



REBEL TALENT

**IF YOU WANT ENGAGED EMPLOYEES,
LET THEM BREAK RULES AND BE
THEMSELVES. WE'LL SHOW YOU HOW.
BY FRANCESCA GINO**

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LET YOUR WORKERS REBEL

BY **FRANCESCA GINO**

Throughout our careers, we are taught to conform — to the status quo, to the opinions and behaviors of others, and to information that supports our views. The pressure only grows as we climb the organizational ladder. By the time we reach high-level positions, conformity has been so hammered into us that we perpetuate it

in our enterprises. In a recent survey I conducted of more than 2,000 employees across a wide range of industries, nearly half the respondents reported working in organizations where they regularly feel the need to conform, and more than half said that people in their organizations do not question the status quo. The results were similar when I surveyed high-level executives and midlevel managers. As this data suggests, organizations consciously or unconsciously urge employees to check a good chunk of their real selves at

the door. Workers and their organizations both pay a price: decreased engagement, productivity, and innovation (see the exhibit “The Perils of Conformity”).

Drawing on my research and fieldwork and on the work of other scholars of psychology and management, I will describe three reasons for our conformity on the job, discuss why this behavior is costly for organizations, and suggest ways to combat it.

Of course, not all conformity is bad. But to be successful and evolve, organizations need to strike a

balance between adherence to the formal and informal rules that provide necessary structure and the freedom that helps employees do their best work. The pendulum has swung too far in the direction of conformity. In another recent survey I conducted, involving more than 1,000 employees in a variety of industries, less than 10% said they worked in companies that regularly encourage nonconformity. That's not surprising: For decades the principles of scientific management have prevailed. Leaders have been overly focused on designing efficient processes and getting employees to follow them. Now they need to think about when conformity hurts their business and allow — even promote — what I call *constructive nonconformity*: behavior that deviates from organizational norms, others' actions, or common expectations, to the benefit of the organization.

WHY CONFORMITY IS SO PREVALENT

Let's look at the three main, and interrelated, reasons why we so often conform at work.

We fall prey to social pressure. Early in life we learn that tangible benefits arise from following social rules about what to say, how to act, how to dress, and so on. Conforming makes us feel accepted and part of the majority. As classic research conducted in the 1950s by the psychologist Solomon Asch showed, conformity to peer pressure is so powerful that it occurs even when we know it will lead us to

make bad decisions. In one experiment, Asch asked participants to complete what they believed was a simple perceptual task: identifying which of three lines on one card was the same length as a line on another card. When asked individually, participants chose the correct line. When asked in the presence of paid actors who intentionally selected the wrong line, about 75% conformed to the group at least once. In other words, they chose an incorrect answer in order to fit in.

Organizations have long exploited this tendency. Ancient Roman families employed professional mourners at funerals. Entertainment companies hire people ("claques") to applaud at performances. And companies advertising health products often report the percentage of doctors or dentists who use their offerings.

Conformity at work takes many forms: modeling the behavior of others in similar roles, expressing appropriate emotions, wearing proper attire, routinely agreeing with the opinions of managers, acquiescing to a team's poor decisions, and so on. And all too often, bowing to peer pressure reduces individuals' engagement with their jobs. This is understandable: Conforming often conflicts with our true preferences and beliefs and therefore makes us feel inauthentic. In fact, [research I conducted](#) with Maryam Kouchaki, of Northwestern University, and Adam Galinsky, of Columbia University, showed that when people feel

Employees who said they could express their authentic selves at work were more committed to their organizations.





ABOUT FRANCESCA GINO

inauthentic at work, it's usually because they have succumbed to social pressure to conform.

We become too comfortable with the status quo. In organizations, standard practices — the usual ways of thinking and doing — play a critical role in shaping performance over time. But they can also get us stuck, decrease our engagement, and constrain our ability to innovate or to perform at a high level. Rather than resulting from thoughtful choices, many traditions endure out of routine, or what psychologists call the *status quo bias*. Because we feel validated and reassured when we stick to our usual ways of thinking and doing, and because — as research has consistently found — we weight the potential losses of deviating from the status quo much more heavily than we do the potential gains, we favor decisions that maintain the current state of affairs.

But sticking with the status quo can lead to boredom, which in turn can fuel complacency and stagnation. Borders, BlackBerry, Polaroid, and Myspace are but a few of the many companies that once had winning formulas but didn't update their strategies until it was too late. Overly comfortable with the status quo, their leaders fell back on tradition and avoided the type of nonconformist behavior that could have spurred continued success.

We interpret information in a self-serving manner. A third reason for the prevalence of conformity is that we tend to prioritize information that supports our existing beliefs and to ignore information that challenges them, so we overlook things that could spur positive change. Complicating matters, we also tend to view unexpected or unpleasant information as a threat and to shun it — a phenomenon psychologists call *motivated skepticism*.

In fact, research suggests, the manner in which we weigh evidence resembles the manner in which we weigh ourselves on a bathroom scale. If the scale delivers bad news, we hop off and get back on — perhaps the scale misfired or we misread the display. If it delivers good news, we assume it's correct and cheerfully head for the shower.

Here's a more scientific example. [Two psychologists](#), Peter Ditto and David Lopez, asked study participants to evaluate a student's intelligence by reviewing information about him one piece at a time — similar to the way college admissions officers evaluate applicants. The information was quite negative. Subjects could stop going through it as soon as they'd reached a firm conclusion. When they had been primed to like the student (with a photo and some information provided before the evaluation), they turned over one card after another, searching for anything that would allow them to give a favorable rating. When they had been

Understanding why people so often conform to the behavior of others has been a topic of interest to Francesca Gino ever since she arrived in the United States from her native Italy, in 2001. Although she had planned to stay for only a year, she felt compelled to conform.

"I took speech classes," she said, "because I was bothered that my funny accent made me stand out, and I decided to overhaul my wardrobe and buy American fashions." But it did not feel right. So after extending her stay, she chose "just to be who I am."

The experience stayed with her and sparked her professional curiosity. While on the faculties of Carnegie Mellon University, the University of North Carolina

at Chapel Hill, and now Harvard Business School, where she is the Tandon Family Professor of Business Administration, she asked questions: What triggers the desire to conform? When is conformity useful to individuals and organizations, and when is it harmful? How can leaders strike the right balance between conformity and nonconformity in their organizations and themselves?

Gino suspected that the pressure to conform that exists in most enterprises was linked with both the deepening employee-engagement crisis and firms' failure to adapt to changing times. She started looking for organizations whose leaders encouraged their workers to be themselves,

use their signature strengths, and challenge the status quo. She found examples in a wide range of industries, from software, entertainment, and financial services to valve manufacturing, food processing, and executive search. Drawing on insights from behavioral economics and psychology, she identified strategies those companies employed to encourage "constructive nonconformity."

In this package Gino shares her findings, offers case studies, and provides practical advice. She hopes leaders can use her suggestions to create more-innovative and more-productive workplaces, where people are engaged in their jobs and contribute fully.

primed to dislike him, they turned over a few cards, shrugged, and called it a day.

By uncritically accepting information when it is consistent with what we believe and insisting on more when it isn't, we subtly stack the deck against good decisions.

PROMOTING CONSTRUCTIVE NONCONFORMITY

Few leaders actively [encourage deviant behavior in their employees](#); most go to great lengths to get rid of it. Yet nonconformity promotes innovation, improves performance, and can enhance a person's standing more than conformity can. For example, [research](#) I conducted with Silvia Bellezza, of Columbia, and Anat Keinan, of Harvard, showed that observers judge a keynote speaker who wears red sneakers, a CEO who makes the rounds of Wall Street in a hoodie and jeans, and a presenter who creates her own PowerPoint template rather than using her company's as having higher status than counterparts who conform to business norms.

My research also shows that going against the crowd gives us confidence in our actions, which makes us feel unique and engaged and translates to higher performance and greater creativity. In one field study, I asked a group of employees to behave in nonconforming ways (speaking up if they disagreed with colleagues' decisions, expressing what they felt rather than what

they thought they were expected to feel, and so on). I asked another group to behave in conforming ways, and a third group to do whatever its members usually did. After three weeks, those in the first group reported feeling more confident and engaged in their work than those in the other groups. They displayed more creativity in a task that was part of the study. And their supervisors gave them higher ratings on performance and innovativeness.

Six strategies can help leaders encourage constructive nonconformity in their organizations and themselves.

STEP 1
GIVE EMPLOYEES OPPORTUNITIES TO BE THEMSELVES

Decades’ worth of psychological research has shown that we feel accepted and believe that our views are more credible when our colleagues share them. But although conformity may make us feel good, it doesn’t let us reap the benefits of authenticity. In [one study](#) Dan Cable, of London Business School, and Virginia Kay, then of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, surveyed 154 recent MBA graduates who were four months into their jobs. Those who felt they could express their authentic selves at work were, on average, 16% more engaged and more

committed to their organizations than those who felt they had to hide their authentic selves. In [another study](#), Cable and Kay surveyed 2,700 teachers who had been working for a year and reviewed the performance ratings given by their supervisors. Teachers who said they could express their authentic selves received higher ratings than teachers who did not feel they could do so.

Here are some ways to help workers be true to themselves:

Encourage employees to reflect on what makes them feel authentic. This can be done from the very start of the employment relationship — during orientation. In a field study I conducted with Brad Staats, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Dan Cable, employees in the business-process-outsourcing division of the Indian IT company Wipro went through a slightly modified onboarding process. We gave them a half hour to think about what was unique about them, what made them authentic, and how they could bring out their authentic selves at work. Later we compared them with employees who had gone through Wipro’s usual onboarding program, which allowed no time for such reflection. The employees in the first group had found ways to tailor their jobs so that they could be their true selves — for example, they exercised judgment when answering calls instead of rigidly following the company script. They were more engaged in their work, performed better, and were more likely to be with the company seven months later.

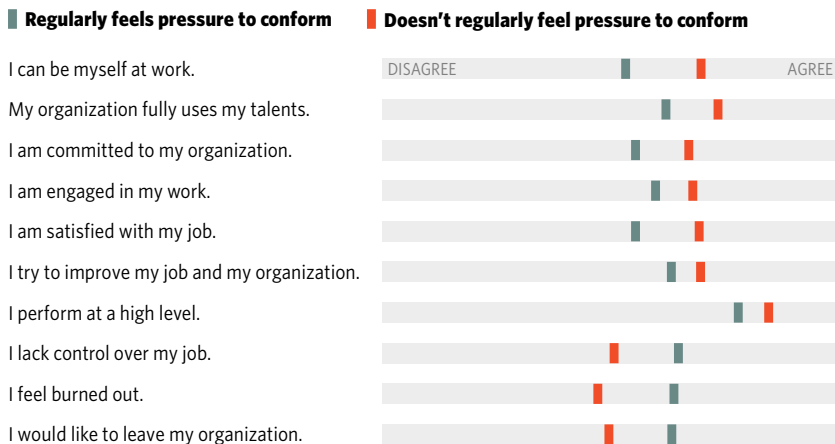
Leaders can also encourage this type of reflection once people are on the job. The start of a new year is a natural time for employees and [their leaders](#) to reflect on what makes them unique and authentic and how they can shape their jobs — even in small ways — to avoid conformity. Reflection can also be encouraged at other career points, such as a performance review, a promotion, or a transition into a new role.

Tell employees what job needs to be done rather than how to do it. When Colleen Barrett was executive vice president of Southwest Airlines, from 1990 to 2001, she established the goal of allowing employees to be themselves. For example, flight attendants were encouraged to deliver the legally required safety announcement in their own style and with humor. “We have always thought that your avocation can be your vocation so that you don’t have to do any acting in your life when you leave home to go to work,” she has said. This philosophy helped make Southwest a top industry performer in terms of passenger volume, profitability, customer satisfaction, and turnover.

The Perils of Conformity

Organizations put tremendous pressure on employees to conform. In a recent survey of 2,087 U.S. employees in a wide range of industries, nearly 49% agreed with the statement “I regularly feel pressure to conform in this organization.”

This takes a heavy toll on individuals and enterprises alike. Employees who felt a need to conform reported a less positive work experience on several dimensions than did other employees, as shown by the average scores plotted below.





Employees of Semco Group set their own schedules and production quotas. They even choose the amount and form of their compensation.

Let employees solve problems on their own. Leaders can encourage authenticity by allowing workers to decide how to handle certain situations. For instance, in the 1990s British Airways got rid of its thick customer-service handbook and gave employees the freedom (within reason) to figure out how to deal with customer problems as they arose (see “Competing on Customer Service: An Interview with British Airways’ Sir Colin Marshall,” HBR, November–December 1995).

Another company that subscribes to this philosophy is Pal’s Sudden Service, a fast-food chain in the southern United States. By implementing lean principles, including the idea that workers are empowered to call out and fix problems, Pal’s has achieved impressive numbers: one car served at the drive-through every 18 seconds, one mistake in every 3,600 orders (the industry average is one in 15), customer satisfaction scores of 98%, and health inspection scores above 97%. Turnover at the assistant manager level is under 2%, and in three decades Pal’s has lost only seven general managers — two of them to retirement. Annual turnover on the front lines is about 34% — half the industry average. Pal’s trains its employees extensively: New frontline workers receive 135 hours of instruction, on average (the industry average is about two hours). As a result, employees are confident that they can solve problems on their own and can stop

processes if something does not seem right. (They also know they can ask for help.) When I was conducting interviews for a [case](#) on Pal’s, a general manager gave me an example of how he encourages frontline workers to make decisions themselves: “A 16-year-old [employee] shows me a hot dog bun with flour on it and asks me if it’s OK. My response: ‘Your call. Would you sell it?’”

Let employees define their missions. Morning Star, a California-based tomato processing company, has employees write “personal commercial mission statements” that reflect who they are and specify their goals for a given time period, ones that will contribute to the company’s success. The statements are embedded in contracts known as “colleague letters of understanding,” or CLOUs, which employees negotiate with coworkers, each spelling out how he or she will collaborate with others. The personal commercial mission of Morning Star’s founder, Chris Rufer, is “to advance tomato technology to be the best in the world and operate these factories so they are pristine.” That of one sales and marketing employee is “to indelibly mark ‘Morning Star Tomato Products’ on the tongue and brain of every commercial tomato product user.” That of one employee in the shipping unit is “to reliably and efficiently provide our customers with marvelously attractive loads of desired product.”



STEP 2 ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO BRING OUT THEIR SIGNATURE STRENGTHS

Michelangelo described sculpting as a process whereby the artist releases an ideal figure from the block of stone in which it slumbers. We all possess ideal forms, the signature strengths — being social connectors, for example, or being able to see the positive in any situation — that we use naturally in our lives. And we all have a drive to do what we do best and be recognized accordingly. A leader's task is to encourage employees to sculpt their jobs to bring out their strengths — and to sculpt his or her own job, too. The actions below can help.

Give employees opportunities to identify their strengths. In a [research](#) project I conducted with Dan Cable, Brad Staats, and the University of Michigan's Julia Lee, leaders of national and local government agencies across the globe reflected each morning on their signature strengths and how to use them. They also read descriptions of times when they were at their best, written by people in their personal and professional networks. These leaders displayed more engagement and innovative behavior than members of a control group, and their teams performed better.

Tailor jobs to employees' strengths. Facebook is known for hiring smart people regardless of the positions currently open in the company, gathering information about their strengths, and designing their jobs accordingly. Another example is Osteria Francescana, a Michelin three-star restaurant in Modena, Italy, that won first place in the 2016 World's 50 Best Restaurant awards. Most restaurants, especially top-ranked ones,

observe a strict hierarchy, with specific titles for each position. But at Osteria Francescana, jobs and their attendant responsibilities are tailored to individual workers.

Discovering employees' strengths takes time and effort. Massimo Bottura, the owner and head chef, rotates interns through various positions for at least a few months so that he and his team can configure jobs to play to the newcomers' strengths. This ensures that employees land where they fit best.

If such a process is too ambitious for your organization, consider giving employees some freedom to choose responsibilities within their assigned roles.

STEP 3 QUESTION THE STATUS QUO, AND ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEES TO DO THE SAME

Although businesses can benefit from repeatable practices that ensure consistency, they can also stimulate employee engagement and innovation by questioning standard procedures — “the way we've always done it.” Here are some proven tactics.

Ask “Why?” and “What if?” By regularly asking employees such questions, Max Zanardi, for several years the general manager of the Ritz-Carlton in Istanbul, creatively led them to redefine luxury by providing customers with authentic and unusual experiences. For example, employees had traditionally planted flowers each year on the terrace outside the hotel's restaurant. One day Zanardi asked, “Why do we always plant flowers? How about vegetables? What about herbs?” This resulted in a terrace garden

featuring herbs and heirloom tomatoes used in the restaurant — things guests very much appreciated.

Leaders who question the status quo give employees reasons to stay engaged and often spark fresh ideas that can rejuvenate the business.

Stress that the company is not perfect. Ed Catmull, the cofounder and president of Pixar Animation Studios, worried that new hires would be too awed by Pixar's success to challenge existing practices (see "[How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity](#)," HBR, September 2008). So during onboarding sessions, his speeches included examples of the company's mistakes. Emphasizing that we are all human and that the organization will never be perfect gives employees freedom to engage in constructive nonconformity.

Excel at the basics. Ensuring that employees have deep knowledge about the way things usually operate provides them with a foundation for constructively questioning the status quo. This philosophy underlies the many hours Pal's devotes to training: Company leaders want employees to be expert in all aspects of their work. Similarly, Bottura believes that to create innovative dishes, his chefs must be well versed in classic cooking techniques.

STEP 4

CREATE CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES

It's easy for workers to get bored and fall back on routine when their jobs involve little variety or challenge. And employees who find their work boring lack the motivation to perform well and creatively, whereas work that is challenging enhances their engagement. [Research](#) led by David H. Zald, of Vanderbilt University, shows that novel behavior, such as trying something new or risky, triggers the release of dopamine, a chemical that helps keep us motivated and eager to innovate.

Leaders can draw on the following tactics when structuring employees' jobs:

Maximize variety. This makes it less likely that employees will go on autopilot and more likely that they will come up with innovative ways to improve what they're doing. It also boosts performance, as Brad Staats and I found in [our analysis](#) of two and a half years' worth of transaction data from a Japanese bank department responsible for processing home loan applications. The mortgage line involved 17 distinct tasks, including scanning applications, comparing scanned documents to originals, entering application data into the computer system, assessing whether information complied with underwriting standards, and conducting credit checks. Workers who were assigned diverse tasks from day to day were more productive

than others (as measured by the time taken to complete each task); the variety kept them motivated. This allowed the bank to process applications more quickly, increasing its competitiveness.

Variety can be ensured in a number of ways. Pal's rotates employees through tasks (taking orders, grilling, working the register, and so on) in a different order each day. Some companies forgo defined career trajectories and instead move employees through various positions within departments or teams over the course of months or years.

In addition to improving engagement, job rotation broadens individuals' skill sets, creating a more flexible workforce. This makes it easier to find substitutes if someone falls ill or abruptly quits and to shift people from tasks where they are no longer needed (see "[Why 'Good Jobs' Are Good for Retailers](#)," HBR, January–February 2012).

Continually inject novelty into work. Novelty is a powerful force. When something new happens at work, we pay attention, engage, and tend to remember it. We are less likely to take our work for granted when it continues to generate strong feelings. Novelty in one's job is more satisfying than stability.

So, how can leaders inject it into work? Bottura throws last-minute menu changes at his team to keep excitement high. At Pal's, employees learn the order of their tasks for the day only when they get to work.

Leaders can also introduce novelty by making sure that projects include a few people who are somewhat out of their comfort zone, or by periodically giving teams new challenges (for instance, asking them to deliver a product faster than in the past). They can assign employees to teams charged with designing a new work process or piloting a new service.

Identify opportunities for personal learning and growth. Giving people such experiences is an essential way to promote constructive nonconformity, research has shown. For instance, in a field study conducted at a global consulting firm, colleagues and I found that when onboarding didn't just focus on performance but also spotlighted opportunities for learning and growth, engagement and innovative behaviors were higher six months later. Companies often identify growth opportunities during performance reviews, of course, but there are many other ways to do so. Chefs at Osteria Francescana can accompany Bottura to cooking events that expose them to other countries, cuisines, traditions, arts, and culture — all potential sources of inspiration for new dishes. When I worked as a research consultant at Disney, in the summer of 2010, I learned that members of the Imagineering R&D group were encouraged to belong to professional societies, attend conferences, and publish in academic

and professional journals. Companies can help pay for courses that may not strictly relate to employees' current jobs but would nonetheless expand their skill sets or fuel their curiosity.

Give employees responsibility and accountability. At Morning Star, if employees need new equipment to do their work — even something that costs thousands of dollars — they may buy it. If they see a process that would benefit from different skills, they may hire someone. They must consult colleagues who would be affected (other people who would use the equipment, say), but they don't need approval from above. Because there are no job titles at Morning Star, how employees influence others — and thus get work done — is determined mainly by how their colleagues perceive the quality of their decisions.

STEP 5

FOSTER BROADER PERSPECTIVES

We often focus so narrowly on our own point of view that we have trouble understanding others' experiences and perspectives. And as we assume high-level positions, [research shows](#), our egocentric focus becomes stronger. Here are some ways to combat it:

Create opportunities for employees to view problems from multiple angles. We all tend to be self-serving in terms of how we process information and generate (or fail to generate) alternatives to the status quo. Leaders can help employees overcome this tendency by encouraging them to view problems from different perspectives. At the electronics manufacturer Sharp, an oft-repeated maxim is “Be dragonflies, not flatfish.” Dragonflies have compound eyes that can take in multiple perspectives at once; flatfish have both eyes on the same side of the head and can see in only one direction at a time.

Jon Olinto and Anthony Ackil, the founders of the fast-casual restaurant chain [b.good](#), require all employees (including managers) and franchisees to be trained in every job — from prep to grill to register. (Unlike Pal's, however, b.good does not rotate people through jobs each day.) Being exposed to different perspectives increases engagement and innovative behaviors, [research](#) has found.

Use language that reduces self-serving bias. To prevent their traders from letting success go to their heads when the market is booming, some Wall Street firms regularly remind them, “Don't confuse brains with a bull market.” At GE, terms such as “planting seeds” (to describe making investments that will produce fruitful results even after the managers behind them have moved on to other jobs) have entered the lexicon (see “[How GE Teaches Teams to Lead Change](#),” HBR, January 2009).

Hire people with diverse perspectives. Decades' worth of research has found that working among people from a variety of cultures and backgrounds helps us see problems in new ways and consider ideas that might otherwise go unnoticed, and it fosters the kind of creativity that champions change. At Osteria Francescana the two sous-chefs are Kondo “Taka” Takahiko, from Japan, and Davide diFabio, from Italy. They differ not only in country of origin but also in strengths and ways of thinking: Davide is comfortable with improvisation, for example, while Taka is obsessed with precision. Diversity in ways of thinking is a quality sought by Rachael Chong, the founder and CEO of the startup Catchafire. When interviewing job candidates, she describes potential challenges and carefully listens to see whether people come up with many possible solutions or get stuck on a single one. To promote innovation and new approaches, Ed Catmull hires prominent outsiders, gives them important roles, and publicly acclaims their contributions. But many organizations do just the opposite: hire people whose thinking mirrors that of the current management team.

STEP 6

VOICE AND ENCOURAGE DISSENTING VIEWS

We often seek out and fasten on information that confirms our beliefs. Yet data that is inconsistent with our views and may even generate negative feelings (such as a sense of failure) can provide opportunities to improve our organizations and ourselves. Leaders can use a number of tactics to push employees out of their comfort zones.

Look for disconfirming evidence. Leaders shouldn't ask, “Who agrees with this course of action?” or “What information supports this view?” Instead they should ask, “What information suggests this might not be the right path to take?” Melody Hobson, the president of Ariel Investments and the chair of the board of directors of DreamWorks Animation, regularly opens team meetings by reminding attendees that they don't need to be right; they need to bring up information that can help the team make the right decisions, which happens when members voice their concerns and disagree. At the Chicago Board of Trade, in-house investigators scrutinize trades that may violate exchange rules. To avoid bias in collecting information, they have been trained to ask open-ended interview questions, not ones that can be answered with a simple yes or no. Leaders can use a similar approach when discussing decisions. They should also take care not to depend on opinions but to assess whether the data supports or undermines the prevailing point of view.

Create dissent by default. Leaders can encourage debate during meetings by inviting individuals to take opposing points of view; they can also design processes to include dissent. When employees of Pal's suggest promising ideas for new menu items, the ideas are tested in three different stores: one whose owner-operator likes the idea ("the protagonist"), one whose owner-operator is skeptical ("the antagonist"), and one whose owner-operator has yet to form a strong opinion ("the neutral"). This ensures that dissenting views are aired and that they help inform the CEO's decisions about proposed items.

Identify courageous dissenters. Even if encouraged to push back, many timid or junior people won't. So make sure the team includes people you know will voice their concerns, writes Diana McLain Smith in *The Elephant in the Room: How Relationships Make or Break the Success of Leaders and Organizations*. Once the more reluctant employees see that opposing views are welcome, they will start to feel comfortable dissenting as well.

STRIKING THE RIGHT BALANCE

By adopting the strategies above, leaders can fight their own and their employees' tendency to conform when that would hurt the company's interests. But to strike the optimal balance between conformity and nonconformity, they must think carefully about the boundaries within which employees will be free to deviate from the status quo. For instance, the way a manager leads her team can be up to her as long as her behavior is aligned with the company's purpose and values and she delivers on that purpose.

Morning Star's colleague letters of understanding provide such boundaries. They clearly state employees' goals and their responsibility to deliver on the organization's purpose but leave it up to individual workers to decide how to achieve those goals. Colleagues with whom an employee has negotiated a CLOU will let him know if his actions cross a line.

Brazil's Semco Group, a 3,000-employee conglomerate, similarly relies on peer pressure and other mechanisms to give employees considerable freedom while making sure they don't go overboard. The company has no job titles, dress code, or organizational charts. If you need a workspace, you reserve it in one of a few satellite offices scattered around São Paulo. Employees, including factory workers, set their own schedules and production quotas. They even choose the amount and form of their compensation. What prevents employees from taking advantage of this freedom? First, the company believes in transparency: All its financial information is public, so everyone knows what everyone else makes. People who

pay themselves too much have to work with resentful colleagues. Second, employee compensation is tied directly to company profits, creating enormous peer pressure to keep budgets in line.

Ritz-Carlton, too, excels in balancing conformity and nonconformity. It depends on 3,000 standards developed over the years to ensure a consistent customer experience at all its hotels. These range from how to slice a lime to which toiletries to stock in the bathrooms. But employees have considerable freedom within those standards and can question them if they see ways to provide an even better customer experience. For instance, for many years the company has allowed staff members to spend up to \$2,000 to address any customer complaint in the way they deem best. (Yes, that is \$2,000 per employee per guest.) The hotel believes that business is most successful when employees have well-defined standards, understand the reasoning behind them, and are given autonomy in carrying them out.

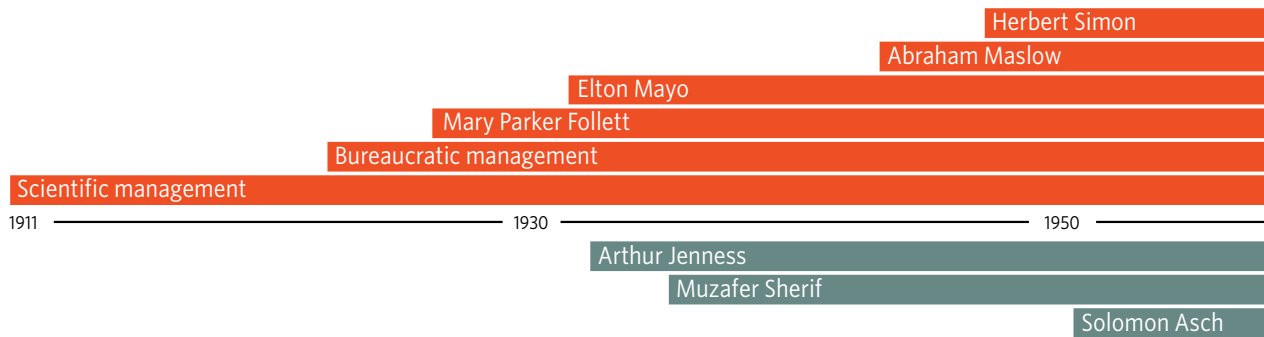
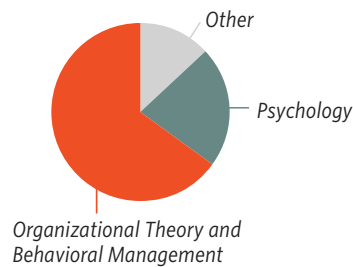
Organizations, like individuals, can easily become complacent, especially when business is going well. Complacency often sets in because of too much conformity — stemming from peer pressure, acceptance of the status quo, and the interpretation of information in self-serving ways. The result is a workforce of people who feel they can't be themselves on the job, are bored, and don't consider others' points of view.

Constructive nonconformity can help companies avoid these problems. If leaders were to put just half the time they spend ensuring conformity into designing and installing mechanisms to encourage constructive deviance, employee engagement, productivity, and innovation would soar. ■

The Origins of the Idea

Francesca Gino’s research on “constructive nonconformity” builds on a long heritage of ideas from multiple disciplines. This timeline shows some of the core ideas that influenced her work.

Francesca Gino’s Research for “Rebel Talent”

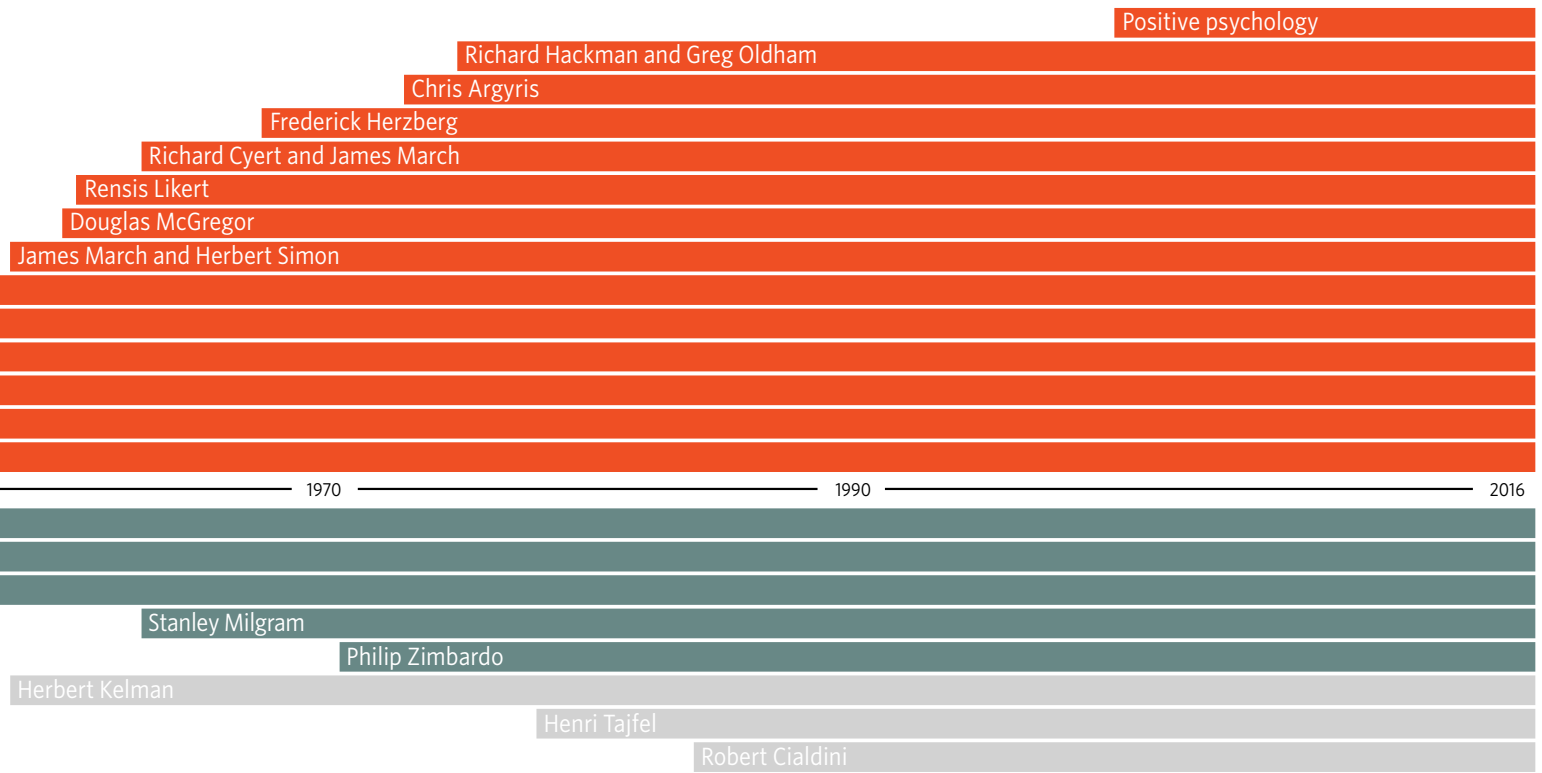


Frederick W. Taylor's scientific management (1911), followed by **Max Weber's** bureaucratic management (1922), made work increasingly specialized, rules more rigid, and hierarchies stronger. The roots of disengaged workforces can be traced to these movements.

A countermovement called the human relations approach focused on teamwork and motivation to improve firm and employee performance. **Mary Parker Follett** (1924) championed worker empowerment. **Chester Barnard** (1938) promoted less-dictatorial leadership. **Elton Mayo's** celebrated Hawthorne studies (1932) challenged scientific management by showing motivational tactics that increased productivity.

Psychologists began to study an inherent aspect of bureaucracy: conformity. **Arthur Jenness** (1932) and **Muzafer Sherif** (1936) demonstrated that individuals will change their minds to conform with a group. Later research focused on peer pressure (**Solomon Asch**, 1951), obedience to authority (**Stanley Milgram**, 1963), and conformity to social roles (**Philip Zimbardo's** Stanford prison experiment, 1971).

Led by **Herbert Simon** (1947), behavioral science began to challenge scientific management by showing that people make decisions that aren't good for them or their organizations. **Richard Cyert and James March's** general theory of decision making in firms (1963) was foundational. **Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham** (1975) argued that work could be designed to keep employees happy and productive.



Douglas McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (1960) codified the scientific and human relations approaches to management. Theory X assumes that workers are irresponsible and lazy, making managers autocratic and distrustful. Theory Y holds that they are responsible individuals who seek motivation.

The psychology of conformity and the ability of leaders to sway others through it culminated in the theory of influence, introduced by **Robert Cialdini** (1984).

As technology has eroded divisions between work and life, theories of how to keep employees engaged have followed. The positive psychology research of the early 21st century argues that workers want to bring their “whole selves” to the job and that by letting them do so, firms can find deep reserves of untapped potential.

Psychology research has helped **Francesca Gino** understand how nonconforming workers think and make choices and the resulting benefits for their firms, especially in terms of employee engagement. Organizational theory and behavioral management research have helped her understand how leaders can structure work to encourage nonconformity without creating chaos. The result: **“Rebel Talent”** (2016).

CASE STUDY: EGON ZEHNDER

THE MOST IMPORTANT TRAIT FOR REBEL TALENT: CURIOSITY

The executive search firm Egon Zehnder found a link between high potentials and curious nonconformists.



Think of an innovation that changed how a key process in your organization unfolds or the way a product is made. I'm willing to bet the driving force behind it was curiosity.

Curiosity — the impulse to seek out new ideas and experiences — is crucial to innovation because it moves people to look at the world from a different perspective and to ask questions rather than accept the status quo. Thus it's an important tool for fighting conformity.

Yet few organizations and leaders think systematically about it. One exception is the global executive search firm Egon Zehnder, which has developed a robust way to assess curiosity, both in its own employees and in the candidates it proposes to clients.

Most companies evaluate leaders and employees on the basis of certain broad competencies, such as being results-oriented or having the ability to influence others. Egon Zehnder itself did so for many years. But as the business environment became more volatile and complex, the firm realized the importance of being able to adapt to unforeseen situations by learning new skills, and it began assessing candidates in terms of their potential in this area.

To that end, it created a [model](#) consisting of four dimensions:

- 1. Curiosity:** a thirst for new experiences and knowledge; an openness to feedback, learning, and change
- 2. Insight:** the ability to gather and synthesize information that suggests new possibilities
- 3. Engagement:** the ability to connect with others and communicate a vision
- 4. Determination:** the persistence to overcome obstacles and achieve difficult goals

Egon Zehnder's research showed that curiosity was the most important of the four dimensions and that people who scored high on it were likely to score

Focusing on curiosity, and on potential more broadly, can shine a different light on candidates who may seem ill-suited to a given role but who excel when faced with new challenges.

high on the other qualities as well. In fact, level of curiosity determines the readiness with which a person will exhibit behavior associated with the other traits, and variations in people's curiosity levels predict variations in their job performance and innovative behaviors. Curiosity triggers a direct response to situations that challenge our assumptions. And our capacity to question unlocks the potential for change that such situations represent. (See [“21st-Century Talent Spotting,”](#) by Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, HBR, June 2014.)

Focusing on curiosity, and on potential more broadly, can shine a different light on candidates who may seem ill-suited to a given role but who excel when faced with new challenges. Consider this example: Several years ago a global energy company asked Egon Zehnder to evaluate its prime internal candidate for CEO. After meeting with the board of directors, Egon Zehnder developed a detailed description of the job, mapping the competencies required in the present and those likely to be needed in the future. It assessed the internal candidate on those skills and also presented six well-qualified external candidates to the board. The assessment showed that the internal candidate had strong operational and analytical abilities but lacked strategic acumen and did not delegate effectively. As a result, the

board thought it might need to take the time-consuming and possibly risky step of recruiting one of the external candidates.

However, that became unnecessary once Egon Zehnder had assessed the internal candidate's potential to adapt and grow. Interviews with him and his colleagues revealed that he scored high on all four dimensions of the model — especially curiosity. Although he needed to refine his people skills, he had great insight and could effectively communicate his vision. And he had a track record of surmounting obstacles and achieving challenging goals.

Egon Zehnder concluded that with mentoring and support from the board, the internal candidate could overcome his weaknesses and adapt to changing situations as the industry continued to evolve. Viewed through the lens of the model, he was stronger than the external candidates. The board designed a professional development program for the year before he became CEO, giving him significant strategic-planning roles and requiring that he delegate a larger portion of his operational responsibilities. Since taking the helm a few years ago, he has surpassed the board's expectations.

To assess curiosity, pose questions like the ones Egon Zehnder's interviewees ask, especially: When could you not stop yourself from learning something new? and What fueled that drive? The answers will

suggest whether someone was learning for a narrow purpose (“I had to look something up for my job”) or out of innate curiosity (“I just had to know”). A person who's curious grapples with learning something but stays with it — she feels she *needs* to understand.

Curiosity increases the likelihood that someone will not just survive but triumph when he encounters unexpected challenges. By encouraging employees' curiosity — and nurturing that quality in themselves — leaders can unleash their organization's potential to adapt and grow. ■



CASE STUDY: SUN HYDRAULICS

THE MANUFACTURER THAT SET ITS WORKFORCE FREE

At Sun Hydraulics, almost no one has a title. Workers design their own jobs, and they can make decisions and implement changes as they see fit.

Our predisposition to fit in by imitating starts early: Within minutes of birth, infants begin mimicking the facial expressions of their parents. But this innate tendency to conform can be costly for organizations. It undermines the ability of employees, including leaders, to think creatively and to innovate.

How can companies fight conformity? By encouraging employees to be themselves — to be authentic and use their strengths. Sadly, this rarely occurs. One exception is Sun Hydraulics, a Florida-based manufacturer of high-performance hydraulic cartridge valves and manifolds. The company has roughly \$200 million in annual sales, and its 900 employees work in the United

States, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, South Korea, India, and China.

When Robert Koski cofounded Sun, in 1970, he set out to create a company without hierarchy, organizational charts, titles, job descriptions, private offices reporting relationships, or even close supervision. He wanted everyone to be informed about what was happening in the business and to be aware of organizational goals and desires. He wanted to be able to trust people to make the right decisions. And he wanted to foster an environment that would capitalize on people's strengths.

Koski, then 40, was motivated by the frustration he had experienced at his previous employer. For more than a decade he had worked at Dynamic

Controls, an Ohio-based maker of fluid-power control products, rising through the ranks to become vice president and director of corporate development. During that time annual sales grew from \$600,000 to \$5 million, but Koski felt that the company's organization and culture — especially its obsession with prescribed procedures — stifled employees' contributions.

Koski died in 2008, but Sun Hydraulics still reflects his vision. The only job titles are those legally required of a public company (for example, CEO and CFO). Employees have great discretion to make decisions and to implement changes as they see fit. There are no quality inspectors; everyone is responsible for the quality of his or her own work.

Employees are also expected to choose the activities that best allow them to contribute to the organization and to express their signature strengths. They may decide to expand or share their responsibilities. For example, a worker who had largely administrative and clerical duties found that other employees often approached her with questions about and problems with working relationships. After a few years she was recognized as the person most responsible for human resources and related matters.

Efforts to get Sun employees to use their core strengths and express their authentic selves begin with the onboarding process. All new employees take a “manufacturing tour” during which they rotate through areas of the plant, including assembly, testing, washing, and lathing. Depending on the employee’s role, the tour may last anywhere from two weeks to four months. This introduction lets workers discover the various jobs involved in the business and learn which ones interest them most and suit them best. It also allows them to build relationships across the organization and to understand the company from all angles. Finally, it enables them to understand one another’s roles and capabilities — something that, my ongoing research has found, creates trust and therefore increases the likelihood that people will be authentic and use their strengths.

After the manufacturing tour, it is not unusual for a worker to assume a role different from the one for which he was hired. Personal interests and qualifications take precedence. For instance, an engineer hired for a product development function became intrigued with computers and decided to concentrate on creating new programming applications instead. Through careful planning and discussion, the company fills the vacuums thus created, even if that takes months.

Sun’s self-management approach gives all employees the liberty to identify opportunities for improvement, discuss their ideas with colleagues, and implement changes without seeking high-level approval. I saw several examples of this at one of

the company’s Florida plants. A machinist had an idea for a process improvement, presented it to his colleagues, got positive feedback, and pursued it to fruition. No supervisor was looking over his shoulder, but he knew he could ask for help at any point. He also knew that as long as he made a good-faith effort, he would not be penalized if the idea didn’t work out. Another worker, frustrated by how long it took to manually prepare hydraulic valves for testing, thought up a simple machine that could make the necessary adjustments and persuaded an initially skeptical engineer to build the device — which became a valuable part of the assembly process. Upon assuming responsibility for the plant’s aluminum inventory, one employee installed a just-in-time ordering system after persuading machine operators to learn how to use it. Aluminum bars are now delivered daily in the exact quantities needed rather than monthly in imprecise amounts — significantly lowering inventory costs.

Sun believes that when needs arise, it should help workers expand their capabilities rather than recruit outside expertise. Upon introducing a complicated new generation of flexible machining centers, it sent plant

operators to the vendor’s factory to learn how to program them. It was the first time the vendor had been asked to train relatively unsophisticated shop workers: Other customers had hired specialized programmers and instructors. But Sun wanted to ensure that the employees using the equipment had the skills to run and maintain it. And the vendor said it had never seen a faster, smoother introduction of its machines.

Even exceedingly hierarchical organizations can learn from Sun’s efforts to foster employees’ authenticity. For example, fully informing workers about company operations and objectives increases their ability to make decisions on their own and thus empowers them. Organizations might also let employees sculpt their jobs or give them greater say in their tasks so that their work better reflects their interests and draws on their capabilities. There is no downside to encouraging employees to be true to themselves and to use their signature strengths. There is only this upside: a more engaged, productive, innovative workforce. ■

Employees have great discretion to make decisions and to implement changes as they see fit.

CASE STUDY: ARIEL INVESTMENTS

THE EVERYDAY WAYS ONE LEADER HELPS EMPLOYEES BUST THE STATUS QUO

Ariel Investments president Mellody Hobson models rebel behavior to get her staff to question everything and everyone — including herself.

In February 2014 I gave a talk at the Impact Summit, a conference of 250 top women in financial services. One person in particular stood out: Mellody Hobson, the president of Ariel Investments, a Chicago-based money management firm with offices in New York City and Sydney. Hobson serves as a director of Estée Lauder and Starbucks and chaired the board of DreamWorks Animation until its recent acquisition by Comcast-NBCUniversal. An impressive background — but that's not why she caught my attention. Nor was it because she was the only African-American in attendance. It was her remarks during a session titled "Insights on Innovative Leadership." Hobson noted how easy it is to conform to the usual ways of thinking in a firm and how important it is to fight that tendency. She also pointed out that being different makes you memorable and voiced her hope that people will embrace, not hide, their differences.

Hobson's remarks inspired me to write a Harvard Business School case study about her leadership at Ariel. During my research, I learned that she is an exceptional role model. In a recent interview she discussed simple methods every leader can use to fight conformity and to encourage others to do the same.

Gino: What is your personal experience with organizational pressure to conform?

Hobson: Conformity is the norm in many organizations — but fortunately it has not played a large part in my career, for two main reasons.

The first is the precious and unforgettable advice I received on my first day at Ariel, where I came after graduating from Princeton. The founder and CEO, John W. Rogers Jr., said to me, "You are going to be in rooms with people who make a lot of money and have big titles. But it does not mean your ideas are not as good or even better. I want to hear your ideas. It is incumbent on you to speak up." He started off by giving me permission to speak "my truth" — the truth as I saw it as a young woman (I was 22 at the time). It was a very reassuring and compelling instruction.

Fast-forward three years: I persuaded John to separate from the Calvert Group, which had been selling Ariel's mutual funds as Calvert-Ariel funds. At the time, we had about \$400 million invested in our mutual funds. I said that we were big enough to strike out on our own. Amazingly, John said, "I trust you." As with a divorce, it was both painful and liberating to make the break from Calvert. But by doing so,

Ariel was finally able to control its own destiny.

I've told that story many, many times, because that kind of trust is a great gift. Recently I hired a person to join our research team. I told her, "I am expecting you to be a source of spark in the conversation. I expect you to push us to say the uncomfortable thing." She kept asking, "You are really inviting that?" and I assured her, "I am expecting it!"

The second reason I don't think I've ever been a conformist during my career is that I've approached work with an entrepreneurial mindset. When you are in that mode, you try to think differently and act differently so that you can stand out. I've always had a view that being original and unique is very hard — but it's something I've aspired to. In my mind, that means not just having original ideas in meetings or original ways of attacking a problem but also being who I am without fear.

For example, I take a nontraditional approach to business attire: When it comes to fashion, I am very willing to be myself. The fact that I'm a black woman also challenges the status quo. Rather than viewing that as a potential difficulty, as some do when it comes to sensitive issues, I see my uniqueness as an opportunity to be memorable. And my name is Mellody, with two Ls. It stands out. I often joke that I don't need a last name.

As a leader, how do you encourage employees to resist pressure from colleagues to conform?

It is hard to fight conformity personally and to encourage others to fight it. But there are ways, big and small.

“I am expecting you to be a source of spark in the conversation. I expect you to push us to say the uncomfortable thing.”

For instance, during a brainstorming meeting, I might throw out sentences like “This may be a crazy idea.” I do that because it invites other people to have crazy ideas. In meetings where I am the only voice on an issue, I point to that fact and say, “It is a bit lonely dangling on this branch alone, but I feel strongly about this issue.” It’s a way to tell people that I am willing to be there on my own and hopefully to give them permission to do the same.

Similarly, I model dissenting behaviors. For instance, when John and I would disagree in meetings, I’d say, “Mom and Dad are disagreeing,” or I would look at him with a smile and say, “What are you going to do, fi e me?” I was not trying to be disrespectful. I was sending a message to everyone else that I didn’t fear repercussions for disagreeing with him and that they should feel free to speak their minds too.

When I see conformity at Ariel, I point it out. For instance, when I see people automatically agree with others’ opinions, I say, “We are making donuts.” That’s based on a Dunkin’ Donuts commercial from years ago, in which Fred the Baker would wake up and say, “Time to make the donuts.” The next day he would do the same thing, and the day after that. So when I feel that we are repeating something without questioning it, I tell people, “We are making donuts.” I’ve used this language for a long time, so it’s understood here. Quick phrases like that can be really helpful.

One of the ways in which conformity takes over is through email chains. The chains get so long that people start agreeing with one another because they lose the point. I always try to stop email chains. After the third back-and-forth, I write, “Stop, and meet!”

Obviously, it’s necessary to abide by certain rules and norms. How do you strike a balance between conformity and nonconformity?

The line has to do with excellence and compliance. So we have clear rules around processes. You can’t wing it



with a process that is mission-critical for the firm. You want to follow the process as much as possible, and have very good and defensible reasons when you don't. That is the only way we can do postmortems when something goes wrong.

The processes may involve something as simple as how a trade goes through — or how to comply with industry advertising regulations, or how to check a client statement before it goes out. We have a rule that no letter leaves the firm until two sets of eyes have reviewed it to ensure that there are no typos. Nothing is worse than a business letter with typos. It hurts the brand.

A big risk is that people won't question standard practices that are no longer helpful. How do you get people to challenge the status quo — “the way we've always done it around here”?

At Ariel, people are encouraged to ask questions, investigate further, and not take things for granted. Asking questions is critically important. Go back to Plato and Socrates — that's what they did. The Socratic way of questioning led to the best thinking and outcomes. Questions can generate breakthroughs, not just answers. I ask a lot of questions. I want asking questions to be in our firm's DNA. We joke that if everyone is agreeing on a stock, we should be very nervous.

We often assign someone to serve as a devil's advocate. In 2008 and 2009, during the financial crisis, the devil's advocate became a fixture in our research process. There is one person who follows a stock and another whose job is to argue the other side. That's one way to make sure people do not conform to others' opinions or fall into groupthink. We are contrarian investors — we try, at our core, to do things differently from others. So much of what we do is about standing

against the wind. You have to learn to be comfortable being on your own.

There are other things we do to encourage people to challenge the status quo. At the end of our summer internship program, we ask the interns what they would do differently if they were leading the firm. And when new teammates join the firm, we ask about the best practices of their previous employers.

It sounds like you've tried to institutionalize dissent.

Yes. I have a McKinsey quote on my desk: “Uphold your obligation to dissent.” I am told that at McKinsey, voicing dissent is not optional; it is required. Similarly, Reed Hastings, of Netflix, says that if you don't respectfully dissent, you are being disloyal to the company. Both sentences have resonated with me.

Here is an example of how we put these ideas into practice at Ariel. We want analysts to work as hard to keep an idea out of a portfolio as they do to keep it in. We don't want them just advocating for possible investments; we want them fighting hard against them, because it hurts us all if an investment goes badly.

Are there other ways you seek diverse points of view?

One is in our hiring practices. We want to make sure we have people with different backgrounds and experiences. We totally buy in to the work of Scott Page — the University of Michigan professor who wrote the book *The Difference*. He argues that if you want to solve a really hard problem, you need people to come at it from different perspectives.

We love to find people who are different. We don't feel we have to consider only candidates with traditional finance backgrounds or those from traditional schools. Someone with a liberal arts education

can be just as insightful as someone with an economics degree. And we don't have hard rules about prior experience. We will adjust a role to a person's skill set.

As Scott Page acknowledges, diversity can result in conflict. And at times it does result in conflict at Ariel. But, as Page writes, if you find yourself in a meeting arguing with your colleagues, you should stand up and clap. The dissension should lead to a better outcome. It may be easier to be around people who agree with you, but that doesn't drive stronger outcomes. ■

ASSESSMENT ARE YOU A “CONSTRUCTIVE NONCONFORMIST”?

Find out how much of a rebel worker you are.

For decades, prevailing management wisdom has encouraged leaders to focus on designing efficient processes and getting employees to follow them. But conformity can hurt businesses. Innovation and high performance often result from behaviors that defy organizational norms — established ways of thinking and of doing things. How much does your company pressure you to conform? And are you succumbing to the pressure and hurting your chances of success? Take the following assessment (adapted from my ongoing research) to discover whether you’re engaging in what I call constructive nonconformity: deviant behavior that benefits the organization.

When answering these questions, focus on the past month.

	NEVER	ALMOST NEVER	SOMETIMES	FAIRLY OFTEN	VERY OFTEN	ALWAYS
1. In the past month, how often have you refrained from opposing your team members just to avoid rocking the boat?	0	1	2	3	4	5
2. How often have you publicly supported ideas you privately disagreed with?	0	1	2	3	4	5
3. How often have you followed established rules or procedures, even though you suspected there was a better way to do things?	0	1	2	3	4	5
4. How often have you raised questions about the effectiveness of current processes or systems?	0	1	2	3	4	5
5. How often have you seen senior leaders challenge the status quo or ask employees to think outside the box?	0	1	2	3	4	5
6. How often have you felt pressured to conform to the cultural norms of your organization (how to dress, how to interact with others, how to do your work, and so on)?	0	1	2	3	4	5
7. How often have you felt free to be yourself — to behave and express yourself in an authentic way?	0	1	2	3	4	5
8. How often have you been encouraged to solve problems on your own, without involving a supervisor?	0	1	2	3	4	5
9. How often has your job played to your strengths?	0	1	2	3	4	5
10. How often have you been challenged — urged to develop a new skill or to take on a task that pushed you out of your comfort zone?	0	1	2	3	4	5
11. How often have you sought information that was inconsistent with your views and might even prove you wrong?	0	1	2	3	4	5
12. How often have you and your team been encouraged to debate ideas or consider multiple perspectives before reaching a decision?	0	1	2	3	4	5

SCORE: 0–24 You’re lucky: Your low score indicates that you are probably very engaged in your work, are performing at a high level, and are innovating frequently. Just make sure that you don’t become complacent — the pressure to conform affects everyone. Keep being the rebel that you are!

SCORE: 25–30 Your score is average — and in this case, average is good. Scores in this range indicate that your ability to express yourself at work is at a healthy level, allowing you to be productive and innovative. To stay in this sweet spot, watch out for situations in which you feel pressured to conform.

SCORE: 31–39 Your higher-than-average score indicates a level of pressure that may be detrimental to your performance and your ability to innovate. You may also be disengaged. Try shaping your job in ways that allow you to be yourself and that bring out your talents and skills. Even small changes can let your authentic self shine through.

SCORE: 40–60 Your high score indicates an unproductive level of conformity. You’re probably disengaged, and you’re almost certainly having a hard time being your true self at work. It’s critical that you find ways (big and small) to lower the pressure to conform, and that starts with allowing your authentic self to shine through. Act more like a rebel, and you and your organization will benefit.

**VISIT [HBR.ORG/REBEL](https://hbr.org/rebel)
FOR MORE →**

VIDEO →

REBEL TALENT AT OSTERIA FRANCESCANA

Chef Massimo Bottura breaks all the rules for running a kitchen. And he has the best restaurant in the world.

Watch at hbr.org/rebel

**"TO BUILD A TEAM YOU HAVE
TO KNOW THE PEOPLE.
YOU HAVE TO KNOW WHO YOU
HAVE, AND LOOK IN THEIR EYES
AND FIND THE SPARKLE."**

—Massimo Bottura
Chef Patron, Osteria Francescana

RELATED READING

In the course of developing this Big Idea on Rebel Talent, HBR asked Francesca Gino to provide a portfolio of content that could further inspire, advise, and help develop your understanding of the topic. Gino's curated list of materials on rebel talent runs the gamut from classic HBR articles to novels and more.

HBR ARTICLES →

While studying leaders and organizations that attract, develop, and manage talent so as to spark engagement and creativity, I found many insights in the pages of HBR.

“How Pixar Fosters Collective Creativity”
Ed Catmull
September 2008

“Are You a High Potential?”
Douglas A. Ready, Jay A. Conger, and Linda A. Hill
June 2010

“How to Hang On to Your High Potentials”
Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, Boris Groysberg, and Nitin Nohria
October 2011

“How GE Teaches Teams to Lead Change”
Steven Prokesch
January 2009

“Managing Without Managers”
Ricardo Semler
September–October 1989

“Why My Former Employees Still Work for Me”
Ricardo Semler
January–February 1994

BOOKS →

I've found inspiration in books from as far back as the 1850s that document how and why companies create pressure to conform and what can be done to combat it.

The Organization Man
William H. Whyte
1956

Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness
Frederic Laloux
2014

The Art of Being Unmistakable: A Collection of Essays About Making a Dent in the Universe
Srinivas Rao
2013

Bartleby, the Scrivener
Herman Melville
1853

Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation
Linda A. Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove, and Kent Lineback
2014

CASE STUDIES →

The best way to learn how to foster constructive nonconformity is to dig into how actual companies did so.

“Sun Hydraulics: Leading in Tough Times (A)”
Linda A. Hill and Jennifer M. Suesse
2003

“Pal’s Sudden Service—Scaling an Organizational Model to Drive Growth”
Gary P. Pisano, Francesca Gino, and Bradley R. Staats
2016

“The Morning Star Company: Self-Management at Work”
Francesca Gino and Bradley R. Staats
2013

OTHER ARTICLES →

“Monkeys Are Adept at Picking Up Social Cues, Research Shows”
Pam Belluck
New York Times, 2013

“For Some Flight Attendants, Shtick Comes With the Safety Spiel”
Zach Schonbrun
New York Times, 2016

“I’m Quite Eccentric Within Accepted Societal Norms”
Martin Grossman
The Onion, 2007

SURVEY RESULTS

SMALL MEASURES CAN LIBERATE EMPLOYEES TO CONTRIBUTE THEIR BEST

A six-week experiment demonstrates that small prods can significantly increase worker engagement.



Think about your first day of work at your job. If you're like most people, you probably felt energized, motivated, and even inspired. You may have been anxious about joining a new group of colleagues, but you were ready for the challenge. Yet it's likely that within just a few months the honeymoon period came to an end.

All too often, work is a [source of frustration than fulfillment](#). This lack of engagement can hinder productivity and innovation.

How can companies improve employee engagement? In collaboration with HBR, as part of the ["Rebel Talent" program](#), I recently conducted a six-week survey to

test the effectiveness of a few small changes.

First, I recruited HBR subscribers for an online survey about their current job experiences. Respondents answered questions about their level of engagement at work, how often they take charge and innovate in their jobs, and how curious they feel. I also asked them questions about their performance. They indicated their agreement with various statements (e.g., "At work, I feel bursting with energy" and "I am immersed in my work") on a seven-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Once a week for the next four weeks, respondents received one of four email messages asking them to engage in certain behaviors at work. According

to a decade of my research, these behaviors are key ingredients for enhancing employee engagement.

The four messages were:

1. "In the next week, we'd like you to focus on the following. For many, work has become routine. It's important to keep finding ways to improve current processes. Do not take established systems and procedures for granted: Frequently ask yourself why you are executing work the way you are and if there might be better ways of doing things."

2. "In the next week, we'd like you to focus on the following. Find ways to let your true self shine through at work. It may be as simple as dressing the way you want, decorating your workspace so that it reflects your personality

and makes you feel at ease, or communicating with colleagues and clients in ways that align with who you are. In short, try shaping your job in ways that allow you to feel more authentic and bring out your talents and skills more frequently.”

3. “In the next week, we’d like you to focus on the following. If you find yourself agreeing with colleagues or others in the organization to avoid confrontation or accelerate decision making, be sure to fight that tendency and voice your opinion instead. If you feel strongly that someone is wrong or that there’s a better way of doing or thinking about something, speak up and offer your different perspective.”

4. “In the next week, we’d like you to focus on the following. Ask yourself what your talents are and bring them out more frequently. Think of what makes you unique, and assure that your individuality comes through as you work. Also try to identify opportunities for learning and expanding your current set of skills and interests.”

In week six, respondents answered a final survey, which asked about their experiences at work and invited them to make some observations about the behaviors they engaged in. Almost 1,000 people completed the first survey, and 725 of them participated through the end of the study.

My goal was to examine whether encouraging people to behave in specific ways could lead them to approach their work differently and affect their engagement and performance. To be able to draw conclusions, I enlisted 500 working adults from a range of industries to serve as my control group. I recruited them through ClearVoice, a service that provides panels to academic institutions. They answered the online surveys in weeks one and six but did not receive any messages asking them to adopt new behaviors at work.

As I expected, in the first survey I found no difference in the levels of engagement, innovation, and self-reported performance between the respondents in the intervention group and those in the control group.

But then the results got interesting. When comparing the scores from weeks one and six, I found that they had barely changed for the people in the control group. The results were different for those I had asked to change behaviors — by questioning usual practices and expressing their individuality, for example. Based on their survey answers, after the six weeks they were 21% more engaged in their jobs, they were 18% more likely to take charge and innovate, their performance improved by 14%, and their level of curiosity was 12% higher. In other words, prodding them to behave in ways that constructively fight conformity had had all sorts of benefits

I asked respondents in the intervention group to share a few stories about how they had put into practice the messages they’d received. Overall, the stories seem to suggest that participants experimented with the new behaviors and found them helpful. Here are a few of the replies:

“I had some pictures and postcards that I brought in from home and put up in my office. A couple of colleagues noticed and reacted positively to them.”

“I prioritized work and behaviors based on my strengths, thought about learning goals in every project I was currently working on, and asked myself if the work I am doing today is helping me get where I want to go.”

“After a lot of thinking, I’ve decided to do the following. I made a list of all duties and works of my department (including works that were carried out

entirely by me) and redistributed them to all members of my team, having in mind the skills that each person should develop. In that way, I made a lot of free time for myself and I was able to get involved in more important issues that I was not able to until now, due to lack of time. People felt better, as they felt that they were trusted with duties that were carried out by their director, and higher management started to take a different look at me, as I have started participating in more complicated decision making.”

These behaviors reflect different ways of responding to the messages, but they point to a broader theme: To stay engaged, we need to fight the urge to conform to the expectations of others, the status quo, and even our own point of view. By finding ways to be more authentic at work, challenging common ways of acting, making sure our talents are reflected in our jobs, and taking the opportunity to let our voice and opinions be heard, we can become more engaged in the work we do — and not just to our personal benefit. This greater engagement will lead to the types of innovative behavior and high levels of performance that all organizations crave. ■

LIVE EVENT FOSTERING REBEL TALENT INSIDE PIXAR

AS FRANCESCA GINO delved into the topic of rebel talent, she found inspiration in how Pixar onboards employees. Instead of celebrating the company's successes, Pixar tells new hires about its mistakes and less successful ideas. This helps new workers get past the idea that they're not allowed to make errors or question decisions. Gino joined Pixar president Ed Catmull and HBR editor in chief Adi Ignatius for a sold-out event at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. The three talked about how Pixar continues to get great results from its highly engaged, creative staff of constructive nonconformists.



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WEBINAR →

FOSTERING REBEL TALENT AT WORK

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TODAY'S SPEAKER
Francesca Gino

OCTOBER 26, 2016 @HBRexchange | #HBRwebinar

**“OPPORTUNITIES TO FIGHT CONFORMITY
EXIST IN OUR JOBS. RIGHT NOW.”**

—Francesca Gino

FRANCESCA GINO AND HBR SENIOR EDITOR STEVEN PROKESCH talked about “Rebel Talent” in an hour-long webinar. Gino dove deep into examples of companies that encourage constructive nonconformity and gave advice on how you can follow their lead: Start small. Be persistent. Let new employees know it’s safe to question authority and bring their whole selves to work. Prokesch explored the challenge of balancing nonconformity with the need to get things done and follow *some* rules and regulations. The duo also answered questions from the audience.



NEXT IN THE BIG IDEA:

JANUARY 2017

Generosity Burnout

Join HBR and **Adam Grant**, author of “[In the Company of Givers and Takers](#)” and [The Originals](#), as we explore his latest research on generosity’s dark side, and how leaders can avoid the kind of giving that backfires.