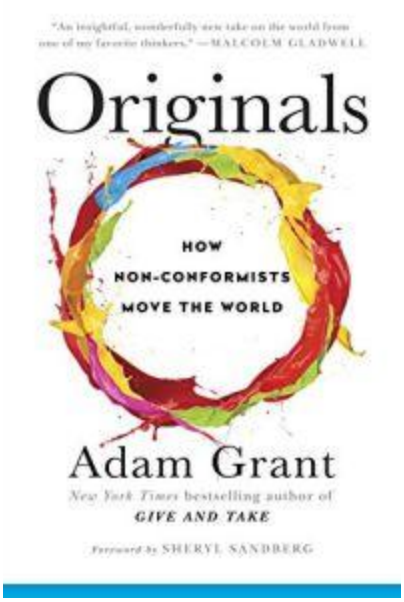

Book

Originals

How Non-Conformists Move the World

Adam Grant

Viking, 2016

Rating

8 Overall

9 Applicability
7 Innovation
8 Style

Curious about *Originals*? Read our review below. While we're awaiting the copyright holder's go-ahead to summarize this book in our usual summary format, we hope you'll find our review just as helpful. – getAbstract

Review

Respected Wharton School professor, consultant and best-selling author Adam Grant raises fascinating questions about originality and creativity in the workplace. The primary theme he explores through studies, anecdotal evidence and business histories is how someone original can perform effectively within an organization. Even the most fluid, forward-thinking companies – or at least those self-described as forward thinking – can resist originality. Your success depends on how you present your original ideas, especially if they don't fit the type of originality your particular firm endorses. Grant depicts illustrative examples of creative thinkers who turned their original ideas into functioning reality. He shows a rare understanding of how organizations squelch originality and how deft, tactical and strategic the original thinker must be to thrive.

Warby Parker

Grant begins by citing the extraordinary success of online eyeglass marketer Warby Parker. He admires the originality of the company's four founders, all Wharton students, in no small part because he had taught one of them. The founders offered Grant a chance to invest before their launch. He turned them down on the grounds that Luxottica controlled more than 80% of the eyeglass market. Grant didn't feel that a bunch of student upstarts could earn back an investment. Warby Parker took an original path: Buy glasses online and, if you don't like them, send them back. Its launch was an amazing success. The founders thought they'd sell three pairs a day, but they sold a year's worth in under a month and had to create a 20,000-person waiting list. Grant candidly sees his failure to invest as his "worst financial decision" ever. This book sprang from his desire to comprehend his inability to embrace originality when it was right in front of him.

Skepticism

Grant writes in a relaxed, conversational style. His work reads like a cross between a popular business book and an academic business school text. His best-selling success shows that he's touched a nerve. Although his style is plain vanilla, his huge audience understands the core issue he raises. Even now, when every author preaches the end of command-and-control, top-down management, Grant finds that being original in

business is difficult. Many original people present their ideas or themselves in ways that undermine how others regard them. They don't realize that most of the people they'll approach – as when Warby Parker's founders pitched Grant – will default to skepticism. Original thinkers must prepare for that skepticism and be ready to dispel it.

"Two Routes"

Two roads lead to success: "conformity and originality." Conformity means being like everyone else. You might think originality means having a new idea, and that's only half the struggle. Originals embrace the battle of making their ideas come alive. Many authors discuss drive and ambition as if they arise in the heart and mind like stand-alone flavors in an ice-cream shop. Grant shows unusual sensitivity in discussing how the "drive to succeed" can arrive hand-in-hand with the "fear of failure," one magnifying the other in a cycle that can paralyze original thinkers.

Embrace Your Flaws

Grant prepares entrepreneurs to expect that venture capitalists will greet their pitches with cynicism; these listeners will be distant and ready to attack. They won't encourage you. Instead, they'll hunt down every flaw in your presentation and throw it in your face. Grant counsels that one original way to sidestep this trap is to describe the flaws in your idea yourself, before anyone else can. Rufus Griscom, co-founder with Alisa Volkman of the Babble parenting website, used this strategy to great effect when Disney entered discussions about possibly buying the site. He created a slide for his pitch that read, "Here's Why You Should Not Buy Babble." He listed its low page-view count, its irrelevant posts and its need for "retooling."

Grant reports that this seize-the-offense tactic disarmed Disney's people. They told Griscom that none of those issues were insurmountable. Then, they bought Babble for $40 million. Griscom understood that emphasizing only his site's positive aspects to powerful people just brought out their skepticism. Being as honest as possible in any situation usually makes people respect you more. Any endeavor can run into problems. People tire quickly of those who pretend everything is perfect. Admitting possible pitfalls with your idea makes you seem smart and forthright.

Lucy Stone

Grant illustrates the fragility of coalitions and demonstrates that an alliance of enemies can endure longer than one of "frenemies." He uses the history of the suffragette movement as emblematic of the way enemies admit their enmity, but are willing to join in common purpose. Lucy Stone (1818-1893) was the first American woman to retain her maiden name after marriage, the first Massachusetts woman to earn a college

degree and the first American to “become a full-time lecturer” on women’s rights. She published *Woman’s Journal*, the “country’s foremost women’s newspaper,” which endured for 50 years. For 15 years beginning in 1853, Stone worked with famous early feminists, Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1869, Stone went through a bitter split from Anthony and Stanton. They created rival organizations and published competing newspapers, virulently opposing each other. Over time, Anthony and Stanton “wrote Stone out” of their coverage of the history of women’s quest for the vote.

Grant tells this story to show that coalitions backing radical causes, however worthy, are “inherently unstable” and always devolve into internal rivalries. He laments how much sooner the suffragettes might have attained their goals if their leaders had cooperated instead of undermining each other. “Common goals” can unite people, but the methods advocates use to achieve such goals often ensure that their associations can’t last. Grant discusses this seeming contradiction in human nature. He says the more you support an “extreme group,” the more you will try to show you aren’t like the people in more moderate groups that support the same issues.

Remarkably, Grant reports, the issue that sundered Anthony and Stanton from Stone was African-American suffrage. Anthony and Stanton thought it would be unfair to let black men vote when white women couldn’t, so they opposed suffrage for black men. Anthony saw Stone’s support for granting black men the vote as a “betrayal of the women’s cause.” They never allied again and fought until the end of their days. Grant uses their history to show why you must know your supposed allies and perhaps trust them less than your enemies, who, at least, will behave consistently. He warns that in a partnership, especially in business, common goals aren’t enough to keep a group together. Shared values are fine, but you also must agree on strategies and tactics.

Take Action

Many business authors provide workbooks at the end of each chapter or offers synopses of steps readers can take to actualize a book’s lessons. Grant’s “Actions for Impact” section at the end of *Originals* demonstrates, appropriately enough, an original approach to this feature. His suggestions offer surprising, direct, workable guidance for clearing the hurdles he discusses. Grant recognizes that psychological realties can be complex and self-contradictory. He understands that the more you want something, the likelier you are to impede your own progress. Only truly original thinkers avoid this trap, and they need tools, like those he offers, to do so.

Grant’s many worthy suggestions include never being bound by the status quo. Ignore the rules, create as you think best, and tell your peers you’ve found a new approach.

Never be underhanded about being original. However many ideas you devise, create more. The most prolific writers, composers and artists are usually the most successful. You may be shocked to realize, as Grant promises, that thinking up new solutions will help you think up even more new solutions.

To spur your creativity, try an entirely fresh field, like learning a language or working in a foreign country. As you create new solutions, stop when one of your best ideas is only half-finished. If you break off your thinking, note-taking or brainstorming, you will come up with even more ideas before you finish. When your idea is ready, share it with your peers – not your manager or staff. No matter what their feedback is, listen carefully and consider what you might apply productively to bring your original concept to fruition.

About the Author

The Wharton School's top-rated professor **Adam Grant**, PhD, also wrote the bestseller *Give and Take*. He consults for top companies and writes for *The New York Times*. Grant earned his Ph.D. in organizational psychology and is a former junior Olympic springboard diver and magician.