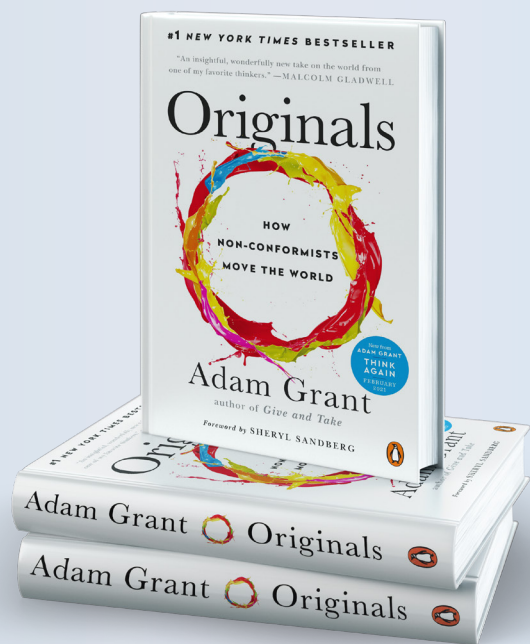


BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



Originals

By Adam Grant

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist at Wharton, where he has been the top-rated professor for seven straight years. He is an expert in how we can find motivation and meaning, and lead more generous and creative lives. He is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of five books that have sold over 2 million copies and been translated into 35 languages: *Give and Take*, *Originals*, *Option B*, *Power Moves*, and with his wife, Allison Sweet Grant, *The Gift Inside the Box*. His books have been recognized as among the year's best by Amazon, the Financial Times, Harvard Business Review, and the Wall Street Journal and been praised by J.J. Abrams, Richard Branson, Bill and Melinda Gates, Malcolm Gladwell, and Malala Yousafzai.

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How Nonconformists Move the World

Adam Grant is a researcher, teacher, management thought leader, and writer. In 2009, a young entrepreneur came to offer Grant an opportunity to invest in the company he and three of his college buddies were launching. Grant declined and bills it as “the worst financial decision” he ever made. The company was Warby Parker and it revolutionized the way people buy eyewear. In 2015, it landed the number one spot on Fast Company’s most innovative companies list. That same year it reached “\$100 million in annual revenues and was valued at over \$1 billion.” Grant wanted to understand why he reached the decision he did with Warby Parker, which launched him on the track to researching and writing *Originals*.

In it, he teaches readers how each and every one of us can become more original ourselves and in doing so, make life better for us all. Oftentimes, we come to accept the “dissatisfying defaults in our world” as the natural order of things. If we can think about them in an original way, though, that curiosity allows us to recognize that most of those things are actually social norms created by people. “And that awareness gives us the courage to contemplate how we can change them.”

In the foreword, Sheryl Sandberg says that in our lives and in our work we may find ourselves wondering if one person can actually make a difference and if so, could that one person be us? Grant’s answer is a “resounding yes.” Every person is capable of “championing ideas that improve the world around us.” *Originals* shows us how.

The Surprising Habit of Successful Originals

Many of the world’s “most eminent and influential people” were not geniuses who began life as child prodigies as we may assume. Children who are intellectually gifted often go on to become highly successful in a specialized area of expertise but they don’t often spark cataclysmic progress or innovation in the world at large. They work hard at being the very best in a chosen instrument or field of science but they don’t compose their own music or produce scientific breakthroughs. “Practice makes perfect, but it doesn’t make new.” Achievement becomes more



highly valued than creation. “Instead of aiming for unique accomplishments,” we take the safer, more certain road to success. Great ideas are lost along the way.

Grant shares examples of how some of the most notorious change agents in history came to their positions only after being prodded, pressed, or pushed in that direction. Martin Luther King Jr. and founding fathers John Adams and George Washington had no intention whatsoever of leading monumental moments of change for humankind. Yet people in their lives exerted their influence to place them in public positions and as a result a country and later, a civil rights movement were born. We may not have huge ambitions on the scale of changing a nation or the world, but we “do have ideas for improving our workplaces, schools, and communities.” Few of us take steps to put those ideas into action. We fear that the risk is too great.

A surprising pattern emerges when we study entrepreneurs. Most people think that starting a business requires a single giant leap where all the time, energy, and focus is directed towards the new idea. Studies have shown that the opposite is true. Entrepreneurs who hedge their bets, mitigate risk, and take steps, not leaps, have a far greater chance of launching a business that is built to last. Grant likens it to having a diversified stock portfolio. If you decide to invest in a stock that is unproven, you balance that decision out with a stable stock. A balanced portfolio isn’t made up entirely of moderately risky stocks. Entrepreneurs, likewise, do not stick to safe middle ground. Instead, “successful originals take extreme risks in one arena and offset them with extreme caution in another.”

Picking Winning Ideas

People are able to generate a hefty stock of original ideas but we lack the ability to pick the ones that will be winners. Grant helps readers identify the challenges encountered and the best practices to put into place in picking original ideas that have legs. Sometimes people get stuck refining an idea they think is great instead of continually coming up with new ideas. Originals need to rely on sheer numbers to increase their chances of hitting on some winners. “Even the most eminent creators typically produce a large quantity of work that’s technically sound but considered unremarkable by experts and audiences.” Producing a “huge volume of work” is the single most important thing someone can do to be original. Thomas Edison filed nearly 1,100 patents and Mozart composed 600 pieces of classical music. But they are remembered for merely a handful of them.

We have an inherent bias in favor of our own ideas. Our misguided perceptions of quality go hand in hand with the problem of quantity. “Conviction of 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.” We are “not reliable judges of the quality of our ideas” so we have to turn to others for feedback. The most accurate forecasters for an idea’s potential are other creators. To assess the merit of an idea, we would be best served in turning to colleagues who have “no particular investment in our ideas” and “enough distance to offer an honest appraisal.”

Another trap we fall into when choosing ideas is following our intuition when we don’t have the right experience in the domain to rely upon it. It is best to have experience creating things in a particular area such as entertainment, technology, or transportation, before you rely on your gut to predict the success of a novel idea in that area. Intuition is “only trustworthy when people build up experience making judgments in a predictable environment.” Analysis is a far better “source of insight” when considering new ideas.

How to Raise Original Children

There is a robust and fascinating area of scientific research focused on birth order. Whether looking at sports, politics, or science, laterborns consistently show greater ease with taking risks, accepting radical ideas, and embracing societal progress when compared to first borns. As Grant dove deeply into this research he came to realize that birth order is not the real reason that we see these patterns emerge. Rather, the parenting practices we typically adopt in relation to later born children are more responsible than birth order itself. Grant “examines the family roots of originality,” to determine what impacts siblings and parents have on risk taking and how parents can steer their children into rebelling in a constructive, not destructive, direction.

The impact of birth order on achievement has long been the focus of research. Studies have shown that firstborns are more likely to rise to executive level positions in corporations, win Nobel Prizes, and become congressmen, for example. “Birth order doesn’t determine who you are; it only affects the probability that you’ll develop in a particular way.”

Firstborns are typically more risk averse than laterborns. This tendency can be partly explained by the way parents raise younger children differently. In cases of larger families, it is common for the youngest of the children to have surrogate parents in their older siblings. Siblings do not enforce as many rules or punishments and furthermore, younger siblings learn to follow the lead of the older siblings, doing what they do, rather than following the lead of their adult parents who make more “carefully considered choices.” In cases where older siblings are not heavily involved in raising the younger children, parents themselves tend to start off strictly with firstborns and become “increasingly flexible” and relaxed with laterborns.

If we want our children to become original and creative, we have to give them freedom to do so, regardless of their birth order. The challenge is to encourage risk taking in a way that channels that originality in the right direction. We all know rebellion can lead us down a destructive path. There are several factors “that shape whether children use their freedom to become honorable or antisocial, proactive or passive, creative or destructive.”

Parents who focus on an explanation or reason-based discipline have favorable outcomes to those who use threats or punishment. A clear rationale helps internalize standards of conduct and develop “one’s ethical code.” A fascinating paradox arises from this. Children raised this way will “comply voluntarily with rules that align with important values and questions rules



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that don't." When a rule doesn't make sense internally, these budding originals will rebel against it and take active steps to change the rule itself.

One kind of explanation is particularly effective in "enforcing discipline." Parents who focus on the consequences of a behavior to others will develop empathy in their children. This distinction "directs attention to the distress of the person who may be harmed" by a particular behavior. Explaining to your child that washing their hands will help keep their classmates from getting sick will lead to better hand-washing habits than explaining that hand washing will keep them from getting sick, for example.

Praise for making good behavior choices also goes a long way in sending children down a more desired path. How parents provide that praise can have an impact. Research shows that praising the child, not the action, is more effective at fostering character traits we all want to see in our children. For example, let's say a child shared a toy with a playmate. Praise focused on the behavior would sound something like, "That was nice to share your toy." Praise focused on the child herself would sound more like, "You are a nice person for sharing that toy." "When our character is praised, we internalize it as part of our identities. Instead of seeing ourselves as engaging in isolated moral acts, we start to develop a more unified self-concept as a moral person."

How Managers Can Foster Nonconformity

Groupthink is "the tendency to seek consensus instead of fostering dissent." According to Grant, it is the enemy of originality but traditional theories of cohesion breeding conformity are a myth. He examines the real causes of groupthink and ways leaders can prevent it. Ordinary people and organizations have the ability to "breed originality early on and embrace it over time."

In the short run, companies stand to realize an advantage by creating what are called "commitment firms." These organizations value culture over all and hire people that conform to the established set of characteristics. Similar people are hired so that they will fit in and research shows that these firms outperform other types of hiring practices initially. But over time, this "weeds out diversity in thoughts and values." In more volatile markets, the need to change is often ignored, they fail to adapt, and they suffer financially as a result. They favor "the comfort of consensus over the discomfort of dissent" so mistakes are left uncorrected and innovations are never pursued.

Leaders can avoid these pitfalls by hiring and soliciting input from a diverse set of team members. Dissenting viewpoints are incredibly valuable, even when they end up being wrong for the

company. They "stimulate divergent attention and thought," stirring up ideas in everyone and ultimately, leading to innovative and creative solutions. "Promoting the expression of original ideas" is correlated with huge organizational success.

Many leaders fall short in fostering dissent when they rely too heavily on assigning a purposeful "devil's advocate." In a robust research study it was discovered that having someone tasked with dissenting against a majority opinion had very little impact on drawing out a diversity of ideas. The others in the group seem to be sensitive to the lack of sincerity and do not take the advocate's opinions seriously. It is far more powerful, Grant states, to "unearth a devil's advocate" then to assign one. Leaders can accomplish this by offering opportunities for "open-minded debate" with the purpose of reconciling differences.

Finally, leaders should move away from the maxim that team members should only bring up problems when they have a solution to accompany it. Grant says this is a mistake that can have dire consequences. Countless problems are left unexplored because people feel they cannot bring them up. Instead, leaders should invite complaints, with or without proposed solutions, creating an "invaluable safeguard" for the organization as a result.

There is little question as to why Adam Grant is described as a management guru. His thinking is evolutionary, his writing is entirely convincing, and he points followers down an enlightened and clear path to improvement. Every principle introduced in the book is backed by extensive research and made relevant through real-world examples found in well-known corporations, teams, and individuals. It does all of this while being compulsively readable, a difficult feat when grappling with such subject matter. One of the most appealing aspects of the book is its relevance to a wide swath of readers. Managers, policy makers, teachers, parents, and literally any individual who wants to "generate, recognize, voice, and champion new ideas" will find the book useful. *Originals* is captivating, refreshing, and insightful in making a case for going against the grain ourselves and in fostering the same in our children, employees, and students.