Part V
The Part of Tens

In this part . . .

Not all paths to innovation have to be complex or completely time-consuming. This part provides you with easy-to-use tips for innovating in all areas of your business and career. You'll find inspiration and practical advice on how to give your career a jolt, how to stimulate innovation in a meeting or team, how to generate more good ideas, and how to implement your ideas and plans with success.

Chapter 19

Ten Creative Ways to Boost Your Career

In This Chapter

- Challenging yourself to try to make a difference through your work
- Taking an inquisitive approach that leads you into new areas and fresh ways of thinking
- Approaching work with a desire to stand out as a patiently persistent innovator

Creativity is the secret ingredient in highly successful careers. A lot of famous people have used creativity to advance their careers more rapidly than others around them. Here are ten good ways to make your mark as an innovator and leader among your peers.

Look for Opportunities to Stand Out

Ordinary careers are made up of consistent performances, year after year. Consistency is a good way to keep your job, but it doesn't help you get ahead. Exceptional careers are made of breakthrough performances — memorable problems or situations in which you've played leading roles.

To stand out, look for a tough challenge, a difficult assignment, or a new program or invention that needs a champion to be implemented. Be the person who steps up and wrestles with the problem or opportunity of the month or year. Be a volunteer and a risk-taker. Tackle something that might really make a difference. A certain amount of boldness is necessary if you want to do anything that will be remembered.

Share Your Enthusiasm for Innovative Ideas

Many people assume that it's inappropriate to talk about new ideas and approaches in the workplace. After all, most people around you don't, so why should you? It might make you seem like a troublemaker or malcontent, right? Wrong. Many people secretly wish that things would improve in their workplaces and have private complaints and concerns about how things are done. They welcome someone who has fresh ideas and a positive attitude toward innovation. Just so long as their own necks aren't sticking out, they're happy to see someone else propose new ideas.

It's better to be the employee who suggests new approaches than any of the timid people who don't have the courage to propose an idea or point out the flaws in everyday procedures. Just make sure that you aren't too strident. Recognize that the majority of good ideas get shot down. Even ideas that get adopted have usually been shot down a few dozen times before they finally take hold, so be good humored about the process, and don't get mad if people are slow to recognize that you're right. A patient innovator is a successful and popular innovator. An impatient innovator is destined to work alone.

Look for Emerging Problems You Can Help Solve

It feels good to be part of a team that figures out how to resolve a major problem. Have the courage to dive headfirst into the most troubling area in your field, and be one of the leaders who innovates to improve it. The only caveat is that you need to pick your place of work carefully. Look for like-minded people in a situation where there's enthusiasm for change so that you don't feel hampered by traditional, narrow-minded thinkers.

Take, for example, the shortage of primary-care (general-practice) medical practitioners in the United States. This shortage is an artifact of the cost-saving pressures applied by the insurance industry, which have turned primary care into a race to see a new patient every 15 minutes and then to squeeze enough procedures into the visit to make it profitable for the medical practice. Many doctors and nurse practitioners are turned off by general practice and have gravitated toward specialties in which they make more money and have more control of the way they practice medicine.

It's smart to avoid a problematic area — or is it? Somewhere, some medical practice is going to solve the problems of primary care and create a new model that spreads across the country. The doctors who innovate to resolve

the major issues of primary care will be seen as leaders in the field of medicine, and they'll have rewarding careers.

Look for Emerging Opportunities You Can Surf

Another way to be a winner is to jump on a wave that's gaining strength and looks like it will be one of the big ones that transforms society. You may find that you face a few years of uncertainty and slow growth by trying to position yourself in the vanguard of an emerging field. It's hard to know exactly when an industry will take off. Many people today have spent decades struggling to turn solar power into a major industry that replaces fossil fuel. I think that they're right, conceptually, but I'm not sure whether this will be their decade. My advice is to pick an emerging field that you're excited about and really believe in so that you'll have the satisfaction of doing meaningful work while you wait for your chance to become a billionaire.

My great-grandfather, Edwin S. Webster, and his business partner, Charles A. Stone, met at registration in the beginning of their freshman year at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Both were intrigued by the emerging field of electrical engineering and decided to major in it. They were the first two graduates with degrees in this new major, back in 1888. The next year, because no firms were hiring electrical engineers at that time, they founded a testing laboratory and consulting firm in Boston called Stone and Webster. Their timing was impeccable. Within ten years, the firm was doing major projects all around the country, and it played a leading role as electrical plants, trolley systems, and streetlights were introduced in cities throughout the world. My great-grandfather was a smart guy who focused his career on an emerging field and put his considerable energy and enthusiasm into growing it.

Do Something You Really Enjoy

There's a strong link between creative thinking and doing, on one hand, and happiness on the other. Unhappy people don't do very much or very good creative work; they worry rather than imagine. Now apply this principle to your career. How are you going to do your best work and contribute innovative ideas to your workplace and profession? Certainly not by being unhappy and stressed in your work!

What interests you? What was your favorite summer job when you were a kid? What are your top hobbies? These sorts of questions help you zero in on the field or profession that you're most likely to make a mark in. It may seem to be less economically promising to focus on, say, knitting compared with

accounting, but if you do accounting just to pay the bills and really love knitting, perhaps a shift of careers is overdue.

Start thinking about how to create a role for yourself in the world based on a genuine interest, and when you've figured out how to meet your minimum economic requirements in that field, make the switch! If you're midway into a dull career and have a bunch of dependents and a costly mortgage, it may take some years to figure out how to switch careers to something you really love, so you'll need a long-term plan with a lot of innovative thinking and entrepreneurship along the way. But even if it's for five or ten years, having a plan feels great. It took me ten years out of college to cement my plans to make a living as an author, but now I'm glad that I persisted in moving in that direction, because I love the work.

Consider Working on Commission

Careers that are based on sales commissions include real estate, investment banking, automobile sales, industrial-equipment leasing, commercial lending, insurance, and business to business sales. People who work in these careers are responsible for drumming up enough business to earn their own incomes, making them basically entrepreneurs who build personal business networks, often under the umbrella of some larger company. A real estate agent, for example, may do her own marketing and build her own roster of satisfied customers while working in a real estate company's office and competing against the other agents there.

Why work on commission? Most commission-based jobs leave you more freedom to pursue sales your own way so long as you produce. The autonomy of commission-based work is great for self-directed, motivated people who are eager to experiment with different approaches until they find a success formula that works for them. It's true that the average entry-level salesperson doesn't make much in the way of commissions and may give up after a year or two to take a "safer" job. But you're not average! The top-performing salespeople in many industries are able to build successful careers, first within the boundaries of a firm's sales force and later by going out on their own and creating their own real estate firm, sales-rep company, or other venture. (See Chapter 18 for tips on successful entrepreneurship.)

Build Two Careers at the Same Time

Some people have double majors in college, and some people have double careers. Having two careers means working two jobs, so it may not be appealing as a career strategy at first, but building two parallel career paths has many benefits:

- Two career tracks in different industries or fields expose you to many more opportunities than a single career path does.
- A *shadow career* (something that you do in your extra time, such as on weekends or in the evenings) often grows over time to become your primary activity, especially if it's the thing you most enjoy doing.
- By working in multiple fields or professions, you gain a breadth of experience and knowledge that allows you to see creative combinations and options that other people don't.

Study

Nothing educates the mind like education, to coin a redundant phrase. Before my own career took off fully, I used to have enough time to teach regularly in business schools in my area, and my favorite gig was teaching an evening or weekend MBA class, because my students were working adults who had decided to come back to school for an advanced degree. Adult learners are fun to teach because they're . . . well, adult! They have experience, motivation, and discipline that they probably lacked in their teen years. Many of my students from that period are now leaders in their fields, and a surprising number have made it as entrepreneurs.

But wait — why is that surprising? To be a successful entrepreneur, you need to be self-directed, motivated, and disciplined, and you need enough real-world experience to be able to imagine useful innovations. Add some new ways of thinking and a little mental training, and you've produced a recipe for innovators who will rise to the top.

I highly recommend going back to study something that you think will be useful or interesting. If you're already in school, take a course in a different department to add breadth to your studies. If you haven't been in a classroom for a while, sign up for a course at the nearest community college, or if you can't find a conveniently located classroom, take a course online. Your studies may not turn into a full-fledged degree program, but either way, taking classes will enrich your thinking and power up some parts of your brain that may not have had enough exercise lately.

Volunteer

Whether you're taking a tough work assignment that nobody else wants or helping a homeless shelter raise funds, volunteering can have a big effect on you and your career.

Volunteering is a great way to build confidence and get practice in problem-solving, leadership, and innovation. It often involves working with teams, so

it strengthens your communication and facilitation skills. Also, when you offer your efforts for free, it's amazing how many doors open to you that might have stayed closed if you were looking for paid work. Volunteering is a great way to get some experience in a new field that interests you or that you think may someday be combined with your own field of work for a future innovation. Take a look around, and see what you can volunteer for right now that would enrich your own working life at the same time that it helps other people.

Champion Someone Else's Good Idea

To be a leading innovator, do you have to be the one who comes up with the next big idea? No, that's not true at all. Many people make their mark as leaders in their fields by embracing a great idea early, before other people realize its qualities, and championing its development.

There's a time window — often a really big one — between invention and rapid spread. During that period, an innovation may stagnate or spread very slowly, as early adopters try to get the kinks out and make it work. The idea of electronic medical records, for example, was around for several years before it began to gain traction in actual medical practices. During that time, a few innovators saw the potential for digitizing medical records and began to try to make it work. Some of their efforts failed, but others emerged as industry standards. I wish that I'd been involved in one of the successful companies supplying medical-records systems, because they've found a fast-growing market niche and can hardly supply the demand.

Take a look around your industry or workplace, or in one of the fields in which you volunteer or do part-time work. Does someone have a really good idea or invention that just hasn't caught on yet? Start studying it. Experiment with it in your own work. Blog about it. Go to industry conferences, and lead discussion groups about how to make it work. Being an early champion of someone else's breakthrough idea is a great role, and without such champions, many innovations would fail to catch on.

Chapter 20

Ten Tips for More Innovative Meetings

In This Chapter

- Turning ordinary meetings into extraordinary innovation sessions
- Finding time for creative problem-solving
- Getting everyone involved in the thought process

Do you like meetings? In surveys, almost all people say that they dislike the meetings they have to attend in their workplaces. As a consequence, meetings are shorter and fewer than they were in earlier decades. Besides, everyone's so busy that they have precious little time to talk. They need to stay at their desks, cranking out work that was due yesterday.

Fewer face-to-face meetings, however, mean that far fewer innovative ideas come up, because many of the best ideas arise in discussions at meetings. The best solution to the I-hate-meetings syndrome is to run better meetings rather than cut back on them. This chapter contains ten tips for making meetings count toward your monthly quota of brilliant breakthroughs.

Ask for Original Information and Ideas

Questions such as these help open a meeting to creative ideas and insights:

- "What else could we think about before deciding what to do?"
- "Are there any fresh ideas or suggestions?"
- "Does anyone know anything that we haven't discussed yet or have new information or a different viewpoint?"

Challenging the group to come up with fresh ideas or new sources of information almost guarantees increased creative thinking. You have a variety of human minds sitting around the table; use them fully by asking each person to make a unique contribution to your meeting. Nodding doesn't count.

Reorganize Your Meetings, Not Your Staff

How many times have you seen something like this in the business news?: "XYZ Co. announced that it is reorganizing its Z division and consolidating the A, B, and C departments into a new strategic business unit reporting directly to the chief executive officer." Behind every such announcement smacking of redrawn organizational charts is a performance problem that made the CEO think she needed to pay more attention to the A, B, and C departments (or wherever the problem happened to be). Reorganization only helps if disorganization is the root cause of the performance problem, however, and it rarely is.

The next time you or your boss starts talking about redrawing the organization chart to solve some problem, suggest holding a problem-solving meeting instead. Run it as a straight-ahead, no-politics session with freewheeling generation of any and all possible ideas and solutions. See what comes up. You'll probably get a better, less drastic solution than redrawing the organization chart.

Re-solve Old Problems

It's a great exercise to dredge up old problems and revisit them. One problem per staff meeting and a limit of ten minutes are good rules for keeping this exercise from overstepping its bounds. Hindsight often reveals a better way to solve a problem, and it's interesting to see what improvements you can make on the old solution. Sometimes, you end up discarding the previous solution and replacing it with a far better solution. Now, that's a productive use of meeting time! It also signals something essential to creative enthusiasm and the innovative spirit: Nothing's carved in stone, and a better idea is always welcome.

A software company in Palo Alto, California, faced a shortage of parking for visitors. It solved the problem by requiring lower-level staff members to park off-site (across the street at a commercial lot or in any spaces available at meters along the street). Also, all senior staff members were required to park in the back of the parking lot and leave the best spaces next to the door free for visitors. Problem solved. But was the solution the *best* solution?

Forcing lower-level staff members to pay to park on the street was a major sore point that hurt morale — an unintended negative consequence of the plan. A better idea came up in a staff meeting later: Rotate access to the limited spaces in the company lot among all staff members. Also, someone pointed out that the visitor spaces weren't needed most days and that the company rarely held a large enough gathering to require them all for visitors. It would be perfectly feasible to anticipate days when all the spaces were needed and days when only a few would have to be blocked off for drop-by

visitors. Staff members whose turn it was to park on the street could use the open visitor spaces on a first-come basis. With these two changes, the parking situation seemed to be more under control, and morale went up.

Use a "Sideways Thoughts" Board

An old-fashioned military acronym, TBDL, used to mean *to be decided later*. I've attended some meetings in which a chart pad or section of a chalkboard was designated as the TBDL area, where people could write notes about questions or suggestions that didn't fit the agenda item being discussed. It's a good idea and should be done more often. The meeting needs to stay on topic to cover each agenda item, but discussions often raise other thoughts and questions that deserve discussion time too.

When I use this technique, I set up a chart pad with *Sideways Thoughts* written across the top of the page. Sideways thoughts — those ideas and questions that arise through association during discussion of a main agenda item — are well worth capturing and reviewing later for insights that could lead to future innovations. (I don't use TBDL because I don't like to limit the list to decisions. Usually, the most productive sideways thoughts are questions or suggestions, not formal decisions that need to be made.)

Pay Close Attention to Body Language

When you meet around a table in a conference room, as people so often do in workplaces, you have an opportunity to tune into body language, which expresses things that verbal and written communications don't. The most important messages embedded in body language are emotions — how you feel about yourself, other people, and the topics of conversation. Usually, people are unconscious of their nonverbal messages, but if you pay attention to posture, facial expression, and tone of voice, you can become a student of body language and then use it to draw more and better information and ideas from those who are attending the meeting with you.

Avoid making these all-too-common body-language errors at business meetings:

- **Withdrawal** is signaled by leaning back, facing away from the person who's talking, and by doing things like texting or reading while others are talking. It sends a strong message that you're not interested in the topic and also may be interpreted as saying that you don't like or respect the other people in the meeting. Withdrawal behavior shuts down creative discussion and prevents people from speaking their minds or sharing all their information.

- **Contraction** is signaled by looking down, bowing the head, drooping the shoulders, and slumping. It sends the signal that you're depressed or secretly defiant and makes people think that you're not onboard or part of the team.
- **Expansion** is signaled by expanding the chest, leaning back, holding the back straight and head up, and sometimes by raising the shoulders. It sends a strong message that you think you're superior to others and don't care what they think. It's associated with high status and arrogance.

When you've familiarized yourself with the three nonverbal postures that prevent innovation in meetings, it's time to master *approach* — the behavior that boosts innovative discussions and stimulates free and open sharing of information and ideas. Approach is signaled by leaning forward slightly, squaring up to face the person speaking, and making a fair amount of eye contact with the speaker. You can also nod or use encouraging short phrases such as "Okay," "Uh-huh," "Interesting," and "What else?" to keep the flow of discussion going.

Approach signals interest in the speaker and the topic. Without the subtle encouragement of approach behaviors, people don't speak freely in meetings. Whether you're in the boss's seat at the head of the table or holding down one of the other seats around it, you should use approach behaviors to encourage whoever is offering a contribution to the meeting. That way, people will *feel* encouraged to contribute their thoughts.

If you're interested in reading more about nonverbal behavior and communication, I recommend the classic book on the topic, Albert Mehrabian's *Nonverbal Communication* (Aldine Transaction).

Control Routine Topics Tightly

The problem with many meetings is that they wander off topic and waste time on trivialities. If you want to go over the week's progress, by all means do — but make sure that each person's progress report is brief and to the point. Limit individual reports to two minutes or less. (Handouts can be used if there's too much information for a brief review.) Keep questions relevant and brief, and don't let anyone grandstand by talking at length during the progress review.

Many of the topics on meeting agendas can be handled with discipline and focus. Most topics are best handled with a fairly high level of control so as to keep the meeting on track and prevent anyone from wasting others' time. A tightly run meeting gets through its agenda quickly, much to the relief of the attendees. Allow extra time for low-structure discussion of any interesting topics that may be on your mind or that have been posted to the Sideways Thoughts board (refer to the earlier section "Use a 'Sideways Thoughts' Board") during the structured part of the meeting.

Schedule 50-minute meetings with 30 minutes' worth of agenda items to allow for 20 minutes of creative thinking at the end. Use the time to brainstorm about a problem or opportunity, or simply open the floor for general discussion and see what interesting ideas or problems come up. By covering your agenda items promptly and with discipline, you leave plenty of time for creative discussion during the meeting. This facilitation method of tight followed by loose takes care of today's business and also allows innovative thinking about the future.

Control or Exclude Spoilers

Spoilers are those people who rain on your creative parade. They come in various flavors:

- Difficult people who complain and demand all the attention during a meeting
- Self-styled experts who always shoot down ideas and insist that they're the only ones who know what will work
- Contrarians who like to argue and debate and who leap to criticize new ideas before they've even been fully formed
- Pessimists who grumble and like to share their bad news

It takes only one spoiler to ruin a meeting and make most of the other people withdraw. It's really, really hard to generate good ideas or do creative problem-solving with a spoiler at the table. That's why you have to insist that the spoiler stop his spoiling behavior at once. If not, get the person out of the meeting as soon as possible, and don't invite him to the next one. (Yes, appropriate meeting behavior should be part of employee job descriptions so that incurable spoilers can eventually be fired.)

Brainstorm at Least Once a Month

How often should you stop and think about your work instead of just doing it? The answer depends on the level of innovation you need or want to achieve, but the range is somewhere between once a day and once a month. If you hold fewer than a dozen brainstorming sessions a year, you're really not making even the minimum commitment to innovation. It's all well and good to study innovation and know how to facilitate creative groups, but the point is that you actually have to *use* the techniques in this book, not just read about them.

I can't find any surveys showing how often the average business asks its employees to participate in a full-blown idea-generation or brainstorming session, but in my own experience of visiting hundreds of workplaces, I'm

sorry to say that I don't think the average employee is asked for ideas more than once a year at best. Ramp it up, guys! If we don't ask ourselves and our co-workers and employees to imagine a better future, we won't create one.

Ask for Multiple Alternatives

Regardless of the topic of a meeting, there's almost always a decision to be discussed. Some bosses just announce their decisions, preferring an autocratic style. (But what style do employees like? A more participative one, of course.)

To get better input for decision-making, use meetings to generate three to five viable alternatives. Then examine the pros and cons of each alternative and make your selection. The result is bound to be better than the first option that sprang to mind, and by including the group in your thinking process, you've used the meeting to generate buy-in as well as better decisions.

Meet Somewhere New and Different

If the weather's good, take your group to the lawn in front of your building (if there is one) or to the nearest park for a brown-bag lunch and informal staff meeting. Or hold your meeting in the private dining room of a local restaurant and treat everyone to a company lunch. If a restaurant doesn't fit your needs or budget, look for a different location within your own company, such as a large conference room or one with a better table than where you usually meet.

The idea behind changing your venue is that the environment influences the mood of the group and may be used to loosen up people's thinking and encourage creative expression. A fun or attractive environment stimulates free thinking. A fancy, formal environment signals that the meeting is special and its subject is an important one. A meeting on the shop floor or in the warehouse signals that you want everyone to roll up their sleeves and work on the details of a production or other process. Adjust the environment to fit your agenda and signal the kind of participation you expect from those present.

Chapter 21

Ten Ways to Stimulate Your Creative Genius

In This Chapter

- Developing a habit of persistent problem-solving and invention
- Avoiding common beliefs and assumptions that blind you to fresh insights
- Beefing up your creative muscles by doing creative things and spending time with creative people

How do you come up with really brilliant ideas when and where they're needed? If you can do that, you can do anything. Doors open to those who have better ideas. And it feels good — no, great — to be the author of a breakthrough business strategy or the inventor of a great new product or process.

But how can you power up your creative genius and produce more and better big ideas? Here are ten tips that range from specific practices you can try to lifelong habits you may want to adopt.

Persist, Persist, Persist

Are geniuses born or made? Talent, we assume, appears early in life. Child prodigies are so remarkably brilliant that they receive special recognition from the beginning and grow up into leading thinkers, composers, or athletes, just as their proud parents and the rest of society expects them to. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart began composing at the age of 5, history tells us. What were you doing at the age of 5?

We don't listen to or perform Mozart's early compositions, however; we know him for his mature work. It was the fact that he loved music from an early age that explains why he was an excellent performer in his teens and composed really great work in his 20s. He had, by virtue of his love of music and the support of his musical family, devoted more than a decade to practice and study by the time he was in his teens. What modern science tells

us is that practice makes perfect, and talent is a relatively minor contributor to the success stories of leading scientists, musicians, athletes, artists, entrepreneurs, and inventors.

The trick is to focus, practice, and learn — persistently and for a fairly long time. It takes time to become a sudden success. Lots of time. Thomas Edison invented a light-bulb filament that wouldn't burn out right away through the simple but tedious process of testing every material he could think of. He performed hundreds of unsuccessful tests, more than anyone else, so he learned more about how different materials performed and eventually hit on the right one.

Have faith in your own potential for creative genius! By persisting where others give up, you can and probably will find a better solution to a problem, or a better design or invention. It's the persistent people whom history recalls as having been geniuses. Heck, if your ideas are important enough, people may even make up stories about your amazing early talent — whether you actually exhibited any or not.

Work on BIG Problems

Most people spend most of their time solving small problems and ticking items off endless to-do lists. A working life ruled by details is all well and good, but it doesn't add up to any breakthroughs. Take time — at *least* one day a week — to focus on something big. That's the biggest secret of successful innovators. They elbow aside the mundane and routine stuff and actually find time to focus on something major, such as

- A big question, like how to replace fossil fuels with renewable energy, how to prevent breast cancer, or how to modernize an old family business to give it growth potential for the new generation
- A big problem, like how to turn around a failing business or what to do with an empty old warehouse or factory on the edge of town
- A big opportunity, like how to contribute to the challenging goal of making airports and airplanes more secure from terrorist attacks

Major questions, problems, and opportunities are the stuff of creative genius for the simple reason that if you contribute solutions, you will be hailed as a hero, not just given your cost-of-living increase.

If you're not focusing on anything big, you're wasting your creative energy entirely on the little things of life. I agree that little things *do* matter; it's helpful to remember to buy dog food and diapers on the way home from work, or to pay your electric bill before the power company shuts the power off. But little things don't add up to anything big; they just add up to a long to-do list. Remember to take the time to focus on something big too.

I don't like shopping lists, because I view chores as getting in the way of more important thinking and work, but sometimes I have to sally forth with a shopping list. Here's something you can do to make grocery (or any) shopping more productive: At the bottom of every list, add a big question you want to think about, and then think about it as you walk through the aisles, filling your cart. I don't know how many trips to the grocery store it will take you to get a breakthrough idea, but I do know that, eventually, you'll come up with something good.

Rotate Among Three Knotty Problems

Challenge yourself with not one, not two, but three major puzzles or problems at the same time. See whether you can invent three better products, processes, or solutions. This advice may seem counterintuitive, because it's hard enough to crack just one tough innovation puzzle, but you increase your chances of having a breakthrough idea by working on several main problems simultaneously. Research and think about one topic until you feel stale or at a dead end; then set the folder aside and turn to the next one. When you get stuck on it, go to the third and then back to the first.

Being able to set a tough problem aside for a while helps you be persistent. Another benefit of rotating among three problems is that you increase the chances of having a breakthrough by a factor of three. If you solve even one of them, you'll have a good invention or solution in hand that you can work on implementing. The third benefit of this approach is that you often get cross-fertilization of ideas; your work on one problem can enrich your approach to another.

Pick problems or puzzles that would benefit from an innovation, but don't necessarily feel that you have to make a breakthrough right away. That way, you can take your time and wait for an "aha" idea.

Most inventors use this technique of rotating among multiple puzzles or problems. They may give the impression that they're always completing a project, but actually, they're harvesting the ones that bore fruit and abandoning others that didn't. Give yourself some flexibility by looking into more than one puzzle, problem, or possible invention, and pushing ahead on whichever one seems to be moving forward most easily.

Eat Ideas for Lunch

Try this procedure for working out a solution to a problem or coming up with a clever idea to take advantage of an opportunity:

1. **Invite a creative friend to lunch at a diner or other informal restaurant where scribbling ideas on a large pad of paper won't elicit too many stares.**
2. **Explain the ground rules to your friend: You're both to brainstorm about the topic of your choice, and you have to suggest an idea to earn the right to take a bite.**
3. **Order sandwiches or salads, because hot entrees may grow cold before you fill your pad with ideas!**

You'll need to pick up the tab, of course, but in exchange, you get a brainstorming partner for however long it takes to fill a piece of paper with ideas and eat your lunch. If you don't follow this three-step process, you'll find yourself chatting with your friend about other things and forgetting to focus on the brainstorming topic. That's why you have to establish, and follow, a strict idea-for-a-bite rule!

What if you get through your sandwiches and still don't have the breakthrough idea you need? There's only one thing to do: Order dessert.

Work on Your Self-Talk

Those little voices inside your own head determine success and failure to a large extent. You're not crazy to listen to them; in fact, that's the sanest thing you can do. Pay special attention to the way you explain notable events to yourself. Notable events are, generally speaking, either notably good or bad.

If you think about bad events as being your fault, you're setting yourself up for pessimism and blocking your creative genius. Watch out for self-blaming, and if you start to do it, make a point of listing the external factors that contributed to a bad event. Rather than blame yourself entirely for having an automobile accident, for example, remind yourself that it was dark and icy, that the roads hadn't been properly sanded, and that the other driver was going way too fast.

Watch out for overgeneralizing a bad event too; that tendency also depresses your creative impulse. Rather than conclude that you "can't manage money well" after investing in a retirement fund that does poorly, tell yourself something productive like "I won't repeat the specific investment strategy I used in that case, because it didn't work well."

When it comes to good events, do the opposite: Generalize, and take the credit! Yes, you're brilliant; that's why you made that big sale. And if you can make one big sale, you can make many. You have the potential to be the top salesperson in your entire industry! This kind of positive self-talk actually does help increase your optimism and drive, giving you energy for creative problem-solving.

Creativity and innovation are tightly tied to mood. Hopefulness and optimism produce innovation. Work on your state of mind first, and the innovative behavior you want will naturally follow.

For more information on how to get your self-talk right, see Martin Seligman's classic books *Learned Helplessness* and *Learned Optimism* (Knopf Doubleday) and his summary of his findings, *Authentic Happiness* (Simon & Schuster), or do the exercises in the "Transforming Negative Talk" booklet, available at Trainer's Spectrum (`www.tspectrum.com/communication_negtalk.htm`).

Correct Your Mental Biases

It's hard to see problems and projects 100 percent clearly when you're human (which I assume that all my readers are). Humans have these big brains that are good at thinking but have some curious blind spots built into them. We have certain biases that lead us to make incorrect assumptions. Here are some of the biggest and most persistent mental biases:

- **The belief that correlation implies causation:** If two things are associated or occur together, we naturally assume that one is causing the other.

  If people who smoke cigarettes also tend to suffer from heart disease, for example, we leap to the conclusion that smoking causes heart disease and that to prevent heart disease, people need to stop smoking. In fact, research partially confirms this conclusion; smoking does increase the risk of heart disease. But it's not the root cause, and if we focus only on preventing smoking, we'll never eliminate all heart disease. More to the point, it might be productive to ask, "Could something be causing both smoking and heart disease?" In other words, what if you look for a *third factor* that drives the first two?

  If you apply this thinking to the example of heart disease and smoking, you might find that certain kinds of stress cause heart disease, which might get you thinking about ways to reduce or manage stress as part of a public-health strategy. Perhaps it would be more effective to help people manage their stress than to focus on creating an antismoking campaign. Nobody's doing that, however, probably because the mental bias to see correlation as causation is a strong one.

- **The tendency to satisfice:** *Satisficing* (a term coined by 1978 Nobel laureate in economics, Herbert Simon) means to make a hasty choice among alternatives instead of looking more systematically for an ideal option. When people shop for apartments, for example, they often satisfice by signing a lease for a place that has some of the qualities they wanted but not all. Why don't they keep searching? Are they too busy or afraid that all the good apartments will be gone soon? It's not clear why people stop searching and accept a less-than-perfect option, but it's clear that we do.

Satisficing saves us time and trouble, so it's fine for minor decisions. But when it comes to deciding what business strategy to use, which job to take, or whether to stop brainstorming about a major challenge or keep looking for more ideas, you definitely don't want to satisfice. You want to *optimize* — seek the best option (or at least a really good one).

When we accept mediocre options and choices, we turn our backs on our potential to create optimal solutions and don't use our capacity for innovation. The next time you find yourself saying, "Oh, well, I guess it's good enough," stop, give yourself a kick in the rear, and ask, "Or is it? What if I pour a little more creative energy into this problem? Maybe I can find an optimal solution, not just an adequate one!"

- **The tendency to let groups of people reach incorrect or inadequate conclusions:** There are a lot of *group decision-making biases,* each with its own peculiar flavor:
  - Groups can be too polite, with each member being afraid to say something critical about a proposed course of action of decision, even though it's not a very good one.
  - Groups can defer to a dominant person rather than get into conflict with him, even though other members may have valid alternative points of view that aren't being considered fully.
  - Groups tend to talk and think about what they have in common — their shared information and knowledge base — and to fail to take advantage of the unique perspectives of people whose knowledge isn't shared by the rest of the group.
  - Groups, just like the people who make them up, can be quite illogical, failing to apply general principles or abstract beliefs to specific decisions.

  In business, people often make key decisions in small groups — management teams, boards of directors, product development teams, and so on. I recommend reading about group decision-making biases and failures to arm yourself against the many ways in which groups so easily get things wrong.

Nurture a Secret Project

Your boss is probably never going to assign you the task of going off and thinking up something brilliant. She's going to expect you to be at your desk, logging the face time needed to prove that you're a diligent worker. The challenge you face is finding time in your overcrowded daily schedule to daydream, imagine, brainstorm, or free-associate.

In the daily press of work, you need to step back and ask really big questions, like these:

- What's the future of my industry, and how can I help bring it about?
- What's the biggest, most challenging problem in our business right now, and how can I help solve it?
- What needs inventing right now, and why don't I just sit down and invent it?

Why indeed? If you tried to sit down and think about ideas for an important invention, your boss would notice that you weren't shuffling papers or punching the keypad of your computer and would tell you to stop napping and start working.

For many of us, it's unfortunately necessary to sneak the time needed to do any major creative thinking. Adopt a special, personal project or problem to stew on and don't tell your boss or co-workers about it unless you begin to see some practical solutions that you can propose. Until then, keep working in secret, between boring routine tasks, and keep your notes filed away in some private place. Oh, and don't feel bad about this particular bit of dishonesty. It's to everyone's ultimate good for you to try to come up with a brilliant breakthrough idea. After all, *someone's* got to.

Cross-Train in Art

It takes years to get really good at something as difficult as drawing, playing guitar, flamenco dancing, or cooking gourmet meals, but even if you never achieve full mastery, the journey offers many benefits. Studying and practicing anything artistic are great ways to get in touch with and strengthen your creative self.

Join a creative-writing group, for example. Please! If you're not actively exercising your imagination, you aren't going to come up with any brilliant ideas or inventions. It's just as plain and simple as that. The arts, which are by nature extremely creative, offer a great way to train the same mental muscles that you need to be a brilliant innovator at work.

Do Art Projects with Your Kids

Here's an interesting addendum to my tip about using the arts to build your innovation skills: Young people used to do a lot more art in the course of their academic careers. It was common to include arts in the curriculum in many schools, and it was also common for many children to take music lessons and to draw, paint, act, work with clay, or make jewelry and crafts for fun. Now schools are cutting back on arts funding to concentrate on science, math, and reading skills, while at home, children watch TV or play computer games.

What's lost by not having children engage in artistic expression every day? Certainly, the arts are poorer, but even more important, the imagination is poorer. What we learn from the arts about creative thinking, problem-solving, and expression translates strongly and directly into our working lives. If you have children at home, you may want to consider doing arts or crafts with them so as to share the benefits and to help prepare them to be innovative thinkers and doers in their adult working lives.

Start or Join an Inventors' Club

Many groups of people meet regularly to share ideas and support one anothers' efforts to invent cool things or to commercialize their cool inventions. Like-minded people are always helpful and inspiring to be around, and where can you find more innovators in one place and time than at an inventors' association meeting? Do a search for inventors' clubs or associations near you, or go to the United Inventors Association Web site (`www.uiausa.org`) and look at its list of links to local clubs for contacts near you.

If a club isn't near enough for you to attend meetings easily, consider starting your own. People in other associations and clubs can give you advice about organizing your own inventor's group. You might start with the Houston Inventors Association, which posts a helpful article, "How to Start an Inventors Club," on its Web site, `www.inventors.org/invclub/h2start.htm`.

If you have a great idea or design of your own that might be unique and worth patenting, don't share it with members of an inventors' club — not until you've actually filed for and received the needed patent protection. Otherwise, a more experienced inventor might beat you to the patent punch.

Chapter 22

Ten Tips for Better Implementation of Your Ideas

In This Chapter

- Anticipating problems
- Building a strong team to maximize your chances of success
- Keeping clear records of your spending and your work
- Handling the conflicts and stresses of innovation

The best ideas and plans don't amount to successful innovations unless they're implemented well. Implementation is as important as creativity — sometimes more so.

Disorganization, disappointing initial results, or unanticipated flaws in the design or plan can derail many projects before they've really had a chance. Follow these tips to reduce the pain and suffering — and the high failure rate — of implementation.

Develop Your Team First

You have a great idea or plan, and you're eager to implement it. I would be, too! However, a plan is only as good as the people who are expected to execute it. Before you start to work on your development or implementation activities, take a little time to form a strong team by following these guidelines:

- **Make sure that you have the right group — a team with the needed expertise and capacity.** You don't want to have to change personnel or add more people because you failed to anticipate your staffing needs. The right group should be working together from the get-go to have a smooth, easy implementation.
- **Talk about everyone's quirks, rough edges, and pet peeves.** Teams that share their requirements and concerns upfront are better able to work together because they know not to push one another's hot buttons.

A certain amount of accommodation is always needed, and it's better to know about personal styles and needs upfront than to discover them later, when people have bitter complaints and are too angry to discuss things with level heads. (Consider taking a personality test such as The Big Five self-assessment, available at `www.tspectrum.com`, and comparing your results to help understand differences and how to accommodate them.)

- **Make the ground rules clear.** Be explicit about what constitutes doing a fair share and who's expected to do what. You get the RED (rules, expectations, and demands) out of group dynamics by discussing these items. Anyone who can't live with them should have the option of opting out *before* he or she becomes integral to the work and hard to replace.
- **Develop a sense of belonging by giving the team a strong identity.** Brand the team with a name that everyone likes, give it a logo, and make sure that everyone is onboard with a big-picture vision of what you want to accomplish. Innovation should be exciting, so take time to articulate an enthusiastic view of what the team is trying to accomplish.
- **Be sure about the purpose and focus.** Don't pull a group together to do one thing and then change your mind and tell it to do something else. Changing the purpose undermines your credibility as an innovation leader and hurts team morale. Do your strategic planning first so that when you charter a team, you'll be clear about the project and can give team members clear instructions.

With these tips in mind, you can form a strong team that bonds around a motivating development goal. That's what most innovations need to succeed.

Plan for the Worst

As the old saying goes, what can go wrong, *will* go wrong! Here are some of the things that can go wrong as you try to implement your innovation:

- Costs spiral out of control, and you have to give up before completion.
- Others sabotage the project because they think it will compete with their own projects or threaten their departments or budgets.
- A key assumption (about technology, more often than not) proves to be incorrect, and you have to go back to the drawing board to try to save the project with another approach or invention.
- Key people leave, taking some of the necessary knowledge with them and leaving the remaining team members unable to complete the project.
- Everything's going fine, but a key source of funding or overhead support dries up, leaving you short of the resources needed to complete the project.
- The innovation proves to be a success, but there's conflict about who developed it and who owns the intellectual property.

When you're developing your ideas, you need to be a confirmed optimist with a positive, creative outlook and a deaf ear to critics and naysayers. But as soon as you finalize a design or plan and begin to implement it, you need to switch mental gears and become a cautious pragmatist with a pessimistic streak.

After roughing out your plans, take at least a full day for your team to brainstorm things that can go wrong with the plan. Make a thorough, pessimistic list; then sort it according to how fatal to the project each problem would be and how likely it is to occur. Very fatal, fairly likely problems deserve immediate planning to prevent them, and if you have to budget time and money for prevention, by all means do. It's reasonable to include some preventive work for several of the major problems that could be fatal to your project. If you work within a large organization, for example, you may need to spend some time building political support to minimize the chance that others will sabotage your project.

Other potential problems may not need any immediate action because they haven't actually occurred (yet . . .), but you should develop contingency plans for as many problems as you can. That way, you've already thought about how to shift course and work around various problems, should they occur. If you're counting on a particular technology becoming commercially available in time for you to purchase a part for your new product, give some thought to alternative designs that don't rely on the new technology. If the technology is late to market, you'll be stuck without a key part for your product unless you have a backup plan in mind.

A well-planned development project includes some contingency plans for what to do when various things go wrong. It's a bit like bringing your umbrella to work: If you make contingency plans, you'll most likely be pleasantly surprised and will never need to use them.

Account for Each Project Separately

From the first time you purchase anything, the innovation should be a separate accounting entity. Give it a project name and code (if you're using a computer-based accounting system), or simply start a set of files or books for it that you can enter into an accounting program or electronic spreadsheet later. Whatever you do, just make sure that you track time, money, and the use of supplies or assets day by day, over the entire life of the project.

By accounting for each development project separately, you'll know what you're spending, how much you've invested, and what you'll need in returns to make the innovation profitable. Also, it'll be easier to project future expenses, which is a good idea when you update your plans.

What if the project fizzles and you never implement the innovation? All the costs are potential tax deductions, provided that you accounted for them clearly from the beginning.

Also, if you're an entrepreneur and hope to develop your invention to the point at which you can attract outside investors, you'd better have accurate, detailed records of what you've invested in it to date. Without those records, you'll have a hard time showing how much your own investment is — and won't get paid back for it with an appropriate share of equity.

Document Failures

It's human nature to want to forget failures and mistakes. In innovation, however, it's amazingly helpful to have detailed records of anything that goes wrong. Most projects suffer setbacks. The projects that ultimately succeed are the ones in which the development team learns from setbacks.

To learn from experience, you have to document and study it. Figure out what went wrong and why. Clarify what processes or materials you used and what alternatives you could try next time. Good records allow you to evaluate the innovation intelligently and learn rapidly from experience.

What if you reach an impasse, or something goes so terribly wrong that you have to abandon the project? You still need to document the problem before you close the project down. It's amazing how many innovations proved to be a little ahead of their time. In a few years, revisit old failures to see whether technology has caught up with them and you can now find a good solution to a problem that seemed insurmountable before.

Differentiate Owners from Workers

I used to help Silicon Valley entrepreneurs write their business plans when they were ready to approach venture-capital firms for major funding. In 90 percent of the ventures I saw, there was conflict about who ought to get a share of equity when the venture funding came in or when the company went public or was acquired by some major industrial, electronic, or pharmaceutical firm.

In the early days of a new venture, the lines between founders and employees blur easily. Some people may think that they're working at reduced salaries in exchange for a chance to profit from the venture when it succeeds, but if they don't have formal, written documents proving that they own shares, they won't get a dime when the next round of investment comes in. What they may get instead is an aggressive lawyer who will harass the founders or owners and quite possibly scare investors away. Nobody wants to invest in a startup team whose members are lawyered up and angry at one another.

A similar problem arises with many patent filings. Who are the inventors? Is a lab assistant an inventor, or was she just doing work for hire? She may think that she contributed an important idea to the final design, but the senior scientists may disagree. Then there's the question of how the inventors assigned the rights. Did they develop their patentable invention while working for an employer that thinks it ought to control the rights, or did they come up with the key ideas on their own time?

To prevent confusion and conflict about ownership and intellectual-property questions, clarify every role from the very beginning. Most people who will contribute to your project will be employees or contractors working on a work-for-hire basis, and the terms of their employment ought to specify that they won't have any legal interest in the innovation. (See Chapter 17 for more information about managing your intellectual property.)

Communicate

If you're developing a prototype product all by yourself, all you need to do is make sure that your patent attorney knows what you're up to. But usually, innovation involves a growing number of people as the project progresses. Any new development, whether it's a patentable product, a new business process, or an exciting new ad campaign, is going to require cooperation within a core project team, as well as periodic contributions from an ever-expanding circle of occasional contributors.

Communication is key to keeping all the contributors on track and avoiding errors, confusion, and rework. I can guarantee that no two members of your team see the project exactly the same way or have exactly the same ideas about how to complete it, what the specifications should be, or any other details. Unless you make everyone talk regularly, in detail, about what they've been doing and what they plan to do next, things will go wrong.

Although constant communication can seem to be boringly detail oriented, hold weekly (at least) project meetings — in person if possible, or by videoconference or teleconference — to go over who's doing what. I guarantee that every meeting will uncover at least one point of confusion or misunderstanding that you'll be glad you cleared up.

Avoid Burnout

Take a break. You deserve it. Even if you don't think that your results are sufficient to earn you a break, I'm sure you *need* one. People suffer burnout when they're working on the scale-up and implementation of innovations. Burnout is a common problem because the work creates a sense of urgency.

Innovating is exciting and tense and can be very rewarding emotionally, but it can also be highly stressful. Manage your health, and keep your energy up so that you have the strength and resilience to see the project through to the end, even if unexpected problems arise and the timeline has to be pushed back. Good emotional health is essential to successful innovation.

Resolve Conflicts (Don't Avoid Them)

Disagreements can and should arise during development and implementation. There are difficult decisions to be made, and you often have to make them under time and cost pressures. The core team of innovators has an emotional stake in making the idea work. People get more emotionally involved in innovation than in regular work, and the result is conflict.

People use a variety of styles or approaches to deal with conflicts. Avoidance, accommodation, competition, and compromise are four of the most common styles (see Chapter 13). A development or implementation team needs to use a fifth style for resolving conflict: collaboration. To collaborate effectively, each party to the conflict needs to share concerns honestly, clearly, and fully, with no holding back, no politicking, no deception, and no overasking in the hope of winning ground from more-accommodating teammates.

A collaborative approach is important in innovation teams because it produces the highest-quality solutions to conflicts. It also preserves and in most cases improves the working relationships within the team. In other words, it's good for both the team and the project for team members to collaborate by communicating fully and honestly about any concerns or disagreements.

For more information on how to negotiate a high-quality, collaborative solution to disagreements within your development or implementation team, see Chapter 13 or consult *Mastering Business Negotiation* by Roy J. Lewicki and Alexander Hiam (Jossey-Bass); or study *The Conflict Master Course: Turning Conflict Into Cooperation*, a workshop published by Trainer's Spectrum (`www.tspectrum.com`).

Know When to Persevere

If your basic assumptions about your innovation hold true, but you run into practical difficulties that slow you down, it's usually a good idea to persist. There are good reasons to pull the plug on a project, but there are plenty of bad reasons too.

Don't give up prematurely! Every innovator runs into some unforeseen difficulties during development, scale-up, or implementation. Things rarely work out as easily as you hoped. If the project is fundamentally on track and the basic idea is valid, however, don't allow a few practical problems to derail it.

What if you're going over time or money budgets? Well, that could prove to be fatal, but it doesn't always have to be. There can be alternative ways to fund a project. Also, you can always revisit the forecasts and see whether the work you've done allows you to make a better-looking forecast for future returns. If so, an increase in investment may be justifiable. It's worth running the numbers again, anyway.

Many projects go through several rounds of effort and funding before finally breaking through to commercial or practical success. Yours could be one of those projects that needs the team to regroup, reassess, and then reinvest in another round. Be careful not to pull the plug prematurely. Nobody said innovation was easy!

Know When to Quit

Every innovative plan, design, or project rests on a few key assumptions. When a key assumption proves to be flawed or just plain wrong, it's time to admit defeat and close the project before any more effort or money is wasted on it.

It's hard to admit that you're wrong. It's disappointing to quit. Winners never quit, or so the old saying goes. But that's not a good rule for innovators. A better saying is this one: If you can't win this game, try to win the next game. Innovators who are smart enough to walk away from a loser quickly are able to get started on a new project quickly too, which greatly increases their odds of success.

What are your key assumptions? What do you need to be right about for your project to be worthwhile? Make a short list of critical assumptions and then see whether they prove to be correct. If not, pull the plug on the project at once and begin searching for your next big idea.