



BOOK SUMMARY

GOING ON OFFENSE

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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

How do you transform a typical organization into one that is *perpetually* agile, innovative, fast-paced, and filled with heightened expectations and intensity? The potential for transformation is enormous. What could you accomplish if you applied the methods used by the most innovative companies? Those with a *winning mindset* that fuels constant experimentation across the entire organization, from top to bottom. These kinds of firms have key ingredients that allow them to succeed.

Going on Offense: A Leader's Playbook for Perpetual Innovation provides practical, actionable advice you can apply within your organization. It shows how to develop and maintain the mindset necessary to continuously adapt to new environments and explore new territories, reducing the need for drastic change. Author Behnam Tabrizi leverages in-depth research from leading companies and their leaders to share strategies that can elevate your organization to similar levels of success. Whether you're a frontline employee, a middle manager, an executive, or a CEO, this book aims to highlight the key traits companies need and offers practical steps for you and your team to reach your full potential.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The challenge that stops large organizations from being innovative.
- How a spirit of generosity lays the foundation for perpetual agility.
- The role ferocity plays in cultivating a start-up mindset.
- How companies can act courageously to make sustained change.

Seeing the Challenge

Many leaders dismiss the idea that large organizations can become constantly innovative firms as a myth. Even tech companies that were once agile in the 2000s, like Facebook and Google, are now just shadows of their innovative selves. Nokia held a major share of the mobile phone market before Apple entered in 2007. However, its dominance ended sharply due to a narrow focus on operational metrics, a failure to foster cultural change, and a lack of courage to develop products customers would love. Now, recent advances in artificial intelligence are bringing yet another disruption to many markets. Agile innovation is becoming more essential than ever—and increasingly out of reach for complacent giants.

Becoming an agile innovator requires constantly seeking ways to reimagine and implement new processes, partnerships, products, markets, and services, while also enhancing existing ones. Innovation is vital for success in our increasingly dynamic and disruptive markets. Agility is essential for quickly responding to opportunities and threats. Being agile begins with a mindset and is a core part of a culture that reacts swiftly to change.



The obstacles are daunting, and human nature is the primary barrier to change. First, people are conditioned to be dependent. In the workplace, we're comfortable ceding our power to the bureaucratic hierarchy, which allows us to settle into predictable and stable routines, and tasks.

Second, it's human nature to be self-interested and proud. Most managers in large companies have a certain level of this, which leads them to prefer a command-and-control style to protect their domains.

Third, people tend to commit themselves and resist change when they have invested significant resources in a project or strategic direction. They persist even when abandoning that course of action could ultimately benefit them financially.

Ultimately, the kind of change that can break through the inertia of tradition requires tremendous resolve. Agility and innovation demand a level of alertness and flexibility that requires significant mental and physical effort. It requires more energy than most people are willing to dedicate to their work.

Even with all of that, transforming large companies is not an impossible dream. They require a holistic approach that fosters discipline and builds the emotional energy necessary to thrive during times of disruption. Leaders must set aside their wishes and transform for a greater purpose. In other words, they must open their eyes and "see" that they can't continue business as usual.

Part One: Generous

Setting an Existential Purpose

Perpetual Innovation is hard work, and only positive motivation can bring out the energy and enthusiasm necessary to sustain it over time. Therefore, the work must begin with a spirit of generosity. Like many prominent organizations, Microsoft became a victim of its success. Responding aggressively to initial opportunities, it had brilliantly exploited a new and fast-growing market; however, once it arrived, it lacked an existential vision to remain dynamic.

In 2014, Microsoft's board promoted Satya Nadella to CEO. He had a simple solution: to "rediscover the soul of Microsoft, our reason for being." He had a larger vision than just corporate strategy. But the bulk of the organization remained in the old perspective.

Large, successful companies inevitably resist the effort necessary to remain perpetual innovators. They've built structures to scale up and deliver reliable profits, so they naturally resist bold, disruptive experiments. To change, they need something more.

People need a deep-seated conviction to summon the energy to recognize a powerful purpose that animates their life. Companies are not people, but they need a similar reason for being. An existential commitment provides both direction and motivation.



The answer to “Who am I and what is my purpose?” is central at both the organizational and individual levels. It inspires members to imagine what the organization could become. It also embeds and energizes everyone in the transformation process to achieve this. It goes beyond the usual talk about purpose nowadays, which is shallow and feel-good.

Existential purpose is profound; it reaches the company’s identity and reason for existence. It has real trade-offs; it closes off attractive opportunities and strategies. It should make some people leave. However, only a firm, existential commitment to that purpose will compel companies to break free from established structures and pursue perpetual innovation. An existential purpose aligned with an individual’s existential commitment to the organization will make people feel they have a stake in the transformation process.

Customer Obsession

An existential purpose can falter over time, especially when the business model proves itself to be successful. To sustain a company’s discipline—to avoid the complacency and internal politicking that come from success, you need an external tug as well. You can leave your rivals in the dust and still lose sales at the cash register. People will still pester you for lower prices, higher quality, added features, or all of these at once.

To compete in this type of environment, you must be obsessed with satisfying your customers. It’s a kind of emotional commitment that enables the company to accommodate, listen to, and attune itself to customers’ challenges, no matter how frustrating or contradictory.

It forces the company to make some questionable choices in the short term to pay off over time, not just in customer satisfaction, but also in employee engagement and overall quality. Customer-obsessed companies also tend to be the first to realize when and how markets are shifting.

This obsession doesn’t simply mean surveying to find out what people want and giving it to them. Customers must come alive to developers, and that happens with cocreation and empathetic imagination.

To co-create with customers means to solicit their input at every stage of the production process. Companies act based on what customers say they want, making the customers the experts. But it should be done with *empathetic imagination*. The focus should not be on finding out what customers think *right now*. Instead, they should ask, “What would a product that could improve the *future* lives of customers look like?” That focus may come into conflict with short-term profitability, but it has a greater potential long-term payoff.

Beyond employee attitudes, customer-obsessed companies focus on satisfying their customers. They invest in infrastructure to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction, not just through traditional call centers, but also by identifying potential pain points. Customers appreciate knowing that their complaints are being addressed, but nothing can surpass the experience of having no complaints at all. Mistakes happen everywhere, obsessed companies want to make up for problems that you nearly



notice, on principle. Customer obsession manifests in various ways, but its foundation is a profound commitment to the well-being of users.

Pygmalion

Existential commitments and obsession are qualities that are hard to promote through direct personal interactions. As companies grow to thousands of employees, how can they create cultures that drive agility and innovation?

The solution comes from the simple ancient story of Pygmalion, a male sculptor in Cyprus who had contempt for the women around him. In his frustration, he shaved his ideal woman out of ivory. After generously pouring his heart and soul into the sculpture, he named it Galatea and fell in love with it.

At a festival in honor of Aphrodite, Pygmalion offered sacrifices and wished for a bride who would be the “living likeness of my ivory girl.” On returning home, he discovered that Aphrodite had granted his wish. The statue had become a real woman. Pygmalion married Galatea, had a daughter, and lived the rest of his life with the woman of his dreams.

The key to the story is that Pygmalion imbued the best characteristics he could imagine into Galatea. His deep-seated commitment and attention to detail enabled him to create something beyond what should have been humanly possible.

Steve Jobs, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk did the modern equivalent in their companies. They achieved a Pygmalion effect, instilling values and mindsets throughout the company's culture as a whole.

Curating an organizational culture becomes increasingly challenging as a company expands and grows. Founders and CEOs can easily mold those around them, especially those with whom they interact personally, but it's nearly impossible to mold an entire organization. That's what makes modern-day Pygmalions so special.

To achieve the Pygmalion effect throughout their organizations, leaders must not only embody these values in their management but also instill them into the company's culture. That's especially difficult as a company grows. By chiseling specific attributes into a company's DNA, they sculpt employees they never see.

Part Two: Ferocious

The Start-Up Mindset

Existential commitment is necessary for companies to thrive in our current era of rapid technological advancement and uncertainty. There are practical consequences of that commitment, and how it can energize not just a few leaders, but many people in the organization. The challenge is to turn that commitment into the kind of mindset that helps start-ups succeed despite immense obstacles.



Grit, along with a deep sense of purpose, enables people to drive towards ambitious goals. After all, most start-ups aren't really trying to earn more than the cost of capital. They have a big agenda.

To spread that feeling beyond founders or leaders, large companies need people not just committed to an existential purpose, but who feel a sense of ownership for the company's trajectory. These people believe that if they don't perform, then the company can't achieve its noble purpose. They're missionaries, not mercenaries.

Here, it helps to follow the lean start-up loop of build, measure, and learn. Companies can design, launch, assess, and iterate on new and existing products thanks to this continuous cycle. Each stage in the loop involves developing a minimum viable product and testing hypotheses against market reactions, then embodying new hypotheses in an adjusted version.

People can follow the loop as masters of their destiny, free to pursue what needs to be done, even if it's different from what's been done before. The lean start-up approach has the advantage of working under tight budgets, which makes it easier for leaders to give product teams the autonomy they need. Those teams can now go boldly and ask for forgiveness rather than permission.

Some people fall behind, unable to keep up with the pace. But the intensity of the start-up mindset usually attracts more than it repels people's best work. That's the heart of the start-up mindset. It pushes people to overcome daunting challenges by calling up energies they didn't realize they had.

It's not for everyone, but many talented people find it exhilarating. And together they can shake a mature company out of its settled ways.

Managing the Tempo of Change

The world of business is about more than just speed. It's also about tempo—controlling the pace of activity, speeding up or slowing down as needed. Moving fast all the time isn't sustainable, but too many companies settle for a relatively fixed, somewhat relaxed speed. Perpetual innovation companies have a high-tempo culture.

Tempo is about decisions as well as movement. That's the first simple rule. Jeff Bezos outlined a similar concept in business, distinguishing between type 1 and type 2 decisions.

Type one corresponds to high-magnitude decisions with low reversibility. They involve a lot of data and deliberation, as the stakes are high. You're still on offense, but you move deliberately. Type-two decisions, on the other hand, are highly reversible and less critical. These can be made by a skilled person quickly, with limited data.

Differentiating between these types of decisions can be the difference between a slow-moving organization and a quick one. Getting a Type 2 decision wrong can be a setback, while extending consideration of it is disastrous.



The opposite is true for type-one decisions, where careful thought is necessary—although even these decisions can't be delayed indefinitely. Eventually, the organization must act. Holding back skilled workers in an organization that's too afraid to push boundaries leads to stagnation.

Tempo is more than just speed, though. Here are a few more simple rules:

- Stay alert
- Stay paranoid
- Look broadly
- Eliminate barriers
- Purge inefficiencies
- Set clear goals
- Establish frequent check-ins

Big companies have many advantages, but they'll be passed by if they lose control over the tempo. Don't let up.

Bimodal

Perpetual innovators tend to operate in two modes: compression for predictable or commodity activities, and experiential development for new or differentiated areas. Other companies typically settle into a single mode, usually a lighter version of compression, which falls short in both cost savings and creating new kinds of value.

Since at least the 1990s, companies have been shedding non-core assets and activities. Many have contracted for everything from managing the cafeteria to marketing, manufacturing, distribution, or even product development, when these are not intrinsic to the strategy. This outsourcing led to a wave of downsizing as companies focused on their core competencies.

Yet many activities remain that companies cannot fully outsource, usually because they are too complex or integrated into core operations. The solution for ambitious companies is to compress or accelerate their ongoing efforts to improve efficiency.

Compression adds discipline and urgency, especially for complicated operations that haven't already been routinized. The goal here is to standardize, automate, and aggressively reduce costs.

Agile innovators relegate complex but predictable projects to compression. But they go in the opposite direction for most of their core strategic operations. Here, they downplay efficiency altogether and encourage managers to pursue multiple options and hypotheses. Their experiential approach emphasizes learning and discovery, while still maintaining a focus on milestones to ensure discipline and accountability.



The bimodal approach divides the organization into activities that are to be compressed and those that are to be developed experientially. That division continues over time, separate from short-term changes in speed.

Part Three: Courageous

Go Boldly

Companies must act courageously to effect lasting change. A tepid, cautious approach to products and services won't work because it won't draw on the emotional energy that comes from boldness. Overcoming challenging problems can create enormous value.

Elon Musk, at Tesla, SpaceX, and other companies, has essentially turned that approach into a strategy. Boldness is risky, but success is the ultimate differentiator, catapulting his companies above their competition. After all, if you refrain from boldness, you'll always have to deal with rivals, and you'll never get much respect from investors.

Besides impressing investors, a strategy of boldness has two significant benefits. One is that trailblazers can achieve sustainable competitive advantage if they continue to invest and focus on innovation. Even now, Tesla's cars offer features that the legacy carmakers, with their foundation in combustion engine technology, have failed to match.

The second is that boldness attracts high-level talent. Ambitious people want to work for ambitious companies because they know they'll work on major innovations that could change the world. With high-level talent, bold companies are better positioned to achieve their goals than those with less-skilled employees. Boldness, when carried out with the other elements discussed in this book, becomes a positive feedback loop.

It's easy for a startup to move boldly, but much harder for a large, established company that has already achieved success. Large companies have established structures and routines designed around reliability, rather than major innovation. Even if the founders are still in charge, they're likely to remember their difficult early times and prefer the current smooth sailing.

As a result, most successful companies lapse into conformity. Sometimes that conformity is apparent, as when the firm copies every move of a successful competitor. Sometimes it's sneaky, where the company digitally replicates a physical product that people already love, without making improvements.

It takes boldness to actively resist the tendency to stick to the safety of conformity. A heroic leader, for example, can move a large group of people in a new direction through the force of their will or charisma. Yet organizations can become bold at every level.



Start with you. Boldness must start somewhere, and it has the most significant effect from the top. Know, be, lead: This organizing principle should guide how company leaders approach any institutional change.

First, articulate your vision for the organization's great future. Know yourself, including your strengths, weaknesses, and ultimate desires. Identify the compromises you can make and determine what you absolutely will not settle for.

Then, become this bold person, inwardly and outwardly. Take advantage of your strengths, improve on your weaknesses, and ensure that your inner values are reflected in any changes you make. Finally, lead others to do the same, and trust that they are emboldened by the example you have set. The energy you'll gain from pursuing your dream will inspire and energize others.

Radical Collaboration

Often, two heads are better than one. At work, at school, and home, the biggest challenges we face are always easier to overcome when we work together as a team than when we face them alone. It stands to reason that the larger the organization, the more complex its challenges. So why do some organizations achieve collaboration more than others?

It all comes down to the power of silos. When companies are small, everyone knows everyone else, and it's both easy and necessary to collaborate across the organization. However, when the company expands and grows its offerings, it typically does so by increasing its size and complexity. Now, with so many people and complicated activities, each function becomes a world of its own, with less connection to the other functions.

In this new state, leaders often take survival for granted and start building mini empires under their management. Everyone is looking for security, and a solid organization that they control usually appears to be the best way to get there. The most successful companies grow and diversify to such an extent that they must create discrete, stand-alone operations. All those silos are suitable for handling complexity, but at the cost of making it difficult for people to work across functions and divisions.

Silos are essential for scaling up complicated processes. You need people specialized in each area who can run those processes reliably and at a low cost. Silos are how we got the abundant, high-quality products and services of the mid- to late-twentieth century.

Silos made sense then, but now they're risky as companies face upheaval from technological advances. Upheaval doesn't happen neatly; it affects activities throughout the organization, and overcoming it requires rapidly collecting information, generating new ideas, and pivoting to exploit them. Hence, the need for radical collaboration — an environment where people seek solutions for their organization, unhindered by structural or cultural constraints.

The problem is not the structures themselves, but the attitudes that turn those structures into silos. Perpetual innovators still need to organize their activities, and those structures do not need to be



counterproductive. What matters is the company's readiness to reap the benefits of extensive collaboration regardless of how it is organized. That readiness comes from the following:

- An openness to new solutions, no matter where they come from or how unprecedented they are.
- A company ethos that encourages collaboration and puts little emphasis on fiefdoms.
- A structure that's porous enough to allow broad collaboration.

People need to be comfortable working with others across functions, people who may respect them only for their expertise. The company must value results and be willing to disregard silos and hierarchies to achieve them.

That's the essence of radical collaboration. It goes beyond typical partnerships that simply encourage people to seek help for complex problems. Perpetual innovators believe that only through aggressive collaboration can they keep up with rapidly changing markets. The core of their radical collaboration is both structural and cultural.

A collaborative organization can take many forms. Some perpetual innovators are extremely decentralized. Others, like Apple, are highly centralized and functionally organized to generate revolutionary, user-friendly innovations.

Another approach is to employ a conventional organizational structure, but overlay it with collaborative work teams that handle the primary work of innovation. That's what Amazon does. By relying on cross-functional teams for innovation, internal collaboration becomes necessary for success.

Ultimately, embracing collaboration in all its forms and organizing your company around it is essential. Companies that collaborate not out of necessity but as a way of life make collaboration truly radical. If they can sustain that embrace, they can achieve impressive results.

Putting it All Together

To transform your organization for long-term success, you'll likely need all eight drivers described here to some extent. Above all, you require a deep commitment—transformation isn't a one-day event or just a corporate initiative but an ongoing and self-sustaining effort.

A company that has been losing steam can still achieve a significant transformation. However, achieving this requires strong direction and concerted effort, which can only be accomplished by someone in a leadership position. It helps if that person is the CEO, but if you are a manager or above, you can still apply the concepts to your team or department and succeed beyond expectations.



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