



# Innovation is Everybody's Business

**How to Make Yourself  
Indispensable  
in Today's Hypercompetitive World**

ROBERT B. TUCKER



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# Introduction

Most books on innovation are aimed at helping organizations succeed. They focus on how to create a culture of innovation. They demonstrate how to launch breakthrough products. And they model how to establish an innovation process that drives growth and differentiation. I know this, having written a number of these books since *Winning the Innovation Game* was first published in 1986.

This book is different. This book is about you.

In a time of economic disruption, unprecedented downsizings, and the constant pressure to outsource more and more routine functions (and the employees who perform them), books offering advice on professional survival begin to seem shallow and out of touch. Their tired message: Be visible. Don't make enemies. Suck up to the boss. And work even harder.

My guess is that you are already working harder. And not one of these solutions even begins to address the issues you confront on a daily basis.

I decided to write this book after listening to the questions my audiences and clients were asking as individuals trying to cope with a world of change: How do I make myself less vulnerable and more valuable to my organization in a time of

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disruption? How do I “think outside the box” amidst the piles of work, endless meetings, and countless e-mails?

The unarticulated questions I began to sense were these: How do I create greater satisfaction in my working life and restore a sense of balance? And how do I navigate my career, provide for my family, and achieve security in these tumultuous times?

After delving deeply into these issues during the past eight years, my premise is this: Simply working harder will not be enough. Relying solely on your functional skills and expertise will not be enough. And even accumulating more years of experience on the job will not be enough.

The underlying issue is this: The system wants to eliminate your job. Nothing personal, you understand. Just the way it is. But you don't have to give in to anxiety.

The good news is that there is something you can do to take charge of your career if you're willing to consider it. That is what this book is about.

### **WHY YOUR EXPERTISE MAY NOT BE ENOUGH**

Your organization employs you to perform a specific set of tasks. Your organization employs you to provide certain skills and expertise. It employs you to manage particular functions, and perhaps to oversee the work of others. Maybe you're a highly skilled technical person or an engineer. Perhaps you lead a sales team or you're a high-performing sales person earning big commissions. You've been successful at meeting those requirements. You've delivered what you are charged to deliver. You're highly competent.

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How can this not be enough? If you're wondering why, as you no doubt are, ask yourself these questions:

- Is your organization facing new, potentially destabilizing, disruptive competition?
- Is senior management asking everyone to do more with fewer resources?
- Does your organization's lock on its customers seem more tenuous than ever before?

If your answers were yes to such questions, this is why your expertise may not be enough. Your specialist skills and expertise—no matter how intelligent or highly educated you are—cannot ensure your value proposition to your firm in today's hypercompetitive world.

To lower their cost of doing business, companies are transferring expertise work to other countries and companies. If a job can be "routinized," that is, reduced to a set of instructions and rules that make it step-by-step, and if a job has portability, economists tell us that that job can and probably will be outsourced.

What is left? Jobs that can't be outsourced, those relatively few positions that are impossible to do from afar, may still be secure. Job security will demand a new and rare kind of expertise. This expertise is the subject of this book.

### **HELP WANTED: I-SKILLS REQUIRED**

The focus in this book is on helping you, the individual manager or employee, succeed by building and unleashing

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a new set of skills in your work and in your life. I call them Innovation Skills, or I-Skills for short.

By developing I-Skills you will be able to:

- Transform yourself from “competent employee/manager” to “sought-after, difficult to replace talent”;
- Do your job more effectively and transform your work to accomplish more with less stress and boredom;
- Discover hidden opportunities to grow, get promoted, and achieve “internal fame” in your organization;
- Help your company survive and prosper in fast-changing times;
- Master new ways of working to overcome obstacles and produce results;
- Improve the value-adding contribution of your team, work group, or department;
- Bring yourself to the attention of senior management;
- Live a deeper and richer life as you have more fun in your profession;
- Become indispensable to your organization.

I realize this is a big promise. Yet the people you will meet in these pages are using their innovation skills to achieve these very objectives. And if you invest the time to build and unleash these skills, you can achieve similar results.

The message of this book is spelled out in the title: Innovation is everybody’s business. Not just the folks who work in the research and development department of your organization. Not just the top leaders of your firm. Not just the marketing department. Everybody. Including you.

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So this book is for you if you're a frontline customer service representative in your firm. It's for you if you're a mid-level manager in operations. It's for you if you work in a small privately held firm. It's for you if you work in the human resources department of a multinational corporation. And despite what you may have heard, you can innovate in any job, in any department, and in any organization—and you shouldn't expect a permission slip to get you started.

Innovation is about more than inventing new products and services. It's about figuring out how to add value where you are and where you work. Innovation is the act of coming up with ideas and successfully bringing them to life to solve problems and create opportunities.

Innovation is not something you must do after you get your regular work done. It's how you approach your work. And it's about discovering opportunities and taking initiative to get new projects done.

In Part 1, we'll look at the mindset (attitudes and ways of seeing the world) necessary to be an innovator at work. We'll examine the four modes of thinking, and you will be able to better understand the mode that currently dominates your thinking. We'll look at the assumptions and mistaken beliefs that many people harbor, such as, "My organization doesn't want me to be creative. They just want us to get our work done." Or, "I have a lot of ideas but I can never seem to get anybody to listen to them." In Part 1, I'll guide you through a series of questions that will help you clarify where you are and where you want to go and will explain how to adopt the innovator's mindset to rocket your career to a higher plane.

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Making yourself indispensable in an era of disruption, downsizing, and discontinuity is a journey, not a destination. It is a process of learning new skills that transform you from being a merely competent employee or manager to being a sought-after, in-demand, difficult-to-replace key player whom colleagues seek to follow.

In Part 2, we'll explore the seven fundamental I-Skills you need to master to make yourself indispensable in today's hypercompetitive world. These are:

1. You embrace the opportunity mindset in every task you work on, and in every project you are part of.
2. You are adept at assaulting assumptions: personal, organizational, and industrywide.
3. You have a passion for the end customer, whether internal or external.
4. You are able to think ahead of the curve with regard to emerging trends, threats, and opportunities.
5. You know how to fortify the idea factory and discover the ideas needed to propel your team, workgroup, and organization forward.
6. You are considered a standout collaborator by your peers and organization by virtue of the value you add on a consistent basis.
7. You are adept at building the buy-in for your ideas and enrolling others in your vision.

When I and my team of associates began researching this book, we sought solutions that would help you, our reader, become more valuable and even indispensable to

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your organization and to yourself. I was hearing questions that people had harbored but never quite articulated, much less found satisfactory answers for.

Yet in interviewing dozens of adept leaders, what became clear was that simply moving up the food chain where they worked was only one payoff from mastering the I-Skills. The other was that these individuals had also created their own job satisfaction. They couldn't wait to come to work. They love what they do. They pour their best selves into it and are deeply engaged and rewarded well beyond simply receiving a paycheck.

As one manager expressed it, "I've never felt such satisfaction doing my job as I do now. It's not only because I'm helping my company survive and succeed. I get to manage a really great team of people and I'm having the time of my life."

If you're ready to transform yourself and take your career and your life to the next level, you are ready to make innovation the source of your secret strength. If you're ready to lead and to contribute in a whole new way, you are ready to go to work learning and applying the skills and the tools you'll discover in this book. You were put on this earth for a purpose. This book can help you discover it . . . right where you are, right where you work, beginning right now.



## **PART 1**

# **Unleashing the Indispensable You**



## Chapter 1

# **Make Innovation Your Business**

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

**M**y 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

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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 under-supply 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.