
Nine Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career

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The turbulent business market has caused many people to rethink their careers—sometimes without choice. Here are some tips for reinventing your career from *Working Identity: Unconventional Strategies for Reinventing Your Career*, published by Harvard Business School Press.

by Herminia Ibarra



Here are nine unconventional strategies for reinventing your career: act, then reflect; flirt with your selves; live the contradictions; make big change in small steps; experiment with new roles; find people who are what you want to be; don't wait for a catalyst; step back periodically but not for too long; and seize windows of opportunity.

Unconventional strategy 1: *Act your way into a new way of thinking and being. You cannot discover yourself by introspection.*

Start by changing what you do. Try different paths. Take action, and then use the feedback from your actions to figure out what you think, feel, and want. Don't try to analyze or plan your way into a new career. Conventional strategies advocated by self-assessment manuals and traditional career counselors would have you start by looking

inside. Start instead by stepping out. Be attentive to what each step teaches you, and make sure that each step helps you take the next.

Unconventional strategy 2: *Stop trying to find your one true self. Focus your attention on which of your many possible selves you want to test and learn more about.*

Reflection is important. But we can use it as a defense against testing reality; reflecting on who we are is less important than probing whether we really want what we think we want. Acting in the world gives us the opportunity to see our selves through our behaviors and allows us to adjust our expectations as we learn. In failing to act, we hide from ourselves.

Unconventional strategy 3: *Allow yourself a transition period in which it is okay to oscillate between holding on and letting go. Better to live the contradictions than to come to a premature resolution.*

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The years preceding a career change necessarily involve difficulty, turmoil, confusion, and uncertainty. ⁴ One of the hardest tasks of reinvention is staying the course when it feels like you are coming undone. Unfortunately, there is no alternative but foreclosure—retreating from change either by staying put or taking the wrong next job. Watch out for decisions made in haste, especially when it comes to unsolicited offers. It takes a while to move from old to new. Those who try to short-circuit the process often just end up taking longer.

Unconventional strategy 4: *Resist the temptation to start by making a big decision that will change everything in one fell swoop. Use a strategy of small wins, in which incremental gains lead you to more profound changes in the basic assumptions that define your work and life. Accept the crooked path.*

Small steps lead to big changes, so don't waste time, energy, and money on finding the "answer" or the "lever" that, when pushed, will have dramatic effects. Almost no one gets change right on the first try. Forget about moving in a straight line. You will probably have to cycle through a few times, letting what you learn inform the next cycle. You will know that you are learning at a deeper level when you start to question what aspects of your life apart from your job also need changing.

Unconventional strategy 5: *Identify projects that can help you get a feel for a new line of work or style of working. Try to do these as extracurricular activities or parallel paths so that you can experiment seriously without making a commitment.*

Think in terms of side projects and temporary assignments, not binding decisions. Pursue these activities seriously, but delay commitment. Slowly ascertain your enduring values and preferences, what makes you unique in the world. Just make sure that you vary your experiments, so that you can compare and contrast experiences before you narrow your options.

Unconventional strategy 6: *Don't just focus on the work. Find people who are what you want to be and who can provide support for the transition. But don't expect to find them in your same old social circles.* Break out of your established network. Branch out. Look for role models—people who give you glimpses of what you might become and who are living examples of different ways of working and living. Most of us seek to change not only what we do; we also aspire to work with people we like and respect and with whom we enjoy spending our precious time.

Unconventional strategy 7: *Don't wait for a cataclysmic moment when the truth is revealed. Use everyday occurrences to find meaning in the changes you are going through. Practice telling and retelling your story. Over time, it will clarify.* Forget about moving in a straight line. —Herminia Ibarra

Major career transitions take three to five years. The big "turning point," if there is one, tends to come late in the story. In the interim, make use of anything as a trigger. Don't wait for a catalyst. What you make of events is more important than the events themselves. Take advantage of whatever life sends your way to revise, or at least reconsider, your story. Practice telling it in different ways to different people, in much the same way you would revise a résumé and cover letter for different jobs. But don't just tell the story to a friendly audience; try it out on skeptics. And don't be disturbed when the story changes along the way.

Unconventional strategy 8: *Step back. But not for too long.* When you get stuck and are short on insight, take time to step back from the fray to reflect on how and why you are changing. Even as short a break as a day's hike in the country can remove the blinders of habit. But don't stay gone too long, or it will be hard to reel yourself back in. Only through interaction and active engagement in the real world do we discover ourselves.

Unconventional strategy 9: *Change happens in bursts and starts. There are times when you are open to big change and times when you are not. Seize opportunities.* Windows of opportunity open and close back up again. We go through periods when we are highly receptive to major change and periods when even incremental deviations from "the plan" are hard to tolerate. ⁵ Take advantage of any natural windows (e.g., the period just after an educational program or assuming a new position; a milestone birthday) to start off on the right foot. Communicate to others that you have changed (and will be making more changes). Watch out for the insidious effect of old routines. Progress can be served by hanging in limbo, asking questions, allowing time and space to linger between identities. But don't let unanswered questions bog you down; move on, even if to an interim commitment.

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