

BOOK

Originals: How Non-conformists Move the World

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SYNOPSIS [From the publisher]

“Using surprising studies and stories spanning business, politics, sports, and entertainment, Grant explores how to recognize a good idea, speak up without getting silenced, build a coalition of allies, choose the right time to act, and manage fear and doubt; how parents and teachers can nurture originality in children; and how leaders can build cultures that welcome dissent. Learn from an entrepreneur who pitches his start-ups by highlighting the reasons not to invest, a woman at Apple who challenged Steve Jobs from three levels below, an analyst who overturned the rule of secrecy at the CIA, a billionaire financial wizard who fires employees for failing to criticize him, and a TV executive who didn’t even work in comedy but saved *Seinfeld* from the cutting-room floor. The payoff is a set of groundbreaking insights about rejecting conformity and improving the status quo.

“The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.” George Bernard Shaw

“Years ago, psychologists discovered that there are two routes to achievement: conformity and originality. Conformity means following the crowd down conventional paths and maintaining the status quo. Originality is taking the road less traveled, championing a set of novel ideas that go against the grain but ultimately make things better.”

“Originality itself starts with creativity: generating a concept that is both novel and useful. But it doesn’t stop there. Originals are people who take the initiative to make their visions a reality.”

“Employees who had held five jobs in the past five years weren’t any more likely to leave their positions than those who had stayed in the same job for five years . . . Employees who used Firefox or Chrome to browse the Web remained in their jobs 15 percent longer than those who used Internet Explorer or Safari . . . Thinking it was a coincidence, Housman ran the same analysis for absences from work. The pattern was the same: Firefox and Chrome users were 19 percent less likely to miss work than Internet Explorer and Safari fans . . . To get Firefox or Chrome, you have to demonstrate some resourcefulness and download a different browser. Instead of accepting the default, you take a bit of initiative to seek out an option that might be better. And that act of initiative, however tiny, is a window into what you do at work.”

“People who suffer the most from a given state of affairs are paradoxically the least likely to question, challenge, reject, or change it.”

“The hallmark of originality is rejecting the default and exploring whether a better option exists . . . The starting point is curiosity: pondering why the default exists in the first place. We’re driven to question defaults when we experience *vuja de*, the opposite of *déjà vu*. *Déjà vu* occurs when we encounter something new, but it feels as if we’ve seen it before. *Vuja de* is the reverse—we face something familiar, but we see it with a fresh perspective that enables us to gain new insights into old problems.”

“When we become curious about the 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 contemplate how we can change them.”

“Child prodigies, it turns out, rarely go on to change the world. When psychologists study history’s most eminent and influential people, they discover that many of them weren’t unusually gifted as children . . . Although child prodigies are often rich in both talent and ambition, what holds them back from moving the world forward is that they don’t learn to be original . . . Practice makes perfect, but it doesn’t make new.”

“Yet ‘only a fraction of gifted children eventually become revolutionary adult creators,’ laments psychologist Ellen Winner. ‘Those who do must make a painful transition’ from a child who ‘learns rapidly and effortlessly in an established domain’ to an adult who “ultimately remakes a domain.”

“Child prodigies are hindered by achievement motivation. The drive to succeed is responsible for many of the world’s greatest accomplishments.”

“When achievement motivation goes sky-high, it can crowd out originality: The more you value achievement, the more you come to dread failure. Instead of aiming for unique accomplishments, the intense desire to succeed leads us to strive for guaranteed success.”

“The drive to succeed and the accompanying fear of failure have held back some of the greatest creators and change agents in history. Concerned with maintaining stability and attaining conventional achievements, they have been reluctant to pursue originality. Instead of charging full steam ahead with assurance, they have been coaxed, convinced, or coerced to take a stand.”

“The men who took commanding roles in the American Revolution were as unlikely a group of revolutionaries as one can imagine,” Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jack Rakove recounts. “They became revolutionaries despite themselves.” In the years leading up to the war, John Adams feared British retaliation and hesitated to give up his budding law career; he only got involved after being elected as a delegate to the First Continental Congress. George Washington had been focused on managing his wheat, flour, fishing, and horse-breeding businesses, joining the cause only after Adams nominated him as commander in chief of the army. “I have used every endeavor in my power to avoid it,” Washington wrote.

“The word entrepreneur, as it was coined by economist Richard Cantillon, literally means “bearer of risk.”

“I declined to invest in Warby Parker because Neil and his friends were too much like me. I became a professor because I was passionate about discovering new insights, sharing knowledge, and teaching the next generations of students. But in my most honest moments, I know that I was also drawn to the security of tenure. I would never have had the confidence to start a business in my twenties. If I had, I certainly would have stayed in school and lined up a job to cover my bases.”

“I want to debunk the myth that originality requires extreme risk taking and persuade you that originals are actually far more ordinary than we realize. In every domain, from business and politics to science and

art, the people who move the world forward with original ideas are rarely paragons of conviction and commitment. As they question traditions and challenge the status quo, they may appear bold and self-assured on the surface. But when you peel back the layers, the truth is that they, too, grapple with fear, ambivalence, and self-doubt. We view them as self-starters, but their efforts are often fueled and sometimes forced by others. And as much as they seem to crave risk, they really prefer to avoid it.”

“If you think like most people, you’ll predict a clear advantage for the risk takers. Yet the study showed the exact opposite: Entrepreneurs who kept their day jobs had 33 percent lower odds of failure than those who quit. If you’re risk averse and have some doubts about the feasibility of your ideas, it’s likely that your business will be built to last. If you’re a freewheeling gambler, your startup is far more fragile.”

“When we embrace danger in one domain, we offset our overall level of risk by exercising caution in another domain. If you’re about to bet aggressively in blackjack, you might drive below the speed limit on your way to the casino.”

“Having a sense of security in one realm gives us the freedom to be original in another.”

“The best entrepreneurs are not risk maximizers,” Endeavor cofounder and CEO Linda Rottenberg observes based on decades of experience training many of the world’s great entrepreneurs. “They take the risk out of risk-taking” . . . successful originals take extreme risks in one arena and offset them with extreme caution in another.”

“And what about Bill Gates, famous for dropping out of Harvard to start Microsoft? When Gates sold a new software program as a sophomore, he waited an entire year before leaving school. Even then he didn’t drop out, but balanced his risk portfolio by applying for a leave of absence that was formally approved by the university – and by having his parents bankroll him. “Far from being one of the world’s great risk takers,” entrepreneur Rick Smith notes, “Bill Gates might more accurately be thought of as one of the world’s great risk mitigators.”

“A growing body of evidence suggests that entrepreneurs don’t like risk any more than the rest of us – and it’s the rare conclusion on which many economists, sociologists, and psychologists have actually come to agree.”

“Economists find that as teenagers, successful entrepreneurs were nearly three times as likely as their peers to break rules and engage in illicit activities. Yet when you take a closer look at the specific behaviors involved, the adolescents who went on to start productive companies were only taking calculated risks. When psychologists studied American twins and Swedish citizens, they found the same results.”

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

“The greatest presidents were those who challenged the status quo and brought about sweeping changes that improved the lot of the country. But these behaviors were completely unrelated to whether they cared deeply about public approval and social harmony.”

“Originality is not a fixed trait. It is a free choice. Lincoln wasn’t born with an original personality. Taking on controversy wasn’t programmed into his DNA; it was an act of conscious will. As the great thinker W. E. B. DuBois wrote, “He was one of you and yet he became Abraham Lincoln.”

“Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.” Scott Adams

“When we bemoan the lack of originality in the world, we blame it on the absence of creativity. If only people could generate more novel ideas, we’d all be better off. But in reality, the biggest barrier to originality is not idea generation – it’s idea selection.”

“Creators proved to be terrible at judging how their performances would do with the test audiences. On average, when ranking their videos against the performances of nine other circus artists, they put their own work two slots too high. The managers were more realistic: they had some distance from the performances, which put them in a more neutral position.”

“In music, Beethoven was known as a perceptive self-critic, yet as Simonton observes, “Beethoven’s own favorites among his symphonies, sonatas, and quartets are not those most frequently performed and recorded by posterity.”

“Consider Shakespeare: we’re most familiar with a small number of his classics, forgetting that in the span of two decades, he produced 37 plays and 154 sonnets. Simonton tracked the popularity of Shakespeare’s plays, measuring how often they’re performed and how widely they’re praised by experts and critics. In the same five-year window that Shakespeare produced three of his five most popular works – Macbeth, King Lear, and Othello – he also churned out the comparatively average Timon of Athens and All’s Well That Ends Well, both of which rank among the worst of his plays and have been consistently slammed for unpolished prose and incomplete plot and character development.”

“In science, Einstein wrote papers on general and special relativity that transformed physics, but many of his 248 publications had minimal impact. If you want to be original, “the most important possible thing you could do,” says Ira Glass, the producer of This American Life and the podcast Serial, “is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work.”

“Original thinkers,” Stanford professor Robert Sutton notes, “will come up with many ideas that are strange mutations, dead ends, and utter failures. The cost is worthwhile because they also generate a larger pool of ideas – especially novel ideas.”

“Many people fail to achieve originality because they generate a few ideas and then obsess about refining them to perfection.”

“The best way to get better at judging our ideas is to gather feedback. Put a lot of ideas out there and see which ones are praised and adopted by your target audience.”

“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.”

“Managers tend to be too risk averse: they focus on the costs of investing in bad ideas rather than the benefits of piloting good ones, which leads them to commit a large number of false negatives.”

“As we gain knowledge about a domain, we become prisoners of our prototypes.”