Think back to the last time you had an original idea. Did you run with it? Or did you put it on the shelf and go back to what you were doing before?

If you decided to put it on the shelf, you weren’t alone. Although we live in a world that celebrates freedom and individuality, most of us choose to blend in rather than stand out.

“Most people believe that in order to be an original, you need to take radical risks,” writes Adam Grant in his New York Times bestselling book *Originals*. Many people also believe that originality is something that you’re either born with, or you’re not. These beliefs are embedded so deeply in our cultural psyche that we rarely stop to think about them. But what if these beliefs are completely misguided? What if it were possible to be an original without taking much risk at all? What if anyone can learn to be an original, simply by following a few basic steps?

It turns out that in just about every domain one can think of – from business to politics to science – the people who move the world forward with original ideas aren’t all that different from the rest of us. We idolize icons like Steve Jobs and Bill Gates for having the audacity to drop out of school to pursue their entrepreneurial dreams, and we tend to assume they’re cut from a different cloth. In the same way that some lucky folks are born with genetic gifts that make them resistant to cancer and disease, we tend to believe that great creators like Jobs and Gates are somehow born with a biological immunity to risk. But this is simply not the case. *Originals* worry about failure just as much as anyone else does. But unlike so many of us, they don’t let their fear paralyze them.

As an organizational psychologist at Wharton (who happens to be ranked as one of the world’s twenty-five most influential management thinkers), Adam Grant has spent more than a decade studying the phenomenon of originality in a wide range of settings; from technology companies to schools, hospitals, and governments. For his book, Grant also sought out some of the most prominent originals of our time – folks like Neil Blumenthal of the fast-growing online glasses retailer, Warby Parker – to gain first-hand insights into how we can all be more original without jeopardizing our relationships, reputations, and careers.
The first section of *Originals* focuses on managing the financial and other risks involved in generating, recognizing, and voicing original ideas. Grant also grapples with the dilemma of timing. (It turns out that we should always be wary of being the first mover, because it’s often riskier to act early than late.)

The second section of Grant’s book deals with practical approaches we can use to sell our original ideas to skeptical audiences, like venture capitalists and senior executives.

The third and final section of his book looks at how to unleash and sustain originality both at home and in work. Here, Grant examines how to nurture originality with a particular focus on how to raise our children to think and behave in unconventional ways. He also looks at how we can build our emotional resiliency to deal with the criticism that often comes with being an original.

But first, let’s look at some commonly held misperceptions about the origins and nature of originality that need to be put to rest before we can fully embrace the author’s prescriptions for change in our own lives.

**The Roots Of Originality**

When we stop to think about the people who might grow up one day and make a difference, the group that usually comes to mind is child prodigies. After all, these little geniuses learn to read at two, play Bach at four, breeze through calculus at six, and speak seven languages by eight. For the first decade or two of a child prodigy’s life, everything looks pretty rosy: their classmates are seething with jealousy while their parents are rejoicing. But by the time they reach adulthood, the success of most child geniuses usually starts to plateau. Interestingly, they don’t turn out to be the ones who change the world after all. Or, as Grant puts it, “The careers of most child prodigies tend to end not with a bang, but a whimper.”

When psychologists study history’s most eminent and influential people – people like Martin Luther King – they discover that most of them weren’t gifted as children. In fact, they were typically pretty average students. Intuitively this makes sense, says Grant. We all know that gifted kids have “book smarts,” but very often they’re lacking in “street smarts.”

“Although child prodigies are often rich in both talent and ambition, what holds them back from moving the world forward is that they don’t learn to be originals,” writes Grant. “As they perform in Carnegie Hall, win the science Olympics, and become chess champions, something tragic happens … they never learn how to compose their own original scores. They focus their energy on consuming existing knowledge, not producing new insights. They conform to the codified rules of established games, rather than inventing their own games.”

To become an original, you have to be willing to try something new, which clearly means accepting some measure of risk. But the most successful originals aren’t daredevil-types who leap before they look. They are the ones who “reluctantly tiptoe
to the edge of a cliff, calculate the rate of descent, triple-check their parachutes, and set up a safety net at the bottom just in case.”

Indeed, as Malcolm Gladwell recently wrote in the *New Yorker* “Many entrepreneurs take plenty of risks, but those are generally the failed entrepreneurs, not the success stories.” Smart entrepreneurs will often remain in their day jobs for a year or two even after their start-ups have launched. After inventing the original Apple computer in 1976, Steve Wozniak continued working full-time at Hewlett-Packard until 1977. And Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin had already figured out how to dramatically improve Internet searches in 1996, but they didn’t leave their graduate studies at Stanford until 1998. “We almost didn’t start Google,” says Page, “because we were too worried about dropping out of school.”

The point here is, the vast majority of people who went on to become paragons of originality started out with the same fears and doubts as the rest of us. But what set them apart is they didn’t freeze in the face of a challenge. They stepped into the unfamiliar waters, but they did so one foot at a time. They hedged their bets. It’s a great lesson for us all.

### Selecting Original Ideas

When we bemoan the lack of originality in the world, we blame it on the absence of new ideas. If only people could generate *more* novel ideas, we’d all be better off. Right?

Not so much. According to Grant, the biggest barrier to originality is not idea *generation*; it’s idea *selection*. In one analysis, when over two hundred people dreamed up more than a thousand ideas for new ventures and products, 87 percent were completely unique. Our companies and countries don’t necessarily suffer from a shortage of novel ideas. They’re hampered by a shortage of people who truly excel at choosing the right novel ideas.

To address this issue, Grant takes us through a selection of best practices in idea selection in order to help us make fewer bad bets. The common thread across all of them is to lean on the expertise of others where you can, but to do so in a highly strategic way.

Why is it so important to seek feedback from others before charging merrily ahead? Because we’re biologically predisposed to be overconfident in our own ideas and abilities.

“Social scientists have long known that we tend to be overconfident when we evaluate ourselves,” writes Grant. Among high school seniors, for example, 70 percent in one study self-reported that they have “above average” leadership skills, compared with just 2 percent who considered themselves “below average.” And amongst college professors, 94 percent rated themselves as doing “above average” work. That’s a lot of superstar professors.
Overconfidence is a particularly difficult bias to overcome in the creative domain. When you’re generating a new idea, by definition it’s unique, so it’s tempting to ignore all the feedback you’ve received in the past about your earlier innovations. Even if your previous ideas have bombed, you tell yourself: this one will be different. Also, when we’ve developed a novel idea, we’re typically too close to it to evaluate the idea accurately. If we think an original idea is really clever or funny, then we typically assume others will too. But as Brandon Tartikoff, NBC’s longtime entertainment president, frequently reminded his producers, “Nobody ever walks in here with what they think is a bad idea.”

Since originals aren’t reliable judges of the quality of their ideas, they must get feedback. But don’t assume that means asking for feedback from a focus group of your target audience; at least not at first. Focus groups are rarely ideal judges of highly creative ideas. Often, their knee-jerk reaction will be to say that the whole idea is horrible, instead of thinking it through and offering more nuanced insights.

That’s why, when you’re hoping to get some feedback in order to fine-tune an original idea, it’s often best to start with your peers. Your peers will often know better than a focus group which ideas are actually worth pursuing. A well-known circus production company recently proved this phenomenon with a clever experiment. They videotaped a bunch of original acts, and then put them in front of a focus group of their target audience – families and children. They asked the focus group to rate which of the videos would be most likely to be shared on YouTube. They then showed the video to a group of performers from a different focus group, and asked them the same question. They then posted all the videos. By far, the most accurate predictors of whether a video would get liked and shared were the peers evaluating one another. When artists assessed one another’s performances, they were about twice as likely to correctly assess how popular the act would become, versus a focus group of audience members.

**Only Fools Rush In**

When you’re attempting to determine the real-world worth of a highly original idea, sometimes it’s best to wait for the market to develop a bit first.

“Parents are constantly imploring children to begin their assignments earlier instead of waiting until the last minute,” writes Grant. “And in the self-help world, an entire cottage industry of resources is devoted to fighting procrastination. In work and in life, we are constantly taught that acting early is the key to success, because ‘he who hesitates is lost.’” But what if all of this advice is completely bogus when it comes to advancing original ideas?

When we come up with an original idea for a product or service, common sense tells us that we should try to be the first mover to secure a competitive advantage. But the advantages of being first to market are generally outweighed by the disadvantages.

In a seminal study, marketing researchers Peter Golder and Gerard Tellis compared
the success of companies that were either pioneers or settlers. The pioneers were first movers: the initial company to develop or sell a product. The settlers were slower to launch, waiting until the pioneers had created a market before entering it. When Golder and Tellis analyzed hundreds of brands in three dozen different product categories, they found a staggering difference in failure rates: 47 percent for pioneers, compared with just 8 percent for settlers. Pioneers were about six times more likely to fail than settlers. Even when the pioneers did survive, they averaged only 10 percent market share after five years, compared with an average of 28 percent for settlers. On balance, studies suggest that pioneers may capture greater market share for a year or two, but they’re rarely able to hold onto it.

Deliberately procrastinating can also improve the quality of your ideas and innovations by giving them an appropriate amount of time to gestate and mature. Da Vinci spent about fifteen years developing the ideas for The Last Supper while working on a variety of other projects. The painting began as a sketch of figures sitting on a bench, and only rarely would Da Vinci ever return to work on it. Although he was often exasperated by his procrastination, Da Vinci realized that originality could not be rushed. He famously noted that people often “accomplish the most when they work the least, for they are thinking-out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect idea.”

Obviously, you don’t have to take 15 years like Da Vinci did with The Last Supper, to reap the creative benefits of procrastination. Even a few minutes of procrastination can yield results. This was demonstrated by Professor So Jihae at the University of Wisconsin, who ran some experiments to demonstrate the effect of procrastination on original thinking. Dr. Jihae asked a group of young people to come up with new business ideas. Some were randomly assigned to start the task right away. Others were given ten minutes to play Minesweeper first. Everyone submitted their ideas, and independent raters evaluated how original they were. It turns out the procrastinators’ ideas were 28% more creative.

“Minesweeper is awesome, but it wasn’t the driver of the effect,” writes Grant. It was the act of procrastinating before getting down to the task that drove the better results. After all, our first ideas are usually our most conventional ones. But when you procrastinate a bit before starting a job, you’re more likely to let your mind wander. That gives you a better chance of stumbling onto the unusual and spotting unexpected patterns.

Selling Your Original Ideas

One of the best ways to sell an original idea to a skeptical audience is to make it sound more like a familiar one. To see how this works, consider this example.

In the early 1990s, a group of screenwriters at Walt Disney Studios proposed something that had never been done before at Disney – they wanted to make an animated movie based on an original story. Departing from Disney’s time-honored tradition of animating familiar fairy tales like Cinderella and Snow White, these writers
set out to create a new story from scratch. From the get go, studio chief Jeffrey Katzenberg was skeptical, telling all of his colleagues it was just an experiment. “No one had any confidence in it,” lead writer Rob Minkoff recalled to Grant. “It was seen as the ‘B movie’ at Disney.”

This little “B movie” was *The Lion King*, which turned out to be the highest-grossing film made by Disney to that point, winning two Oscars and a Golden Globe. In the early going, Katzenberg would have gotten down on his knees in appreciation if it even brought in $50 million. But by the end of 2014, it had earned over $1 billion (with more sales still pouring in).

Like so many other original ideas, *The Lion King* almost never got off the ground. Even Disney’s normally forward-thinking CEO Michael Eisner was initially opposed to it. Then, in one crucial production meeting, Disney executive Maureen Donnelley said that the screenplay kind of reminded her of *Hamlet*. Suddenly, everyone from Eisner and Katzenberg on down got it. “There was a collective sigh of recognition,” beamed Minkoff. “Of course it was *Hamlet* - the uncle kills the father and then the son has to avenge his father’s death.”

In that pivotal moment, *The Lion King* finally got the definitive “green light.” The dose of familiarity helped the executives connect the original script to a classic tale, which had been the successful (and safe) Disney recipe. “It gives senior people a common point of reference,” Minkoff said. “With absolute originality, you can lose people. Executives have to sell it, so they’re looking for those ‘handles.’ You must give them something to hang on to.”

And so, as we’ve seen, the most promising ideas often begin from novelty, and then toss in a pinch of familiarity to make the final dish more palatable to conservative decision-makers.

**Sparking Originality In Children**

The author points to emerging research that shows how too many rules can stifle creativity in young children, and leave them less well positioned to become creative adults. It’s a big challenge: researchers have found that from ages two to ten, children are urged by parents to change their behavior once every six to nine minutes. For young children, this translates into dozens of disciplinary encounters over the course of a day, or over 15,000 a year!

Moreover, most children are expected to internalize a lot of family rules. In one study, parents of ordinary children had an average of six household rules to remember, like specific schedules for homework and bedtime. But interestingly, parents of highly creative children had an average of only one rule, and it tended to be about moral values, rather than specific behaviors. In other words, the one rule would aim to convey a general set of principles about right and wrong (building in key values like morality, integrity, respect and curiosity) as opposed to things like “you must always clean up your toys before bedtime.”
“By teaching their kids to see the world in terms of moral principles, as opposed to specific rules, parents encourage their children to comply with rules that align with important values, and to question rules that don’t,” explains the author. This one relatively simple change in child rearing has been shown to encourage original thinking, both in children and in adults.

Finally, it we truly want to encourage originality in our children, the best step we can take is to raise our children's aspirations towards originality by introducing them to appropriate role models. According to Grant, fictional characters may be even better role models than the real life variety. Because in inspiring works of fiction, like *Harry Potter*, characters can perform actions that have never been accomplished before, thus making the impossible seem possible. This can have a lasting effect, says Grant. Some of the earliest mobile phones, tablets, GPS navigators, portable digital storage disks, and multimedia players were designed by people who watched *Star Trek* characters using similar devices.

### Sustaining Originality In Ourselves

We also have to account for the fact that there can be an emotional cost in going against the grain. “Although many originals come across as beacons of conviction and confidence on the outside, inside they often harbor ambivalence and self-doubt,” explains Grant. The most successful originals adopt clever mental strategies for combatting these negative emotions. Grant highlights two different strategies for handling these challenges: strategic optimism and defensive pessimism. Strategic optimists anticipate the best, stay calm under pressure and set high expectations for themselves and others.

Defensive pessimists, on the other hand, deliberately expect the worst. They combat their feelings of self-doubt by imagining all the things that can go wrong. They deliberately imagine a “total disaster scenario” to intensify their anxiety and convert it into motivation. Then, once they’ve conjured up that scenario in their minds, they’re driven to avoid it, considering every relevant detail to make sure they don’t crash and burn. This enables them to feel a profound sense of control, with great confidence that springs not from delusions about the difficulties ahead, but from a realistic appraisal and an exhaustive plan.

Both strategic optimism and defensive pessimism can be highly effective strategies. But defensive pessimism should never be deployed until after we’re fully committed to a particular action. Thinking like a defensive pessimist too early will only create anxiety and cause you to slam on your brakes.

Lastly, anger can also be a powerful tool to sustain your drive to be an original, but again it must be used strategically. Anger works because when we feel that we’ve been wronged, we’re compelled to do something about it.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew this well. Less than a year after Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to sit in the back of a Montgomery bus, the Supreme Court
outlawed segregation across the United States. To prepare citizens for the racial conflicts that might ensue on integrated buses, Dr. King designed and delivered workshops for thousands of black Alabamans, working in concert with non-violence experts like James Lawson, Bayard Rustin, and Glenn Smiley. The team simulated a bus by setting up rows of chairs, and assigned about a dozen different audience members to play the “white” passengers. The passengers called the black ones names. They spat on them, flicked cigarette ashes in their hair and squirted ketchup in their faces. Through all of this, Dr. King was aiming to make his followers deeply angry so as to motivate them to take action against racial injustices. But at the same time, he was training them to channel their anger, and to react in non-violent ways. As a true original, Dr. King understood that anger can be a powerful mobilizing tool, so long as you harness it and direct it in constructive ways.

**Conclusion**

We all love a good success story, and we’re quick to put entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs, Larry Page and Sergey Brin on a pedestal. To be sure, these wonderfully creative individuals deserve our praise. But we go too far when we start to think of them as something other than mere mortals. To imagine that they were born with some extra creativity gene that we’re somehow lacking, is totally wrong.

The truth is, any one of us can be infinitely more creative in our personal and professional lives if we adopt the right mindset, and apply the right tools.