WHAT MAKES A CHANGE MAKER A CHANGE MAKER?

Amy Radin

Innovation has moved

from a distant abstraction in the business world to a front-and-center deliverable that is expected to show evidence of impact. But there is no guaranteed formula for finding ideas and executing on them for sustained impact. Users and buyers set moving expectations, investors are demanding and unforgiving, and society expects companies to contribute beyond the bottom line.

Change makers operate within the polarities of innovation—innovation is cool yet threatening, inevitable yet unpredictable, attractive yet avoided—and remain undeterred. They want to solve real problems by getting stuff done, even with the uncertainty, unpredictability, and ambiguity that defines their journey. They are guided by purpose, and are driven to create value benefiting investors and employees, users, buyers, partners, and the broader community in which they exist. They don't accept the status quo. They operate with urgency, and speed their progress by rolling up their sleeves and learning on the fly.

Last year I conducted a series of expert interviews with nearly 50 corporate innovators, startup founders, investors, and thought leaders to gain insights into what makes a change maker, well, make change. Seven attributes came through consistently, across diverse sectors, and among companies of all sizes and stages of maturity. Like the innovations they pursue, change makers follow a path that is neither clear nor secure. Their days do not lead to a guarantee of rewards, and their work cannot be defined by a programmable answer. Luck and serendipity play roles. But, by breaking down the methods, behaviors, and mindsets change makers are in the habit of adopting, any aspiring change maker can better their odds.

Change makers share these seven attributes:

1. They are driven by purpose, not fixed targets, and exceed traditional notions of results.

2. They iterate and collaborate for speed, to conserve capital, and to manage risk.

3. They progress with whatever resources they have. Change makers simply know they will find what they need along the way.

4. They turn to their well-tended networks to chip in guidance and support.

5. They see surprise and serendipity as routine, and use both to gain leverage.

6. They explore and observe to find the real insights in and beyond the data.

7. They get in the game, stay in the game, and execute. As a result change makers make the future happen. They don't watch and wait for the future to unfold.

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Stu Libby is Cofounder and CEO of ZipDrug, a New York City startup taking on the drugstore chains by creating an alternative patient experience to fill and refill prescription medication. Two 800-pound gorillas, CVS and Walgreen's, dominate the US market, particularly in major metro areas.

Stu spent over a decade as an ad tech executive, participating in the exit of DoubleClick to Google in 2008. Despite this accomplishment, for Stu, something was missing: "I knew my instinct to move on was correct when I told my new manager not to worry, that I didn't plan to be around for long, and he had absolutely no reaction."

Stu's dad fell sick, and, following a hospitalization, required prescription medications. The experience of transitioning from hospital to home, and getting prescriptions filled, was not merely messy and inconvenient, it could have been life-threatening. Stu saw an opportunity to solve a problem that had commercial potential and also reflected his values.

Sure, a major goal for Stu as he builds ZipDrug is to generate financial returns, and he certainly knows what that takes. His vision is also to close holes in the business-as-usual journey from illness to good health. Stu is using technology, data, and partnerships to enable a corner-drug-store experience in the digital world—an experience that ZipDrug aspires to make proactive, relevant, compassionate, and connected.

Founders often identify market needs through personal experiences. In the best cases, personal experiences are followed by exploration of whether other people have the same or different needs, and founders question how their purpose connects to market opportunities. Why are they going after this problem? What is it they really want to achieve?

Having purpose is not a matter of writing a vision statement that ends up as a slogan on a conference room or coffee station wall.

Purpose means knowing what you stand for—why you want to exist and what mark you want to make. Change makers who put thought into defining their purpose and then connect it to execution energize others with their courage and commitment

Purpose comes from self-awareness, not brainstorming sessions or focus groups. It provides a basis for big and small choices. It triggers alignment across values, principles, and execution. When purpose is baked into the culture, things happen the right way and everyone knows what that right way is. And when there is a choice between the purpose-driven way and some other way, the team course-corrects. They work harder, work smarter, work better, have passion about what they are doing, and are closer to the brand's constituents. That is why the purpose-driven way is more sustainable (and joyful) than the alternatives.

Purpose is the fuel that gets entrepreneurs and corporate innovators so fired up that they will not be deterred from pursuing transformative results.

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Last year I went back for my first visit since childhood to Thomas Edison's West Orange, New Jersey lab, where evidence of why Edison became one of the greatest innovators of all time was apparent everywhere. The 1,093 United States patents bearing his name are central to his legacy, along with his dedication to prototyping as the way to discover ideas and translate them into commercial products.

Edison kept on hand thousands of samples of just about every kind of material imaginable. He continuously enlarged his collection, which he saw as a source of inspiration and enablement. He focused on turning new ideas that could potentially lead to functioning, feasible models into prototypes that could eventually be manufactured, distributed and sold at scale.

Edison role-modeled the behavior and mindset that in today's startups drive ideas to commercialization. Beyond iterating in the lab, he also iterated to figure out whether business models supported each of his inventions. He addressed operational and manufacturing requirements, and never abandoned testing and learning to uncover new breakthroughs and confirm market fit.

Edison believed in collaboration. "Unlike most inventors, Edison depended upon dozens of 'muckers' to build and test his ideas." Working for him involved long hours but engaging work. Charles Clarke, who worked at the lab, recalled:

"Laboratory life with Edison was a strenuous but joyous life for all, physically, mentally and emotionally. We worked long night hours during the week, frequently to the limit of human

endurance; and then we had time off from Saturday to late Sunday afternoon for rest and recreation. ... Here breathed a little community of kindred spirits, all in young manhood, enthusiastic about their work, expectant of great results; moreover often loudly emphatic in joke and vigorous in action."

Iterating is a way to learn. Engaging users in a live rendition of a product or service, however rough, narrows gaps between what may be a great idea inside the change maker's head and a tangible, functional, and sought-after real world product.

Iterating prototypes and letting users play with them begins to uncover answers to questions like:

- Does it function?

- Does it do what it was intended to do?

- Does it meet quality standards and expectations?

- Can it be replicated at scale, and at what cost?

- Does it solve the problem it was intended to solve, and does it do so effectively?

- How does it perform relative to existing alternatives?

- What reactions does it evoke for potential users?

Seen through the lens of play, tinkering with a prototype is just a way to figure things out. Contrary to being the domain of technically trained experts, life experience proves that even a child can do it.

Creating and playing with prototypes also builds user, team, and investor buy-in. Such collaboration nurtures creativity, and encourages rallying around a concept. Teams that embrace prototyping advance innovations—testing and learning, engaging with users and with each other, and experimenting without fear of failure. These behaviors become essential for raising money, too. Whether investors are corporate executives, angel investors, or venture capitalists, "show and tell" builds understanding between founders and funders.

Change makers progress with whatever resources they have—knowing they will find what they need along the way.

Drew Lakatos is CEO and cofounder of ActiveProtective, a health tech startup whose invention is best described as an airbag that deploys automatically from a belt to reduce injuries and deaths occurring when seniors fall. His purpose is to solve a tough problem that can save lives and preserve quality of life.

In 2005, Drew and his wife, Kelley (a physician's assistant specializing in trauma care), attended the holiday party at St. Mary Medical Center outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Among the attendees was Dr. Robert Buckman, director of the Trauma Unit. An emergency call during the party led Drew to witness the aftermath of an eighty-year-old woman's fall down a flight of stairs during Christmas dinner with her family. The woman passed away in the Trauma Unit from injuries suffered during her fall. Drew saw the woman's death as an avoidable tragedy caused by something we all do every day without even thinking—going up and down stairs.

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Why wasn't this problem already solved? Well, others had sort of solved it. Existing solutions ranged from thick, protective padding inserted into tight-fitting spandex undershorts, alarms and sensors to notify an attendant of a fall after the fact, even helmets. These products were aimed at nursing homes and senior living residences. Garments were restrictive, and hard to put on. They reduced quality of life. They were a reminder of lost mobility and independence. Not surprisingly, these products saw limited adoption. The need for a better answer was there.

Dr. Buckman shared his inflatable cushioning concept designed to pop open instantaneously with Drew—something thin enough when collapsed to not be uncomfortable, and as easy to put on as a belt. It would offer life-saving performance, but without discomfort. Drew found that:

"There are a million great ideas. The interesting thing about the evolution of our idea was that research suggested it would work, but until initial investors came in and funded device development far enough along to produce legitimate evidence, we couldn't move forward."

The most remarkable moment in Drew's story was how he went about assembling the device prototype that would allow testing to generate sufficient evidence that the product would deploy quickly enough and at the right moment. "People were asking, 'how do you know it will work?' We knew we could tune the air bag to deploy correctly, but everyone was asking, 'how can you be sure?'

"One day I grabbed my son and ran to a junkyard in search of non-bloody air bags from wrecked cars. I took the inner tubes out of my bicycle tires so I could make a sort of bladder inside the air bags to adjust the loads. I got an invitation to do testing at a VA mobility lab. I showed up with a suitcase full of airbags that I had cut out of junked cars, with bicycle inner tubes installed inside, sewn together by my dry cleaning lady for two bucks apiece. We were able to beat the best product on the market. We had the data we needed to prove effectiveness."

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Drew embodies the change maker's doggedness to earn the first vote of confidence that initial funding represents, then execute the plan, sticking to dates and budgets. They find the path forward no matter what. They work the ins and outs, the unexpecteds, the good news, bad news, great news, and terrible news, often knowing the news before it even happens. They live steps ahead, in the future. Living in the present means being too late and burning resources in a game of constant catch-up.

This level of resourcefulness depends on being able to see and plan for potential derailment before it happens. Change makers refuse to give up, but they are not stubborn to a destructive extreme. They are undaunted by the conflicts inherent in changing the status quo. They are energized by the potential contribution they can make.

Change makers don't wait for resources to be allocated or approved. They have a knack for tracking down the best resources and taking advantage of the vast capabilities that are out there. They search and use the many free or low-cost tools widely available in our self-service world. They are networked.

Being resourceful isn't annual plan or budget-dependent. Quite the opposite—resourcefulness liberates change makers from putting budget approval on the critical path. As the saying goes, constraints breed creativity, whether those constraints are self-imposed or externally driven. Drew Lakatos lived this as he combed junkyards for airbags from totaled cars that could be reused to prove the viability of a sophisticated medical device.

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It is surprising that there are people out there who still narrowly associate networking with a job search.

Change makers take a wider view of networking: They value relationships with all kinds of people. They are givers, to whom great things happen serendipitously because they have invested in relationships with heart and authenticity. They form genuine no-strings-attached relationships, which is—perhaps ironically—the best way to ensure people are there to help them along in unforeseeable ways.

Who the change maker knows and how skilled they are at forming and tapping into relationships surpasses technical skill, especially when survival demands knowledge unrelated to their prior experience. Well cared for relationships supercharge innovation. Getting from idea to execution, or problem to solution, may be just a phone call or cup of coffee away. The costly, unforced errors that may cause a startup to burn too much cash or erode the c-suite's confidence can be circumvented by a network that can offer vital pieces of advice.

Change makers are people attracters and connectors. Some are intensely introverted, so do not imagine they are all the life of the party. But, they come across as people whom others would like to know, they express a point of view that others want to hear, and they convey their purpose so that those around them feel motivated by it and want to pitch in.

Change makers know that putting effort into sustaining and expanding their network is not formulaic, and that it's a life-long pursuit. They know that the effort will deliver many rewards, both tangible and intangible, professional and personal.

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Change makers see surprise and serendipity as routine, and use both to gain leverage.

A journalist asked me recently what the most surprising finding was that emerged from the research for *The Change Maker's Playbook*.

My answer was how complementary startups and grown-up companies are to each other, and how, irrespective of organizational setting, change makers share consistent attributes, challenges, success factors, and derailers. Theirs can be a lonely role, and they are in a position to bring much to their peer change makers to speed progress and avoid mistakes.

But at least one divide separates the two, which may be among the toughest obstacles for change makers within established businesses. At these companies, surprise and serendipity may be viewed as unpleasant, as negatives to be preempted and avoided. When there is a focus on hitting the annual plan one quarter at a time, deviation from the norms are negatives to be managed away. Change makers operating free of this outlook assume surprise and serendipity may present themselves at any moment. They are able to be opportunistic. They pick up added momentum. They are better able to handle and leverage whatever comes their way. They even put themselves in positions to allow for surprise and serendipity. They are incredibly focused and stingy about how they spend their time, but they manage to be open to stumbling across new relationships, new insights, new partnerships, and new technologies that make the critical difference at vital moments.

Change makers explore and observe— to find the real insights in and beyond the data.

Marcia Tal is a change maker, currently as an entrepreneur and advisor. Earlier in her career, Marcia invented, shaped, and led Citi Decision Management, a global powerhouse analytics function. She led efforts to adapt and apply her team's skills and methods to understanding and acting upon the marketing, financial, and operational implications of digital channels as they were being opened up within the credit card category, which had been built upon a direct-to-consumer telephone and mail-based business model.

Figuring out the impacts took art and science. Data of course mattered, but so did having empathy for customers. Structured data sets were a hugely important resource, made productive because they were approached with insight, intuition, and observation, often beginning with qualitative reasoning and hunches that led to increasing precision.

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Marcia shares a wonderful family anecdote highlighting the impact of paying attention to data—all of the data—and then seeing insights through to action:

"For decades around the 1950s, my uncle Norman owned a store—Norman's Everybody Store—in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He would ask everybody who came through the door the same question: "What do you need?" That was his way of gathering data. He could sell anything, and he did, from cowboy boots to hats to women's pajamas to lingerie to men's underwear. And he applied a very important insight to his location— always next to a bar. What data drove the insight? He knew that people went to the bar after they got paid. So he knew when they had cash, and he wanted to be second in line, after the bartender, to get some of it."

Norman understood his business-model levers. He gathered and applied data about how customer behaviors drove sales. He aligned his location strategy to take advantage of findable and measurable business drivers.

At Norman's Everybody Store, learning from data was as much a part of how things worked as it is at today's high-tech startups.

Sure, understanding and acting upon customer data back in Norman's day may look primitive from the perspective of a Google, Facebook and Amazon world. But what Norman lacked in technology was more than offset by his explorer and observer mindset, and how he translated insights into decisions and actions based upon the data he collected.

Change makers get in the game, stay in the game, and execute—and as a result make the future happen. They don't watch and wait for the future to unfold.

From a vacation beach chair in 1976, Citibank CEO John Reed penned a vision to transform the retail banking business model. His "Memo from the Beach" was a handwritten call to action to replace a deposits and loans business with one based on customer experience. The memo, which went from words on paper to trigger the reinvention of retail banking, continues to circulate today among Citi alumni.

Mastercard global board member Steve Freiberg joined Citi under Reed's leadership. Steve says about Reed, "Here was a guy who was young but senior. He went to his boss and said, 'I've got a great idea. I am going to take a machine and stuff $50,000 into it and leave it in the lobby of a bank branch. Over the weekend after we go home people can come and go, and take money out as they please.'"

The bankers sitting on executive row must have thought Reed's vision was crazy. But he persisted, and moved Citi to disrupt the sleepy model of Monday through Friday, 9 A.M. to 3 P.M. branch banking. In so doing, Reed defined the business model parameters for what is now a given—a twenty-four/seven banking experience where people bank when, where, and how they prefer. Mobile devices, artificial intelligence, voice recognition, and other capabilities continue to expand what "anytime, anyplace" means, advancing the vision seeded over forty years ago.

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The business model for twenty-four/seven banking came to life in the market as the service experience in the ATM channel and the customer service platform. Once twenty-four/seven banking went live, learning continued about customer segments, preferences and behavior, how each impacted revenues and expenses, and how best to deploy technology and data. The business model became a live, evolving ecosystem that could not have been derived from sitting on the sidelines evaluating spreadsheets and management presentations.

Fast forward to the present, and change makers' future-shaping efforts are in the headlines every day. Whether in the public eye or not, their willingness to act upon possibilities that are hard for most people to imagine, let alone create, is proactive and often provocative. That's why they experience the gamut of praise, doubt, admiration, and questioning from others.

Being in the game takes courage—to challenge norms, innovate the experience, and believe in the potential to execute at scale based on the view of some future point that cannot be seen yet by others. An entirely new future cannot be brought into focus using the filters of the rear view mirror data mature businesses depend upon to operate and assess performance. Change makers foresee the trends that rewrite industry norms or even create whole new sectors taking on big, emerging problems.

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Innovation comes about more as a series of irregular, interconnected, multi-dimensional, moving and messy loops than in a two-dimensional, linear process, so there is risk to presenting any framework for change makers on a two-dimensional plane. But unpacking and simplifying this complexity around common themes also can help change makers see in tangible chunks how to make progress, pursue their purpose, and make a difference.

Economic and social stability depend upon innovation. The friction of capital and information, and the impediments that used to be caused by distance, time, and space are gone, but getting from imagination to execution continues to be full of challenge. **Change makers close the gap between napkin-back idea and real-world impact. Theirs are hard-won achievements, and they deserve our support, mentorship, and encouragement.** ⬚

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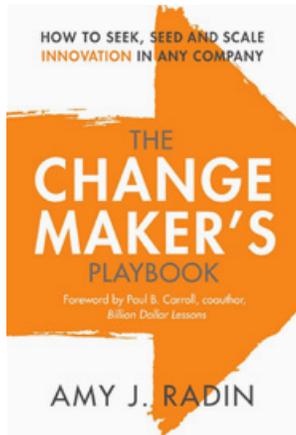
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About the author

Amy Radin, author of *The Change Maker's Playbook: How to Seek, Seed and Scale Innovation In Any Company*, is a Fortune 100 chief marketing and innovation officer with a record of moving ideas to performance in complex businesses, including Citi, American Express, E*TRADE and AXA. Amy is passionate about developing innovations that can create sustainable, business-changing impact. She now advises high-growth start-ups on business development and marketing.

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