



A. J. CHOPRA

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**MANAGING**  
*the People Side of*  
**INNOVATION**

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8 Rules for Engaging  
Minds and Hearts



KUMARIAN PRESS

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# **MANAGING** *the people side of* **INNOVATION**

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MINDS AND HEARTS

A. J. CHOPRA



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PRESS

*Managing the People Side of Innovation: 8 Rules for Engaging Minds and Hearts*

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**MANAGING**  
*the people side of*  
**INNOVATION**

**TO  
MY MOTHER**

## **AUTHOR'S NOTE**

The stories in this book are all based on things I've seen in my work. But names and in many cases the settings and other details are made up to protect the identities of the individuals and organizations involved.

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## ■ Introduction

*innovate*: to introduce something new;  
make changes in anything established.

### Managing Innovation: Why You Need to Be Good at It

Look at any organization's mission or vision statement, or at any big message from its president to its people. Odds are you won't see one that doesn't mention innovation (or the thing that drives it: change). Not surprising, given the pressure on all organizations — public and private, business and non-profit — to deliver “new and improved” products and services, and to deliver them faster and cheaper than the competition.

This pressure on your organization makes innovation a part of your job in two ways, one more obvious than the other.

It's easy to see that it's become part of your job when you have to spend time managing or being part of an effort to design and deliver a new product, or to cut costs, or to “reengineer” the way something is done.

What's not so obvious is that the kind of performance expected from the organization is also expected from *you*. You and your unit or team are expected to deliver better “goods and services” tomorrow than you did yesterday, and to do it more cost effectively. You are expected to do these things not just once but continuously, in an ongoing way. The expectation may not be stated explicitly, but it's

there nevertheless. Your job is a business in microcosm, and you have to run it innovatively.

## **The Focus of This Book: What It's Not, What It Is**

Managing innovation means getting people (including yourself) to look for better ways of doing things. And getting them to do a good job of implementing these “better” ideas, whether their own or those of others.

You can manage innovation by doing things at one or both of two levels, the *organizational* and the *operational*.

### **The organizational level (what this book is *not* about)**

Here you are concerned with the way people think about and do things *in general*. The things you do at this level are aimed either at creating a culture that is innovation friendly, or at redirecting people's creative energies when the goals or the circumstances of the organization change.

When competition was introduced in the U.S. telephone industry the people at AT&T had to change their way of thinking from one that was O.K. for a technology driven company, to the very different one needed for one that was market driven. Senior managers in some of the companies I've worked with had to figure out how to change the culture from one that placed a premium on maintaining business methods and not rocking the boat, to one that encouraged people to try new things and make a few waves.

Managing innovation at this level means tinkering with a company's systems and structures. Is the way people's performance is evaluated and rewarded consistent with the way you want them to think and act? Does the organization chart need to be redrawn to make it easier for people to work in new ways? Do you need to do something dramatic — like fire a few senior members of the old guard — to drive home the need for people to let go

of old ways of doing things?

Doing things at this level is what's talked about in most books and videos and workshops on innovation, and it's not hard to find a few good ones. So I won't be talking about these things in this book. I'll focus instead on what you can do at the other level.

## **The operational level (what it is about)**

At this level you are not concerned with innovation in general but with *making a specific one happen*. Managing innovation, here, means getting the resources needed to pursue a new idea, and motivating people to put in the effort required to implement it. Neither of these is an easy task.

Putting something new in place almost always requires more effort than doing a routine job. Things rarely go as expected, so they have to be re-worked. It's easy to underestimate how much time and effort you'll need to get the job done. Whatever your estimate you aren't likely to get all the resources you want. The same economic forces that push organizations to innovate also push them to run lean. In every case I know of, the people who've had to make an innovation happen have been stretched.

People usually have to find time for their innovation projects while still taking care of their regular jobs. The number of days in a week doesn't change to accommodate them.

Yes, people are sometimes assigned to a project full-time, but this doesn't exempt them from long hours. If you've ever managed one of these projects you know they tend to be under-staffed. They also have a high profile in the organization, which is a very mixed blessing. Nice for the egos of the people involved in it, especially at the beginning. Top management tells them how important their task is, how they are holding a piece of the organization's fate in their hands. And not to worry, they'll be given the time and resources they need to do it right. But soon after the project starts the pressure begins to build to deliver results quickly. People find that the pace at which they have to work and the hours they have to put in are similar to those needed to start a new business on a tight budget, the difference

is they don't own any stock in the project.

Managing innovation at the operational level is a tough job. To do it successfully you have to create enthusiasm for the venture in several sets of people. Your own boss and subordinates, of course. But also people in other functions and departments, mostly your peers, sometimes people above and below them as well. This is because implementing something new in one area usually makes waves for and requires help from others. In this sense new ideas don't show much respect for organization charts.

Getting and motivating people to do what it takes to make an innovation happen is a tough job no matter where you work. Sure, it's easier to get permission to try new things in a place where the culture is innovation friendly than in one in which it is not. But in the former there are also likely to be more innovation projects going on, making it harder to get people to find time for yours.

## **What the Naturals Know How to Do**

There are some people who have a knack for getting new ideas implemented, regardless of the kind of organization they're in. Of the more than ten thousand managers I've worked with, I'd say less than one in twenty have this knack. What do they know that the others don't?

They know how to tap sources of motivation that the others either don't know about or don't know how to tap. They understand that you can get to people's hearts through their minds. That what you do with people's ideas has a big impact on their motivation to help you do things. That if you engage people's minds in the right way you create goodwill toward you and toward your plans for making an innovation happen.

Most people know that you can increase others' commitment to a plan or decision by including their ideas in it. But they don't know how to make people their partners in thinking in a way that's productive and time effective. The one in twenty managers I'm talking about know how to do this. They also know how to do it in a way that enables them to gain far more commitment to a plan or decision

than you get if all you do is give people a piece of ownership in it.

How these managers tap these sources of motivation is one of the best kept secrets around. No, they don't belong to some guild that jealously guards its know-how. How they do it is something most of them aren't clear about either. They are naturals. Which doesn't mean that they have a special ability that you and I don't have. It just means that they acquired their know-how largely unconsciously, through a process similar to the one we all use as kids to learn our native tongues. We can learn to speak them and even do that well, without being aware of the rules of grammar and syntax that we employ.

## **Anything they can do, you can do too**

The “rules of engagement” described in this book are based on observations of what the “naturals” do. Using them will make you a more effective manager of innovation at the operational level. It will help you to get resources and motivate people to do the work needed to make specific innovations happen. It won't guarantee that you will be successful in doing these things in every situation, or with every person in it. But it will significantly raise your batting average.

If you are already a “natural,” this book will increase your awareness of what you do and how you do it. And that will help you to do it more fully and consistently.

Here's how I learned about the “rules” described in this book.

## **The Surprising Lessons of Creativity Research — For Motivating People**

I learned about the rules in a roundabout way. I studied physics and engineering and became the manager of product development for a company that made semiconductor devices. I left because I wanted to work for myself. I didn't have any set ideas about the kind of business I wanted to be in, as long as it was interesting. I happened to run into some people who were struggling to get off the

ground a company based on what they had learned from their study of the creative process.

Their down to earth approach to the subject appealed to me. They recorded discussions of people trying to think of new ways to solve tough business problems. They then studied the tapes to see whether the people who had the most successful discussions thought about their problems differently than the others, who were equally expert in their fields. When they spotted what looked like a productive thinking habit they experimented with it to see if it consistently led to good results. If it did, they added it to their bag of tools. If not, they studied more tapes.

I liked this reliance on first-hand observation rather than on theories about the creative process. I also liked the focus on creativity as displayed not by Mozart or Picasso or Einstein, but by people like you and me thinking about everyday situations that required innovation. After working with them on a few projects I became a partner in the business.\*

It took me a while to see the motivational impact of the “thinking tools” I was using in my work. I didn’t get into the business because I was interested in the art and craft of motivating people. I was excited by the thought that you could put a handle on something as elusive as the creative process. I thought the main barrier to innovation was people’s inability to think of good ideas, especially when pressured by time or other things. I didn’t see that more often than not the problem was not a lack of ideas, but a failure to get others to buy into them.

And so I thought the sole purpose of the thinking habits we promoted was to help customers to tap the creative side of their minds. The measure of the effectiveness of our methods was the quality and quantity of the ideas they helped someone to produce, consistently and on demand. My attention was so focussed on this measure that I

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\* My partners were William J.J.Gordon, George M. Prince, and Cavas M. Gobhai. Bill developed the earliest version of the problem-solving process known as “synectics.” That was also the name of the company that Bill and George started and that I had just joined.

didn't see that the kind of thinking that helped an individual to produce fresh ideas did something else as well *when two or more people did that kind of thinking together. And this was that it increased their motivation to help each other get things done. It also eliminated a lot of friction from their discussions.* But I had to be hit on the head several times with these facts before they grabbed my attention.

The first hint was provided by the marketing manager of a division of a company that was one of our first customers. Ann could extract something useful out of any old idea you gave her, no matter how absurd or dumb sounding. Naturally we studied tapes of her discussions to see how she did it. We also talked to her subordinates to see if they knew. They didn't, but they talked about how much they liked working for her. So, I thought, she's good with people too. I didn't think this had anything to do with what she did with their ideas.

I became convinced the two things were connected only after I repeatedly saw things like this.

## THE SITUATION

I run a meeting for the manager of a manufacturing plant that is part of the European division of an American company. The plant makes protective coatings and paints, such as the ones used on ships to prevent corrosion and the formation of barnacles. The purpose of the meeting is to develop a plan for making the plant more profitable.

The people at the meeting are Paul, the plant manager, four members of his staff, six non-plant people, and me. Three of the six are scientists from the company's technology center in the U.S. The other three are marketing people from the European division's head office.

We meet for dinner the night before the meeting. Keith, one of the three scientists, makes it clear that though he is pleased to have been invited to the meeting and hopes

to contribute some ideas that will help Paul and his team, he will not be able to give them more time anytime soon after this meeting. Maybe a day for a follow-up meeting in six months or so, but even that is not something they should count on. He has a lot of projects assigned to him, it's a struggle to find time for them all.

The other five non-plant people are quick to add that their situations are similar. They too will find it hard to give Paul more time than these few days.

In my pre-meeting discussions with Paul I told him that as the principal "owner" of the agenda he would have, at the end of the session, the final say over which of the ideas we developed would go into his action plan. But during the meeting he would have to be more than just an idea judge. To get the most out of people's ideas he would have to help them mold and modify their ideas to meet his requirements.

Paul did this in the session. He did an especially good job of extracting actionable ideas from the thoughts of the non-plant people who knew the least about the details of his plant's operation. And so something happened on the second day that pleased Paul even more than the useful ideas he was getting.

## THE PLEASANT SURPRISE

We had spent the first day developing ideas for reducing the plant's operating costs. It's just before noon on the second day. We've been talking about products the plant could make that might be more profitable than the ones it is now making. We have a list of five candidates that appeal to everyone, including three that none of them has thought of before.

I ask Paul to outline the next steps that would need to be taken to pursue these ideas after the meeting, if they become part of the plan.



The thing that pleases Paul happens when he talks about what would need to be done with one of the three new ideas.

“We would want to talk to some customers,” he says, “to get their reactions to the idea. And we would need to do some technical work to see if the product can be made the way we are thinking it can be made.” He says that the latter is not something that could be done at the plant — it’s work best done at the company’s technology center in the U.S.

“If, at the end of the meeting, we decide that this is one of the ideas we should pursue,” he says, “then I will submit a work request to Len.”

Len is the director of the technology center.

“If you do that,” says Keith, “it’ll be six months at least before any work gets done on it. There are a lot of requests backed up on Len’s desk, and this one will have to take its place in line. But Bill and I could do some unofficial work on it right away, don’t you think Bill?”

“Well, that’s right,” says Bill, another of the scientists. “It’s mostly a question of finding some technician time. It won’t take you and me long to design the experiments we’d want them to run.”

Paul gives me a quick look before he turns to Bill and Keith.

“That would be appreciated very much,” he says.

Paul’s look says to me that he’s aware this is a big shift in the position Keith took — and others took with him — before the meeting. Which was: don’t count on me to give you any more time after we’re done here. Paul also noticed that Bill went along with Keith’s shift. It becomes clear the next morning that the other four non-plant people have also changed their stance.

The last thing we do before the meeting ends is to outline a plan of action that includes a timetable and a listing of who is going to do what. Every one of the six non-plant people volunteers to do some of the work needed to implement the plan. The three people from the technology center pull out their calenders and I list on the flip-chart dates on which one or more of them are scheduled to be in Europe on other business. When Paul suggests it they all agree that it would be a good idea for the whole group to meet again in two months to