DISRUPT YOURSELF

EIGHT WAYS TO HACK A BETTER BUSINESS—BEFORE THE COMPETITION DOES
Introduction

In the introductory chapter to *Disrupt It Yourself: Eight Ways to Hack a Better Business—Before the Competition Does*, author Simone Bhan Ahuja recalls the lively discussions she’s had with corporate leaders about impending disruption—disruptions to their industries, their markets, their businesses, their leadership—anything that can upset the apple cart, so to speak, and put once-leading companies behind their startup competition. Far from a negative thing, disruption is a business necessity that keeps companies from stagnating, forcing innovations to keep them vital and growing.

Throughout the book, Ahuja interjects conversations, business practices, lessons learned, and success stories from companies with which she’s consulted on innovation, disruption, and harnessing the creativity and business acumen of “intrapreneurs,” which are basically entrepreneurs who work within companies and introduce innovations to help advance the business, keeping it vital in its specific marketplace. Ahuja urges corporate leaders to “trigger these changes themselves. It’s a part of what I call the Disrupt-It-Yourself imperative, which presupposes that the only way an organization can win in an innovation-driven economy is to invent the future itself by unleashing more of its own talent and energy.”

Ahuja explains that any organization is “capable of bringing breakthrough innovation to market with a DIY approach” if they resolve to:

- “build a strong internal structure for innovation and growth management, investing in a well-balanced innovation portfolio that will provide a sustainable edge;
- harness the creativity and knowledge of people at all ranks and across all parts of the organization, building supportive systems and processes to leverage human strengths;
- shift the prevailing culture to one that enables and celebrates experimentation with fast and frugal solutions and agile responses to dynamic conditions; and
- develop leadership capable of engaging and retaining the people most committed to solving the problems of the future, and securing the enterprise’s place in it.”

Based on her research and experience with companies “learning to disrupt themselves while they carry on their everyday operations,” Ahuja identified eight key principles, which she explains in-depth in the book: “(1) keep it frugal, (2) make it permissionless, (3) let customers lead, (4) keep it fluid, (5) maximize return on intelligence, (6) create the commons, (7) engage passion and purpose, and (8) add discipline to disruption.”

Prior to the first chapter, she also defines the terms, *disrupt-it-yourself* and *DIYer*:

“*disrupt-it-yourself*: v. to launch a spectrum of high-impact innovation from within an established organization; to use a fast and frugal approach common to an entrepreneurial startup to invent a valuable new solution that finds a mass market; to enlist others in the process and refuse to be disrupted externally.

“*DIYer*: n. a Disrupt-It-Yourself innovator; an employee who acts and behaves more like an entrepreneur in the context of an established organization; a contemporary version of the traditional intrapreneur.”
Chapter One. Navy SEALs, Not Pirates: Meet the D-I-Y Disrupters
The author explains more about the motivations behind intrapreneurs in chapter one. She says that although they are “still relatively rare” they are “distinguished by both who they are and what they do.” Some of the “job qualifications” she lists for intrapreneurs include: action obsessed, forward-thinking, optimistic, energized by new processes, progress focused, impatient with systems that don’t work effectively, problem oriented, natural hackers, talent attractors, solutions co-designers, mission oriented, frugal by nature, expert recyclers, and resourceful.

Chapter Two. Why Does It Have to Be So Hard?
Prior to launching into the eight principles, Ahuja explores why some companies have a difficult time breaking through the barriers that are holding them back from accepting the importance of disruption, the need for supporting intrapreneurs, and encouraging innovations. According to the author, “The diagnosis comes down to two kinds of problems, some created by the structure of large organizations, and others due to the mind-sets that take hold in them. As we look at these structural and mind-set barriers in their various forms, we’ll learn that no one is actively trying to kill innovation. People are behaving rationally, and almost all of them with good intentions. The problem is that they are deciding and acting within a context, and the system around them is arrayed in complex ways against the forces of innovation.”

She identifies two barriers. The first (and worst) is the mind-set barrier. “That mind-set barrier has destructive effects on two levels,” she explains. “First, it robs the company of any immediate innovations those intrapreneurs were imagining. Second, it drives away those who represent the organization’s best chance of innovating more in the future.” The second (serious) barrier is the company’s structure. If a company is so finely tuned to “accomplish certain things in certain ways,” they “lose their ability to imagine other possibilities.”

Ahuja encourages corporate leaders to “get messy.” In other words, companies will not open themselves up to innovation—and growth—if they stay too locked into their current ways of operating.

Chapter Three. Principle 1: Keep It Frugal
The first principle emphasizes the need for frugality, matching the intrapreneurial predisposition for resourcefulness. Corporate innovations often “involve someone hacking a solution using limited resources, often in their spare time.” The five “á la carte” strategies for keeping the company frugal are: remain asset-based, keep it simple, encourage frugal experiments, focus on teams, and rethink incentives.

Chapter Four. Principle 2: Make It Permissionless
The author has observed that intrapreneurs are averse to bureaucratic barriers that impinge on their ability to move forward with their creativity and innovations. “Having worked with a lot of innovators, I’ve seen that they aren’t trying to be defiant exactly—especially the ones who work within large enterprises,” she writes. Companies that hold too tightly to requiring permission in their normal processes will have difficulty working with intrapreneurs. Ahuja explains that managers may be concerned about the risks involved in any deviation from the status quo. As with the other principles, though, she has strategies for overcoming this fear: support, don’t control; say yes more often; and add light structure.
Chapter Five. Principle 3: Let Customers Lead
Companies that connect well with their customers understand that they need to provide what their customer wants, how they want it, when they want it. This understanding often leads to innovations to keep up with customer desires. The author notes that the “plays” she’s seen work best in industries and environments across the board include: create leading-edge customer focus, hack better access to customers (using a “pull” approach), locate internal customers, turn customers into innovation partners, co-create with customers, and make intrapreneurship a sales priority.

Chapter Six. Principle 4: Keep It Fluid
Keeping it fluid is about integrating ways to “enable new levels of information sharing, networking, and mobility across their talent pools.” The author explains that intrapreneurs in DIY environments need to be given the latitude to connect with specialists across the organization. This may require the company to lighten up on its current organizational structure, which could prove difficult for companies unwilling to become more flexible with their hierarchical processes and procedures. To become more fluid, Ahuja suggests companies incorporate new mechanisms for: “(1) coordinating and aligning the efforts of self-managing teams, (2) for encouraging symbiotic behavior among people who no longer have clear and consistent reporting lines and group identity, (3) for motivating and recognizing great work in the absence of clear paths for promotion, and (4) for identifying those people who should be given more responsibility and bigger roles in ensuring the company’s future success.”

To help with this adjustment, the author offers the following strategies: create a team of teams, get agile, make management fluid by rethinking the role of managers, and support agility through structure.

Chapter Seven. Principle 5: Maximize Return on Intelligence
To maximize the benefits that can result from innovations, a company needs to be “willing to test ideas and take smart risks.” This testing helps generate data and insights that can be used across the organization to the benefit of a variety of employees.

Among this testing are performance metrics that help keep innovators on track—and give managers a measurement of progress to share with stakeholders. The author explains that “Intrapreneurs rely on constant learning in an open, agile environment where the culture can balance structure with autonomy and metrics with flexibility.” To further illustrate this, she suggests companies let go of assumptions and open themselves up to testing, make learning a priority, measure return on intelligence (connect learning to results), and make failure feasible by empowering intrapreneurs to pull the plug on a project if it’s not panning out as planned.

Chapter Eight. Principle 6: Create the Commons
The author notes that she often encounters companies that want to instill intrapreneurship-driven innovation but are not willing to be as inclusive as they need to be to succeed. She assures that “the payback gained when we involve many more types of people, and thinking, in the innovation process is enormous and just as diverse as the people and perspectives we want installed on these teams.”
Including a variety of stakeholders in the innovation process, and gaining buy-in, builds a sense of excitement and commitment to making the innovation work. According to Ahuja, “The benefit is even greater if people know they do not have to stay in their lanes as they think about what the business could do better. If someone in accounting has an idea relating to customer service, there should be a pathway for it to be expressed and taken seriously—even if that person will not ultimately own the responsibility to develop it.” Some of the strategies for implementing principle 6 include: plan for full inclusion, make it safe to innovate, use technology in appropriate measure, train future intrapreneurs, and create porous networks.

Chapter Nine. Principle 7: Engage Passion and Purpose
Passion is not to be underestimated as far as a motivating factor for intrapreneurs. This enthusiasm can become contagious and incite more productive collaboration. This collaboration can lead to the formation of ad hoc groups from a variety of functional areas within the company—all of whom share a common passion for solving a specific problem. This passion can help the growth of mutual trust, “and they can often find a way to overcome whatever frictions arise from their different roles and reporting structures.”

Employees who are passionate about their work are more engaged, which also “makes the most of creativity and ingenuity.” Ahuja’s strategies for putting this “win-win dynamic to work in a Disrupt-It-Yourself way” include: make purpose programmatic by creating social intrapreneurship programs, leverage passion that bubbles up and cultivate a sense of community among innovators, and push passion to go viral within the organization.

Chapter Ten. Principle 8: Add Discipline to Disruption
The author cautions that some discipline is necessary to give the DIY approach a modicum of structure “in order to extract the most value from each stream of innovation and install metrics that guide and measure success without losing the learning or limiting the idea.” To that end, some strategies to accomplish this include: develop multiple streams of innovation (normalize intrapreneurship), create a culture that enables hybridity (value innovation equally), and manage disruption with disciple (customize key performance indicators [KPI]).

Epilogue. Eight Myths of Intrapreneurship
Ahuja concludes the book with an epilogue that debunks what she’s termed as the eight myths of intrapreneurship. For companies to benefit the most from a DIY approach to innovation and intrapreneurship, they need to move beyond the myths and accept the truths. Ahuja sums it up thus: “With three years of research and reflection behind me, I’m convinced: It is time to construct a new mythology of intrapreneurship—one that celebrates the skills and behaviors that drive innovation forward today.” Here are those myths (and their corresponding truths):

Myth 1: Intrapreneurship is too creative for a disciplined approach.
Truth: Innovation is too important to be done in a random way.
Myth 2: Intrapreneurs go it alone.
**Truth:** Intrapreneurship is a team sport.

Myth 3: Only "creatives" become intrapreneurs.
**Truth:** Intrapreneurship requires a wide variety of talents and types. A successful intrapreneur can excel at any of them—and can’t be expected to have all of them.

Myth 4: Management’s best approach to intrapreneurs is benign neglect.
**Truth:** Management’s best approach to intrapreneurs is active support.

Myth 5: Intrapreneurs aren’t in it for financial rewards, and they don’t need performance metrics.
**Truth:** If you want more of anything, measure it—and reward it.

Myth 6: Intrapreneurs are just like entrepreneurs.
**Truth:** The typical intrapreneur is different from the typical entrepreneur in terms of both skills and motivation.

Myth 7: Innovation labs are the best place to house intrapreneurs.
**Truth:** The place for intrapreneurs is everywhere. Innovation centers help provide the discipline and network required to grow intrapreneurial initiatives from idea to execution.

Myth 8: Having an innovation strategy has nothing to do with cultivating intrapreneurship.
**Truth:** A clear innovation strategy is not only compatible with intrapreneurial activity—it is critical to taking intrapreneurship from a random event to a reliable engine of new solutions and revenue streams.

---

*Buy the book and get more resources at disruptityourselfbook.com*