

Free Book Excerpt

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

CHAPTER 26

BULLETS FIRST, THEN CANNONBALLS: THE SECRETS OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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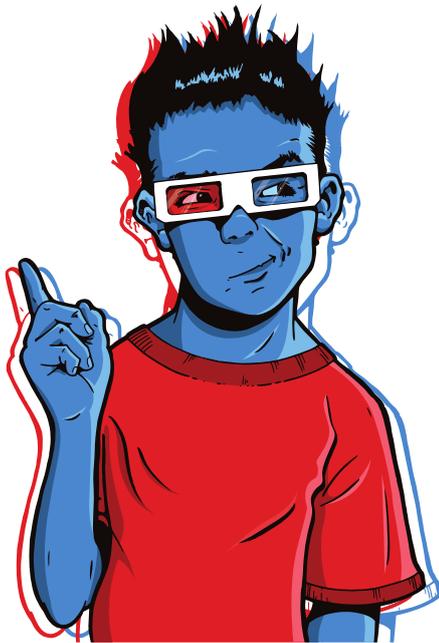
Use available resources systematically to find out what has the most potential.

”

BRYAN CASSADY

LEAD AUTHOR OF THE BOOK CYCLES





WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THE CHAPTER

KEY TAKE-AWAYS

- **Active learning is vital** because it provides quicker results, lowers the risk of failure, and helps develop a scalable innovation.
- **The three pillars of learning are:** being open to learning, sharing learning, and being committed to continuous learning. Active learning is the ability to take action on what has been learned using the three pillars.
- **The best learning approach is to fire fast**, low stakes, low distraction, and low-cost bullets. Once the bullet hits the target, then upscale the idea and eventually fire a cannonball.
- **Incorporating active learning** into your organization helps with faster innovation. Acknowledge the value of failing; keep rating your personal and your organization's ability to learn well using the questionnaire in this chapter.
- **Make learning an organizational habit.** Communication channels need to be clear; reflection needs to be an active part of organizational functioning through meetings, feedback forms, and rewarding acts of learning. In addition to this, it's vital to stay open to learning even in difficult times

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?	Step 2. Convert Problem into Challenges
<p>Briefly describe your system</p>	<p>Change the problem into challenges. Think HOW (How might we improve or improve further?)</p>
<p>List your biggest problems</p>	<p>Choose one (the best challenge to focus your energies)</p>
<p>Choose one (the biggest problem)</p>	<p>How to resolve changes (Solutions)</p>

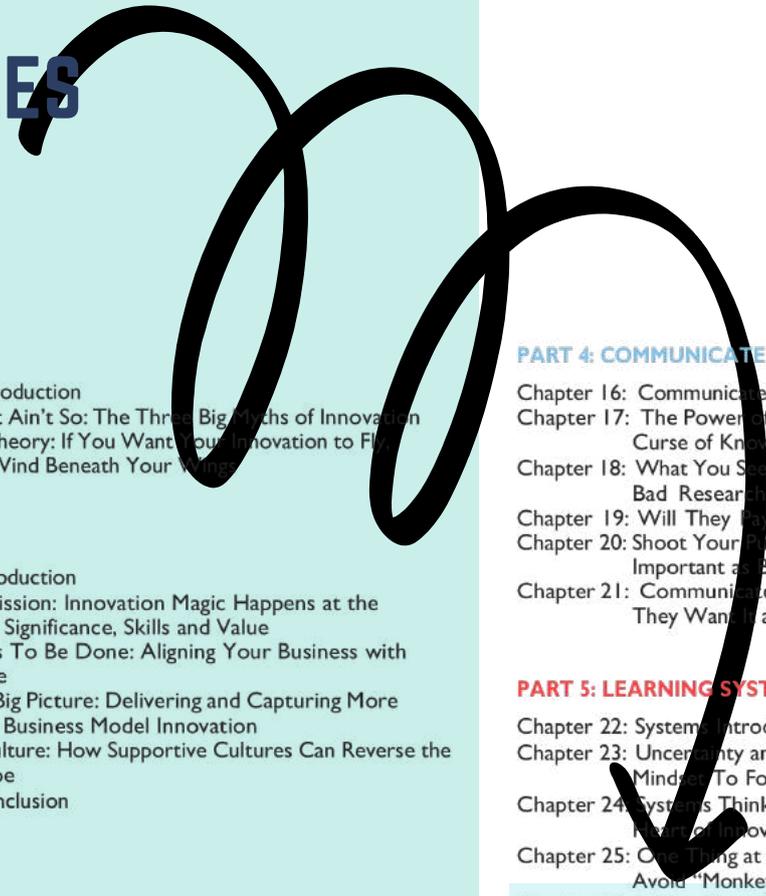
Step 3. Deal with the Death Threats	Step 4. Set up a learning plan
<p>Best Solution Now:</p>	<p>1. What do you need to learn</p>
<p>Death Threats (top 2)</p>	<p>2. Turn this into a hypothesis/munch you can test (We believe that)</p>
<p>Description Action</p>	<p>Setting up your Tests</p>
<p>What is the one single thing that would have the most impact</p>	<p>3. Success metrics (test) possible</p>
<p>To Find Time to Focus on These, I Will Stop Working On...</p>	<p>4. Measurement (tracking)</p>
	<p>5. Success is (criteria)</p>

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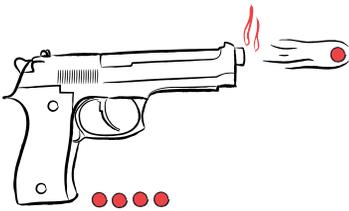
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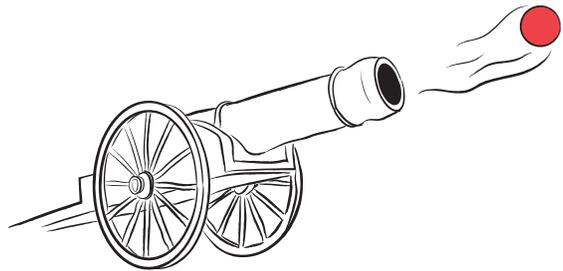
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CHAPTER 26: BULLETS FIRST, THEN CANNONBALLS: THE SECRETS OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION



First These



Then This

**Use available resources systematically
to find out what has the most
potential.**

A Hotel Made of Ice Could Be a Cool Idea.

You wake-up on a bed made of ice in a hotel room made entirely of ice set amongst stunning natural beauty. Just for a moment, you think that surely, an idea as wonderfully outrageous as an Icehotel must have originated in a moment of divine inspiration? Then you put your innovation hat on. You know that there are no moments of divine inspiration, only a systematic process of building ideas...

In the mid-1970s, Yngve Bergqvist arrived in the small town of Jukkasjärvi, Sweden, two hundred miles north of the Arctic Circle. In the summer months, Bergqvist organized canoe and raft trips on nearby rivers and lakes, and by the late 1980s, more than five thousand tourists were visiting Jukkasjärvi each summer. But Bergqvist wanted something to draw visitors during the long winter months.

After attending an ice-sculpture event in Japan, he invited two Japanese sculptors to spend the winter of 1989/1990 in Jukkasjärvi to lead an art workshop. They built an ice igloo with blocks of ice from the nearby River Torne, and this became an art gallery and performance space. The ice-sculpture workshops became an annual event and attracted artists from around the world. Most stayed in wooden cabins in Jukkasjärvi but, one winter, a group of visiting artists asked whether they could sleep in the ice-igloo? They did and loved the experience, and just then, the idea of the Icehotel was born.

Initially, this meant allowing visiting artists to sleep in the art gallery. Bergqvist gradually refined the idea into a completely sustainable hotel entirely separate from the ice-sculpture event. Each December, they would construct the hotel from ice-blocks taken from the river. Each spring, it would melt.

By 2016 the idea had been refined even further into a year-round experience. Permanent buildings were added to ice-suites, an ice bar, and an ice gallery, all lit and heated by solar power. The ice part of the hotel would still melt in the spring, but tourists who came to hike, raft, canoe, and explore would use the permanent element. Currently, more than fifty thousand visitors come to Jukkasjärvi every year to stay in this unique hotel.

Failing Forward: Reframing the goal.

Instead of sticking with the initial idea of an ice-sculpture event, Bergqvist refined the idea, first into an Icehotel during the winter and then into permanent, year-round accommodation. He learned he needed to remodel his idea into something even more durable.

His question changed from “*How to start a successful business based on things I like to do?*” to “*How to start a successful all-year-round business activity for tourists in Sweden?*”. Eventually, he refined his idea into what people liked the most: a sustainable, year-round ice hotel. It had never been done before and became an extremely popular tourist activity.

Bergqvist has also partnered with big companies like Absolut Vodka to provide unique corporate getaways. He has been involved in creating ice bars in Copenhagen, Tokyo, London, and Stockholm.

The Lesson: Learn Actively.

The idea for the Icehotel did not arrive fully-formed and complete. Bergqvist tried several ideas, refined what he was offering, and gradually developed something that provided lasting appeal. That is common to most innovation successes. A great idea will not automatically lead to a commercially successful product or service. That process is actually about refinement through learning. Each time you do something, you learn. Each time you learn, that informs your next action. This cycle of acting and learning and acting again is what we call active learning. The learning part of the cycle is supported by what is called the three pillars of learning. These are:

- Being open to learning.
- Sharing learning.
- Continuing to learn.

This chapter is about; developing an active learning approach. This combination of learning based on the three pillars and action is essential to successful innovation.

The “Magic” Behind Great Ideas.

“My training does not seem to have prepared me well to produce good ideas from the get-go. Instead, it has prepared me to arrive at them.”

LUIS PEREZ-BRAVA
THE DOER'S MANIFESTO

Do companies innovate faster when they value learning, or does learning slow innovation?

To answer this question, my research team and I created a self-report questionnaire that we administered to over four hundred companies to assess their approach to learning. We measured three significant variables; how open-minded the company is, whether they often share their knowledge inside the company and how committed to learning they believe they are. The data from these learning questionnaires was compared with each company's overall innovation rank based on how many ideas they successfully upscaled in a year.

We found a striking and direct correlation between success in innovation and a positive learning orientation. The top 25% of the innovation ranking companies had an average 74% score in learning orientation. The companies in the bottom 25% of the innovation ranking scored an average of just 19% for learning orientation.

This survey made it very clear that innovation winners are most often companies that value learning. This begs the question; *how do they learn?*

Bullets First, Then Cannonballs: The Best Way to Learn.

The key difference that distinguishes successful innovators is learning and a willingness to take action based on that learning. This is captured in the Bullets first, then Cannonballs approach coined by Jim Collins in his book *Great by Choice* (2011). In the book, Collins describes the approach as follows: “*First, you fire bullets (low-cost, low-risk, low-distraction experiments) to figure out what will work – calibrating your line of sight by taking small shots. Then, once you have*

empirical validation, you fire a cannonball (concentrating resources into a big bet) on the calibrated line of sight. Calibrated cannonballs correlate with outsized results; uncalibrated cannonballs correlate with disaster. The ability to turn small proven ideas (bullets) into huge hits (cannonballs) counts more than the sheer amount of pure innovation."

The science of the bullets first approach has been proven by Collins' research in *Great by Choice* to have a lasting impact on a business' ability to consistently innovate successfully. The reason is simple; this approach makes learning consistent over time.

At the heart of this idea is the ability to learn with purpose. Firing your ideas as bullets mean you have identified a target, have understandable instructions on how to shoot, and a focus on learning whether or not you hit your target. This approach requires you to ensure your calibration is right before you even think about firing an expensive cannonball. There is another way to describe this approach; learning as you go.

What Does It Mean to "Learn as You Go"?

Harvard Business School psychologist Chris Argyris defines learning as the "detection and correction of an error", where an error is "any mismatch between our intentions and what actually happens". Correctly detecting errors, i.e., learning well, requires certain key traits:

- Open-mindedness (a willingness to critically evaluate an organization's operational routine and to consider new ideas).
- Commitment to learning (the degree to which an organization values and promotes learning).
- Sharing knowledge (collective beliefs or behavioral routines related to the spread of learning among different units within an organization).

Every Cycle of Innovation Emphasizes Learning in Mini Cycles.

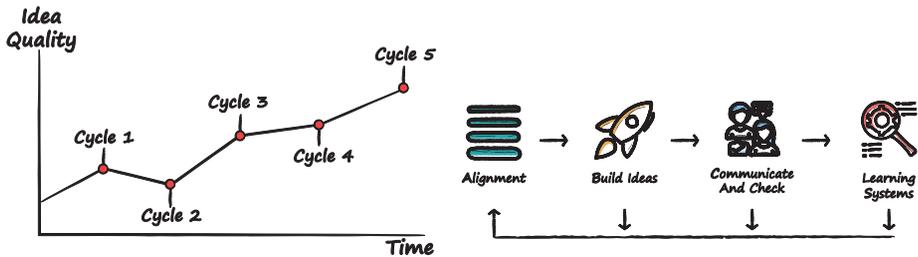
Many approaches to innovation emphasize the need for reflection and learning. Probably the best-known is the Plan, Do, Study, Act cycle first described by Deming. In this cycle, the Study stage is where the actions taken during the Do phase are examined, and the learning is used to inform the Act phase. In Scrum sprints, every cycle of innovation has a stage of assessment and reflection built-in. In the ABCS, systematically improve is the essence of the method. If done right consistently, it is the one step that will have the most impact on your innovation success.

Which approach you use is not important. What is important is that after each action, there is a pause to extract learning from that action, informing the next action stage. Learning and taking action based on what you have learned is an essential element of the innovation cycle; it ties the whole process together.

The basic process looks like this:

1. Mini cycles (low risk, low cost, low distraction experiments), followed by
2. A learning and reflection stage at the end of each mini-cycle that informs the action needed for the next mini-cycle.

Cycles: The ABCs Of Growth



Why Cyclical Learning Matters.

Our research makes it obvious that learning organizations have a competitive edge over those companies that do not value learning. A commitment to learning is also associated with long-term strategic alignment, another essential building-block for successful innovation. However, these are not the only significant benefits of the active learning approach.

Lowered risk

“Asking customers what they want and then making precisely that doesn’t sound revolutionary, but it’s not the way most development projects work.

Most of the time, the developers obsess over getting everything exactly right before customers get a peek.

That’s risky-you burn through your resources and then hope for the best.”

JEFF SUTHERLAND, SCRUM

Firing bullets before cannonballs reduces risk. Bullets are low cost and low risk. If they miss the target, recalibration is not a major issue. You only fire expensive, high-risk cannonballs when you know you are accurately aligned with the target.

Recall the Icehotel example. By holding an ice sculpture event in Sweden, Yngve Bergqvist was firing a bullet. Each subsequent change and expansion was low risk, low cost, and based on what had been learned before. It was not until 2016, twenty-five years after the first ice-sculpture competition, that he fired his first cannonball by building a permanent, year-round, sustainable hotel complex in Jukkasjärvi. By that time, the bullets that he had previously fired had shown that the idea of a permanent hotel was commercially feasible.

Quicker results

It may seem counterintuitive, but, in terms of innovation, making mistakes and learning from them in short cycles is more effective than not making mistakes or learning at all. Without pauses for learning and reflection, a company may be headed in the wrong direction for months, wasting time and resources. Using short cycles followed by periods of reflection identifies mistakes quickly and allows you to pivot, getting you where you want to be faster.

In innovation, speed matters. In simple terms, the faster you work through mini-cycles, the faster you learn. The faster you learn, the more quickly you move from an idea to a product or service. Firing bullets is always faster than firing cannonballs.

Successful innovations

The bullet-first approach ensures that you pursue attainable objectives that will deliver what you need quickly. It also helps you develop the necessary skills to deliver the final product and see potential other avenues.

Yngve Bergqvist did not stop with ice hotels. His partnership with Absolut led to the idea of creating bars made entirely of ice outside of Sweden. These were highly successful and built on the ideas of the original innovation. They also helped to bring attention to the Icehotel in Jukkasjärvi.

The fact is that companies that make active learning a systemic part of their organization's functioning innovate better and produce more and fresher ideas. Here is how you can do the same.

Creating Your Learning Organization.

In 1995, Kellogg's was aware that its breakfast cereals were not doing well in India. In this potentially huge market, cultural differences were a significant barrier to increasing sales. While customers in the US and elsewhere had no problem eating sugary foods for breakfast, customers in India simply did not want to swap their traditional savory morning meals for a sweet cereal.

To deal with this issue, Kellogg's began marketing themselves in three distinctly different ways to test what would appeal to customers in India. Each of these marketing strategies was a bullet to see what would hit the target.

The first to be launched was Kellogg's "healthy and tasty" campaign. They created advertisements showing a famous Indian actress and fitness enthusiast, Lara Dutta, eating a bowl of Kellogg's cereal in her exercise gear sitting next to her yoga mat. Second, they produced a "Kellogg's is parent-approved" advertising campaign featuring Indian actress and mom Karishma Kapoor announcing that she swears by Kellogg's cereals for her children. Finally, another set of advertisements described Kellogg's cereals as good for digestive health through high fiber digestive aid products like "all-bran cereal" and "heart to heart oats".

The "healthy and tasty" campaign generated very little interest, but the other two bullets hit the target. From these mini-experiments, Kellogg's learned that children were more likely to consume the sweeter cereals while adults would be happy to consume their higher fiber products. Next, they moved to cannonballs, importing a range of cereals for children and more digestive aid products for adults. The success of their bullets meant that the cannonballs were a lower risk, and Kellogg's successfully expanded their breakfast cereal market in India.

Kellogg's was able to succeed in India by becoming a learning organization. The question now is, how can you do the same?

1. Acknowledge the value in failure

Our experience suggests that active learning represents a crucial difference between innovation winners and losers. However, it is vital to understand that you will learn as much from failures as from successes. Every bullet that misses the target makes it more likely that your cannonballs will hit, provided that you learn why the bullet missed and what you need to do to get the next one closer to the bulls-eye.

Missing shots is part of the process of learning. People should not be afraid to fail as long as they are willing to share those failures and learn from them. Google acknowledged that failure means insight. They experimented with two products; Google AdSense and Google Answers. While the latter experiment failed in vitro, the former grew massively successful and now runs most ads across the Internet.

When asked to describe the experience Susan Wojcicki, the first marketing manager of Google and current CEO of YouTube, said: "We learned a lot in that time, and we were able to apply the knowledge we had gathered to the development of future products. If we'd been afraid to fail, we never would have tried Google Answers or AdSense, and missed an opportunity with each one."

Failure is just another step on the road to success. But only if you learn from that failure and take action to ensure you do not make the same mistakes again.

2. Rate your organization's learning orientation

To test your organization's current learning orientation, use our research questionnaire, and decide whether you agree or disagree with the following statements concerning your organization:

1. The sense around here is that employee learning is an investment, not an expense.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
2. Learning in my organization is seen as a key commodity necessary to guarantee organizational survival.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
3. We have specific mechanisms for sharing lessons learned in organizational activities from department to department (unit to unit, team to team).				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
4. We always analyze unsuccessful organizational endeavors and communicate the lessons learned widely.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
5. We continually judge the quality of our decisions and activities taken over time.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
6. We are not afraid to reflect critically on the shared assumptions we have made about our customers.				
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

The first two statements assess a commitment to learning, 3 and 4 assess intra-organizational knowledge sharing, and the final two assess a company's open-mindedness. Rate yourself on each by scoring five if you strongly agree with the statement and one if you strongly disagree. An overall score of 25-30 demonstrates a high learning orientation. A score of 16-25 demonstrates an average learning orientation, and any score of 15 and under suggests a low learning orientation.

This rating will help you understand whether your company is a learning organization. Unless the score shows that you already have a high learning orientation, you will want to think about the structural changes and new habits you need to incorporate to promote learning throughout your company.

Make Active Learning an Organizational Habit.

Perhaps the most important step in creating a learning organization is to reinforce learning as a habit. Here are the steps you need to take to ensure this:

Reflection

Reflection is a key element of active learning. Pausing to think about what you have learned and how you can incorporate this learning in your next round of

action must be built-into your systems. This is done in the “Study” phase of PDSA. Scrum does this by having a mandatory reflection meeting at the end of each day. Learning can also be made an organizational habit by scheduling after-action reviews, personally conducting town hall meetings, generating weekly reports, conducting stand-up meetings, and scheduling reviews at key junctures in the innovation cycle.

Build clear communication channels

Working out promptly whether a bullet hit or missed the target is important to allow for quick recalibration. To enable this, employees must convey their feelings about a particular product or process, and management must communicate the required changes to everyone involved. For this, all systems must include clear communication channels for receiving and disseminating feedback and learning.

Reward acts of learning

Ensure that everyone in your organization understands the importance of learning. It is essential for creating a unified organizational orientation towards learning. Alignment towards learning can be encouraged by rewarding employees for meaningful participation in meetings. For instance, employees can be given personal praise, gifts, or even promotions for sharing their knowledge, being open to feedback, and fostering a learning environment.

It is also vital that customers recognize that your organization values learning and welcomes honest and helpful feedback at all times. Hence, rewarding customers for good and detailed feedback is another useful strategy.

Stay open to learning

It is relatively easy to be open to learning when things are going well. Everyone is happy to share the good news. However, where many companies fail is by being less willing to learn when things are going badly. That is a mistake as the perfect time to learn how to do things better is by failing. If things are going badly, pause and ask, “*what could we have done better or differently?*” It’s vital to stay open to learning at all times, even bad times.

Never be afraid to fail.

“Accept that you will learn by being wrong as you venture into the impossible in search for that thing others come to appreciate as magical-an “innovation”- when your turn comes to tell your story in hindsight.”

THE DOER'S MANIFESTO.

Like the Icehotel story, Kellogg's and Google recognize that failure is part of the process and can help you innovate faster. If you are too afraid to risk failure, success is going to be much harder to achieve.

Conclusion: Low Stakes Learning Through Beta-Testing.

Zappos online apparel store was born in 1999 and was acquired by Amazon for 1.2 billion dollars just ten years later. How did the company grow so fast? In an interview, their CEO Tony Hsieh said their core focus was always on low-stakes marketing as beta tests for their new products.

Beta testing is a cost-effective way of testing a new product or service with the end-users to validate its usability, functionality, compatibility, and reliability. Essentially, it allows for “real” customer interaction with a product and can provide useful feedback on the product's design and functionality. A beta test is a mini-cycle followed by a period of reflection. It is another word for what we have been discussing in this chapter; bullets.

Initially, to gain brand awareness, Zappos bought mass adverts, including expensive sports stadium signage. Although it was a major investment, this strategy did not get people to choose Zappos over other online retail markets. They were wasting money, time, and resources. Since then, Zappos prioritized what they call low-stakes marketing and what we will refer to as low-stakes learning.

After changing their approach, Zappos no longer announced new products or features through mass advertising. Instead, they quietly rolled out their latest products, attracted the first few enthusiastic buyers – “early adopters” – and got their feedback. In the 2007 interview, Hsieh described his thoughts about the new approach. He said: *“There's still a temptation to come out in a big way and waste a lot of money like we did in the early days... It's better to start small because, until you are actually doing it, you cannot predict the thousand little things that will inevitably happen.”*

This approach led to Zappos growing immensely in popularity. Their story summarizes the focus of this chapter—low-cost, low-risk mini-cycles lead to rapid learning. Bullets are a method of testing the waters. Firing bullets will help you see whether you know what people want, if you are offering them value, and whether they are willing to pay for that value.

Learning from their feedback is vital to improve your calibration. Once your bullets are hitting the target, you can start gearing up for the cannonball shot.

Key Take-Aways



- Active learning is vital because it provides quicker results, lowers the risk of failure, and helps develop a scalable innovation.
 - The three pillars of learning are: being open to learning, sharing learning, and being committed to continuous learning. Active learning is the ability to take action on what has been learned using the three pillars.
 - The best learning approach is to fire fast, low stakes, low distraction, and low-cost bullets. Once the bullet hits the target, then upscale the idea and eventually fire a cannonball.
 - Incorporating active learning into your organization helps with faster innovation. Acknowledge the value of failing; keep rating your personal and your organization's ability to learn well using the questionnaire in this chapter.
 - Make learning an organizational habit. Communication channels need to be clear; reflection needs to be an active part of organizational functioning through meetings, feedback forms, and rewarding acts of learning. In addition to this, it's vital to stay open to learning even in difficult times.
-



Next Steps: The core of good innovation systems is a systematic approach to experimentation and learning. Follow these steps in the canvas below:

Step 1: Think about what knowledge would help your business most. Re-write this as “what you need to learn.”

Step 2: Try to guess what might be true and write this as a hypothesis you could test.

Step 3: Structure your learning plan. We will (bullets), we will measure, and success would be.

Chapter 26

Bullets First, Then Cannonballs: The secrets of a learning organization



60
Minutes

Objectives

To think strategically about the need to test and learn.

Deliverables

Ways you could test a key business hypothesis.

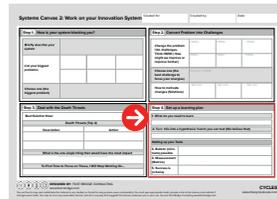
How to

Step 1: Think about what knowledge would help your business the most. Re-write this as a “what you need to learn”
 Step 2: Try to guess what might be true and write this as a hypothesis you could test.
 Step 3: Structure your learning plan. We will (bullets), we will measure, success would be.

The Full Systems Canvas



This Chapter



Systems Canvas 2: Work on your Innovation System

Step 4. Set up a learning plan

1. What do you need to learn

2. Turn this into a hypothesis/ hunch you can test (We believe that)

Setting up your Tests

3. Bullets' (mini-tests) possible

4. Measurement (Metrics)

5. Success is (criteria)

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



CHECK LIST

- Don't think about learning as something academic. Learning is the key to progress.
- Whenever possible, look for quick, easy tests.
- Before you run a test, define how you will measure.



tiny.cc/M-systems-template



Next Up: You have now worked your way through the ABCS of innovation. You are excited, you want to share the good news, and perhaps want to launch a big new innovation initiative in your organization. Stop! The next chapter looks at how you can pull everything together and implement these ideas in a way that will bring lasting change.

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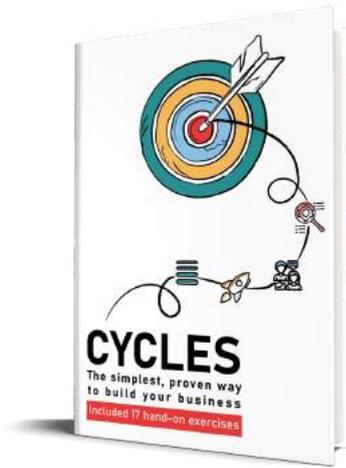
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Chapters: Lead Author

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

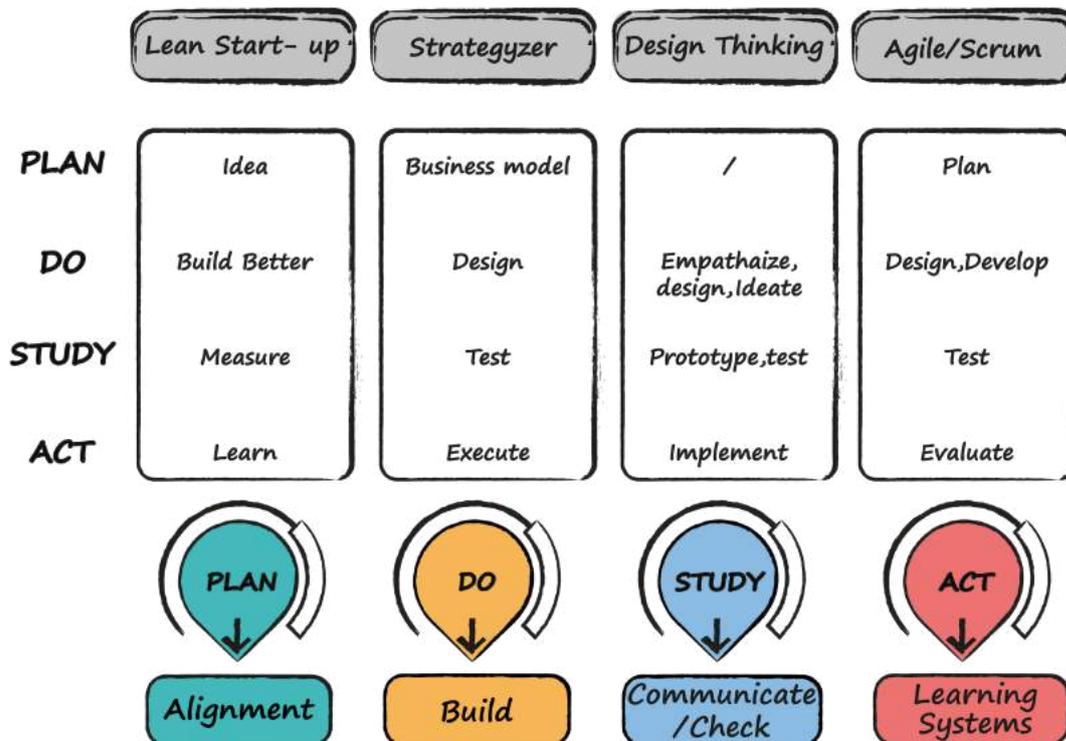
Standing on the shoulders of giants...

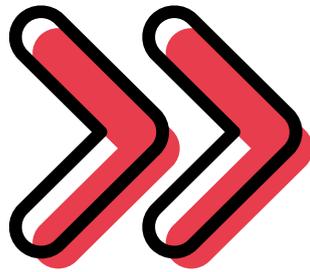
Many of the leading methods- lean start up, scrum, agile are built around the ideas of PDSA (Plan, do , study, act)

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.

All the leading methods are Plan, Do, Study, Act and Cycles brings it all together





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