
the core of ‘onlyness’

Nilofer Merchant is a Fellow of the Martin Prosperity Institute at the Rotman School of Management and an author. Her most recent book, *The Power of Onlyness: Make Your Wild Ideas Mighty Enough to Dent the World*, reveals proven strategies to unleash the power of a new idea.



She has personally launched more than 100 products, netting \$18bn in sales and has held executive positions at Apple, Autodesk, and GoLive Systems. Merchant has provided guidance to companies such as Logitech, Symantec, HP, Yahoo, VMWare, and many others on new product strategies, entering new markets, defending against competitors, and optimizing revenues. In 2013, she was awarded the Thinkers50 Future Thinker Award which is to recognize ‘The #1 Person Most Likely to Influence the Future of Management in Both Theory and Practice’ by the UK-based organization. She is ranked 22 on the 2017 Thinkers50 list of management thinkers.

Nothing matters more than innovation; that something new that creates value. It is innovation that has allowed us to build today's smartphones, and will let us build tomorrow's teleportation pods. It is innovation that solves centuries-old problems, and lets us invent the future. It is, of course, what makes money and grows our economy to benefit our lives and society.

A bedrock finding from innovation research is that unlike invention or scientific discovery, it emerges from connections between previously separate elements. And yet, the very way we have constructed our societies and the organizations which populate them strangles the most fruitful forces of innovation. We are long overdue for an alternative conception, one in which 'onlyness' is central.

onlyness

While onlyness is not a word in the English dictionary, it should be.

Because at its simplest, it means "anyone's—quite possibly everyone's—ideas matter..." Based on that spot in the world 'only' one stands, and through the connectedness offered by distributed networks, new ideas can count, connect, and scale to make a difference.

When I was describing the economic value of onlyness to a colleague, I said this construct could be a way to open the doors to the 'castle on the hill' to new ideas. Not based on the power and status of the person who brings those ideas, but based on the power of the ideas themselves. And, this friend...he shook his head, and said... actually...the castle is old and drafty and works only for those who established it, the men who have traditionally held power. Instead, he pointed out, what you seek is not incremental shifts but a radical one, to build a new village by the river...so innovative, the castle'ites' will join you there.

Maybe he is right. After all, the secret to change, Socrates said, is not in fighting the old, but to put all one's energy to building the new.

it is new ideas and not productivity we need to optimize for

And there is no doubt we need a new way to work.

We need the fuel of ideas to thrive in an ideas economy, yet *The Economist* recently ran an article¹ arguing that 'we've run out of ideas'. Nearly 60% of US workers and 80% worldwide do work that amounts to following orders, leaving them unable to contribute their ideas, apply their creativity, or use their own judgment.² 61% of workers admit to 'covering'³, to hide their own passions and interests to fit into a corporate culture, thus leaving their own differentiated ideas at the door. All while 58% of workers are actively disengaged at work.⁴

why?

These cumulative facts show that the collective workforce is designed to be commoditized, so workers can be easily substituted for one another. And let us be clear: this is not a bad thing unto itself because it optimizes the ways an innovation—say, the wheel—can generate growth. The management model to do that, Taylorism, was created at the dawn of the 20th century, when the vast majority of people's ability

The collective workforce is designed to be commoditized, so workers can be easily substituted for one another. And let us be clear: this is not a bad thing unto itself because it optimizes the ways an innovation—say, the wheel—can generate growth.

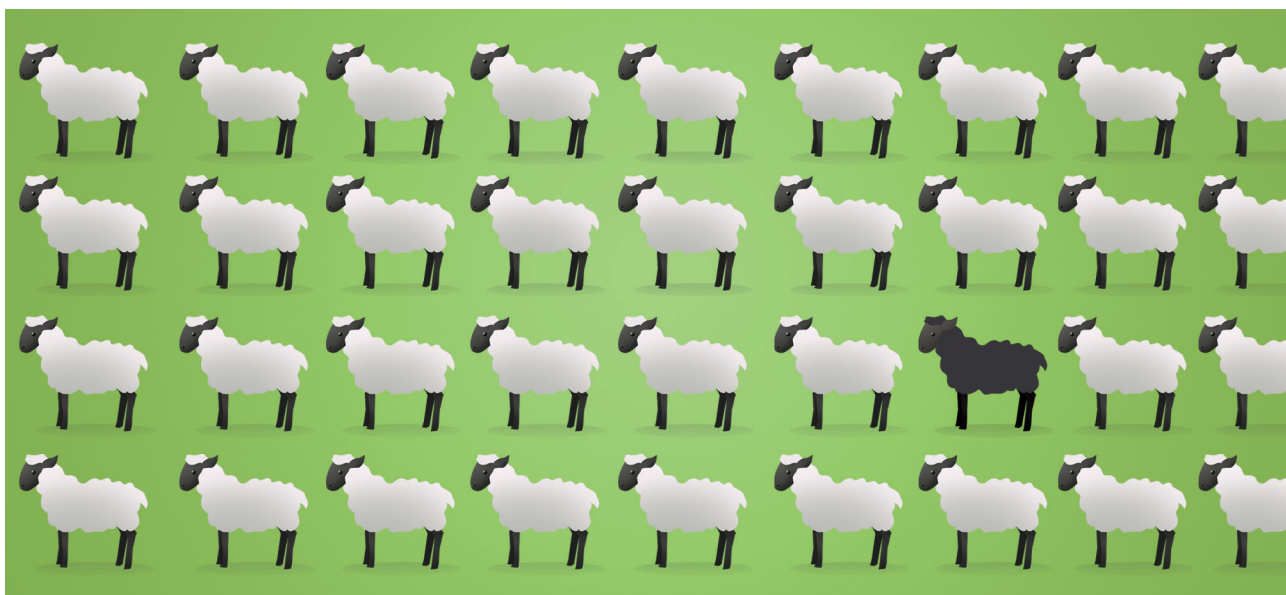


illustration by darshan sompura

It is no wonder that management defaults to Taylorism, despite its reductive nature: atomizing people instead of activating them, dehumanizing them while needing their very human creativity more than ever.

to create value was tied to how fast they could do a pre-determined thing like... install an engine, or hood, or wheels at a Ford manufacturing line. The management system had to do three things: break complex jobs down into simple ones, measure everything that workers did, and link pay to performance. Modern companies (Amazon, Uber, Walmart) have found a way to update the construct for modern times; call it Digital Taylorism.⁵ It still divides large goals into bits and pieces. It is why job descriptions specify and scope what skills and experience make one qualified; the reason why 'talent' is credential-dependent; you are 'talented' for a job when you have a degree to prove your skill, or if you have already done a similar job, so an organization can optimize productivity. It is why modern management has planning cycles; to assess and measure the productivity of work instead of trusting people to do what is best. And it is why rewards still optimize for the individual performance, rather than the more innovation-focused, collaborative, creative work that would connect disparate parts.

When Taylorism rules, companies and societies do not see the modern-day innovation equivalents of the wheel. And, while a rival school of management (Mary Parker Follett, Peter Drucker, Tom Peters) has argued that workers are more productive if you treat them as human beings, it did not shift the fundamental framework of Taylorism, and the underlying premise of productivity as the key measure of growth. So, it is no wonder that management defaults to Taylorism, despite its reductive nature: atomizing people instead of activating them, dehumanizing them while needing their very human creativity more than ever.

We need to adopt a framework that unlocks the fuel for the modern economy, that of new ideas.

And that is why onlyness, the framework and word, came to be. This shift addresses what 'fuel' gets to count (ideas, based on that spot in the world 'only' they stand) and 'the engine' used they make seemingly wild ideas into new realities (distributed networks, and connectedNESS).

| | existing frame: Taylorism | future frame: onlyness |
|-----------------|--|---|
| source of ideas | qualified, credentialed talent in specific jobs. sorted and selected. | broad capacity, widely dispersed for value creation. inclusive. |
| scale | leaders in organizations divide problems and assign them in deconstructed yet measurable bits. | distributed networks where people self-organize as needed to create value / solve big problems. |
| structural unit | organizational role. | shared purpose. it brings out the best in people and the best people. |
| optimizes | productivity | innovation |

While one can argue whether this word is the best way to capture this reframe, or that it is (as yet) an incomplete management theory, but no one can argue it is directionally correct.

economic results from this untapped capacity

An example is the #metoo⁶ phenomena. Individuals have been speaking about their distinct experiences within centralized, hierarchical, and patriarchal organizations for years, only to be silenced, dismissed, and isolated by HR and Legal. Now, those with shared purpose use distributed networks to gather together, in self-organizing connectedNESS, to make a new reality. It is honoring each 'only', and connected by purpose, thus allowing an idea to scale. In the world dominated by Harvey Weinstein, you get blockbusters like *Shakespeare In Love* or *The English Patient*. Yet, it is hard to measure what did not get made; how many potentially valuable perspectives were lost because the rigid power structures of who gets to count? One case study⁷ could provide us a proxy. Franklin Leonard's onlyness-centered model of the Black List opened up Hollywood's elite doors to script writers outside the establishment and circumvented the powers that be. By asking people to (anonymously) submit scripts one loved, not ones that could be approved by the power-brokers in charge, the Black List helped 'discover' scripts previously destined for the dustbin to be picked up and put into production. *Moonlight*, *Juno*, *King's Speech*—scripts once dismissed, were able to create value. In ten years, as of 2015, nearly 300 of the 1000 Black-Listed scripts have been produced, earning over \$25 billion worldwide. They also received 223 Academy Award nominations, and won 43 Oscars. Four of the past six Best Picture winners, ten of the last fourteen screenwriting winners, and three of the 2014's screenwriting nominees were Black List scripts. Most interestingly, for each of the first eight years, the Black List's top five scripts were submitted by outsiders—writers not living in Los Angeles nor represented in the industry. The Black List opened doors into the walled city, past

While one can argue whether this word is the best way to capture this reframe, or that it is (as yet) an incomplete management theory, but no one can argue it is directionally correct.



As we funnel in ideas that do not come from expected places but nevertheless harbor the ideas, solutions, and innovation that humanity most needs, we will make progress.

the Weinstein-type gatekeepers so that new people and their ideas came in. This construct—that of networked individuals adding that which only they could—showed up in economic and artistic results. Based on the qualitative research of 300 examples, the Black List outcomes are not coincidental; there is untapped capacity when new ideas count, and scale through connectedness.

building the new scaffolds and structures

We have not run out of ideas, it is that existing systems obscure or deny ideas that come from people who lack organizational heft, or do not 'fit in' to a particular profile. So, new ideas do not have a chance. As organizations optimize for productivity, they are also optimized to eliminate the incredibly messy moments that birth innovations and new outcomes.

Each of us has something of value to offer, based on that spot in the world only one stands, and joined together in purpose, in connectedness. While not everyone will, anyone can. The fact that today so many people do not is not a sign that they lack capacity, but instead a sign that new scaffolding and structures need to be built to let them do so. This is our biggest management problem, and also our greatest opportunity. As we funnel in ideas that do not come from expected places but nevertheless harbor the ideas, solutions, and innovation that humanity most needs, we will make progress. All progress is born of new ideas. They let us reimagine who we are, and how we might be. Ideas rupture the status quo and incubate the future—of innovation; of growth; of prosperity. A future that works for not just a few, but for many. ■

01 <https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21729746-exploitation-currently-available-knowledge-far-complete-cost>

02 <http://martinprosperity.org/content/onlyness-a-trillion-dollar-opportunity/>

03 <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/us/Documents/about-deloitte/us-inclusion-uncovering-talent-paper.pdf>

04 <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/190445/negative-impact-disengaged-employees-germany.aspx>

05 <https://www.economist.com/news/business/21664190-modern-version-scientific-management-threatens-dehumanise-workplace-digital>

06, 07 <http://nilofermerchant.com/library/the-power-of-onlyness/>