"Glenn guides us through the critical phases of reinvention to prepare for jobs that do not exist and to seize opportunities yet to be identified."

Robert E. Johnson, Ph.D., President
Western New England University

MAKE REINVENTION YOUR SUPERPOWER

6 Skills to Escape ***Career Quicksand*** and Revive Your Future

GLENN LLOPIS

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Introduction

There's a creator on Instagram, @ellecordova, who brilliantly captures our human condition through short videos in which she personifies things like fonts and inventions. Here's the dialogue from a video she calls "Reference books on the retirement shelf." She gives each of these characters its own personality.

Atlas: It just doesn't seem that long ago people used to use me to chart out all their grand adventures.

Encyclopedia: Tell me about it. My kid Wiki gets updated a couple of times a second, whereas I used to have to wait over a year for new information.

Dictionary: My youngest, Urban, basically speaks an entirely different language now. I can't even understand her.

Cookbook: These digital kids today don't even know the struggle. The stains in my pages—

Encyclopedia: —the pencil marks and dog-ears—

Cookbook: —but you know what? They're badges of honor from years of hard use and spills. I wouldn't trade them. What do they have?

Phone Book: Young humans today don't even know that I have white *and* yellow pages.

Travel Brochure: I hate to break it to you, buddy, but all your pages have been yellow for some time now.

Phone Book [looks down with resignation]

Thesaurus: It's all just such a pity, a misfortune, a tragedy.

Dictionary: Oh my god, just pick a word.

This is both comical and poignant. It captures so much of what people are feeling today. Almost without exception, no matter what job you have, what role you serve, what expertise you've developed, what standing you've built within your sphere of influence, there's something in the works that could make it all obsolete in a flash. At least, that's how it feels.

Likewise, if you're early in your career or still a student charting your course, you face the same uncertainties, wondering if your degree will still be relevant in five years.

Here's the thing: It might not be. There's a stat going around that up to 85 percent of the jobs that today's college students will have in 2030 haven't been invented yet. People argue about whether that statistic is legit or not, but we don't need an official report to tell us what we can already see: The world changes faster than ever.

There's an app to help you do almost anything yourself. You can be your own graphic designer even if you can't draw. You can do your own video and audio editing. A company can have ChatGPT write all of its website content. Artificial intelligence (AI) is here and is just barely getting started. We live in a world in which machines can do more and more of the expert work, making us less and less confident in banking our future on any particular expertise.

According to the World Economic Forum, by 2027, 43 percent of work tasks will be automated, and by 2030, 23 percent of global jobs will change due to industry transformation. This understandably makes us feel vulnerable whether we're just starting out, trying to move up, or hoping for a few more years before retirement.

This level of uncertainty feels like a threat. In fact, it *is* a threat. If you're a graphic designer for a big corporation, in the past you might have been able to feel secure in that role for a long time. You'd have an expertise and a talent that every department needed at some point. You might have faced competition from other designers, so if you were wise you continued to improve your knowledge and your skill over the years, maybe expanding the repertoire of the types of things you could design.

But today the role itself might be at risk. That's scary. For those who are already working as designers, how do you adapt to that? For those who are studying design, how do you plan a future around that?

The first step: Recognize that just because a particular expertise or job or skill might not be in demand in a few years, it doesn't have to mean you, as a person, are not in demand. There are many threats, but it's not the threats themselves that make us vulnerable; it's our inability to respond, be nimble, demonstrate resilience, and reinvent.

Reinvention Is the Practice Every One of Us Needs to Master

"I have a choice: Evolve or become obsolete." That's a quote from Robert E. Johnson, president of Western New England University. As a

university president, he's reached the highest point of his field. Yet even he says: If I don't evolve, I'll become obsolete.

He said those words while giving a talk about what higher education is facing today in its quest to prepare students to thrive in a world of so much uncertainty. When I asked him to share what he means by "evolve"—what it looks like, how we achieve it—he articulated something I've been teaching for years in various forms, but have struggled to define so succinctly.

He said, "I have to understand how to learn, unlearn, and relearn as a constant state."

What he described is a constant state of reinvention.

Learn. Unlearn. Relearn. Repeat.

This book is my way of digging into the nitty gritty of *how* to do that. It involves two overarching ideas: We have to expand ourselves (Chapters 1 through 3), and we have to integrate our expanded selves into existing relationships (Chapters 4 through 6).

Expanding ourselves involves a constant state of reassessing and updating what we know about ourselves, what opportunities we can see, and which ones we should be pursuing. Integrating our expanded selves is also key for accelerating and multiplying our impact, because reinvention is not a solo act. We exist in community—whether that community takes the form of family, friends, co-workers, even industry partners or rivals. You probably already know this if you've ever changed something about yourself and then realized that everyone else still sees you as your old self—either because they're more comfortable with the old you, or they just don't see the new you yet.

My Own Journey of Reinvention

I've worked one-on-one with thousands of professionals over the years, helping them rediscover themselves in the context of how they work and what they're truly capable of. In any given month, I'm spending at

least an hour on the phone each with 50 different individuals at all levels of corporate careers.

I choose to work this way because I genuinely enjoy spending time with people one-on-one. It helps me know people as individuals, and also helps me learn from them about the struggles of not only achieving one's own personal transformation—but also how difficult it can be to function within a team or organization that has *not* evolved. I get to see what obstacles arise for people along their paths of reinvention: obstacles from within themselves, and obstacles from their institutions.

As a result, my own approach to this work has evolved over time, and that evolution has not always been easy.

I started my own career in a corporate job in the food and beverage industry and was an executive by age 25. But it wasn't a great fit for me, so I started my own food business, and ran that for several years before selling it. Then I started a tech company with a 19-year-old partner. Over time I realized that what I truly enjoy is teaching, training, and mentoring people, so my next business centered around that—taking what I'd learned from both the corporate leadership treadmill and the entrepreneurship track to help people accelerate their ability to grow and evolve in the face of resistance. This is how I ended up working one-on-one over the years with so many people at multiple global enterprises.

But just because I had, in the popular language of today, "found my passion," doesn't mean my reinvention was complete. Remember the key word at the end of this line:

Learn. Unlearn. Relearn. *Repeat*.

It's continuous.

The need to unlearn and relearn comes whether you want it or not. Maybe what you're passionate about changes—or maybe you were wrong about your passion in the first place. Maybe the way you're pursuing it has become outdated. Or maybe you encounter obstacles and

have to react, which changes your course. For me, it was obstacles . . . so many obstacles.

Because I'm continuously embedded in the change process with many different individuals, I get to hear them talk about what they're facing along the way: their epiphanies, their successes, their frustrations, and their hurdles. I started to see commonalities and patterns.

I had started my early consulting business by focusing on teaching four skills for managing opportunity: seeing it, sowing it, growing it, and sharing it. I call these the four skills of earning serendipity, and it's still a powerful approach. But people wanted more detail: *How* do we do that?

So over time, I deepened my thinking and defined six strategies that helped the process become more tangible. People responded to that, and those skills and strategies are still useful today. But the next hurdle was an even bigger one. A lot of the frustrations expressed by people had something in common: People had done hard work to transform themselves, but they were bumping up against systems that stifled them. We realized that individual transformation can only go so far if you're caught in a work or learning environment that doesn't give you the room to be your transformed self. Workplaces are so controlling that there's no room for people to apply what they're learning.

So for my next reinvention, I took a macro view. I studied organizations and started drawing attention to this tension that I saw everywhere: Organizations want to standardize everything, but we live in a world in which individuals experience more and more personalization in every aspect of their lives, and they seek it at work, too.

My new approach was not universally welcomed, or even understood. Large organizations had hired me to do one thing, but while doing that one thing I (along with those the organization hired me to help) realized that, actually, the organization itself needed to change in order for these transformed individuals to be most effective. That news was not always accepted. In fact, I faced a lot of resistance and

still often have a hard time finding leaders who are willing to genuinely explore how their organizational systems might be getting in the way of progress.

I share all of this to point out that we all have to continuously reinvent what we do or how we do it. Today when I summarize in hindsight what I've been through to refine my own approach, it can almost seem as if I were simply following inevitable steps in a natural evolution. But that is far from the truth. It's easy to look back at changes you've made in the past and downplay the forces at work that got you to:

- Acknowledge that a change was needed.
- Take action to put that change into motion.
- Reintegrate your changed self into your existing relationships or structures that have not changed.

That takes a *lot* of intention and energy. And that's the central reason reinvention is hard.

Are You in Career Quicksand?

One of the most common themes I'm seeing today is when someone realizes they've been defining themselves and navigating their career based on the particular rules of each specific job they've held, rather than on what matters to them. This seems reasonable: We're judged by how well we meet the demands of our role, and our salary and promotions depend on that. But here's what I've seen: When we do that for so long, we lose touch with our identity and our own passions and it's difficult to get those back. We start to forget. It's hard to have new ideas when you've been trained that success depends on how well you execute old ideas.

We've stepped into the sand and adapted our ways to the corporate ways. Pretty soon we don't remember our ways, or even if we do, we're already stuck. It's quicksand. People tell me they want out, they want to navigate their careers based on how they work best, what they know

they can contribute, and what stimulates their curiosity and engagement. So they ask me, "How do I even do that?"

It angers me that this is so common. And it makes me want to warn my young daughter so it doesn't happen to her. That's why I'm writing this book. My previous books were written for leaders to try to tackle this problem from the top down. This book is different. It's for those of you who feel stuck and don't know how to get out of the quicksand, who are worried about an uncertain future, or who are young and eager and want to avoid this quicksand from the start.

Get Grounded in a Sense of Who You Are and What You're Capable Of

This is urgent for at least two reasons. First, we spend our lives detached from all we could be. How sad. But also, in the context of the threats mentioned above: If we don't know how to navigate our careers based on our true identities and capabilities, then we won't know how to reinvent when we need to. And we *will* need to.

Being stuck in that institutional quicksand makes it impossible to be nimble. I'm not saying quit your corporate job. I'm saying: After years of being stuck, many people don't know how to reinvent on their own.

The good news: We can learn how.

Here's how I'm defining reinvention: It's a self-directed journey of discovery plus action. You're looking both inward and outward, to see what could be next for you, and you take the steps to put that in motion. Reinvention is not a one-and-done. I'm not talking about a single huge midcareer pivot, although it certainly could be that. It doesn't have to be big. Everyone's approach and need for reinvention is different. It feels daunting, but it's actually a routine that we should all incorporate into our regular lives so we don't get stuck.

Learn. Unlearn. Relearn. Repeat.

In this book I'll share six skills we can learn and put into action in order to get into the habit of continual reinvention. These will make you more aware of what you're already doing and elevate it, or introduce you to a new skill set that you can act upon.

I know your employers are already inundating you with lists of behaviors to master, goals to meet, skills to acquire. From my experience in working with people, those lists add up and they become overwhelming and meaningless. But I believe that's because you're given those self-improvement goals without any opportunity to take ownership of the results: You have to meet *their* expectations, rather than being given the freedom to define for yourself how you will live out those particular qualities or behaviors on which you're being measured.

This process is meant to empower you to take ownership of it. It's about *self-directed reinvention*. This is the book that teaches you how to reinvent without being forced to.

Here's an overview of what you'll learn in this book.

Part One: Expand Yourself

First, to make ourselves ready to reinvent, we need to make sure we're seeing as far and wide as possible. Are we open enough to see different opportunities, consider new ideas, and recognize their potential? Over the years I've seen that people haven't had the freedom to explore and learn how to discover, because they have to follow the predetermined playbook from either their schools or their employers. So in Chapter 1 you'll learn five ingredients that will help you ***DISCOVER: Harness your natural curiosity to discover something new***.

Then we want to make sure we know the value of what we're seeing: Which opportunities or ideas are most suitable or interesting for us as individuals? Many people don't have a grounded sense of who they are because they have to be and achieve whatever their roles demand. Chapter 2 covers five ingredients for improving your ability to ***KNOW: Ground yourself in an open, always-learning mindset.***

Finally, to expand ourselves we need to explore how to take what we see and what we know and start to act on it. Those first two skills build awareness and internalization. This third skill helps you gain enough clarity in your ability and actions to move forward confidently. Chapter 3 introduces five ingredients to help you ***PURSUE: Rev up the engines of your ambition***.

Part Two: Accelerate and Multiply Your Impact

The first part of this book focuses on what we need to discover within ourselves to prepare for the reinvention journey, because transformation begins with us as individuals. But in our quest to remain relevant in a world that keeps changing, we can't stop at our own individual evolution. Most of us work as part of a team, whether it's an official team of co-workers within the same organization, or a collection of people with whom we collaborate temporarily or for the long term.

First, we need to develop the skill of building something new. This involves harnessing all the resources around us to bring an idea to life and keep that idea moving forward. Chapter 4 covers five ingredients to ***BUILD: Take action with and for others***.

Then we need environments of trust in order to move forward toward anything we want to do. But we can't build environments of trust unless people see that we value them as individuals and that we both trust them and are trustworthy. Chapter 5 introduces five ingredients for building ***TRUST: Cultivate a deeply rooted sense of yourself and your ability to elevate others.***

Finally, a key part of your own reinvention is helping make reinvention possible for others. People want room to reinvent. You can and should help make that room. Chapter 6 covers five ingredients to ***LEAD: Use your influence to strengthen your purpose and make the world better.***

For each of these skills and their corresponding ingredients, I draw from my own extensive experience and research conducted by

psychologists, neuroscientists, and other experts to give you concrete ways to practice each behavior. These are things you already do and have (creativity, awareness, generosity); you will be naturally inclined more toward some and less toward others. I give you tools and worksheets so you can assess yourself along the way, to get a sense of where you are now: Do you typically behave in these ways or not? But that's just a starting point so you can see where you shine and where you could benefit from being more deliberate about practicing certain behaviors.

Chase Discomfort

There's one more reason reinvention is hard: You have to choose to discard your comfort and to chase discomfort. (Yes, I said "chase.") To practice reinvention, we have to step out of our comfort zone. As much as we might resent the quicksand, on some level it might offer a sense of comfort: It keeps us in place, and maybe that gives us a feeling of stability. But here's the thing about comfort zones: They might give you some comfort now, but they rob you of comfort later. It's a false comfort, because it's keeping you successful now at the expense of significance later.

Sometimes discomfort just comes at us and it's not our choice. It could be something negative, like losing a job. Or it could even be positive, like getting a promotion into a role we don't yet feel ready for. Both can be uncomfortable, and what we do with that discomfort will determine how successful we are.

But to reinvent, we also have to disrupt our current level of comfort. That's harder. We have to choose discomfort, and we have to will ourselves to act *while we're still comfortable*. Consider getting out of bed in the morning. If a loud noise abruptly wakes you, you might jump out of bed in a panic. Discomfort came for you, you reacted, you're out of bed. But if your alarm goes off, and you're cozy and warm under the covers, getting out of bed into the cold room takes a willful act of disrupting your current comfort.

Likewise, if you lose your job, discomfort has come for you. It's there, you have to react. If you're in a comfortable job but long for something else, it's hard to leave that comfort for the unknown.

Mark Manson, author of numerous bestselling life advice books, said:

> *Fear doesn't control us by dominating our emotions. It controls us by quietly convincing us that our comfort is more important than happiness. The only real risk is taking no risks. The only real failure is having no failures. The only real pain is the avoidance of pain.*

But I want to take this challenge even further. Yes, you need to tolerate discomfort. Yes, you need to embrace discomfort. But also, you need to chase it.

Researchers from the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business and the University of Chicago Booth School of Business conducted a series of studies to explore this question: What if instead of tolerating discomfort and feeling awkward or uncomfortable, people actively sought it out? Their hypothesis was that we could use discomfort as a cue that we're making progress when it comes to personal growth. Instead of seeing discomfort as a signal to stop, we would see it as a sign of progress toward our goal, and we'd be motivated to continue. (They included the necessary caveats that there are times when discomfort shouldn't be ignored, such as when it might indicate physical injury or actual danger.)

Indeed, their research found that when we turn discomfort into something positive, something to seek out, we see it as a signal of growth, and that motivates us. We start to see discomfort as a sign of progress, and we're motivated to continue. So seek it out!

Here's what you stand to gain when you seek out the discomfort of going through a process to make yourself ready for reinvention. These are excerpts from actual feedback, from people sharing some of the results of the process I take them through:

"I felt stuck and Glenn helped ignite a new energy to move forward."

"Ignited a flame in me that needed to be awakened."

"Helped me see that I can be an agent of change for the betterment of others."

"Showed me the importance of embracing my true self and allowing my authentic personality to shine through."

"I now understand the significance of being open and genuine with myself, which in turn enables me to positively influence others and drive meaningful change."

"Empowered me to unearth my authentic personal brand, aligning passion with purpose."

"Unleashing new energy from within to begin aspiring for more and chasing after it."

People now realize that the playbook they've been following in their current jobs or careers was created to benefit the institution, not them as people full of life experiences and unfulfilled capacities.

What got you to where you are today won't get you where you want to be tomorrow.

How to Use This Book

As I mentioned previously, I'm drawing from my own extensive experience over decades of working with people on their own reinvention journeys. I've also consulted academic research conducted by psychologists, neuroscientists, and other specialists to further refine and validate my own thinking and processes. I've turned all of that into practical tools to help you apply this insight to your work and to your life in your own way. I've distilled all of that insight down into six skills that will help you direct your own reinvention journey. I've broken each skill down into five ingredients to help you develop the skill and make it your own, so you can put it into practice with confidence and purpose (see Figure 1).

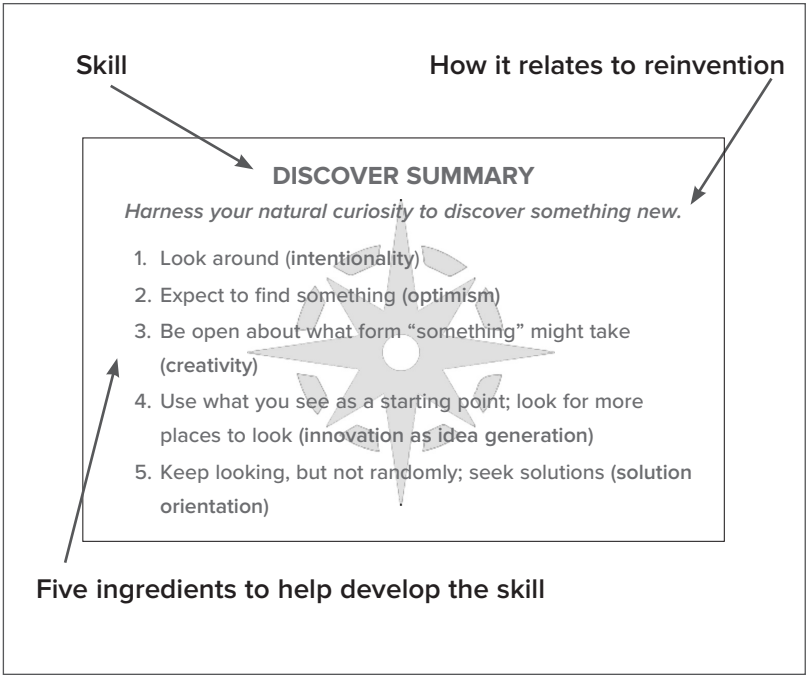

FIGURE 1: **Summary of a skill and its five ingredients**

Each chapter gives an overview of the skill as a collective whole. Then I break the skill down into its ingredients, showing you what it looks like in action with a list of behaviors and characteristics plus research findings and stories that offer context as to how it all works together. Some of these combinations of ingredients might seem odd to you. I've done my best to get beyond the usual and the familiar. If we're looking to reinvent the way we work or live, we have to first reinvent the way we see or do things. For each ingredient, I include a question for you to pause and consider. Then at the end of each chapter, I've also provided exercises to help you explore the ideas and integrate them into your own self-directed reinvention journey.

Pause and Consider

This book is intentionally concise and straightforward. Long, drawn-out explanations are not required. I've learned that people need a jolt: something that gives your brain a surprise, or a glimmer of something different that you can immediately apply and test. Something that helps you break out of any current thought patterns, old habits, or bad advice that might be keeping you stuck in that quicksand.

You could get through this book in a day if you wanted. But I encourage you to take time to pause and consider as you go. Do the exercises that speak to you in the moment. Come back and revisit the exercises whenever you feel stuck, or when circumstances change in your career or in your life and you need to find something new.

Over the past year I've noticed that people want more time to take in these thoughts about how to make sure they're ready to reinvent themselves when they need to. At my company we've even stretched our leadership training program to cover the same amount of content over three days now rather than just two, at the request of participants. They tell us they want more time to connect intimately with the new ideas and the probing questions, not just for themselves, but also for their colleagues or other people in their lives.

I'm sharing this because I am learning every day about where people are in their careers and in their lives, and it's been enlightening to see how much people relish the chance to take time for themselves, to have an opportunity to pause. In fact, at our Leadership in the Age of Personalization Summit in 2023, Shawntee Reed (then an executive at Block) said she's noticed that when we don't have a chance to pause—and let's face it, most of us don't—it's difficult to expand our own thinking because that's hard and requires time. It's so much easier and quicker to have conforming thoughts, while it's rare to have the opportunity to pause and consider.

As she put it, "Leaders are held accountable for how quickly they're able to solve problems. And so rarely do we have an opportunity to really

pause and consider a different way." She noted the value of knowing how to sit with questions for a while before needing to jump to answers. I couldn't agree more. So I encourage you to pause and consider the questions and the exercises. Put your thoughts and reactions in writing. Sit with your answers for a bit before moving on.

This Is Self-Directed Reinvention

I don't believe in giving you a standard recipe for success. I'm not here to tell you how much of each ingredient you need. I'm just presenting these skills, offering context, and giving you practical ways to start reinventing yourself as you see fit. My goal is to share my views on how I've helped thousands of people reinvent themselves, not by trying to standardize them to think like me, but the opposite: by helping them find their own way to direct their own reinventions. My hope is that you can see yourself in the content, in the stories, and then make the six skills your own.

I do believe in giving you guidance, tools, and a process designed to help you see things in new ways and to evaluate yourself to see where you might have room to grow. This book is designed to help you become self-directed in your reinvention. **This is your playbook** to make reinvention your superpower so that you're never stuck in career quicksand again.