

Six secrets to true originality

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Author and professor Adam Grant shares six tips on generating great ideas, including reframing your creative process, not worrying about being too old, and learning how to procrastinate artfully.

Some of the most original people in history achieved their level of fame or legend because they wouldn't stop coming up with ideas. Sometimes—like in the case of renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright, who procrastinated for months before beginning work on his famous Fallingwater—they know when to procrastinate to give themselves time to develop and refine their ideas. In this interview with McKinsey's Rik Kirkland, Adam Grant, professor of management and of psychology at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, and author of *Give and Take: Why Helping Others Drives Our Success* (Penguin Books: March 2014) and his latest, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World* (Viking: February 2016) discusses six practical secrets to being more original. An edited and extended version of his comments follows.

1. Have lots of ideas, not just a few big ones

I always thought that the great originals in history—creative musicians, artists, scientists, and more recently, business thinkers and leaders—I thought what they did was they had a couple of big ideas and then they refined them to perfection.

But the data tell the opposite story: that the great originals throughout history did not have few ideas, they had *tons* of them, and way more than most of their peers. If you look at musicians, for example—Mozart, Bach, Beethoven—their average hit rate is not any higher than many composers you have never heard of.

What differentiates them is that they came up with a lot more ideas. So 600, or more than 1,000 in a couple of those cases. The reason for that is you have to generate a lot of variety to be original. If you just come up with a few ideas, your first few are usually the most obvious. You have to rule out the familiar in order to get to the novel. But most people never do that. They fall in love with their first idea, or they end up questioning whether they have the ability to come up with more ideas.

So one of the things leaders need to be doing more often is encouraging people to generate lots and lots of ideas, knowing that you're going to spew out a lot of garbage in order to get greatness.

2. Judge ideas in a creative mind-set

Most people are overconfident in their own ideas because they created them, and it's very easy to sell yourself on the pros of an idea and lose sight of the cons. People then say to themselves, "You need some distance. Let me go to managers." But the data suggest managers aren't great judges, either, for the opposite reason. Just as you're too positive, managers tend to be too negative. What they do is they take new ideas and they compare them to existing prototypes. *Harry Potter* was rejected by publishers because it was too long. "Who would read a children's book that was hundreds and hundreds of pages?" they thought. But that's not the right way to evaluate an original idea.

What you want to do is ask "Is this going to appeal to the audience" as opposed to "Is this similar to what's come before?" So, whom do you turn to if you can't trust yourself and you can't rely on your managers who tend to be a little bit risk averse—peers; fellow creators.

There's an amazing study by Justin Berg, a Stanford Graduate School of Business professor. He looks at circus performances—think Cirque du Soleil—and collects all these original acts done by different kinds of circus artists: jugglers, dancers, acrobats. He asks people to evaluate their own performances, and then he asks managers to evaluate them as well, and then he has performers judge each other's videos.

Finally, he looks at how well the videos do with the audience, and who the best forecaster is of which original ideas will succeed. Sure enough, people are horrible at judging their own performances, and the managers tend to be way too closed to the most novel acts. The best forecasters are the performers judging each other's performances. They have the distance that we don't have from our own ideas, but, unlike managers, they also tend to be open to novel possibilities because they're in a creative mind-set.

What we need to do to become better at judging ideas is to teach ourselves to think more like creators. The way that Berg does this is that he has people generate a few ideas of their own right before they evaluate somebody else's ideas. Being in that mind-set of generating new possibilities and thinking creatively increases your openness to novel performances. You're much more likely to say, "You know, I've never seen anyone do somersaults over fire before, but that's interesting." You're much more likely, then, to bet on great, original ideas.

3. Don't assume it's a young person's game

I've always thought of originality as something that belongs to the young. We've heard over and over again that you need to come up with all your great, creative ideas early in your career

because, at some point, you're either going to run out of novel thoughts or you're going to get too stuck in conventional wisdom.

That doesn't turn out to be true. If you look at founders of start-ups, for example, the average venture-backed founder is 38. Before I saw those data I would've guessed 25. There are a lot of people who are starting companies much later than we've ever seen before.

You could think about experience as having both assets and liabilities. On the one hand, yes, you do get more entrenched. When you know a domain better and better, you're more likely to internalize the assumptions that everyone else shares. It's harder to look at a problem through fresh eyes. On the other hand, though, one of the things you can bring if you have more experience is some degree of breadth.

As you learn about a domain, if you can gain experience in other domains—and the older you are the more of those domains you can learn—you can start importing and exporting ideas from one place to another, which gives you a great advantage because all original ideas come out of a culmination of depth and breadth.

The other thing we've learned from social science recently about the age–originality relationship is that it depends on how you structure your creative process. If you're an abstract thinker and you like to look at a problem and just imagine new possibilities, you tend to do best when you're young. That's the young-genius approach, where you have a eureka moment or a flash of insight. But there's a second approach that is often called the old-master mind-set, which is much more about learning a craft and—instead of saying, “You know what? I'm going to come up with a new idea on the spot”—running experiments, testing, tinkering, and trying to figure out where the data or where the industry end up taking you.

If that's your style, you tend to peak much later. When you look at Nobel Prize winners in abstract, theoretical areas—such as physics, for example—you will see that it's very hard to make abstract contributions past your 20s or 30s. But the experimental physicists who are running studies over and over again are much more likely to excel in their 50s and 60s, sometimes even into their 70s and 80s.

You see the same thing among painters as well. Those who have the whole vision immediately are more likely to have their greatest paintings happen early in their career. Those who end up trying different kinds of brushstrokes and going wherever the canvas takes them tend to peak a lot later. So there's hope for the tortoises.

4. Avoid groupthink (in a real way)

Groupthink is probably the biggest problem I hear leaders complain about. It's the barrier to innovation. It leads to all kinds of bad decisions. It gets in the way of change. Every leader I work with wants to know, “How do I get diversity of thought?” What most of them do is they assign

a devil's advocate. They say, "Look, if we have a majority opinion, we need to get somebody who's going to argue for the opposite."

Unfortunately, most of the time, it doesn't work. Charlan Nemeth at Berkeley, University of California, has spent a few decades studying this. What she finds is that people aren't actually persuaded by devil's advocates most of the time. One, they don't argue forcefully enough because they don't really believe the position: it's "All right, I'm going to play a role here. I've checked the box, and now I can go right back to the majority view."

And then, second, even if they do argue with passion and conviction, their audiences tend not to believe them because they know, "Yeah, that guy's just playing a role." So how do you get dissenting opinions? The answer from Nemeth is that we need to do a much better job not assigning devil's advocates but unearthing them.

Find somebody who genuinely holds a different opinion and invite them into the conversation. Look for the person who's in the silent minority and ask them, "What do you think?" Go out of your way to figure out who has a contrarian view on the topic that you're debating, and ask that person to present the view, and give them a chance to prepare for it.

Many leaders will say to that, "Look, I get it. It's important to hear dissenters, but what if they're wrong?" Well, Nemeth has a wonderful answer to this. Dissent is useful even when it's wrong. She shows that if you have a majority preference, which is incorrect, and then you have somebody argue for a minority opinion, which is also wrong, you increase the probability of getting to the right answer anyway.

Because when somebody brings in a divergent thought it forces the group to step back and say, "Let's review our assumptions. Let's look at all the criteria on the table for this decision." Then they're much more likely to get to a good answer or a novel possibility that they hadn't seen before.

My favorite example of this is Bridgewater Associates. Everyone knows it as one of the most successful hedge funds in history. You only beat the market by thinking differently from everyone else. Ray Dalio, the founder, made it his job to figure out how to get dissent into the room. What Ray says is—one of his core principles that he trains every single one of his employees on—is that no one has the right to hold a critical opinion without speaking up about it.

What that means is that you can be penalized and even fired for not bringing your contrarian opinions to the table. What I've learned most from Bridgewater is that they evaluate people on whether they fight for their right to speak their mind even when they know that other people might disagree. Imagine how different the world of organizations would be if in your performance reviews you were rated on how frequently and how effectively you were willing to challenge the majority or fight against the status quo.

5. Learn how to procrastinate wisely

I have always thought procrastination was a vice. But, against my better judgment, I've come to believe that it can be a virtue. I'm the opposite of a procrastinator. As long as I can remember, I've been a "precrastinator," which is a great term for somebody who just feels a strong impulse to get things done as soon as possible. So an email pops up, and if I don't answer it in the first four seconds, I feel like my world is spinning out of control. When I have something due in six months, I will wake up tomorrow morning feeling a tremendous sense of urgency to begin making progress on it. I always thought that was a great way to be efficient and productive. But when you want original ideas, it's not necessarily the best way to go.

The reason is, when you dive right into a task, you end up with tunnel vision. You think in linear ways, and you sit down, and you only have access to the obvious and familiar ideas that you initially started with. What I've learned to do is take a step back and say, "What if I delay the start of a task so that it's in the back of my mind for a couple days?" I'm much more likely, then, to see unexpected connections between ideas, to have leaps from one possibility to another.

Part of the reason I got excited about learning to procrastinate is that I had a student who collected a bunch of data suggesting that those who procrastinate somewhat are more original and creative than people who never do it—and more creative than those who always do it. Of course, if you wait until the deadline, then you're just going to have to rush to finish the simplest idea. But there is a sweet spot where procrastination helps with divergent thinking, with incubation, and with nonlinear connections.

There are great originals in history who turn out to be serious procrastinators, such as Frank Lloyd Wright, the famous architect. His most celebrated accomplishment, Fallingwater—he procrastinated for almost a year until his client was so upset that he literally drove out and said, "I want you to design this for me on the spot," not believing it was ever going to get done. Over a number of months, Frank Lloyd Wright had been processing a bunch of ideas, and that was when he finally came up with his masterpiece.

And Da Vinci. He wrote in his notebook over and over again, "Tell me if anything ever was done" because he was constantly putting things off. He spent at least 16 years working, on and off, on the *Mona Lisa*, and many years on *The Last Supper*. He thought that he was dragging his heels and that he would amount to nothing. But, in fact, all the diversions, all these random things that he got curious about, led him to innovations in optics and light, which ultimately helped make him the Renaissance man.

6. Follow the evidence

I'm amazed by the number of leaders who make decisions, especially about people, based on intuition instead of evidence. When I talk to leaders about this, the defense that usually comes

up is, “I have this wealth of experience, and the reason I was put in this leadership role is to leverage that experience that no one else has.”

My response is, “Well, I’m not saying you shouldn’t learn from your experiences, I just want you to learn from people’s experiences, too. That’s what data are.” Let’s talk about hiring, for example. In hiring, what most leaders do is they have a set of criteria, they evaluate a bunch of candidates through interviews and resumes and other information available, and then they make decisions based on their gut. You could actually turn that process into a much more scientific approach, where you lose none of your experience but you add a lot of data.

The way I would do that is, I would start out by having a bunch of candidates reviewed, take 100 candidates, and get all your managers who do hiring to rank them in order from 1 to 100. Make them candidates who already work for you, but disguise who they are. Then figure out who your best decision makers are when it comes to hiring.

What you’ll find is that some people are much more consistently right than others. There are many people who will take unreasonably risky bets. There are others who will play it safe too much. Once you do that, you can then do two things. One, you can take those people who have an empirical track record of good hiring, and you can give them more responsibility for hiring.

Two, you can use them to train the trainers. You can figure out what are they doing differently that allows them to be a better talent spotter than their peers. Then make sure that that knowledge and expertise gets spread across the organization. That doesn’t replace your intuition, it harnesses it. It takes the people who have effective intuitions and, instead of doing that just based on gut, helps make it explicit. That’s what I want to do. I want to understand what most people do effectively and teach that to other people. ▣

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