

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

ASPEN IDEAS FESTIVAL 2016

ASPEN LECTURE:  
ORIGINALS—HOW NONCONFORMISTS MOVE THE WORLD

Paepcke Auditorium  
Aspen, Colorado

Monday, June 27, 2016

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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?"

Takers are the opposite: it's all about what's in it for me. They volunteer for projects that are interesting, visible and important, but then they dump the work on everybody else and somehow they walk away with the lion share of credit for collective achievements.

Now, I don't want to be too hard on takers, and I did want to give you a chance to figure out where you stand on this spectrum from givers to takers. So I've actually prepared a short test that you can take, whenever you're ready, to figure who you are.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: This is the only thing I will say today that has no evidence behind it. But I'm convinced the longer it took you to laugh at this cartoon, the more worried we should be that you are a taker.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: No, I like this cartoon because it reminds us that narcissists are one kind of taker, people with fragile, inflated egos who think that "if I want to win, somebody else has to lose." There's another kind of taker, though, that's more common: somebody who used to be a giver, but then got burned one too many times and learned the hard way it's dangerous to be generous.

So most takers don't mean to be cruel or cutthroat. They just say, "Look, the world is a dog eat dog competitive place. If I don't put myself first, no one else will."

There's a third kind of taker we won't be talking about this morning that's called a psychopath.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: But the other two kinds of takers, the narcissists, the recovering givers, we could actually

change the way they interact. That might be something to talk about in the Q&A.

But my assumption was simple: if you have a new idea, you want to go to a giver, not a taker. And that's right. The givers will try to make your idea better and help you succeed. The takers will either steal it or try to make sure that it doesn't threaten their success. The challenge is figuring out who is a giver and who is a taker, and this is where we often end up making big mistakes.

There is a personality trait that throws us off. It's called agreeableness. Agreeable people are warm, friendly, polite, welcoming, nice people. Disagreeable people: more critical, skeptical, challenging and far more likely than the rest of us to work as lawyers.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: That is not a joke; actually, that's right out of the data. Not only are disagreeable people more likely to become lawyers, but it is the only known profession where extreme disagreeableness is just a sheer advantage.

So I always assumed that agreeable people were givers and disagreeable people were takers. But in fact when I gathered data, the correlation between those traits was zero. There's no correspondence. Because agreeableness is your outer veneer: how pleasant is it to interact with you. Whereas, giving and taking, those are your inner motives: what are your intentions toward others.

So if you really want to judge people accurately, you've got to draw the 2x2. And when you do that, you will find that there are two combinations that you recognize instantly and two that you overlook. The agreeable givers, those people are incredibly easy to spot. They say yes to everything. They bend over backward to try to please other people and they are at the

greatest risk for becoming pushovers and doormats at the hands of takers.

The other combination, the disagreeable taker, you know those people right away too -- although you may call them by a slightly different name -- and my guess is you don't waste a lot of time on them.

The other two are the ones that we forget about. There are disagreeable givers in our lives. They are the people who are gruff and tough on the surface, but underneath have other people's best interest at heart.

Now, for those of you who are having a hard time thinking of a disagreeable giver, there is a programmer at Google who said, "Ah, that's like somebody with a bad user interface, but a great operating system" -- if that helps you.

But disagreeable givers are the most undervalued people in our lives by far, because they are the ones who give the critical feedback that no one wants to hear but everyone needs to hear. They are constantly challenging the status quo, representing unpopular minority views. And I think we need to do a much better job appreciating these people as opposed to saying, "Ah, kind of prickly, must be a selfish taker."

And when you're looking at givers, most of us when we have a new idea, we go to the agreeable givers rather than the disagreeable ones. And that's where we go wrong. Because we expect that agreeable givers will be our supporters and they are in that interaction.

But agreeable people hate conflict and they are reluctant to upset the applecart and champion our ideas and become our advocates. And so they basically end up nodding, smiling and cheerleading face-to-face with us and then doing absolutely nothing to help our ideas come to life.

Disagreeable givers, on the other hand, when you bring them a new idea, they will tear it apart in the

service of making it better. And then if you can get them excited about the idea, they will run through walls for you.

There's a great study on this that actually looks at people's happiness over the course of a few weeks. So you get a text message and it asks you: how happy are you in this moment and what are you doing right now? And if you're highly disagreeable, the data show you actually experience more joy in an argument than a friendly conversation, right.

So next time you have an idea, the best thing you can do is find the most disagreeable giver you know who will say this is a great opportunity to prove everyone in the world wrong and serve us in something that really matters.

Now, the last combination is the deadly one: the agreeable taker, also known as the faker. This is a person who is nice to your face and then stabs you in the back. And I should say there's one country on earth that has a harder time spotting these people than any other because it's the most agreeable country on the planet. Anyone know what that is? Who said Canada? It is in fact Canada. Before I go further, Canadians in the room please raise your hands.

Okay. So statistically you should not be offended by this because you're highly agreeable, right?

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: All right. No, of course there's variation within countries, but Canada does consistently score at the very top of the agreeableness spectrum on average and there's a radio station in Toronto a while back that actually anticipated this. They said, "Look, we don't have enough national pride. We need more Canadian slogans." So they held a nation contest: let's come up with a Canadian equivalent of "as American as apple pie."

As Canadian as? Maple syrup. Yeah, I thought so too, growing up in Michigan right near the Canadian

border where we actually drove south to get to Canada. Maple syrup seemed like a natural candidate, ice hockey too. But, no, the winning entry was the best demonstration of Canadian agreeableness that you will ever find. I kid you not, four million Canadians voted for their national slogan to be "as Canadian as possible under the circumstances."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: For those of you who are highly agreeable or slightly Canadian, you get this right away: "How could I ever say I'm any one thing when I'm constantly adapting to try to please other people?" And if that's you, it's well to remember that just because someone is nice to you does not mean that they actually care about you.

And I wish I had known that 15 years ago when I went into my boss's boss's office because she was a highly agreeable taker and I had missed all of the warning signs. I want to talk for a minute about what those warnings signs are. But first, I don't want to be too hard on Canada: agreeableness one day might save your life.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: All right. So how do you spot an agreeable taker before it's too late? A couple of patterns to look for. One is agreeable takers are great at kissing up and kicking down. They are great fakers when dealing with powerful people because they know that's how they get ahead. But then they learn: it's a lot of work to pretend to care about everybody and they tend to let their guard down with peers and subordinates, who see their true colors. That means it's a red flag if somebody has a great reputation upward and a more mixed one lateral and downward.

And there's an interview question that I love that comes from Alex Gorsky, who runs Johnson & Johnson. At the very end of his interviews for senior leaders, he often asks, "Can you give me the name of four people whose careers you have fundamentally improved? And takers will

often respond to that by saying: "Here are four people above me in the hierarchy who I have helped to elevate to greater heights." The giver response is much more likely to be: "I don't know if I fundamentally improved anybody's life, but here are the four people I've worked the hardest to develop and mentor and I hope they would say I added some value."

My favorite way to catch an agreeable taker, though, is to ask a question like this. Let's take a taking behavior like theft, stealing from your company, and we will define that to include cash, intellectual property, materials and merchandize. The question is what's the theft rate in the United States? And I want to ask you actually to estimate it. So what percent of people steal at least \$10 a month from their employers?

SPEAKER: Thirty.

MR. GRANT: Thirty. Keep shouting.

SPEAKER: Two.

MR. GRANT: Two.

SPEAKER: Seven.

MR. GRANT: It's oddly specific, but thank you.

SPEAKER: Seventy.

MR. GRANT: Seventy.

SPEAKER: Twenty.

MR. GRANT: Three-and-a-half, twenty. Anyone higher?

SPEAKER: Ninety.

SPEAKER: A hundred.

MR. GRANT: Ninety. A hundred, you realize that includes you, right?

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: All right. I want you to take your results with a grain of salt, because if we were really assessing you're likelihood of being a taker, we would give you a whole series of questions where you make predictions. We triangulate and look at the consistent pattern of responses. But the data do show: the higher your estimate that other people are thieves, the greater the chances that you are a thief.

If you're sitting near someone with an 80 percent or higher estimate, I would check your wallet right now.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Now, there are lots of ways you could give a high estimate and not be a taker. One way is you might have worked with a bunch of thieves in the past. Another is it's your job to catch thieves. But what's interesting is when people answer a question like this to predict other's behavior, they start asking themselves "what would I do" or "what have I done" and then they project.

So I'll just caricature this extreme taker answer in this question: "Let's see what percent of people steal \$10 a month." Takers always talk that way.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: "Last week I stole \$377. I'm assuming \$10 a month has got to be common. Ninety-four percent." Whereas, an extreme giver answering the same question: "How do you even steal \$10 from a company? How many pens do you have to take home? It's about 70. But what kind of person would do such a thing? Six percent." Notice how the giver sounds exactly like me.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: These differences play out in large

samples. Takers anticipate more selfish behavior from others and that's part of how they justify and rationalize being a taker. "It's not me. All of you people are selfish jerks. And I'm just being smart, cautious and self protective."

So if you ever want to figure out whether someone is a taker, pick the taking behavior you are most worried about -- it might be knowledge hoarding instead of sharing, it could be stealing credit for other people's ideas -- and ask how common people think that behavior is and then ask them how did you come up with that estimate.

And there are lots of high estimates that are reasonable. When takers reveal themselves is when they say, "You know, at the end of the day I think most people are fundamentally selfish." What they don't realize is they are giving you a pretty good look in the mirror when they say that.

Now, of course you want disagreeable givers in your organization, but it's even more important to weed out the agreeable takers, because the negative impact of a taker on a culture is typically double or triple the positive impact of a giver. Think about it this way: one bad apple can spoil a barrel, but one good egg just does not make a dozen. I don't know what that means.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: But I hope you do. No, you let even one taker into a team and paranoia starts to spread. People are watching their backs, worrying that somebody is out to get them. Whereas, you put one giver in a team and you don't get an explosion of generosity. More often people are like, "Great, you can do all my work." So who you hire, who you put in a group, who you marry is not about bringing in the givers as much as it is weeding out the takers.

My favorite way, though, to catch a taker is to follow the IKEA model.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Takers tend to take that a little too literally. All right, last thing I want to say quickly before we open it up for questions. The most important thing I've learned about being original is -- especially for parents -- if you want to raise creative children, you've got to put values above rules. If you look at high school students and you ask teachers who are the most creative students in your school and you compare them to the rest of the students, you will find on average ordinary students had typically six major rules in their household growing up. The creative children had less than one rule on average.

So create like two-thirds of a rule and your work as a parent is done. No, of course you're going to have rules, right? But when you have rules, kids are much more likely to internalize them when you actually explain the why behind them, and say, "Look, this rule has a principle that matters deeply to us."

And I was reading this research right when our two daughters were -- they were about seven and five and they were running around our family room about to trample our, at that time, baby son and I'm really worried that somebody is going to get injured. And I hear this alien voice come out of my mouth that I've never heard before, which was, "No running in the house." And the great thing about being a psychologist is that every day you get to confront your own hypocrisy. I'm like, "Wait a minute, I'm not doing any of what this research says."

So the whole point of tying rules to values is then instead of just following rules and conforming to authority, kids actually develop principles for themselves and they think for themselves and they are much more likely then when they are confronted with something they disagree with or don't believe in to challenge it.

And so I started thinking: "Okay, I've got to do something." So I sit down with our oldest daughter, Joanna (phonetic). I say, "Joanna, why is it dangerous to run in the house?" And she says, "Well, we could hurt our little brother." And I ask, "Well, do you want to hurt

him?" "No, no, I don't." "Okay, well, what do we need to do?"

Now, at that point I'm creating a monster, because Joanna then not only makes sure that she's not running the rest of the day, she also practically locks her younger sister in a chokehold to make sure that she won't do it either and becomes the enforcer of rules.

But I think this is such an important question to reflect on, right: Am I doing a good job enforcing my rules with values behind them? And the easiest way to make sure that your kids are learning values is to think about the way that you praise them.

I know you've all been exposed to Carol Dweck work on the importance of growth mindsets, praising behavior and effort as opposed to ability or intelligence. In the domain of character, this works a little bit different. So I always thought if I wanted to raise a kid to be an original or a giver what I should do is wait until they are engaged in the right behavior and then swoop in and say, "Wow! You know, that was really nice, or "Wow, that was a really creative drawing."

But the evidence actually suggests that in this domain instead of praising the behavior, it's better to praise the person behind the behavior. So what I should have been saying all this time is not, "Wow, that was really helpful." But instead, "Wow, you are really helpful." Not, "Thank you for giving." But instead, "Thank you for being a giver."

And what's neat about that is that actually helps children internalize values as part of their identity. So the next time they have a chance to do this behavior again, they think about that as fundamental to who they are and they are more likely to repeat it.

And this, by the way, works for bad behavior too. So if you want kids not to cheat, instead of saying, "Don't cheat," you say, "Don't be a cheater." And now the behavior casts a shadow, right? I can cheat and still be a good person. But when you say don't be a cheater, now I

actually have to make sure that my behavior is in line with my standards and my moral principles.

Of course you have to worry a little bit about kid's misbehaving, and there there's an emotion that works for parents better than any other, which is disappointment. Disappointment is this great statement that says: "I had such high expectations of you and you feel so far short of them that I hardly ever want to see you again, but I believe you could do better next time."

And disappointment seems to work because it forces kids to feel the emotion that's more moral than any other, guilt. Erma Bombeck put it best: "Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving."

And it's actually true, right? When you express disappointment, kids are much more likely to feel guilty about the wrongs that they have done and try to repair their behavior than in the past and prove it in the future. And I think disappointment for bad behavior coupled with character praise for good behavior is the best way to raise kids to be giving, but also to be original, right? Instead of, "Wow, that was creative artwork" -- "Wow, you are creative." Instead of, "You know, you don't have to follow the crowd and be a sheep" - - "You are a nonconformist."

And my parents understood this intuitively. Growing up my mother always said no matter what grades I would get, as long as I tried my hardest she would be proud of me. And then she would add, "But if you didn't get an A, I'll know you didn't try your hardest."

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Thanks mom. So look, I have a simple goal: I want to create a world with more originals where our households, our schools, our families are dominated by creative thinking by people speaking up. And the easiest way to do that is to bring in more givers and weed out the takers.

And with that, I would love to open it up for

questions. Thank you.

(Applause)

MR. GRANT: Now, there will be mics coming around. Raise your hand if you have a question. You will get a mic. And I just want to remind you that questions usually end with a question mark. Right over here, Georgette (phonetic).

SPEAKER: Thanks, Adam. You present -- Georgette Philips (phonetic). You present give and take as a dichotomous choice when in fact I think it's much more on a continuum. Do you have any thoughts of how to move somebody along the continuum rather than placing them in one box or the other?

MR. GRANT: Yeah. So, first of all, definitely not a dichotomist choice; at minimum it's trichotomous. Because most of us fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum is what I've come to call matchers, which is instead of -- you know, like coming -- trying to come out ahead in every interaction or just trying to help. Matchers are people who try to maintain fairness: I'll do something for you if you do something for me. And that's actually the most common style by far.

What's neat about these styles, though, is there are choices we make at every interaction, right? So you could say -- look, most of us have a default and that's what I spend a lot of time studying. Your default is how you treat most of the people most of the time. And so if you want to change somebody's style, you actually have to shift their default instinct when they interact with others. That is not easy to do because often these values are learned early on and ingrained and reinforced.

I think the easiest way to do it is to recognize that because we all fluctuate -- people -- everybody, no matter how far on the taking under the spectrum they are, they all have moments of generosity.

And so you want to look at the fluctuations and their approach to interacting with other people and figure

out what are the times when they are most giving and what do those moments have in common. Are there certain people they care a lot about? Are there certain ways of helping that they really enjoy? And then you start to ask them for those kinds of helping or you create opportunities for them to give in those ways.

And then they actually get trapped by expectations that they are going to be generous, which makes them look really bad if they are not and they start to shift their behavior a little bit -- and over time that can change.

The other thing that seems to matter a lot is reputation. There are a lot of takers wandering around thinking they are givers. And this is like out of *The Sixth Sense*. It's not an ego thing so much as it is an information discrepancy problem. You know more about your own generosity than anyone else's, right? You were there for every act of giving you've ever done; whereas, you've only seen a fraction of each other person's generosity.

So most people overestimate just how generous they are. And one of the ways you can recalibrate is actually giving them feedback about how they are seen. I've seen a few people actually go to colleagues they work with and say, "You know, I've had four different people warn me that you're going to be really selfish and I just shouldn't trust you. And I just wanted to let you know that since we're going to be working together, I hope that's not true. And you're not going to like working with me if it is."

And behavior starts to shift when people come face-to-face with those reputations provided that internally they either hold some degree of generosity and their values, or they value success so much that they are worried that being known as a taker is going to jeopardize that success.

And I think those are the places that I would usually start, but I don't think it's an easy thing in any way, shape or form. Who is our next victim? Right over there.

SPEAKER: Thank you. Hello. Hari Steven Kumar (phonetic) from Ambers College (phonetic). So I'll ask a Donald Trump question. Mostly -- he was an alumni of Wharton.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Are we still live recording?

SPEAKER: So what do you do when sort of the dominant model for nonconformist creative leadership tends to be exemplified by somebody like Donald Trump?

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: That is a great question. I will now take the next one.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: No. Look, I don't have any easy answers to this. I think that -- I think it's actually really hard for politicians to be givers and be successful. I think Abraham Lincoln was very clearly a giver. And after that, it's hard to figure out whether somebody could actually make it to the fundraising, the votes that you need -- like that requires a lot of taking and matching.

I think that the main thing to recognize is, you know, unless they are in the psychopath category, right, everybody is a giver in some roles and relationships, like we were just saying. And, you know, I think that Donald Trump, for example, is very giving to his family and apparently to his employees. And we see that with a lot of leaders, right?

So I think the challenge is then to try to broaden their circle of concern and get them to think about: "Look, it's not just an inner-group of people that I want to help. I actually need to find people who normally are in an out-group for me as people who I care about."

That is not an easy task, but we have half a century of prejudice-reduction research. There's a great meta-analysis published about a decade ago looking at every study that ever tried to reduce prejudice. And in 94 percent of the cases -- this is over 800 experiments -- just having contact with a member of the out-group was enough to reduce prejudice and force people to think about whatever group that they are against as real human beings. And I think that would be a step in the right direction.

I don't think we do a very good job especially with the nonconformists at really giving them a chance to get to know people who don't share their values and believes. And I think that's a tiny step in the right direction. Beyond that, I think your guess is probably better than mines. Over here.

MS. LaNASA: My name is Julie LaNasa. I have a company called Collaborative Consulting and we help executives with their mindsets, because we know it goes right downhill. So what do you do -- and we actually do evaluations? What do you do with agreeable givers who run companies? Right? How do you help them become disagreeable? How do you help them help themselves?

MS. GRANT: So --

MS. LaNASA: It's like they're running, you know, nonprofit usually.

MR. GRANT: Yes.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Yeah, it's --

MS. LaNASA: In fact I've had somebody stand up: "Oh, now I know I'm running a nonprofit." Right.

MR. GRANT: Yeah, it's -- I think it's something that everybody faces with agreeable givers whether they're in a leadership position or not. I try to tackle this in chapter 7 and chapter 6 of *Give and Take*. I don't think I

got it right. And here's what I would go and say if I could rewrite it. I think that fundamentally it's not about learning to be disagreeable. It's much more about learning to set boundaries on your helping.

So there are three kinds of boundaries that seem to matter. It's a question of who you help, how you help and when you help. The who is easy: don't be generous with takers, right? You want to be -- if somebody has a history or a reputation of selfish behavior, you want to shift into a matching mode and say, "Look, I'm not going to reward and reinforce selfish behavior. I'm going to expect you to pay it back or pay it forward if I'm going to help you." In that way you can reserve your generosity for matchers and givers who are much more likely to pay it back and pay it forward, which is far more sustainable.

The how you help is about aligning in ways that are effective, which means not just saying yes to every request, but actually being a specialist rather than general in saying, "I have certain skills that are unique to me and I'm going to focus on giving in ways that are aligned with that. And then I'm also going to figure out what the organization goals are and I'm going to make sure that my helping activities are actually serving the mission, right, one of which is profits. And so I'm not going to help people at the expense of our organization's success."

So aligning the giving you do with your skills and the organization's goals I think is what I mean by saying specialize.

And then the last thing is just the when, right -- saying, look, you can't help with every request at every moment. And a lot of agreeable givers make the mistake of dropping everything they're doing to try to serve other people.

Well, you see with successful givers is they actually block time in their calendar to get their own stuff done and then they have separate windows dedicated to helping other people. And a lot of people feel like that's selfish, but ironically they actually give more

because they are less likely to burnout. They end up sort of securing their oxygen mask before assisting others, which is good advice off an airplane as well as on. And so they end up becoming more generous even though they are a little bit more ruthless with the boundaries on their time.

And I think -- like I've seen a lot of leaders say, "All right, I'm going to make Friday giving day. I hold a bunch of meetings. I mentor people. I share advice. Or I'll take an hour at the end of the day when I know I've finished on my major priorities because I have to have a hierarchy, right. I can't help everybody equally and I've got to put the organization's needs and interests first. That's my responsibility as a leader. And then the other people that I'm trying to help in ways that may not align with that, once I've hit those goals, then I will follow up. And that is where I would start."

MS. LaNASA: But I actually think that they need to surround themselves with different things, you know, (Off mic).

MR. GRANT: Yeah. So here's what's interesting on this. Agreeable people and disagreeable people if you put them together are far more effective and they dislike each other a lot more.

(Laughter)

MR. GRANT: Because it's much harder for them to find a norm of communication that's appropriate and polite enough for agreeable people and that's challenging and dissenting enough for disagreeable people. And I hope somebody can figure that out at some point. There's a hand right here. I think this is our last question.

SPEAKER: So I actually worked in management for the past year at Bridgewater. That's something you cited. And I'm curious to see -- like you talked a lot about what makes -- like why that culture at Bridgewater, where I said I had just worked for the past year, is good for originals and enables people to put ideas on the table.

But having been there, I've seen it to be like a massive block to productivity in that like when we gather tons of originals in one space and we're all just like putting ideas on the table, like many of them don't come to fruition.

So I was thinking like could give a little advice on how people who are inclined to be more original and inclined to be, you know, the disagreeable but open-minded people that are at Bridgewater, how they then bring their ideas to fruition and what traits are then most important?

ADAM GRANT: Yeah, this is really a big challenge. So I worry more about the opposite problem, I have to say. And I worry more about having too few ideas and too little disagreeableness than too much. And I think this is an unusual problem to have and a pretty unusual culture.

I think the first thing to recognize is -- I said at the very beginning that one of my most surprising findings was that highly original people had more bad ideas than their peers. And the reason for that is they just have more ideas.

A lot of people think there's a quality-quantity trade off. In reality, one of the easiest ways to be original is just to double or triple the number of ideas that you generate, because originality depends on variety and the best way to get to variety is sheer volume. You see with inventors. You see it in studies of classical composers. It's true with organizations trying to innovate. The more ideas you get, the more likely you are to go outside the norm of what's comfortable for you.

Your first ideas are usually the most conventional. And so you end up generating a lot more diversive thinking if you encourage people to generate volume. Then you sort of have a needle in the haystack problem, right, and you want to make sure that not all your time is spent in idea generation and idea selection and you're actually working too.

I think Bridgewater has an interesting solution to this, which is they actually have a system that you will be familiar with, but others may not be -- which is designed to give every single person a believability score. And that score is basically a probability for how likely you are to be right today based on how correct you've been in the past in that domain. And so you get believability scores in every single domain and you can then delegate some of these decisions to people who have a good track record with this kind of decision or problem.

Now, the more original the idea is, the harder it is to know who is believable, right? And so one of the things that I would do is I would say, "Look, we need a small group of people whose job it is to vet these ideas and then figure out which ones are going to get invested in."

Warby Parker has a pretty cool way of doing this. They take all their problems and ideas, they put them in a Google doc and then they have managers vote on which ones are important, and then anyone who works in tech can go and solve them as part of their job. And that allows people who sort of figure out which problems matter and also have the skills to do something about them to go and use that to be productive as opposed to saying, "We're going to spend all day brainstorming." But your guess is as good as mine about how to actually solve that.

So in closing, I just want to say two things. One is it's a huge honor to have a chance to share ideas with you here in Aspen; and secondly, an especially big thanks to Laura Lauder and Gary for hosting and my cousins, Ross (phonetic) and Michelle Jacobs (phonetic), for allowing me to enter the city. Thank you.

(Applause)

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