

“Ideas? Easier than ever. Leading innovation? Trickier than ever . . .  
unless you’ve got this book.”

MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER, author of *The Coaching Habit*

# UNLOCKING

A LEADER'S GUIDE FOR  
TURNING BOLD IDEAS  
INTO TANGIBLE RESULTS

# INNOVATION

**ROBYN M. BOLTON**

FOREWORD BY DR. MARSHALL GOLDSMITH

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# What's the Problem?

CONGRATULATIONS! You have the awesome privilege and responsibility of growing your organization by creating new things that deliver impact. Or, as your boss or HR rep said, you are leading innovation.

Whether you volunteered for this role or were volun-told that it was yours, you are at the start of an exciting journey that changes you, your teams, your organizations, and maybe even your industry and the world. Like all great journeys, it will be perilous because you will confront challenges, obstacles, and heartbreak beyond what you can imagine. Like all great heroes, I believe that you will be victorious in the end. But before we pack up and set out, you need to know where you are and what you're up against.

In 1997, *The Innovator's Dilemma* was published. Though it wasn't the first book on innovation, it plucked innovation out of inventors' minds and scientists' labs and flung it onto CEOs' agendas and into popular business discourse.

CEOs scrambled to avoid the mistakes Clayton Christensen outlined in his doctoral-thesis-turned-bestseller. Paranoid about possible disruptors and deeply skeptical that their teams had the creativity or courage to innovate, executives hired consultants, devoured books and articles on the topic, and installed new frameworks

and tools. As the innovation industrial complex grew, terms like “design thinking,” “human-centered design,” and “lean startup” became commonplace, and innovation teams, corporate venture capital, venture studios, hackathons, and accelerator programs spread like wildfire.

Yet decades later, the results of corporate innovation efforts haven’t changed.

- 0.1 percent of ideas developed by companies launch
- 5 percent of launched products are still on the market a year later
- Less than 50 percent of these launched ideas achieve \$1 million in sales

That means that only 0.002 percent of incubated ideas generate \$1 million or more in revenue.

What is different about the journey of the 0.002 percent that enabled them to defy the odds?

I’ve asked this question most of my career, including during the nine years I spent at the consulting firm founded by Clayton Christensen, the author of the book that started it all. Only recently did I realize I had been given the answer before I thought to ask the question.

My first job after graduating from Miami University was as an assistant brand manager at Procter & Gamble. Everyone told me how lucky I was to land a job at such an iconic company, especially since it was the one that essentially created the concept of brand marketing. I did not share this sentiment. I dreamed of working at an advertising agency where I could be creative and push boundaries. I didn’t think that could happen at a stodgy, insular, old-school company like P&G. But P&G paid twice what the advertising agencies paid and was in a city that cost half as much to live in, so practicality won out, and I took the job.

I was right to take the job. I was so very wrong about what was possible there.

A mere nine months after starting my job, I was part of the team announcing the North American launch of Swiffer. The moment onstage in Orlando, in front of P&G's North American sales force, was exhilarating and more than made up for the scars I earned battling agencies, debating in corporate conference rooms, and navigating budgets and timelines. Not to mention the myriad of other challenges that college didn't prepare me for, like dealing with lice-infested yak hair for product demos or corporate spies on flights to our test market.

Today, Swiffer is a \$1 billion brand and one of P&G's most well-known products. What people don't know is that it was mere moments away from being among the 99.9 percent of ideas that never launch. Swiffer survived not only because it was a great idea but also because a great leader took a massive risk.

## **Your Problem**

Innovation is not an idea problem. It is a leadership problem.

If you ask most corporate executives why their companies' innovation efforts struggle to achieve results, they'll tell you that the problem is a lack of ideas or not enough big ideas.

They're wrong.

Every organization I've ever worked with is full of ideas. Every day, people see opportunities for improvement, are inspired by something they see in the market, or have zany ideas that just might work. But they don't share these ideas because they don't think anyone listens, they've shared ideas before only to be told to focus on their day jobs, or they're afraid of the repercussions of stepping outside their defined role and responsibility. People don't share ideas

because someone somewhere in your organization made it clear that ideas weren't welcome.

The silencing of ideas is a problem. Especially if you believe that your organization needs ideas to improve and grow. But most managers, in their heart of hearts, are scared of the financial, operational, and even strategic risks that are inherent in new ideas. They know that if they play it safe, they'll hit their numbers, earn their bonuses, and get a promotion. Why risk all that on an idea that may not be good, probably isn't big enough, and almost certainly wouldn't generate results?

This is your problem.

As risky as innovation is for an organization, it's also risky personally and professionally.

In 2019, InnoLead, an organization specializing in supporting and studying corporate innovation, researched corporate innovators' careers. It found that the average tenure of someone working in corporate innovation was 4.4 years. Vice presidents of innovation had the longest tenure at 5.4 years, while managers and principals had the shortest at 3.3 years.

Those tenures aren't surprising when you learn that 90 percent of corporate innovation labs and incubators fail within three years. Some fail for reasons outside executives' control, like global pandemics and economic downturns. However, most labs and incubators fail for reasons that are within executives' control but are blamed on external events. Among those controllable reasons is a single choice, an answer to a question that most executives don't even know they're being asked, which drives every other decision they make:

Are you willing to trade safety for growth?

Most people answer no. Safety is the logical and rational choice. It keeps you employed and your reputation in good standing. It promises minimal interruptions to your success and maximum flexibility if you decide to pursue bigger and better opportunities.

Innovation  
is not an idea  
problem.

**It is a leadership  
problem.**



If you answer yes, people tell you you're nonsensical, irrational, and radical because success isn't guaranteed. You're risking everything—your bonus, your job, your reputation—for the *chance* of growth. And when you choose growth in the context of corporate innovation, you are choosing to do things differently, take risks, and challenge the status quo. You choose these things even though you *know* the odds are against you and that you're more likely to end up as a cautionary tale than an inspiring legend.

There is no wrong answer to the question.

There is only your answer, the one you believe is best for you personally and professionally.

If you choose safety, the innovation you oversee is safe, low risk, and incremental. It keeps the company moving forward, no faster or slower than competitors, and ill prepared for a market or technological disruption. You'll get your bonus, promotion, and peer recognition. Things may get a bit better, but nothing will truly change.

If you choose growth, you'll push boundaries, inspire others, expand how your organization sees itself, catapult it ahead of your competitors, and define a world that doesn't yet exist. Or you'll lose your bonus or your job. There's no middle ground. Because the middle ground is safe. Nothing changes there, and you are all about making change happen.

## **How to Be the Solution**

This book is your guide to becoming the solution your organization needs to do the impossible: innovate within an established and successful organization. It's based on the stories of real-life executives like you who confidently claim the title of innovation leader—someone who creates new things that create value (innovation) and inspires other people to follow (leader).

At the heart of this book is a framework for a holistic approach to innovation. It is based on my experience with companies that transformed themselves into successful innovators because their leaders approached innovation as a system, developing and investing in each part simultaneously.

The ABCs of Innovation may seem simple, but it is the mental and intellectual equivalent of keeping dozens of plates spinning without ever letting one fall. It requires constant attention, nurturing, and evolution to build the momentum necessary to achieve a return on your investment in three years.

Three years leading corporate innovation can feel like a lifetime of throwing yourself against a brick wall. When a small chunk of mortar finally falls out, you celebrate like the whole wall came down. And one day, the wall does fall. I promise.

I've seen it happen. For the past twenty-five years, I've walked in your shoes and alongside others as they walked. As a part of innovation teams and executive boards determining their fates, I understand what both sides need and want, and why what is said and done is frustratingly different. I also know how to knock out pieces of mortar and then whole bricks so you can lead your team and your organization into a future they could only imagine.

A future you saw all along.

Are you ready to start your innovation journey? If you've read this far, I assume the answer is yes. The first stop on our journey is the ABCs of Innovation: what they are and why they're both familiar and different from what you already know.

Ready? Let's go!

**“Unlocking Innovation is the playbook every CXO needs to drive meaningful change and deliver measurable impact.”**

**BEN GEHEB, global CXO at VML**

# Why do most corporate innovation efforts fail?

**O**NLY 1 IN EVERY 50,000 incubated ideas reaches \$1 million in sales. If you ask most corporate executives why their companies’ innovation efforts fail, they’ll blame a lack of ideas or not enough big ideas. Innovation expert Robyn M. Bolton knows that innovation isn’t an idea problem, it’s a leadership problem. To drive real innovation, executives must defy the very instincts and behaviors that made them successful operators.

In *Unlocking Innovation*, Bolton draws on her twenty-five years of advising leaders to provide a practical, holistic innovation framework. Her ABCs of Innovation show leaders how to reshape their roles, teams, and organizations to create new value and catalyze corporate renewal from within. Using real-life stories, Bolton follows innovation leaders’ trajectories from heading up a new team and generating first results to navigating the inevitable crosswinds, complications, and conflicts—and ultimately delivering success. *Unlocking Innovation* is the essential guide for any leader tasked with innovating inside an established organization.

**“This is the kind of book you can hand to a new innovation leader and say ‘make it so.’”**

**JOERN KALLMEYER, chief supply chain officer at tms**

**MileZero.io**



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Cover design: Taysia Louie

\$19.95 USD

\$24.95 CDN

ISBN 978-1-77458-561-0

