



From ideas to action

Turn your ideas into real avenues for innovation



Didier Avril, série Storytelling

Our sources

This synopsis is based on the publications presented below and on the back page.

Making Ideas Happen

Scott Branson, Portfolio Penguin, 2010.

The Other Side of Innovation

Vijay Govindarajan, Chris Trimble,
Harvard Business Review Press, 2010.

Most ideas never get implemented. Indeed, many companies fall short of their goals when they design programs to boost the organization's capacity to innovate. Observing the mediocre output of many innovation and continuous improvement projects, companies often try to boost creativity by encouraging people to generate more ideas in general, and more original ideas in particular. However, innovation experts point out that raw creativity is far from the main issue at hand. The real challenge lies in knowing how to transform these ideas into concrete action.

"Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration," said Thomas Edison. And that is precisely where the problem occurs. Indeed, don't customer-facing employees commonly come up with intuitive ideas to adapt the offering more closely to customer needs? How many process improvement ideas are quickly pushed aside in order to address other priorities? How many pending innovation projects are kept in mind, but never see the light of day?

Indeed, everyday operational concerns tend to keep new ideas dormant. This is not for lack of motivation; the root of the difficulty often lies in methodology. Much more than creativity, perseverance is what is lacking to bring new ideas to fruition.

To avoid this pitfall, the publications we have analyzed propose three essential disciplines:

- **Focus on action.** Otherwise, it is very tempting to come up with more ideas without knowing where to set priorities.
- **Drastically filter ideas.** An overabundance of ideas scatters energy and attention and hence becomes an obstacle to innovation.
- **Move forward collectively.** Many ideas die prematurely because they are developed in isolation.

In this synopsis...

- 1 New ideas are rarely implemented
- 2 Focus on action
- 3 Drastically filter ideas
- 4 Move forward collectively

1 New ideas are rarely implemented

Companies generate many more ideas than they can implement. Admittedly, this is an integral part of the innovation process; a wide variety of ideas must be produced in great number in order to select the best. At the same time, the number of good ideas that end up falling between the cracks is astronomical.

The author of *Making Ideas Happen* consequently stresses that what distinguishes great innovators is not so much their capacity to generate original ideas as what often resembles an obsessive focus on getting them implemented. Leonardo da Vinci and Picasso, for example, are known for their creativity. But they made their mark on history more for their prolific production and their unceasing efforts to test new ideas.

That being said, the deployment of new ideas is far from natural in business

organizations (Figure A). When faced with a large number of radically innovative ideas or continuous improvement opportunities, the same phenomena are generally observed:

Efforts are spread too thin

The more ideas there are, the harder it is to implement them. Indeed, each new idea requires a significant expenditure of energy to imagine ways to implement it, to convince the various stakeholders, to develop a detailed

The biggest obstacle to innovation is execution.

action plan, to solve the problems that necessarily arise, to get people to abandon old habits, etc. It's a long, hard road from idea to action.

Putting every single new idea into practice is therefore literally impossible. Many companies consequently fall into

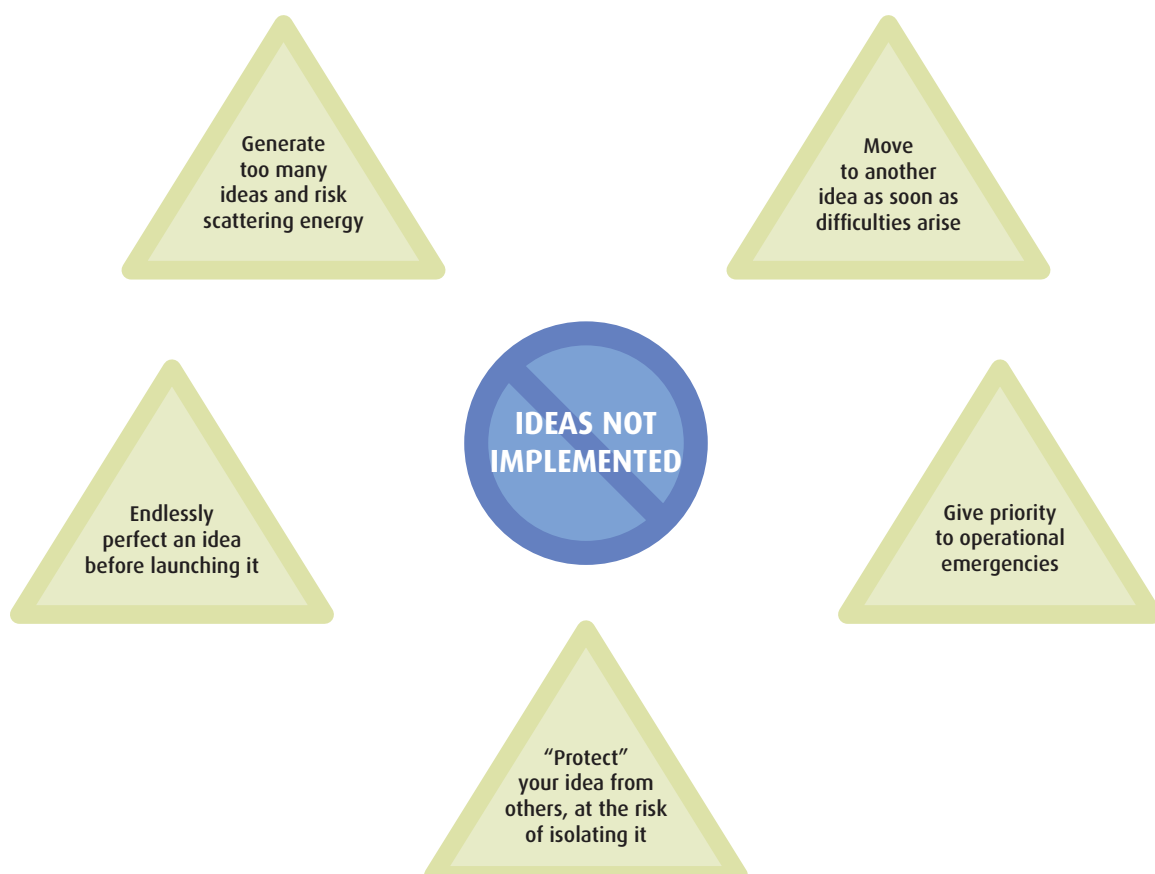
the classic trap of spreading their efforts too thin by trying to deploy more ideas than they can reasonably handle, at the risk of failing to deploy any successfully.

Motivation tends to dwindle

Even when focus is placed on a single idea, maintaining the same level of motivation over time is difficult. Initial enthusiasm for a good idea tends to erode as small and large problems inevitably arise. This is especially true since initial rapid progress often gives way to slower and less visible advances as the project moves forward. So, the motivation fueling the project tends to peter out over time.

Most innovative projects thus cross a plateau, where energy drops to the point of stopping altogether. How many projects, even those at a late stage of completion, are then abandoned along the way for lack of motivation to tie up all the loose ends? The easiest and most common escape is to generate new

FIGURE A Five major obstacles to the implementation of ideas



ideas, which will be abandoned in turn when their implementation becomes too laborious.

Operational concerns take priority

Lastly, the biggest obstacle to the deployment of new ideas is the priority given to current operations over innovation projects. Indeed, operational tasks are visibly necessary, with short-term objectives, well-understood risks and rapidly tangible outcomes. Conversely, a great deal of time is often needed before the benefits of innovative projects become visible. Moreover, a delay on an operational task is more likely to be criticized than the failure to launch an innovation that everyone has always done without up to now. So, the temptation is strong to place priority on “urgent” operational matters to the detriment of new projects, no matter how important.

Faced with these many obstacles, it is not surprising to note that very few ideas generated in business organizations are effectively deployed. Three principles nonetheless help reduce the number of good ideas that get lost somewhere between their generation and ultimate execution:

- Continuously maintain an obsessive focus on action;
- Be stringent in screening ideas to deploy;
- Involve those around you.

2 Focus on action

People often connect innovation with creativity. This vision is simplistic, however, because only a tiny percentage of generated ideas actually become concrete innovations. In particular, the brainstorming phase is just the tip of the iceberg in the innovation process. What is really essential is the ability to organize action in a disciplined manner to successfully translate ideas into real innovation projects and bring them to fruition.

Remaining continuously—almost obsessively—focused on action is the best way to keep ideas from remaining

purely theoretical. The most innovative companies, such as Disney and Apple, for example, are distinguished less for the creative genius of their teams than for their remarkable discipline in terms of execution.

Their experience highlights four rules to keep in mind to avoid confusing idea generation with innovation:

Formulate your ideas as projects

Abstract ideas have little chance of leading to tangible innovation. “*We need to overhaul the entire inventory management system*” does not encourage people to take action, for example. Forcing yourself to restate and clarify your ideas systematically until they take the form of concrete projects helps minimize this risk. The CEO of the digital agency R/GA, Bob Greenberg, explains that this sort of discipline is what helped him acquire a reputation as one of the most creative members of his

The most successful inventors think in terms of projects, rather than ideas.

generation. Every day for the past thirty years, without exception, he devotes a specific block of time to translating emerging ideas into projects, which he plans and prioritizes. An idea that he cannot express in this form is naturally put aside.

Above and beyond this personal discipline, it is important to instill an action-oriented culture in your organization. For example, you could insist that each meeting end with a list of concrete action items, with targeted deadlines. In this way, every idea that is “thrown out there” must necessarily be assessed in order to make a deliberate decision to pursue it, abandon it or set it aside for later study.

Give people the responsibility to implement their ideas

Regardless of their intrinsic interest, original ideas tend to move forward

only if someone feels personally responsible to making them successful. For example, an employee who suggests the idea of researching a particular sales opportunity won’t necessarily feel responsible for implementing this initiative. This is true even if everyone is unanimously in favor of the idea! It is consequently crucial to ensure that every initiative is clearly assigned to someone—either the person who suggested it or someone else—and that this person explicitly accepts this responsibility. Systematically asking the person placed in charge of the project to restate this responsibility in his or her own words is thus a reflex that everyone should acquire.

In team meetings, it is a good idea to ask each member to come up to the whiteboard or flipchart and write the assignment he or she will take away from the meeting. This facilitates ownership. It is also essential to create a chart clearly delineating exactly who is responsible for the implantation of each idea, stated in project form. This method helps identify ideas that risk falling through the cracks because no one is in charge of moving them forward. At the same time, specific people can also be assigned to keep track of ideas put aside for later study, in order to ensure that they are put back on the agenda at a more opportune time. Organizations that exercise this sort of discipline tend to implement significantly more generated ideas than those that don’t.

Don’t wait to be convinced to take action

Many companies have processes or beliefs that delay them from taking action. The belief that consensus is necessary from the start, for example, or that feasibility must always be proven, that the full range of risks must be studied, that every alternative or every step of implementation must be explored beforehand can be a major obstacles to the concrete deployment of ideas. The longer action is delayed after initial enthusiasm is expressed, the greater the probability that the idea will never be implemented at all!

Developing an action-oriented culture means getting people used to taking action even before verifying all of the ins and outs of a project. This principle is embraced by IDEO, the well-known product design and innovation consulting firm. When a new idea is generated, IDEO team members do not start by debating the concept. They begin by developing an initial prototype to test the idea. The firm effectively provides employees with a workshop where they can find all the tools and materials required to make mock-ups and gradually refine their ideas. This is how the famous Microsoft mouse wheel was developed, for example. Initial tests thus reinforce motivation and generate energy for the critical study and planning phases, which can be conducted in parallel. (Figure B).

Use specific criteria to manage creative projects

Lastly, many innovative projects die because they are managed with the company's usual systems for operational projects, whose risks are more fully understood (Figure C). In particular, the success of creative projects cannot be

defined according to the same criteria used for recurrent activities. The priority in managing innovations must be placed on identifying and testing the assumptions upon which the project is founded. These hypotheses must then be continuously reassessed to confirm, refute or adapt them. When Infosys, a software supplier, decided to launch a new consulting business, it started by building a project management approach designed first and foremost to learn about the market and the best way to tackle it. It would have been senseless to try to evaluate the success of the new business based on initial sales volume or margin data. Instead, the company focused on validating the fundamentals of the project, rather than the necessarily incomplete findings of initial tests.

3 Drastically filter ideas

Even with a resolutely action-oriented culture, it is materially impossible to implement all of the ideas that emerge in an organization. Hence, a second essential discipline is to limit the number of ideas selected for concrete execution. This may seem paradoxical when a company is trying

to be more innovative. The experts point out, however, that applying this critical prerequisite keeps companies from spreading their efforts too thin and producing few results.

Developing an effective innovation culture thus requires establishing a rigorous screening process. A purely rational approach is rarely sufficient. Finding objective criteria to choose between radically creative ideas is indeed extremely difficult. How can the head of a production facility, for example, decide whether to start by improving the management of

It is better to implement a few carefully-selected ideas than launch many projects that never get deployed.

breakdowns, limiting wastage of supplies, facilitating customer information on the progress of orders, or integrating the ideas of each team member? They are all interesting and important initiatives. Yet, a manager can't do everything at once. It would be illusory to base the decision on a cost/benefit analysis. Indeed, reliably estimating the time and resources required to implement different ideas is generally very

FIGURE B Move into action quickly to maintain motivation

Moving into action quickly makes it possible to maintain the motivation needed to implement an idea. Below are some suggested ways to augment this effect.

Maintain your own motivation	Increase the motivation of those around you
• Celebrate your progress: Surround yourself with visible evidence of your successes, e.g., photos, progress plan, etc. • Organize your workspace to surround yourself with good people, e.g., to share ideas, work together, inspire emulation, etc. • Try to see challenges in a positive light, e.g.: Expressed doubts may be a sign that an innovation is happening; according to the law of averages, failures are generally followed by successes, etc. • Share tasks according to individual preferences and skills, e.g.: Reduce or delegate tasks for which you are less competent, etc. • Try to report regularly to those around you, e.g.: Make official commitments, establish a visible project tracking routine, etc.	• Cultivate positive feedback, e.g.: Always start feedback with something positive; establish "appreciation roundtables" at meetings, etc. • Share ownership of ideas, e.g.: Empower various players, accept that the implemented idea will probably diverge from the original concept, etc. • Market your idea, e.g.: Communicate carefully by underlining the benefits of the idea; find out who could be most interested, and ask them to be liaisons; adapt the original idea to the needs of those who will be essential to implementing it, etc. • Establish recognition tools, e.g., progressive incentives over time to encourage perseverance, communication that recognizes the origin of the idea, etc.

difficult. Likewise, ROI forecasts are usually rough estimates.

Faced with this dilemma, a resolutely pragmatic approach is often most effective:

Consider your “store of energy”

Launching a new idea requires motivation and energy, in proportions often quite higher than those needed to continue business as usual. However, we often tend to forget this aspect, in light of more rational and financial considerations. Yet, this is precisely where the problems occur. If we undertake too many physically or mentally demanding projects, we will inevitably end up abandoning many of them.

Classifying your projects according to importance and the amount of energy they require is thus quite enlightening (Figure D). This perception is certainly subjective. However, it is generally much more telling than a simple estimation of the time required to complete the project. One bank, for example, challenged a transformation project using this approach. The project in question was quite promising. Yet, those involved had already had to adapt to major changes in the previous years. They needed to recharge their batteries before engaging on another such demanding project. So bank executives decided instead to focus on conti-

nuous improvement for a time. They developed many small projects which each consumed very little energy, with remarkable success. All in all, they estimate that the overall change was probably more consequential than if they had launched the large project they were initially considering.

Pay attention to the pressure of those around you

It is often difficult for individuals to choose alone between various projects that motivate them and which appear to be equally important. In such cases, a “Darwinian” approach can be very helpful, meaning that if a project keeps being brought back to the table by other stakeholders—employees, superiors, customers, etc.—this is a sign that it deserves to be pursued. Conversely, if everyone forgets about it, the project is probably not as important as it may have originally seemed. Natural selection thus turns out to be extremely valuable.

Some go as far as making pressure from those around them a key selection criterion. The partners of the NY creative agency Brooklyn Brothers, for example, have made it a ground rule. They say that employee comments and reminders are what make them decide which ideas will be implemented, in a context where only 10 percent of

ideas generated are actually deployed. Similarly, the CEO of Legal Sea Foods, Roger Berkowitz, confessed to *Inc.* magazine that his productivity was based on repeated pressure from those around him: “It’s management by reminder!”

Ask the skeptics

When a choice must be made among too many ideas, there’s nothing like relying on people who have a strong critical sense. Recruiting people with a naturally suspicious bent, and who tend to challenge the feasibility or relevance of generated ideas, is thus paradoxically an asset to creativity. Indeed, skeptics play a role much like that of white blood cells in the immune system. They help point out the flaws in suggested ideas and thus facilitate their rapid elimination.

Disney made skepticism a cornerstone of its creative process. For example, to develop its feature-length films, Disney teams move successively through three rooms, each dedicated to a step in the process. The first is dedicated to unbridled brainstorming; the second, to consolidating ideas; and the third, to skepticism. Each participant is asked to reexamine suggested ideas with a critical eye—no holds barred. This process spurs creativity, because it serves as a framework for ensuring

FIGURE C Innovations must not be managed like operational projects

Existing management tools used in the organization are generally designed to manage operational projects, and are thus not well adapted to innovation projects. The stakes are indeed very different.

Operational Management	Innovation Planning
Optimize performance	Optimize training
Rely on validated data	Clarify assumptions to be validated
Organize and optimize the sequencing of initiatives needed to execute the strategy	Plan milestones to reassess and adapt the strategy in light of initial lessons learned.
Track results using indicators shared by the organization, e.g., turnover, margin, etc.	Track the lessons learned from tests using dedicated and evolving indicators

Based on *The Other Side of Innovation*, Vijay Govindarajan, Chris Trimble, Harvard Business Review Press, 2010.

that superfluous ideas are relentlessly “nipped in the bud.” As a result, the ideas that do manage to get through the “skeptical” screen are more likely to be implemented.

4 Move forward collectively

Successfully implementing innovative ideas is difficult, and there are inevitably ups and downs along the way. Motivation fluctuates. Potential pitfalls are legion. Under these conditions, going it alone rarely works.

Indeed, observation of great inventors shows that they generally interact with numerous diverse groups and individuals. This attitude is a far cry from the image of the genius inventor who works locked away in a laboratory. Chris Anderson, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Wired* and author of the best-seller *The Long Tail*, attests to this: “Any project conducted by just one person is doomed to fail, because it cannot be scaled up. If one of my projects doesn’t manage to

attract a team for implementation, I tell myself that it has a flaw somewhere.”

Integrating an idea into a collective process is indeed remarkably effective in ensuring its success. This requires, however, applying a few essential rules:

Seek complementary profiles

It is tempting, when a project is still in the vague idea stage, to surround yourself with people who see things like you do. Indeed, there is a risk that the idea could be rejected prematurely simply due to communication problems. Yet, the most creative teams are those that gather individuals with highly diverse profiles, each of whom contributes his or her unique perspective and expertise. This requires making the effort sufficiently upstream to establish communication principles to help people take advantage of their differences, without becoming bogged down in sterile conflicts. (Figure E).

In addition to technical expertise, complementary “dreamer” and “doer”

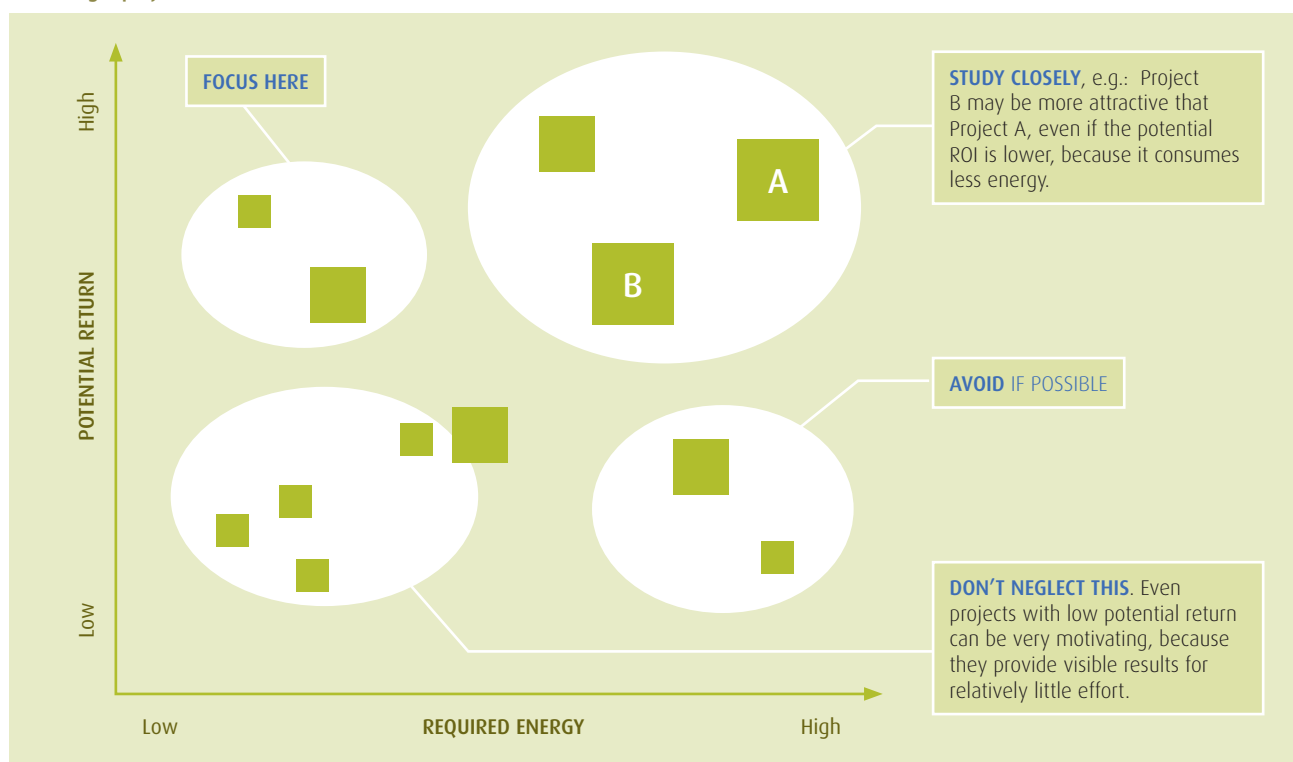
profiles should be sought. Dreamers are great idea generators with highly active imaginations, who often struggle when it comes to taking action and who are not particularly interested in implementation. On the other hand, doers are people who are generally less imaginative, but more action-oriented. Always ready to put new ideas to the test, they naturally take feasibility

Many ideas die because they are developed in isolation.

into consideration, and move things forward concretely. These diametrically opposite qualities are rarely found in the same individuals. At Nike, for instance, Bill Bowerman, who developed running shoes, joined Phil Knight to carry out his vision. Such partnerships are common currency in the fashion world and can lead to fruitful and lasting partnerships, such as that between Calvin Klein (dreamer) and Barry Schwartz (doer), Ralph Lauren

FIGURE D Select your projects according to the energy they require

More than just economic return on investment, it is important to measure and take into consideration the return on invested energy before launching a project.



Based on *Making Ideas Happen*, Scott Branson, Portfolio Penguin, 2010.

and Roger Farah, etc. The collaboration of dreamers and doers is thus the best combination to generate and implement a large number of ideas.

Make public commitments

Another benefit from involving others is that the more we publically communicate our commitment to innovate, the more we feel obligated to move the project forward. This natural sensitivity to how others see us can be consciously utilized to increase the probability that an idea will be implemented. Hence, simply forcing yourself to communicate broadly about your projects can be very effective. The reputed artist and artistic director, Brock Davis, thus created a page on his website called *"Make Something Cool Every Day,"* on which he committed to publish an artistic creation every day of 2009. He explains to what point this public commitment was, for him, a real innovation accelerator. The commitment he made to his readers created such expectations and enthusiasm that he redoubled his efforts to avoid disappointing them. In the same way, a project director can choose to post publicly the creative projects selected by various individuals. The mere fact of displaying an active interest in the deployment of these ideas and posting their progress for all

to see generally has a multiplier effect on the rate of concrete execution.

Give up total control of the project

The more people involved in a project, the greater the chances that it will be implemented. Indeed, collective involvement helps to balance out individual fluctuations in motivation, creates contagious collective energy, and makes it easier to effect necessary changes in light of more abundant positive and negative feedback. More people also bring additional energy and resources to the project. However, involving others is far from natural when it comes to innovative ideas, because inventors must relinquish control by accepting that the project that is finally implemented will probably diverge from the initial idea as they originally imagined it. Giving up creative control is often not easy for creative types and inventors. The right balance must thus be found between conserving the genius of the idea and allowing for adaptations that will make it feasible to implement. It is also important to recognize all those who are involved, even if they didn't originate the idea. This reflex is key to keep people engaged over time. For example, the famous NY architect Joshua Prince-Ramus, CEO of REX, asked that the

brochure published by one of his clients giving him all the credit for a particular building be reprinted to list the names of all the architects who participated. This rare attitude in the architectural community was instrumental in ensuring that the supporting teams remained committed and involved.



When it comes to innovation, the problem is often not so much generating new ideas as translating them into action. And indeed, the greatest inventors do not rely purely on their extraordinary talent or genius. What distinguishes them initially is an exceptional sense of organization and discipline that drives them to obtain tangible results. This is a stimulating source of inspiration for any team seeking to boost its innovative capacity.

FIGURE E Set rules to allow different profiles to innovate together

In theory, bringing together personalities that are very different from your own is ideal. Diverse perspectives gather complementary ideas, enable the group to capitalize on the specific areas of excellence of each member, compensate for respective weaknesses, etc. Reality is often more nuanced. The group commonly establishes a standard and dictates "ideal" behavior to the detriment of diversity. Establishing a few rules and communicating them with everyone can minimize this risk.

- **Respect** differences in the way problems are tackled. For example, some concentrate first on analysis, while others prefer to start with a more intuitive approach. Everyone must understand that each approach has its strengths.
- **Rotate leadership** in the group. Developing innovative ideas requires different approaches for each phase. Putting different players in a position to take initiative in turns helps the group capitalize fully on available skills.
- **Make time to listen** to each participant. To prevent the most lively and extraverted participants from taking up all the space, a system must be organized to allow everyone a say. This will give more time to those who need to think before expressing themselves and ensure that more introverted participants have a voice without having to fight for it.
- **Take the time to discuss** differences. Ignorance is often the culprit behind problems and misunderstandings. Holding a dedicated meeting to give people a chance to express how they see the behavior of others often helps to enhance performance.

Our selection

To find the best ideas on this subject, we recommend the following publications:

Making Ideas Happen

Scott Belsky, Portfolio Penguin, 2010.



With a great passion for creativity, Scott Belsky founded the “Behance” network designed for creative professionals. This network has observed that success does not depend on generating fantastic ideas, but rather on their implementation. Indeed, although every innovation necessarily begins with an idea, not every idea leads to an innovation! Hence, the importance of developing your ability to execute: as the most challenging part isn’t finding the idea, but carrying it out.

Based on interviews with hundreds of extremely prolific creative people and teams, Scott Belsky has identified three characteristics common to these “serial inventors”: a well-developed sense of organization and systematic focus on action; the ability to draw upon the strengths of their community; and leadership skills that stimulate their own efforts and those of their team.

This book breaks down and successively develops these three characteristics. In particular, it explains how to modify organizational routines and cultivate the tendency to take action; how to attract collaboration and support from the community, and finally, how to develop requisite leadership skills. With a wealth of handy tips and concrete, well-chosen illustrations, this book is a useful guide for action. Purposely provocative, the author does not hesitate to run counter to common sense, as demonstrated by his recommendation that managers take action even when they aren’t convinced, surround themselves with skeptics and give up trying to keep their ideas confidential!

If you are among those who generate many ideas, but have trouble implementing them concretely — or if you want to improve your general project execution and organization abilities, this book will help you. Through its pragmatic approach to creativity, it is, in the words of Ji Lee, creative director of the Google Creative Lab, “a Swiss knife for your ideas.”

The Other Side of Innovation

Vijay Govindarajan, Chris Trimble, Harvard Business Review Press, 2010.



Innovation is vital to any company. Yet, most companies have trouble innovating, whether in terms of developing new products or services or improving existing processes.

Whatever the scope of a creative initiative, the problem remains the same, that is, implementing the idea successfully. That being said, very little attention is paid to execution. If innovation can be compared to climbing a mountain, originating the idea is often compared to reaching the summit, where the inventor is both exhilarated and convinced that he or she has

“done the hard part.” Yet, all the experts attest that the hardest part is the descent, meaning the execution of the idea.

To accomplish this, the authors focus first and foremost on the need to organize and plan creative initiatives as specific projects that require dedicated resources. They divide their message into two main parts: the first covers the organization of the innovation project, which can require a dedicated team and specific operating rules. Great care must be taken to manage interactions with operational teams, which are often sources of conflict! The second part looks at the best way to plan the project, which must be conducted like a scientific experiment, by testing assumptions, drawing lessons from the comparison of predictions with results, and measuring progress made.

The methods described in this book are based on observations of many innovative companies, such as BMW, Timberland, Thomson and Nucor. Although the advice dispensed by the authors is not revolutionary, it is undeniably useful, particularly for those who manage innovation projects in large organizations.

Further readings

To explore this topic further:

- **Build teams that are both efficient and creative** (Manageris synopsis 168b)
What organization should you adopt to reconcile productivity and creative capacity?
- **Reinforce your collective execution skills** (Manageris synopsis 183b)
How can you set the stage for effective and concerted action in your organization? By creating a context that instills an individual sense of responsibility and urgency to act in the right direction!
- **Move from Strategy to Action** (Manageris synopsis 149a)
How to keep the strategic plan from remaining purely theoretical? Paying careful attention to implementation can help prevent many failures.

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