

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

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ASPEN LECTURE:
ORIGINALS—HOW NONCONFORMISTS MOVE THE WORLD

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ASPEN LECTURE:
ORIGINALS—HOW NONCONFORMISTS MOVE THE WORLD

(9:00 a.m.)

MR. GERSON: Good morning everyone. If you could take a seat. Gorgeous morning. It's great to see all of you inside. This morning you're in for a treat. I'm Elliot Gerson, executive vice president of the Aspen Institute, and I would like to welcome you to this -- our first of our Aspen Lectures at the Ideas Festival this year.

We added this feature at Aspen Lectures a few years ago because of -- for those of you who have been to Ideas Festival before, you know that our standard format is very informal: typically discussion, a moderated panel with two, three or even more panelists. But many people said that given the remarkable people we invite here each year that they really would enjoy the opportunity to have a deeper dive on a particular topic or with a particular person.

So we added this feature and we specially market them and brand them as Aspen Lectures. And they are invariably fascinating and they cover the wide variety of topics that represent the Ideas Festival.

Our lecturer this morning is Adam Grant, who is a professor of management and psychology at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He's also a contributing writer at the *New York Times* on topics relating to work and psychology. He's also written two books, *Originals* and *Give and Take*, both of which were *New York Times* bestsellers. And I think, as you will very quickly discover, you won't be surprised that he has been the top rated professor at Wharton and a highly sought after speaker and consultant by leading companies around the world.

Adam's topic for his Aspen Lecture is *Originals: How Nonconformists Move the World*. Adam Grant.

(Applause)

MR. GRANT: Good morning, everyone. I want to take you back about 15 years. I was working in one of my first jobs and I had responsibility for doing a bunch of hiring. So of course I did what every great manager does. I hired a bunch of my roommates and friends. And one of them fell way behind on a deadline. Eventually, it got so bad that a senior leader in the organization walked up to his desk, started screaming at him and said, "If you don't get your act together, you are going to be fired."

And I watched this happen. So I had a choice to make: do I stay silent or do I speak up? And I had known all my life what I had done. I had been the person who stayed silent. I was the ultimate conformist. Growing up in elementary school, I got called to the principal's office. I found out I was not in trouble and I still cried.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: That is not a joke. After that, I followed not only all the rules, but even the rules that didn't exist just in case somebody made them to make sure that I would not get in trouble. And I was very careful to respect my elders, to make sure that I was listening to authority and I was afraid of rocking the boat.

But in this situation, I felt like I had a responsibility to actually do something. So I looked around the organization and I found the person who I knew would have my back. It was my boss's boss. She had nominated me for an award the previous year. She frequently came to my desk to talk about what was going on on the latest episode of *Survivor*. And I thought, "Okay, this is a safe person to go to."

So it took me a whole day to work up the courage to go to her office and speak up. And finally, I opened the door and I said, "You know, I've had a really hard time deciding to do this, but I've got to tell you this happened. I think not only is it a horrible injustice, but I'm worried that this guy is going to quit. And if you think we are behind on the deadline now, just wait

until he is not working anymore."

Deep breath -- nothing bad happened. Then I'm getting dragged by my ear down the hallway. My boss's boss opens the door, throws me into a dark room. I'm completely disoriented. The light goes on. I have no idea where I am. I've never been in this room in my entire life. I'm standing smack in the middle of the women's bathroom. My boss's boss proceeds to tell me that if I ever speak up out of turn again, I'm going to be fired too.

So at that moment, I made three vows. The first vow was that I was never ever going to have a real job where someone could fire me.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: University tenure year, check.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: The second vow was that I was going to spend as much time as I could trying to study how we could create organizations where actually voice was encouraged as opposed to silence. And that's what I've been up to since then. And then the third vow was to never again step in a women's bathroom. And proud to say that I've lived up to that one too.

But ever since then, I've really been studying people who are quite the opposite of me, the non-conformists, who I've come to call originals. They are the people who actually enjoy standing out and speaking up, who drive a lot of the creativity and change in the world. And I wanted to know how we could all be a little bit more like them.

So if you're somebody like me who is constantly following the rules, right, how can you get comfortable speaking up, and more importantly, how can you do that effectively? For leaders, how do you create organizations where people are actually able to challenge authority and bring dissent? And for parents, how do you raise creative

children?

And I spent a lot of the first part of that body of research trying to figure out what creative people do differently from the rest of us. I was stunned to discover that the most original people procrastinate more than their peers. I also found out that they feel just as much doubt and fear as the rest of us, that they don't like taking risks and they actually have more bad ideas than everybody else.

And that all was fascinating. That's not what I want to talk about today. What I want to talk about today is what happens after you have an idea. So I don't think the world suffers from a lack of creative ideas. I think it suffers from a lack of people who are willing to champion them and a lack of knowledge about how to do that effectively.

So I wanted to give you a top 10 list today of the most important steps that you could take if you wanted to drive more original ideas in the world. Now, sadly, I could only think of five, so this is going to be a top five list.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Are you ready? I was going to do it anyway, but I appreciate the enthusiasm.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: So the first thing that I learned is idea selection is a critical skill and originals are people who end up betting on the right ideas. The coolest data that I've come across on this comes from a former student, Justin Berg, who spent a couple of years at Wharton trying to study circus artists, and he got all these performers who were trying to make it in the Cirque du Soleil to submit their videos. And then he got audience members to watch them, rate them, even donate their own money to them. And he wanted to know who could predict which of these videos would really take off with audiences, right.

All the videos are pretty novel. The question is: which of these novel ideas will actually turn into successes? So the first thing he does is he has artists rate their own videos. And they are terrible forecasters of their own idea of success. On average when they take 10 different videos, they rank their own video two spots too high because they have fallen in love with their own work. And I know no one in this room has ever done that before.

But then Justin wants to know: well, if people can't judge their own ideas, who can do this well? And the second group he turns to is managers. And managers are almost as bad. In some cases, they are worse. But they are bad for the opposite reason: they are too negative on novel ideas and they commit a ton of false negatives, rejecting really promising ideas.

Now, managers have done this pretty much as long as we've ever had ideas in the world. I spent a lot of time digging into the history of *Seinfeld* to try to figure out why every single executive at *NBC* shot that show down. And it took a guy, Rick Ludwin, who didn't even work in sitcoms -- he came from variety and specials -- to say, "You know, I realize that the show makes no sense and it's really about nothing. The plot lines never get resolved and you can't identify with anyone of the characters."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: "But this made me laugh and that's what a sitcom is supposed to do." The managers, on the other hand, were much more likely to take novel ideas and compare them to a template of what has worked in the past. And so they would say, "Look, this is what a formula for a successful sitcom looks like. *Seinfeld* violates that. Therefore, we should not give it a chance."

And they have intuition built up from years of experience. And the danger of intuition is: if the past doesn't resemble the present and the future, then the lessons of experience actually leave you astray, right? So all of that experience they built up about what made

for a successful show actually made them biased against the novelty that actually made Seinfeld great.

Now, it wasn't just intuition and comparing past ideas to current ideas that made these managers so bad. It was also incentives. If you are a manager, if you commit a false positive, you are going to embarrass yourself and potentially ruin your career.

And just to bring this to life: I want you to look around the room for a second; we're going to try to spot the most paranoid person here.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: And then I want you to point at that person for me.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Thank you for that. I appreciate it. Now, for those of you who are tempted to point at yourselves, this is what a lot of managers do. They are terrified of committing a false positive. False negatives, on the other hand, if you reject a good idea, most of the time no one will ever know. So incentives are very skewed, right? It's easy to bet on ideas that are safe, and managers were afraid to risk on the most novel.

So Justin got these results. And I asked him, "Well, if people can't judge their own ideas and managers can't judge new ideas either, who does? And Justin came up with a great insight. He had a third group, which was peers, fellow creators, circus artists judging each other's videos and they were the best forecasters by far.

Because unlike the artists themselves, the peers could take a step back and say, "You know that act with clowns, well no one likes clowns. Don't do that." And that's not a joke. That's an empirical fact: clowns are universally hated in the data.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: No one ever liked a clown act. But unlike managers, the peers were also really invested in the creative process and they were able to say, "You know, I know this looks like nothing I've ever seen before and it's kind of out there, but I think we should give it a shot and see if it could take off." And so the peers were the best ones by far to take the risks on novel ideas. And that is what originals do, right? They say, "This idea is novel, I can't put it in a box, and that's exactly why we should give it a chance."

One lesson from that is: maybe we should take leaders and managers out of the gate keeping process and say, "You know what, fellow creative artists should be responsible for judging ideas" -- "not just generating them, but evaluating them and selecting them."

And that would be a way to leverage the wisdom of crowds, because we talk a lot about the wisdom of crowds. It turns out not all crowds are equally wise. And so we need to think about who actually understands creativity before we put responsibility for judging ideas in the hands of certain people.

But I want to go further. I want to help leaders and managers become less ineffective at judging new ideas. And Justin figured out a way to do this. Now, I should say Justin's intelligence has dropped precipitously in the last few years because he recently joined the Stanford faculty. But while he was still at Wharton, what he discovered was that if you took a bunch of managers and gave them a five minute activity, you can make them every bit as good as creative peers at judging which ideas would take off.

All he did was he asked managers to spend five minutes brainstorming about their own ideas before they judge other people's ideas and that was enough to open their minds. Because when they came in to select ideas, they were looking for reasons to say no. Get them into a brainstorming mindset first. Now, they are not thinking evaluatively, right? They are thinking creatively and they are much more likely to say, "What are reasons that I should consider this idea," as opposed to, "Why should I

walk away from it."

So I'd love to see a rule: every time we look at new ideas, before we evaluate other people's ideas, we should brainstorm about our own. And you have to be careful, though: if you brainstorm about ideas in that domain, you might end up just thinking your own ideas are great and then you don't end up actually considering anyone else's.

So the best version of this exercise is: you brainstorm about something completely different before you go and vet other people's ideas. And that I think would be a pretty exciting step.

Now, once you get good at idea selection, the next challenge is really to communicate them and get people to appreciate your original ideas. And this is where a lot of creativity goes to die. To illustrate this, I want to ask you to do a quick exercise. I like you to think of a song, any song that you know, and I want you to tap the rhythm to that song on the chair next to you. You can use your phone or your leg, if you prefer. So you are going to go like this. Try to tap the rhythm. The person next to you is going to try to guess the song.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: You got 30 seconds. I wish you good luck; you're going to need it.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: All right, stop. Some of you had far too much fun with this exercise. Why did I just ask you to do this? Because for those of you with kids or grandkids, when they ask you what you did in Aspen, this is your answer. I can promise you at least 12 minutes of dinner table fun. But what I think is fascinating about this is to find out how many of you could actually guess each other's song. So what I would like you to do is

stand up if you guessed it correctly for a round of applause.

(Applause)

MR. GRANT: Wait, I'm not done with you yet. Stay on your feet, please. If you guessed right, stand up again and you have to stay standing until I name your song. All right, *Happy Birthday*. Sit down. *Row, Row, Row Your Boat; Twinkle, twinkle little star; ABCs; Jingle Bells*.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. All right, I've got to stretch here: *Shave and a Haircut*. How about *We Will Rock You*? Anyone do Darth Vader's *Imperial March*? All right, what else did you have? Shout them out.

SPEAKER: *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

MR. GRANT: *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*.

SPEAKER: (Off mic).

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: Beethoven's 5th.

MR. GRANT: Beethoven's 5th. I cannot tap the 3rd. I don't know how you did that. Any others?

SPEAKER: *God loves America*.

MR. GRANT: *God loves America*, okay. Any others?

SPEAKER: *The Trooper* by Iron Maiden.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: I have so much to say right now. All right. So look, as fun as this is, what I love about this exercise is this was a real study done years ago and before people tap their song, they had a chance to estimate the likelihood that somebody else would recognize it. And here is where things get interesting. On average, people think that the guessing rate is going to be 50 percent. You can choose any song, so most people pick an easy one like a children's nursery rhyme. And they are like, "All right, one out of every two people will get it." And then you actually look at the correct guessing rate and it's only 2.5 percent of people who get it right. So you thought it was going to be one in two, but it was only 1 in 40. Why are the tappers so overconfident?

I got a clue into this a few years ago speaking to a leadership team at JPMorgan and I made the mistake of having them actually do the probability estimates before they tapped. And I heard a voice shout out, "A 100 percent."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: And I'm thinking, "First of all, nothing is ever a 100 percent," and then I look over and it's Jamie Dimon.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: And he ends up tapping the song and the guy next to him gets it right, which is good for all of us. But most of the time when people give high estimates, they are overconfident. Why? I think you already know the answer. Because when you are taping your song, it's impossible to do it without hearing the tune in your head. I dare you to try it. You can't do it.

That makes it also impossible to imagine what your disjointed tapping sounds like to someone who is not hearing the tune in your head, right? So I'm hearing da

da, da, da, da. And you're hearing, "What the hell is that?"

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: I think this is a great metaphor for what happens when we bring original ideas to the table. When you pitch a new idea, you are not only hearing the tune in your head, you wrote the song. You've spent days, weeks, maybe years thinking about this idea. It makes perfect sense to you. And that makes it really tough to predict how it's going to sound to somebody who has never heard it before.

The data actually suggests it takes 10 to 20 exposures to a new idea before other people fully appreciate it. So next time you bring an idea that other people don't get, just come back six minutes later and say, "Here's it is again." "No, of course not." What you want to do is master the art of repetition, which is all about making the unfamiliar feel familiar.

My favorite example of this happened at Disney years ago. They decided that they wanted to make their first animated film based on an original script. So instead of, you know, borrowing a time-honored fairytale, they are going to write something from scratch. And they wrote a bunch of drafts; they all get scrapped.

Finally, they are in a big pitch meeting and Jeffrey Katzenberg says, "This is a B-movie. We'll be lucky if we make 50 grand on it." Michael Eisner wants to save it. So he calls out, "Well, do you think you can make this into *King Lear*?" And one of the screenwriters coincidentally has re-read *King Lear* three weeks earlier -- because that's what you have to do when you work at Disney, you read *Shakespeare* -- and isn't able to connect the dots. But that actually sparks an idea for a producer in the room, and she says, "Wait, no, this is *Hamlet*." And that moment, the movie ends up getting the green light, becomes the most successful film of 1994. Some of you have probably seen it: it's called *The Lion King*.

I did not realize that *The Lion King* was based in part on *Hamlet*. But what's remarkable about this story is the original pitch for *The Lion King*, I quote, was "Bambi in Africa with Lions."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Think about that for a second. You hear that pitch, "Bambi in Africa with Lions," and you've got to be thinking like, "I have no idea what that movie is going to be about and I'm terrified for Bambi."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: When you reframe it to "Hamlet with Lions," now it clicks and you start to think, "Oh, of course, the uncle is going to kill the father and then the son is going to have to avenge it." And now you can imagine the plot and the characters.

And that's what I mean when I say make the unfamiliar familiar. You have to take your idea the more original it is and figure out how is it like something that people already get. And then connect those dots. You build the bridge. And it's a lot easier for them to grasp your novel concept.

I have a lot of students coming into office hours pitching startup ideas, and about seven years ago one of them came in and said, "I want to sell glasses online. Do you want to invest?" And I thought: "Who would ever order glasses online? You have to try them on and you have to get your prescription tested." And I declined. And today Warby Parker is worth over a billion dollars and my wife is really pissed at me.

But I wish I had paid more attention to something they said in their pitch, which was they said, "We want to do for glasses what Zappos did for shoes." And if I had stopped to think about that, if I had gotten over the fact that I've never worn glasses and I don't

really understand them to begin with, I might have thought, "You know, I didn't use to think about ordering shoes online, but now I do that all the time."

And then a couple of months later GQ called them the Netflix for eyewear. And that was another familiarity infusion, where people were able to say like, "Hey, I used to drive to Blockbuster and now I don't and so maybe this could happen too."

So every time you have an original idea, right, your challenge is to fill in that blank and ask what's the metaphor, what's the similar concept from a different domain that will help people to grasp what I'm trying to do.

Now, you can take this too far, as some startups are doing. And here's a quick illustration. Goal is to get a little bit of familiarity, right, not just copy everybody's idea. But I think Uber for X is actually a really smart pitch as long as it's overdone because it does provide that connection.

All right. The third thing I learned about originals was that the most important role they play in organizations, in teams, in communities is that they don't just generate their own novel ideas. They actually unleash originality in others.

I spend a lot of time working with organizations and the most frequent question I get by far from leaders is how do I fight groupthink, how do I get people to stop jumping on the bandwagon of what the majority prefers, what's popular and instead get people to bring real dissent and diversity of thought to the table.

So as I go to different organizations, I'm always intrigued by what leaders are doing that shuts this down and recently I actually started taking pictures of the leader behaviors that most suppress originality. And here's a photograph from one of the organizations that I think was most problematic.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: When I think about leaders who shut down originality, a lot of it is unintentional. There's one sentence that drives me crazy more than any other and I bet you've had a boss at some point in your career who has said this sentence. Think about it for a moment. Fill-in the blanks. I'm going to ask you all to do it out loud in a second. All right, ready? Don't bring me?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: Problems.

MR. GRANT: Bring me?

AUDIENCE MEMBERS: Solutions.

MR. GRANT: That was pretty good.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Now, I understand the logic behind this sentence, right. You want people to be efficient. You want them to not just be complaining and whining, but actually contributing. And I think it's reasonable for any leader to say, "Look, if you are going to point out that the emperor has no clothes, you should probably invest some time in becoming a tailor too."

But there's a big issue with this sentence, which is: if you can only bring solutions to the table, then you're going to create a culture of advocacy, not one of enquiry. People can only speak up after they have already figured out what to do with a problem. And that means most of the time your hardest problems will never get voiced, the ones that nobody knows how to fix, where people would love to say, "You know, I see this big challenge. Does anybody have ideas about what to do about it?"

You can't do that in a solution-focused culture. So I love to see organizations say, "Look, we actually

want to make it safe for people to bring problems to the table."

I had a really interesting conversation a couple of months ago with Elon Musk about the complacency that led to some of the errors that they have had at SpaceX and I asked him what he was doing to make sure that people would really speak up about every single flaw that they saw. Because in one case, the major issue that caused one of their Falcon 1 launches to explode was number 11 on a priority list of major problems and he asked for the top 10 problems. A little painful. Never wants to see that happen again, so now his goal is to make it unsafe not to speak up.

And imagine how different that is from a typical organization. The most extreme example of this that I've seen in a company is at Bridgewater, for those of you who are familiar with them. For those who aren't, it's a hedge fund that's done pretty well. They have made more money in the last 40 years than any other company in their industry. They also in 2007 warned their clients about an impending financial crisis. Not bad.

And one of the things that they have done is they have tried to create a culture of radical transparency and idea of meritocracy, which means that nobody has the right to hold a critical opinion without speaking up about it. And then instead of making decisions based on democracy, where everyone has one vote, or hierarchy, where the people in leadership roles dictate everything, they actually wanted meritocracy, where the best ideas win.

And they have some pretty unconventional practices to create that kind of transparency: one of which is they videotape or audiotape every single meeting that happens at the company. And that way, nobody ever says things behind closed doors that won't get shared publicly. So if you're ever caught talking behind somebody's back, you will be accused of backstabbing them

and then you will be marched right in front of them to front-stab them instead.

This is not going to work for every organization or every culture. But it has allowed them to do something really interesting, which is to really create a culture where voice is a necessity and part of how you get evaluated and how you get promoted is whether you're speaking up and challenging other people.

So the culture was tested a few years ago. There was this guy that today I'm going to call Jim because that's his name, who sends an e-mail -- he's three levels below Ray Dalio, the founder, and says -- I'm going to just paraphrase -- "Dear, Ray, that big client meeting we were in recently, I give you a D-minus for your performance. You rambled incoherently for well over an hour. This was a huge deal and I think you blew it." And he goes on for well over a page like that.

I don't know about you, but I don't know a lot of people would send that e-mail to the billionaire founder of their company. I was pretty sure Ray was going to fire the guy. But Ray's response is really telling. He writes back and he says, "I'm sorry I let you down." Then he copies the entire management committee of the firm and asks them to go and investigate the whole history of tapes and figure out whether this is a pattern so he can learn from his mistakes and avoid it again.

Now, that kind of action speaks so much louder than words that words are irrelevant at that point. But it doesn't stop there. Then the co-CEO actually copies the entire e-mail, trails it to the whole company so everyone can learn from the exchange.

When you look at randomized controlled experiments on this kind of leader behavior, admitting mistakes, being open to criticism, you see it has two effects. One is that people now feel like it's safe to speak up and you get a lot more voice. And two is: every other manager in the organization now feels responsibility

to really listen and try to learn and improve. So an extreme example, but I think a compelling one.

How can you create a culture more like that in your own workplace? My favorite answer to that question is an exercise called Kill the Company. So I was working with a pharmaceutical company a few years ago. The CEO got really frustrated, and he is like, "Look, we need to shake things up. We need innovation." So he brought in his leadership team and he asked them to spend an hour imagining they were a major competitor and brainstorming about how to put their company out of business.

And I've never seen a more energized group of executives in my life. One scientist was like, "I've been waiting 27 years to destroy this company." But after the brainstorming exercise about how to kill the company, they had to turn around and say, "Look, a lot of our competitors are considering these ideas already and some of them are threats, some of them are opportunities. Let's figure out what we're going to do with them."

What I love about this exercise is that it puts you on offense instead of defense and we know that people are much more original when they are thinking offensively than when they are thinking defensively. On defense, you're risk averse, you're cautious, you are looking for every single potential threat and then you're just trying to play it as safe as possible. Whereas, on offense, you're going to think about things you never would have considered otherwise and then you're really going to give them a serious shot.

And so I think this is an exercise that everybody should do, right. Save the company doesn't work so well; kill the company does. And you spend some time doing that and you feel -- you find out that a lot of people actually have some major concerns, major problems or real ideas and now they feel like it's their job to bring them to the table because they are actually going to gain status from trying to destroy their own company.

You have to make sure that exercise did not last for an hour, though, otherwise they go into competition with you. But that's a separate question.

All right. The fourth thing that I found really interesting was every original needs allies. If you're going to bring an idea or a suggestion, you want to go to the right people. And those right people are not always who you think they are. I always thought that the people who would most support us are the ones who share our goals: people with the same values, the same ends, the same visions. And yet the data show that often times common goals drive people apart instead of bringing them together.

My favorite example of this is actually a study of vegans. So I'm just going to say some of you might be a little upset by this knowing that we are in Aspen, but there is clear evidence that vegans hate vegetarians even more than meat eaters.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Freud had a name for this. He called it the narcissism of small differences. So what happens is extreme groups often look down their noses at more mainstream groups. They think of them as sellouts, right. So if you're a vegan, at least meat eaters are consistent in their principles; whereas vegetarians, what do they actually stand for?

So you have to be thoughtful about who you go to when you have ideas. And the first place that I started on this was thinking -- something that I've been studying my whole career is a big factor here. I've been studying the differences between givers and takers. Givers are the people who by default are generous, they enjoy sharing their knowledge, they like to mentor other people and they want to be helpful. They are constantly asking, "What can I do for you?"