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How to Build a Culture of Originality

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by Adam Grant



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ANYONE CAN INNOVATE IF GIVEN THE OPPORTUNITY AND THE SUPPORT. **BY ADAM GRANT**



If there's one place on earth where originality goes to die, I'd managed to find it. I was charged with unleashing innovation and change

in the ultimate bastion of bureaucracy. It was a place where people accepted defaults without question, followed rules without explanation, and clung to traditions and technologies long after they'd become obsolete: the U.S. Navy.

But in a matter of months, the navy was exploding with originality—and not because of anything I'd done. It launched a major innovation task force and helped to form a Department of Defense outpost in Silicon Valley to get up to speed on cutting-edge technology. Surprisingly, these changes didn't come from the top of the navy's command-and-control structure. They were initiated at the bottom, by a group of junior officers in their twenties and thirties.

When I started digging for more details, multiple insiders pointed to a young aviator named Ben Kohlmann. Officers called him a troublemaker, rabble-rouser, disrupter, heretic, and radical. And in direct violation of the military ethos, these were terms of endearment.

Kohlmann lit the match by creating the navy's first rapid-innovation cell—a network of original thinkers who would collaborate to question long-held assumptions and generate new ideas. To start assembling the group, he searched for black sheep: people with a history of nonconformity. One recruit

had been fired from a nuclear submarine for disobeying a commander's order. Another had flat-out refused to go to basic training. Others had yelled at senior flag officers and flouted chains of command by writing public blog posts to express their iconoclastic views. "They were lone wolves," Kohlmann says. "Most of them had a track record of insubordination."

Kohlmann realized, however, that to fuel and sustain innovation throughout the navy, he needed more than a few lone wolves. So while working as an instructor and director of flight operations, he set about building a culture of nonconformity. He talked to senior leaders about expanding his network and got their buy-in. He recruited sailors who had never shown a desire to challenge the status quo and exposed them to new ways of thinking. They visited centers of innovation excellence outside the military, from Google to the Rocky Mountain Institute. They devoured a monthly syllabus of readings on innovation and debated ideas during regular happy hours and robust online discussions. Soon they pioneered the use of 3-D printers on ships and a robotic fish for stealth underwater missions—and other rapid-innovation cells began springing up around the military. "Culture is king," Kohlmann says. "When people discovered their voice, they became unstoppable."

Empowering the rank and file to innovate is where most leaders fall short. Instead, they try to recruit brash entrepreneurial types to bring fresh ideas and energy into their organizations—and then leave it at that. It's a wrongheaded approach, because it assumes that the best innovators are rare creatures with special gifts. Research shows that entrepreneurs who succeed over the long haul are actually more risk-averse than their peers. The hotshots burn bright for a while but tend to fizzle out. So relying on a few exceptional folks who fit a romanticized creative profile is a short-term move that underestimates everyone else. Most people are in fact quite capable of novel thinking and problem solving, if only their organizations would stop pounding them into conformity.

When everyone thinks in similar ways and sticks to dominant norms, businesses are doomed to stagnate. To fight that inertia and drive innovation and change effectively, leaders need sustained original thinking in their organizations. They get it by building a culture of nonconformity, as Kohlmann did in the navy. I've been studying this for the better

Idea in Brief

WHAT'S POSSIBLE

We tend to believe that true innovators are a rare breed. But most people are quite capable of original thinking, and leaders can set them up for success by building a culture of nonconformity.

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY

Unfortunately, leaders often fail to do this because they have trouble moving past their flawed assumptions—for instance, believing that doing fewer things leads to better work, and that strong cultures squash originality.

WHAT TO DO

Give employees ways and reasons to generate lots of new ideas (being prolific actually increases quality). Have fellow innovators evaluate the ideas (they do the best job of predicting success). And strike the right balance between cohesion and dissent in your organization (you need both).

part of a decade, and it turns out to be less difficult than I expected.

For starters, leaders must give employees opportunities and incentives to generate—and keep generating—new ideas, so that people across functions and roles get better at pushing past the obvious. However, it's also critical to have the right people vetting those ideas. That part of the process should be much less democratic and more meritocratic, because some votes are simply more meaningful than others. And finally, to continue generating and selecting smart ideas over time, organizations need to strike a balance between cultural cohesion and creative dissent.

Letting a Thousand Flowers Bloom

People often believe that to do better work, they should do fewer things. Yet the evidence flies in the face of that assumption: Being prolific actually increases originality, because sheer volume improves your chances of finding novel solutions. In recent experiments by Northwestern University psychologists Brian Lucas and Loran Nordgren, the initial ideas people generated were the most conventional. Once they had thought of those, they were free to start dreaming up more-unusual possibilities. Their first 20 ideas were significantly less original than their next 15.

Across fields, volume begets quality. This is true for all kinds of creators and thinkers—from composers and painters to scientists and inventors. Even the most eminent innovators do their most original work when they're also cranking out scores of less brilliant ideas. Consider

Thomas Edison. In a five-year period, he came up with the lightbulb, the phonograph, and the carbon transmitter used in telephones—while also filing more than 100 patents for inventions that didn't catch the world on fire, including a talking doll that ended up scaring children (and adults).

Of course, in organizations, the challenge lies in knowing when you've drummed up enough possibilities. How many ideas should you generate before deciding which ones to pursue? When I pose this question to executives, most say you're really humming with around 20 ideas. But that answer is off the mark by an order of magnitude. There's evidence that quality often doesn't max out until more than 200 ideas are on the table.

Stanford professor Robert Sutton notes that the Pixar movie *Cars* was chosen from about 500 pitches, and at Skyline, the toy design studio that generates ideas for Fisher-Price and Mattel, employees submitted 4,000 new toy concepts in one year. That set was winnowed down to 230 to be drawn or prototyped, and just 12 were finally developed. The more darts you throw, the better your odds of hitting a bull's-eye.

Though it makes perfect sense, many managers fail to embrace this principle, fearing that time spent conjuring lots of ideas will prevent employees from being focused and efficient. The good news is that there are ways to help employees generate quantity and variety without sacrificing day-to-day productivity or causing burnout.

Think like the enemy. Research suggests that organizations often get stuck in a rut because they're playing defense, trying to stave off the competition. To encourage people to think differently and generate more ideas, put them on offense.



That's what Lisa Bodell of futurethink did when Merck CEO Ken Frazier hired her to help shake up the status quo. Bodell divided Merck's executives into groups and asked them to come up with ways to put the company out of business. Instead of being cautious and sticking close to established competencies, the executives started considering bold new directions in strategy and product development that competitors could conceivably take. Energy in the room soared as they explored the possibilities. The offensive mindset, Carnegie Mellon professor Anita Woolley observes, focuses attention on "pursuing opportunities...whereas defenders are more focused on maintaining their market share." That mental shift allowed the Merck executives to imagine competitive threats that didn't yet exist. The result was a fresh set of opportunities for innovation.

Solicit ideas from individuals, not groups.

According to decades of research, you get more and better ideas if people are working alone in separate rooms than if they're brainstorming in a group. When people generate ideas together, many of the best ones never get shared. Some members dominate the conversation, others hold back to avoid looking foolish, and the whole group tends to conform to the majority's taste.

Evidence shows that these problems can be managed through "brainwriting." All that's required is asking individuals to think up ideas on their own before the group evaluates them, to get all the possibilities on the table. For instance, at the eyewear retailer Warby Parker, named the world's most innovative company by *Fast Company* in 2015, employees spend a few minutes a week writing down innovation ideas for colleagues to read and comment on. The company also maintains a Google doc where employees can submit requests for new technology to be built, which yields about 400 new ideas in a typical quarter. One major innovation was a revamped retail point of sale, which grew out of an app that allowed customers to bookmark their favorite frames in the store and receive an e-mail about them later.

Since employees often withhold their most unusual suggestions in group settings, another strategy for seeking ideas is to schedule rapid one-on-one idea meetings. When Anita Krohn Traaseth became managing director of Hewlett-Packard Norway, she launched a "speed-date the boss" initiative. She invited every employee to meet with her for five minutes and answer these questions:

Who are you and what do you do at HP? Where do you think we should change, and what should we keep focusing on? And what do you want to contribute beyond fulfilling your job responsibilities? She made it clear that she expected people to bring big ideas, and they didn't want to waste their five minutes with a senior leader—it was their chance to show that they could innovate. More than 170 speed dates later, so many good ideas had been generated that other HP leaders implemented the process in Austria and Switzerland.

Bring back the suggestion box. It's a practice that dates back to the early 1700s, when a Japanese shogun put a box at the entrance to his castle. He rewarded good ideas—but punished criticisms with decapitation. Today suggestion boxes are often ridiculed. "I smell a creative idea being formed somewhere in the building," the boss thinks in one *Dilbert* cartoon. "I must find it and crush it." He sets up a suggestion box, and Dilbert is intrigued until a colleague warns him: "It's a trap!!"

But the evidence points to a different conclusion: Suggestion boxes can be quite useful, precisely because they provide a large number of ideas. In one study, psychologist Michael Frese and his colleagues visited a Dutch steel company (now part of Tata Steel) that had been using a suggestion program for 70 years. The company had 11,000 employees and collected between 7,000 and 12,000 suggestions a year. A typical employee would make six or seven suggestions annually and see three or four adopted. One prolific innovator submitted 75 ideas and had 30 adopted. In many companies, those ideas would have been missed altogether. For the Dutch steelmaker, however, the suggestion box regularly led to improvements—saving more than \$750,000 in one year alone.

The major benefit of suggestion boxes is that they multiply and diversify the ideas on the horizon, opening up new avenues for innovation. The biggest hurdle is that they create a larger haystack of ideas, making it more difficult to find the needle. You need a system for culling contributions—and rewarding and pursuing the best ones—so that people don't feel their suggestions are falling on deaf ears.

Developing a Nose for Good Ideas

Generating lots of alternatives is important, but so is listening to the right opinions and solutions. How

A Syllabus for Innovators

can leaders avoid pursuing bad ideas and rejecting good ones?

Lean on proven evaluators. Although many leaders use a democratic process to select ideas, not every vote is equally valuable. Bowing to the majority's will is not the best policy; a select minority might have a better sense of which ideas have the greatest potential. To figure out whose votes should be amplified, pay attention to employees' track records in evaluation.

At the hedge fund Bridgewater, employees' opinions are weighted by a believability score, which reflects the quality of their past decisions in that domain. In the U.S. intelligence community, analysts demonstrate their credibility by forecasting major political and economic events. In studies by psychologist Philip Tetlock, forecasters are rated on accuracy (did they make the right bets?) and calibration (did they get the probabilities right?). Once the best of these prognosticators are identified, their judgments can be given greater influence than those of their peers.

So, in a company, who's likely to have the strongest track record? Not managers—it's too easy for them to stick to existing prototypes. And not the innovators themselves. Intoxicated by their own "eureka" moments, they tend to be overconfident about their odds of success. They may try to compensate for that by researching customer preferences, but they'll still be susceptible to confirmation bias (looking for information that supports their view and rejecting the rest). Even creative geniuses have trouble predicting with any accuracy when they've come up with a winner.

Research suggests that fellow innovators are the best evaluators of original ideas. They're impartial, because they're not judging their own ideas, and they're more willing than managers to give radical possibilities a chance. For example, Stanford professor Justin Berg found that circus performers who evaluated videos of their peers' new acts were about twice as accurate as managers in predicting popularity with audiences.

Make it a contest. Idea competitions can help leaders separate the wheat from the chaff, whether they're sifting through suggestion-box entries or hosting a live innovation event. At Dow Chemical, for example, employees participate in an annual innovation tournament focused on reducing waste and saving energy. The tournament calls for ideas

When aviator Ben Kohlmann set out to build a culture of nonconformity in the U.S. Navy, he found inspiration in many sources. Here's a sampling of the items he recommends to people who want to think more creatively, along with his comments on how they've influenced his own development.



SPEECHES

"Lead Like the Great Conductors"

TED TALK BY ITAY TALGAM

Much can be learned from professions we have no understanding of. People are people—and recognizing the commonalities is useful.

"How Great Leaders Inspire Action"

TED TALK BY SIMON SINEK

Sinek cracks the code of influence: Deep-seated desire is what inspires followers and builds movements.



FICTION

Ender's Game

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

This novel illustrates how tactical and strategic teams can be adaptable—and how genius can emerge at a young age. It's especially apropos reading in the military, where we promote on seniority and not merit.

DUNE

BY FRANK HERBERT

A compelling story about insurgency and taking on established powers, *Dune* explores the ambiguous nature of messianic saviors.



NONFICTION

Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

We're wrong a lot, and yet we almost never admit it. Schulz helped me critically evaluate my own biases and better understand how people view and portray themselves.

The Hard Thing About Hard Things

BY BEN HOROWITZ

Horowitz doesn't merely talk about how to lead; he's actually lived it. And who doesn't love a guy who starts his chapters with rap lyrics?

The (Mis)behavior of Markets

BY BENOIT MANDELBROT

Mandelbrot is the father of fractal theory, and his insight into how that plays into the stock market transformed my understanding of luck's role in managerial successes and failures.

Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War

BY ROBERT CORAM

When I read this in college, I realized that those who don't toe the party line often have the most impact.

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success

BY CAROL DWECK

Dweck argues that intelligence is not fixed. My world opened up once I discovered that we can grow into what we want to be.

Letters to a Young Contrarian

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

I'm a person of faith, but I appreciate the way Hitchens incisively questions everything, even faith. I've used his methods many a time to develop contrarian positions and win debates.



TV SHOWS

Sherlock (BBC SERIES)

Each episode is pure fun—but yields lots of learning at the same time.

that require an initial investment of no more than \$200,000, and those costs must be recoverable within a year. Peers review the submissions, with monetary rewards going to the winners. Innovation researchers Christian Terwiesch and Karl Ulrich report that over more than a decade, the resulting 575 projects have produced an average return of 204% and saved the company \$110 million a year.

When an innovation tournament is well designed, you get a large pool of initial ideas, but they're clustered around key themes instead of spanning a range of topics. People spend a lot of time preparing their entries, which can boost quality, but the work happens in a discrete window of time, so the contest is not a recurring distraction.

Thorough evaluation helps to filter out the bad ideas. The feedback process typically involves having a group of subject matter experts and fellow innovators review the submissions, rate their novelty and usefulness, and provide suggestions for improvement.

With the right judges in place, an innovation contest not only leverages the wisdom of the crowd but also makes the crowd wiser. Contributors and evaluators get to learn from other people's successes and failures. Over time, the culture can evolve into one where employees feel confident in their ability to contribute ideas—and develop better taste about what constitutes quality. Because successful innovators earn recognition and rewards, everyone has an incentive to participate.

So start by calling for ideas to solve a problem or seize an opportunity, and then introduce a rigorous process for assessment and feedback. The most promising submissions will make it to the next round, and the eventual winners should get the staff and resources necessary to implement their ideas.

Cultivating Both Cohesion and Dissent

Building a culture of nonconformity begins with learning how to generate and vet ideas, but it doesn't end there. To maintain originality over time, leaders need to keep fighting the pressures against it.

We used to blame conformity on strong cultures, believing they were so cultish and chummy that members couldn't consider diverse views and make wise decisions. But that's not true. Studies of decision making in top management teams show that cohesive groups *aren't* more likely than others to

seek consensus, dismiss divergent opinions, and fall victim to groupthink. In fact, members of strong cultures often make better decisions, because they communicate well with one another and are secure enough in their roles to feel comfortable challenging one another.

Here's the evidence on how successful high-tech founders in Silicon Valley built their start-ups: They hired primarily for commitment to the mission, looking for people who would help carry out their vision and live by their values. Founders who looked mainly for technical skill or star potential didn't fare nearly as well. In mature industries, too, research shows that when companies place a strong emphasis on culture, their performance remains more stable.

Yet there's a dark side to strong, cohesive cultures: They can become homogeneous if left unchecked. As leaders continue to attract, select, and retain similar people, they sacrifice diversity in thoughts and values. Employees face intense pressure to fit in or get out. This sameness can be advantageous in predictable environments, but it's a problem in volatile industries and dynamic markets. In those settings, strong cultures can be too insular to respond appropriately to shifting conditions. Leaders have a hard time recognizing the need for change, considering different views, and learning and adapting.

Consider BlackBerry: After disrupting the smartphone market, senior leaders clung to the belief that users were primarily interested in efficient, secure e-mail. They dismissed the iPhone as a music player and a consumer toy, hired like-minded insiders who had engineering backgrounds but lacked marketing expertise, and ultimately failed to create a high-quality web browser and an app-friendly operating system. The result? A major downsizing, a billion-dollar write-off, and a colossal collapse of market share.

So to balance out a strong culture, you also need a steady supply of critical opinions. Even when they're wrong, they're useful—they disrupt knee-jerk consensus, stimulate original thought, and help organizations find novel solutions to problems. In the navy's rapid-innovation cell, the norm is "loyal opposition," says Joshua Marcuse, one of Ben Kohlmann's collaborators in the Pentagon. "Agitating against the status quo is how we contribute to the mission."

In short, make dissent one of your organization's core values. Create an environment where people

can openly share critical opinions and are respected for doing so. In the early days of Apple, employees were passionately committed to making the Mac a user-friendly household product. But each year, the Mac team also gave an award to somebody who had challenged Steve Jobs. Every one of those award winners was promoted.

Cohesion and dissent sound contradictory, but a combination of the two is what brings novel ideas to the table—and keeps a strong culture from becoming a cult. Here are some ways to hold these principles in productive tension:

Prioritize organizational values. Give people a framework for choosing between conflicting opinions and allowing the best ideas to win out. When companies fail to prioritize values, performance suffers. My colleague Andrew Carton led a study showing that across hospitals, heart attack readmission rates were lower and returns on assets were higher when leaders articulated a compelling vision—but only if they spelled out no more than four organizational values. The more values they emphasized beyond that, the greater the odds that people interpreted them differently or didn't focus on the same ones.

Values need to be rank-ordered so that when employees face choices between competing courses of action, they know what comes first. At the software company Salesforce.com, trust is explicitly defined as the number one value, above growth and innovation. That communicates a clear message to employees: When working on new software, never compromise data privacy. At the online shoe and clothing retailer Zappos.com, CEO Tony Hsieh prioritizes employee happiness over customer happiness. The airline WestJet identifies safety as its most important value. And at GiveForward, a company that helps people raise money for causes, compassion tops the list. Although media coverage is critical to the company's success, cofounder Ethan Austin notes, "We will not push a story in the media unless we are certain that the customer whose story we are sharing will benefit more than we do."

Once you've prioritized the values, keep scrutinizing them. Encourage new hires to challenge "the company way" when they disagree with it. They're the ones with the freshest perspective; they haven't yet gone native. If they familiarize themselves with the culture before speaking up, they'll have already started marching to the same drummer. At Bridgewater, when new employees are trained, they're asked about the company's principles: Do you disagree?

Solicit problems, not just solutions. When working with executives, organizational psychologist David Hofmann likes to ask them to fill in the blanks in this sentence: "Don't bring me ____; bring me ____." Without fail, they shout out, "Don't bring me *problems*; bring me *solutions*!"

Although leaders love it when employees come up with solutions, there's an unintended consequence: Inquiry gets dampened. If you're always expected to have an answer ready, you'll arrive at meetings with your diagnosis complete, missing out on the chance to learn from a range of perspectives. This may be especially common in the United States: In a recent study comparing American and German decision groups, the Germans made twice as many statements about problems and 30% fewer statements about solutions. "Americans are driven to find solutions quickly," the researchers observe, "often without a complete and thorough analysis of the problem."

When individual members of a group have different information, as is usually the case in organizations, it's smarter to get all the problems out there before pursuing solutions. At the digital music company Spotify, instead of working on projects, people organize around long-term business problems. "If they were easy to solve," chief technology officer Oskar Stål notes, "we would have solved them already. When we create a new team, people typically stay together on a business problem for at least a year. If it becomes successful, the team and mission will exist for a long time." Angie's

List cofounder Angie Hicks holds weekly office hours to hear concerns from employees. And when Anita Krohn Traaseth became the CEO of the Norwegian government's innovation efforts, she again used



ISTOCKPHOTO; PHOTO ILLUSTRATION: STEPHEN WEBSTER

“speed dates” to give employees a voice. To make sure she had full visibility into problems, she asked people to name their three biggest bottlenecks and what they would like to safeguard or change. Only after gathering problems across a tour of 14 offices did she begin implementing solutions.

Don’t appoint devil’s advocates—go find them. Research by UC Berkeley psychologist Charlan Nemeth shows that assigning someone to play devil’s advocate doesn’t overcome confirmation bias. Though people may pay lip service to considering the counterargument, they’ll stick to their own views in the end.

To make a difference, the devil’s advocate has to actually hold a dissenting view, not just voice it for argument’s sake, and the group has to believe that the dissent is authentic. Under those circumstances, groups look at more information *against* the majority view than for it, and they’re less confident in their original preferences. It’s rare that role-played disagreement is forcefully argued or taken seriously; actual disagreement is what stimulates thought.

Groups with authentic dissenters generate more—and better—solutions to problems. Abraham Lincoln famously asked his political rivals to join his cabinet, knowing they would genuinely hold contrarian views. At a recent Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting, Warren Buffett invited a trader who was shorting the stock to share his criticisms. Of course, this strategy works only if the dissenter’s input is clearly valued and respected.

Model receptivity to critical feedback. Many managers end up promoting conformity because their egos are fragile. Research reveals that insecurity prevents managers from seeking ideas and leads them to respond defensively to suggestions. Employees quickly pick up on this and withhold ideas to avoid trouble. One way to overcome this barrier is to encourage people to challenge you out in the open.

Years ago at the software company Index Group, CEO Tom Gerrity gathered his full staff of about 100 people and had a consultant give him negative feedback

in front of everyone. When employees saw their CEO listen to critical opinions, they were less worried about speaking up. And managers became more receptive to tough comments themselves.

You can also get people to challenge you by broadcasting your weaknesses. “When you’re the leader, it is really hard to get good and honest feedback, no matter how many times you ask for it,” Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg says. “One trick I’ve discovered is that I try to speak really openly about the things I’m bad at, because that gives people permission to agree with me, which is a lot easier than pointing it out in the first place.” For example, Sandberg tells her colleagues that she has a habit of talking too much in meetings. “If I never mentioned it, would anyone walk up to me and say, ‘Hey, Sheryl, I think you talked too much today’? I doubt it.”

FOR A CULTURE of originality to flourish, employees must feel free to contribute their wildest ideas. But they are often afraid to speak up, even if they’ve never seen anything bad happen to those who do.

To fight that fear in the navy, Ben Kohlmann rejected the military’s traditional emphasis on hierarchy. Everyone communicated on a first-name basis, ignoring rank. “If you have an idea, pitch it to the crowd and run with it,” he told members of his rapid-innovation cell. And he introduced them to people who had successfully championed creativity and change in the navy, to show them it was possible.

Other ways to nip fear in the bud include applauding employees for speaking up, even when their suggestions don’t get adopted, and sharing your own harebrained ideas. Without some degree of tolerance in the organization for bad ideas,

conformity will begin to rear its ugly head. Ultimately, listening to a wider range of insights than you normally hear is the key to promoting great original thinking.

If at first you don’t succeed, you’ll know you’re aiming high enough. ♥

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