

Free Book Excerpt

CYCLES: The simplest, proven method to innovate faster while reducing risks
A work from Bryan Cassady and 22 Innovation Experts

CHAPTER 24

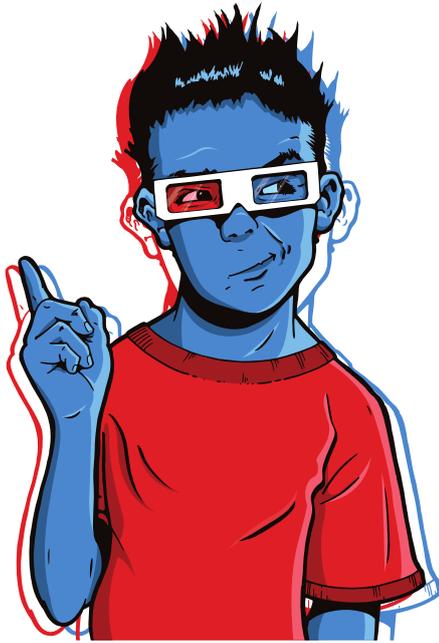
SYSTEMS THINKING AND PROFOUND INNOVATION: GETTING TO THE HEART OF INNOVATION

“The good news is that you already have an innovation system. The bad news is that it is probably not working.
“I have seen the enemy ,and he is us.” **WALT KELLY**”

NICOLAS DETURCK

CO-AUTHOR OF THE BOOK CYCLES





WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THE CHAPTER

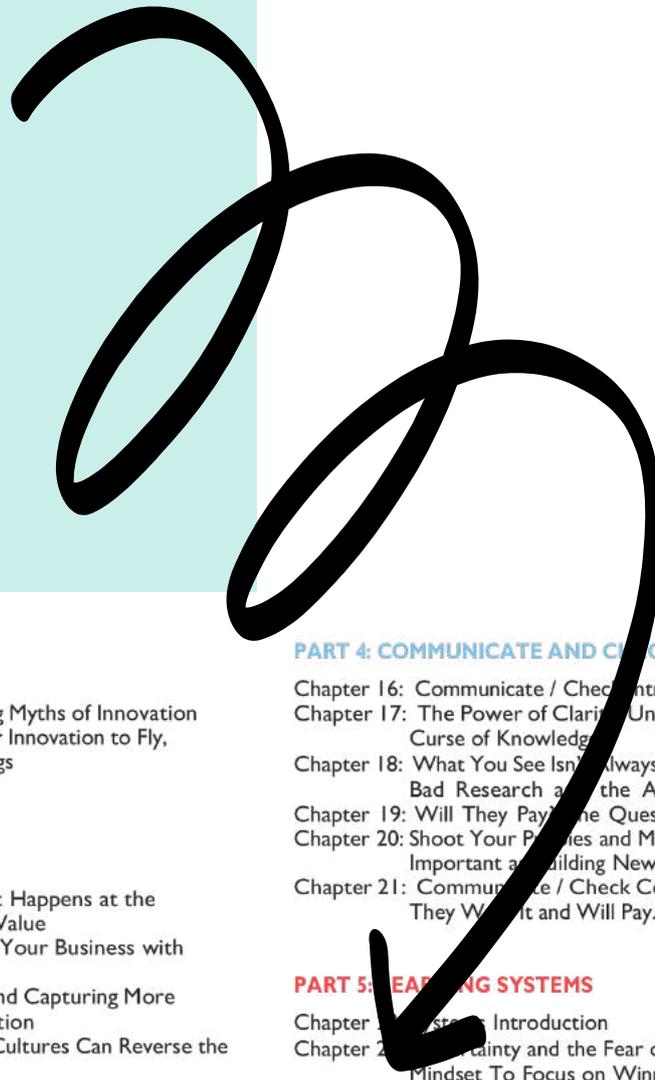
KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- **Systems are the solution** – you need to get people to think in terms of systems.
- **Understand your systems** – you cannot improve systems unless you understand them and the interactions that happen within them.
- **Solve common causes** – do not look for people to blame.
- **Learn** – As you work to change, make sure you are learning and ready to share that learning.
- **Focus on intrinsic rewards** – ensure that people understand the importance of why they are doing what they are doing.

YOU WILL ALSO GET A LINK TO SOME USEFUL CANVASES

Systems Canvas 2: Work on your Innovation System		Created for:	Created by:	Date:
Step 1. How is your system blocking you?				
Briefly describe your system				
List your biggest problems				
Choose one (the biggest problem)				
Step 2. Convert Problem into Challenges				
Change the problem into challenges. Think HOW (How might we improve or improve further?)	HOW...	HOW...	HOW...	
Choose one (the best challenge to focus your energies)	Choose 1 (HOW)			
How to reevaluate changes (Solutions)	Yes and...	No and...	Yes and...	
Step 3. Deal with the Death Threats				
Best Solution Now:				
Death Threats (Top 2)	Description	Action		
What is the one single thing that would have the most impact?				
To Find Time to Focus on These, I Will Stop Working On...				
Step 4. Set up a learning plan				
1. What do you need to learn?				
2. Turn this into a hypothesis/truth you can test (We believe that)				
Setting up your Tests				
3. Outcome (what tests) possible?				
4. Measurement (tracking)				
5. Success is (criteria)				
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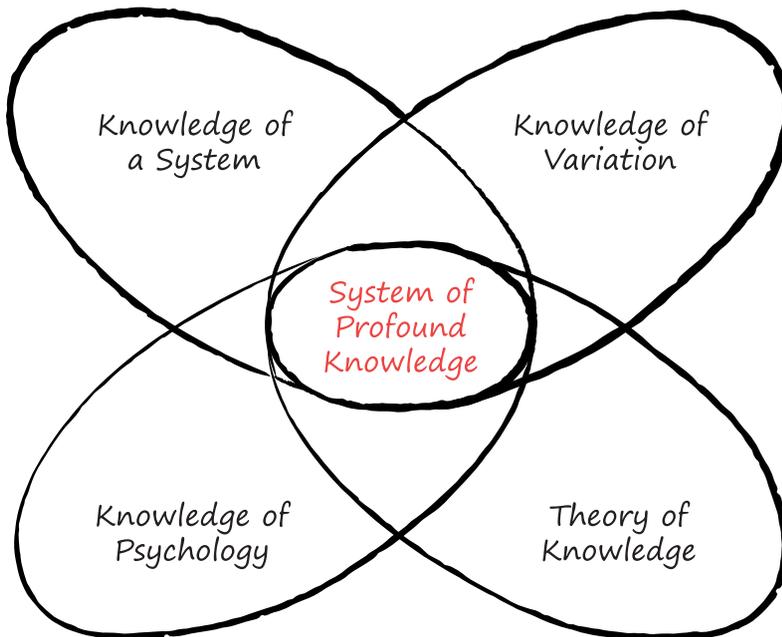
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CHAPTER 24: SYSTEMS THINKING AND PROFOUND INNOVATION: GETTING TO THE HEART OF INNOVATION



"The good news is that you already have an innovation system. The bad news is that it is probably not working."

This chapter was co-written with Nicolas Deturck.

“I have seen the enemy, and he is us.”

WALT KELLY

A few years ago, I asked all eight divisions of a large multi-national company to complete an Innovation Readiness Assessment questionnaire.

The results were not good; all eight divisions scored low.

The senior manager was predictably unhappy. “*Here is the problem...*” he said, tossing the report on to the table in disgust, “*we just don’t have people who can innovate. We need better people.*”

In all eight divisions...

Gently, I pointed out that it seemed unlikely that the company had somehow managed to employ only people incapable of innovation in every single division. Could it be that the problem was not that all the employees were unwilling or unable to innovate, but that the company’s processes were themselves stifling innovation?

It was a light-bulb moment. Suddenly my contact understood that the problem was not underperforming staff but a system that was not designed to encourage innovation. The enemy was us.

Successful innovation arises as part of a system designed to recognize, enable, evaluate, and learn from new ideas at every level. If an organization is consistently failing to innovate, what needs to be fixed is not the people but the systems within which they work.

When Innovation Is Not Working.

The situation at the organization referred to above was not by any means unique. Many organizations struggle to implement innovation effectively.

The statistics back this up; Over 70% of companies list innovation as one of their top five strategic priorities, but over 90% are unhappy with their ability to innovate. Many organizations blame this problem on a lack of creativity. But, as discussed earlier, creativity is just one aspect of successful innovation. The most common “*solution*” is to bring in consultants to fire up the troops and announce new innovation programs.

Unfortunately, this approach usually fails because it ignores a fundamental truth; successful innovation is a long-term process that must become embedded in an organization’s day-to-day operation. In my experience, stop-gap and short-term measures designed to produce “*instant innovation*” generally do not work.

Experts estimate that 80-90% of innovation success is linked to systems. Sound innovation systems provide clarity that aids alignment. These good innovation systems enable and reward learning and remove fear to make it easier to build big ideas. Good innovation systems encourage and reward clear communication. Systems are the glue that binds together the different elements of your approach to innovation.

It has been proven time and again that great people using bad systems produce little while average people using great systems can change the world. It was best described by Taiichi Ohno, the father of the influential and enormously successful Toyota Manufacturing System: *“Brilliant process management is our strategy. We get brilliant results from average people managing brilliant processes. We observe that our competitors often get average (or worse) results from brilliant people managing broken processes.”*

Creating an innovation system is not about imposing control over the creative process; it facilitates that process and ensures that the ideas generated are captured and given a chance to grow. Putting such a system in place requires a fundamental understanding of all the systems currently operating within an organization.

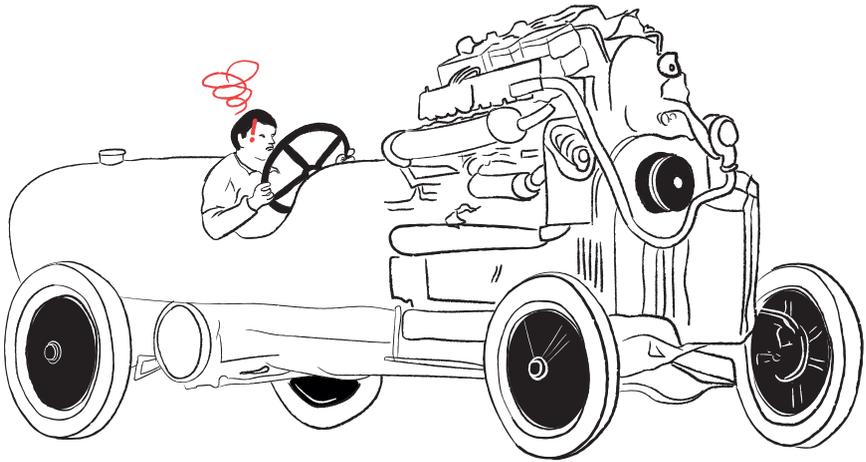
The big questions you need to ask are:

1. Do you have a defined, formal, and understood innovation system or a collection of practices that have arisen spontaneously? (Hint: If you haven't written it down, you almost certainly don't have a formal system.)
2. Is your system or collection of practices enabling innovation? To enable innovation, you need to make the objectives clear and give people the skills they need to succeed. Is innovation within your organization a regular habit or a random occurrence? (Hint: A habit is something that people do when no-one is watching. When no-one is watching, are your people content to do what they always have done, or do they look for ways to learn and improve?)

What Is a System?

A system is a collection of processes, procedures, and practices that form a particular element of what an organization does. These are often grouped according to operational requirements; an organization may have one or more finance, manufacturing, stock control, and customer relations systems. The individual parts of any system are separate but interconnected and dependent on one another. Systems themselves may have dependencies with other systems. Changing one element without considering the impact on other parts and other systems will rarely lead to improvement; it may even make things worse.

Russell Ackoff used the analogy of an automobile to explain how systems work. A car is like an organization with systems covering things like the engine, transmission, brakes, and suspension. Each system is separate, but each is also designed to work in harmony with the others. If you were to improve, for example, the engine of a car by making it much more powerful without considering upgrading the brakes, suspension, and transmission, the result would not be a better car. You would almost certainly end up with something worse than the original and possibly even dangerous. Business systems are the same; improve one system or one part of a system without considering the impact on other elements, and the outcome may not be an overall improvement.



That is why systems thinking is not just about understanding how systems and their elements operate separately; it is about understanding the overall interactions.

It is the same with innovation. The parts **need** to fit together. If you build on the ability to generate new ideas but don't improve your ability to test and execute these ideas – things won't work. A working innovation system is independent parts working together to achieve a common objective. It means an innovation system is the product of its parts. It is only as good as its weakest link.



The Philosophy of Successful Innovation.

In 1983 an American professor, engineer, statistician, management consultant, and lecturer named William Edwards Deming published *The New Economics for Industry, Government, and Education*, a book that has become regarded as a classic in defining how large organizations function.

Although it is now more than thirty-five years since *The New Economics* was first published, I believe it is still relevant today, particularly in understanding how innovation happens.

Deming based his work on a systematic analysis of how organizations operate. He found that the widely-held view that underperforming staff are generally the cause of failures is a fundamental error. Instead, inefficient systems are more often the cause of failures.

Deming's work and recent studies agree that systems and habits drive innovation success. Deming is a numbers man; all his ideas are backed up by hard data. His research showed that only 6% of failures could be attributed to individual performance, while 94% are due to failures in an organization's systems.

I am not alone. In books from Clayton Christensen, arguably the world's innovation sage, he quotes Deming frequently. You'll also find Deming prominently in the works of Doug Hall, Morris Langdon, and Eric Ries. They all see the wisdom of Deming's system view of companies.

These failures are often divided into two categories and defined by their causes; *Special Causes* are due to failures such as a staff member making a mistake or failing to take the required action. *Common Causes* include poorly designed procedures or processes that are implemented or managed. If everyone is failing in an organization, that is a clear sign of common cause issues.

Suppose you want to get the maximum "*bang-for-your-buck*" by improving innovation in your organization. In that case, you must focus your efforts on addressing failures due to *Common Causes*, not *Special Causes*.

Innovation Is a Concert, Not a One-Man Show.

Deming and others since have used the analogy of an orchestra to illustrate how organizations work.

The desired outcome from any orchestra is harmonious music. It is enabled by a Conductor who gives direction to individual musicians organized into brass, woodwind, percussion, and strings sections. Each section of the orchestra works like the systems in an organization.

Each section is separate and unique, but they must all interact correctly with the other sections. You may have the world's best woodwind section, but if it is not playing in time with the rest of the orchestra, the result will not be the great music you are aiming for.

Likewise, if one of the individual musicians within the orchestra consistently plays wrong notes or is out of time, that will ruin the overall sound of the orchestra. Over-performing musicians can also spoil the effect. No matter how talented they may be, someone trying to stand out from the rest or behaving like a prima donna can negatively impact the orchestra's overall performance. Everyone in the orchestra must work together, not in competition with one another.



However, it is unlikely that individuals will be responsible if an orchestra sounds terrible. After all, a musician would not be allowed to join unless they can play their instrument well.

Discordant music is more likely to originate with failures from the orchestra's managers, the principals who lead each section, or even in misdirection from the orchestra's CEO, the Conductor.

Your organization is that orchestra. Every individual and system must work together towards an understood outcome. Having elements within a system that perform poorly is clearly a problem. Still, even elements that work well individually but do not work harmoniously together will not deliver what you want.

The fundamental point here is that the people and systems that constitute an organizational system must collaborate towards achieving an agreed and understood goal under the direction of managers and a CEO. If this does not happen, the outcome may be disharmony and a failure to deliver the desired outcome. The key to getting the outcomes you want is effective systems that work together.

The benefits of putting systems in place to promote organizational harmony are apparent, but you may still face resistance. People usually work in silos, with their own goals and agendas. People get used to working in specific ways and may be reluctant to change. They may even see systems as a means of taking control away from them or feel that following the system's processes may slow things down.

In his book, *The Lean Startup*, Eric Ries talks about how organizations are split into silos. People like to focus on their own work and their own areas of knowledge and experience. When you start work at a systemic level, things will often feel slower from a silo perspective. (This can happen even if the organization is getting more done faster! An innovation leader's job is to ensure you show the group progress, not departmental progress).

To overcome this inertia, it is necessary to be very active in establishing and supporting the implementation of new systems. At first, this may require a great deal of effort, but, as systems become embedded and regularly enacted, they become habits that become part of the organization's day-to-day operation.

It Is Time to Put On Your Systems Thinking Hat.

Like it or not, you already have an innovation system. But the chances are it was never planned or consciously built. If you want to be more successful, the starting point is to understand the system currently operating in your organization. It can seem a daunting task, but fortunately, it can be broken down into bite-size chunks by looking at systems in terms of four principles:

Appreciation for a System. What is the system for? Can you identify the system's boundaries, the stakeholders, and the metrics by which the system's desired outcomes are measured? These are often called the *Why, Who, and How* of the system.

This step is very important. You cannot improve any system unless you fully understand its elements and how they interact. Nor can you make things better without a clear understanding of a system's desired outcomes and how these are measured.

Variation. The performance of any system will change over time. It may be due to external or internal factors. The internal factors are those that the organization can control. External factors (for example, a seasonal change in demand for a product) are generally outside the organization's direct control. It is imperative that you distinguish between internal factors that you can control and external factors that you cannot.

Once you have identified the metrics used to measure the desired outcomes from a system, you can objectively measure variation. Variation can be positive, resulting from a system improvement, or negative, resulting from a failure. Most failures are attributable to *Common Causes* rather than *Special Causes*.

Theory of Knowledge. A great deal of management is about prediction. It is particularly important when you are trying to introduce an improvement; just how will it work, what will it do, and how will you measure the improvement? Reliable prediction involves appreciating the system you are trying to improve, access to metrics to measure its performance, and understanding the causes of variation.

However, there is another crucial part of this principle. Improvement is not something you do once and forget about; it is not a process with an end-point. Improvement within an organization has to be continuous. This iterative process is often called a *Cycle of Learning* that involves four defined steps; Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA). It is not something you do once but all the time.

Psychology. Organizations are made up of people. These people are not pieces of equipment whose performance can be reliably predicted. Each person is unique with their own needs regarding fulfillment, motivation, and acceptance of change. People are not components in a machine. Managing people effectively requires an understanding of psychology.

Most psychologists agree that humans have an innate desire to perform well and take pride in what they do. Successful organizations harness this by ensuring that systems allow workers to contribute towards improvement. Employees who are part of an effective system of improvement are much more likely to feel motivated and perform better than those treated like inert and replaceable components.

Profound Knowledge.

These four principles of understanding systems are not separate; they have interactions and dependencies. In-depth knowledge of psychology, for example, will not necessarily lead to an improvement in an organization without an understanding of variation and an appreciation for the systems involved.

Together, these four principles are referred to as *Profound Knowledge*. *Profound Knowledge* is a way to understand how systems affect every part of your organization. But how can we apply these principles and this approach to innovation? That is what we will look at next, and we call this *Profound Innovation*.

Profound Innovation.

Making innovation happen is about people working together to build, test, and grow new ideas. It is about the creation of systems that make this possible. Your job is to identify what is blocking people from innovating and to listen to them.

The bad news is that when you start looking at the full system, you will encounter resistance. People like to work on *their* things; they like to see progress on *their* things. Making people see the significance of what they do in terms of a larger process can be difficult.

One of the secrets of being a good manager and innovation leader is to do the right things instead of the easy things, to have the ability to rise above the distraction of the details, and see the underlying systemic structures that are producing or blocking innovation progress. Effective systems capture the improvement of ideas you need, while ineffective systems do not. But how do you objectively assess your current innovation system?

Here is a 6-step program:

Step 1: Identify and understand your current innovation system. It may not be documented or even recognized, but you already have an innovation system. People in your organization have ideas for improvement, and those ideas are either taken forward or ignored. Find out what happens now if a person at any level in your organization has an improvement idea. How do they raise that idea with line management? What does management do with the idea? Are such ideas valued or discouraged as a distraction? Does any part of this process get written down?

Step 2: Identify the main problems with the current system. Does everybody have clear responsibilities in terms of evaluating and communicating improvement ideas? Is there clarity about where the organization wants to go? Is there a clearly understood process for building, testing, and growing innovation? Is there a process for giving feedback to the people who raise new ideas? Are people appropriately trained?

Step 3: Identify the single biggest problem. What is the main current barrier to improvement ideas turning into innovation? Is it the lack of a documented system? Is it that people do not have clear responsibilities? Is it that too much control is stifling creativity?

Step 4: Turn the problem into challenges. Use the *How Might We...* (HMW) approach popularized by books like *Sprint* by Jake Knapp. List all possible solutions to the problem as challenges. Think about systemic changes. For example, is the main problem a lack of clarity in how improvement ideas are captured, creating a written procedure defining roles, responsibilities, and addressing it? Is training needed? Use Commander's Intent (see the *Alignment Conclusion*) to clearly and simply set out what needs to be done and why.

Step 5: Choose one challenge to focus on. Use the TRUE NORTH tool (see the *Alignment Conclusion*) to clearly set out your objectives. Focus on what and why rather than how.

Step 6: Implement the change. Now think about how the chosen challenge can be addressed. Who within the organization has the experience and knowledge to understand what needs to be done? Use the outcome of the TRUE NORTH process to let them understand what is being done and why. If you assign responsibility for this task, do the people chosen have the time needed? How will you measure success?

A 6-step process to start working on improving your innovation systems

Step 1	What is your innovation system?	Frenetic, exciting but uncertain of who should do what		
Step 2	List your biggest problems	Lack of clarity	More control than enablement	No clear system
		No one know who to start	Innovation is not my responsibility	People not trained
Step 3	Choose one (the biggest problem)	More control than enablement		
Step 4	Change the problem into challenges. Think HMW (How might we improve or improve further)	HMW more clearly Clearer of objectives	Accept leadership can come from all levels	Move from inspecting results to making better systems
		Agree process and systems, let results follow	Set commander's intent	Use the TRUE NORTH alignment tool in this book
Step 5	Choose one (the best challenge to focus your energies)	Use the TRUE NORTH alignment tool in this book		
Step 6	How to motivate change (Solutions)	Make TRUE NORTH part of all innovation project kick-offs. Sell this as "Freedom in a framework"	Agree to invest enough time and thought in the TRUE NORTH, so a promise can be made it will not change	Give responsibility to the team for delivering ideas on the TRUE NORTH and agree to stay out of the way

Slowly but Surely.

When I talk with people about innovation systems, I often get the reply, "Sure, that will work for incremental innovation, but I need big ideas now!"

Let me repeat: Big ideas are built. Put faith in your people, create the right systems, and amazing things will happen. Things might be slow at first. Slower than bringing in a flashy consultant to shake things up. The difference is, effective systems will continue to generate new ideas long after the impact of a big, new innovation initiative has worn off. Have patience. Successful innovation is not a sprint; it is a marathon where you need to make progress every day.

Winning in the long term is all about getting the innovation flywheel turning. Jim Collins describes well the image of a flywheel of progress in his book *Good to Great*: "Pushing with great effort, you get the flywheel to inch forward. You keep pushing, and with persistent effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire turn. You don't stop. You keep pushing. The flywheel moves a bit faster. Two turns ... then four ... then eight ... the flywheel builds momentum ... sixteen ... thirty-two ... moving faster ... a thousand ... ten thousand ... a hundred thousand. Then at some point, breakthrough! The flywheel flies forward with almost unstoppable momentum."

More with Less.

Today, we are all asked to do more with less. They say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. But trying to do the same thing with even less and expecting things to turn out better is even more insane. Systems thinking will get you out of this trap by providing three things:

- A way to capture innovation ideas that might otherwise be lost or ignored.
- A clearer focus on results, so your odds of success increase.
- A shared sense of purpose.

If you embrace Profound Innovation underpinned by a systems approach, you really will be able to do more with less, faster.

Equally important, you will be able to do more with what you already have.

Final Thoughts.

An important task in the systems approach is defining and documenting your innovation system. In my experience, it is very rare for organizations to have a documented system for enabling innovation. That is one of the reasons why so many are failing. Documenting your system is a long-term task, but it is something that can transform your approach to innovation.

I would like to share some words from Doug Hall, founder of the Innovation Engineering movement and author of seven best-selling books: *“If you can’t describe your system in writing, then you don’t have a system. A written operations manual turns innovation from a random gamble to a reliable investible opportunity. Without a written innovation system, employees never make a mistake innovating! When there is no defined system, then any method is acceptable. When you first write your operations manual, it will be imperfect. That doesn’t make it worthless. Just the process of writing it will provide clarity to you and your team. Most important of all is that you revisit it as you work on projects. Edit, improve, and optimize your system description as you go along. Having the system written down makes improvement of the system possible.”*

Providing instructions on how to write an innovation systems manual for your organization is well beyond the scope of this book. But I can suggest a simple outline based on the content of this book.

Section 1 Alignment:

What is your organizational process to decide what you're going to work on?

Section 2 Build:

What are your company's best practices to collect stimulus, build individual expertise, and bring people together to build ideas?

Section 3 Communicate and Check:

What is your gold standard for clarity, testing ideas, and consumer willingness to pay. Can you build in shoot the puppy sessions to ensure you're killing ideas, allowing the important ones room to grow?

Section 4 Systems:

How will you manage fear in your organization and work together to understand how you work together? How will you stop blaming individuals and start working on how you work together to focus on the big challenges and learn as you go?

I haven't seen many companies with an innovation system manual. Imagine how much better your company could be if you were the first in your industry or sector. Innovation is not something that happens by accident. A systems view could change your company's innovation processes.

Key Take-Aways



- **Systems are the solution** – you need to get people to think in terms of systems.
- **Understand your systems** – you cannot improve systems unless you understand them and the interactions that happen within them.
- **Solve common causes** – do not look for people to blame.
- **Learn** – As you work to change, make sure you are learning and ready to share that learning.
- **Focus on intrinsic rewards** – ensure that people understand the importance of why they are doing what they are doing.



Next Steps: Take some time to think about your innovation systems. Canvas 1 is about identifying problems in your innovation systems. Canvas 2 is about how to turn these problems into challenges you can work on.

Chapter 24A

Systems thinking and profound innovation: getting to the heart of innovation



60
Minutes

Objectives

To use systems thinking to identify key challenges and your single biggest challenge.

Deliverables

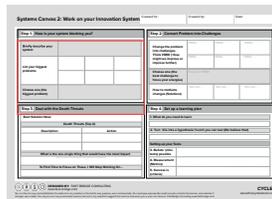
Your current biggest challenge.

How to

- Step 1: Think about the SYSTEM you are working in. What is causing what, what are the interconnections
- Step 2: List all the barriers/blocks/problems in your system.
- Step 3: List your single biggest problem

The Full Systems Canvas

This Chapter



Systems Canvas 2: Work on your Innovation System

Step 1. How is your system blocking you?

Briefly describe your system

List your biggest problems

Choose one (the biggest problem)

How do you know if you have done this canvas right ?



CHECK LIST

- Don't believe you don't have a system. Your system might not be documented or even recognized, but you have a system.
- Look for common causes – common cause issues are often your biggest problem.
- Avoid blaming people; remember the issue is usually the system, NOT the people.



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Chapter 24B

Systems thinking and profound innovation: getting to the heart of innovation



60
Minutes

Objectives

To turn your biggest problem into challenges that you can work on

Deliverables

A single challenge to work on and some first solutions to this challenge

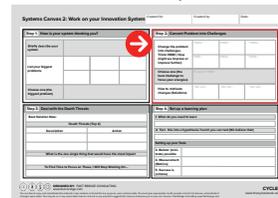
How to

Step 1: Turn your key problem into a “non-problem” by identifying ways the future might be different and better with How-Might-we-statements that define a challenge that could be solved in many different ways.
Step 2: Choose a single HMW with the greatest potential (or is the most motivating)
Step 3: Write alternative solutions

The Full Systems Canvas



This Chapter



Systems Canvas 2: Work on your Innovation System

Step 2. Convert your problem into challenges

Change the problem into challenges. Think HMW (How might we improve or improve further)	HMW...	HMW...	HMW...
	HMW...	HMW...	HMW...
Choose one (the best challenge to focus your energies)	Choose 1 HMW		
How to motivate changes (Solutions)	We will...	We will...	We will...

How do you know if you have done this canvas right ?



CHECK LIST

- Keep your HMWs broad. Don't write your HMWs with a specific solution; keep them a challenge that could be solved with many different solutions.
- Focus your HMWs on desired outcomes.
- Be flexible with your solutions. There are usually many solutions to any challenge.



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Next Up: A systems view will help you identify what is holding your organization back. How do you decide where to focus your efforts when you are ready to start fixing things? The answer is simple; work on your “*death threats*” first.

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Nicolas is a genuine passionate about innovation, change and business transformation. His backpack comes from 22 years of professional experience including 10 years in the automotive industry. He acts as a facilitator and catalyst for transformation projects and operational optimization. Nicolas is an advocate for best practice, lean methodologies and a driver of excellence in creative thinking and execution. His focus is to deliver measurable business success, operational efficiencies and increased brand equity by making people's life choices easier and stress free.



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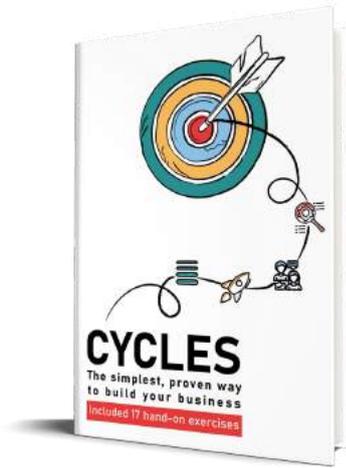
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Bryan is a passionate believer in anyone's ability to innovate and build new businesses. He has personally built 11 companies in 6 countries, with eight of these making money.

For the last eight years, Bryan has been coaching startups and scale-ups and trying to help larger companies regain the spirit of startups. He has taught at the KU Leuven, The Solvay business school, EDHEC, ESCLA, and been a guest lecturer at the University of Chicago, INSEAD, Cornell, Berkeley, and many other schools.

He has also led programs like Founder Institute Brussels and the European Innovation Academy. This book results from four years of research with over 400 companies on what really drives innovation success.



BOOK CYCLES

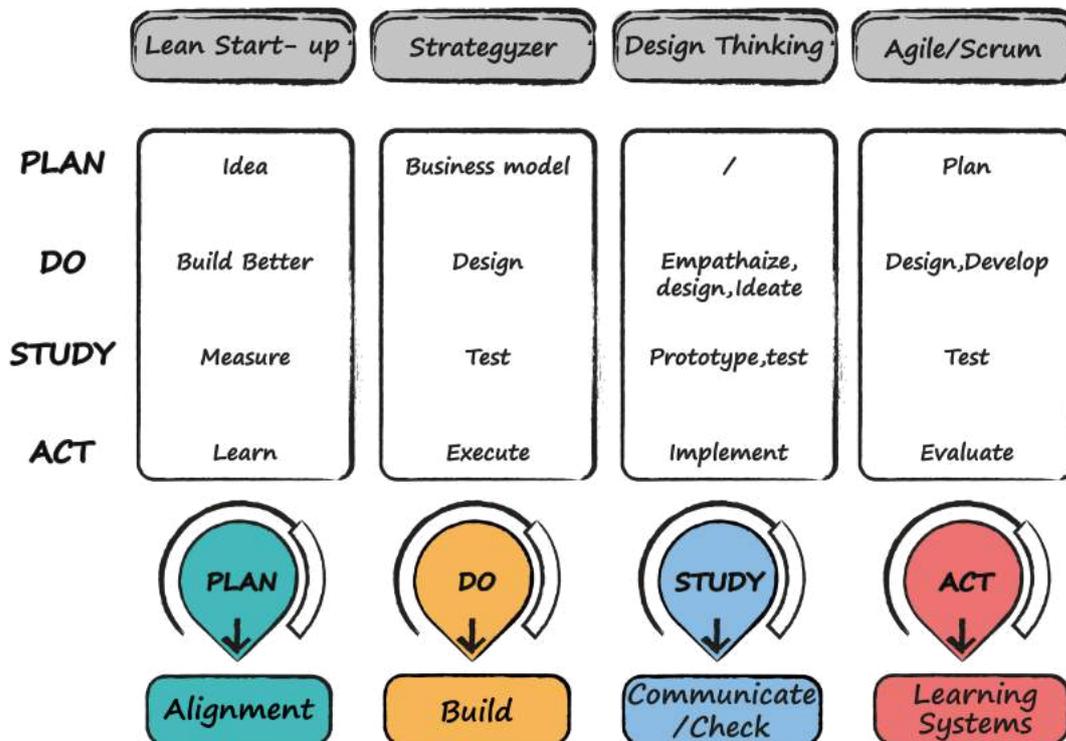
Standing on the shoulders of giants...

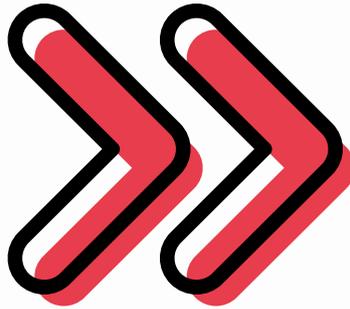
Many of the leading methods- lean start up, scrum, agile are built around the ideas of PDSA (Plan, do , study, act)

This book builds on these ideas, but thanks to the expertise of 22 co-authors, goes one step further.

CYCLES doesn't just tell you what to do, but shows you how to do things step by step.

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