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Six Ways to be an 'Original' [Entire Talk]

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University of Pennsylvania Professor Adam Grant, one of today's most influential management thinkers, shares the top six takeaways from his book "Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World," bringing his insights to life through amusing behavioral research and lively audience interaction. Grant explains why middle managers are notorious idea killers, why stress helps some rise to the occasion and how entrepreneurs and organizations can get what they want through unconventional means.

Transcript

(audience applauding) - Yeah, it's all downhill from here, I can promise you. I actually want to take you back about 15 years. I was working in advertising, it was my first real job, and I hired this guy that I thought was gonna be a creative genius. He spoke six languages fluently, he was self-taught, he had brilliant ideas in the interview. I hired him, and then he didn't do anything. And he starts falling way behind on a deadline. And I'm trying to figure out, how am I gonna cover my tracks and make sure that I don't get fired for hiring him? And while I'm trying to sort this out, a senior leader in our organization walks over to his desk, and starts screaming at him. And says, if you don't get your act together, you're gonna be fired. And I watched this happen. And I've got a choice to make, do I speak up or do I stay silent? And I know my whole life I have been the person who stayed silent.

When I was in elementary school I got called to the principal's office, I got there, found out I was not in trouble, and I still cried. (audience laughing) And, I was just, I was so motivated to follow the rules that I also followed rules that didn't exist yet just in case one day somebody would create them. And I really wanted to, you know, conform, respect my elders, please authority, and yet in this situation I felt like I had to say something. And 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 had also stopped by my desk religiously every week to talk about Survivor, which meant I had to watch Survivor. And, I just, I felt like she was the safe place to go. So I marched into her office. And I said, look I think this is a terrible injustice, nobody should be treated this way. And that aside, I'm worried that this guy is gonna quit, and if you think we're behind on deadline now, just wait until he leaves the organization, we're gonna be screwed.

Whew, deep breath, nothing bad happened. Except then my boss's boss dragged me down the hallway, and shoves me into a dark room. The light goes on, I'm totally disoriented, and I'm standing somewhere I've never seen in my entire life, smack in the center of the women's bathroom. Turns out it's the only room on our floor with no windows. And my boss's boss, she proceeds to tell me that if I ever speak out out of turn again, I'm gonna be fired. So, after that I made three decisions. The first one was that I was never ever gonna have a real job where someone could fire me. This is the allure of university tenure, right? (audience laughing) Check. The second commitment was, I was gonna go and try to study how we could create organizations where speaking up was welcomed as opposed to silenced. And I went and became an organizational psychologist.

One of my role models was a guy by the name of Bob Sutton. And my goal was to follow in his footsteps. And that's what I've been trying to do ever since for the last decade and a half. And then the third decision that I made was to never again enter

a women's bathroom. (audience laughing) Proud to say I've lived up to that one too. But one of the things I've really been up to since then is I've been studying people that I've, I've come to call originals. And when I think of originals, they're the people who are not like me. Right, who are comfortable standing out and speaking up, who are non-conformists, who are willing to drive the creativity and change in the world. And they seem to only get degrees from Stanford. By last account, you seem to have a monopoly on this particular tendency, but I really wanted to know how we could all become more original, but more importantly how we can be more effectively original.

Right, because so often we're ahead of our time. Or it ends up being really lonely when we have creative ideas. And I wanted to know, what do we do about that, and then more broadly how do you build an organization where originality thrives? And so I wanted to bring to you today a top 10 list of the most important things I've learned about what it takes to build cultures of productive originality. But sadly I could only think of about six. So this is gonna be a top six list. Are you ready? Are you ready? - [Audience] Yes! - Alright, I was gonna do it anyway, but I appreciate your enthusiasm. (audience laughing) So, I will say that I am gonna say almost nothing about Creativity today. And the reason for that is, I kind of wrote wrote Originals as a sequel to Creativity. We have tons of books, mostly written by gurus with no data, but also some books with real data behind them, that teach us how to generate good ideas. And I don't think that's the problem in the world.

I think the problem is, we don't have enough people who know how to champion original ideas. And I want to talk about how to do that, so what do you do after you have an idea, so you can think of this talk as a little bit like a sequel to Creativity. So the first thing that I learned, is I think that most originality dies in the idea selection process. That we have tons of great creative ideas that could change the world, but we don't have enough people who know which ones to bet on. And, there is a brilliant former student of mine, named Justin Berg, who has tackled this problem. Unfortunately, he joined the Stanford faculty recently so I don't get to work with him as much as I used to. But he's over at the GSB. What Justin wanted to do is figure out, how do you know if an idea is going to take off? And he went to a really weird place to do this, he studied the circus arts. So think about Cirque du Soleil for example. He got hundreds of circus artists to submit videos of their brand new acts that had never been seen before.

And then he got over 13,000 audience members to watch them, rate them, and then if they wanted to, they could donate their own money to the performers, which is a really clear way to figure out, would you pay to see these people live. And then after we know which videos are hits with audiences, he goes and he has lots of different groups watch the videos and try to predict which ones are gonna be successes. First group that he looks at is circus performers themselves. And they are awful at this. They on average, if they have to put their own video ranked in a set of 10, they rank their own video two spots too high. They're like this is my performance, of course it's amazing! How could anyone not love it? And they have a really hard time seeing their own work objectively, so duh, we can't trust people to judge their own ideas. So Justin says, we've gotta to leaders and managers. They're the gatekeepers. Right, we pay them to decide which ideas live and which ones will die. Except leaders and managers are almost as bad as the performers themselves.

But for the opposite reason, instead of being too positive they're too negative. And I know none of you have ever run into a manager in your lives who shot down ideas, but (audience laughs) it's particularly middle managers who are the worst at this, they tend to be the most conservative. Right, they've worked for years to earn this spot, and it's a very long way to fall, whereas if you are at the bottom and you're new, you have nothing to lose, you have no status anyway. And if you're all the way at the top, you've built up a lot of power and credibility and respect, and you're expected to take some risks and deviate a little bit. So, why are middle managers in particular so bad at judging ideas? Well one problem is that they tend to rely a lot on intuition. They're like, yeah, I've worked my way up and I have all of this experience and I want to use that. And, you know, I think it, look. Experience is important. And especially those of you who are engineers know this, right? From having a lot of experience driving a car, you know how to build an engine, right? And from all the experience you have obeying the laws of gravity, you must be a physicist. Right? Maybe not.

But what's interesting about intuition is, I think of intuition just as unconscious or subconscious pattern recognition. And that's a useful source of insight in a lot of your life. But it is not a good basis for judging original ideas. Because your intuitions about what's gonna work are based on your past experience. What's worked in the past is totally irrelevant to trying to figure out what's going to work tomorrow if you're trying to do something new and different. So managers tend to get stuck in prototypes. They ask, what's worked in the past, they compare your idea to that, and then if it looks different, they say reject. And you see this a lot in entertainment, right. Remember the TV show that was shot down by NBC because it was a show about nothing? And all these executives looked at it and they're like, you know, a sitcom, like all of our great sitcoms have two things in common. Number one, their plot lines actually make sense, and number two, I root for at least one of the characters.

And this is not true for Seinfeld. But, there's an executive there, Rick Ludwin, who doesn't even work in sitcoms, he comes from the Variety and Specials department, and he watches it and he says yes, Seinfeld breaks all the rules of a great sitcom, but I don't care because it made me laugh. And that's what comedy is supposed to do. So he's willing to bet on it, and he's only able to do that because he doesn't have those years of experience that these managers do. The other problem that managers

run into is they have skewed incentives. So if you're a manager and you bet on a bad idea, you could destroy your career. It's gonna embarrass you at minimum. Whereas if you reject a good idea, this is kind of a good situation for you because no one will ever know. And so what are you gonna do, right? Are you gonna play it safe or are you gonna take some risks, and most managers choose to play it safe. So, if we can't trust you to judge your own ideas, we can't trust your bosses either, who do we go to? Justin found a third group that excelled at this.

It was actually peers. Fellow circus artists judging each other's videos. So they were able to have a little bit of distance and objectivity, right, and they would say things like, you know that act where you dress up like a clown? Don't do that. That was actually an empirical fact in the data, clowns are universally hated. (audience laughing) but, unlike the managers, who did have that distance, they also were invested in seeing new ideas take off. Right, and so they would, instead of looking for reasons to say no, they would come in and say, you know, this is kind of weird, but let me take a chance on this, or let's take another look at least. And so one lesson here is that you should go to your creative peers much more often than you do for feedback on your ideas. Those are the people who will give you the best input typically. But Justin wanted to go further, and he said I want to teach managers to be less bad at this. So, he found a five minute exercise that helped a lot.

All he did was, before managers judged other people's ideas, he made them spend five minutes brainstorming about their own ideas. And that was enough to make them just as good as peers at judging new ideas. Because they were now out of an evaluative mindset. And in a creative mindset. They were much more open. And I think this should be a rule, right? Never judge other people's ideas unless you've been in brainstorming mode first. Because it keeps you really receptive to weird possibilities. And I would go a step further though, and say you've gotta be careful when you do that, because if you brainstorm about the same domain that you're about to judge, you're just gonna fall in love with your own ideas. So the best case scenario is, you brainstorm about something totally unrelated for a few minutes, and then you come to look at this new set of ideas. And that's it, that's all there is to idea selection.

Alright, maybe it's a little more complicated. But, let's say you get better at this, and you improve your skills at idea selection. Your next challenge is, you've gotta pitch your ideas, right, you have to speak up, you have to find allies and supporters, and build a coalition. And a lot of us get really nervous in this process. I know I thought, when I started studying originals, that they were just cut from a different cloth than the rest of us. That they didn't feel the same doubt and fear and anxiety that we do. And I had a chance to interview a whole bunch of them, and I was surprised that when I talked to Mark Cuban and Elon Musk and Larry Page and a whole bunch of their peers, they all said the same thing, which was that they were terrified when they had their big ideas. But, they chose to take action anyway. And I was trying to figure out what propelled them to act even in the face of anxiety and fear. And what I learned actually traced back to the time when I was in school.

So for those of you who are students, I want you to think back to the last time you had a big exam to prepare for. And the question is, about a week before your big test, what were you doing? So if you're an optimist, optimists start about a week beforehand, imagining the perfect performance. They're visualizing knowing the answers to every question on the test, and acing it, and then also being the person who about 19 minutes into the exam is able to stand up and shout I won, and then leave. Just to make all their peers really nervous. And, that's, that kinda goes pretty well, right, optimists are excited by a positive vision of the future, that motivates them and they study really hard, and they often ace the test. For those of you who are defensive pessimists, you have a slightly different emotional experience going into that exam. So about a week beforehand, you wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat, panicked that not only are you going to fail the exam, you're going to do so badly that your professor will take away points on all your previous exams. Because there's no way you could have earned them. And that fear actually starts to create motivation.

You don't want to fail, and so you study really hard. And ironically, you do just as well as the strategic optimist. That anxiety actually becomes a source of motivation. And across the board, defensive pessimism turns out to be an effective strategy. In that, if you can psych yourself up into the state where you are convinced that you are going to fail, that will motivate you to work a lot harder on not just preparing for a test, but pitching an idea, and trying to find people who will support it. And what's funny is, then you'll succeed, and afterward, when you have a new idea, or a new exam, you convince yourself, no, this one is different, this time I really am gonna fail. And you start freaking out over and over again and that cycle continues. Because that anxiety is necessary to motivate you. And the funny thing about this is, there's one way to sabotage the performance of defensive pessimists, which is you make them happy. That's not a joke, that's a data point actually.

If you put defensive pessimists in a good mood, their performance drops. Because they no longer have the anxiety that they need to propel themselves into that frenzy of effort. So I think this is a really critical skill. And I think that sometimes, that anxiety also leads to really creative solutions to problems. (audience laughing) now, that for me begs the question of, of, what do you do when that anxiety becomes debilitating, when it literally causes you to freeze? Or, it disrupts your thinking capabilities? And, the best thing that I've learned about this actually comes out of evolutionary psychology. So, I think you're all familiar of prehistoric theories of how our minds tended to work. Which is, an oversimplified story that goes like this. So, imagine that you're walking in a jungle. And you see something moving in the bushes in the distance. And you watch this

happen, and you're like, you know, this thing that's moving seems to have orange and black stripes, there are sharp objects protruding from its mouth, I wonder what that is? And you die.

Or, you do what most people did, which is immediately, you see that thing moving in the bushes and you're like tiger run! And then you get to survive and pass on your genes. And I think many experts believe that we evolved an amygdala to serve this function, which is basically often the fear circuitry involved in driving that gut reaction, which bypasses your higher level thinking capabilities. And just causes you to immediately show fight or flight. The problem is, we can have those kinds of emotional reactions to events today that are totally ordinary. That are not survival relevant. And the key is to be able to keep those emotions in check. Another former student, Alison Woodbrooks, who's now at Harvard Business School, ended up doing some studies to try to figure out how to manage that anxiety effectively. And when she asked people, how do you manage anxiety? She found the most common answer by far was I try to calm down. I listen to relaxing music, I remind myself that everything's gonna be okay, and over 90% of people said that is the best way to deal with it. And it turns out, it's not.

Because when you're super anxious, it's really hard to slam on the brakes. When you have a brick on a gas pedal. What Alison found is that if instead of trying to calm down, you say I'm excited, you actually manage your anxiety much more effectively. Because excitement just like anxiety is a high intensity emotion. And so, you can keep your foot on the gas pedal, and just convert it into something that's a little bit more energizing, and the great thing about both anxiety and excitement is they both involve uncertainty. When you have something coming up in the future and you don't know what's gonna happen, you can be nervous about it going poorly, or you can be excited about it going well. Incidentally, in some of her research she had people do karaoke, so you had to come in and belt out the tune to a Journey song, like Don't Stop Believing, and literally just randomly assigning people to say I am excited instead of I'm calm or I'm anxious before that improved their karaoke performance. So try it out tonight. (audience laughing) I don't have anything particular against calming down, but for those of you that have tried meditation and found that it doesn't work, there are lots of other routes to emotion management. And this idea of actually focusing on why you believe this idea in the first place.

Why are you excited? Is actually a great source of motivation. Alright, third thing I learned. Has to do with then, you overcome your anxiety, you figured out which idea you want to pitch, you're ready to do it. You've gotta convince people that it's a good idea. I want to do an exercise to illustrate where this goes awry for so many of us. What I'd like you to do is just think of a song, any song that you know, and I'm gonna have you clap the rhythm to that song and see if the person sitting next to you can guess it. So you're gonna go like this, person next to you is gonna try to guess, then you're gonna trade roles, you've got about a minute, I wish you luck, you're gonna need it. (audience laughing) (audience members clapping, talking) Alright! Let's stop there. So I'm gonna do mine quickly, we'll see if you can guess it. Ready? (clapping) Shout it out if you know it.

Darth Vader's Imperial Death March, from Star Wars. (audience laughing) Come on, Stanford, really? Alright, so, I actually want to come back to that in a second, but first of all, if you guessed the song right, can you stand up please for a round of applause, and stay standing. (audience applauding, laughing) Stay on your feet, stay on your feet, I'm not done with you yet. You have to stay on your feet until I guess your song, and then you can sit down. So Happy Birthday, have a seat. Row Row Row Your Boat? Twinkle Twinkle Little Star? Also known as the ABCs. Jingle Bells, anyone? Okay. Bad Romance? (audience laughing) We Will Rock You. Beethoven's Fifth. I can't even tap the third, or clap it.

What did you have? - [Man] 15 Steps by Radiohead. Wow, alright. - [Woman] Salvation Army. - Salvation Army, what else? - [British Woman] Mary Had A Little Lamb. - Good choice. Okay. - [Other Man] Three Blind Mice. - Alright I just, I ran out of kid's songs, clearly. So, what I love about this exercise is this was a real study, that was done for a doctoral dissertation here at Stanford. By Elizabeth Newton.

And before people, they actually tapped their songs, so instead of clapping, they had a table and they went like this. But before they tapped, they had a chance to estimate the probability that other people would recognize their song. And, the average tapper said, eh, 50%. And then they went and tapped, they all had easy songs by the way, they did like Mary Had A Little Lamb and Happy Birthday. When they actually tapped them, only two and a half percent of people recognized them. So, everybody thought it was one in two, it was really one in 40 odds. And a lot of tappers are overconfident. I had a chance to see this live, I was speaking for a large organization a while back, and I made the mistake of having people shout out their probability estimates out loud. Before they tapped or clapped. And I heard a voice shout, 100%! (audience laughing) and, I couldn't resist, I just started to think like, that's just dumb.

(audience laughing) like, nothing is ever 100%, you do not understand probability theory. (audience laughing) and I look over, and it's Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JP Morgan. (audience laughing) and luckily the guy next to him guessed it right, because we were all afraid of the consequences, but, but, most of the time, when tappers or clappers give high estimates, they are overconfident by a lot. And I was curious about why, and I think you already anticipated the answer, which is, in order to clap your song, you have to hear the tune in your head. It's impossible, can't do it otherwise. That makes it also impossible to imagine what your disjointed tapping sounds like to someone who is not hearing the tune in their head. Right, so I do this exercise, and I'm like, (humming and clapping the Imperial March) this is easy, everyone's gonna know it! Meanwhile, you hear

me tapping and you hear this. (taps randomly) What the hell is that? And I think this is a great metaphor for what happens when we communicate original ideas to other people. Because when you pitch a new idea, you are not only hearing the tune in your head, you wrote the song. You spent days, or weeks, or years thinking about this idea, it makes perfect sense to you.

And that makes it really hard to fathom what it's gonna sound like to somebody who's hearing that idea for the first time. Who hasn't mastered the lyrics and the melody. So, I think that the challenge here is to master the art of repetition. And some of you will know, there's data on the mere exposure effect, which says that it often takes 10 to 20 exposures to a new idea or concept before we really start to like it and appreciate it. So the lesson here is, the next time you pitch an idea to a colleague or a boss or a venture capitalist and it gets shot down, you should just check your watch, wait until six minutes go by, and then say, here it is again! No, maybe not. I think it's all about taking your unfamiliar idea and trying to make it more familiar. And, there's a great example of this that happened at Disney a while back. So for years Disney made animated movies based on fairy tales. And then at some point they start to worry, we're gonna run out of fairy tales. We need to write original scripts.

So they try their hand at their first ever original script for an animated movie, and everyone hates it. Jeffrey Katzenberg actually laughs at it and says, this is a B movie, it'll make 50 grand if we're lucky. A few screenwriters want to save it, so they go back to the drawing board, they rework it, they're in a big pitch meeting. And nobody's really getting it at all, and Michael Eisner wants to give it a shot, and he says well, I dunno, can you turn this into King Lear? Now coincidentally, one of the screenwriters has re-read King Lear three weeks earlier. And is like, yeah, I'm not seeing it. But that sparks an idea for a producer in the back of the room. And she shouts out, no, this is Hamlet! And in that moment the movie gets the green light, becomes the most successful film of 1994, you might have heard of it, it's called The Lion King. I didn't realize there was the Hamlet connection there until I heard the story, but to me what's remarkable about this story, is that the original pitch for The Lion King was, I quote, "Bambi in Africa with lions." (audience laughing) You hear that pitch, and you're like, I have no idea what this movie is gonna be about, and I am terrified for Bambi. Whereas, when it gets reframed as Hamlet with lions, now it clicks, and you're like, oh of course, the uncle will have to kill the father, son's gonna avenge it. And now you can wrap your mind around the plot and the characters.

This is what I mean when I say, make the unfamiliar familiar. Right, build the bridge between your idea and something that's already worked before. You don't want to do this early in the creative process, because it often stifles your ability to think outside the box. It's a late-stage communication device, mostly. And I had a chance to see this in action when I first arrived at Wharton. I was teaching my very first class, a student came up to me and he said, I want to start a company and I'm wondering if you want to invest in it, we're gonna sell glasses online. And we're gonna try to do for glasses what Zappos did for shoes. And I was like, that's ridiculous. Like, you can't order glasses online, you have to go try them on, and you know, sort of get your eyes checked, and that's not gonna work. And of course, then, Neil went on to co-found Warby Parker, and company's worth a billion dollars and my wife is not happy with me.

(audience laughing) but, what's interesting is, the Zappos pitch didn't work for me. I had never ordered a pair of shoes online. I had heard of Zappos, this was 2009, but I was like, yeah, I don't really know how many people are doing that, and I don't know if that'll work for glasses anyway. A few months later, they ended up getting called the Netflix for eyewear. And that one absolutely resonated with a lot of people, because many of us have that memory of, you used to have to drive in your car to Blockbuster when you wanted to rent a movie. And then, you take it home and watch it, and you had to physically rewind it. In order to not get charged a fee. Nobody does that anymore, right? So, the lesson from that for me is, the familiarity connections are gonna vary by audience. Right, what connects the dots for one group of people is not necessarily gonna make a difference for another. And some startups are trying to solve that problem by going a little bit too far.

(audience laughing) I do think this is overboard, but there is real value in the Uber for X pitch, right? And the more time you spend with people who have backgrounds different from yours, explaining your ideas and asking them, like, what else does this remind you of, what is it similar to? The easier time you will have figuring out if there's one that actually works. Alright, fourth thing that I learned, this is also about pitching ideas effectively, is, every pitch I have ever seen starts with, this is the best idea you have ever heard, and let me explain to you why it's gonna change the world. Except for one entrepreneur, who turned it upside down. His name is Rufus Griscom. Rufus ended up having kids, and he found that all the parenting advice he had gotten beforehand was just like a complete lie. And he said I want to start a website called Babble that is going to tell people the truth about parenting. And, you know, let them know that you will never, ever have a night of sleep for the next 15 years. And, you also will be really unhappy most of the time, but it's really joyful and meaningful anyway, totally do it. And he, he decided he needed funding for the website, so he goes and starts pitching VC's. And, one of the things he does in his pitch, is he says these are the three reasons you should not back my startup.

And everybody is like, what? You're coming here asking for money, like you're telling me now why I should not give you my money? Get out of here. Except he walks away with 3.2 million dollars in funding that year. And then a couple years later, Disney contacts him and says we're interested in possibly acquiring Babble. He goes to Disney, his big presentation includes a slide that says, here are the five reasons you should not invest in Babble, and you shouldn't acquire us. And they end up

paying 40 million dollars for Babble. So you will not see this happen on Shark Tank. But, I think Rufus's strategy is ingenious. Well, first of all it's a marketing gimmick. Right, like this catches you off guard, it's kinda interesting, you think he's creative. But it's more than that.

Rufus shows that he's willing to take an honest look at his business. And he's able to see it clearly, as opposed to just having blinders on. So he shows he's more trustworthy and credible by admitting that it has some flaws. But the other thing he does is even more interesting. So I'm gonna need a couple of volunteers to try to illustrate this. Where are you, raise your hands if you're willing. Alright, right over here, stand up, what's your name? - [Man] Brandon. - Brandon, alright, wait, stay on your feet, yeah, definitely. I'm not gonna make you tap or clap a song. But I am gonna ask you to name three good things about your life.

- [Brandon] Uh, healthy, um, relatively intelligent except in this exact moment. (audience laughing) Um, relatively well off. - Okay, and zero to ten, how happy are you overall in life? - [Brandon] I'd say, you know, seven or eight. - Okay, good. You can have a seat now, I need another volunteer. Alright over here, stand up, what's your name? - [Second Man] Akash. - Akash, great, nice to meet you too. Can you name for us 37 good things about your life, please. (audience laughing) - [Akash] I'm at Stanford, I'm in this talk, I did a lot of things today, - Do you want to count them all individually? (audience laughing) - [Akash] Uh, I have a good family, I mean, I have a good dad, I have a good mom, (audience laughing) - [Akash] I have 30 good friends, I can name all the 30 if you want. - Alright, I think we've heard quite enough from you.

(audience laughing) Zero to 10, how happy? - [Akash] I think, eight? - Okay. So, you can't see it with the law of small numbers here, but when you do this experiment with large groups and I make my students suffer through it individually every fall. What you will see is, when you ask people to predict who's happier, the person who names more good things is supposed to be happier, right, the more blessings you can count, the better your life is. Except the data tend to show the opposite. That those of you who name three good things are significantly happier than those who will name even a dozen. Why? Some of you will know Danny Kahneman and Amos Tversky pioneered this research on what's called the availability heuristic. And it's the basic idea that when something is hard to think of, we assume it's rare and uncommon, and when it's easy to think of, we assume it's important and common. And so, when you have to name three good things, it's like, boom boom boom. That's an easy task, my life must be pretty good. And many of us, when we have to name a bunch more good things, and we're getting to like number 11 and 12, you're like, this is kind of hard.

My life is not that great. And then happiness ratings tend to fall by somewhere between half a point and a point in many of these examples. And you can see the same thing if you ask people about bad things about their lives. So if you take somebody who's depressed, and you ask them for three bad things about their life, it's like, wow, here are the three horrible things, my life is infinitely bad. You ask them for 10 bad things about their life, they struggle a little bit more, and they're not quite as miserable as they were before. So, next time you know someone who's depressed, just ask them for a list of 4000 horrible things that have happened to them, and hope that they struggle at some point along the way. But, no, don't try that one at home, please. But this has been demonstrated in a lot of domains, and my favorite example actually comes from politics. Where, in the UK, after Tony Blair was done with his term as Prime Minister, psychologists went and asked people to name two good things about, excuse me, two bad things about Tony Blair, or five bad things about Tony Blair. And the ones who named five bad things about him liked him more afterward.

And it's the same thing, right, like I think of two bad things, I'm like, well, he has a cooler accent than I do and he still has hair, like, what a jerk. And then when I have to come up with five, I'm like you know, this is actually not that easy, he's probably not as bad as I thought. And, this is exactly what Rufus Griscom does to his investors and to his acquirers. Because when he tells you three things that are wrong with his startup, his investors have to work hard to think of flaws. And they end up walking away thinking like, you know, this startup isn't as bad as I thought. But then there's an extra part as an investor, which is you always want to impress your entrepreneurs. Right, and show them how smart you are. And so the problem is, when he names the three big flaws, you're like, crap, he covered all my bases, like, I don't know how to show off anymore. And so, the only thing that most investors end up doing then is they're like, I'm gonna show him how smart I am by solving all his problems. And so then they're like yeah, those first two problems you pointed out, I could fix those in my sleep, here's exactly how I would fix them.

And then you end up talking yourself into the fact that this startup is really great. So, I encourage some of you to give this a try, I wouldn't say, like, here are all the reasons you should never ever bet on me, but I think it's totally reasonable to walk into a pitch and say, look, I'm excited about this idea. But I do think there are a few possible risks and issues, here's what they are, I think the strengths outweigh the limitations, and if you have ideas on how to solve these, I would love to talk with you about it. The one place where I probably wouldn't do this is in a job interview. (audience laughing) although some of you will remember George Costanza saying, I'm unemployed and I live with my parents as a great way to get hired by the New York Yankees. But, even there though, interestingly, in job interviews, we have data that people are about 30% more likely to get hired when they name honest weaknesses. As opposed to, you know, doing what most of us do, and we're like, well, yeah, I work too hard

and I care too much. So take that for what it's worth. Fifth thing I wanted to highlight, this is now to think about beyond just recognizing and pitching your own ideas. How do you build a culture? If you're a startup, if you're a team, if you're a nonprofit, if you're a big company, where people are likely to have lots of original ideas, and bring them to the table effectively.

I think hiring is huge for driving culture. Right, I think it's actually pretty difficult to dramatically change people's values and their behaviors, and the people you hire, what they already bring to the table, are really critical drivers of what the culture's all about. And, I think that a lot of founders mess this up. So just a quick gut check in the room. When you look at research on Silicon Valley founders, you'll see that they tend to have three different blueprints for what they like to hire on. Some say, I put skills first. My top priority is I've got a job description and I want to know if you can do that stuff. Second say, yeah, it's nice to have people who can do great things today, but it's more important to know, what's the ceiling on your potential? And they try to hire stars. Who have a lot of learning agility, or just raw intelligence. And the third approach is culture fit.

To say yeah, I want skills and I want stars, but to me that's a nonstarter if you do not subscribe to our values. So of course you want all these things, but if you have to choose one, which is most important? Let's get a vote. How many of you put skills first? (laughing) No one, okay. We're gonna have a bunch of incompetent startups. (audience laughing) How many of you put stars first? And how many of you, culture fit first? Alright, so, again, study done right here at Stanford. Led by Jim Baron and Mike Hannan. What they show is that the firms where founders say culture fit is my top priority, are significantly less likely to fail. Significantly, and I wanted to quantify that, but in the study, we look at about 200 startups in this case, zero percent was the failure rate for the culture fit firms. And then not only were they less likely to fail, they were more likely to IPO, too. And it's easy to figure out why, right? When you have culture fit, everybody subscribes to the same values, they believe in the same mission, and they are uniquely motivated, because there's nowhere else they would possibly want to work.

And so they end up doing great things. And they're willing to do whatever it takes to save the company. Except, after they go public, the ones that hire on culture fit grow at the slowest rates when you track measures like annual market capitalization. And so what got you there doesn't get you here, culture fit seems to be good early but dangerous late. Why? Well I think over time, culture fit sort of turns. Early on, you don't worry about its negative effects as much, because you usually have a disruptive idea. And you're trying to do something original, and you need to be aligned on that. But as you grow, now you're dealing with disruption from the outside, and the world is changing, and you have to be able to adapt. And culture fit is code for hiring a bunch of people who think the same way I do. And it leads to groupthink and weeds out diversity of thought.

So, IDEO has a great solution to this, I think you all know them as the world's greatest design firm, when they started tackling this problem they realized that instead of hiring on culture fit, they should hire on cultural contribution. So instead of asking, what is our culture about, and bringing in people who live those values, they ask what's missing from our culture. And then they try to bring in people who will enrich it and stretch it. So, they have a lot of great design thinkers, right, many of whom come out of the d.school here, and eventually they realized, you know, we need more than just design thinkers. One of our challenges is, if we're gonna go build a mouse for Apple or a new shopping cart in a grocery store, we have to learn about a very very foreign environment very quickly, who's good at that? And they say, anthropologists, that's what they do for a living. They go in to, you know, foreign cultures, and then they try to make sense of it. And they start hiring anthropologists and they're like, this is amazing, we should only hire anthropologists. (audience laughing) And then they realize they're falling into the same trap again, so they say alright, how do we diversify again? Well, once you understand a new world, you've gotta translate that understanding back to help your designers get it, and also your clients. And they say that's a storytelling skill. So now they start hiring more screenwriters and journalists.

And again, it's tempting, we only want this kind of person. And the moment you find a skill or a background that you think is uniquely great, that's the moment that you need to think again about what else is missing from your culture. And that seems to be a great antidote to this culture fit problem. So, I think that what a lot of us end up doing, sadly, when we hire, is we not only think about culture fit, we think about me-fit. I always think when I'm trying to hire originals that this is what I'm looking for. (audience laughing) But, for those of you who are building teams or interviewing people for clubs or anything like that, one of my favorite things to do is to start at the bottom of a resume. Because, that's when you start to see people's unconventional experiences, interesting backgrounds and hobbies and skills, and the other thing you can do, is when you chat with them, just make your last question, how would you improve our interview process? And then wait to see how many creative ideas they have for how to hire differently, and they've just been through that process themselves so, they oughta have something to bring to the table. And it's kind of a neat way to get a quick window into their ability to think originally on the spot. Last thing I want to say before we open up for questions, is, I think obviously it's nice to make sure that you don't end up with this culture fit problem. But you still have to manage it.

And there's huge pressure toward groupthink in organizations. Bob has actually written a whole book on this called Weird Ideas That Work, and it's one of the greatest books I've ever read. It has a ton of insight about how to fight groupthink, highly recommend reading it if you haven't already. But one of the things that I was motivated to do after reading his work was to go around to different organizations and take pictures of leaders who were not listening to other people's ideas. And this is my all-

time favorite one that I snapped. I think that it's really sad that a lot of leaders have good intentions, and they don't realize they're shutting people down when they say stuff like this. So think of a boss you had at some point who uttered this phrase, I'm gonna ask you all to shout it out loud, ready? Don't bring me, - [Some Audience Members] Problems. - [Presenter] Bring me, - [More Audience Members] Solutions. - That was pretty good. I get the idea behind this, right? You want people to, you know, not just be complaining, you want them to be constructive.

But if you can only bring problems, or excuse me, solutions to the table, then people never speak up about the hardest problems. That they don't know how to solve yet. And when they do know how to solve them, you only then get a culture of advocacy instead of one of inquiry, where people figure out the solution and they're like, my job is to ram that solution down everybody else's throat. As opposed to, find out what everybody's ideas are, and then bring those to the table. So I actually love to see organizations just accept problems with no solutions. Warby Parker has gone so far as to create a Google doc, where they literally have people submit all the problems they see whenever they catch them. Managers review them weekly, and vote on which ones are important, and if you want to fix one of them, you can just add that to your job description. And it's a great way to maintain visibility into what's not working, but also, what kinds of issues demand creativity. And I think we ought to have more of that, and one thing I'll recommend in closing, is an exercise that I learned about at a pharma company a few years ago. So the CEO got really frustrated that everybody was sort of stuck in very bureaucratic thinking.

And he said, I want you to spend the next hour, this is his whole executive team, we're gonna spend the next hour trying to kill our company. Imagine that you're our biggest competitor, and just try to put us out of business. How would you do it? I have never seen a more energized group of executives in my life. (audience laughing) right, like, there was a scientist who said, I've been waiting 27 years to destroy this company, thank you for finally giving me the floor. But, after that, they had to turn around and ask, well, what would you do now? Like, some of these ideas are competitive threats, others are real opportunities. And I think this is a great exercise for two reasons, one is that it really makes it safe for everyone to speak up. Because if your job is to kill the company, there is nothing that you can't say, and two, it makes people much more likely to think creatively. Because if you do this exercise as save the company, you come up with a bunch of very risk-averse cautious ideas. Whereas when people are on offense, to try to destroy a company, they're much more willing to try some crazy possibilities. So if you haven't tried this out, I highly recommend it.

So look, I have a simple goal, I want to create more organizations where originality thrives. And I hope you all will help me do that. Thank you. (audience applauding) So I would love to take some questions, if you have one raise your hand, if not I will cold-call. (audience laughing) Yes. - [Woman] You spoke about making the unfamiliar familiar. So, when you join a new company, does that imply that you should wait for some time, establish your credibility, and then kind of, is that a part of becoming more familiar? - That's a really great question to start. So the question is, in a nutshell, when you have to establish familiarity, should you then wait and kind of get to know a company first before, you know, maybe challenging the status quo. I think a lot of it depends on how much political capital you're willing to expend, and how many risks you're willing to take. The advice that I give to my students pretty frequently is that they should get in the habit of advice-seeking.

So instead of just going and pitching your ideas right away, what you do is, you go to your boss or somebody else who's volunteered to do a little bit of mentoring, or helping with onboarding. And you say hey, I have a couple of these ideas, I would love your suggestions on, are these worth considering, are there other people I should talk to about them? And the great thing is then, like instead of, instead of being in a pitch situation, you're now in a situation where you're asking somebody else to support you a little bit. And the first thing that will happen is, you tend to flatter the person that you're asking. To paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we all admire the wisdom of people who come to us for advice. Right, let's face it, they have really good taste, they knew to come to me. And then secondly you force perspective taking. They have to walk in your shoes in order to give you advice. And usually, those two things together lead people to say like, alright, here's where I think this idea might have promise, why don't you go talk to these people, or best case scenario, I'll step up and become your advocate. And I think that's a, that's just a soft way to start socializing your ideas, that protects you against risk, and that's kinda where I would start. But I do, I do stand with that, with Francis Ford Coppola, who said that, sometimes you shouldn't just try to change the establishment from day one, instead sometimes you should make a place in the establishment, and then once you're at the top, double-cross them.

Who's our next victim? Way in the back. - [Light-Voiced Woman] You talked about harness anxiety. But how would you apply to yourself, for example you took kind of a big risk, and you say oh, I'm excited, but actually it's not within your head, like the outcome is just there, and you just cannot do anything about it. Pretty much. - Yeah, I dunno, I just study this stuff, right? So, good luck. (audience laughing) No, I, so I think, look, this is a fundamental challenge. So oftentimes, we're anxious because we're underprepared. Right, or because, like, there's a real reason to be concerned about who we're speaking up to. And I think the only thing you can do from that is learn from it. So I'll tell you what I ended up doing, which is, I was terrified of my boss's boss after that, and I literally, I hid in the men's bathroom for a couple days.

(audience laughing) To make sure that she wouldn't fire me. But eventually I worked up the courage to go to her and say

look, that suggestion I made obviously did not go well. I'd like to learn to avoid that in the future. And, is there advice you could give me about, if I were gonna come to you and have this conversation, how should I have brought it up differently? And she actually gave me some suggestions, and then fired me. No I'm just kidding. (audience laughing) But I think that so often we shy away from seeking feedback, especially on the very people who have criticized us. There's some research that Francesca Gino just published recently, showing that when people give us negative feedback we tend to drop them from our lives. Because, it's really uncomfortable, nobody likes to look in the mirror and see somebody incompetent staring back at them. But I think the people that have been hard on us are exactly the people we should go back to and learn from. At minimum, right, we won't screw up as badly the next time we have to confront them.

So that's kind of how I've, I guess I thought about that over time. - [Man] One more. - One more question. Yes, right over here. - [Deep-Voiced Man] So in your book, you give the example of the, I think it was an NSA or a CIA analyst? - Carmen Medina, yeah. - [Deep-Voiced Man] Yes, exactly. So, can you talk about the difference between somebody who's in the public sector and private sector? - Yes. Next question. (laughs) (audience laughing) Yeah, look, so, I've spent a bunch of my career trying to figure out what public-private differences are real on average. So one of the biggest differences that has good data behind it is, there's a greater motivation to be of service in the public sector, for reasons that will shock no one.

Because of that, I always thought it would be easier then, to pitch ideas in a public than private organization. Obviously I was wrong. And I think the reason is that people often believe that they're doing really important meaningful work that's helping, right, so it's harder to criticize them, whereas in the private sector, if you're failing, everybody knows it already. And I think that that often makes it harder to speak up in organizations, not just because they have more bureaucracy. But also because there's a zeal around the mission. And you have to be really careful about that. I spent the past few months working with the Pentagon on the Defense Innovation Board. And trying to figure out how to take a military that doesn't do a huge amount of innovation across lots of different parts of this complex organization, and figure out, where would you start? And I think that probably the biggest thing that I learned is actually something that Chip and Dan Heath wrote about in their book, Switch. Which is an amazing book on change. What they basically said is look, no matter how backward an organization is, there are always bright spots.

And, your job is to find the bright spots. And so one of the things we've been doing is we go around to different Air Force and Army and Navy bases, is asking, who are the most innovative people around here? And what you find is, everywhere, there's somebody who's broken rules and gotten away with it. Right, and then the question is how did they do it, and who are there allies, and then we want to try to build a network to bring them together. And I think that that's valuable in the private sector of course, but maybe even more so in the public sector. So that's one thing that jumps out for me. With that, it's been a huge honor to share ideas with you this afternoon. I'm told there are future talks to come. Thank you for having me. (audience applauding)