Act Different, Think Different, Make a Difference

Why Innovation Is an Investment—in Yourself, in Your Company, and in the Greater World

Excerpted from
The Innovator’s DNA: Mastering the Five Skills of Disruptive Innovators

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Conclusion

Act Different,
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“Care about something enough to
do something about it.”

—Richard Branson, founder, Virgin Inc.

By the end of our eight-year research project on
some of the most innovative people and com-
panies in the world, we came to believe that if individuals, teams,
and organizations want to think different, they must act different.
Now that you’ve nearly finished The Innovator’s DNA, we wonder
where you stand. Do you believe that if you act different, you can
think different? That if your organization acts different, it can think
different as well? We hope so, because the innovator’s journey, in-
dividually or collectively, can often feel like a road “less traveled.”
Yet, the road is worth taking because it just might make “all the difference” in your life and the lives of many others.

Mastering the five discovery skills of disruptive innovators and demonstrating the courage to innovate are what we’ve tried to share in this book. Doing so requires practice, personally, professionally, and organizationally (for a road map of how to master the five discovery skills, and even how to build them in the next generation, see appendix C). Consistent practice produces mastery, and mastery makes for new habits or, in organizations, new capabilities. By developing heavy-duty discovery skills, we really are different. We act different, think different, and by doing so we can make a concrete difference.

Of course, there are a variety of ways to leverage your discovery skills to make a difference. Ideally, you will uncover a big, disruptive idea, initiating meaningful change in many lives. Certainly, Bezos, Jobs, Benioff, and other innovative entrepreneurs have had an immense impact on the world. Their organizations employ hundreds of thousands of people, and their products influence—and most would say improve—the lives of hundreds of millions. No wonder many of these business innovators moved from disrupting industries to seeking an even greater impact by aiming their attention and resources (including innovator’s DNA skills) at some of the toughest world challenges, such as poverty, education, and disease.

Take a look at Salesforce.com, where Benioff built a company to not only disrupt the entire enterprise software industry, but also to make a difference wherever it operates. He did this through a 1-1-1 philosophy where 1 percent of all employees’ time, 1 percent of all its products, and 1 percent of all its equity go toward improving communities and promoting compassionate capitalism. As Benioff puts it, he’s in the “business of changing the world.” His approach relies on hundreds of thousands of employee hours and millions of dollars to tackle problems ranging from sanitation
to homelessness. Benioff is not alone in taking on tough issues. Bill and Melinda Gates, Richard Branson, and many others do the same in their own shape and form.

On a smaller scale but a highly similar focus, we have also worked with social innovators around the world who rely on innovator’s DNA skills to create profound solutions to some of society’s most difficult problems. For example, Andreas Heinecke founded a for-profit social enterprise, Dialogue in the Dark, when working as a newspaper journalist in Germany. Heinecke’s boss had brought a blind coworker to his desk and asked him to teach the person how to become a journalist. Heinecke had no idea how to approach the situation, but quickly threw himself into the task of figuring out how to make it work, in part because he had less than perfect hearing. Heinecke not only helped his blind colleague to become a journalist but, in the process, used his innovator’s DNA skills to found Dialogue in the Dark, which hires blind experts to take sighted visitors into a world of complete darkness for one to three hours. (Our assessment showed Heinecke as exceptional at idea networking and questioning.) Heinecke observed that to better understand and appreciate blind people, you must experience the world as they do.

To date, over 6 million visitors in thirty different countries have experienced the exhibitions where people learn to navigate through parks and across streets, and to eat in completely dark spaces. Dialogue in the Dark also conducts very successful leadership development sessions at companies and conferences, including the World Economic Forum Davos events. (We regularly collaborate with Heinecke to produce “Innovator’s DNA in the Dark” experiences that deliver a unique and profound learning context for cultivating the innovator’s DNA skills with companies like the leading logistics firm in the Middle East, Aramex, to the world’s leading art business, Christie’s.) Dialogue in the Dark is now one of the largest worldwide employers of blind people
(hiring and training over six thousand so far). All this was triggered because Heinecke decided to focus his persistent questions and conversations on a search for new ways to create jobs for the blind and to overcome barriers in all walks of life.

In the end, most of us will likely make a difference through many minor (derivative) innovations. An idea with impact might be a new process for hiring that helps your company find more talented people (such as Google’s Code Jam tournament described in chapter 9). It might be a new approach to marketing your company’s products (such as P&G’s new use of bloggers and customer-generated content described in chapter 9). Or it might be building a business model based on the premise that for every pair of shoes sold, the company will give away one pair, as Blake Mycoskie did when he founded TOMS Shoes (after traveling to Argentina in 2006 and seeing so many children with foot diseases because they lacked shoes).

Clearly, the process of creative discovery can be difficult, but the rewards far outstrip the challenges. Being a creator is exciting, and to author or coauthor an idea that leads to a new product, service, process, or business energizes. Being an innovator is psychologically and emotionally gratifying in a way that money simply isn’t, even though the financial rewards of successful innovation can be significant. Mark Ruiz, co-founder of MicroVentures and finalist for the Entrepreneur of the Year Philippines 2010 award, admitted the same when he told us, “even though I’m an entrepreneur, what drives me is not really the money. What really drives me is a deep sense of mission and purpose. I just see problems that are screaming for new and innovative solutions.” Ruiz works nonstop to build new venture after new venture to take on these problems in his home country, the Philippines.

Ruiz and all the other disruptive innovators we encountered while working on this book take seriously the questions, “If not you, who?” “If not now, when?” They do not sit still. They are
physically active, always asking questions, observing, networking, and experimenting. Others can actually “see” their discovery skills at work because their innovation work is far from sedentary. Judi Sandrock, CEO of the Branson Centre for Entrepreneurship, told us that she lives by the question, “How do I do this now?” and works tirelessly to help emerging entrepreneurs in South Africa do the same. In his path-breaking research on risk and uncertainty, economist Frank Knight saw innovative entrepreneurs as a class of individuals with the “disposition to act” in spite of the uncertain context in which they operated. We heard this over and over from various innovators, including Virgin’s Branson who lives by, “Screw it, Let’s do it,” and Skype’s Zennström, who made the following analogy between action and entrepreneurial success:

Say that you have one of those reality shows on TV and you drop a bunch of people in the middle of a desert island. The winner is the person who gets to the shore the quickest. Some people try to analyze where they are, which direction to go. Some of them say, “Let’s climb up a tree or a rock or hillside and maybe we can see further and figure out what is the best direction to go.” They will spend time planning and analyzing how to find the best direction to go. But some other people will just look around, follow their intuition, and start running in a direction.

If there are a lot of people that have been dropped on the island, I can almost guarantee that whoever starts climbing up the tree to start analyzing where he is and which direction to go will not win the competition. Why? Because there are a few other maniacs who will follow their intuition and just start running. They’re much more likely to get to shore quicker. The point is: if you have a good gut feeling for which general direction to go, then you should just run as fast as you can.
Zennström’s challenge: act and figure it out as you go. That way, you get valuable feedback by acting, and you get even better feedback by fully engaging your innovator’s DNA skills along the way. But act now or it may be too late. Windows of opportunity exist for capturing the full value from any innovative business idea. No wonder successful innovators move fast to implement an idea before its window closes.

In the end, innovation is an investment—in yourself, in others, and if you’re a senior manager or emerging entrepreneur, in your company. Whether you’re working at the top of an organization or as a technical specialist at the bottom, eBay’s Whitman advises everyone “to have the courage to plant acorns before you need oak trees.” Innovation is all about planting acorns (ideas) with less than complete confidence that each will grow into something meaningful. The alternative, however, is little or no growth when no acorns emerge as trees. By understanding and reinforcing the DNA of individual innovators within innovative teams and organizations, you can find ways to more successfully develop not just growth saplings but the real oak trees of future growth. As you continue your innovation journey, let your life speak the final line from Apple’s Think Different campaign: “The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.” So just do it. Do it now!
Appendix C

Developing Discovery Skills

Years ago, Arnold Glasow, an entrepreneur and humorist, concluded that “improvement begins with I.” We couldn’t agree more. The focus of this appendix is to suggest how you might personally improve your discovery skills—associating, questioning, observing, networking, and experimenting.

Developing Your Discovery Skills

To develop your skills, we provided a number of practical tips in chapters 2 through 6. To decide which tips make the most sense to follow, we suggest that you take five steps: (1) review priorities to see where you spend your time, (2) assess your discovery skills systematically, (3) identify a compelling innovation challenge that matters, (4) practice your discovery skills ruthlessly, and (5) get a coach to support your ongoing development efforts. When combined, these steps can help you—and your team—build the relevant innovation skills required to make a bigger, better impact at
work and beyond. (If you also want to build your team’s discovery skills, take the steps outlined, but focus your development work on your team.)

**Step 1: Review priorities**

Consider how you typically spend your time at work. We suggest dividing your core tasks into three broad categories: discovery, delivery, and development. *Discovery* focuses on innovation and includes actively engaging the five discovery skills in search of new products, services, processes, and/or business models. *Delivery* is all about producing results, analyzing, planning, executing, and implementing strategies. Finally, *development* centers on building your capabilities and those of others (primarily direct reports, if you are a manager). This task includes selecting the right people for your team and training them well in the innovator’s DNA skills.

Now, look at your calendar for a typical workweek. What percent of your time do you personally spend on each task—discovery, delivery, and development? You may want to answer this question by filling out the chart in table C-1, using the following simple process. First, make your best guess about how you currently spend your time (the “today” column). Second, record your best judgment about where you think you should be spending your time (“tomorrow”), given your team’s purpose and your company’s strategy. Third, calculate the difference or “gap” between today and tomorrow for each category.

Next, focus primarily on the gap. Is it large? Negative? Positive? Or neutral? If the gap is zero, you’re spending the time and energy that you think you should on discovery. However, a negative gap reflects a need to devote more time to discovery activities to improve your ability as a discovery-driven leader.

Innovative CEOs and founder entrepreneurs spend roughly 50 percent more of their typical week on discovery activities than
noninnovative CEOs and entrepreneurs do. So if you aren’t devoting at least 30 percent of your time to discovery, you probably aren’t leading the innovation charge. Creative problem solving takes time, so increase the amount you spend on discovery to have a bigger impact on innovation.

**Step 2: Assess your discovery skills**

After reflecting on your time spent (discovery versus delivery), get a more refined, specific sense of your discovery and delivery skill strengths and weaknesses. You can gain an idea of your performance on these skills through the brief self-assessment in chapter 1. You can also visit [http://www.InnovatorsDNA.com](http://www.InnovatorsDNA.com) to take a more comprehensive online self-assessment or a 360-degree online assessment (which provides feedback from your manager, peers, and direct reports) to capture a better sense of your strengths and weaknesses. These assessments can prove valuable in helping you answer: “What is my everyday discovery versus delivery orientation? In which discovery skills am I strongest? Which ones do I want to develop? In which delivery skills am I strongest? Which delivery skills do I need to develop?”

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Step 3: Identify a compelling innovation challenge

After assessing your strengths and weaknesses in discovery and delivery, the next step is to find a specific, current innovation challenge or opportunity so that you can practice your discovery skills. This challenge might range from creating a new product or service, reducing employee turnover, or coming up with new processes that reduce costs by 5 percent in your business unit. With your innovation challenge clearly in mind, develop a plan to practice some of the discovery skills as you search for creative solutions.

Step 4: Practice your discovery skills

We propose that you work on your questioning skills first, since innovation often starts with a compelling question and innovative teams have a culture that supports questioning. Write down at least twenty-five questions about your innovation challenge and conduct a QuestionStorming activity (or other questioning tips) with your team, as outlined at the end of chapter 3. A personal habit of asking questions helps create a safe space for other team members to also ask questions.

After strengthening your capacity to question, identify your strongest skill among observing, networking, and experimenting and seek to practice it as you tackle your innovation challenge (unless it’s so strong that more practice provides diminishing returns; in that case, working on a weaker discovery skill may be a better development option). Again, refer to each of the chapters about these skills (chapters 4 through 6) for suggestions about improving them. Involve your team as much as possible in whatever discovery skill you are working on (observing, networking, or experimenting) as you search for a solution to your challenge. Finally, engage in frequent brainstorming sessions (alone and with your team) to practice associating (see chapter 2 for tips on associating).
Step 5: Get a coach

Innovation is habit forming or, rather, innovation requires forming new habits regarding the five discovery skills. Our friend Stephen Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, might call this book *The Innovator’s DNA: The Five Habits of Highly Creative People*. How can you increase the probability that if you try out the new skills suggested, you will turn them into new habits? One place to start is asking someone to serve as your creative mentor or coach—someone who can motivate and coach you while you work on developing new behavioral patterns. Personal change is difficult, and asking someone you respect to help with the change effort is an important step (getting one person engaged in the change process will bump up your success rate 15 percent to 20 percent). The coach can be a boss, peer, professor, classmate, or even someone you live with (you might practice these skills with other family members as you attempt to creatively solve problems at home). But whomever you pick, make sure he or she is someone you can trust to give you honest feedback and suggestions. A creative mentor and coach can make a big difference in helping improve your creativity skills.

Master the Five Skills of Disruptive Innovators

Mastery of any skill comes by practicing specific elements of that skill. For example, world-class athletes, musicians, or managers break down a skill into very specific parts of their “game.” Then they practice these minute elements relentlessly. For a golfer, it might mean short putts on the green, over and over for days until she masters one small element of the swing. Concert pianists do the same with a small part of a musical piece. Practice over the course of weeks, months, and years ultimately provides mastery of not only one skill, but a set of skills.

The disruptive innovators in our research did precisely this, either consciously or unconsciously. They practiced skills relentlessly,
on almost anyone or anything they interacted with. The mystery of innovation is far less mysterious when people practice the innovator’s DNA skills regularly so the skills become new habits. This takes time and self-discipline. So start with realistic expectations and actively allocate time to improving your discovery skills. Most of all, remember that your personal development efforts send a serious signal to your team and organization about how high innovation ranks in your priorities and how important it might become to theirs.

**Developing Discovery Skills in the Next Generation**

The most important innovation work any of us might do is within the four walls of our home, the boundaries of our neighborhood, or the classrooms of our local schools. Why? Almost all the disruptive innovators we interviewed mentioned at least one adult in their lives who paid personal attention to their innovation skills and helped nurture them as they grew into adulthood. That’s why we think it’s so important for adults to honor and amplify young people’s discovery skills worldwide.

Consider Steve Jobs’s life. Early on, his father set aside part of his workbench for Jobs to experiment on mechanical things. Later, Jobs’s neighbor, Larry Lang, taught him (and other interested neighborhood kids) a lot about electronics by building Heathkits together (products like transistor radios that were purchased in do-it-yourself kits). In retrospect, Jobs realized that building Heathkits with a neighbor and exploring things on his father’s workbench ultimately gave him an understanding of what lurked inside a finished product. More importantly, Jobs acquired the sense that “things were not mysteries” and, as a result, he also gained “a tremendous level of self-confidence” about mechanical and electronic things.
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Jobs was not the only fortunate one when it came to developing the next generation of disruptive innovators. Jeff Bezos’s grandparents played an equally powerful role in fostering his experimentation skills during the summers on their Texas farm. Richard Branson’s mother supported his curiosity to carry on a family legacy of discovering new terrain. Orit Gadiesh’s parents and schoolteachers not only tolerated her questions, but valued them. In short, disruptive innovators had one or more adults play a key role in keeping their natural innovator’s DNA alive beyond childhood. You can play that same important role with a future generation of innovators.

**Developing Discovery Skills in Homes and Neighborhoods**

What better place to start building the five skills of disruptive innovators than in our homes and neighborhoods? If you take on this challenge to “send the elevator down,” as entrepreneur (and founder of Ariadne Capital) Julie Meyer put it, and bring up a new generation of disruptive innovators, here are a few concrete, helpful tips.

**Associating Skills**

1. One game you can play, particularly when traveling in the car, is called, “What’s the connection?” Two people each think of a random word. A third person is the player. Once they decide on random words, each of the first two people announces his or her word. The third person must then create a logical connection between the two words, but try to be creative in doing so. For example, the words *pickle* and *stitches* might be connected with: “We make sour faces when getting stitches at the hospital and when we bite into a sour pickle.” Similarly, the board game TriBond (distributed by Mattel) gives you three word clues and asks you to
figure out what they have in common. (You can also try out the game at http://www.TriBond.com, where there’s a new combination of three words to connect every day.)

2. Search for books that foster associational thinking. One of our favorites is *Not a Box*. The main character, a rabbit, tries to convince readers that boxes are not boxes. Instead, boxes might be anything, if we let our imaginations run wild (ranging from a race car to a spaceship). After one of us read *Not a Box* to a three-year-old grandchild, he discovered him sitting in a box later that day. It was not a box, but a pirate ship! If you enjoy reading creative books with children, a few others are: *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (by Crockett Johnson), *Ish* (by Peter Reynolds), *The Anti-Coloring Book* (by Susan Striker and Edward Kimmel).

**Questioning Skills**

1. When most children come home from school, parents often ask: “How was your day?” or “Did you learn anything interesting today?” The second question is better than the first (in terms of insights gained), but what if you regularly asked your child (or neighbor’s child): “What questions did you ask today?” “What questions did other children ask today?” “What questions didn’t you have time to ask today?” Then listen; really, really listen. You may be surprised by what you discover. (You may also want to take a moment to watch *What Is That?*, a short video by MovieTeller films about how a father’s and son’s questions powerfully affect each of them).

2. Whenever you face a family, school, or community problem or challenge that needs a solution, try using a modified
version of our QuestionStorming approach with young people. Kids don’t have the patience to brainstorm fifty questions, but they usually have the patience to brainstorm ten questions. For example, suppose you have a problem with your child not doing chores or homework. Asking just ten questions together about the “problem” can often yield interesting insights. For example, you might ask, “Why isn’t science interesting to you?” “What can I do to be helpful?” Your child might ask, “Why do I need to know science?” “Why is science so important to you?” This process of asking questions about a problem can often trigger ideas or insights that will lead to novel solutions.

Observing Skills

1. Give children a chance to see you at work. You never know what surprises they might have by joining you for a day. Pay attention to what they notice as they enter your world; become a fly on the wall and watch the world through their eyes as they try on the likely new, adult world of work. For Jon Huntsman Jr., going to his father’s workplace when he was eleven years old altered the course of his life. He was visiting his father, who worked as a special adviser to President Nixon, at the White House. While there, he met Henry Kissinger, who was on his way to a secret meeting in China. When young Jon asked Kissinger where he was going, Kissinger replied, “China.” Until then in Jon’s life, China had not been a real place with real people. But hearing that one word from someone who was actually going to China sparked a lifelong interest. Huntsman later studied Asian history and Asian languages in school. In total, he spent fifteen years learning Mandarin and spoke it fluently as the U.S. Ambassador to China.
APPENDIX C

2. Take frequent walks in old places and new ones. Take a child on a walk and look at the experience through her eyes. What does she see? Hear? Taste? Touch? Smell? You may be surprised at what you’ve never noticed before. Watch carefully for what surprises her; it just might surprise you as well. When traveling or living in new places, do the same, especially in moments of transition (just arriving or just leaving) when we sometimes see things that otherwise remain invisible. Keep a journal together that captures your observations. *How to Be an Explorer of the World* (by Keri Smith) is a great guide for adults and children who are interested in making better observations of the world.

Networking Skills

1. You can start building networking skills with young people by occasionally bringing a work (or even family) problem to them and asking for their opinion. Explain that problems are best solved when you get a variety of people looking at them from multiple perspectives. If they express interest in the problem, you might even invite them to join you as you bring the same problem to someone else with a different background. This becomes a powerful example of the importance of networking for ideas and demonstrates a process for doing it.

2. Occasionally, whenever you face a family, school, or community problem or challenge, think about inviting a focus group of three or four people with different backgrounds to give their perspectives on how to best solve the problem. This could involve a dinner invitation or drinks and refreshments to accompany the discussion.
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3. If you have young people in your home, do some idea networking together by socializing with a diversity of people. For example, pick a person from a different country, different ethnic group, different religion, different age, or unusual occupation and invite him or her to a meal with your family. Explore together how other people live and see the world.

Experimenting Skills

1. Conduct experiments at home or in your neighborhood and discuss them with children. For example, Bill Dyer (a sociologist and father of Jeff Dyer) placed an ironed white shirt on the floor of the central walkway in his home. He watched for two days as his children carefully stepped around it, as no one bothered to pick it up. He then discussed with his children why they didn’t think to pick up the shirt and, more broadly, what they viewed as their responsibilities around the house. On another occasion, he swapped a teenage son for a neighbor family’s teenage son for a week. After the week, the two families got together to discuss what each boy, and each family, learned from the experience.

2. Take a young person to a junkyard or flea market to find something to take apart. Pick something for yourself at the same time. Take the items home and dismantle them together to see what new insights emerge about how and why things work. One father and son did this with an old airplane engine. The experience sparked a future aviation career, as the young boy grew up to become a pilot.

3. Engage young people in prototyping efforts. Select a product you’d like to improve (or imagine a new one) and
design and construct a crude prototype together. Children love the chance to create something new, particularly if Play-Doh is involved; you never know what new feature of the prototype they might discover.

4. Take your child on a trip to a foreign country (or even a “foreign” part of your hometown) with the explicit goal of experimenting with everything new. Try out new foods, customs, and local products and services. If possible, live in a home to experience life as a local. Try out as many new interactive experiences as possible.

Final Call for Action

What is our final call for action? Adopt a young innovator! Find at least one child (your own, a relative’s, or a neighbor’s) and help that young person appreciate and strengthen his innovation skills. Every child deserves at least one adult who values her innovation skills, at least one adult who listens to her honest questions. As Dr. Seuss knew so well, “Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.” If we don’t collectively nurture the next generation of disruptive innovators, who will? There are far too many children in need for any adult to slack off when it comes to nurturing the next generation. If we collectively do this task well, many young people will grow up acting different, thinking different, and, in the end, making a difference in a world bursting with complex, challenging problems. Naively perhaps, we believe in the power of one, that one adult honoring one child’s innovation skills can make all the difference in building a new generation of disruptive innovators. That is our hope.
Appendix C

1. These online assessments also provide a development guide with your customized assessment report to help you understand your strengths and potential areas of improvement with regard to your discovery skills and delivery (execution) skills. The development guide also helps you build a skill development plan to leverage your strengths and improve on any major weaknesses that could derail your career.