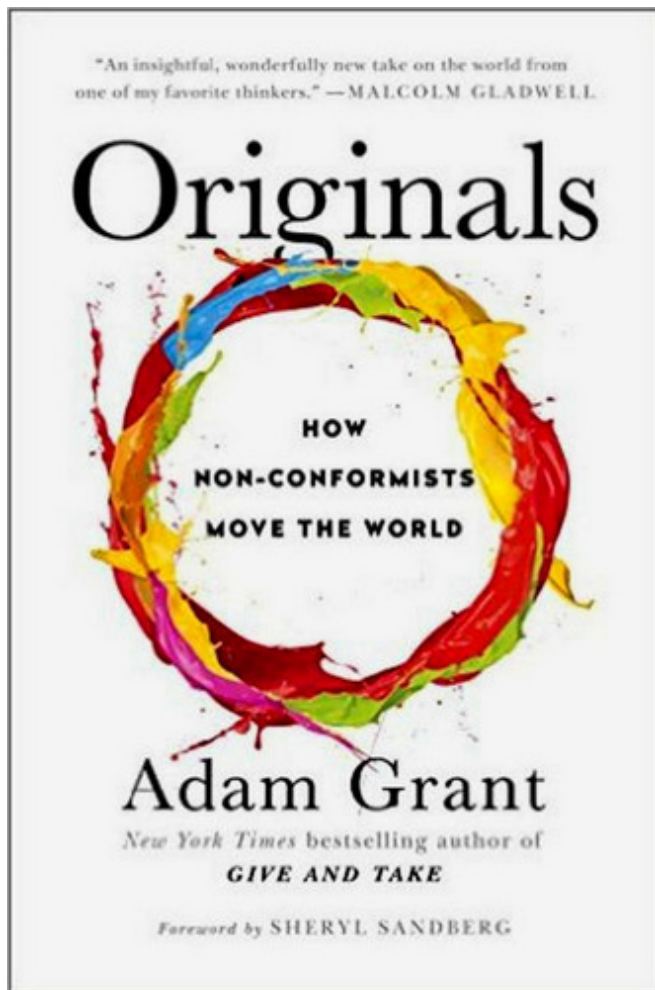


# ‘Originals’ is refreshing

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“*Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*” by Adam Grant. New York: Viking (an imprint of Penguin Random House), 2016, 336 pages, \$27.00.



“Years ago, psychologists discovered that there are two routes to achievement: conformity and originality,” Adam Grant explains near the beginning of “*Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*,” his exploration of the virtues of thinking outside the box. “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.”

I was drawn to this thought-provoking volume as soon as I ran across it in the “new releases” section of Barnes & Noble Booksellers. People who eschew the popular route and refuse to go along with conventional wisdom are often ostracized, overlooked for promotions, denigrated by those in positions of power and relegated to the margins of organizations. But as Grant makes clear, nonconformists represent our best hope for overcoming the immense social, economic, political and even biological problems we face in coming decades.

Instead of encouraging consistency and adherence to rules and regulations in our educational institutions and corporate

enterprises, we should be actively and unabashedly encouraging students and employees to constantly question the status quo at every available opportunity. It is not the traditionalists who will take us to the Promised Land.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Grant does not write from an ideological perspective. He backs up everything he asserts, not just with convenient anecdotes that serve his immediate purpose, but with solid empirical evidence reinforced and supported by near-flawless critical reflection and analysis.

Grant is a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania; he has a B.A. from Harvard and a Ph.D. in organizational psychology from the University of Michigan. As might be expected, “*Originals*” is extensively researched, with 50 pages of references at the conclusion of the eight chapters comprising the main text. This is the second book for Grant, who has authored more than 70 scholarly publications. In demand as a presenter and keynote speaker, Grant has consulted

with a number of high-profile companies and organizations, including Google, Microsoft, Apple, Merck, Pixar, the National Football League, the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.

Very few books these days get me to think about a subject in a novel way. In far too many cases, old ideas are simply repackaged and presented as new insights. With “Originals,” however, I found myself confronted with a different interpretation for many of the things I felt I had sufficiently deciphered long ago. For instance, I have often been fascinated by how those drawn together for a common cause – as in the case of a major social movement – can often seem more interested in their own agendas than in doing what is in the best interest of the group as a whole. As such, I found Grant’s discussion of “horizontal hostility” intriguing.

“We assume that common goals bind groups together, but the reality is that they often drive groups apart,” Grant notes in the fifth chapter. “According to Dartmouth psychologist Judith White, a lens for understanding these fractures is the concept of horizontal hostility. Even though they share a fundamental objective, radical groups often disparage more mainstream groups as impostors and sellouts.”

“White noticed horizontal hostility everywhere,” he continues. “When a deaf woman won the Miss America crown, instead of cheering her on as a trailblazer, deaf activists protested. Since she spoke orally rather than using sign language, she wasn’t ‘deaf enough.’ When a light-skinned black woman was appointed as a law professor at one university, its Black Students Association objected on the grounds that she wasn’t black enough.”

One of the features I appreciated about “Originals” is the author’s inclusion of a supplemental section after the final chapter titled “Actions for Impact.” Here, Grant provides concrete suggestions for putting many of his ideas into action both personally as well as organizationally. Many readers might understand – and even agree with – the fundamental concepts Grant is promoting without having a real sense of how to implement them on a practical level. Note the following suggestion:

“Be a tempered radical. If your idea is extreme, couch it in a more conventional goal. That way, instead of changing people’s minds, you can appeal to values or beliefs that they already hold. You can use a Trojan horse, as Meredith Perry did when she masked her vision for wireless power behind a request to design a transducer. You can also position your proposal as a means to an end that matters to others, like Frances Willard reframing the right to vote as a way for conservative women to protect their homes from alcohol abuse. And if you’re already known as too extreme, you can shift from leader to lightning rod, allowing more moderate people to take the reins.”

Grant has written a very powerful treatise that’s filled with real-world lessons that have direct applications for what it takes to achieve and sustain success in a world in which the finish line is constantly evolving. For example, most of us recall a time when Polaroid pretty much ruled the world when it came to photography. So why didn’t the company adapt when it became obvious the predominant platform of the 21st century would be digital? Good question – and one the author uses to great effect in developing his primary thesis.

“Polaroid came close to being a pioneer in digital photography and could have easily been a fast settler,” Grant observes in the seventh chapter. “Instead, leaders fiddled while the company burned. Had they embraced original ideas instead of adhering to Land’s beliefs in hard-copy chemical imaging, the company might have survived.”

In case you have not surmised, I really liked this book. It offers a refreshing and ultimately optimistic view of how our future can be if we’ll open our minds to the possibilities.

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