

The Road [to Reinvention] Is Calling

Josh Linkner

We live in a time of brutal competition. Fickle consumer trends, friction-free markets, and political unrest threaten the existence of many organizations.

Nearly every industry is in the midst of massive upheaval, with the old stalwarts falling quickly to the new breed of innovators. Dizzying speed, exponential complexity, and mind-numbing technology advances exacerbate the challenges we face as leaders.

With economic threats like these racing toward you, how do you react? Do you stand frozen in place with fear and anxiety? Or do you leap into action, finding a new and better way forward? Renegade leaders choose to upset the status quo long before there's a need to do so. Instead of losing ground, these innovators are accomplishing dramatic growth and spurring tremendous economic gain.

Companies, communities, and individuals fall for many reasons, but one of the most common—and easily avoidable—is the failure to reinvent.

Those who feel the most secure in the status quo are in fact the most vulnerable. Many organizations, once great, wither and die as a direct result of their deep entrenchment in the past. They discover too late that success isn't about cracking the code once and then enjoying the spoils forever. Instead, it's a moving target that we have to hit again and again. The disruption of ongoing innovation eventually topples any organization that fails to keep moving—to reinvent.

The good news about reinvention is that you don't need magic, genius, good looks, or vaults of cash to transform your organization or career. The required elements are open-mindedness, courage, and imagination. Unleashing your imagination is no longer optional. It will, in fact, become the lifeblood of your success. It's time to embrace your role as chief disruption officer, no matter where you sit on the organization chart. Your company and your career depend on it.

Myth: Achievement occurs through a gigantic epiphany or an all-at-once breakthrough.

Fact: Most things worth accomplishing involve a persistent stream of small advances that lead to something transformational over time.

Even after making a first leap toward innovative change, many of us get discouraged when we can't reach our goals at Internet speed. We fail to understand that reinvention isn't an event; it's a lifelong process.

The process of creative breakthroughs is marked by the same pattern, one that is so often completely misunderstood. Sure, there are bursting moments of creative insight, but the research shows that most creative breakthroughs come by chipping away at a problem.

Too often, people use the words reinvention and turnaround interchangeably. In fact, these are radically different concepts. Turnarounds are generally reactionary, desperate responses to crushing challenges. Much like a drowning swimmer who will scratch and claw at anything in order to live another day, the goal in a turnaround is simply short-term survival.

	Turnaround	Reinvention
Timing	After something devastating happens to the company, community, or individual (reactive)	Ideally when a company or person is thriving (proactive)
Characterization	Digging out of a hole, often through spreadsheet-based cost cutting, layoffs, and control by executives or outside consultants	Doubling down on innovation, nurturing a creative culture, letting go of past success and architecting for the future
Outcomes	Destroys morale and is largely ineffective	Breathes new life, opens new possibilities, drives sustainable growth

The Eight Principles That Define the Reinvention Ethos

- 1. Let go of the past.** The past is a great teacher, but it's a horrible master. Living in the clutches of the past can shackle your imagination and relegate you to thinking small. Imagine carrying around a backpack full of rocks, each representing some past injustice or setback. You'll never be able to play your best game unless you release the burden of the past and liberate yourself from its heavy load.
- 2. Encourage courage.** You'll never instill the spirit of reinvention in your team by making people afraid to express their ideas. Instead, encourage the people you work with to be bold—confident in their ability to innovate and courageous in their vision. Your whole organization will benefit from their bravery.
- 3. Embrace failure.** “Every bull’s eye is the result of 100 misses,” the old saying goes. Yet we harshly condemn setbacks or any signal that doesn’t indicate immediate success. Failure in fact is an essential part of the discovery process. As a leader, it’s critical that you teach your team to consider mistakes and missteps a natural part of the pathway toward reinvention.
- 4. Do the opposite.** Throughout time, some of the biggest breakthroughs have come from innovators implementing a contrarian approach. Leaders who have experienced the pinnacles

of success have dared to zig while everyone else zags. Doing the opposite—upending expectations, pushing through boundaries, running toward the thing everyone else is running from—is critical to stand out from the crowd.

5. Imagine the possibilities. Disruptive thinking takes a certain amount of faith. You have to be willing to explore the unknown and imagine outcomes you've never experienced before. The human brain is hardwired for imagination; in fact, our ability to project possibilities is part of our survival system. From our understanding of the workings of the universe to our knowledge of the microbes on our skin, almost every human advancement began as someone's wild dream. If we waited to see it first, we'd never have civil rights, advanced manufacturing, lifesaving medical treatments, or wireless Internet. Reinvention is born in the imagination. We have to unshackle ourselves from the bland realities of the present in order to imagine, and then create, a profoundly different future.

6. Put yourself out of business. The best leaders today realize that their job is to put their own companies out of business. They know that ongoing, far-reaching reinvention—from products and services to production and technology—is mandatory for survival. Top-tier companies constantly examine their offerings and the way they do business to find new approaches with greater impact. They are obsessed with finding a better way to do their work and are on a relentless hunt for outdated systems, processes, communication, and frameworks. Sometimes

this philosophy yields a series of strong, incremental improvements that collectively move the needle. At other times, the gains from this approach are transformational.

7. Reject limits. The world is filled with naysayers, but if we accept the limits of their no-can-do thinking, progress as a society stops. Nearly every advance in civilization was met with an ice-cold reception. Thankfully, the best leaders have the courage to advance their causes despite the critics.

8. Aim beyond. Whether you are launching a product, opening a fashion boutique, seeking a job, or rebuilding a broken community, your focal point must be ahead of you. You need to move forward anticipating trends and changes in the competitive landscape. A solution that is spot-on in the near term may completely miss when it's time to go live, even if it's only a few months away.

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Cannibalize Your Own Product

“We can’t do that. We can’t cannibalize our core business!”

We’ve all heard this kind of conventional thinking. Oriented in a mind-set that sees limitations in every direction, where every marketplace, technological sphere, or other essential resource is finite, the folks who cling to the cannibalization myth can’t possibly imagine creating some wholly new success. In their version of the world, survival is the only goal; forget about growing and thriving.

In a free market economy, innovation wins. Isn’t replacing past successes with new ones the very nature of progress? Shouldn’t we all be gunning hard to drive the next evolution of our industry or marketplace instead of using a fear of “cannibalization” as an excuse to slam the brakes on exploration?

Refusing to embrace new products or processes because they might prove to be more effective than existing ones is an illogical exercise in magical thinking. It assumes that we can prevent progress, that we wield some paranormal power to control innovation throughout our marketplace. We can’t; we don’t. Regardless of our industry, and no matter how powerful our organization may be, we cannot prevent disruption. Those who focus all of their energy

on simply holding on to what they have will never be able to reach out for more. By clinging to the past, they are choosing to become obsolete.

In today's highly competitive world, we must sprint toward cannibalization instead of trying to hide from it.

You must aim to be better than the competition's product and your own previous offering by a factor of ten.

To hit that level of superiority, you'll need to do something so compelling, so remarkable, and so brash that it can't be ignored. That's the only way to disrupt the status quo. And you can't achieve 10X factor success without being willing to unseat even your most highly prized product or service and usher in a new superstar to take its place.

Is your sales pitch 10X better than your competitors'? Is your theater performance 10X stronger than the others auditioning for the same part? Is the software code you just wrote 10X better than last year's version? If you want to remove chance and luck from the reinvention of your organization, explore every option, and then focus on the 10X factor. Even if you hit an unexpected speed bump, your determination to go deep in exploration and innovation will give you the momentum you need to win.

Retool Your Operations

Operational innovation is a term, coined by Boston-based management consultant Michael Hammer, which refers to the concept of completely overhauling the way a company does business in an effort to create a significant competitive advantage. It in essence rewrites the rules of the game.

Operational innovation works especially well in businesses that are based on commodities such as insurance, mortgages, banking, and office supplies. If you are struggling to innovate the product or service you offer, operational innovation can be your playground for creative expression.

To tinker with your own operational innovation try model inversion. Follow this basic formula:

Instead of _____ [the traditional approach, what the rest of the industry does, what you've been doing to date], let's flip the model and do this: _____ [often the polar opposite].

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Create Vivid Experiences

The experience you create for customers is a key area for your business to implement reinvention. If your product or service is unchangeable and you've already optimized the way you do business, the experience is another powerful playground for creativity and reinvention. While others are vying for a fancier product package, you can compete in an area that will have dramatic impact on your business.

The Five Senses Test

A good starting point is to experience your offering from your customer's perspective—not just the product or service itself but every touch point surrounding it.

I highly recommend a five-senses experience audit. Take a look at each possible customer experience and deeply examine the sensory experience you deliver. In the karate example, there are a number of touch points that must be explored: the initial customer inquiry phone call, the sign-up meeting, the first lesson, the first group lesson, the breaks, the ongoing correspondence, the billing process, the after-workout experience, the website, the equipment ordered, and more. Once you establish a similar list of touch points for your own business, do a compare-and-contrast exercise illuminating the differences between your current state and ideal future state.

Make ‘Em Feel

Business leaders are often so busy managing resources or reducing costs that they forget about what matters most: delivering value to paying customers. If you're out to build a sustainable organization that gains momentum by delighting customers, you need to go beyond the functional specifics of your product or service and use experiences to create positive feelings. With most of the competitive advantages of the past already commoditized, customer experience is an area that remains largely uncharted and ready for innovation. Only 26 percent of companies have a well-developed strategy in place for improving customer experience, presenting an obvious opportunity to leave 74 percent of your competition in the dust.¹⁴ Make your customers feel your brand, and you'll be on the path to leapfrogging the competition while driving the bottom line.

Think about your own organization and contemplate every experiential element that isn't making your customers say, "Wow." Is it the way you require them to navigate through your automatic messaging system with countless menus when they call? The outdated paperwork you require customers to complete? The dimly lit parking lot? Take a single touch point and reinvent it with purpose.

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Tell a Memorable Story

Even if you're not a specialist in marketing and communication, there is an easy approach you can follow to reinvent your communication efforts. These powerful principles apply to any form of communication (e.g., written, spoken, online, social media) and for any audience (e.g., internal team, customers, vendors, investors, media). If you follow these six high-impact principles, you'll be well on your way to driving positive change:

- 1. Keep it simple.** Translate a concept into a simpler format. Ditch the jargon; focus on clarity.
- 2. Make it clear.** Make sure that you expunge vagueness, ambiguity, and imprecision, leaving behind a crystal-clear and easy-to-follow communication.
- 3. Speak to your audience, not yourself.** Make sure you speak in a language that your audience understands, and realize that they don't have the same context and point of references you do. Start from the beginning and make sure every word will make sense to them, not just you.
- 4. Keep it brief.**
- 5. Make it memorable.** People will remember stories and feelings far more than details and figures.
- 6. Activate with action.** Start with the end goal in mind. Lead your audience down a deliberate path with a specific action in mind, and make sure that next step is completely apparent.

Become a Firebrand

We all come across two types of companies (and individuals) in our lives. First are those who blend in with the others, swimming in mediocrity. They don't like to stand out, prefer the safety of the masses, and eke out a profit (or a living). Second are those that dare to stand out and have the courage to tell their story differently.

It's time to make your brand a firebrand. A firebrand is described as "(1) a piece of burning wood or other material and (2) a person who kindles strife or encourages unrest; an agitator; trouble-maker." 9 I can't think of a more important recipe for success in today's turbulent times. The ones who make history are burning with passion and creativity. They disrupt, cajole, and thumb their noses at tradition.

You can't help notice a blazing fire, and you can't help notice a white-hot firebrand. Nobody remembers the also-rans. If you want to drive your company or yourself to new heights, it's time to ignite your firebrand: do something so different that it can't be ignored.

1. Make one point at a time. Pick one thing and really own it. Make a single point in a compelling way instead of trying to jam in every feature and benefit.

2. **Use surprising, uncommon language.** Use words and phrases that others do not, and make sure that any sentence or claim can only be made by you.
3. **Dumb it down.** Avoid technospeak and industry jargon. Simplicity wins.
4. **Connect at an emotional level.** Work to create an emotionally charged communication with your customer and speak to his or her needs and desires.
5. **Use humor to reinforce and exaggerate.**
6. **Less beats more.** Use fewer words, make fewer points, and eradicate clutter.
7. **Make sure it's aspirin, not vitamins.** Selling vitamins is roughly ten times more difficult than selling aspirin since you are marketing an optional product. Vitamin purchases lack urgency, are frequently price sensitive, and offer customers the viable alternative of doing absolutely nothing.

“No matter what your circumstances ... it is never too late to reinvent yourself.”

Transform Your Career

We've covered many approaches to reinventing your organization; now it's time to focus on you. No matter how stuck you may feel, there is almost always a way to discover new possibilities. From those who were homeless to those living with debilitating diseases, many of the most successful individuals came from less-than-ideal circumstances. You may be in a tough spot or, like millions of others, you may be doing just fine but feel unfulfilled professionally. In the same way that it's your responsibility as a leader to help your company innovate before it's too late, the same logic applies to your own career. Even if you've enjoyed success to date, your calling is much bigger than being a one-hit wonder. You are here for a reason, and it isn't to hide in a cubicle forever. Your real job is to leverage your strengths and creativity in order to realize your full potential. It's time to reinvent your career, and put the you of six months ago out of business. It's time for You, Version 2.0.

No matter what your circumstances, age, upbringing, education level, geographic location, or previous career path, it is never too late to reinvent yourself. Just like organizational transformation, personal reinvention can be achieved by taking a systematic approach with your career.

1. Set a clear vision. You should map out your desired end state with incredible detail. A vision board will be a powerful weapon to keep you focused and fight back adversity along the way.

2. Do a gap assessment. As you build your reinvention plan, identify the soft spots. What areas do you need to change, improve, or supplement in order to achieve your desired outcome? Your gap assessment should list all the differences from your starting point to your destination, so it ends up becoming a critical path to-do list as you pursue your plan.

3. Identify costs and sacrifices. All things worth doing require sacrifice and commitment. Make sure you know these parameters going in.

4. Find mentors. Getting inspired by others, through a connection with a mentor or two, can be the difference maker in your reinvention efforts. Mentors can help steer you in the right direction, hold you accountable, and offer insight into the new arena you crave. While it may feel intimidating to ask, successful people are often willing to give back and really enjoy the process of helping others.

5. Conduct a premortem. A postmortem is an analysis or discussion of an event after it is over; a premortem is doing the same thing before the event.⁴ From your current jumping-off point, think about all the ways your reinvention could fall off the tracks. Rather than waiting until the end, do this examination up front and use the insights as guardrails throughout your transformation.

6. Build accountability markers. Putting a system of penalties and rewards in place will boost your ability to achieve. For optimal results, have someone else help hold you accountable. You may be able to rationalize behaviors to yourself, but having someone else track your steps and administer rewards and penalties will keep you moving ahead. This is the same reason athletes collaborate with a coach or workout buddy, using external accountability to drive performance.

7. Track, measure, refine. Tracking weekly performance in specific areas will allow you to keep yourself focused and on track. Keep a close eye on your key metrics, and use this information to refine and adapt your plan along the way.

Explore the Many Flavors of Reinvention

The Miles Davis: Davis's brand of reinvention kept his core industry, career, and skill set consistent. In other words, he didn't leave the trumpet to become a carpenter or auto mechanic.

In his type of reinvention, Davis maintained his same primary career choice (musician, composer, trumpet player), but reinvented his work regularly rather than becoming stagnant.

The Butterfly: We all learned by second grade that caterpillars are born to do more than creep. They start out in one state and naturally progress to a more advanced condition. You can think of this as the ultimate personal and career reinvention that is readily accessible. A law clerk

becomes a lawyer and then becomes a judge. A dancer becomes a singer and then becomes an actor and finally a director. A software engineer becomes a team leader, then the chief information officer, and eventually writes her own code and launches a start-up.

The Bill Gates: After stepping down from his position at Microsoft, Gates brought his same intensity and drive to the world of philanthropy by recruiting Warren Buffett and dozens of other billionaires to join the Giving Pledge, a commitment to give at least half of their wealth to charity at or before their death. In addition to raising the pool of available capital, he's managing charitable giving with the same attention to detail he used to manage Microsoft. Because of the incredible impact Gates has made (and continues to make) on the world, I've named this type of reinvention the Bill Gates: changing to a completely different career with the specific goal of helping the world instead of enriching your bank account.

The Curve Jump: Sometimes, a straight and logical path just won't carry the day. Many of the world's biggest success stories are of those who leaped from one line of work to a radically different field in order to seize enormous prosperity.

The Passion Leap: When you are on fire with passion and excitement, you'll be more creative and give more of yourself to your work. As you evaluate new opportunities, think about the

areas of life that fuel your energy the most. If you pursue what you love, the challenges will feel smaller and the upside exponentially greater.

The Adventure: Think of the adventure flavor of reinvention as a siren song calling you into the wild. Rather than tapping into your inner child, you must harness your inner Louis and Clark. Do you want to tell your grandkids about your experiences sitting at the same office for thirty years, or do you want to share stories of daring exploration?

Forge Your Legacy

As you develop your overall reinvention plan, focusing on yourself can be the most challenging yet rewarding effort of all. Becoming a better person and a stronger leader will drive greater financial success, and, more important, it will fill you with a much deeper and lasting sense of accomplishment. We've studied how to rebuild your company; now it's time to rebuild your character. The two are not mutually exclusive competing forces, but rather symbiotic in achieving sustainable success. Interestingly enough, the more you help the world, the more commercial success you'll likely gain. Becoming a more caring, giving, purposeful person will actually drive the economic gain you seek. It's an and, not an or.

Be → Do → Have

Many of us chase success, only to find it to be an elusive tease. We say to ourselves if “I could HAVE what I want [money, fame, power, clothes, spouse, car, house], then I could DO the things I want, which would allow me to BE who I truly am.”

We think have → do → be. Unfortunately, that’s backward.

When you study the most successful and happy people, they run the reverse model. They first focus on who they are (philosophy, character, values) and are uncompromising on BEING true to those beliefs. This allows them to DO the things they want. Because they are authentic and follow their destiny, they end up HAVING what they need. The HAVING is simply a by-product of first BEING, and then DOING.

If you really want to maximize your true potential, turn the conventional approach upside down. BE true to your core beliefs, DO the things you care about, and the HAVE will take care of itself.

When you think about doing, forget about what you think you ought to do. Instead, follow a path that is both inspired and inspiring. Step away from what you perceive as safe since you have only so many years to make your mark. Start by asking yourself these seven questions:

1. What do you love to do the most?
2. What gives you the most satisfaction and joy?
3. When do you feel like you are making the biggest impact?
4. What activities most energize you?
5. What would you do if there was no possibility you could fail?
6. What are you doing when you lose track of time?
7. If you could be remembered for one thing, what would it be?

If you've identified a path that is different from your current gig, it's time to seriously consider pursuing your true calling instead. If you don't, who will?

As for the have, it will take care of itself. If you follow your passion and purpose, you'll get all the stuff you need. By focusing on being the person you are meant to be and doing what you are meant to do, the having will end up being a whole lot less important anyway.

How You Want to Be Remembered?

Having a deep connection to the ultimate legacy you want to leave behind is the most powerful guidepost you can have. In the same way your company has its mission statement posted in the lobby, it's important that you develop your own personal statement to help you make the best decisions throughout your journey. As a reference, here's mine:

To seize my full potential while making the biggest possible impact in the world. To challenge myself and others to achieve at the highest levels and to harness the gift of creativity that we all share. To leave everyone and everything I touch better than I found it.

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Craft Your Plan Z

Plan Z ... Chances are your parents instructed you to always have Plan B. We all are familiar with this concept — a fallback plan in the event things go very wrong. The notion is so widespread that it's even the name of a morning-after contraceptive pill.

Most people first focus on their careers, which are fairly risk-averse to begin with. Next, they spend time carefully plotting out their Plan B so they have a safety net in the event of a fall from grace. While it's practical to wear both a belt and suspenders, I think we're missing something far more important ... a Plan Z.

The Z can stand for zoom, zap or zigzag. It is the opposite of a Plan B; it is the dream plan. The plan that you had in mind before you learned all the things that could go wrong. The plan that you'd pursue if you knew you couldn't fail.

Plan Z is your road map for things going incredibly right instead of horribly wrong. It is the intersection of your passion, heart and soul. It's your calling. It's what you're meant to do. No, it doesn't stand for Zombie. That's what Plan B is for.

Reflect for a moment on what you would do if you had \$250 million in the bank but weren't allowed to retire. Would you still suck up to your overbearing boss? Would you hold your best thinking back for fear of looking foolish? Would you write cover-your-behind memos? Or would you pursue your art?

Since life often works in reverse order, you're much more likely to wind up with the success you seek by following your dreams instead of neutering them. The history books aren't written about middle managers who withheld their creativity in order to have a false sense of security.

What have you always wanted to do? How could you make your biggest impact on the world? How do you want your grandkids to remember you? These are the guideposts of your real plan, not how many sick days your employer offers.

If you are going to build an alternative plan, ditch the Plan B and go all-in on Plan Z. The very act of crafting it will be both inspiring and liberating, and each step toward it will be cathartic. Just think how the world would be if we all sprinted toward Plan Z instead of its puny counterpart. Zoom. Zoom. Zoom. You'll be zelirious with joy and feel absolutely zensational.

The Road Ahead

It's your choice. Regardless of the circumstances that have led you to this point in your life, you have a decision to make. Proactive reinvention is a route that leads to success in all areas of life if you firmly commit to embracing it. You are the only one who can make that choice. Too often, we feel that life happens to us, as if we are simply a passenger along for the ride. This is your time to slide over into the driver's seat and speed toward the enormous opportunities that lie ahead. Despite the obstacles, both real and perceived, that may be holding you back, it's time to shed your barriers in the same way a snake sheds its skin.

The decision is yours: disrupt or be disrupted.

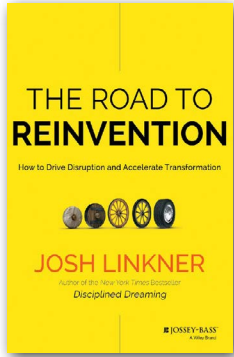
While the times may be challenging, we're living in a world of endless possibility. You get to write the script of your own screenplay, paint your own masterpiece. Take personal responsibility for the outcomes you desire and then proceed with passion and conviction. Now is the time to choose:

- New ideas over old ones
- Abundance over scarcity
- Fresh thinking over conventional wisdom
- Innovation over stagnation
- Growth over protection
- Exploration over fear
- Your dream over someone else's

Your full potential awaits. Retool. Reimagine. Rework. Rebuild. Recreate. Reestablish. Relaunch. Rekindle. Renew. Rejoice.

Reinvent. 

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Josh Linkner is a successful tech entrepreneur, venture capitalist and keynote speaker. Linkner is CEO and managing partner of Detroit Venture Partners and author of two NY Times Bestsellers, *Disciplined Dreaming: A Proven System to Drive Breakthrough Creativity* and his most recent work *The Road To Reinvention: How To Drive Disruption and Accelerate Transformation*. He is a regular columnist for *Forbes*, *The Detroit Free Press*, and *Inc.* Magazine. He is playing a key role in the reinvention of his hometown of Detroit, Michigan. And he also plays a mean jazz guitar. For his full biography check out joshlinkner.com. Follow him on Twitter [@joshlinkner](https://twitter.com/joshlinkner).

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