

# Nilofer Merchant: Ideas can now spread and scale through networks, rather than hierarchies



As a former executive at Apple and Autodesk, and consultant for a number of other Silicon Valley companies, Nilofer Merchant has a pretty good idea of how to move things forward in the business world. One key ingredient, if you ask her, is collaboration. How to get people to collaborate, and companies to value collective work more than hierarchy, is a constant focus of her attention. Her most recent book, *“The Power of Onlyness: Make Your Wild Ideas Mighty Enough to Dent the World”*, is less focused on companies than on individuals. It’s an exhortation to people who have ideas that never see the light of day to build on the power of social networks and work collectively to realise their dreams. “Ideas can now spread and scale through networks, rather than hierarchies”, she says. For the book, Nilofer created a new word, *onlyness*. This is how she defines it: “Onlyness is that which is deeply and ONLY you, that lets you be in connectedNESS with others to get things done”. This interview with Nilofer was done via email by **Helena Vieira**, managing editor of LSE Business Review.

**When you were writing the book, was the reader you had in mind mostly an entrepreneur building a business out of an idea? How can the concept of *onlyness* help people flourish in their careers when they’re someone else’s employee?**

The *Onlyness* reader is an innovator who is bone-tired from applying advice that fails them. Let me elaborate on the two common falsities that misdirect. First: while it’s clear that breakthrough ideas nearly always come from left-field, the dominant literature (Outliers, Originals, Where Do Ideas Come From, et al) completely ignores the role of bias. The fact is ideas are sorted and screened based on the power of the person who brings forward that idea, not the power of the idea [itself](#). By not addressing this power dynamic, it suggests bias is not a major issue. Yet these forces limit people’s ideas and affect nearly two thirds of all ideas, which denies us all the innovations and solutions that humanity most needs.

For those who *do* address those power dynamics (affecting women and people of colour especially), the message is “Lean In”, “Have Grit”, and “Be Brave”. This second body of literature suggests the problem is predominantly one of confidence and personality, and by inference... if you’re not able to get your idea thru, it’s on YOU and you alone. This completely overlooks what happens when women leaders *do* lean in: if they power-seek...they’ll get negative backlash. So, I offered a research-based field guide to those 60 per cent of innovators-in-waiting to actually get the advice they need: How exactly does one change the systemic rules of the game ... so one’s ideas can count. This can apply within or external to organisations. (Spoiler alert: What is often attributed to a confidence problem is a connectedness opportunity.)

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**For many people searching for their own direction, things are not so clear-cut and it's hard to see the horizon, especially when there are multiple options involved. How can people find their *onlyness*?**

Each of us has a problem, which is we can't see what we distinctly offer the world. It's as if we have a light on top of our head and every room we're in is the colour of that lightbulb. It reminds me of when my stepdaughter had a 4.0+ GPA (grade point average) from UC Berkeley, even as she double-majored in physics and astrophysics. And when I remarked how much passion and natural capacity she had for these fields, she said "if I can do it, it must be easy". She couldn't see her own light, for what it was. This is where the perspective of others can help.

Our tribe can see and describe how the room changes when we're in it, if what we offer is the visual equivalent of mallard blue or mandarin orange. The simple exercise is to ask five or ten people who know you (but not necessarily your inner circle) to ask 'What do I distinctly do and offer when I'm in the room?'... and listen to hear back one's personal *onlyness*. Don't get stuck on specific words, but clarity on what you offer. The natural follow-up question is to ask, 'where can this be put to use?' These are not asking "what should I do" but 'what can I distinctly offer to serve the team (or world) which is the basis of *onlyness*?'

**At a time when many people cross national borders often, speak more than one language, are exposed to multiple cultures, is it possible that they may have more than one single *onlyness*?**

Yes, *of course*. *Onlyness* is that which is deeply and ONLY you, that let's you be in connectedNESS with others to get things done. Your personal *onlyness* is, by definition, your distinct history and experience, as well as your visions and hopes. It is ALL of you, and lets you embrace your own multitudes, as [Whitman](#) said. Then, it's a question for whom and how do you want to be connected to the world? That can change over time, just as you do. It is not a singular lens of you or a fragmented view.

Back when I served on corporate boards, I would sometimes get described as the "woman corporate board member". This description sorting by gender showed the *silhouette* of who I am, not the *soul* of what I brought to the corporate board room. When 52 per cent of the population are women, that description wasn't very descriptive. Instead, it showed how my contemporaries were seeing me first (and perhaps only) as that member of a group, not what I the individual was bringing to the business situation. They weren't celebrating the fact that I was the ONLY person in that room who had shipped over 100 products and so probably had a great deal of perspective on solving the go-to-market problems the company was facing. To see *onlyness* is not to see the singular but to celebrate the specific. It's how we each add value and are valued.

**You write that co-ownership of an idea is what leads to successful execution. That seems to go against the myth of the lone genius entrepreneur. How is this relationship built between the inventor and the people who help them build a project? How can creators mobilise other people and yet make sure their original plan stays on track?**

Magazines sell us a hot image of Steve Jobs, not of *Jobs, Wozniak and the early team*. And the existing entrepreneurs go along with it, partly because they like how it sounds but mostly because the networks that let them innovate are invisible to them. They think this must be how the world works for everyone. But existing power networks that served Steve Jobs mostly serve people who look like him... That's why it's important to talk about why this is a myth at best, and a lie at worst. It's also why I spent two thirds of *Onlyness* talking about how to go from "you" to "us". The bedrock principles of innovation are two-fold. First is that unlike invention or scientific discovery, innovation (a) emerges from "left-field" sources, and (b) by connections between previously separate elements. That's true for *everyone*. What is less understood is that for many of us have to actively work to build that set of connections because existing power networks don't currently include us.

**I'm thinking of *onlyness* and leadership. Can leadership skills be learned? Are there people who are born not to be leaders, who shouldn't bother trying to become one?**

Anyone can be and likely *is* a leader of ideas. Or as I am apt to say, not everyone will, but anyone can. Leadership is too often associated with title. But look around, and you'll see innovation happens because someone is acting on what only they see, building communities around that idea and then turning that idea into reality. In the US, the Parkland kids have done more in the last 30 days around the topic of guns in American culture than the 20 years prior. And none of them have a title. In traditional society, they are powerless as young, non-voters. But in an *onlyness*-centred model, they are powerful enough to dent the world, because of the power of their idea that others jointly act on, to make a reality.

**You say that job titles don't count so much anymore, if you can build a circle of influence through social media. How easily do social networks lead to real influence and actual offline participation in a common cause?**

We should do a distinction between social media and social networks. Social media is the way information we share is used to market to us; it's the message board of Facebook. Social networks are Twitter or private FB groups where you can find people with whom to form action with. Whether it is a private group of Economists for Prosperity or professional networks of women entrepreneurs, This is an important way for us to find and know, later to trust and depend on, and ultimately to act together as one.

Networks (funded by the media model) that lets people gather together can now do what once only large centralised organisations could; this tectonic shift changes everything.

Let's take, for example, the recent #MeToo movement. Individuals (both men and women) have been speaking about their distinct experiences of sexual harassment within centralised, hierarchical, and patriarchal organisations for years and years...only to be silenced, dismissed, and isolated by corporate HR and Legal. Now, those with shared purpose use distributed networks to gather together, in self-organising connectedNESS, to make a new reality. It's honouring 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's hard to measure what didn't get made. How many potentially valuable perspectives were lost because the rigid power structures of who gets to count? One case study (a chapter 5 story in *Onlyness*) could provide us a proxy. Franklin Leonard's *onlyness*-centred 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 they loved, not ones that could be approved by the power-brokers in charge, The Black List helped "discover" scripts previously destined for the dustbin, which could then be picked up and put into production. *Moonlight*, *Juno*, *The King's Speech*, scripts once dismissed, were able to create value. In 10 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 2014's screenwriting nominees were Black List scripts. Most interestingly, for each of the first 8 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 the Weinstein-type gatekeepers so that new people and their ideas came in.

This construct of networked individuals, adding that which only they could, showed up in economic and artistic results. Note how this is not a *marketing* or social media shift, but a core "product" using networks to effect change. 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.

**You speak of the importance of social media. How do I know that a person is authentic and means what they post? Isn't everyone carefully curating their images on social media? Can you fake an *onlyness*?**

There are certainly those who can focus on the optics and position themselves (and frankly there's plenty of people who encourage you to do this, to "brand" yourself) but how authentic you are, and what you put out there authentically is going to be your call. The world tells us — starting from when we're little (with teachers and adults alike) how to fit in rather than be ourselves. In fact, some groups get negative feedback for being "authentic". But social media can be used constructively: a way for us to signal /seek one another so that we can gather together in distributed networks to get things done. Where once we were limited to whom we knew based on where we went to school or where we grew up, we can now find anyone globally who cares about certain things. It can be used as fakeness and it can be a more true reflection of your interests and passions; I do encourage you to be all of you. I only because it is going to help you see and be yourself more clearly and ultimately others will be able to, too.

**On page 156, TED fellow Sunny Bates says "If there's one word to describe the Fellows programme it's love", and you comment that love is the "other-acknowledging, other-respecting, other-helping drive that reunites the separated". Can we talk about love in professional settings, especially in corporations?**

As I hear this question, I reflect that it's worth an essay to explore this topic more. Most of our organisations hate actual people. I mean, how else can the statistics of [87 per cent](#) of people not liking their work exist year after year and yet, nothing changes. Work is right now monotonous, boring, soul-destroying where most people are not asked to bring themselves or their ideas to work. Imagine if we wanted people to love their work? How might we design it? Some organisations do that for some select people, for example Google X with their breakthrough ideas of [Loons](#), and such. The goal there is to find people who are passionate about certain things and then let them join the team and self-organise to add their bit to the world. It sounds a little nuts to most of us who are used to figuring out how to put people in specific and pre-defined jobs but what if we could do this across every job?

**How did "corporate" come to mean such negative, undesirable characteristics (cold/inhuman/artificial)?**

To understand today, we have to understand history. For nearly 150 years, the collective workforce has been *designed* to be commoditised, so workers can be easily substituted for one another. And let's be clear: this is not a bad thing unto itself, because it optimises 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 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, etc) have found a way to update the construct for modern times; Call it [Digital Taylorism](#). It still divides large goals into bits and pieces. It's why job descriptions specify and scope skills and experience and is the reason why "talent" is often credential-dependent. You are "talented" for a job when you have a degree to prove your skill, or if you've already done a similar job, so an organisation can optimise productivity. It's why modern management has planning cycles, to assess and track the productivity of work ... instead of trusting people to do what is best. And it's why rewards still optimise for the individual performance, rather than the more innovation-focused, collaborative, creative work that would connect disparate parts.

If you believe the role of workers is to do the bidding of others, then this model works. If you believe work is a fundamental way that humans add their bit to the world and we need more of that, then we'd design a new system. Which is, at its most fundamental, what I am lobbying for with the construct of *Onlyness*.

**You talk a lot about trust and integrity as important to get people to work towards a common goal. At a certain point you give an example, that "if my supervisor demonstrates empowering leadership but I don't feel it's genuine I'm not going to take the risk to be creative". Is convincing people that you mean it key for leadership?**

What we're talking about here is tied to one of your earlier questions.

You asked if what we're talking about was social media-related, and I said, actually you're asking the wrong question because this is about social networks as a new way of getting things done. Here you ask, "is convincing people that you mean it key to leadership" which suggest it's something one person does to another and not something people come to understand together. This tension is important to call out and elaborate on. Social media is what one applies to get *you* to do *my* bidding, a way of advertising and influencing. Social networks are applied so we can decide and act as one, reaching new outcomes together.

But if we're talking about "social" in the way I have defined it, that of distributed networks that lets people join in as needed — then there is a new way to organise, mobilise and enact change. Instead of an employee model where I do what you want me to because I report to you, I instead have the power to act on my own interest, to find those who can join in and we can do something that otherwise was impossible before. I have agency, autonomy and can act accordingly. It changes leading to be how we come together to solve some of the world's most complex problem. In the social and networked model I describe as the future of work, "leadership" becomes about getting people to join in because we are aligned in purpose. Social trust, then, is an extraordinarily interesting variable in how we each lead. It means people "follow" based on clarity and alignment of purpose. It means we focus on alignment of interests, not organising by organisational chart.

It means we shift from rewarding individuals to rewarding the cultures that allow people to take the risks to learn, and figure it out so we bring out the best of one another and for one another. And this form of social trust doesn't get anywhere near the attention it deserves. But the basic idea is this: if you believe my interests are aligned to yours, and that I'll choose *our* interest over *my* own, *we'll* invest of ourselves to get things done.

When we see this change in "social", leadership will know it's not about what you get me to do, it's about us and where we're going.



*Notes:*

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