# The four greatest ways we stop ourselves... in business and in life.

INNOVATION
ESSENTIALS

**DENNIS
STAUFFER**

# Contents

*"Dennis has found a great route to understanding the thinking processes that lead to innovation, as well as the process that stalls people into stagnant spirals."*

-Art Fry
Inventor of Post-It Notes

## Executive Summary



Even brilliant highly competent people, with great educations, tremendous skill and extensive expertise often fail to realize their potential because without realizing it, they stop themselves.

This report is for innovators and entrepreneurs and visionaries; for change agents and game changers and challengers; for anyone striving to make the world a better place and gain personal success. It's for all of us who struggle to navigate this increasingly complex world.

If you want to confront the status quo and create a new future…

If you want to become more consciously aware of your own mindset and the often unconscious choices you make…

If you want to have more impact, better results and greater success…then this report is for you.

## Imagine What You Can Accomplish

Imagine that you have the gift of discernment, that you have the ability to quickly gain powerful insights…that you're creative and skilled at coming up with novel and promising new possibilities…that you know how to improvise your way around problems to maximize your impact and success…that you have a firm grip on the realities you confront and foster…and that you systematically gather feedback and learn from experience.

These are the characteristics we've identified in our research that define the mindset of a great innovator, as well as highly effective individuals generally. Every one of these attributes reflects personal choices. In other words, any normal person already has the necessary capabilities—if we just get out of our own way.

*"There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new order of things."*

-Niccolo Machiavelli

You may feel that you're already applying one or more of these capabilities, perhaps all of them…and you may be. But few if any of us have no room for further improvement. And even fewer of us use them effectively in combination—which is where their power is greatest.

Think about what you hope to accomplish by upping your game. Would it be…

• A more fulfilling and lucrative career?
• More growth and revenues for your business?
• A breakthrough new product or invention?
• Better relationships with family and peers?
• Some great new discovery or advance?
• Making the world a better place?

Whatever innovation you may hope to create in your life or your work, this report is designed to give you the insights you need, to gain the insights you need, to get there.

| The four critical choices we face are whether we prefer to: | | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Know | -or- | Imagine |
| Apply | -or- | Explore |
| Validate | -or- | Challenge |
| Reinforce | -or- | Discover |

This is not a list that you'll find anywhere else, not in the literature on personal effectiveness,

or success, or leadership, or education, or organizational development. Yet, these are powerful distinctions that are compatible with the best work in all of those areas, and that provide unique new insights and strategies. It's a list grounded in solid psychometric research with hundreds of individuals, teams and organizations.

These choices and the patterns they form describe your personal operating system or mindset. It's not the skills we apply to specific tasks, but rather our underlying assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that guide all of our behaviors. It's like a computer's operating system software that operates in the background largely unnoticed, but that must be working properly or all of the other programs and tasks are undermined.

While this report is focused primarily on personal choices, all the issues raised here are just as relevant to teams and organizations, with the added problem that systems and processes have usually been put in place to perpetuate those choices that obstruct innovation and adaptability, sometimes severely.

We have developed a technology to directly assess these choices and measure them in individuals and groups, something you can learn more about at the end of this report. The first step it to enable you to gain a personal awareness of these choices and their implications.

## We Learned Early How to Kill Innovation

Every one of us is a born explorer and experimenter. Just watch any small child to see how naturally those tendencies come to us—and how frustrating it can be when someone (mom or dad) stops us. A child hates it when someone interferes with this impulse and will frequently throw a tantrum. So as parents and teachers we feel a need to socialize our children and keep them safe by demanding that they respect the limits we impose. This is all well intended and perhaps necessary, but one unintended side effect is that from a very young age we learn to suppress those impulses. We learn to stop ourselves. We stop exploring and experimenting with new possibilities and instead begin learning the skills that enable us to function effectively in the world as it is, but not necessarily as it is becoming.

*"Play is the highest form of research."*

-Albert Einstein

When as teenagers we again feel the impulse to explore and experiment, we're bombarded by messages that tell us how dangerous and immature that is, and that again we must suppress those urges. We're told not to engage in "risky behaviors" (which admittedly some are), but rarely does anyone give us any alternative way to exercise what is obviously an entirely natural tendency. So again we learn to stop ourselves.

Throughout our education we learn that knowledge is important, so we emphasize what we know and discount the importance of what we don't know. We're taught to find the one "correct" answer to a problem and reject any alternatives. So we become increasingly assertive about our knowledge and disinterested in hearing anything that might prove us wrong, gradually losing our sense of genuine curiosity. When we encounter an idea that contradicts what we're learned previously, we immediately stop ourselves from seriously considering it because it's not the "right" answer.

In his book *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*, Gordon MacKenzie, who was once known as the "creative paradox" at Hallmark, tells how much he enjoyed visiting schools. He would typically set up in the gym and lead sessions with each grade level, beginning with the first graders and working up. When he spoke, he would note all the student art work he saw on the walls of the school and say how nice it was to be among so many other artists. Then he would ask how many artists were in the room. With the first graders, every hand would go up enthusiastically. By the second grade, about half went up, just shoulder height. By the sixth grade, only a few would sheepishly raise their hands, apparently fearing the judgment of their peers.

That's what we've done to ourselves, and continue to do to our children—with the best of intentions. We've been conditioned to suppress our creative impulses and with them our capacity to innovate. When the world was stable and predictable, this may have been adaptive. When we could learn a trade or a profession and get a job for life, having a fixed skill set and a head full of ready answers was the path to success. But none of us lives in that world anymore. We live in a much more dynamic place where we need to constantly learn and unlearn and relearn, where imagination and insight are now our path to success and fixed ideas are almost certain to be inadequate. The behaviors we've been taught to suppress are now exactly the ones we need most!

Throughout history, the artists and eccentrics and creatives have been viewed with skepticism, even shunned, and perhaps for good reason. Maybe it was appropriate in a slow changing world. It may be that we're living in the first era ever in which those talents have become so important—for everyone. And the sooner we recognize this shift, the sooner we can respond to it effectively. But thanks to the long-ingrained habits conditioned into us, this is unlikely to happen by chance. It requires that we make conscious choices to think and behave differently and stop suppressing our own creative genius.

We need to stop stopping ourselves…and we can do that by making different choices.

## Innovation Essentials: Choose to Imagine

When Einstein famously said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge," he wasn't saying that knowledge was unimportant, but rather that imagination is underrated. It can truly be the

more valuable of the two. Yet this is not the choice many of us would make.

We tend to see knowledge as that which is proven and dependable. If it wasn't, we probably wouldn't call it knowledge. It's the answers we already have, the things we already know how to do or know to be true. We think imagination is fine but it's more speculative, perhaps a good guess or a great possibility, but not something we can fully count on when it's really important. It's just not as reliable as knowledge. So even when we have good ideas, we tend not to trust them as much as our knowledge, and we especially don't trust the ideas of others as much as our own knowledge.

This is one of the ways we choose to stop ourselves from tapping into our own creative genius.

Sure, trying new things is risky, but when we're in a changing environment trying old things is risky! When we use our imagination, we at least recognize that we need to be testing and exploring. When we apply knowledge we often simply assume it's going to work for us until proven otherwise. So we're still taking risks; we're just not acknowledging those risks. How dangerous is that?

> *"Most of us spend our lives pursuing knowledge when what we need is insight."*
>
> -From *Thinking Clockwise*

Over reliance on knowledge is like a species that becomes so specialized that it's utterly at the mercy of its environment. It may be a plant that can only survive in soil of a particular acidity and moisture, within a limited range of daily sunlight. Perhaps it requires a specific type of bog or forest floor. If taken from that environment, or that environment is destroyed, it immediately dies, because it can't adapt. When someone loses a job due to cutbacks or a business failure, or an entrepreneur or project manager encounters setbacks, they can behave like that fragile overspecialized plant and blame the environment, or they can choose to adapt to their new environment and rediscover success.

Our imagination is what gives us the ability to adapt, and clearly we need to be able to adapt and readapt in this modern world. It's not that we should always trust our imagination, but that we have the courage to experiment with it, in order to find the new solutions we need. As the 20th century philosopher Eric Hoffer wrote, "In times of change learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists." The learning he was talking about wasn't knowledge transfer as from teacher to student; he was talking about learning things no one has figured out yet, that we need to discover in order to solve the unique challenges we face.

Accomplished innovators routinely choose their imagination over their knowledge. They recognize, as Einstein did, that knowledge is limited—and limiting—and they don't want to be caught unprepared for the inevitable changes and surprises they know they will encounter. They ex-

ercise their imagination like an athlete exercises muscles, not because it's always needed, but because without exercise it won't be ready to perform at those crucial times when it is needed.

Knowledge isn't a bad thing. Our knowledge gives us valuable options to consider and possibilities to explore. It's when we allow our knowledge to convince us of what's not possible, when we use it to prematurely reject ideas, that it becomes a hindrance.

Most organizations become limited by their knowledge too, by their assumptions and beliefs and conventional wisdom about how to do business or fulfill their mission. And as with individuals, if an organization isn't practicing the use of imagination, of exploring new possibilities, it gradually loses that capability.

To be innovators, we need to get comfortable exercising our imagination and valuing what it gives us—especially when it contradicts our knowledge. Because if it's entirely consistent with what we already think we know, it's probably not imagination, just memory.

We need to consciously choose imagination over knowledge.

## Innovation Essentials: Choose to Explore

Many of us resist exercising our imagination, and even more of us don't trust our imagination enough to act on it. Yet it's by exploring our ideas and gathering feedback that we're able to improve them…and it's not just our imagination that needs frequent testing.

When we look to knowledge for ideas, the next step is usually to simply apply what we know. If we didn't already think it would work, we wouldn't consider it knowledge, right? We sometimes do the same thing with our imagination; we fall in love with an idea and lose our skepticism about it. The downside should be obvious. When we're in a dynamic environment, both knowledge and imagination need to be treated with caution. Whichever we rely on, we still need to maintain a mindset of exploration. We should always want to know whether some idea (new or old) will work, rather than assume that it will.

Once we recognize that there's uncertainty in any action we take, courage has a whole new significance…and so does humility. The paradox is that we need to muster the courage to act despite our uncertainties, and we need to have the humility to be prepared for failure. This is the contradiction that skilled innovators have mastered and it's not a balancing act; it's being fully courageous and humble at the same time. The two are not mutually exclusive.

*"All life's an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better."*

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Someone watching us might not be able to tell when we're exploring our ideas and when we're applying them, because the difference is primarily inside our heads. It's a difference in how we're processing things, a difference in mindset.

Choosing to explore and experiment reveals the true value of setting goals and explains why they sometimes seem to almost magically produce success. It's only when we define our desired outcomes that we can distinguish success from failure, so we know whether our ideas are working or not. Goals position us to make the course corrections and improvisations that increase our chances of success and the impact we have. It's not just about being persistent; we can be persistently wrong. (It's called stubborn.) It's about considering multiple options. Despite, what we've all been told, persistence rarely leads to success…unless it's coupled with experimentation.

Innovation is not for the faint of heart. It requires that we step up to challenges. It's putting our ideas into action, not because we're certain they'll work, but because that's the only way to find out. Skilled innovators take action and they do that to explore their ideas rather than simply apply them. It's about being willing to experiment and fail because we can often learn as much or more from the failures as from the successes.

We need to choose to explore rather then simply apply.

## Innovation Essentials: Choose to Challenge

The ability to make accurate observations may be the most overlooked aspect of innovation and adaptability. Extensive research into selective perception and memory reveals that what we think we observe is not nearly as reliable as most of us assume. Our brain works very much the same way as Google. We get what we search for and very little else. So for example, if we're looking for confirmation of our knowledge, we are likely to find it…while missing those exceptions that might prompt us to rethink.

This tendency is aggravated by our natural tendency to want to look good to ourselves and others, and by the pressure to achieve certain objectives on the job. Our bosses want confirmation that we're doing our job well, so that's what we try hardest to find. Research has also found that both teachers and supervisors will tend to confirm either good or bad performance ratings for students and employees, even when those ratings have been assigned at random. So our evaluations of people and situation are clearly biased by prior information.

Taken together, a great deal of research demonstrates that making accurate observations is far harder than it looks. Since learning from the feedback we receive requires good data, this is no small problem. Yet most of us engage in what researchers call naïve realism. We assume that what we see is what happened and what we didn't see when we were looking didn't happen.

There are a variety of ways to compensate for some of these problems. They include: comparing our observations to those of others, (Did you see what I saw? Did you notice anything I didn't?) making specific measurements as in scientific experimentation, and being clear in advance about what we want to observe so we focus our inherently selective attention on what matters most to us. (This is another benefit of the goal setting mentioned in the previous section. What we are trying to accomplish helps us define what's most important to observe.)

> *"We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."*
>
> -Anas Nin

What all of these strategies have in common is a healthy skepticism of what we think we've seen or not seen and a willingness to challenge the data and ourselves to catch any exceptions. The need for this should be clear: Looking for confirmation reinforces existing knowledge; looking for exceptions opens us up to new discoveries and insights. Innovation requires that we are attuned to those exceptions, constantly looking for the unexpected, for the surprising.

Inside organizations, this means persistently challenging the status quo. It means looking for evidence of failure even as we pursue excellence and success.

The most skilled innovators have developed a personal discipline of making careful, skeptical observations, and are willing to revise those observations. They are slow to conclude that they have all of the relevant information. That helps to keep them firmly grounded in the realities of the challenges they are trying to overcome, and solving the right problems.

Most of us are less disciplined and more eager to confirm our success, so again we stop ourselves, in this instance from learning as much as we could from our experiences. We choose to confirm when we should be choosing to challenge.

## Innovation Essentials: Choose to Discover

Many of us are not well positioned to gain fresh insights and make new discoveries. We're not in the right mindset and as Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors only the prepared mind." So even when we've made all the other choices that set us up to innovate, we still have a gap.

Making sense of our experience is a two step process. First we need good data, which requires making accurate observations as discussed in the previous section. Then, we need to interpret that data and that forces another important choice: We can seek to reinforce our existing knowledge, or we can seek to discover new knowledge. The first option perpetuates the status quo; the second has the potential to produce breakthrough insights.

Who doesn't like to be told that he or she is "right?" Who doesn't feel diminished when they must admit that they're "wrong?" Most of us do our best to hear the former and avoid the latter. We call it looking for "validation." That simple preference colors how we interpret our experiences, and form assumptions and beliefs. We like getting reinforcement of what we already believe to be true, of what we claim to know.  But that of course does not lead to innovation. It leads us right back to where we already are. It's yet another way that we stop ourselves from discovering the insights we need.

This is one reason why high levels of expertise and prior experience frequently interfere with the ability to find new solutions—even when we're trying to be innovative. We resist having to unlearn what we've already concluded is true. Yet that's exactly what innovation often requires. Gaining new knowledge and insight is not necessarily a cumulative process. It can be very disruptive and if we're not open to making those kinds of revisions, we can't make new discoveries.

> *"The universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow stronger."*
>
> -Eden Phillpots

Most organizations eventually die because they fail to make this crucial shift. They fall victim to conventional wisdom, to the orthodoxies of their industry and to the complacency created by their own success. And so they are unable to change themselves in response to the changes around them. Changes in technology or business models or economic trends or consumer preferences gradually render the organization obsolete.

Innovators prefer to discover rather than confirm and reinforce. They've made that choice. So they're deliberate about actively considering multiple explanations and slow to settle on just one "right" answer. They seek diverse perspectives and welcome alternative interpretations, because that prompts fresh insights. There are times when this means not reaching any conclusion at all, but rather holding multiple possibilities in mind subject to further consideration. We may need to further investigate…imagine, explore and observe…before we find the breakthroughs we need.

## Create a Pattern of Innovation

As important as these four choices are, they become truly powerful for innovators who apply them in combination. Together they form a pattern or cycle, from 1) Where we get our ideas and form intuitions, to 2) How we act on those ideas and create impact, to 3) How we observe the consequences of our actions and gather information, to 4) How we interpret that feedback to make discoveries and gain insight. Those insights then inform 1) Our ideas and intuitions, as the cycle continues.

The alternative choices (know, apply, confirm, reinforce) also create a pattern and that pattern is just as rational. It's how we develop competence and expertise around routine tasks, but it has a strong tendency to resist innovation. It's your choice which pattern you prefer.

The question isn't: Which choices are right or wrong?

The question is: Where do you want to go and which choices are most likely to help you get there?

## What's Your Mindset?

Each of these four choices represents alternative attitudes, assumptions, values, beliefs and behaviors. And because they are choices, they are something each of us has the power to control. Ultimately, each of us controls our own mindset.

What do you want to accomplish? What changes would you like to make? What challenges are you facing? You can recapture the creative genius you were born with, to discover your own powerful insights, create stronger intuitions, have greater impact and produce better results.

The first step is to make sure that you're not stopping yourself. ■

## Take the Next Steps

We have measured these four preferences and the patterns they create in hundreds of individuals, teams and organizations using a psychometric assessment technology that we've developed. For a detailed description of this technology and the supporting research, click on the Research tab at www.insightfusion.com and download the available white paper. Or give us a call and we'll explain how we can help you and your organization strengthen your capacity to innovate.

Whether you're looking for some personalized coaching & leadership development, or want to arrange an in depth seminar, or need some strategic innovation guidance, we can help you gain the insights you need…to achieve the breakthroughs you need.

For a **free consultation** focused on your objectives and how you can reach them by finding your own powerful insights, contact us at **www.insightfusion.com** or **763-744-1036 (USA)**

## About the Author

**Dennis Stauffer** is an internationally recognized thought leader on the behaviors that drive innovation and personal effectiveness. He's the founder of Innovator Mindset, LLC a speaking, training and consulting firm that works with companies of all sizes to help individuals, teams and organizations boost their capacity to innovate.

Dennis' work includes research into the measurable skills and behaviors that promote innovation, creativity and adaptability. He is the creator of the Innovator Mindset assessment technology, a uniquely powerful tool that evaluates the personal and organizational mindsets that enhance, or undermine, innovation.

Dennis is an Emmy award-winning journalist and former Business Editor. His most recent book, *Thinking Clockwise, A Field Guide for the Innovative Leader*, received a Fresh Voices book award. It's in its third U.S. printing and is currently available in five languages. Based in Minneapolis, Dennis delivers keynotes, seminars and other interventions for clients throughout the U.S. and abroad.

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## Additional Resources

*Thinking Clockwise, A Field Guide for the Innovative Leader*, by Dennis Stauffer
http://www.insightfusion.com/Think-Clockwise.asp

*Mindset, The New Psychology of Success*, by Carol Dweck

*Choice Theory, A New Psychology of Personal Freedom*, by William Glasser

*A Whole New Mind, Moving From the Information Age to the Conceptual Age*, by Daniel Pink

*Invisible Gorillas, And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us*, by Chabris and Simons

*The Scientist in the Crib, What Early Learning Tells Us About the Mind*, by Gopnik, Metsloff and Kuhl

## Client Comments

"Interesting and well worth your time."
        -Felicia Webster, Hewlett Packard

"Dennis has a deep understanding and brilliant insights into ways in which to organize thinking in order to get breakthrough results. His structured approach provided us with a powerful methodology that allowed us to experience, reflect, think and learn. "
        -Bob Barbour, Director & Chief Executive, Centre for Competitveness, Northern Ireland"

"It was a light bulb going on for me."
        -Shawn Schow, 3M

"Your talk inspired people to form an informal innovation group within the company."
        -James Snyder, Medtronic

"After his sessions, people take home something new, concrete and reliable."
        -Andrea Montusci, Executive Director, CREA Europe

Exceptional presentation, makes you stop and think about your approach to management and to life situations...helps you evaluate how to handle situations.
        -Wanda Buckner, Blackwood Family, LLC

"Dennis has a program with excellent content that keeps people involved with his presentation. His work in the field of innovation and leadership is unique and compelling."
  -Joe Kisicki, Federal Aviation Administration

"Dennis really listened to our need to involve everyone on the team in continuous improvement efforts and innovations...It has created momentum and excitement within the team which will help galvanize us in the coming year."
  -Mary-Clare Bates, Wells Fargo Home Mortgage

"The feedback that I received from those in attendance was overwhelmingly positive. Quote 'Rick, you have brought in some really informative and great speakers in the past. However, Dennis was by far the best.'"
  -Richard Hatch, Spherion

"Thank you for your excellent and insightful presentation. The feedback from our members has been overwhelmingly positive. Their comments include:
"Entertaining, thought provoking"
"Great topic, great speaker"
"Very entertaining way to get message across"
"Very timely, given my situation"
"Energizing"
"Dennis has a unique approach."
"Makes me eager to go to work tomorrow and apply"
"Great speaker!"
  -Oded Galili, Project Management Institute

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