Lisa Peters was awarded the Society of Human Resource Professionals’ Human Capital Manager of the Year award for her work on the highly successful merger of Bank of New York and Mellon Bank. After both banks’ management teams came together to negotiate various roles and procedures, newly named chief executive officer (CEO) Robert Kelly turned immediately to Lisa and asked, “What do we do to create a single culture?” This was the beginning of a grueling but rewarding three-year integration that Peters helped lead and orchestrate. The merger was so successful that Harvard Business School did a case study.
I asked Lisa, “Would people in your organization describe you as an innovative thinker?” Her answer surprised me. She didn’t think so. “I think the first thing they’d probably say is, ‘She has the ability to get new things done.’ And if you pressed on that, probably the next level of thinking would be, ‘[She] can see the big picture, can see where someone [in senior leadership] wants to go, and can put the project plan in place to get that completed.’ And eventually I’m sure someone would talk about my innovative approaches to putting a team together or to getting new things done.”

After my interview with Lisa, I began to notice this comment over and over again. He or she has the ability to get things done. What it said to me was: Forget those romantic portraits of lone-ranger innovators you read about in magazines. Today’s indispensable person innovates in a style that is collaborative rather than maverick, embedded rather than forcing, and is known more for flawless execution than swinging for the fences. Today’s innovators establish track records for getting old and familiar things done and then they build a reputation for getting new things done. It is the combination that becomes so powerful.

Execution Skills plus Innovation Skills produce indispensable value for the organization and for everyone in it who understands the blunt reality of our times.

**EARN YOUR INDISPENSABILITY**

When thousands of small and large accomplishments on your part add up to incredible value-added, you become indispensable to your organization, your colleagues, and
Your co-workers. *Webster’s Dictionary* defines *indispensable* as “absolutely necessary or required.”

Indispensability is the result of bringing so much unique and exceptional value to your organization that your superiors would never even think of wanting to replace you. It happens because you develop an internal reputation as an absolutely necessary player, a go-to person, an idea person, a catalyst, and, yes, as an innovative thinker. You come to mind when senior leadership wonders, “How in the world are we going to get X done?”

How do you build such a reputation? If you want to follow in the footsteps of the Lisa Peters out there, here’s your first chance to take action. Map out a personal innovation strategy—a conscious, deliberate, thoughtful set of goals and actions—that you master and use in your work and your life.

A strategy is about figuring out where you want to go. And it is about figuring out how to prepare yourself to assume new responsibilities and deliver results that earn your reputation of indispensability. Nobody but you is responsible for your reputation or where you’ll be in five years.

Being strategic doesn’t mean you’re Machiavellian. Your “hidden” agenda puts advancing the organization’s goals before your own. By charting a personal innovation strategy, you will achieve your objective. In developing a strategy, you take responsibility for your innovation development just as you do for continuing education in your specialized field.
DESIGNING YOUR STRATEGY

As you read this chapter, you’ll want to have some paper and a pencil handy so you can design your innovation strategy piece by piece. The difference between merely glancing at the following questions and taking the time to consider and write down your responses is the difference between, to paraphrase Mark Twain, lightning and a lightning bug. Not only will your plans become more focused, but you’ll also own a record for later reference.

There are four critical components to designing your strategy:

1. **Identify where you are and where you want to go.**
2. **Learn the business side of your organization.**
3. **Understand your company’s culture.**
4. **Pull it all together.**

I. IDENTIFY WHERE YOU ARE AND WHERE YOU WANT TO GO

In an age of multitasking and the tyranny of technology, it’s easy to become lost in today’s business. You’re putting out fires fast and furiously. You’re rushing from meeting to meeting. It is all too easy to convince yourself that right now it’s just not possible to carve out time to think about where you want to go and how you plan to get there.

Here’s your first opportunity to take action—by writing out your responses to these eight questions. They are designed to help you understand yourself, where you are in your career, and where you want to go in the future.
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

1. What Thinking Mode Are You Operating in Most of the Time?

The process of building your I-Skills starts with becoming conscious of which of four thinking modes you are operating in right now:

**Defeatist Mode:** Your mental state is dominated by worrying, which is a negative use of your imagination. You’re thinking back to past events and replaying roads not taken. You dwell on things you “could have, should have, and would have” done. Your Idea Factory is basically shut down.

**Sustainer Mode:** You’re merely sustaining the status quo. You go through the motions, inclined to look for the reasons an idea will never work or didn’t work in the past, rather than being poised for taking action. You tend to immediately shoot down any ideas that may arise, even before they reach your conscious awareness. “Ah, that will never work,” or “My boss wouldn’t go for that,” or “I’ve got way too much to do already, I can’t possibly find time to do something with that,” are all symptoms of the sustainer mode.

**Dreamer Mode:** You come up with ideas—lots of them in fact—but your attitude is wistful: “Oh, wouldn’t that be awesome if we did something with that idea,” says the person in this state, before drifting on to something else.

**Innovator Mode:** You are alert to ideas and action-oriented. You want to make dreams a reality and create results. This is a confident state of mind. Your attitude is, “Try anything and everything until something works.”
This is what innovators do. The more ideas you hatch, the more concepts you grab hold of, the more ideas you act on. The more experiments you attempt, the more feedback you receive. The more “failures” you learn from and advance from, the more successes you’re bound to have.

In the innovator mode you don’t merely react to change; instead, you seek to foster some of it yourself. Ideas occur because you are in motion, in pursuit of a goal. Although stress, pressure, and impending deadlines do set innovation off for some people, in reality it’s a flow state. You’re attuned to those little sparks, those moments of brilliance when you have inspiring notions about how to handle a particular situation in a different way. You figure out how to accomplish something on your “to do” list in short order, or better yet, how not to have to do it at all!

The innovator mode is a mental state of improvisation.

2. Where Would You Really Like to Be in Five Years?
When I taught at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the 1980s, I used to pose an exercise to my students: Design an ideal day for yourself five years from now. What kind of work are you doing? What position do you hold in your company? How does your day begin? What’s the view over the breakfast table? Who are your friends? What events of the day give you satisfaction? What do you do just for fun?

If you’re serious about taking control of your life, start by figuring out where you want to go. Visualize and fantasize yourself into the future as you would like it to be.
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

Let your imagination go. How do you want life to work for you? Do you want more love in your life? More respect from professional peers? Do you want to earn a higher income? Do you yearn to make a contribution to society outside the office? Consider the totality of your life.

If you take the time to sketch out a portrait of your life on that hypothetical day, you will have examined your own goals and desires in a remarkably thorough fashion. Just by mapping out this vision of your future, you are already improving the chances that you’ll realize it.

3. How Is What You are Presently Doing Helping You Build the Future You Imagined in Question 2?

In working with a wide variety of organizations across industries and continents, I find that most people don’t spend much time thinking about where they want to go. Nor do they set personal goals and review them frequently to ensure that they are taking the necessary steps to achieve them.

Climbing a traditional career ladder may not be what you are after. Perhaps your own goals include achieving greater autonomy and discretion in the work you do and in the teams you lead. Maybe you want to develop a broader array of skills or, perchance, to create a new position for yourself.

Perhaps deriving a greater sense of meaning from work may be your goal.

Whirlpool manager Moises Norena expressed it well when he said: “At Whirlpool we solve people’s chores; we are in the appliance business. I am excited about solving their problems because I am leaving a mark in life. I’m helping society. And when you talk with people who have gone
Innovation Is Everybody’s Business

through this [creating a new consumer product] they say ‘I am excited about this because I participated in something that solved a problem and now people are using it.’”

When you have a few years of innovation experience at Whirlpool, you start to develop “internal fame.” You become what they informally call an “I Hero.”

“The company has no say in who [the I Heroes] are and how they get acknowledged,” says Moises. “It is kind of like a vote of the people. And what’s interesting about them is that they create a kind of virtuous effect because you realize that they’re just like you—they’re not somebody who sits at the top of the organization or is some genius. And you want to be like them and you want to be part of what they’re doing. You want to get involved in innovation because of them.”

4. What Is the Most Innovative Thing You’ve Ever Accomplished?
I asked this question in a workshop on innovative thinking for real estate industry trainers, and one man responded: “I cured myself of cancer.”

What is your answer? Did you:

- Quit a job that was getting you nowhere?
- Make a risky lateral move to take on a nontraditional assignment?
- Return to school to earn a master’s degree?
- Help create a new product or service for your company?
- Organize a charity drive and raise a record amount of money?
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

Giving serious thought to this question will reveal what you have accomplished so far. It won’t, however, indicate where you can go.

5. What Is the Ratio of Ideas You’ve Been Able to Bring to Completion to Those You’ve Had to Give Up On?

Brain researcher and author Marilyn Ferguson used to say, “Our past is not our potential.” To which I would add: Those who ignore their past are often hard-pressed to change the trajectory of their lives.

Successful innovators establish track records for getting familiar and even routine things done before they build a reputation for being able to. If you never try to bring an idea to fruition but content yourself to be an implementer of others’ ideas, your value-added is limited. Organizational leaders need employees who can do more than bring them problems. They need their people to also bring forth solutions. But if you never stick with an idea long enough to turn it into a result, you will never receive the positive feedback that comes from such successes. Some people are stuck in dreamer mode their whole lives and wander from idea to idea, forever excited that “this will be the one.” They become infatuated with ideas that are well beyond their level of experience and their ability to execute. They become frustrated that they had a fantastic idea but others were just too dense to see its potential.

That’s why it’s important to consider this ratio. Whenever you try to persuade others to believe in and support your ideas, the question of your track record always looms. If the issue knocks you off guard, it suggests that you’re not in touch with your strengths and your weaknesses.
Innovation Is Everybody's Business

Don’t be discouraged. Instead, try this: Write down five ideas you’ve come up with in recent years that became successful. Record the kinds of feedback you received from others. How did implementing each idea make you feel at the time? Record the specific pleasures of having been successful.

Then write down five ideas that didn’t bear fruit. Not ideas that you merely thought about, but ones you—and your team or department—attempted to implement. These might have been goals you set at the beginning of a new year, ideas you came up with to expand your job, new directions you decided to take in your life, even cost-saving ideas or process improvements you submitted to your company’s management. Why didn’t they bear fruit? What did you learn about yourself in the process?

If you found it was much easier to come up with ideas that didn’t achieve the intended results than ones that did, it might mean you want to rethink and retool your personal innovation process. By this I mean not only the way you generate ideas but also how you think them through, gather research, refine and test them on others, and ultimately decide to launch them or shelve them.

6. What’s Your Personal Value Proposition?
When Lisa Peters got that call from her CEO asking her to be in charge of merging the Bank of New York with Mellon Bank, she was able to rise to the challenge. She was able to recruit the people she needed because she had infused a strong sense of loyalty and trust into her relationships with her colleagues, and she did this in a simple,
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

seemingly obvious way: “I returned people’s phone calls,” she says. “My view is that you have to show respect for people all the time; there’s no phone call you shouldn’t return within 24 hours. And now what I’ve found is that when I call on people for help, I’m successful because people have seen through the years that I would always do the same for them.”

In addition to being reliable and supportive to her colleagues, Lisa has a reputation as an outstanding collaborator. “I never take credit as an individual; I always credit the team,” she says. Lisa finds that emphasizing the group identity of the team motivates people to work hard and succeed as a group. “If there’s a member who isn’t doing their part, you pick up their work and get it done,” she explains, “because it’s the final results that matter most, not just the parts that you were responsible for as an individual.”

To enhance your personal value proposition, start by getting really good at what you do. If you’re in finance, be exceptional at it. If you’re in human resources, keep on top of all the trends. If you’re in sales, make it a point to learn new selling skills, upgrade your product knowledge, and exceed your quota.

Not only must you get really good at what you do, you’ve got to make sure the right people know about it. Getting better at communicating your value to the company is a constant. The decision-making process of who stays and who goes comes down to two words: perceived value. Those who are contributing the most perceived value to the company will be the least likely to be asked to leave.
7. How Engaged Are You?
According to a global workforce study conducted by Towers Perrin, just 21 percent of the employees surveyed are engaged in their work, meaning they’re willing to go the extra mile to help their companies succeed. Worse, 38 percent are partly to totally disengaged.

If you were asked to participate in a confidential survey on this issue, what would you say? If you are learning new things in the work you’re doing, you’re probably engaged. If the people in your group are interesting to you, chances are you are feeling engaged. If you are making a bigger impact, achieving greater authority, building a broader array of skills, and seeing a pathway for advancement, you are probably engaged in your work.

But if you are not engaged, you will be less inclined to do your best work. Business is a performance art. People pick up on your level of engagement fairly quickly. Engaged people emanate infectious enthusiasm. Disengaged people suck the energy out of the room. So if you find, upon reflection, that you are more disengaged than engaged, then your efforts should be directed at changing your career path. Perhaps making a lateral move, taking on a new assignment, or transferring to a different area of the company will put you on a more promising path.

8. What Is Your Innovation Style?
We are all unique individuals, with different natural tendencies, talents, and aptitudes. We all have the capacity to innovate, so the question is not whether you are capable of being an innovator. The question is really, How are
You innovative? How do you prefer to handle challenges at work?

There is no shortage of inventories and assessment tools to give you a better sense of your preferred style. The one I favor, and have used in my consulting work, is called the Innovation Styles Inventory.

Created by William Miller, a former lecturer at Stanford Business School, the Innovation Styles Inventory suggests that there are four distinct styles people are naturally inclined to:

**Visioning:** You like to focus on the long-term result, the way things could be but aren’t now. You tend to be intuition driven and decisive, and you trust your instincts. The downside of this style is that you can tend to be unrealistic about the level of change and resistance involved in achieving a vision.

**Modifying:** You like to cover your bases and move forward one step at a time. You are efficient and disciplined and seek solutions by applying methods that have worked in the past. You excel at streamlining and simplifying processes. Your highest value to groups and teams is your stability and attention to detail. Yet you are at a disadvantage when there’s no real history to draw from or when there’s a great deal of uncertainty. In these situations, you need to team up with others in the exploring and visioning styles to expand the options. You need to remind yourself to assault your assumptions, especially when your firm is facing disruption in the marketplace.

**Exploring:** You tend to go off enthusiastically in new directions, without a lot of focus, and without a lot of prodding.
You are great at turning “conventional wisdom” on its head. You are the person whom a team orchestrator would be smart to invite onboard. But you chafe when the work structure is too tightly organized or when those around you want to go by the book.

**Experimenting:** You like facts and working models and are prone to experimentation. Your advantage is that once a common process or approach to understanding a situation is established, you can troubleshoot just about anything. Your contribution to collaborative groups is your systematic, thorough evaluation of new ideas and your uncanny ability to build consensus for practical solutions. But you can get caught up in overtesting and overanalyzing, and you lose the sense of urgency to get new things done.

These summaries are just that: condensations of different preferences. To become thoroughly familiar with your preferred style (which is often a combination of two styles), take an online survey.

Now that you’ve spent some time considering where you are and where you want to go, we can turn to the second critical component in designing your personal innovation strategy: analyzing your organization.

**II. LEARN THE BUSINESS SIDE OF YOUR ORGANIZATION**

I am constantly amazed by the number of people who have little knowledge of the business they work for. Several years ago I was ushered around a legendary Silicon Valley company by a young woman from the marketing department.
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

It turned out she knew very little about the company’s unique culture or how it made money. She was unaware of what the business media was reporting, which was considerable. Most surprising, she didn’t seem curious in the slightest to learn about such things. She guided our tour from notes she’d printed from the company’s intranet.

As my father used to say, “Everybody is different.” But if you’re going to innovate, understanding your firm’s business model and culture is a must. A business model is the basis upon which your company makes money, how it creates value for end customers, and how it captures some of that value in the form of profits.

In a world of specialization, we’ve all come to know more and more about less and less. So it’s easy to avoid the topic of your company’s business model altogether. But would-be innovators need to know how that business model is holding up, how its new products are being received, and what industry pundits are saying about the company’s prospects (and possible disruptions on the horizon). Start adding to your understanding of the business side of your company on a regular basis. Try to comprehend where your company is trying to go, not just where it has been and not just where your daily duties take you.

You cannot possibly align with where your company is trying to go if you don’t read your company’s annual report, especially the chairperson’s letter. This is where the future vision is communicated to shareholders and where you’ll find clues and hints to guide your own strategy.

How viable is your company’s business model in today’s market? Most employees in organizations never, ever think
about the end customer. They think about more immediate, transactional issues—pleasing the boss, being professional, meeting deadlines. They wonder what other people think of them, who is moving up, and who is moving out.

To break out of this mentality, take a long and wide view of what you and your department do and how it adds value to the rest of the business. Find out what’s happening on the front lines with customers by developing contacts in sales and asking people outside the company their impressions of your firm and its products and services.

Start figuring out how your organization works on a deeper level. Think of yourself as an outside consultant and try to look at your company from a fresh perspective. Talk to people in other functional areas to learn their points of view. Find out what they do and how they feel about future growth potential. Doing these sorts of things will help you dig deeper into your firm’s business model, develop your own point of view, and be better positioned to innovate in appropriate ways.

III. UNDERSTAND YOUR COMPANY’S CULTURE

Although the incident occurred years ago, I recall vividly leading a group of high-potential managers from a storied mobile phone manufacturer. I asked the group: “If one of your employees were to hatch an idea, would they know what to do with it?”

“I’d tell them not to waste their time,” one fellow blurted out. “You’re just going to beat your head against a wall.”

Ironic isn’t it? Somewhere along the line—and maybe this was the spot—I began to realize that there really are only a few truly innovative companies out there and that they always
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

seemed to be “out there.” Even when I coach companies that are ranked among the “25 most innovative companies in the world” in Boston Consulting Group’s annual survey, I find that the people working in them don’t see them that way. Instead, they see all the things about their organization and its culture that work against innovation.

There are no flawlessly innovative companies. There are only those that are somewhat less dysfunctional and bureaucratic than others and that somehow manage to deliver growth and breakthrough innovations to the market despite themselves.

Even if you work for an organization that is perceived as innovative from the outside, you may not see it that way on the inside.

In my book *Driving Growth Through Innovation*, I defined culture as an organization’s values, beliefs, and behaviors. Culture is really an amalgamation of subtle and (sometimes not-so-subtle) cues that signal how to behave effectively in a particular environment.

Organizations exhibit a dominant culture, but they also contain microcultures: Divisions, departments, outposts, regional centers, and country headquarters. The culture is a bit different everywhere you go. The thing to keep in mind is that a firm’s culture is really the collective sharing of interpretations of signals from leadership. The culture dictates what’s expected, desired, and rewarded. It determines what is, and is not, acceptable behavior.

One comment I hear in my confidential client surveys goes like this: “I am excited that you are coming to our company to help us improve innovation. My concern is that it seems as if mediocrity is okay around here, yet it’s dangerous
to take risks. Sometimes we need to take risks. But taking risks seems to run counter to what management telegraphs to us.”

Your company’s culture may or may not be conducive to promoting innovation. Its reward system may be at odds with encouraging people to try something that may not work. Its hiring practices may weed out maverick personality types.

On certain days, your company’s culture may seem so screwed up that its long-term prospects seem hopeless. You may be able to list, with only the slightest prodding, all the things that are wrong with your company’s culture and your department’s microculture. You may have tallied examples that prove your organization doesn’t want innovation and therefore come to the conclusion that you should put aside all thought of sticking your neck out. But don’t give in to these defeatist mode thought patterns.

Instead, take a step back and size up your culture in as objective a manner as possible. You must unleash your inner organizational behaviorist before you unleash your inner innovator. Innovation-adept leaders are in tempo with their organizations, no matter where their organization happens to be in its innovation journey, no matter how dysfunctional.

Start by understanding your company’s culture. If it’s bureaucratic, proceed cautiously. If there’s an established innovation process to welcome your ideas, use it. Doing so will determine your strategy, and your strategy determines your behavior.

**11 Ways to Understand Your Company’s Culture**

Ask yourself these questions, and thoughtfully record your answers:
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

1. What behavior does your company’s culture value? Remember that “behavior that gets rewarded gets repeated.” Look around at people’s behavior and you’ll see what your culture values. You want to get this right because it makes every bit of difference going forward in terms of how you get new stuff done.

2. If people in your company have ideas, do they know what to do with them?

3. What happens to mavericks in your organization?

4. Is mediocrity okay where you work but risk taking is not? If so, how have you let this perception of your organization influence your behavior?

5. Does your company have an organized innovation process? Does its position in the marketplace make it appear likely that innovation will become a major focus in the near future?

6. How does innovation take place in your organization and in your department and division?

7. How (and where) have you been empowered to innovate or to “be creative/innovative” at your company?

8. What happens when someone fails? What stories have you heard, and what is the impact of those stories on others’ behavior?

9. Who in your organization is perceived as an innovator, a go-to person, someone in the center of the action when it comes to “getting new stuff done”?

10. How aligned with your boss’s priorities are you? If your boss is mired totally in tactical execution and is (continued)
not innovative in the least, this has huge implications in terms of how you innovate and how you build your reputation and knowledge base as an innovator.

11. How might you rethink your job and department as a profit center rather than as a cost?

IV. PULL IT ALL TOGETHER

If you’ve thought through all the questions in this chapter and diligently written out your answers, you’ve taken a giant first step toward earning a reputation for indispensability. You’ve shown that you’re willing to look at tough issues in your life, introspect, and commit to making changes in order to reap future rewards.

Now it’s time to pull these responses together in such a way that they become a blueprint for progress.

At the outset of this chapter, I defined strategy as a conscious, deliberate, thoughtful set of goals and actions that you use to guide your career forward. So here’s how to take all these answers and turn them into a strategy.

1. Make sure you are alone and undistracted, and have a block of uninterrupted time to devote. Go back over your notes. Examine your responses as if they are another person’s so that you are as objective as possible to the essence of what they reveal.

2. Ask yourself questions about what your responses suggest to you about your past (track record, success episodes, etc.), present (level of engagement in your current job
Your Personal Innovation Strategy

and workplace, reputation for getting the job done, ability to add value), and future (where you want to be in one year, five years, etc.).

3. Think also about the business model of your organization and the kinds of disruptive competitive forces at work. Consider how the end (paying) customers are responding to your organization’s value proposition and where your organization needs to innovate and adapt. Consider what your organization’s culture rewards, what it truly needs from employees, and how this might alter the nature of your contribution.

4. Finally, compose a short, succinct summary memo to yourself to guide your forward movement. Set out a few goals and action steps based on your responses. For example: Where I want to be in one year is doing X. I’ll achieve this goal by doing A, B, and C. Also, identify areas where you want to upgrade your value proposition to yourself and your organization.

After you’ve turned your responses into a list of goals and set some deadlines for reaching those goals, you’re ready to dive into mastering the I-Skills, the subject of Part 2 of this book.