



**BIG LITTLE BREAKTHROUGHS**  
HOW EVERYDAY PEOPLE BECOME  
EVERYDAY INNOVATORS **Josh Linkner**

# The pressure to generate big ideas can feel overwhelming.

We know that bold innovations are critical in these disruptive and competitive times, but when it comes to breakthrough thinking, we often freeze up.

Instead of shooting for a \$10 billion IPO or a Nobel Prize, the most prolific innovators focus instead on Big Little Breakthroughs—small creative acts that unlock massive rewards over time. By building a daily habit of creativity, organizations not only enjoy a high volume of small wins, but the daily practice of micro-innovations is the fastest route to discover the massive breakthroughs we seek.

**Big Little Breakthroughs aren't just for propeller-head inventors, fancy pants CEOs, or hoodie-donning tech billionaires. In fact, they help everyday people become everyday innovators.**

This simple yet effective method is designed for all of us to cultivate the power of human creativity. Focusing on a deliberate approach to daily practice, the proven system enables people from all backgrounds, training, and walks of life to expand their creative skillset and mindset. It helps everyday people unlock inventive thinking and harness innovation to tackle tough challenges and seize bold opportunities.

Instead of wild, risky and expensive moonshots, you'll learn how to unleash small, daily creative acts to drive gigantic results over time. In fact, cultivating high volumes of micro-innovations not only de-risks the creative process, it builds the much-needed skills that lead to colossal transformations... and the creative confidence to take responsible risks.

## THE RIPPLE EFFECT

We all learned in middle school how a single disturbance can ripple into a large-scale, pervasive impact. Seemingly small acts throughout history have set into motion revolutionary movements and wide-sweeping transformation. As the rings of change radiate from their source, the smallest creative acts can lead to the largest achievements.

When you unleash your full creative power, you become unshackled and unstoppable.

History celebrates the innovations that changed the course of civilization such as movable type, penicillin, and the internet. But we often look down on the smaller acts of invention that drive meaningful results while also serving as the building blocks of life's biggest breakthroughs.

**When you unleash your full creative power,  
you become unshackled and unstoppable.**

**It's time we appreciate the full range of innovation: INNOVATION (all caps), Innovation (capital I), and innovation (lower-case).**

**INNOVATION** in all caps is the big stuff. Inventing the electric guitar. Digging the Panama Canal. Designing the internal combustion engine.

These are the ones we think of when we hear the word innovation, but these are only a small percentage of what human creativity is all about.

**Innovations** (capital 'I') are still meaningful but may not make the history books.

Think of a new product that boosts revenue 30% in six months. Or a solution to a pesky problem that results in a 15% boost to the bottom line.

These may come a couple times a year and can play a major role in reshaping our lives.

And then there's **innovation** (lower-case)—the less glamorous but highly valuable flavor of invention. Lower-case innovation is the most dismissed, the most bullied, and the most overlooked—and the most common. But that commonness doesn't make innovation less powerful, but more so. What do you think has more horsepower—one magnificent thoroughbred racehorse, or 100 small ponies all pulling together?

Stop thinking of yourself as lacking innovation simply because you haven't patented hundreds of inventions or launched a billion-dollar idea. Instead, let's celebrate all levels of creativity and innovation, realizing the inherent value of all shapes and sizes.

## THE ANATOMY OF AN IDEA

We often think of ideas as a single unit, but like atoms, they're actually made up of a series of smaller particles that add up to something special. Here are the five fundamental elements of an idea:

**Inputs** | Inputs are the foundations of any idea and consist of previous experiences, context, research, point-of-view, and external factors such as location. If you want to improve your ideas (both quantity and quality), expand your input base. The more ingredients you have on the kitchen table, the more creative your soufflé will become.

**Sparks** | Often confused with the full idea itself, sparks are more like tadpoles. They are the early beginnings of an idea, but not a fully developed version. Sparks are those raw, initial, half-baked concepts that eventually form into something of value. Most sparks may never see the light of day, so having a high volume of initial sparks will give you more to choose from when selecting the best route forward.

**Auditions** | After a spark is generated, it should be auditioned. Auditioning is the step that determines if a spark should be kicked off the bus or if it merits further exploration. Test and retest to ensure you're backing the best idea.

**Refinements** | Sparks that make it through the audition phase are now subject to further polish. The refinement step is where an idea is tweaked, improved, and sanded to perfection.

**Slingshots** | In the same way that inputs are needed before an initial spark, slingshots are the required step to get an idea out of the lab and into reality. They're not detailed execution plans, but rather provide a directional guide as to where the idea needs to go next. Slingshots are the fasteners from one idea to the next in the same way one piece of a Sunday afternoon puzzle fits nicely into its neighbor. In fact, slingshots from one concept are often the inputs of the next one in a sequence of interconnected creative ideas.

## **CREATIVE THINKING: THE GREAT EQUALIZER**

Creativity is the great equalizer, accessible to each one of us looking to pursue change, growth, and success. Coming up with an all-caps INNOVATION takes a lot of things—including luck. But anyone in any circumstance can unlock their own Big Little Breakthroughs. While we don't all have ambitions of running billion-dollar companies or becoming rap superstars, our own creative skills can be incredibly powerful when it comes to achieving whatever success looks like for each of us.

For some, it's a job promotion or raise. For others, it's becoming a more effective parent and raising independent kids. Maybe your goal is to launch a podcast and connect with others around your passion for miniature model sailboats. Or maybe you want to use your creativity to get more done in less time so you have more time for your passions.

Whatever your creative goals, the key is to take them on one Big Little Breakthrough at a time.

## PLAY BOTH OFFENSE AND DEFENSE

In addition to the notion that innovation is only for the elite, one of the most common misconceptions is that it only applies when playing offense. After all, the most celebrated innovations are bold new product breakthroughs that upend traditional industries. In other words, we think of innovation primarily as a mechanism to drive growth. If you invent the next device to make the perfect hard-boiled egg and then sell 11 million of them on QVC, you have just innovated in the classic sense. Yet the wonders of innovation go far beyond product development.

Let's classify innovation into two camps: Offense and Defense. Offense-focused innovation is how most of us generally view the topic. Here, we use inventive thinking to seize new opportunities and fuel growth. These innovations take the form of marketing campaigns, new product breakthroughs, fresh business models, and inspired growth strategies.

Just like a football team, offensive-focused innovation is there to put points on the board. And just like most football teams, the offense generally overshadows the critical work of the defensive lineup.

Defense-focused innovation may not get all the glory but can be a powerful weapon in your arsenal. Here, we're using the same core ingredient of imagination to fight back against adversity, boost efficiency, overcome challenges, streamline operations, improve safety, solve pesky problems and fend off competitors. Defensive innovation isn't usually as sexy, but this often-overlooked domain can be the difference between raging success and crushing defeat.

## THE RESEARCH IS CRYSTAL CLEAR

Researchers have put lots of effort and energy into determining how much creativity impacts businesses. Their findings have been anything but ambiguous.

- People, teams, and companies that are more creative have better financial outcomes across the board.
- Most people, teams, and companies don't invest enough in expanding those capabilities and don't feel they have an adequate system in place to build creative capacity.
- The stock market puts an immense amount of value on innovative companies, sometimes nearly doubling what its valuation would be if based only on actual performance.

At every turn, research confirms that being more creative and innovative doesn't just make you happier—it makes individuals and businesses more successful.

**Creativity is the great equalizer, accessible to each one of us looking to pursue change, growth, and success.**

## BUILDING YOUR CREATIVE MUSCLES

Creativity isn't just born, it's built.

It begins with inputs, critical to any training regimen. If you want to get in shape, your inputs include food, water, and nutritional supplements. If you want to elevate your own creativity, you need to consume information and art in many forms, even ingesting inputs that have nothing to do with your work or existing passions. You'd be surprised the impact you can gain from reading *Modern Woodworking* or watching instructional videos on how to prune a bonsai tree. Random inputs can actually have a dramatic impact on creativity. As it relates to your own challenges and opportunities, the more insight and expertise you can gain about the problem you hope to solve, the more creativity you'll uncover.

Next, you have to create the right conditions for creativity to thrive. These can look different for each of us. Leonardo DaVinci took up to five naps a day to boost his creativity. Author Neil Pasricha organizes his week so that one day is completely free from emails, phone calls, meetings, or internet connection—just for creative work.

In the same way a greenhouse is the ideal environment for growing plants, creating the right environment for creativity will allow your best ideas to take root.

Finally, there's no substitute for putting in the reps. Just like yodeling or karate or line dancing, practicing your craft will boost your skills. Give yourself permission to practice without judgement... the ability to do so without being derailed by discouragement will help you unleash your most effective Big Little Breakthroughs.

## A FIVE-MINUTE MORNING RITUAL TO RADICALLY BOOST YOUR CREATIVITY

These days, there are more tips for your morning routine than there are menu items at your local diner (I'll take the artisanal, gluten-free, low-carb egg white and seared free-range, low-sodium pomegranate frittata sandwich, please). Rituals to boost your energy, metabolic health, mindfulness, and peak performance abound, but could you also set up your day to optimize something as squishy as human creativity?

Over the last 20 years, I've spent thousands of hours researching how creativity is cultivated, unleashed, and maximized. In addition to research and interviews with legendary creators around the world, I've applied these skills in the real world—first as a professional jazz guitarist and then as a tech entrepreneur, venture capital investor, and now as an author. Just like other learnable skills, a small amount of daily practice will deliver meaningful results over time. Studying the daily creative rituals of CEO's, Billionaires, celebrity entrepreneurs, and Grammy-award winning musicians, here's a five-minute training regimen that will boost your creative ability:

### 1. The Guzzle (one minute)

Just like software engineering, if you want to change the outputs, you must first change the inputs. I start each day with a one-minute drill where I soak in the creative works of others. This can involve watching interpretive dance online, listening to music, staring at a painting, or taking in some spoken word poetry. A transfer effect occurs when bathing in the genius of others, delivering a jolt of inspiration and priming the creative pump.



## **2. The Highlight Reel (one minute)**

In the same format as a sports highlight reel, reflect back for 30 seconds on a time when your inventiveness was on full tilt. Maybe you cleverly solved a tough problem or discovered a better approach to replace an old system. Maybe it was that time you shined in that big sales pitch and landed the Henderson account. Replaying a time when you were in a state of creative flow helps situate your mind for a repeat performance. Next, take 30 seconds and play a future highlight reel in your mind. This film features you crushing it in a big creative way at some point in the future. The combination of a previous highlight (which demonstrates capability) combined with a future highlight (which illustrates possibility) makes a powerful imprint on your creative consciousness and helps lay the groundwork for a highly imaginative day.

## **3. The Unrelated Problem (one minute)**

Grab any headline from the daily news and challenge yourself to discover six tiny ways that might help improve the situation. That gives you only 10 seconds each, so keep the ideas fast and small. This is like jumping jacks for your creativity, helping you develop both skill and confidence.

## **4. The Time Machine (one minute)**

Imagine it's one year from now and you just savored a gigantic win (got a big promotion, landed a huge account, snagged a major investment, etc.) If you had to identify what role inventive thinking and creative problem solving played in your success, what percentage likely came from creativity vs. traditional "hard skills"? Imagine a quick pie-chart, coloring in the creative portion in a bright color (I'm guessing your colorful slice of pie is at least 30% of the chart). That visual anchor can serve as a powerful reminder as you move throughout your day. Spend any remaining seconds reflecting on the various creative feats that may have led to your newfound success.

### 5. The Sprint (one minute)

Now that your juices are flowing, choose any real-world opportunity or challenge you're facing right now. Aim your creative powers at anything on your mind, big or small, and challenge yourself to see how many ideas you can generate in a 60-second sprint. Let it flow in a judgement-free, stream-of-consciousness manner, shooting for small wins while ditching any worry about quality. Can you think of 10 fresh ideas? 15? 28? This rapid-fire sprint will light up your creativity like a Christmas tree, getting you ready for an especially artistic day ahead.

After this simple five minutes ritual, you're ready to conquer your most pressing challenges and seize your biggest opportunities. In these uncertain, competitive, complex, and rapidly-changing times, unleashing your full creative potential can be just the edge you're looking for. If you want to perform like the legends, prepare like the legends. With just a little daily practice, your capacity to innovate will become limitless.

Creating the right environment for creativity  
will allow your best ideas to take root.

## THE EIGHT OBSESSIONS OF EVERYDAY INNOVATORS

How do innovators—of all shapes and sizes—think and act? How can we give ourselves a meaningful creativity upgrade, elevating our performance in both business and life? What should we do to build creative capacity and discover an abundance of Big Little Breakthroughs?

The following eight core mindsets are used by the world's greatest innovators—and by ordinary people like you and me -to elevate creative output, topple pesky problems, and seize new opportunity. Incorporate them into your life and you'll quickly see the results.

### **OBSESSION #1: FALL IN LOVE WITH THE PROBLEM**

Falling in love with the problem involves taking the time to carefully examine and understand the challenge at hand rather than prematurely landing on a specific solution. We often become so focused on a particular manner of solving a problem that we miss out on those less obvious creative opportunities that can be much more successful. The best innovators remain flexible and open-minded in order to find the optimal approach; more committed to solving the problem than a particular manner of solving it.

Innovators of all shapes and sizes realize that any obstacle can be conquered with enough imagination. They hold a fundamental belief that every barrier can be penetrated, which gives them the moxie to take on even the most difficult challenges.

Everyday innovators run toward problems—not away from them—realizing that friction points are essentially heatmaps for innovation. Many of the world’s greatest innovations (one could argue all of them) have come from an attempt to address some type of burning problem. Let’s see problems for the opportunities they are and look for the right solution—not just the solution that seems to work right in the moment.

## **OBSESSION #2: START BEFORE YOU’RE READY**

Let’s take the initiative to get started now instead of waiting for permission, detailed instructions, or ideal conditions. A willingness to course-correct along the way, adapt to changing circumstances in real-time, and operate with agility is much more valuable than waiting until your entire game plan is fully baked.

Some of the greatest innovations started as something else entirely, but they never would have come into being if their creators didn’t simply start quickly and adapt frequently.

Anyone with a bank account knows the power of compounding interest and innovation works much in the same way. Those who begin quickly and then make consistent, high-frequency deposits are the ones that enjoy the biggest account balance in the end. Think of this phenomenon as Compounding Innovation Interest.

Simply put, you’re far better off starting quickly and adjusting as you go instead of waiting until things are just right.

### **OBSESSION #3: OPEN A TEST KITCHEN**

Innovation is both strengthened and de-risked through experimentation. By building a framework and conditions for testing and creative exploration, ideas are cultivated and optimized. Give your ideas the chance to grow and develop by putting them through their paces—and don't be afraid of what your findings will be.

While it borrows its name from the culinary industry, you don't need to be in the food business to open a test kitchen. Lawyers conduct mock trials to test out their arguments in a safe environment before making their case to a live jury. Surgeons now hone their skills using augmented reality goggles as they practice experimental procedures on robotic patients. Car companies prefer to bang up test dummies rather than real customers, while life insurance sales professionals conduct simulated presentations so they can optimize their approach before stepping in front of paying customers. Your test kitchen may be a designated physical space or it could be a metaphorical one that lives only in the hearts and minds of your team. The common thread is a safe, well-equipped environment where you can invent, test, and refine.

### **OBSESSION #4: BREAK IT TO FIX IT**

It's time to ditch the tired adage of 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' In fact, everyday innovators proactively go out of their way to deconstruct, examine, and rebuild their ideas and the world around them in order to deliver superior products, systems, processes, and works of art. They don't just look at failures and ask, "Why isn't this working?" They look at successes and ask, "Why isn't this working even better?" They're willing to rock the boat in order to design an even better boat.

In the same way that the milk in your fridge has an expiration date, have you ever wondered why a mandatory refresh date doesn't exist on most things in the business world? When a new system or process is enacted, why is it assumed that the approach should be everlasting? It doesn't make sense to ascribe permanence in a world that's changing so rapidly.

## It's time to ditch the tired adage of 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'

It's our responsibility to seek new versions, to deconstruct and rebuild, to reimagine and pursue a better way. Everyday innovators are constantly examining current conditions, looking for opportunities to break and then create new ones. Upgrades can pay significant dividends when applied to products, team, production practices, safety standards, sales efforts, training, and nearly every other system, big or small. The same method used to reinvent an industry can apply all the way down to retooling how you run your Monday morning team meeting.

Wondering where to start? Try the **Deconstruct, Examine, Rebuild** framework...

**STEP 1: DECONSTRUCT.** The first order of business is to carefully disassemble the current approach into its individual components. Physical or metaphorical, deconstruct your target into the smallest possible fragments.



**STEP 2: EXAMINE.** Now that the components are isolated, it's time to examine them with the diligence of a scientific researcher. Ask questions like these:

1. What is this thing made of?
2. What's missing?
3. What was the thinking and context that led to its initial creation?
4. Why did this work in the past?
5. What's different today?
6. How has the customer's need changed since this was originally conceived?
7. What are the core rules, truisms, traditions or beliefs that are currently holding this together, but could possibly be challenged?
8. Where else in the world does a similar problem or pattern exist?
9. What technical advances have emerged since this version's construction that could be implemented for improvement?
10. How durable is it, and where are the likely fault lines or soft spots?

**STEP 3: REBUILD.** Using the insights from Step Two, it's now time to reassemble the pieces with the goal of upgrading the end result. Give yourself permission to tinker a bit. Run another list of questions:

1. What is one new component I could add?
2. What's one thing I could subtract? Or substitute?
3. If I could wave my magic wand to make this better, what would the end result look like?
4. How can this be reassembled to save time or money? Improve quality? Solve a new problem?
5. How do other people solve a similar problem in my field? Outside my field?
6. What ideas could I borrow from nature or art that could inspire an upgrade?
7. How might I make it bigger, such as more horse power or computing capacity? Smaller, such as a leaner footprint, less waste, faster delivery?
8. If I have several possibilities, how can I build a prototype to quickly test them before proceeding?

## OBSESSION #5: REACH FOR WEIRD

Successful everyday innovators are downright allergic to the tried-and-true. They prefer unexpected approaches to obvious ones, challenging conventional wisdom by searching for unorthodox ideas. They have a penchant for discovering oddball, sometimes even bizarre ideas in order to discover better outcomes.

Most of us make decisions—big and small—within a generally accepted range of possibilities. We've established left and right guardrails to ensure we don't drift too far afield, largely to protect ourselves from unfavorable consequences. Yet, the very act of playing it safe has become the riskiest move of all. We may not get laughed out of the room, but we run the far more frightening risk of mediocrity and irrelevance. To fight back, everyday innovators push themselves to explore the unexpected. They discard obvious ideas in favor of unorthodox ones. They realize that those strange, peculiar, weird ideas are the ones that stand out and make history.

The very act of playing it safe has become the riskiest move of all. ... To fight back, everyday innovators push themselves to explore the unexpected. They discard obvious ideas in favor of unorthodox ones.

## **OBSESSION #6: USE EVERY DROP OF TOOTHPASTE**

Counterintuitively, being resource-constrained can fuel creative breakthroughs so we must develop a scrappy approach to doing more with less. Resourcefulness and ingenuity become powerful weapons in the fight for superior innovation.

When most of us think of innovation, we quickly create a mental checklist of all the resources we lack. There never seems to be enough time, money, raw materials, support, bandwidth, computing power, training, or staff. We allow the apparent lack of resources to trick us into thinking we can't forge ahead, but in fact, getting scrappy is a hallmark of creativity. Everyday innovators use their internal resource of imagination to compensate for any lack of external resources. They realize that constraints drive breakthroughs far more often than abundance. They outpunch their satiated rivals by remaining hungry, squeezing every last drop out of their proverbial toothpaste tubes.

## **OBSESSION #7: DON'T FORGET THE DINNER MINT**

Adding small, creative flourishes can yield significantly improved results. An extra dose of surprise-and-delight enables new invention, competitive edge, and individual achievement.

A dinner mint can represent any unexpected addition, from extra ideas to time savings to physical goodies. If you're asked to deliver a report on your top five competitors, a dinner mint version would be to expand your efforts to produce your report on seven competitors instead. Or maybe you could format the report in a colorful, well-designed presentation instead of a dull, black and white document.

If a client is expecting your response by Thursday afternoon, a dinner mint might be to shave a day off the timeline to deliver on Wednesday morning. While a dinner mint could certainly be a physical gift, it doesn't have to be. Rather, you embrace the dinner mint concept every time you overdeliver. Upgrading your work product with just 5% more creativity can give you the big-time boost you're looking for.

### **OBSESSION #8: FALL SEVEN TIMES, STAND EIGHT**

Setbacks are inevitable, but everyday innovators use creative resilience to overcome adversity. Mistakes are a natural and important part of the innovation process and can be flipped into advantages when studied and embraced.

The Fall Seven, Stand Eight philosophy is best described as the intersection of creativity and resilience. It's not a Pollyanna you-can-do-anything cliché, but rather a deliberate response to adversity. Instead of dogged persistence, everyday innovators use setbacks as an opportunity to bounce back with a different approach each time, using inventive thinking to guide the way. Removing the judgement of right or wrong, they view stumbles as data which can inform subsequent creative attempts. Fusing tenacity with imagination, the fight is won through a series of creative tweaks and adaptations.

**Mistakes are a natural and important part of the innovation process and can be flipped into advantages when studied and embraced.**



## **DON'T THROW AWAY YOUR SHOT**

Now that you have the requisite tools and mindsets, it's time to take your shot. It will take courage and commitment. But as we've learned, even a shot that misses the mark is better than the shot not taken.

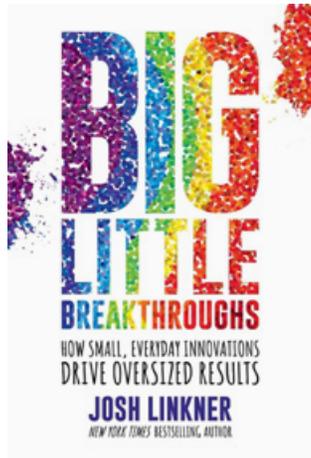
Author Nido Quebein put it beautifully when he acknowledged "The price of discipline is always less than the pain of regret." While it takes an investment of discipline to fully cultivate our creative skills, our inventiveness becomes the key that unlocks the vault of our full potential.

As you gear up to take your shot, remember that even the most world-changing innovations are nothing more than a collage of tiny creative acts. Your most successful path forward isn't taking gigantic, wild swings but rather to cultivate small, daily shots of creativity that coalesce into meaningful results. When you build the habit and develop your skills, your shots become less risky and more impactful.

**It's time to take your shot. 🎯**



# Info



Ready to dig deeper into the book?  
Buy a copy of  
[Big Little Breakthroughs.](#)

Want copies for your organization or for an event? We can help:  
[customerservice@porchlightbooks.com](mailto:customerservice@porchlightbooks.com) 800-236-7323

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Linkner is a Creative Troublemaker. He passionately believes that all human beings have incredible creative capacity, and he's on a mission to unlock inventive thinking and creative problem solving to help leaders, individuals, and communities soar. He has been the founder and CEO of five tech companies, which sold for a combined value of over \$200 million and is the author of four books including the New York Times Bestsellers, *Disciplined Dreaming* and *The Road to Reinvention*. He has invested in and/or mentored over 100 startups and is the Founding Partner of Detroit Venture Partners. Today, Josh serves as Chairman and co-founder of Platypus Labs, an innovation research, training, and consulting firm. He has twice been named the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year and is the recipient of the United States Presidential Champion of Change Award.



## Porchlight

Curated and edited by the people of Porchlight, ChangeThis is a vehicle for big ideas to spread. Keep up with the latest book releases and ideas at [porchlightbooks.com](http://porchlightbooks.com).

This document was created on May 19, 2021 and is based on the best information available at that time.

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit Creative Commons. Cover art from Adobe Stock.

### SHARE THIS

Pass along a copy of this manifesto to others.

### SUBSCRIBE

Sign up for e-news to learn when our latest manifestos are available.