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**The Way of the Outsider:
Lessons Learned from Unlikely Disruptors**

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Abstract

Innovation often begins on the margins, driven by outsiders unencumbered by conventional wisdom. This article explores the paradox of outsider-driven creativity: their distance from the center fosters radical insights, yet their lack of institutional credibility hampers acceptance. Through illustrative cases — including Nobel Prize winner Katalin Karikó and organizations like Pixar, IDEO, and the NSF — the article examines how individuals and institutions can bridge the gap between novelty and legitimacy. Key strategies include cultivating hybrid social networks, translating novel ideas into insider language, nurturing receptive cultures, and seizing inflection points. Drawing on over a decade of research, the authors reveal how empowering outsider perspectives can unlock transformative innovation and reshape organizational dynamics.

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In the theater of innovation, it is often the outsider who steals the spotlight. Consider Coco Chanel, who rose from her modest beginnings as an orphan to redefine elegance with the timeless Little Black Dress, turning the fashion industry on its head. Or take Quentin Tarantino, a self-taught filmmaker who vaulted from the checkout counter of a video rental store into the director's chair, rewriting the rules of modern cinema. Marvel at Katalin Karikó, the Hungarian scientist who endured years of scorn for her theories about mRNA until her research became the cornerstone of the rapid development of the Covid-19 vaccine.

As is often true for successful disruptors, these three all began their work on the fringes of their worlds, mocked for their quirks—misfits in their time. But there was an upside to their isolation: unshackled by the prevailing dogmas that bind insiders, they could see options that others had overlooked. Sociologists dub this "focused naïveté"—an advantageous blindness to commonly held points of view that frees outsider innovators to tackle problems dismissed by experts. Yet this advantage comes with a significant disadvantage: the very detachment that allows these innovators to conjure up groundbreaking ideas hampers their quest for the backing and acknowledgment needed to develop those ideas and share them with the world. Without the conventional badges of honor, the established networks, or the stamp of expert approval, the outsiders' journey is often uphill: even today, after winning the Nobel Prize, Katalin Karikó is still not a tenured faculty member at the University of Pennsylvania.

Karikó's experience isn't unique. As Y Combinator's visionary founder Paul Graham put it, "great new things often come from the margins, and yet the people who discover them are looked down on by everyone, including themselves". This contradiction lies at the heart of what he alludes to as the paradox of the outsider.

How do successful outsiders overcome Graham's paradox and change a world that shunned them? What lessons can we draw from the successes of such outsiders as Tarantino and Karikó? How can organizations not only spot but also empower original outsiders, amplify their voices, support their ventures, and provide the nurturing environment necessary for their ideas to flourish?

We have spent over a decade tackling these questions, relying on a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to chart the remarkable paths of such outsiders, whose careers, we believe, offer important clues as to how individuals, teams, and organizations can expand their creative potential.

Thinking like an outsider.

At the Masters of Scale Summit held in San Francisco in August 2023, a panel titled *Think Like an Outsider* captured the audience's imagination. Featuring the strategic minds behind some of today's trailblazing companies—Sallie Krawcheck of Ellevest, Tope Awotona of Calendly, and Shellye Archambeau, formerly of MetricStream – the session addressed the hidden advantages of strategizing like an entrepreneurial outsider. The crucial takeaway of the discussion? Visionary outsiders usher in innovation by bringing with them experiences that are deeply rooted in their personal backgrounds but novel to their new environments.

This theme resonates powerfully throughout our research. Consider the remarkable journey of Coco Chanel, born out of wedlock to a laundress and a street peddler, then abandoned and raised by nuns in an orphanage. Amidst these humble surroundings, she unearthed a wellspring of inspiration that would shape her most iconic creations. It was here, amidst the austerity of the orphanage, that she cultivated her iconic stark and functional style. For instance, her legendary affinity for the classic interplay of black and white can be traced back to her prolonged exposure to the severe look of the orphan's uniforms and the nuns' robes. Even the Chanel logo, a symbol of enduring elegance, finds its roots in the ornate stained-glass windows of the Romanesque abbey of Aubazine, home of the orphanage that sheltered her during her formative years.

Quentin Tarantino, the rock star of film directors, had a similarly unpromising beginning. Raised by a sixteen-year-old single mother of Cherokee descent, Tarantino abandoned his formal education at the tender age of 15, when he joined an acting school, only to depart two years later. He had no conventional training in filmmaking. Instead, his five-year stint as a clerk in a video store became his film school, where he watched thousands of hours of genres often marginalized by mainstream tastes, from blaxploitation to underground horror, to Chinese wuxia pan. From this potent amalgamation of influences emerged cinematic masterpieces that would go on to be revered by movie connoisseurs across the globe.

Influences need not even be direct. Given up for adoption by his mother, whose father disapproved of Jobs's Muslim biological father, Jobs was brought up in the Bay Area by a working-class family. A college dropout, Steve Jobs was an outsider in any number of ways. Yet a chance encounter with an enigmatic trappist monk named Robert Palladino in Portland, Oregon, set him on a course to change the world. Palladino's teachings, steeped in the art of calligraphy, would resonate deeply with Jobs, becoming a spark that ignited his

creative genius. It was from these ink-stained lessons that the unmistakable, elegant style of the Macintosh computer emerged—a testament to the transformative power of unlikely encounters outside beaten paths.

Look outside, act inside.

Of course, you could argue that such geniuses as Chanel and Jobs would have done well regardless of their circumstances, but other research we have done suggests that there is actually something special about life on the edge. A few years back, we mapped the intricate web of collaborations among approximately 12,000 Hollywood artists in a quest to investigate whether creative success was concentrated at the epicenter of this network or scattered through the industry. The findings were nothing short of revelatory. In this grand social tapestry, it wasn't those on the extreme fringes who reaped the highest creative rewards. Nor were the central figures dominating its core. Statistically speaking, the zenith of creative success resided most often in the liminal borderland, where the center met the periphery—among individuals who straddled both worlds.

This pattern extends to group dynamics as well. As we looked more closely into the data, we found that film crews that blended core and peripheral talents consistently outperformed those in less diverse groups. This hybrid social milieu proves to be a more fertile ground for creativity, blending two essential elements for success: fresh ideas and access to influential players who can champion the outsider's vision.

One way to picture this is as a climber with one hand holding tightly to a trusted boulder while reaching daringly outward with the other. This might mean venturing beyond the boundaries of our customary social circles, traversing unfamiliar literary territories by embracing poetry if our shelves only hold science books, unlocking new harmonies by picking up a musical instrument, even if the notes are foreign to our ears, or embarking on a journey southward if our travels have always led us north. A compelling example from the culinary world is the approach of Chef Ferran Adrià. Best known for his pioneering work in molecular gastronomy, Adrià often explored the periphery of culinary arts by integrating techniques and ideas from chemistry and art. While maintaining a firm foundation in traditional Spanish cuisine, he ventured into experimental techniques, such as using liquid nitrogen for flash-freezing or creating culinary foams with high-speed centrifuges to create a new kind of taste. This blend of core culinary principles with techniques from

outside traditional restaurant kitchens revolutionized the gastronomic world, making his work a symbol of culinary innovation and creativity.

Anchoring to our core contexts ensures we remain firmly rooted in the worlds we are familiar with, where we can more easily mobilize resources and attention. Yet, it is only by daringly stretching beyond the edges of these realms that we can gain access to fresh stimuli and untapped opportunities. Grounding in the familiar provides legitimacy, while forays into the edges provide novelty. It's this dynamic interplay between the secure and the uncharted that can spark world-changing creativity.

If you are not ready to dive in, be ready to help out.

Thinking like an outsider can be a good thing, but it's not so simple to put it into practice. To explain why, we need to go back to the famous series of experiments conducted by psychologist Solomon Asch in the 1950s. In these experiments, a subject was asked to match the length of a line on one card with one of three lines on another card. Unknown to the subject, the other “participants” in the room had been instructed to give incorrect answers in certain cases. Despite the clear evidence of their own senses, most subjects conformed to the group’s consensus, choosing the incorrect line, thus illustrating the strong influence of social pressure on conformity. Introducing a distinct point of view into a social setting can be emotionally taxing, even when one is armed with a strong conviction. Thankfully, Asch’s studies did more than expose the dangers of conformity; they suggested a solution too. The grip of conformity, while strong, can be easily weakened: a second voice of dissent can lead the majority to waver.

One compelling illustration of this idea was offered by Derek Sivers, founder and former president of CD Baby, one of the world’s largest online stores for independent musicians. During a popular TED talk, Sivers showed a video in which a lone dancer cuts loose with wild abandon on a hillside. At first, this solo figure seems crazy, but then something remarkable happens: a brave soul bounds up to join the dance. That single act of allegiance makes a huge difference in making the marginal mainstream: within seconds, as others flood in, a tipping point is reached, and a massive dance party erupts. Sivers' video captures the transformative impact that a single ally can have in championing the outsider’s effort, challenging us not just to recast the outsider in a completely different light but to appreciate the value of the first ally who steps forward in support.

Time and again, history shows us the power of an unexpected ally. Consider the remarkable case of John Harrison, a self-taught clockmaker from a tiny village in Lincolnshire. Harrison audaciously took on the academic establishment with his groundbreaking approach to solving the ancient problem of determining longitude. After enduring years of tireless struggle, his fortunes dramatically shifted when he caught the attention of King George III, who shared Harrison's passion for horology. This unexpected alliance proved pivotal, blending a powerful insider's influence with Harrison's unwavering commitment to accuracy. Then there is Chanel, who found her patrons in Misia Godebska-Sert and a coterie of avant-garde artists. And let's not forget Steve Jobs, whose vision was confirmed by Mike Markkula's enthusiastic yes! in a sea of venture capitalists' nos. Who are these catalysts? What compels them to lift outsiders to prominence? A study we spearheaded in 2014 with Paul Allison from the University of Pennsylvania, shed light on the people who play this role in the film industry. We found that while critics tend to throw their weight behind the artists on the edge, peers often prop up one of their own. Our evidence suggests that the ally is often someone naturally drawn to the outsiders' innovative spark and with the necessary influence to shield their endeavors from skeptical scrutiny.

King George III, with his penchant for timepieces, was a natural patron for Harrison. Chanel's modernist zeal for simplicity and elegance was echoed in the works of the modernist circle revolving around Misia Godebska-Sert: Stravinsky, Picasso, Diaghilev, and Cocteau. These artists didn't just welcome Chanel into their fold; they personified the avant-garde artistic ideals she championed and collaborated with her to infuse those ideals into their creative endeavors. As for Markkula, the young tech enthusiast and affluent investor didn't just provide financial support -- he threw himself into the enterprise when he recognized in Jobs a kindred revolutionary spirit. These allies are often driven by an emotional or cognitive alignment with the visionary outsiders they choose to support. As Fabio Zaffagnini, the charismatic marine geologist who journeyed from the wilderness of oceanographic expeditions to leading [Rockin' 1000](#), the world's largest rock band, explained to us: "I leaped into this wild venture from the outside track, without a single note of experience in the music industry. Yet, I was backed by a small motley crew of friends, even crazier than myself, who bought into my madcap vision. A line I once stumbled upon kept echoing in my mind: 'Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.' I somehow knew that with their support, the leap from the outside to the inside track was not just a dream—it was entirely within reach".

Use words that resonate with insiders.

When you're an outsider, you come equipped with a unique vision and a toolkit that sets you apart from the pack. The disadvantage is that you are essentially a foreigner, and to persuade others to see things your way, you will need to master the language of your new home -- no small feat when you haven't grown up with the locals. To connect with the insiders, innovators on the outside must express their ideas in ways that are in partial sync with their intended audience. Our latest experiments put this theory to the test, by comparing the impact of different kinds of language on several panels of insiders. In one scenario, the innovator used plain language to describe her breakthrough to an audience of professionals. In another, she laced her pitch with the jargon of the inner circle. The result: The generous helping of jargon led to insiders giving her ratings 20% better than the panel that heard the jargon-free pitch.

Of course, mastering the language of the insider may not be easy. It may be too hard, or perhaps inauthentic, to strategically use the insiders' language. In such a case, the outside innovator may need what we call an *outside-in translator*. John Harrison is a case in point. His lack of formal education presented communication barriers with the leading astronomers of his time. But he found people who could navigate both his vernacular and the academic discourse. His first outside-in translator was George Graham, a renowned horologist, who was adept at decoding Harrison's pioneering chronometer concepts into terms that the scholarly Royal Society could appreciate. Then came James Short, a Scottish physicist, and fellow of the Royal Society, who was skilled in the mechanics of optics. He was instrumental in helping Harrison clarify his innovations with the gridiron pendulum and in crafting clear, compelling pamphlets to share the ideas with a broader audience, including Parliament. With the help of his insider collaborators, Harrison converted his outsider ideas into insider success stories—a strategy as useful to innovators today as it was in Harrison's time.

Translations may stretch beyond the linguistic as well. Take the case of LEGO's adventurous foray into digital entertainment. Renowned for its physical building blocks, the Danish toy company faced the challenge of remaining relevant in an increasingly digital world where children were more inclined towards video games and online fun. LEGO, initially, was an outsider in the digital realm, far removed from its core competency in physical toys. The game-changer was the launch of the LEGO video games series, starting with hits like "LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game." By collaborating with seasoned video game developers, LEGO

ingeniously intertwined its fresh, creative ideas with the insiders' expertise, successfully translating its classic brick-building experience into the world of digital gaming. This alliance not only allowed LEGO to communicate authentically with gamers but also ensured its cherished identity thrived in a new realm.

Nurture a receptive culture.

Imagine a world where outsider perspectives are not just welcomed but eagerly sought after, a world where these fresh viewpoints become the keys to unlocking innovative solutions. This vision isn't just an ideal; it's a vital strategy for fostering groundbreaking innovation. Yet, embracing this approach presents two intertwined organizational challenges. Firstly, there's the crucial task of bringing outsiders' ideas into the spotlight. This demands a culture shift, as it requires that organizations break away from rigidly centralized decision-making to empower employees from all corners to freely choose their projects and contribute solutions regardless of rank, expertise, or file.

Lakhani's research on InnoCentive's crowdsourced innovation contests supports this approach's effectiveness. His study of 166 problems across 26 firms revealed that a vast majority of breakthrough solutions sprang from minds far removed from the usual confines of the problem's domain. But that's just the start. The second challenge is nurturing a culture where these outside ideas can take root, particularly in organizations steeped in a strong group identity.

To better understand the dynamics of overcoming a strong group identity, we conducted an experiment with two groups of life sciences professionals evaluating the same innovative idea - one pitched by an insider, the other by an outsider. Predictably, when thinking as a collective, the insider idea was preferred and received higher ratings. Yet, when the participants were primed to think on their own, the tables turned dramatically, and the outsider's identical idea suddenly shone brighter.

This fascinating reversal suggests that even a little nudge can go a long way in reducing aversion to outsiders' ideas by encouraging group members to value their personal perspectives and preferences, alongside the collective norms and values of the group. The outdoor clothing company Patagonia's approach exemplifies this. By encouraging employees to infuse their work with personal interests and passions, particularly those related to environmental stewardship, Patagonia has fostered an organizational environment where individual creativity thrives within the collective ethos, driving forward innovative solutions and a robust, inclusive

decision-making culture. Alternatively, consider the use of independent evaluation in selection panels in the venture capital (VC) industry. For instance, Sequoia Capital, a leading venture capital firm, has a rigorous process for evaluating potential investments to minimize groupthink. Each partner scrutinizes business plans and meets with founders in isolation, allowing them to form unbiased opinions based solely on the merits of the proposal. Only after these independent evaluations are complete do the partners convene to collectively deliberate and make their decisions. This approach fosters a culture of open-mindedness, where contrarian voices are not inhibited but valued as catalysts for innovation.

Ride the inflection points.

When something new knocks on the door of a system—be it a business, an organization, or a team—the outsider is often met with folded arms and wary eyes. However, when pressure mounts, even the most closed systems start to open up to alternative ideas. Our research suggests that the outsider’s vision often comes alive in moments of upheaval, what we call the *inflection points*—make-or-break junctures that upset the status quo, bringing a moment of openness to new ideas.

For example, John Harrison’s moment came with a shipwreck off the Isles of Scilly, a famous disaster that precipitated the search for a solution to the longitude problem. This disaster sparked a surge of interest in inventions and inventors that would previously have been dismissed. For Chanel, the turning point was the upheaval of World War I. The post-war years demanded a new archetype of womanhood—practical, resilient, and unadorned. A society marked by loss and seeking simplicity became the canvas for Chanel’s work, her pre-war experiments with a functional style transforming into the vanguard of post-war fashion. As she put it, "A world was about to end, another was about to unfold... I was in the right place; an opportunity materialized in front of me, and I seized it."

Fast forward to recent history, Katalin Karikó’s groundbreaking work on mRNA risked being relegated to the quiet corners of academic libraries, barely echoing beyond the hallowed halls of science. After years of rejection by top journals, Karikó and her co-author and mentor, Dr. Weissman, finally saw their study in print in 2005—yet it languished, unnoticed for a long time. “We talked to pharmaceutical companies and venture capitalists. No one cared,” Weissman said recently. “We were screaming a lot, but no one would listen”. But

when Covid-19 swept across the globe, it was the inflection point that catapulted their research into the limelight and recast once-scorned Katalin Karikó as a central figure in the fight for humanity's future.

The insights from our research aren't confined to solitary figures; they apply to the corporate realm as well. Take the global airline network shaken by the events of 9/11, which one of us studied extensively. In the face of unprecedented operational chaos, major airlines were suddenly in dire need of new partners and fresh routes. This inflection point opened the gates wide for smaller, once-marginal airlines to step into the limelight. As an example, consider the meteoric ascent of Qatar Airways (QA) during this period. Between 2002 and 2005, Qatar Airways (QA) alliances quadrupled, and its turnover nearly doubled. This rapid growth propelled QA from the edges to the center of the aviation world, showcasing how crisis can catalyze a swift climb from the periphery to the pinnacle of an industry.

Sooner or later, every system will experience an inflection point, a decisive moment that cracks open doors to worlds that are usually shut tight against the unfamiliar. Outsiders looking for a way in need to stay alert to these rare opportunities.

Doing things no one can imagine.

Standing up to the collective voice can be daunting, yet our research suggests that even the support of one like-minded champion can shatter the chains of conformity. Our findings also reveal that systems under strain become unexpectedly receptive to new ideas, that receptiveness to the outside may be nurtured, and that adeptness in speaking the dialect of the inner circle can unlock doors previously thought to be closed. Whether you're a budding entrepreneur or a seasoned executive, the edge is where some of the greatest opportunities often hide, and embracing an outsider's perspective can be your key to unveiling them. As the misunderstood computing genius Alan Turing once said, "Sometimes it is the people no one can imagine anything of who do the things no one can imagine".