

INNOVATION

Use Copycats to Your Advantage

When a competitor knocks off your product, it can feel as if that company is profiting at your expense. But new research shows that imitators can provide valuable, low-cost insights that strengthen your next offering.


A study of the video game industry looked at 438 PlayStation 2 games that had sequels and analyzed the impact of “near clone” replicas released between the original game and its sequel. The imitators copied core features of the original games but introduced small variations—for example, in navigation systems or by offering multiplayer modes.

The researchers found that the more imitators there were in the market, the higher the quality of a game’s official sequel became, as measured by an analysis of product reviews. This effect was especially strong when the imitators had a large share of the market. Their prominence made it easier for the original developers to observe and analyze changes in the copycat games and gather richer feedback from customers and experts and more-reliable performance data. As a result they were able to draw clearer insights from the knock-offs, particularly about which variations to adopt or reject.

However, the researchers found that sequels’ quality improved only when the original development team remained intact. If that team had changed because of turnover or restructuring, the learning benefits vanished. The researchers say that retaining the

original team’s tacit knowledge is crucial because it helps the company spot which changes are worthwhile.

“Innovators may dismiss imitators as copycats with little to offer,” the researchers write. However, their findings provide strong evidence that “failing to study imitation products means missing opportunities for innovation.”

 **ABOUT THE RESEARCH** “*Vicarious Experimentation: Do Innovators Learn by Being Imitated?*” by Sangyun Kim, Hart E. Posen, and Martin Ganco (Academy of Management Journal, 2025)

DEVELOPING EMPLOYEES

Debate Training Helps People Become Leaders


Companies spend millions on development programs that often have mixed results when it comes to producing the next generation of leaders. New research found one intervention that may help: debate training.

In one experiment 471 U.S. employees at a *Fortune* 100 company were randomly assigned to either participate in a nine-week debate course, or not. A year and a half later people who’d taken the training were significantly more likely to have stepped into a leadership

position than those who’d not undergone it.

In another experiment 975 participants recruited in the United States were sorted into three-person teams for a 60-minute session. One member from each team was randomly assigned to spend the first 30 minutes in debate training, in cultural training, or enjoying free time, while the two remaining team members also had free time. After the 30 minutes the teams convened and were tasked with creating an itinerary for a college student orientation. The participants who’d had the debate training were significantly more likely to be rated as assertive and leaderlike by their teammates than the participants who’d been given cultural training or had free time.

The researchers say that debate training helped employees learn to articulate their views with confidence and respect, defend their positions diplomatically, and advocate for their ideas—key qualities in a good leader in U.S. culture. They note that their study suggests a low-cost, scalable way to improve the skills necessary for reaching leadership positions. ■

 **ABOUT THE RESEARCH** “*Breaking Ceilings: Debate Training Promotes Leadership Emergence by Increasing Assertiveness*,” by Jackson G. Lu et al. (Journal of Applied Psychology, 2025)

