

book club synopsis

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originals: how non-conformists move the world

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Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World

It's often been the necessary change agent to usher in progress, but challenging conventional wisdom comes inherent with risks to both reputations and careers. But forward thinkers with an eye on the future aren't the only ones who sometimes buck the status quo for the greater good. In *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, Adam Grant debunks the widely held myth that successful nonconformists are natural leaders who gamely tackle risks with little fear of the consequences. Relying on studies and stories spanning the worlds of business, politics, sports and entertainment, Grant instead illustrates how successful nonconformists are everyday people who recognize a good idea and make useful suggestions without fear of being silenced.

The following is a chapter-by-chapter synopsis that is designed to help you dive quickly into the content of the book. We hope that this will allow you to extract the greatest insights from it in the most efficient manner possible and help you find the sections of the book that will be of most value to you.

About the Author

Adam Grant is the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Give and Take* and is generally regarded as one of his generation's most influential management thinkers. A top-rated teacher at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business, Grant holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's degree from Harvard College.

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chapter one:

creative destruction

the risky business of going against the grain

In 2009, Wharton School professor Adam Grant made what he calls “the worst financial decision” of his life and was determined to find out what went wrong.

Four of his students had approached him with the chance to invest in their new business. Too broke to afford glasses, they planned to build a Zappos for prescription eyewear, offering glasses at 20 percent of retail and matching each sale with a donation to someone in need.

More than the idea itself, Grant was concerned that none of them were prepared to leave school to pursue this company, and worse, they all planned to work full-time jobs after graduation. Viewing their risk aversion as a lack of commitment, Grant declined to invest.

A year later, the students launched Warby Parker, building a 20,000-person waiting list in just a few weeks. Today, the company Grant turned down is valued at more than \$1 billion.

“In my mind, they were destined to fail because they played it safe instead of betting the farm. But in fact, that is exactly why they succeeded.”

The miscalculation, Grant believes, stemmed from the widely held misconception that successful entrepreneurs are bold, confident beings who crave risk and lack uncertainty. In truth, he argues, entrepreneurs have insecurities like the rest of us, and their aversion to risk is actually greater than most.

A 2014 study by University of Wisconsin-Madison professors Joseph Raffiee and Jie Feng tracked 5,000 diverse American entrepreneurs from 1994 to 2008 with the sole purpose of comparing the success rates of those who left their day jobs and those who kept them. They concluded that continuing to work a day job increased the odds of success by 33 percent. Grant pairs this study with a long list of successful entrepreneurs who continued their full-time jobs or schooling well after their companies launched, including the founders of Nike, Google, Spanx and Ford. Outside the business world, author Stephen King, singer John Legend and *Dilbert* creator Scott Adams also continued their regular gigs after tasting startup success.

Why Risks Are Like Stock Portfolios

In the 1960s, University of Michigan researcher Clyde Coombs theorized that successful people balance risk in their daily lives the way a stock trader builds a portfolio: They neither avoid nor embrace risk entirely but balance one risky investment with another safer one.

“Risk portfolios explain why people often become original in one part of their lives while remaining quite conventional in others,” says Grant. One example is the owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers who helped break baseball’s color barrier while remaining a teetotaling, profanity-free traditionalist who wouldn’t work on Sunday. Another example is Polaroid founder Edwin Land, who said, “No person could possibly be original in one area unless he were possessed of the emotional and social stability that comes from fixed attitudes in all areas other than the one in which he is being original.”

As for the poster child for risking it all on a new idea, Grant says we’ve got Bill Gates’ college dropout story wrong. After selling his software, Gates stayed in school another year and, even then, hedged his risk by applying for a leave of absence from Harvard.

It’s a rare consensus, says Grant, that economists, sociologists and psychologists have all observed entrepreneurs to be *more* risk-averse than the rest of us. He points to a study asking people to choose among hypothetical ventures with corresponding levels of risk and reward. Entrepreneurs were significantly more likely to pick the safest one.

For the founders of Warby Parker, the safety net they'd built allowed them to pursue an untested, truly original venture. And even there, they constantly worked to “de-risk” the business with ideas like a free home try-on program for frames—a program so wildly popular, Warby Parker had to temporarily suspend it within 48 hours of launch.

“The most successful originals are not the daredevils who leap before they look. They are the ones who reluctantly tiptoe to the edge of the cliff, calculate the rate of descent, triple-check their parachutes, and set up a safety net at the bottom just in case.”

Finding the Faults in Defaults

“The hallmark of originality is rejecting the default and exploring whether a better option exists,” says Grant. We justify the status quo in order to feel better about our situations, reassuring ourselves, “This is just how the world is supposed to be.”

Economist Michael Housman found that a customer service agent's longevity, customer satisfaction, punctuality and happiness correlated to the Web browser he or she used at work. In each category, employees with Chrome or Firefox outperformed those with Safari or Explorer. The reason? People who accepted the preinstalled software were quicker to feel the job did not suit them. Those who sought a better browser took steps to tailor the job to themselves. But, Grant says, those who can see the opportunity—the originals—are “the exception, not the rule.”

Grant points to impoverished people who view income inequality as a societal necessity, voters who view candidates more favorably when they become frontrunners and women who, prior to the suffrage movement, never questioned their own disenfranchisement. Everywhere, people rationalize the unfavorable status quo rather than challenge it. It soothes us to know that a bad situation is out of our hands, not our fault. Finding a better way requires what Grant calls a “*vuija de moment*”—the reverse of *déjà vu*, viewing something old and seeing it anew.

In the case of Warby Parker, that *vuja de* moment came when the four founders, after wearing glasses for a total of 60 years between them, finally wondered what made the cost so high. They found that most of the major brands, 80 percent of the market, were owned by a single company, Luxottica. They realized the price was dictated not by the free market but by monopoly, and they saw their opportunity.

“When we become curious about dissatisfying defaults in our world, we begin to recognize that most of them have social origins: rules and systems were created by people. And that awareness gives us the courage to consider how we can change them.”

The Two Faces of Ambition

An enemy of originality, particularly in the very gifted, is “achievement motivation,” writes Grant. He looks at child prodigies, perhaps the most gifted of us all, and notes that they “rarely go on to change the world” because from an early age, they are rewarded for mastering re-creation: playing music, speaking languages, completing equations. They are seldom rewarded for invention or originality. As adults, Grant argues their ambition to achieve has steered them away from creative pursuits because, “the more you value achievement, the more you come to dread failure. They apply their extraordinary abilities in ordinary ways, mastering their jobs without questioning defaults and without making new waves.”

He sees achievement motivation and the corresponding fear of failure in all of us, even in the greatest originals.

Michelangelo, Grant tells us, literally fled Rome for fear of painting the Sistine Chapel until the Pope lured him back two years later. Martin Luther King Jr. said that if he’d had time to think over his answer, he would have declined to lead the Montgomery Bus Boycott and focused on his career as a minister and educator. Even George Washington reflected that he had done everything in his power to avoid joining the revolution.

While the magnitude of influence in those examples is rare, Grant believes each of us has ideas for how communities and institutions may be improved. Mostly, fear and achievement motivation leave those ideas unspoken. He references one survey showing 40 percent of FDA scientists had remained silent about serious safety concerns for fear of retaliation. In another survey, 85 percent of consulting, finance, media, pharmaceutical and advertising employees admitted to staying silent about an important consideration their bosses needed to hear.

“What are the habits of the people whose originality extends beyond appearance to effective action?” That is the question Grant strives to answer with this book. After studying originality in a diverse array of settings, he shares the proven tools of the originals so that we may learn to effectively manage risk, scale original ideas and sustain originality.

“After spending years studying [originals] and interacting with them, I am struck that their inner experiences are not any different from our own. They feel the same fear, the same doubt, as the rest of us. What sets them apart is that they take action anyway. They know in their hearts that failing would yield less regret than failing to try.”

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chapter two:

blind inventors and one-eyed investors

the art and science of recognizing original ideas

“When we bemoan the lack of originality in the world, we blame it on the absence of creativity. ... But in reality, the biggest barrier to originality is not idea generation—it’s idea *selection*.”

Grant begins chapter two with the stories of two very different creations. The first came from Dean Kamen, an incredibly successful inventor already dubbed “the Thomas Edison of the 21st century.” Steve Jobs called Kamen’s new work the most amazing creation since the computer and begged to be a part of the project. Experts expected it to revolutionize travel and sell 10,000 units per week.

Six years later, the Segway had sold 30,000 units *total* and, as a business venture, is considered an abject failure—one of the decade’s 10 biggest flops according to *Time*.

The second creation was a sitcom. The creators had no television experience, executives didn’t like the script and test audiences across every demographic were uninterested. An executive working in another department liked the pilot enough to give the show enough of his budget for a few episodes to air, but few watched.

Nine years later, *yada yada yada*, *Seinfeld* is one of TV’s most successful shows ever.

A Random Walk on the Creative Tightrope

In exploring how experts and professionals can get things so totally wrong, Grant begins with the creators themselves. While social scientists have long observed a tendency for people to overestimate

their own work, many assume that geniuses are somehow immune. But Grant finds that geniuses have the same blind spots as the rest.

Beethoven, for example, was known to be a vocal critic of his works. But, one-third of his predictions of success or failure were wrong, and he was nearly twice as likely to overestimate the success of a composition as he was to underestimate it. In his Fifth Symphony, Beethoven scrapped early versions only to return to them for the final version of his most celebrated piece.

Picasso, too, produced dozens of sketches for his paintings—79 for “Guernica” alone—and often based his finished work on the previously discarded drafts.

“If Picasso could judge his creations as he produced them, he would get consistently ‘warmer’ and use the later drawings. But in reality, it was just as common that he got ‘colder.’”

Kissing Frogs

“If originals aren’t reliable judges of the quality of their ideas, how do they maximize their odds of creating a masterpiece?”

For answers, Grant turned to Dean Simonton, a psychologist who studied both Beethoven and Picasso. He found creative geniuses frequently aren’t better than their peers—just more prolific. More variation, he says, means a greater chance of originality.

Here, too, Beethoven and Picasso fit the bill, known for a handful of masterpieces despite hundreds of forgotten works. Into that mix, Grant adds Einstein’s roughly 200 mostly inconsequential papers, Maya Angelou’s six autobiographies that are not *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and the majority of Shakespeare’s nearly 200 plays and sonnets, which few of us will ever hear or read.

And the Dean Kamen of the 19th century? Thomas Edison invented the light bulb, phonograph and carbon telephone in five years. In that same five years, he filed more than 100 other patents, many of which are laughable then and now.

“It’s widely assumed that there’s a tradeoff between quantity and quality,” Grant writes. “In fact, when it comes to idea generation, quantity is the most predictable path to quality.”

Kamen knew this, often saying, “You gotta kiss a lot of frogs before you find a prince.” To Grant, the problem is the Segway’s insular development process. Kamen’s feedback came predominantly from biased team members and impressed prospective investors. What he didn’t hear was the voice of the public. Grant knows we can’t simply trust the public to know what they want. But it is important that we hear what they don’t want. And most did not want a Segway.

“Conviction in our ideas is dangerous not only because it leaves us vulnerable to false positives, but also because it stops us from generating the requisite variety to reach our creative potential.”

Prisoners of Prototypes and Parochial Preferences

False negatives—believing a hit will flop—are common. Grant’s list of the nearly axed hallmarks includes *E.T.*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Lord of the Flies*, Harry Potter books, the laser printer, LED lights and the Xbox.

The constant misfiring, according to Grant, results from “an evaluative mindset” that looks to “protect against the risks of a bad bet.” The manager’s instinct is to reject novelty for not fitting the mold for success rather than embrace its originality. “As we gain knowledge of a domain,” he says, “we become prisoners of our prototypes.”

Free from the pressure of job loss, focus groups should be better, but Grant says otherwise. Because they are conditioned to evaluate rather than appreciate, “focus groups are essentially set up to make the same mistakes as managers.”

The lone group with an edge in predicting success in creative pursuits: fellow creators. Across numerous studies, Grant observes that fellow artists were able to predict audience appeal at a significantly higher rate than managers and focus groups.

The Double-Edged Sword of Experience

When no one at NBC was interested in *Seinfeld*, executive Rick Ludwin saw potential. Outside of the comedy department in “variety and specials,” he sacrificed what he could of his own budget to help *Seinfeld* win “the smallest episode order ever on television.”

Ludwin had dabbled in comedy, but not as a career. Grant believes this made him the perfect *Seinfeld* champion. “It is when people have moderate experience in a particular domain that they’re most open to radically creative ideas.”

Too narrow a focus can close people to new ideas in their field, says Grant. A recent study of Nobel laureates showed that an artistic hobby increased their odds of winning by up to 22 percent. And long before there was a Nobel committee, Galileo leaned on his artistic knowledge to discover the moon’s mountains. In the zig-zag patterns, he recognized chiaroscuro—a technique for painting a mountain’s shadows.

The Hazards of Intuition: Where Steve Jobs Went Wrong

Researcher Erik Dane once led a study asking people to identify a fake designer handbag in five and 30 seconds. Fashion experts did significantly better in the tiny window, while novices scored best when they had time to inspect the bag’s contours.

That extra time allowed the novice to gain knowledge, but for the experts, their instincts had already been honed over years of study. The extra time invited doubt.

Steve Jobs was known for gut calls in personal computing. But not in transportation.

“As Nobel Prize-winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman and decision expert Gary Klein explain, intuitions are only trustworthy when people build up experience making judgments in a predictable environment.”

The Perils of Passion

Kamen's enthusiasm could be infectious, but Grant quotes Google executives Eric Schmidt and Jonathan Rosenberg: "Passionate people don't wear their passion on their sleeves; they have it in their hearts."

What Jobs and so many others saw in Kamen was an extraverted positivity. Infectious, but not indicative of success. In Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David, however, Ludwin saw two guys agonizing at all hours until they got a scene right. That passion leads to success.

Corrective Lenses for Idea Selection

The founders of Warby Parker didn't come from the eyeglass industry. They were consumers. Knowing they were not experts, they gathered input on every element of their concept, constantly inviting new ideas, driven by the passion to reinvent themselves and better connect the consumer to their creation.

"Individual creators have far better odds over a lifetime of ideas. When we judge their greatness, we focus not on their averages, but on their peaks."

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chapter three:

out on a limb

speaking truth to power

“The goal is to explain how we can all reduce the risks of speaking up—and gain the potential benefits of doing so.”

The third chapter opens with the story of CIA analyst Carmen Medina. After a three-year stint in Europe in the early '90s, she returned to Langley convinced that the communication between U.S. intelligence agencies was inadequate. She proposed using budding intranet technology to share vital information instantaneously, but was shot down repeatedly. Her persistence led to frustration on both sides and, after losing her temper with a superior, she was demoted to a low-level staff position.

In 2008, less than a decade later, she had become an instrumental leader in the same agency, implementing the highly successful open-source platform that U.S. intelligence agencies now use to share vital information.

Grant asks, “Why did Medina fail in her first efforts at speaking up, and what enabled her to be heard the second time?”

Power Without Status

“Power involves exercising control or authority over others; status is being respected and admired.”

In the 1990s, Medina was trying to exercise power without status, Grant says. Although she was a CIA veteran, after three years abroad, she was the new kid around the office and had yet to earn any status among her peers or superiors.

In any industry, this can be a dangerous place from which to offer criticism. Grant notes that in studies across manufacturing, service, retail and nonprofit sectors, the more one voices concerns and ideas to supervisors, the lower the chances of promotion.

“It fuels a vicious cycle of resentment,” he explains. In one experiment, one person was given the power to award \$50 to a partner in exchange for completing a task of the superior’s choosing. When the power holders were told that they were respected, they tended to choose easy tasks like “tell a joke.” When a researcher told superiors they were disrespected by peers, they retaliated with impossible or humiliating tasks, like repeating “I am filthy.” Grant writes that “just being told they weren’t respected nearly doubled their chances of using their power in ways that degraded others.”

During her second effort, Medina waited to raise concerns. Along the way, she earned the respect of her peers and what psychologist Edwin Hollander called idiosyncrasy credits—which Grant describes as “the latitude to deviate from the group’s expectations.”

With that status, Medina’s co-workers opened up to her suggestions. In her own words, “People saw that I stood for something, not just against the status quo.”

The second time, she also tried something else. When making her case, she would include the phrase, “Maybe I’m wrong.” It’s a tactic Grant believes has much in common with “the most bizarre startup pitch you might ever encounter.”

Putting Your Worst Foot Forward: The Sarick Effect

Rufus Griscom, co-founder of the parenting website Babble, pitched potential investors with a slide so contrary to conventional wisdom, no one ever bothers to counsel against it. The slide read, “Here’s Why You Should Not Buy Babble.” But the website raised \$3.3 million with the strategy and was ultimately sold to Disney in 2011 for \$40 million the same way.

Grant calls this the Sarick Effect (named for social scientist Leslie Sarick), and he lists four reasons why leading with weakness can be an effective strategy.

First, it disarms the audience. Griscom told Grant, “Unbridled optimism comes across as salesmanship; it seems dishonest somehow, and as a consequence it’s met with skepticism.” Volunteering some downside takes away the feeling of being *sold to*.

As she advanced and heard pitches herself, Medina noticed the same thing from the other side. When someone came to her accentuating just the positives, she would feel like she was getting only part of the picture and conclude, “This idea is full of holes.”

Second, leading with your idea’s limitations makes you look smart. “People think an amateur can appreciate art,” writes Grant, “but it takes a professional to critique it.” Numerous studies have also shown that readers assume writers of scathing reviews to be smart relative to the authors of raves, who are seen as naïve.

The third advantage is the appearance of honesty. Griscom thinks that by offering Babble’s shortcomings, investors felt he was doing some of their leg work for them. “And,” Grant adds, “speaking frankly about the weaknesses of the business in turn made him more credible when he talked about the strengths.” In fact, Disney so trusted Griscom that after buying his company, they made him a vice president of their own.

Grant’s fourth reason to lead with weakness is that it makes it harder for listeners to generate their own potential pitfalls. By volunteering both sides of the coin, the audience has a complete picture, and it becomes more difficult to stray from the pitch. In Griscom’s case, Grant says, “as they found themselves thinking hard to identify other concerns, they decided Babble’s problems weren’t actually that severe.”

There is one important caveat to this approach. If you're going to volunteer your idea's shortcoming, make sure it's a really good idea. Otherwise, you really are telling people why they should say no.

Unfamiliarity Breeds Contempt

When we explain our own concepts, our first job is to make them understandable. But, to Grant, just as important is making them feel familiar to an audience of outsiders. There's an inherent appeal in the familiar, he says.

He asks readers to choose a favorite between the following two words:

sarick

iktitaḡ

He's betting you'll choose "sarick," but it has nothing to do with the words themselves. Sarick appears in the title of the previous section and several times within it. Grant made up Leslie Sarick and the Sarick Effect for the exercise. (All other names, he notes, are real.) The technique comes from Robert Zajonc, who found that the appeal of the seen word increased with each added sighting—10 to 20 times being the ideal and more for complex ideas. "Interestingly," he adds, "exposures are more effective when they're short and mixed in with other ideas."

What Grant calls "the exposure effect" has been shown many times. His favorite test is when people are shown inverted and regular photos of themselves and friends. Over and over, people express a preference for the normal pictures of their friends but the flipped image of themselves—how we see ourselves in the mirror.

Grant admits that "too much familiarity with an idea can lead to boredom. But in the context of speaking up, people rarely oversaturate their audiences."

When Medina returned to her efforts to modernize intelligence communications, she didn't begin with confrontation. She started a blog. First it was dismissed, but gradually it was read more and more. By the time she spoke up, the ideas were no longer foreign.

Quitting Before Leaving

When Medina took her demotion, she had given up her goal of changing minds at the CIA. She had lost. But she was surprised to find a supervisor who would listen to her ideas. Cynical and mercurial, he was short on praise and far from agreeable but listened because he is an original himself and committed to the CIA.

Disagreeable managers are often our best advocates, according to Grant. Prickly people are less burdened by the desire to please, less interested in conforming to the norms or preserving them. Emboldened, Medina began to seek new audiences for her ideas, this time avoiding middle management. She focused instead on high-ranking superiors and low-level employees—Grant’s ideal audience for originals.

“If you’re perched at the top, you’re expected to be different and therefore have a license to deviate. Likewise, if you’re still at the bottom of a status hierarchy, you have little to lose and everything to gain by being original. But the middle segment of that hierarchy—where the majority of people in an organization are found—is dominated by insecurity. Now that you have a bit of respect, you value your standing in the group and don’t want to jeopardize it.”

“Audience matters,” says Grant.

Speaking While Female, and the Double Jeopardy of Double Minorities

In his own research, Grant has found that offering revenue-generating ideas is viewed positively when it comes from a man but reflects poorly on women. He finds that this no longer stems from a simple, overt “the woman belongs in the home” misogyny, but because a vocal woman violates our subconscious, ingrained gender stereotypes.

As a Puerto Rican, Medina faced the preconceptions of two stereotypes. Grant finds that “double minorities” often face stiffer penalties and tougher roads to promotion than white employees of either gender.

In patiently waiting to gain status, Medina no longer fit her stereotypes. To the men around her and other women in power, “it’s clear they’re in the driver’s seat,” Grant says. They can even gain additional respect for overcoming workplace prejudice.

The Road Not Taken

Donna Dubinsky did not patiently wait. As Apple’s distribution and sales manager in 1985, she found Steve Jobs’ proposed changes to the distribution model catastrophic. She told Jobs that she wanted 30 days to make a counterproposal or she’d quit.

Dubinsky had already earned idiosyncrasy credits and was clearly speaking in the company’s interests. Jobs, legendary for being original and not a people pleaser, proved receptive. For choosing voice, Dubinsky got her 30 days and then, a promotion.

Six years later, with Jobs gone, Apple was less receptive to her ideas, so she quit. She had no job lined up, but within a few months she became CEO of startup Palm Computing, launching the PalmPilot and with it, the handheld industry. Two years later, she departed in another disagreement and founded Handspring, which gave the world the Treo, the first touchscreen smart phone. A few years later, Apple followed suit with the iPhone.

Medina and Dubinsky chose very different paths in leaving indelible marks on their companies, but Grant notes that both “chose to speak up rather than stay silent.”

“If we could do things over, most of us would censor ourselves less and express our ideas more. That’s exactly what Carmen Medina and Donna Dubinsky did, and it left them with few regrets.”

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chapter four:

fools rush in

timing, strategic procrastination, and the first-mover disadvantage

"It's true that the early bird gets the worm, but we can't forget that the early worm gets caught."

Over the years, many have marveled at how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. could have reached the great heights of the "I Have a Dream" speech, having only written it the night before.

In this chapter, Grant examines the question, "What if the very act of procrastinating was the reason that King gave the best speech of his life?"

The Other da Vinci Code

Jihae Shin, a grad student of Grant's, tested the idea that procrastination might be conducive to creativity. She asked students to write out new business proposals, some immediately and others to wait and first play video games.

In a blind evaluation, the procrastinators' proposals were 28 percent more creative. Digging deeper, she found that there was no boost in creativity if participants played games before being given the assignment or if they took a game break after they'd already begun. For maximum creative output, the procrastination needed to occur at a time that allowed the student to consider the problem but before they'd settled on a solution.

The idea that procrastination can be a resource for creativity is not new. Grant says many of history's originals were procrastinators and "in ancient Egypt, there were two different verbs for procrastination: one denoted laziness, the other meant waiting for the right time."

Leonardo da Vinci was derided in his day for wasting time on scientific curiosities instead of focusing on his paintings. His greatest works spanned more than a decade and went untouched for years in between. But there's little doubt that his optical experiments, at the very least, helped bring out the greatness in his masterpieces. In his words, "genius sometimes accomplishes most when they work the least, for they are thinking out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect idea."

The Discipline to Delay

For many great thinkers, procrastination is a necessary task that requires work to achieve; it's the act of resisting to committing too soon.

Grant writes that among recent winners of the Science Talent Search (the Super Bowl of Science for U.S. high school seniors), 68 percent admit to procrastinating in multiple areas. One winner said: "In scientific work, ideas need time to mature," and procrastination helps "restrain the urge to respond prematurely."

The night before he delivered the Gettysburg Address, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln had yet to complete a draft, and that was by design. In the words of his secretary John Nicolay, the president "probably followed his usual habit in such matters, using great deliberation in arranging his thoughts, and molding his phrases mentally, waiting to reduce them to writing until they had taken satisfactory form."

Like Lincoln, King's last minute drafting was no accident. For weeks in the lead up to the March on Washington, he met with advisors to hash out the speech, only to call them the night before and direct them to begin anew.

They weren't unprepared; they were trying to get it right. And, says Grant, they were benefiting from the Zeigarnik effect. The phenomenon is named for psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik, who, in 1927, showed that we better remember incomplete than complete tasks. Once the task is complete, our brain is done with it.

Procrastinating keeps our brains working on a problem until we're ready for it to stop.

On a Wing and a Prayer

In the case of King, Grant reminds us that the words “I have a dream” were not written on the page that day. King wrote later, “just all of a sudden, I decided.”

By waiting to finalize his speech, Grant believes King prevented himself from becoming too tightly tied to the script and allowed himself to follow his impulse and make history.

Grant’s research of pizza chains backs up the theory. Stores that rated themselves relatively low on promptness and efficiency tended to be more profitable than their more punctual competitors. And a study of 200 CEOs in India found that leaders who gave themselves the highest marks for efficiency and promptness were graded lowest by employees for strategic flexibility.

Even as he touts the advantages of procrastination, Grant is careful to note that he is not deriding preparation. The speech that King improvised had been delivered in pieces dozens of times throughout the previous months. Lincoln spent years ruminating on the themes of the Gettysburg Address. As Shin’s work shows, procrastination is only useful once the process has begun.

Pioneers and Settlers

Conventional wisdom gives the market advantage to the first on the scene, the pioneer, and considers those who follow, the settlers, copycats who are late to the game. Grant uses the classic study by Peter Golder and Gerard Tellis to tell a different story.

The researchers analyzed hundreds of brands to see how the pioneers’ success compared to that of their settler competitors. They found that pioneers were a staggering six times more likely to fail than the settlers. And when pioneers did survive, settlers accounted for nearly three times their share of the market.

Often, Grant says, pioneers are “recklessly ambitious,” and settlers the shrewd parties carefully observing the market, noting the mistakes of their predecessors, waiting until the time is right to seize opportunity.

Before Nintendo and Atari, there was Magnavox Odyssey. Before Netflix, there was Kozmo. And before the technology that will redefine travel, there was Segway.

For more perspective, Grant turns to author Malcolm Gladwell, who says, “When ideas get really complicated, and when the world gets complicated, it’s foolish to think the person who’s first can work it all out. Most good things, it takes a long time to figure them out.”

Sometimes, the idea itself isn’t what needs fleshing out; it’s the world around it. Before Warby Parker, others tried selling glasses online. But, one of the founders told Grant, “we had to wait for Amazon, Zappos and Blue Nile to get people comfortable buying products they typically wouldn’t order online.”

Ignaz Semmelweis discovered the importance of sanitation decades before Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch won acclaim for introducing germ theory. Semmelweis was sent to an asylum. Carmen Medina nearly lost her career for suggesting the Internet could be an intelligence-sharing tool.

Grant quotes the physicist Max Planck: “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die.”

It’s not that being first is necessarily bad, Grant says, just that the odds are more in our favor if we don’t arrive at an empty table. But if you do find yourself in the position of arriving first, it will certainly help if you can get a strong patent.

The Two Life Cycles of Creativity: Young Geniuses and Old Masters

In the words of famed venture capitalist Vinod Khosla, “People under 35 are the people who make change happen. People over 45 basically die in terms of new ideas.” Albert Einstein made similar observations, and his own groundbreaking works were completed when he was in his twenties.

“But,” writes Grant, “this decline isn’t inevitable.” In companies with suggestion boxes, he says, more and better suggestions come from employees older than 55. And in the notably youthful tech field, “startups that have raised venture capital funding, the average founder is thirty-eight.”

We remember the young wunderkinds but forget that most of Robert Frost’s greatest poems were written in his 40s and beyond, or that Hitchcock made *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest* and *Psycho* between the ages of 59 and 61.

Grant writes: “The time at which we reach our peaks of originality, and how long they last, depends on our styles of thinking.” Economist David Galenson separates those styles into conceptual innovators—those guided by the big idea—and experimental innovators—people who solve problems through trial and error.

Conceptual innovators lock onto a big idea and can do their work quickly. They’re sprinters who make a big, immediate splash like poet E.E. Cummings, who imagined his own rules for language and grammar. But conceptual innovators often struggle to match their early successes as they dig into that original concept rather than reinvent. Cummings’ work continued to be like no one else’s, but many felt that all his books looked alike.

Experimental innovators are marathoners. Their work is governed by methodical investigation with no defined goal but curiosity and journey. Mark Twain fit the experimental mold when he wrote *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in his late forties, saying, “as the short tale grows into a long tale, the original intention (or motif) is apt to get abolished and find itself superseded by a quite different one.”

“Sprinting can be a fine strategy for the young genius, but becoming an old master requires the patience of experimentation to run a marathon. Both are paths to creativity. Yet for those of us who aren’t struck by a bolt of insight, slow and steady experimentation can light the way to a longer stretch of originality.”

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chapter five:

goldilocks and the trojan horse

creating and maintaining coalitions

“The originals who start a movement will often be its most radical members, whose ideas and ideals will prove too hot for those who follow their lead. To form alliances with opposing groups, it’s best to temper the cause, cooling it as much as possible. Yet to draw allies into joining the cause itself, what’s needed is a moderately tempered message that is neither too hot nor too cold, but just right.”

Grant knows that most readers don’t know the name Lucy Stone. But he says no one did more for women’s suffrage than she did. The first married American woman to keep her name and first in Massachusetts to earn a bachelor’s degree, she founded the highly influential newspaper *Woman’s Journal* and was the inspiration that ignited the fight of Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and thousands of other women.

In 1853, as the three leaders embarked on a landmark collaboration in the fight for equality, Stanton wrote to Anthony of Stone: “We have no woman who compares to her.” But in 1869, their alliance was shattered, and when the famous pair would come to write the history of the suffrage movement, they left out Stone’s contributions entirely.

In this chapter, Grant begins by asking: “Since the three leaders shared a deep commitment to the same cause, why did they end up in such a heated, destructive conflict?”

The Narcissism of Small Differences

Common goals are thought to bring people together. But to Grant, they are just as likely to drive people apart. The feeling of commonality, he says, creates resentment in even tiny divergences. It's what psychologist Judith White calls "horizontal hostility."

White notes the phenomenon in numerous instances: vegans judging vegetarians, radical environmental groups slamming Greenpeace, parliamentary parties of opposite extremes preferring each other to the closest party philosophically, Orthodox Jews judging conservative Jewish women more harshly than completely secular Jewish women.

Such was the case when Anthony and Stanton actively opposed the 15th Amendment after joining forces with devout racist George Francis Train, who supported women's suffrage because he hoped to mitigate the political influence of African Americans. To them, no minority should get the vote until women did. But in Stone's words: "Woman has an ocean of wrongs too deep for any plummet, and the negro too has an ocean of wrongs that cannot be fathomed."

The split of the nation's only major suffrage group left the women's movement weak. Eventually, though, the radically liberal movement (by 19th-century standards) would find an unlikely ally: the conservative Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).

Their purposes were at odds, but as Grant writes, "in seeking alliances with groups that share our values, we overlook the importance of sharing our strategic tactics." Across the nation, both movements were bringing women together in small clubs of sisterhood. This may not seem like enough of a bond, but Grant asks us to recall the connection one feels at a diverse rally. He also cites a study in which one group of participants sang a song together, and another sang asynchronously. Afterward, the synchronous group showed more generosity with each other than those who sang apart.

Once Stone began working with WCTU, she discovered another profound and surprising principle that can help to gain allies.

Tempered Radicals

“If we communicate the vision behind our ideas, the purpose guiding our products, people will flock to us. This is excellent advice—unless you’re doing something original that challenges the status quo. When people championing moral change explain their why, it runs the risk of clashing with deep-seated convictions. When creative non-conformists explain their why, it may violate common notions of what’s possible.”

In 2011, college senior Meredith Perry became fixated on the idea of using ultrasound to charge and power devices wirelessly. With the help of a few engineers, she knew she could bring her idea to fruition. The problem: Nobody believed it could be done.

After getting a lengthy series of rejections, Perry changed her approach. She stopped trying to wow people with her vision for wireless power, instead recruiting people with the specifics of what she needed for a vaguely worded project. She managed to cobble together an unwitting team and produce enough work to prove that her vision could become reality. Four years later, wireless charging is the rage, and Perry is a celebrity of the tech world.

“Meredith Perry is a tempered radical,” says Grant. “She made an implausible idea plausible by obscuring its most extreme feature.”

That same year, he says, Occupy Wall Street suffered from the opposite approach, disbanding just months after claiming majority support. Serbian activist Srdja Popovic expressed astonishment that they would take their name from their most radical tactic: “Occupying is still just a single weapon in the enormous arsenal of peaceful protest—and more to the point, one that tends to invite only a certain type of person.” He suggests that if the movement identified as the more inclusive “The 99 Percent,” it might still exist.

Without Stone, Stanton and Anthony continued to publicize their most radical aims. Opponents began to paint the entire movement with that extremist brush. Rather than inspire people to their calls for equality and justice, the extremist rallying cries only reminded

people why they opposed the movement to begin with. The women's suffrage movement was stalled.

Enemies Make Better Allies Than Frenemies

In 1872, with the perspective of time and their movement in need of a jolt, Stanton proposed rejoining forces with Stone. Stone declined.

Grant writes that while her decision may have delayed women the right to vote, the evidence suggests she made the right call in cutting off her frenemies. Studies show that it isn't our fiercest enemies who cause us the greatest stress; it's ambivalent relationships. True enemies are predictable, but friends who we feel may stab us in the back keep us on guard, a constant source of stress and anxiety that taxes valuable energy.

Stone had no use for frenemies. She followed Michael Corleone's advice to "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." Known for approaching male hecklers and antagonists to ask if they love their mothers, Stone often sought to make allies of her most vocal opponents. She knew no one could speak with more credibility than a converted nemesis, and no one feels more loyalty than those who feel they have been shown the way.

Familiar Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

A clue to how Stone was able to convert so many, Grant writes, can be seen in the green lighting of *The Lion King*.

Disney had never made an original animated feature before, and executives were skeptical at best. Creators spent months struggling to communicate a vision that, as of 2014, had grossed more than \$1 billion. One day, producer Maureen Donley suggested that the story was Hamlet with lions. Suddenly, everyone got it.

"The most promising ideas begin from novelty and then add familiarity, which capitalizes on the mere exposure effect we covered earlier," writes Grant.

Stanton and Anthony described a vision that was completely foreign to most people. For the movement to regain traction and grow, the women would need to appeal to the public with a message they could relate to.

How the West Was Won

One of the opponents converted by Stone was Frances Willard, a member of the temperance movement who had disliked the views of Stanton. A quarter century after being swayed, she was a powerful leader at the WCTU. Determined to use her position to help gain women the vote, she changed the way the issue was framed.

For her conservative group, which had been conditioned to oppose the movement, she replaced the word “suffrage” with “home protection.” Protecting the home was a familiar goal of the WCTU, and Willard told them the vote could be a key weapon in that pursuit.

“Willard smuggled the vote inside the Trojan horse of fighting alcohol abuse,” Grant writes, “but that argument didn’t work with every group she addressed.” More radical women were turned away by the placating tone, so the justice argument remained in more liberal circles. For most though, Willard chose a “Goldilocks pitch,” moderate and neither too hot nor too cold: Women could help improve society.

Membership in suffrage organizations spiked, thanks to the new strategy, and within a few years, 81 percent of Western states (along with two in the East but none in the South) gave women the right to vote, at last creating a path to the 19th Amendment.

“Instead of assuming others share our principles, or trying to convince them to adopt ours,” Grant suggests, “we ought to present our values as a means of pursuing theirs.”

United We Stand: Creating Coalitions Across Conflict Lines

In 1890, Stone wrote that “the younger ones want to unite and the old ones who remember the causes of division will soon be gone.”

Stone, Stanton and Anthony reunified the women’s movement but never made personal amends. When Stone passed away, however, the leaders’ deep regard for their former ally and opponent was on full display.

“We have never had a woman in our whole fifty years of this movement who could go before an audience and melt the heart of everyone in it like that woman,” wrote Anthony. And to Stanton: “The death of no woman in America had ever called out so general a tribute of public respect and esteem.”

The torch of the suffrage movement was passed to Carrie Chapman Catt, who came from the WCTU and employed Stone’s model to lead the country to the 19th Amendment, enshrining in the Constitution a woman’s right to vote.

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chapter six:

rebel with a cause

how siblings, parents, and mentors
nurture originality

In baseball, attempting to steal a base has a low probability of success and high chance of injury. Stealing home quadruples the risk of injury and is so rarely pulled off that only three players have reached double-digit home plate steals in their entire careers. The leader, with 19, is Jackie Robinson.

Grant finds something in common between Robinson and most legendary base stealers: They were younger brothers. Among the 10 players to have 70-plus stolen bases in two seasons, seven have at least two older siblings, and the average birth order is 6.9 (the other three are only children). Robinson was the youngest of five.

In examining 400 baseball-playing brothers, Frank Sulloway and Richard Zweigenhaft determined that younger brothers were 10.6 times more likely to steal a base and 4.7 times more likely to be hit by a pitch than their older siblings. Other studies have shown that younger siblings are also more likely to play sports with higher injury rates.

Expanding his research outside of sports, Sulloway found that laterborn scientists were 5.4 times more likely to endorse the Copernican model at its inception, and by the time Galileo invented the telescope, the discrepancy vanished entirely. In the time of Darwin, laterborn odds of supporting evolution was 4.6 times that of the oldest. In political revolutions, younger siblings have been twice as likely to support radical change.

“Laterborns have typically been half a century ahead of firstborns in their willingness to endorse radical innovations,” Sulloway concluded.

A self-described “card-carrying firstborn,” Grant sought to uncover what makes laterborns more prone to risky behavior than their older siblings. “What’s unique about being a younger child, how does family size figure in, and what are the implications for nurture?”

Born to Rebel

“If you’re like Robinson, and you consistently challenge the status quo, you operate differently, using instead a logic of appropriateness: What does a person like me do in a situation like this? Rather than looking outward in an attempt to predict the outcome, you turn inward to your identity. You base the decision on who you are—or who you want to be.”

“I couldn’t care less.” That’s what then-Army Lieutenant Jackie Robinson said about the court martial he received for refusing to sit in the back of the bus in 1944. He said essentially the same thing about his successful decision to steal home in a World Series game when he was well past his prime.

It’s an attitude among younger siblings that has been observed across hundreds of studies. Firstborns are more likely to win Nobel Prizes and elections, they earn 14 percent higher starting salaries and they are less likely to succumb to debilitating vices. But with less aversion to risk, laterborns often advance further in their careers and, by age 30, the salary discrepancy is gone.

There is plenty of disagreement among birth order experts, Grant writes, but there is consensus that while the oldest is more than twice as likely to be a high achiever in school, their younger siblings had double the likelihood of rebellious—original—behavior.

Niche Picking: Competing by Not Competing

“Faced with the intellectual and physical challenges of competing directly with an older sibling, the younger chooses a different way to stand out,” Grant says, calling the practice “niche picking.” Jackie Robinson ran track, but he couldn’t beat his older brother (an

Olympic medalist), so he chose other sports. For many who grow up watching their older siblings build upon their head start down life's path, rather than try to catch up, they build a new road.

To test the theory, Grant turned to comedians—an unstable profession built on the disruption of expectation. He found that of Comedy Central's 100 greatest stand-ups, only 21 were firstborn, and nearly half were the baby of the family. Among some of the most notable lastborns—Stephen Colbert (youngest of 11), Chelsea Handler (fifth of five), Louis C.K. (three older sisters) and Mel Brooks (three older brothers)—their siblings had all gone into conventional professions.

“Niche picking helps to solve the mystery of why siblings aren't terribly similar. ... But there's more to this story,” Grant writes. “As hard as they try to be consistent, parents treat their children differently based on birth order.”

The Slippery Slope of Strict Parenting

“Psychologist Robert Zajonc observed that firstborns grow up in a world of adults, while the more older siblings you have, the more time you spend learning from other children,” writes Grant. Robinson's older sister, for example, called herself Jackie's “little mother.”

And when siblings act as surrogate parents, children are less likely to face strict rules and stiff penalties. “Even when the parenting role isn't delegated to children,” he adds, “parents tend to start out as strict disciplinarians with firstborns and become increasingly flexible with laterborns.”

“I walked all over my parents because they were old,” says Lizz Winstead, co-creator of *The Daily Show*. “They forgot to say ‘you can't do that...’ That's why I dove into everything headfirst.” And though she grew up in a traditionally conservative Catholic home, her parents did not try to stop her increasingly progressive political and religious leanings, even when she went to the bishop asking that, if she couldn't be an altar boy, could she at least be an altar girl?

For Grant, with a mountain of evidence supporting the influence of birth order, he turns his attention to “what factors shape whether children use their freedom to become honorable or antisocial, proactive or passive, creative or destructive.”

Great Explanations

Authors Samuel and Pearl Oliner studied the men and women who risked their lives to shelter Jews during the Holocaust, and compared them to bystanders of similar backgrounds from the same towns.

They found that a recurring difference in interviews was how interviewees described their parents’ disciplining styles. Rescuers were three-and-a-half times more likely to use words like “explaining” or “reasoning” than those who did not shelter potential victims. Particularly prevalent in the upbringing of the heroes were lessons in how their behavior affected others. Grant reports that one rescuer said her mother “never did any punishing or scolding—she tried to make me understand with my mind what I’d done wrong.”

Grant acknowledges that there is a sort of paradox that comes from reasoning discipline: “It leads both to more rule following and more rebelliousness.” On the one hand, recent research shows that teenagers are less likely to disobey rules when a rationale is given than when those rules are relayed in an authoritative manner. On the other, Donald MacKinnon’s study finds that the world’s most creative architects, those who rebel against the norms, tend to be the product of discipline with explanations.

The twofold result comes from learning the values behind the rules. Such discipline neither breeds contempt for authority nor absolute compliance. Instead, the child grows up to see what lies behind the authority. The Holocaust heroes had no great history of lawlessness, but when the Nazis began targeting people on their religion, they knew it was wrong.

For a young Jackie Robinson, morals were not always so clear. As a teenager, he led a local gang and had numerous run-ins with the law. But after being taken to jail for vandalism, a neighborhood mechanic, Carl Anderson, took Robinson aside. “He made me see that if I continued with the gang, it would hurt my mother,” Robinson later wrote. He knew that was a wrong he wanted to right. And it set him on a path to right wrongs for a lot more people as well.

Persona Noun Grata, or Why Nouns Are Better Than Verbs

“Moral standards are also forged in part by what parents say after children do the *right thing*,” Grant writes. Most people, he believes, praise the action rather than the child: “That was really nice. That was so sweet.”

But the experiments of psychologist Joan Grusec show that when children receive “character praise,” they are subsequently more generous: “You are a very nice and helpful person.”

“When our character is praised, we internalize it as part of our identities,” Grant explains. “Instead of seeing ourselves as engaging in isolated moral acts, we start to develop a more unified self-concept as a moral person.”

Children around the age of 8 displayed the highest moral response to character praise in studies, while 10-year-olds already had begun to solidify their identities and 5-year-olds may be too young for an isolated compliment to make impact.

But psychologist Christopher Bryan finds that, as young as 3, children are about 25 percent more likely to clean up when asked to be “helpers” rather than “to help.” His work shows that even adults are more likely to play by the rules if instead of being urged not to cheat, they are told “please don’t be a cheater.” Policymakers would be wise, he believes, to consider the power of identity nouns rather than verbs—consider the impact of warning people not be “drunk drivers.”

“When we shift our emphasis from behavior to character, people evaluate choices differently. Instead of using the logic of consequence, asking whether this behavior will achieve the results they want, they apply the logic of appropriateness ... because it is the right thing to do. In the poignant words of one Holocaust rescuer, ‘I found it incomprehensible and inadmissible that for religious reasons or as a result of religious choice, Jews would be persecuted. It’s like saving somebody who is drowning. You don’t ask them what God they pray to. You just go save them.’”

Why Parents Aren’t the Best Role Models

“Parents can nurture the impulse to be original, but, at some point, people need to find their own role models for originality,” Grant says.

Psychologists Bill Peterson and Abigail Stewart studied Radcliffe College alumnae who, 17 years earlier, had been asked to name the person who most influenced them. While many named a parent, the majority who were working to drive positive change had named an unrelated mentor.

Winstead and Robinson both had support in their families, but it took outside role models to help them find their paths. For Winstead, it was Roseanne Barr’s trailblazing in both comedy and women’s issues. Robinson needed guidance from a mechanic and Karl Downs, a minister who made church an appealing refuge for at-risk youth. Without them, he says, “I might have become a full-fledged juvenile delinquent.”

For some kids, the role model isn’t someone they know at all. Numerous revolutionaries have named Gandhi or Meena as their greatest influence. So too can fictional characters guide us, according to Grant. He points to inventors who followed the inspiration of Jules Verne and H. G. Wells’ stories. In fact, in the last two centuries, psychologists have found that unique accomplishments spike in the years after original achievement themes are most prevalent in children’s stories.

Grant marvels at experiments that have shown that “reading *Harry Potter* can improve children’s attitudes toward marginalized groups,” likely because of the discrimination faced by half-wizards Harry and Hermione. He lets himself wonder about the originality that will come from the generation as they mature.

“If we want to encourage originality, the best step we can take is to raise our children’s aspirations by introducing them to different kinds of role models,” Grant concludes.

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chapter seven:

rethinking groupthink

the myths of strong cultures, cults,
and devil's advocates

Opening chapter seven, Grant introduces us to a visionary known for standing onstage, pulling a new device from his pocket and changing the face of technology. He built an innovative empire, only to be forced out in a clash with his board.

This isn't Steve Jobs. It's Polaroid founder Edwin Land. In addition to giving the world instant photography, Land is responsible for the polarizing light filter that's still used in billions of products. He had a key role in the U-2 spy plane and its impact on the Cold War. Steve Jobs called him "a national treasure."

His company may seem like a relic in the age of the megapixel, but its engineers had Polaroid positioned to be among the first—and possibly best—to market with the digital camera. Instead, they sat on it for four years, ultimately falling into bankruptcy.

"Within the company, there was widespread agreement that customers would always want hard copies of pictures, and key decision makers failed to question this assumption. It was a classic case of groupthink—the tendency to seek consensus instead of fostering dissent. Groupthink is the enemy of originality; people feel pressured to conform to the dominant, default views instead of championing diversity of thought."

A Bolt from the Blueprint

In a study of nearly 200 Silicon Valley startups in the 1990s, sociologist James Baron examined founders' hiring blueprints and found three prevailing templates: The "professional" blueprint looked for employees with specific skills to fit the company's needs,

“star” sought candidates of enormous potential and “commitment” tried to build a workforce that would best fit the company culture.

Baron found that while companies using the star and professional blueprints had high rates of failure, not one commitment company went out of business. Furthermore, with commitment, odds of an IPO tripled the star model and quadrupled professional.

Controlling for the fact that many startups replace their founders with new CEOs who change the blueprint, Baron found no meaningful change in the results. “Founders cast a long shadow,” Grant writes.

Commitment culture can be seen in the early days of Polaroid. While Kodak hired men with advanced science degrees, Land sought a diverse and dedicated workforce that subscribed to his vision of innovation. In the early years, his bet paid off. The problem of fading black-and-white film was solved by Polaroid’s groundbreaking sepia film, developed by Meroë Morse, a woman with an art history degree. After 15 years of toil, the code to instant color photography was cracked by a former car mechanic with no formal education, Howard Rogers. But the story doesn’t end there, of course.

Growing Pains: The Dark Side of Commitment Culture

After going public, companies founded with commitment culture saw their stock values grow 140 percent slower than those with star blueprints and 25 percent slower than companies guided by professional blueprints.

“Commitment firms have greater difficulty attracting, retaining or integrating a diverse workforce,” Baron says. Because they are looking for a certain type of person, the very principle that led to their unique team becomes the rule that weeds out the diversity of thought necessary to reinvent when the market evolves.

In Land’s case, Polaroid prospered in a world of analog photography, constantly innovating and growing annual revenue from \$7 million in 1950 to more than \$100 million in 1960 and nearly \$1 billion by 1976.

Land was first approached with the idea that digital imagery may be the future of photography in 1980. He dismissed the idea. As Polaroid began to struggle and the future became more and more defined by the computer, Land became less receptive (a reaction found to be common among CEOs). He surrounded himself with people who shared his views and literally denied access to anyone who would challenge him.

But, writes Grant, “Dissenting opinions are useful, *even when they’re wrong*.” Psychologist Charlan Nemeth demonstrated this in the 1980s with a study on the hiring process. Participants needed to choose the best of three candidates, and Nemeth led them toward the selection of an unqualified one. When dissent was introduced by encouraging a second unqualified candidate, the groups were four times more likely to settle on the best person for the job. Disrupting consensus encouraged divergent thinking and, ultimately, the right answer.

After investing \$600 million in an instant video technology that would be outdated before its completion, Polaroid’s founder was ousted by the board. But Land’s thinking was in the company’s DNA. When engineer Carl Yankowski became vice president, he pushed the company to compete in the digital space. After several confrontations, CEO Mac Booth told him, “I don’t know if I should punch you in the nose or fire you.”

“Think Different” Culture

Surveys reveal that the most admired culture in finance, by a landslide, is Bridgewater Associates. Managing more than \$200 million in investments, the company is guided by a set of 200 principles—not one of them about investing. New employees are trained in a military-style boot camp, eliminating the learning curve as they became accustomed to notions like “you have nothing to fear from the truth” and “behavior modification typically takes about 18 months of constant reinforcement.”

Admiration for Bridgewater extends beyond its culture. The company earns its clients more money than any hedge fund in the industry and warned about an impending financial crisis a year before the collapse.

Bridgewater prevents groupthink by inviting dissenting opinions from everyone and *to* everyone. In one email to co-CEO Ray Dalio, an advisor told his boss that he deserved a “D-“ for meeting performance, accusing him of rambling and being disorganized. Dalio responded to his subordinate’s attack by asking for more criticism from others and then forwarding the email chain to the company so they could learn from the exchange.

At Bridgewater, where one principle states “no one has the right to hold a critical opinion without speaking up about it,” this is the norm. Unlike the stereotypical yes-men culture or a cult where, Grant says, “values are dogma,” dissent is a core value at Bridgewater, and employees can actually be fired for not challenging the status quo.

The Devil You Know

Shortly after his inauguration, U.S. President John F. Kennedy tried to introduce dissent by asking his brother to play devil’s advocate in the planning of the Bay of Pigs invasion. Bobby made a strong case not to go through with the mission but obviously failed to prevent the famous debacle. Charlan Nemeth believes she knows why.

A devil’s advocate is meant to combat confirmation bias—seeking out opinions that support our preference. But Nemeth’s work shows that assigning someone to role-play for the other side has a minimal effect on either the decision-making process or resources we seek out. “Dissenting for the sake of dissenting is not useful,” she says. “But when it is authentic, it stimulates thought; it clarifies and it emboldens.”

“In one experiment led by Nemeth,” Grant writes, “groups with an authentic dissenter generated 48 percent more solutions to problems than those with an assigned devil’s advocate, and their solutions tended to be higher in quality.” The key, he says, is not to *assign* a dissenter, but to *unearth* one.

Bridgewater literally works overtime to unearth dissenters, sometimes even stirring controversy to stimulate debate. Rather than a workspace of unanimity, Dalio strives to create a culture where dissenting ideas are discussed and reconciled. “The greatest tragedy of mankind,” he says, “comes from the inability of people to have thoughtful disagreement to find out what’s true.”

If everyone speaks up truthfully, Dalio has found, groupthink becomes impossible.

Finding the Canary in the Coal Mine

Using an exercise from organizational psychologist David Hofmann, Grant often asks groups to fill in the blanks: “Don’t bring me ____; bring me ____.” Without fail, he hears multiple people chime in with “Don’t bring me problems; bring me solutions.”

But discouraging observations can be a dangerous inhibitor. In helping NASA improve its safety culture after the 2003 Challenger explosion, Hofmann found that any number of people could have raised concerns about a “mystery object” seen floating near the shuttle at launch. But no one did. That warning might have led NASA to realize that the object had punctured a wing with enough time to make repairs before gas entered the ship. Relying too heavily on solutions, he says, created a culture that stymied inquiry.

Where Polaroid weeded out those who provided warning signs, Google seeks them out with the “Canaries,” a group of engineers known for diverse viewpoints and speaking their minds (named for the canaries in coal mines who would sing all day unless poisonous gas was present, a warning to the miners).

At Bridgewater, Dalio expects all of his employees to bring problems to his attention. But he doesn’t hear them all equally. He keeps statistics on each employee’s skills and performance, ranging from thinking to dependability. Those statistics indicate credibility, and the employee’s voice is weighted accordingly. Still, everyone is expected to speak up and be assertive, yet open-minded. As

management scholar Karl Weick says, “Argue like you’re right and listen like you’re wrong.”

The Moment of Truth

Grant decided to put Bridgewater to the test and tell Dalio where he felt the principles fell short. Dalio welcomed the exchange.

The principles needed a hierarchy, Grant told him. Dalio’s co-CEO Greg Jensen had recently gotten into an epic dispute with an employee over whether or not he had stifled dissent by criticizing how she was vocalizing her issues. Both had valid points, and by failing to prioritize, reconciliation was delayed. Furthermore, Grant argued that more than four core values have been shown to be overwhelming, decreasing their impact.

Dalio agreed but explained that the principles are really a type of event happening over and over, along with a prescription for dealing with it. Life, he said, consists of billions of events, and his hope is that when an employee confronts such an event at work (not in other aspects of life), they will call upon a principle for guidance. The explanation helped Grant see the principles in a new light, but did not take away his desire for hierarchy.

Grant’s second criticism concerned Bridgewater’s process for dispute resolution—three highly credible team members from each side would be assigned to argue the respective points. Feeling this was too subjective, Grant argued for a scientific approach, saying experiments should be run, testing the proposals of each side.

Here, Dalio was less agreeable. In addition to the time needed for the scientific process to run its course, he liked the open marketplace of ideas that debate encouraged. Sometimes, he believes, the solution is less important than the process of reaching it.

Movers and Shapers

Dalio, however, has been running an experiment. He interviews prominent people and studies historical figures to try to understand people who shape our world. In addition to being driven and imaginative, all on his list are curious, nonconforming and rebellious.

“They practice brutal, nonhierarchical honesty. And they act in the face of risk, because their fear of not succeeding exceeds their fear of failing,” says Grant. “The greatest shapers don’t stop at introducing originality into the world. They create cultures that promote originality in others.”

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chapter eight:

rocking the boat and keeping it steady

managing anxiety, apathy, ambivalence, and anger

When, in 2007, Lewis Pugh set out to become the first person to survive a long-distance swim across the North Pole, he already held the record for the world's northernmost swim—and for the southernmost swim. Called the “human polar bear” by some, his body temperature would rise to 101°F in the lead up to a swim, a unique condition dubbed “anticipatory thermogenesis,” likely stemming from decades of Pavlovian conditioning.

For perspective on the challenge, Grant offers this comparison: The water that froze the Titanic passengers was 41°F. Pugh's Antarctic swim was 32°F. The North Pole swim was 29°F. This should have killed him.

So how does Pugh stay positive in the face of certain death? He doesn't. Instead of visualizing success as conventional wisdom dictates, he imagines failure. He allows the fear to take hold. And, so far, it's worked.

The Positive Power of Negative Thinking

In challenges that demand courage, psychologist Julie Norem studies two opposing strategies: “strategic optimism,” staying calm and anticipating success, and “defensive pessimism,” building anxiety and expecting the absolute worst.

In experiments ranging from dart throwing to working out mathematical equations, Norem's work shows that, even with heightened anxiety, defensive pessimists perform just as well as strategic optimists. She was surprised to learn that the pessimists' better-than-expected results came not despite their negativity, but because of it.

Self-doubt creeps in for all of us, Norem says, and pessimists aren't crippled by it. Instead of combating those feelings, they embrace them, imagining the worst possible outcome and sending their anxiety to its peak before they are called on to perform. Having the image of disaster in their heads, they are motivated to avoid it. When, on the flip side, pessimists bypass anxiety, they become more complacent.

If you want to sabotage a pessimist, says Grant, "just make them happy."

Pugh is naturally an optimist, but he saw value in defensive pessimism. "The trick is to make fear your friend. Fear forces you to prepare more rigorously and see potential problems more quickly." But at the North Pole, things were more grim. It was difficult for him to imagine a scenario worse than the most likely outcome.

Don't Stop Believin'

Harvard Business School professor Alison Wood Brooks gave students two minutes to prepare a speech on why they are good collaborators. With public speaking regularly appearing as the only thing Americans fear more than death, it's no surprise that several of her students were visibly shaking. At random, each student was assigned three words to say before speaking: either "I am excited," or "I am calm."

When nerves come into play, the most common prescription is to calm down or relax. But Brooks found that students assigned "excited" were 17 percent more persuasive and 15 percent more confident than the "calm" set. In a similar experiment on a math test, "excited" outperformed "calm" by 22 percent.

She added another dimension, testing how well students sang pop songs without music, as scored by Nintendo Wii. She prompted them with either anxiety, excitement or not at all. With no prompt, the average score was 69 percent. Excitement raised the average to 80, but here, anxiety lowered scores to a mean of 53.

Why didn't negativity do the trick in the singing experiment? Grant says when we're committed to an action, defensive pessimism piggybacks

on fear's natural momentum and channels it into motivation rather than trying to stop the fear in its tracks. But if we haven't fully committed, the added negativity can build upon the doubt as to whether we should be attempting this activity in the first place.

In the North Pole, doubt had begun to accompany Pugh's fear. With a 20-minute swim ahead of him, he recalled a five-minute test swim that burst the cells in his fingers and left his left hand numb for four months. For the first time, he thought, "I don't believe I can do this." With his commitment wavering, defensive pessimism was making things worse.

A friend helped him switch strategies. He reminded Pugh of the many people who had supported him. He told him to think of his parents' inspiration and reminded him of the legacy he was building to fight climate change. "After listening to him," Pugh says, "the idea of abandoning the swim disappeared." He became excited, optimistic.

Not long after, he had completed an unprecedented 19-minute North Pole swim with no physical damage.

Outsourcing Inspiration

In 2008, Skype was in decline. Market share was failing to meet expectations and morale was low. Two months after taking the reins, Josh Silverman announced that Skype would unveil full-screen video within the year. Believing it wouldn't be possible or popular, his employees nearly revolted.

After a series of meetings that failed to rally the troops, Silverman sought outside help to inspire his team. To communicate how they were working to meet the company goal of helping people be "together when you're not in the same room," he gave the floor to Skype users. Employees heard stories of long-distance couples and troops overseas. It united the company around their mission and motivated them. By year's end, they released full-screen video. Skype's user base, value and profit exploded.

It's a technique that's been repeated in numerous experiments. Fundraisers, for example, show better results when they hear from someone benefiting from the funds. Halfway around the world, Srdja Popovic and his friends engaged in another type of inspiration outsourcing in their efforts to topple a dictator.

Strength in Small Numbers

Nearly 40 percent of the time, studies show, a person in a group will settle on an answer they know is wrong if they believe everyone else thinks it is correct. But if just one other person dissents with them, odds of advocating the wrong answer drop to 5.5 percent.

"Merely knowing that you aren't the only resister makes it substantially easier to reject the crowd," Grant writes. "Emotional strength can be found even in small numbers."

Such was the thinking when Popovic helped launch the former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic resistance group, Otpor! It was dangerous for Serbians to express their opposition in public, so most never spoke or heard the dissent they felt. So Otpor! outsourced inspiration to a black fist, painting and stickering hundreds of them around Belgrade along with resistance slogans. Suddenly, if you opposed Milosevic, you knew you were not alone.

In Chile in 1983, where voicing opposition could result in imprisonment or death, miners protesting former dictator Augusto Pinochet mounted an even more subtle opposition campaign. It began with a call for people to flicker their lights to signal protest. Then they began to drive and walk slowly, grinding street movements to a glacial pace. There was nothing illegal and nothing for authorities to do as the opposition movement was born out in the open.

Advised in later years by Popovic, Polish citizens pushed their TVs around the streets in wheelbarrows to protest government propaganda on TV news. Syrians poured red food coloring into public fountains to signify President Bashar al-Assad's bloody rule. These seemingly miniscule actions had more than symbolic value.

They build community and, writes Grant, “it’s easier to rebel when it feels like an act of conformity.”

The Burning Platform

On New Year’s Eve, 2000, Popovic and his friends organized a huge celebration in Republic Square, promising the Red Hot Chili Peppers at midnight. Anticipation was buzzing among the festive crowd as the hour grew near. But when the clock struck midnight, the festivities stopped abruptly. Lights went down and the music grew grim as a voice came from the loudspeaker telling people to go home: “We have nothing to celebrate. This year has been a year of war and depression. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Let’s make the coming year count. Because 2000 is the year.”

Despite the disappointment of the crowd, this move employed numerous critical tactics. First, it gave a timetable. Studies have shown that even if people agree with a cause, without a timetable, they are unlikely to act. Second, it framed the issue around a miserable status quo and made action the alternative—if inaction is bad enough, what’s the risk in trying? And third, it seized upon the moment when the movement was emboldened. Accentuating the work to be done can dissuade people if they are not fully committed, but, once they are down the path, the challenge to complete it can invigorate.

The Otpor! movement, says Grant, “was no longer frozen in fear, it was time to show them how much distance they had yet to travel.”

Fanning the Flame

Anger can be a powerful motivator, but it can also make people erratic and prone to mistakes. For revolutionaries, the key is to keep the anger channeled and useful, controlled. The question for Grant is what is the best way to control anger.

Venting—yelling into pillows or punching them, ranting—is a popular answer. But psychologist Brad Bushman finds that venting actually increases aggression, feeding the fire, not extinguishing it. Even when it makes us feel better, it can be self-destructive, focusing us on revenge against a transgressor instead of the best course in

remedying the situation. He finds the better course is to sit quietly for a few moments.

A more manageable fire is what psychologists call empathetic anger—the desire to right wrongs done to other people. While it ignites our passion to act, we retain a more measured desire to respect a victim’s dignity.

On New Year’s Eve, Otpor! got that right, too. A slideshow accompanied the grave call to action, but it contained no images of Milosevic, which may have caused a riot. Instead, they showed his victims, appealing to a sense of indignation but also humanity.

To overcome Milosevic’s vote rigging, Otpor! would need to mobilize the largest voter turnout in Serbian history. That year, they did just that, toppling a regime.

More than a decade later, in the spring of 2010, the black fist of Otpor! turned up in Egypt, helping to awaken another movement: the Arab Spring.

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“I arise in the morning torn between desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world,” E. B. White once wrote. “This makes it difficult to plan the day.”

Grant closes by reflecting on America’s promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In the struggle to improve life and liberty, we may put our own happiness on the backburner, he says, but seizing the chance to create a better world “brings a different kind of satisfaction.”

“Becoming original is not the easiest path in the pursuit of happiness,” he concludes, “but it leaves us perfectly poised for the happiness of pursuit.”

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