a paycheck; and for Lloyd, a challenge.”

Mehta adds: “For people in creative teams, they aren’t exclusively interested in [economic gains \(extrinsic motivation\)](#); they want [creative gains \(intrinsic motivation\)](#), so let them each have some freedom to play to their respective strengths. That is why this team worked.”

Thank you for the music

Mamma Mia! debuted at the [Prince Edward Theatre](#) in London on April 6, 1999, exactly 25 years after ABBA won the Eurovision Song Contest that launched them to global stardom.

The show was a runaway critical and commercial success. Whereas Craymer had initially hoped to recoup the money she had invested in it, she soon had much more on her plate. Professionals from all over the world were calling her, from Las Vegas, Australia and Broadway. After years of chasing a yes, Craymer began to say no.

No, they weren’t ready for Broadway. No, they wouldn’t give Las Vegas exclusivity. But selectively she said yes. Yes to Toronto, where they could adapt and perfect the show without the glare of Broadway. Yes, then, to a U.S. tour including San Francisco, Chicago and Boston. She said yes to ABBA-mad Australia. Eventually, after a year of touring, she said yes to Broadway. The Broadway debut was set for October 2001.

On [September 11, 2001, the World Trade Centers fell](#) and New York City plunged into a period of mourning. The team behind *Mamma Mia!* debated whether they should open as planned or hold off. Then-mayor Rudy Giuliani encouraged New Yorkers to return to the theaters as an act of patriotism. Craymer’s team debated. Yes, they would open as planned and donate proceeds worldwide from the first night to the victims of 9/11. *Mamma Mia!* became the optimistic, healing show that New York City needed, and it triumphed on Broadway.

Like a roller in the ocean, life is motion

By leveraging the power of no, Craymer had achieved thoughtfully managed growth. Her musical conquered Broadway in part because she had waited until the show was ready. Now it was time to expand abroad into foreign-language markets.

Craymer discovered she faced the same localization challenges as any entrepreneur expanding to a new country. She had a musical, in English, with famous songs, in English. But the team decided there should be only one language spoken on stage, so everywhere the show traveled, it was translated, lyrics and all. It was also adapted to the local context, and Craymer's core team each took on a role making this happen.

Craymer worked with local business partners; Johnson adapted the story alongside advisers when cultural norms (regarding single mothers, for example) clashed with the plot; and Lloyd worked with local directors on the staging challenges.

Through it all, Craymer was still saying no. Ever since *Mamma Mia!* landed in the U.S., Tom Hanks' production company, Playtone, had been calling her to make it into a movie. In an echo of her own odyssey to get the rights to the songs from ABBA, Craymer kept saying no, for years.

Seven years later, when she felt the time was right, she said yes. Johnson wrote the screenplay. Lloyd directed. Three women who had never made a movie before would bring *Mamma Mia!* to the big screen.

Lessons for entrepreneurs from *Mamma Mia!*

Craymer wasn't just a producer — she was a creative strategist, emotional navigator and cultural entrepreneur. Some takeaways for any leader include:

Adaptability

ABBA were popular all over the world, but Craymer and her team knew they couldn't simply expand into different countries without considering the local context. They safeguarded the core of their idea but compromised on some details. Sometimes a vision has global potential but needs shaping to thrive in new contexts.

People-centric teambuilding

Craymer broke convention by assembling her creative team before securing a director. Her

choice of Johnson, who was just beginning her career, and Lloyd, who had never done a musical, showed confidence in potential over direct experience.

Relationship management

Relationships built over decades — with Tim Rice, Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson — were crucial in bringing *Mamma Mia!* to the stage. Later, when Meryl Streep was hesitant to join the movie, Craymer dug out a fan letter Streep had written to the musical cast, which helped entice her on board.

Strategic use of no

Saying no, especially to attractive offers, can be torture. But Craymer's refusals were strategic to preserve the creative integrity of the project and wait until the time was right. Effective leaders should always protect their vision by setting boundaries.

Perseverance and commitment

Craymer spent over 10 years pursuing the rights to ABBA's songs before that one key yes. Through it all, she held fast to her belief in the potential of her idea. "An idea always starts with an individual," says Chinchilla. "Then you need other people to help you tweak the idea, but ultimately it requires an ambitious person to keep pushing, as well the humility to admit what you don't know and learn from others."

A record-breaking musical

By the show's 25th anniversary in 2024, *Mamma Mia!* had been staged in 450 cities and 16 languages, and been seen on stage by over 70 million people. It continues its run in London where it debuted.

\$ 4.5
billion

Revenue earned by the musical to date. The movie version became the highest-grossing film in Meryl Streep's career. A third film is in the works.

MORE: [Mamma Mia! Emprendiendo en femenino](#), a series of three case studies by Nuria Chinchilla, Kandarp Mehta and Arturo Gomez-Quijano, is available from [IESE Publishing](#).

WATCH: This article is based on the Alumni session "Aprendiendo a hacer negocio con *Mamma Mia!*" which is available for Members of the IESE Alumni Association to [watch on demand here](#) (in Spanish).

READ ALSO:

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This article is included in [IESE Business School Insight online magazine No. 170](#) (Sept.-Dec. 2025).



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