

PART 1

Unleashing the Indispensable You

Chapter 1

Make Innovation Your Business

Differentiating Yourself in the Age of Disruption, Downsizing, and Discontinuity

My work with organizations in more than 35 countries reveals that despite all the talk about innovation, the phenomenon is still a daunting topic to most. The individuals I survey and talk to seem to sense the need to develop new leadership aptitudes beyond their functional expertise. But they are confused about what they should do or what these skills might be.

The skills this book explores aren't taught in universities or business schools. Job descriptions barely mention them. They aren't scored in most performance reviews.

The skills we'll explore in these pages have less to do with formal education or raw intelligence than with attitude,

perception, intuition, street smarts, collaboration, passion, and creativity. Taken together, they constitute a powerful new type of expertise that, once you develop it, makes you a rare and much needed contributor.

THE RISE OF INNOVATION-ADEPT LEADERS

After 23 years in the innovation field, and after interviewing 43 standout managers and contributors for this book and combing the literature, I have identified what it takes to be a successful player in this brave new business world.

What I found were established, highly respected contributors who had developed unconventional skills on top of functional and execution skills. In all of my interviews, what struck me about these contributors time and again were their reputations first and foremost for competence. They were good team players and collaborators, who delivered accurately, came in on deadline, hit their numbers, and executed consistently. All of this, plus their innovation skills, gave them the cachet of being indispensable to their organizations.

Where did they start from to work toward this exalted status? They grew where they were planted, whether in nursing, payroll or facilities management, marketing, or some newly created department. At first, they became small pockets of originality, only noticed by co-workers or the boss. But from there, they developed reputations as people who knew how to solve problems and get new things done.

Instead of the maverick social outliers portrayed as the true innovators in the media, I found humble, collaborative, and team-oriented individuals who, regardless of title or position, were quietly moving things ahead. I found people who had

stepped up to the challenge and developed the aptitudes and abilities that their organizations needed but often didn't quite know how to ask for.

They had developed I-Skills: the ability to spot fresh opportunities in all the changes and upheavals in their industries, galvanize cross-functional collaboration, bust bureaucratic strangleholds, drive initiatives forward, and engage teams, departments, and co-workers. They are passionate about generating value for external and internal customers alike.

What I found were individuals who:

- Produce and implement new ways of organizing their own departments;
- Discover dramatic approaches to slashing costs;
- Integrate dissimilar cultures after a merger;
- Come up with unexpected ways of satisfying customers; and
- Develop new profit centers to replace disrupted business models.

Deeply engaged by their work, these individuals thrive amidst chaos. They enjoy exploring unfamiliar territory, exercising greater discretion based on their solid reputations, and building a broader array of skills. They have achieved what one called “a seat at the table”—senior management seeks them out and listens to them. Many of my interviewees shared something else, something deeper. As one manager expressed it, “I’ve got a lot of autonomy in my job and I get to work on some really neat projects. I also get to work with some really smart people that keep me on my

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toes. They're a lot of fun and it's something new every day. I never thought I would enjoy work the way I do now."

GET READY TO LEAD THE FUTURE

Think about your organization's leaders for just a moment. Chances are, they look at this hypercompetitive global economy and what they see is troubling. What they see in most organizations today is a stark and growing mismatch between supply and demand. There's an oversupply of highly skilled, highly competent specialists on the payroll, but an undersupply of those who can help transform the organization to meet the challenges of a vastly changing marketplace.

Your organization's leader presides over a culture designed to deliver operational excellence and execute routine functions in a more or less steady-state world. Your chief looks out upon a vast sea of employees who meet established objectives and execute according to key performance measures.

Chances are good that your organization's top leader sees only a small pool of employees with the necessary skills to stretch beyond the responsibilities of their job descriptions. These are the key people who can develop imaginative ways to add value to their organizations. These are the select few with innovation skills.

Perhaps right now you don't sense that your organization is much concerned about innovation. Perhaps you don't sense that your job or your company is in imminent danger. Your firm just turned in a decent quarter, your latest performance review was glowing, and all this talk about disruption seems remote.

But the new reality is that this could all change in an instant. Companies, even “great” ones, go from being champs to being chumps almost overnight. Somewhere out there is a disruption with your company’s name on it. The steady-state world is over. And your company needs you to do more than fulfill the requirements of your job.

Your Organization Needs You to Help Invent the Future

Innovation may not even be a topic of much discussion in your company right now. Why should you care about innovation if your company doesn’t? Because you can add value right now. And know this: When a crisis strikes, innovation will suddenly become Topic A. When organizations find their innovation pipeline empty and their growth prospects dismal, innovation blips back on the radar. And at that point, senior leadership will issue an all-points bulletin to find the ideas that “we can accelerate into the market, and oh, by the way, we need some ‘innovator types’ to lead the way. Find them.”

If you have developed I-Skills, it will be your time to shine. You will see your value rise. You will be asked to contribute to new projects and to form new teams.

You have a choice to make.

You can continue to do what you do in the way you’ve always done it. You can hope these hurricane-force winds somehow leave you unaffected. Or you can choose to participate in an innovative way. If you’re ready to explore what that way might look like in your career and in your life, you are ready to take the first action step toward skyrocketing your career forward.

WHAT'S YOUR INNOVATION QUOTIENT?

Below are the 15 dimensions that will help you assess your innovation quotient (IQ). Unlike intelligence quotient, these skills can be learned. On a piece of paper, rate yourself from 1 to 10 on how much you, your co-workers, and your boss would agree with the following statements about you. (You can download this survey from our web site at: www.innovationresource.com/iqsurvey.)

- ☐ I approach my job and my contribution with an opportunity mindset.
- ☐ I show initiative and solve problems with a can-do attitude.
- ☐ I see the “big picture.”
- ☐ I constantly coax myself to think big.
- ☐ I volunteer to lead new initiatives and to get involved in projects having to do with the future of my organization.
- ☐ I try to align myself with the strategic goals of my organization's senior leadership.
- ☐ I engage deeply with people in my company and work to improve my collaboration skills.
- ☐ I have a genuine passion for serving the end user (internal or external customer).
- ☐ I look for ways to take on the customer's problem.
- ☐ I often take calculated risks.
- ☐ I collaborate effectively in cross-functional teams.
- ☐ I see through barriers and hurdles to achieve my goals.
- ☐ I welcome feedback and use it to grow.
- ☐ I am idea-oriented and constantly gather ideas to build new opportunities.

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- ☐ I work to build a network of people who I create value for and receive value from.
- ☐ I sell my ideas effectively and work hard at enrolling and converting others to my vision.

My total: _____

As you completed the survey, did you consider your co-workers' perception of you, or did you answer the questions based on your self-perception? Bear in mind that it's not only about how you see yourself. It's about what you have done and what you're recognized as being capable of doing in the future.

If you scored 120 or higher, congratulations. You've developed quite a few of the I-Skills already. You can use this book to consider areas where you can encourage others to hone their innovation skills.

If you rated yourself in the 90 to 119 range, you're still ahead of most of your peers, but you've got some skill building to do if you're going to add value to your organization and turbocharge your career in the process.

If you scored below 90, take heart. Realize that these are new skills for the vast majority of people, ones they haven't had to develop to be successful in the past. Once you learn more about what they are and how to master them, you can use them in your daily work to rocket your career forward, have more fun in the process, and move up the food chain.

In the following chapter, we'll begin our exploration of these often-misunderstood aptitudes, by focusing first on what I call the I-Skill Principles.

