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I find life meaningless

In these difficult times, we’ve made a number of our coronavirus articles free for all readers. To get all of HBR’s content delivered to your inbox, sign up for the Daily Alert newsletter. In dire times, it’s natural to question the meaningfulness of your work. When your world is shaken by a massive disruption, your job may seem insignificant and even pointless. On the other hand, crises can also heighten feelings of purpose and connection — something we saw in studying the response to 9/11 in New York and to the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto. As one ICU director who lived through that outbreak told us, “I felt something important could happen at any minute and that I had to be at work.” An ICU nurse recalled: “There was a sense that if we don’t lock this down, nobody will. We were the few. A lot of people bonded in unusual ways.” Crises lead many people to find deep value in their jobs, develop professionally, and grow personally. Today most of us don’t have frontline roles in the fight against coronavirus, of course. But we all can still discover ways to contribute through our everyday work, by taking these three steps: 1. Empower yourself with small actions. When you’re feeling overwhelmed, obsessing over the big things that you can’t influence is bad for your mental well-being. Instead, try to act on whatever aspect of the situation is still in your control, no matter how minor. That will bolster your feelings of personal effectiveness and make it easier to then move on to more meaningful goals — to think about what else you can do to improve the situation for yourself, your colleagues, or your community. During the 9/11 attacks, Manhattan resident Nicole Blackman was as lost as anyone in the city. She wasn’t trained to do rescue work and didn’t belong to any emergency management organizations. But she felt the need to help in any way she could — so she decided to donate some sandwiches to the rescue workers at Ground Zero. From there things quickly escalated: After delivering the sandwiches, she stayed around for a while at the volunteer drop-off point. When the person in charge of operations left for the day, Blackman ended up taking over. In a few weeks’ time, as she recounted in Damon DiMarco’s oral history, Tower Stories, she was leading an ad hoc volunteer organization involving hundreds of people, with job titles, divisions of labor, and an expanded mission. Most government agencies in the area even assumed her group was an established nonprofit like the Red Cross. Blackman didn’t stay in her apartment wondering how the world better. Instead, she did something, and as a result she put herself in contact with people who were organizing a response, discovered what rescue workers needed, and became a resource for others. The idea here is just to get moving: Try a number of things and see what sticks. We assume that our goals determine our actions. But the reverse is also true. Our small actions generate feedback that allows us to discover more-meaningful goals. 2. Consider how your unique skills can address crisis-related challenges. Proactive employees are increasingly using “job crafting” to actively redesign their work to better fit their strengths, passions, and motives. Part of this approach, according to Yale professor Amy Wrzesniewski, involves simply rethinking how you view your work. After the 9/11 attacks, for instance, many employees of financial service firms doubted the value of their jobs, yet others discovered new purpose in them: Keeping their companies running was a way to defy the terrorists, help their country rebound from economic harm, and honor their fallen colleagues. As one banker interviewed by DiMarco put it, “I’m not a doctor. I couldn’t rush to the hospital to put people back together. I’m not a construction worker, so I couldn’t dig. I tried to give blood, but the line was four hours long...So the way I fight back is to make sure our company is not affected.” Similarly, during the current crisis you can fight the recession that the pandemic is likely to cause simply by keeping your business operating. Remember that it’s providing paychecks that feed families and helping vendors do the same. But even more significantly, you can mold your job to contribute solutions to your community’s current problems. Start by taking an inventory of your skills and resources, and then think creatively about where they could be put to good use. If you’re an expert in investments, for instance, you could dedicate a few hours to giving financial advice to struggling entrepreneurs or those who’ve lost their jobs. If you’re an architect, you could redesign offices, restaurants, and schools to be more virus-proof, and if you’re in marketing, you could help nonprofits providing vital services with their fundraising campaigns. A diverse set of groups is affected by the crisis, so there are countless ways to provide assistance. And by partnering with others, you can maximize your impact. If you don’t yet have an idea, you might start by participating in one of the hackathons that are popping up, at which diverse teams try to innovate ways to help those hurt by the crisis. When the pandemic hit, Samuli Kokki, a service sales account manager at Cisco, noticed that many friends and acquaintances whose livelihoods depended on meeting customers in person were struggling financially. Because of his role, Kokki had a keen knowledge of digital meeting solutions. Partly during his work hours and partly during his leisure time, he guided several organizations through the digital transition. For instance, he helped a real estate agency design and set up a service to display and sell houses remotely and a children’s art school with remote operations that allowed the kids to continue their classes from home. 3. Use the crisis as an opportunity to connect with a more purposeful future. If you’re in a tight spot, there might not be much you can do right now to enhance the meaningfulness of your work. Maybe you’ve been laid off or are so overwhelmed keeping your head above water you have no time for anything else. But you can still find meaning by focusing on the future. Humans’ ability to mentally time travel is unique in the animal kingdom. We don’t just experience the present; we also can relieve the past and envision the future. And research led by Adam Waytz from Kellogg School of Management shows that when we exercise this ability, it enhances how much meaning we feel in the present. Crises interrupt the passive unfolding of our lives and make us more aware of what truly matters. So we’re most apt to gain life-changing insights during them. A crisis can help you realize that what you want out of your career requires a change in direction. A decade from now, many people may look back at this moment as a turning point at which their path toward a more meaningful existence started. With that in mind, think about what your potential dream job might be in 10 years’ time. But don’t imagine just one job; imagine several. Now work backward to imagine the paths that took you there. At the same time, explore where your current back-burner projects and dormant passions could lead you. In 2001 Jeremy Boman’s booming telecommunications business was just five blocks away from Ground Zero, and as a result of the attacks it lost customers and was forced to close the following spring. Although those months were highly stressful, Boman in hindsight saw them as fortunate: “September 11 focused me on thinking about how I would spend my time on earth — how I would contribute to the greater good. Not just selling internet connections for money,” he told Wendy Healy, author of Life Is Too Short: Stories of Transformation and Renewal After 9/11. That led him to take a fundraising job at Lutheran Social Services of New York, where he met his future wife. Eventually he went into social entrepreneurship, founding RISE, a nonprofit that provides entrepreneurship, employment, and character development training to currently and formerly incarcerated men and women. Through the reflection the crisis triggered, he said, “I discovered who I was and found a career and meaning for my own life.” Finding purpose during a crisis is more than finding a temporary situation bearable. You didn’t choose the circumstances, but you can choose what to make out of them. Start with small actions and identify how your own skill set could be put to best use. By taking a step or two forward you will not only make a contribution today but reach out toward a more meaningful future. If our content helps you contend with coronavirus and other challenges, please consider subscribing to HBR. A subscription purchase is the best way to support the creation of these resources. “I’m not saying that one should opt to kill oneself,” Allen said. “But the truth of the matter is, when you think of it, every 100 years, there’s a big flush, and everybody in the world is gone. And there’s a new group of people. And that gets flushed, and there’s a new group of people. And this goes on and on interminably — and I don’t want to upset you — toward no particular end, no rhyme or reason.” And the universe, as you know from the best of physicists, is coming apart, and eventually there will be nothing, absolutely nothing. All the great works of Shakespeare, and Beethoven, and Da Vinci, all that will be gone. Now, not for a long time, but shorter than you think, really, because the sun is going to burn out much earlier than the universe vanishes, so you don’t have to wait for the universe to vanish. It’ll happen earlier than that. So all these plays and these symphonies, the height of human achievement, will be gone completely. There’ll be no time, no space, nothing at all. Just zero. That’s why over the years, I’ve never written or made movies about political themes. Because while they do have current critical importance, in the large scheme of things, only the big questions matter, and the answers to those big questions are very, very depressing. What I would recommend — this is the solution that I’ve come up with — is distraction. That’s all you can do! You get up, you can be distracted by your love life, by the baseball game, by the movies, by the nonsense. Can I get my kid into this private school? Will this girl go out with me Saturday night? Can I think of an ending for the third act of my play? Am I going to get the promotion in my office? All this stuff, but in the end the universe burns out. So I think it’s completely meaningless, and to be honest, my characters portray this feeling. Have a good weekend." VIEW MORE PHOTOS> The decision to move downtown was easy for businessman Bryan Pitts. Thanks to active urban revitalization efforts, new residential buildings and chic restaurants were springing up within blocks of his office, in the heart of Little Rock, Arkansas. The possibility of a comfortable home just a quick stroll from work made his suburban digs (a 2,800-square-foot patio-style house) and his commute feel less and less appealing. There was one challenge inherent in the move, however: The loft-style apartment Pitts chose in a high-rise with panoramic southwestern views of the city skyline and the Arkansas River meant he would have to scale down to just 993 square feet of living space. “I knew this would be a great place to have friends over, and I love to entertain,” he says. “But it had needed to feel like a real home, which seemed problematic in such a small area.” To help the loft live large, Pitts enlisted his brother, Brett, and Kevin Walsh, co-owners of Bear-Hill Interiors, a local interior-design business and retail store. “When we first saw the apartment, we agreed that the view was wonderful and should be played up,” says Walsh. “But when you stood at the front door, you could see nearly the entire place. It needed to be divided into functional zones, without making it feel closed in.” With that goal in mind, the design duo created two partitions containing storage and other practical features that make the dividers function like built-in furniture. These organize the apartment into distinct spaces-foyer, kitchen, living area, bedroom-without blocking light, views, or foot traffic. The foyer’s partial wall, for example, contains on its reverse the kitchen sink, prep counter, and cupboards. Likewise, each side of a freestanding cabinet separating the living and sleeping quarters holds open display shelves, enclosed storage, and a central niche with a flat-screen television. Painting all the walls of the apartment a tranquil sage green, one of Bryan’s favorite colors, helped unify the space while making it feel more expensive. Adding to the effect are the dark-stained maple floors throughout. Keeping the furniture low-slung and dressed in compatible, muted earth tones is another designer trick that enhances the sense of roominess. “It also helps make the windows the focal point,” says Walsh. “So the view becomes part of the interior, making the apartment seem much more open and welcoming.” For added appeal, the designers opted for textured upholstery with crisp, menswear-feel styling, including living room armchairs in taupe wool flannel and the bedroom’s custom padded headboard of cream-colored linen. “Such fabrics work well because they have a masculine appearance and they’re durable,” says Walsh. “And since they’re bright colors, you can chime with the decor with bright pillows and accessories, for a quick mood lift.” In keeping with the overall palette, the kitchen features walnut-stained and a backsplash of soft-green glass tiles. Its 4-by-6-foot glass-and-steel island, the only thing that separates it from the living area, does triple duty as a prep counter, dining table, and buffet for the frequent cocktail parties Pitts hosts. “This has become such a comfortable place,” he says. “All my friends like to get together here and just watch the sun set.” perfect palette To keep the living area’s muted, one-color scheme from appearing bland, designers Brett Pitts and Kevin Walsh, of Bear-Hill Interiors, teamed smooth and nubby textures, which add depth and interest to the room. Club chair Follo wool flannel in taupe #8699-03. Larsen, through Cowtan & Tout, 212-647-6900 Scroll armchair Cotton corduroy in olive #LFY10812F. Ralph Lauren, 888-475-7674; rhhome.polo.com • Sofa Nubby, Arnett chenille in tan #HW0844KB. Hinson & Company, 212-475-4100 This content is created and maintained by a third party, and imported onto this page to help users provide their email addresses. You may be able to find more information about this and similar content at piano.io If your goal is growth, the only way to achieve it is to market a product or service worth talking about—a purple cow (as I called them in my last book). With all the clutter out there, you’re either remarkable or invisible.As this idea has spread, people keep coming back to me, saying (often, whining) three things: Our stuff is boring and we can’t change it. I want to make a purple cow, but my boss won’t let me. I don’t have any great ideas for making something remarkable. This is my answer.1. Our Stuff Is Boring! (Innovation Is Soft, Not Hard)Most on innovation is about paradigm shifts, big projects, huge R&D, and technical innovations. It’s about nanotechnology and space farming. Most real innovation, though, is actually about stuff such as fast lube-jog shops, cell-phone pricing plans, and purple ketchup.These are what I like to call “soft innovations.” That’s what really works—the commonsense, creative stuff that requires initiative and curiosity, not an advanced degree. If it satisfies the consumer and gets him to tell other people what he likes, it’s a soft innovation. And if it catches on and becomes something the consumer wants, then it becomes a “free prize.” A free prize is the thing that makes a product remarkable. It’s the thing that gets talked about. And more often than not, the free prize has nothing to do with the core benefit the product offers. It’s something extra. Free prizes are fashionable or fun or surprising. They rarely deliver more of what we were buying in the first place.Is soft innovation a gimmick? No, it’s the gimmick transformed. It’s yogurt in a tube so you don’t need a spoon to eat it. It’s filmlike strips that whiten teeth without any messy trays or lasers. It’s a mail slot added to every FedEx truck to make it easier to drop off a package. (See boxes throughout this story for the champions behind these soft innovations.)A gimmick is cheap—a trick, a ruse, something not worth the time or attention. Once it becomes something consumers want and talk about—the prize in the Cracker Jack box—it stops being a gimmick. And the only way to find out is to try it.Were frequent-flier miles a gimmick? At first, people treated them that way. Today, American Airlines understands that they are one of its great assets. Is product design a gimmick? If we need a music player or a car, shouldn’t we focus on the way the thing works, not the way it makes us feel? Well, unless you’re driving a used Yugo and listening to an old Aiwa cassette player, I think you’ve already voted with your dollars.People don’t buy a watch just to tell time. They can check the time with a more accurate device than anything mankind could have conceived (until a couple of decades ago) for a few dollars at the drugstore. Turns out, they also want a watch that is beautiful, slim, lightweight, handsome, Russian, Swiss, retro, clunky, prestigious, expensive, glamorous, almost invisible, without computerized parts, with a second hand, with a pedigree, and with a sense of humor. A Franck Muller watch (such as the Perpetual Calendar with Retrograde Monthly Equation, Tourbillon and Split-Second Chronometer) could easily cost well into the five figures without the fancy jewels. Muller figured out what his customers wanted. He doesn’t sell watches. He sells tourbillons with complications. After buying a Muller complication, what are the chances you’ll say to a friend, “Wanna see my watch?” The product is the marketing.So if you’re committed to selling just the time, whatever “time” means for your product (or service), then you’re doomed to slow growth and commodity pricing. After all, you can’t improve time. If, however, you embrace the fact that people rarely buy what they say they’re buying, you have a chance to create a free prize.The reason soft innovation works is that all breakthroughs (big and small) require quantum leaps. Of course, it’s a much easier to create a quantum leap with style or in-sight or guts (a nontechnical breakthrough) than it is to change the physics of the product you offer. Muller doesn’t tell time better. Instead, he adds soft innovations that are different.The perception of how we should do innovation is wrong. We’ve drawn it as a complicated, expensive, time-consuming process that should be done like most corporate initiatives: slowly, expensively, with massive buy-in and with lots of planning. No organization ever created an innovation. People innovate, not companies.We often believe that it’s someone else’s job (the guys in R&D) to make the cool stuff—we just sell it, market it, and service it. That’s wrong. In our fashion-crazy world, we’re all marketers, and being a marketer means changing the product, not changing the ads.If you’ve been told that you’re not qualified, authorized, or entitled to pursue breakthroughs of any kind, you’re getting bad advice. Sure, it’s fine with me if you cure cancer or build a faster computer chip. Most of us can’t wait for R&D to deliver the latest insight. We know that a better ad isn’t going to cut it. We need a free prize.Sometimes it’s hard to imagine that there’s still room to innovate your product or service. While it seems as if the world is changing faster and faster, that everything that can be done has been done, that’s not true.Every product, service, feature, and benefit is open for improvement. There’s nothing that’s finished, nothing so complete that it can’t carry another free prize. No, not carry a prize . . . be transformed by a prize—transformed so completely that the product category finds new life.The opportunity here isn’t subtle: Whatever you do, wherever you do it, you have the opportunity to create this sort of innovation. You have the power to find and develop a free prize. It’s not based on your power in the organization or your desire to become an entrepreneur or how creative you are. So you may be wondering, if this is so effective and productive and requires so little training, why doesn’t everyone do it?Good question.If you think you want to make something great more often than your organization will follow you. And if it doesn’t, there are a hundred organizations waiting for you that will. I call the person who makes an innovation happen a champion. And without a champion, nothing happens.My goal is to sell you on your ability to champion an innovation in your organization. And then to do it again. No free prize lasts forever, which is why it’s essential that we get better at making new ones.Guess what? There’s no correlation between how good your idea is and how likely your organization will be to embrace it. None. It’s not about good ideas. It’s about selling those ideas and making them happen. If you’re failing to get things done, it’s not because your ideas suck. It’s because you don’t know how to sell them.The reason for focus groups, market research, and the like is the continuing mirage that somehow, if we do enough work (and work enough hours), we can figure out in advance if something is the right idea or not. After all, organizations believe that if they only knew what the right idea was, they’d do it. But our resistance to ideas has nothing to do with the idea and everything to do with the process. It’s clear that all of these focus groups and research are just another hurdle to slow down change.Without a champion navigating these obstacles, most projects will slow down and eventually stop. Someone who cares too little won’t put in the effort to overcome the obstacles; she’ll give up and walk away. The forces of mediocrity will band together to water down your innovation. They’ll try to make it more popular, easier to understand, easier to build, easier to fit within the existing retail/factory/media business model. Well-meaning folks will water down your edgy idea into something safer, without realizing that their contribution makes the idea riskier. (Riskier? Yes, because now it’s less remarkable.)Champions turn “no” into “yes.” Champions understand that the internal sales process is at least as important as the idea itself. Champions are able to bring together all of the elements they need to turn a soft innovation into a free prize, creating a remarkable product that reaches the market and potentially transforms an industry.If you can do it alone, you probably should. It’s not unheard of to create a free prize on your own. If you’re a real estate agent, an artist, or a landscape architect, you can probably do something in your business or work that is truly remarkable. The rest of us, though, have to count on other people. We need an organization filled with people, money, and other assets to help make our dreams real. We need their leverage.To get leverage from your organization, you’ll need its willing help. Regardless of what you do and whom you do it with, the steps to generating leverage remain the same. As people consider your idea, they will ask themselves three questions: Is it going to be successful? Is it worth doing? Is this person able to champion the project? If the answer to any of these questions is a resounding no, it’s unlikely your project will happen. Understanding how the three pieces fit together and what to do about them is a big part of choosing the right project and getting it done. Remember, these people don’t care one bit about what your answers to these three questions might be. What matters is what they think the answers are, based on the evidence you give them.If you think you’re stuck because “my boss won’t let me,” what’s really happening is that she has decided that the answer to at least one of these three questions is no.The goal is to go through the steps necessary for your colleagues to believe (because they want to believe). It’s an emotional ticket you need stamped, not an intellectual one. Here’s a partial grab bag of tactics that will work some of the time for some champions:Ask questions, don’t give answers. Please don’t think you have to know all the answers. You don’t. You just need the posture of a champion and the guts to ask hard questions. My first real job involved informally managing 40 world-class software engineers in a bet-the-company launch of five major new software products. Everyone knew that I couldn’t possibly have a point of view when it came to engineering issues, so they were happy to have me kibitz. I spent my entire day going from one team to another, asking questions.Ask obligating questions. Generally, it’s a bad idea to answer objections. If you spend all your time answering one objection after another, sooner or later the people you’re selling to will find an objection you can’t answer. Better to answer the objection with a question. Keep working your way backward until you uncover the actual problem—not the symptom of the problem.Then, before you try to answer the objection associated with the real problem, take two more shots. First ask, “If we can solve this problem, can you see any other reason not to move ahead?” This obligates the person to speak up or put up. It means that the objection you’re going to tackle is the real problem, not a stalling tactic. Second, work to get them on your side. “If I could convince you that solving this problem was really important, how would you do it?”Build a prototype. The first time you see Reebok Travel Trainers, or the Segway, or the iPod, or the Nokia music phone, you “get it.” But until you see it and hold it, it’s merely a concept, a flaky idea, something that may (or may not) happen. A prototype makes it concrete. To hold it makes it possible, makes it likely, and reinforces your role as the champion, the owner of the vision.Prototypes also help us get over our desire to make it perfect before we start. If it’s easy to make one prototype, it’s easy to make a hundred. Each prototype gets better, more useful, more real.Walk into a meeting with a key power broker. Announce you have a prototype in your case. That’s all she wants to see. Now you have her. Take your time. Lay out the vision. Then let her hold it. Put it on her desk!As the days go by, people will pass by her desk, see the prototype, and ask about it. As each person gets more and more excited about this cool innovation, word spreads. It becomes a reality. All that’s left is to actually make it.3. I Don’t Have Any Great Ideas (Don’t Brainstorm, “Edgecraft” Instead)The free prize is the element that transcends the utility of the original idea and adds a special, unique element worthy of more money and notice.The way to find these ideas is what I call “edgecraft.” It is a methodical, measurable process that allows individuals and teams to identify inexorably the soft innovations that live on the edges. It can be done quickly or over long periods of time. And you can even do it by yourself (I do my edgecraft in the shower. It has the added benefit of dramatically increasing personal hygiene).Edgecraft is a straightforward process: Find an edge—a free prize that has been shown to make a product or service (in our example, the industry) remarkable. Go all the way to that edge—as far from the center as the consumers you are trying to reach dare you to go. Moving a little is expensive and useless. Moving a lot is actually cheaper in the long run and loaded with wonderful possibilities. It’s easy (but pointless) to open your store another 30 minutes a day. It’s more difficult (but possibly a fantastic strategy) to open your store 24 hours a day. Little changes cost you. Big changes benefit you by changing the game, but only if you go first.Brainstorming might create the occasional breakthrough, but edgecraft can inexpensively and quickly churn out lots of ideas—good ideas and sometimes great ideas. Ideas you can rapidly implement. If people aren’t blown away, they won’t talk about it. If they don’t talk about it, then it doesn’t spread fast enough to help you grow.There are hundreds of available edges—things you can add to, subtract from, or do to your product or service. Here are a few to consider.The network. This is perhaps the most valuable edge available to most products. If you make it fun and easy (and profitable) to talk about a product, it’s likely that people will. Derek Sivers runs CD Baby, an e-commerce site that sells CDs from more than 59,000 independent musicians. Those musicians send their fans to the site to buy their CDs, and while the fans are there, of course, they discover thousands of other artists. Sivers also writes very funny customer-service emails. When a company tells you that your CD order was placed on a satin pillow before packing, you tell a friend. Or 10.Packaging. Yes, of course, the package is part of the product, and the free prize can very easily be the package itself. Packaging is not a gimmick when it works. Juice boxes, for example, would not be fun seeking out if it weren’t for the innovative packaging—the juice is the same. The package did more than call attention to the product—it changed the product.You can go over the top by adding more packaging (like Rhino Records and its amazing boxed sets), or you can take an industry where the packaging is a hindrance and strip it away. Audio content provider Audible will sell only the digitized voice for your favorite book on tape, not the cassette or the box—the company’s product has zero packaging.Technology. Moore’s Law says that every 18 months, the power of computer chips you can buy for a dollar doubles. This opens two kinds of opportunity. The first is at the cutting edge. Xbox and PlayStation pack supercomputer power into video-game machines. If you could add a supercomputer to your product or service, what would it do? The second approach is to take advantage of the cheap part of the curve. Yesterday’s technology is always (much) cheaper. The latest innovation: The \$11 digital camera. If computer chips were a penny, how would you use them?Design aesthetic. Design is the single highest-leverage investment you can make. A well-designed product is usually cheaper to make and service than what you’re doing now. It will also improve sales because people notice it and talk about it. Not only the user interface but also the entire user experience is now dictated by design. (See “Masters of Design,” page 61.)Of all the edges I know, embracing amazing design is the easiest, the fastest, and the one with the most assured return on investment. We’ve only touched the tip of the iceberg of what great design can do for a product, a service, a form, even an organization.A 9-year-old can do edgecraft. While the edges always change, the process never does: Find a product or service that’s completely unrelated to your industry. Figure out who’s winning by being remarkable. Discover what edge they went to. Do that. Crest figured out how to make money with remarkably cheap electric toothbrushes. What if companies such as Gillette or Henckels or Oster or Braun or Playtex or Toro or Sony decided to go to the same edge in their industry?Don’t copy the specific tactics. Figure out how you can get to the same edge but in a different way. If a restaurant captured the attention of its audience by offering an all-you-can-eat chili-pepper night, that doesn’t mean your hardware store should start selling chili peppers. Instead, realize that their people are attracted to excess. You can offer the contractors in town all the bricks they can carry to their truck for \$9. And post the name of the guy who carried the most on a sign by the cash register. (And why not list the guy who carried the least while you’re at it?)It’s all about marketing now. The organizations that win will be the ones that realize that all they do is create things worth talking about. The future belongs to people who can invent, implement, and sell the ideas—the free prizes—that become remarkable products. It sounds daunting, but it’s not. Just start. You fail often. Enjoy the loss. Make something happen.Angela Kapp, Estee LauderA moment in the Pittsburgh airport in the fall of 1995 gave Kapp her soft innovation. The then-executive director for special projects and technology for Clinique saw stores she actually wanted to shop in, of all things. This wasn’t about bad food and high prices. This was the Gap, Speedo, foot traffic, and shoppers with money to spend. With a prestige brand such as Clinique, location is everything, and she took the edge that worked for other specialty stores and applied it explicitly to her business.She pitched her boss on opening a freestanding Clinique airport store, a first for the brand. He was skeptical, but within a couple of weeks, he had a flight with a stopover in Pittsburgh and was able to see what Kapp had described. With his buy-in, it was easy for management to say yes. The Clinique store in Pittsburgh is one of the top-volume locations for the company in North America.Paul Sagel, Procter & GambleHe’s the inventor of Crest Whitestrips, one of the most successful new-product launches at P&G in many years. The key moment in selling this radical soft innovation to a very large bureaucracy came when he pitched it to senior management. He did two things. First, he brought in the parts to his prototype and built it right there, on the spot, to show how easy it was. The second—and far cooler—thing was that a few days before the meeting, he had his teeth whitened. They glowed. Sagel was the prototype!Jay Gouliard, General MillsCurrently the vice president of packaging development at General Mills, Gouliard knows “you can’t introduce an innovative new package at the same cost that you’ve been running a highly optimized package for the last 20 years.” He realizes that although introducing an innovation might cost more, the consumer is also willing to pay extra (sometimes a lot extra) for the free prize.When General Mills introduced Go-Gurt (the yogurt that comes in a squeezable plastic tube) in 1998, there was no way its costs would be comparable to a boring paper or plastic cup. But General Mills was smart enough to realize that people weren’t going to pay for just the yogurt; they would pay for the fun (and convenience) of the package itself.Years later, the costs of this package have likely gone way down, and the idea looks smart. The difficult part was being brave at the beginning. General Mills is doing it again with Yoplait Nouriche yogurt for grown-ups, in a package that fits in your car’s cup holder.Joe Perrone, FedExWhen Perrone, retail sales manager for FedEx’s eastern region, thought to put a slot in every FedEx truck to make it easier to drop off a package, it’s unlikely that management would have been happy if he had taken a Skisaw and started cutting holes in trucks. So he chose to champion the soft innovation through the system.Perrone approached every department in the company. He didn’t ask for permission. He didn’t say, “I’ve got this great idea, do you guys want to do it?” Instead, he asked whether they were willing to hear more (if someone else did the work). They agreed. Everyone had concerns, but no issue was big enough to give the project a permanent no. Perrone focused on internal coordination. He’d ask, “If we can solve that problem, are you willing to try this?” As each department bought in, he made sure the other departments knew about his progress. The key was that he championed it, step by step, until there was no one left to object. Along the way, he kept pointing his vision (increased convenience, free marketing) and the puny costs in giving it a try.Special Offer For Fast Company ReadersSeth’s new book comes in a limited edition cereal box, most of which are already gone. We’ve reserved 1,000 copies at a special price, just for our readers. You can find them online at www.800ceoread.com/cf.Adapted from Free Prize Inside! The Next Big Marketing Idea, by Seth Godin. Reprinted with permission from Portfolio, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Copyright (c) Seth Godin, 2004.Discussion Guidedentered in further exploring some of the ideas and issues in this article? Consider starting a Fast Company reading group. Here are some possible conversation catalysts:Seth Godin says the best free prizes come via soft innovations. Brainstorm what free prizes you have enjoyed lately — frequent flyer miles, movie tickets, free meals, etc. What’s the logic behind these offerings? Develop three soft innovations for your company’s core product — and present them to teammates. Incorporate some level of edgecraft into one of your prototypes; is the reaction favorable or skeptical? How might you be able to change the attitudes toward new products and soft innovations in your company?

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