

THE BIG IDEAS



Vuja De

+ Default browsers.

Create a Ton of Stuff

If you want to be original.

Fear

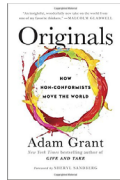
Stop vs. GO!

Anger

"At" others vs. "for" others.

Proper Revolutions

Think: Long, controlled burns.



Originals

How Non-Conformists Move the World

BY ADAM GRANT · VIKING © 2016 · 336 PAGES

"Having revealed that originals often begin by questioning defaults and balancing risk portfolios, the rest of this book is about closing the gap between insight and action. Once you have a new idea, how do you champion it effectively? As an organizational psychologist at Wharton, I've spent more than a decade studying originality in a wide range of settings, from technology companies and banks to schools, hospitals, and governments. I've also sought out some of the most prominent originals of our time, and I want to share their wisdom about how we can all be more original without jeopardizing our relationships, reputations, and careers. I hope my findings will help people develop the courage and strategies to pursue originality, and give leaders the knowledge necessary to create cultures of originality in their teams and organizations. ...

Ultimately, the people who choose to champion originality are the ones who propel us forward. After spending years studying them and interacting with them, I am struck that their inner experiences are not any different from our own. They feel the same fear, the same doubt, as the rest of us. What sets them apart is that they take action anyway. They know in their hearts that failing would yield less regret than failing to try."

~ Adam Grant from *Originals*

"If a handful of people hadn't been cajoled into taking original action, America might not exist, the civil rights movement could still be a dream, the Sistine Chapel might be bare, we might still believe the sun revolves around the earth, and the personal computer might never have been popularized."

~ Adam Grant

First, a definition:

orig•i•nal, n A thing of singular or unique character; a person who is different from other people in an appealing or interesting way; a person of fresh initiative or inventive capacity.

[Adam Grant](#) is an Original—one of the world's leading management thinkers and the top-rated Professor at Wharton for the last four years. He's also a great writer and storyteller.

This book is packed with stories of Originals and how they became extraordinary along with a range of fascinating, often counterintuitive research studies giving us clues as to how WE can tap into our potential and express our originality. (Get the book [here](#).)

I'm excited to take a quick look at a handful of my favorite super practical Ideas we can apply today so let's jump straight in!

VUJA DE + DEFAULT BROWSERS

"The hallmark of originality is rejecting the default and exploring whether a better option exists. I've spent more than a decade studying this, and it turns out to be far less difficult than I expected.

The starting point is curiosity: pondering why the default exists in the first place. We're driven to question defaults when we experience *vuja de*, the opposite of *déjà vu*. *Déjà vu* occurs when we encounter something new, but it feels as if we've seen it before. *Vuja de* is the reverse—we face

something familiar, but we see it with a fresh perspective that enables us to gain new insights into old problems.”

“ Idiosyncrasy credits accrue through respect, not rank: they’re based on contributions. We squash a low-status member who tries to challenge the status quo, but tolerate and sometimes even applaud the originality of a high-status star.”

~ Adam Grant

Vuja de. Not to be confused with *déjà vu*!

Déjà vu = You experience something new but it feels like you’ve experienced it before.

Vuja de = You look at something familiar with a fresh perspective—gaining “new insights into old problems.”

Originality starts with curiosity—with a willingness to challenge the norms and find a better way to go about doing things. Adam brings this point home with a fascinating study on the web browsers people use at work and how that correlates to their level of engagement and effectiveness in their jobs.

Here’s the short story. Economist Michael Housman studied thirty thousand customer service agents across a range of fields. Originally he was interested in understanding why some stayed at their jobs longer than others.

As he dug in, he noticed correlations between the web browser they used and their overall performance. For some odd reason, Chrome and Firefox users outperformed Safari and Internet Explorer users in nearly every regard (stayed on the job longer, missed less work, had happier customers, higher sales, etc.).

After digging in to the data further, he concluded that the individuals who chose not to stick with the default browser (Internet Explorer on a PC and Safari on a Mac) took more initiative in their jobs as well—looking for ways to optimize as they engaged in every facet of their jobs.

Unfortunately, as Adam tells us, we live in an Internet Explorer world—just as nearly two-thirds of the customer service reps used their default browser, most of us seem to simply accept the “default browser” of life and fail to take the initiative to craft our ideals.

How about *you*? What browser are you using? (hah!) (Me? I’m a Chrome guy.)

Here’s to challenging the defaults as we get our *vuja de* on!

SHAKESPEARE, BEETHOVEN, PICASSO + CREATING A TON OF STUFF

“If originals aren’t reliable judges of the quality of their ideas, how do they maximize their odds of creating a masterpiece? They come up with a large number of ideas. Simonton finds that on average, creative geniuses aren’t qualitatively better in their fields than their peers. They simply produced a greater volume of work, which gave them higher variation and a higher chance of originality. ‘The odds of producing an influential or successful idea,’ Simonton notes, are ‘a positive function of the total number of ideas generated.’ ...

In every field, even the most eminent creators typically produce a large quantity of work that’s technically sound but considered unremarkable by experts and audiences. When the London Philharmonic Orchestra chose the 50 greatest pieces of classical music, the list included six pieces by Mozart, five by Beethoven, and three by Bach. To generate a handful of masterworks, Mozart composed more than 600 pieces before his death at thirty-five, Beethoven produced 650 in his lifetime, and Bach wrote over a thousand. In a study of over 15,000 classical music compositions, the more pieces a composer produced in a given five-year window, the greater the spike in the odds of a hit.”

That’s so good. Want to maximize your odds of coming up with an original work? Create a TON of stuff. :)

In addition to Beethoven and Mozart and their super-high level of output, Adam shares data on Shakespeare and Picasso. Both of those guys produced a CRAZY ton of goodness—only a tiny fraction of which was recognized as “great” but all of which was required to get to that greatness.

"Whether you're generating or evaluating new ideas the best you can do is measure success on the kind of yardstick that batters use in baseball. As Randy Komisar puts it, 'If I'm hitting .300, I'm a genius. That's because the future cannot be predicted. The sooner you learn it, the sooner you can be good at it.'"

~ Adam Grant

Reminds me of the 50 lbs = A wisdom from [Art & Fear](#) (see [Notes](#)). It's worth reviewing (especially for the perfectionists in the house): *"The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the quantity of work they produced, all those on the right solely on the quality. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the work of the 'quantity' group: fifty pounds of pots rated an 'A,' forty pounds a 'B,' and so on. Those being graded on 'quality,' however, needed to produce only one pot—albeit a perfect one—to get an 'A.' Well, came grading and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the 'quantity' group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the 'quality' group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay."*

Where do you fall on that spectrum? Trying to create *the* perfect piece or deliberately cranking out a high volume? (Or a nice hybrid of going for your best and holding high standards AND cranking out a ton—knowing that your best will come as a function of getting 4% better with more and more output?)

Here's another section that got some heavy underlining and asterisks (you should see this chapter—it's ALL marked up, and, for me, worth the price of the book by itself): *"If you want to be an original, 'the most important possible thing you could do,' says Ira Glass, the producer of [This American Life](#) and the podcast [Serial](#), 'is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work.'"*

The most important thing if we want to be an original?

DO a HUGE volume of work. 50 lbs = A. (<— That has a permanent home on my whiteboard.)

btw: We're not talking about SHALLOW work here. We're talking about DEEP WORK. Check out our Notes on [Cal Newport's *Deep Work*](#) for more on that and remember the distinction:

Deep Work: *Professional activities performed in a state of distraction-free concentration that push your cognitive capabilities to their limit. These efforts create new value, improve your skill, and are hard to replicate.*

Deep work is necessary to wring every last drop of value out of your current intellectual capacity. We now know from decades of research in both psychology and neuroscience that the state of mental strain that accompanies deep work is also necessary to improve your abilities."

vs.

Shallow Work: *Noncognitively demanding, logistical-style tasks, often performed while distracted. These efforts tends to not create much new value in the world and are easy to replicate.*

In an age of network tools, in other words, knowledge workers increasingly replace deep work with the shallow alternative—constantly sending and receiving e-mail messages like human network routers, with frequent breaks for quick hits of distraction."

Let's not be human network routers flitting from shallow thing to shallow thing.

Remember: Beethoven, Shakespeare, Picasso, et al. DID NOT produce their masterpieces with their attention splintered as their iPhones blew up with every push notification. GO DEEP!

One more gem from Adam worth noting here: *"It's widely assumed that there's a tradeoff between quantity and quality—if you want to do better work, you have to do less of it—but this turns out to be false. In fact, when it comes to idea generation, quantity is the most predictable path to quality. 'Original thinkers,' Stanford professor Robert Sutton notes, 'will come up with many ideas that are strange mutations, dead ends, and utter failures. The cost is worthwhile because they also generate a larger pool of ideas—especially novel ideas.'"*

FEAR: STOP VS. GO!

"Don't try to calm down. If you're nervous, it's hard to relax. It's easier to turn anxiety into intense positive emotions like interest and enthusiasm. Think about the reasons you're eager to challenge the status quo, and the positive outcomes that might result."

~ Adam Grant

"To overcome fear, why does getting excited work better than trying to calm yourself down? Fear is an intense emotion: You can feel your heart pumping and your blood coursing. In that state, trying to relax is like slamming on the brakes when the car is going 80 miles per hour. The vehicle still has momentum. Rather than trying to suppress a strong emotion, it's easier to convert it into a different emotion—one that's equally intense, but propels us to step on the gas.

Physiologically, we have a stop system and a go system. 'Your stop system slows you down and makes you cautious and vigilant,' explains *Quiet* author Susan Cain. 'Your go system revs you up and makes you excited.' Instead of hitting the stop switch, we can motivate ourselves to act in the face of fear by pressing the go switch. Fear is marked by uncertainty about the future. We're worried that something bad will happen. But because the event hasn't occurred yet, there's also a possibility, however slim, that the outcome will be positive. We can step on the gas by focusing on reasons to move forward—the sliver of excitement that we feel about breaking loose and singing our song."

Love this Idea. Seriously. One of my absolute favorites ever.

We touched on the same research by Alison Wood Brooks in our Notes on [Kelly McGonigal's *The Upside of Stress*](#) and [Amy Cuddy's *Presence*](#).

Quick recap: Students are asked to give an impromptu speech before a panel of judges.

(Recall that people are more afraid of public speaking than death (!) making it a wonderful way to test responses to stress and leading Seinfeld to quip that *"If you have to go a funeral, you're better off in the casket than doing the eulogy."* ← hah. Sidenote: [Public Speaking 101](#) soon.)

Brooks wanted to know which approach led to better performance: Trying to calm down or channeling your energy into excitement.

One group was advised to say, *"I am calm."* The other, *"I am excited."*

The "I am excited" group significantly outperformed the trying-to-get-calm group.

Why?

Because it's almost impossible to shift from a high-arousal state of fear/anxiety *immediately* into a calm state. It's like cruising at 80 miles an hour and slamming on the brakes. Not a good idea.

Much wiser to take all that fear energy and simply reframe it as excitement—channeling it into a positive, constructive direction and, effectively, pressing go on the accelerator rather than stop.

And *"I am excited!"* is a shockingly simple way to make that happen.

So...

What do YOU do when you're feeling your heart race before a big event?

Time to get excited?

P.S. Here's how [Amy Cuddy](#) brilliantly captures it in [Presence](#): *"As most of us know, stage fright can feel like a paralyzing overdose of anxiety. And what do people tell us to do when we're anxious? They tell us, with good intentions, to calm down. As it turns out, that might just be the very worst thing they can say. You see, anxiety is what psychologists describe as a high-arousal emotion. As I've explained, when we're anxious, we occupy a heightened state of psychological vigilance. We're hyperalert. Our hearts race, we break out into a sweat, our cortisol may spike—all of these reactions are controlled automatically by our nervous system. And it's virtually impossible for most people to shut off that kind of automatic arousal, to abruptly de-escalate it. Not only can we not calm it down, but when someone tells us to calm down, it also reminds us of how calm we are not, which stokes our anxiety even more."*

But there's another high-arousal emotion that's not so negative. In fact, it's quite positive—excitement. Brooks predicted that we may not be able to extinguish arousal, but we should be able to change the way we interpret it. So rather than fruitlessly trying to change the arousal level of our emotional states from high to low, what if we try to change them from negative to positive? From anxiety to excitement?"

BEING ANGRY *AT* OTHERS VS. *FOR* OTHERS

"Becoming originals is not the easiest path in the pursuit of happiness, but it leaves us perfectly poised for the happiness of pursuit."

~ Adam Grant

"Venting doesn't extinguish the flame of anger; it feeds it. When we vent our anger, we put a lead foot on the gas pedal of the go system, attacking the target who enraged us. Hitting the punching bag without thinking of the target though, keeps the go system on but enables us to consider alternative ways of responding. Sitting quietly begins to activate the stop system.

In other studies, Bushman has demonstrated that venting doesn't work even if you think it does—and even if it makes you feel good. The better you feel after venting, the more aggressive you get: not only toward your critic, but also toward innocent bystanders."

That's from a chapter on "Rocking the Boat and Keeping It Steady" in which, among other things, Adam talks about anger.

Anger can be a powerful catalyst but it needs to be used wisely. And, research shows us that venting is most definitely *not* the wisest path.

(Re-cap: In a study, people received super negative feedback from a critic. Then they were split into three groups: One hit a punching bag imagining hitting the critic (venting group); the other just hit the bag; the third just sat quietly. The venting group became MORE aggressive.)

The better choice?

"To channel anger productively, instead of venting about the harm that a perpetrator has done, we need to reflect on the victims who have suffered from it. ... Focusing on the victim activates what psychologists call empathetic anger—the desire to right wrongs done unto another. It turns on the go system, but it makes us thoughtful about how to best respect the victim's dignity. Research demonstrates when we're angry *at* others, we aim for retaliation or revenge. But when we're angry *for* others, we seek out justice and a better system. We don't just want to punish; we want to help."

Feeling anger?

See if you can tap into the grounded, thoughtful power of empathetic anger by focusing on who you can be angry *FOR* rather than who you are angry *at*.

FUEL FOR PROPER REVOLUTIONS

"When psychologist Dan McAdams and his colleagues asked adults to tell their life stories and plotted their emotional trajectories over time, they discovered two different desirable patterns. Some people had consistently pleasant experiences: they were content throughout the major periods of their lives. The people who had been recognized for making original contributions to their communities shared many more stories that started negatively but surged upward: they struggled early and triumphed only later. Despite being confronted with more negative events, they reported greater satisfaction with their lives and a stronger sense of purpose. Instead of merely enjoying good fortune all along, they endured the battle of turning bad things good—and judged it as a more rewarding route to a life well lived. Originality brings more bumps in the road, yet it leaves us with more happiness and a greater sense of meaning. 'Proper revolutions are not cataclysmic explosions,' Popovic observes. 'They are long, controlled burns.'"

Reminds me of a couple things.

"I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world," E.B. White once wrote. "This makes it difficult to plan the day."

~ Adam Grant

First, in our interview on [The Upside of Stress](#), [Kelly McGonigal](#) made the important point that if you want to find out how much meaning someone has in their lives, one of the best ways is to find out how much STRESS they have. We have a naive idea that stress-free is good, but, of course, if we truly want a life of deep purpose and meaning, we need to embrace and lean into the challenges.

Second, [Malcolm Gladwell](#) shares brilliant wisdom on “desirable difficulties” in [David and Goliath](#) (see [Notes](#)). He tells us that, although not everyone will overcome tough beginnings, those who can are often WAY stronger as a direct result. We want to turn those challenges into fuel for growth. We always have the opportunity to do so.

Finally: As one of the world’s leaders of revolutionaries Srjda Popovic (who, we learn, was one of the masterminds behind the Otpor! youth nonviolence movement that overthrew Milosovic) tells us: “Proper revolutions are not cataclysmic explosions. They are long, controlled burns.”

PERFECT wisdom for our optimizing and actualizing.

Sure, the huge cataclysmic “awakenings” on the journey are nice. But that’s not the foundation of a proper personal revolution. We want to create a long, controlled burn in our lives as we overthrow our internal tyrant(s) and make a difference in the world.

On that note, how’s your controlled burn doing and how can you add a little fuel to the fire?

Specifically, what’s ONE thing you know you could be doing that you’re not currently doing? Now a good time to add that fuel to our fire?

Here’s to the process of being an Original and giving ourselves most fully to the world!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

If you liked this Note,
you’ll probably like...

[Presence](#)

[The Upside of Stress](#)

[Flourish](#)

[Art and Fear](#)

[David and Goliath](#)

About the Author of “Originals”

ADAM GRANT



Adam Grant is Wharton’s top-rated teacher. His first book, *Give and Take*, was a *New York Times* bestseller translated into twenty-seven languages and named one of the best books of 2013 by Amazon, Apple, the *Financial Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*—as well as one of Oprah’s riveting reads, *Fortune*’s must-read business books, *Harvard Business Review*’s ideas that shaped management, and the *Washington Post*’s books every leader should read. His speaking and consulting clients include Google, the NFL, Merck, Goldman Sachs, Disney Pixar, the United Nations, and the U.S. Army and Navy. Connect: [adamgrant.net](#).

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at [brianjohnson.me](#).