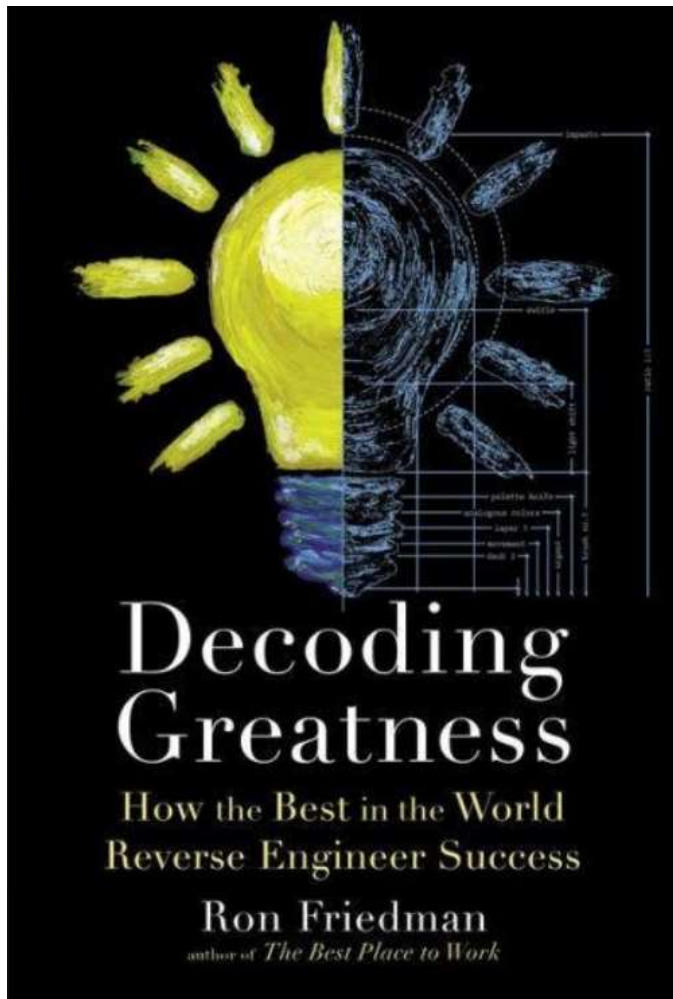


Friedman explores creativity

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*“Decoding Greatness: How the Best in the World Reverse Engineer Success” by Ron Friedman.
New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021, 228 pages, \$28 (hardcover).*



“By the time Steve Jobs finds out he’s been betrayed, it is already far too late,” Ron Friedman explains near the beginning of “Decoding Greatness: How the Best in the World Reverse Engineer Success,” his new foray into how the kind of transcendent innovation that leads to paradigm shifts often occurs. “The press conference is over, and the news is out. Slowly it dawns on him: Apple’s head start is about to disappear. The year is 1983, and we are in Cupertino, Calif. The computer company Jobs co-founded is barely seven years old. Its rise has been meteoric. In a few short years, Wall Street will assess its value at more than a billion dollars. But now, just six short weeks from the release of Apple’s boldest innovation yet, the Macintosh, Jobs discovers he’s been scooped.”

“The blow arrives from more than 2,500 miles away, in the lavish ballroom of New York City’s famed Helmsley Palace hotel,” he continues a little further. “Onstage, standing before a gaggle of reporters, Bill Gates has just announced Microsoft’s plans to develop a user-friendly operating system – one with more than a few striking similarities to that of

the Macintosh. ... Gates appreciated that Windows had not originally been his idea. What he wasn’t prepared to stand for was this notion that a mouse-driven, graphics-based operating system was the creative brainchild of Steve Jobs. It didn’t matter what heroic tales Apple was peddling to the press. Gates knew the truth. The Macintosh had never been Apple’s invention. It had been reverse engineered from a Rochester, N.Y., copier company named Xerox.”

So begins a fascinating and intriguing journey into an aspect of creativity that is often completely overlooked – or severely marginalized – but is nonetheless absolutely fundamental to human progress on a number of levels. The cast of characters employed to illustrate how greatness is achieved reads like a veritable “who’s who” of contemporary culture and spans virtually every field from the arts to politics to science to sports. Yet unlike many authors mining the same subject matter, Friedman infuses his prose with evidence-based research from a number of disciplines, which is the primary distinction between this volume and the drivel that typically populates the self-help section at your local bookstore. Drawing from extensive studies on pattern recognition, skill

acquisition and the creativity process in general, the conclusions and arguments are elegantly articulated and difficult to refute.

“Decoding Greatness” has 39 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, seven chapters and conclusion that form the main text. The narrative is presented in two major sections: “Part I: The Art of Unlocking Hidden Patterns,” which consists of the first three chapters, and “Part II: The Vision-Ability Gap,” which is comprised of the last four chapters. Central to Friedman’s thesis is the concept of “reverse engineering,” which Friedman defines as “systematically taking things apart to explore their inner workings and extract new insights.” Essentially the idea is that by carefully deconstructing something, we can unlock its key features and then apply the knowledge gained to other ventures. It is a process that has been around – in one form or another – since the dawn of human intelligence.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that simply understanding something does not mean that it can be reproduced or emulated to similar effect. Indeed, there is a discernible progression to work that is truly pioneering and groundbreaking. Friedman explains this eloquently in “The Curse of Creativity,” the third chapter and one I found particularly enlightening. You will no doubt find the following exceptionally instructive if you have ever wondered why massive success is often so hard to replicate.

“Copying alone is rarely enough,” Friedman cautions. “On the contrary, it’s one of the most reliable ways of ensuring that your work is not taken seriously. In 2005, a stay-at-home mother from Arizona published a novel about a high school student who falls in love with a vampire. It literally took the world by storm. The astronomical popularity of ‘Twilight’ launched hundreds of vampire-based young-adult titles, few of which garnered even a fraction of the fanfare lavished upon Stephenie Meyer’s original series.”

“You need more than the right formula,” he maintains. “You need the right formula for the right person within the right context. That last factor, context, can be especially tricky. All those ‘Twilight’ clones failed to catch on not because each and every one of them was a dreadful book. They failed because readers’ expectations had shifted. The moment an audience is exposed to a particular experience, it evolves. No longer are fans riveted by a once novel premise, charmed by formerly irresistible characters, or blindsided by what are not conventional plot twists. The audience has adapted, and the formula it found gripping just days earlier now feels insipid and stale.”

Friedman has a bachelor’s degree in political science from the City University of New York, a master’s degree in social-personality psychology and a doctorate in social and personality psychology from the University of Rochester. He has served on the faculty of several colleges, including Nazareth College, Hobart and William Smith Colleges and the University of Rochester, where he received the Edward Peck Curtis Award for Excellence in Teaching. This is his second book; the first being “The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace.”

In the final analysis, “Decoding Greatness” realizes the vision Friedman laid out in the introduction: “By the end of this book, you’re going to have a critical new skill. One that empowers you to take apart examples you admire, pinpoint precisely what makes them work, and apply that knowledge to develop inventive, winning formulas that are uniquely your own.”

I am here to testify that is exactly what happens when you read this exquisite little – but deceptively complex – primer. Highly recommended.

Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.