How Do We Innovate the Future?

I start this part of the book with my motto: You should be humble when facing the future, but not subservient. In the first part of the book, I have discussed how humility, or anticipation, should be practiced in terms of the future. You should be prepared for almost anything, at least mentally. At the very least, we should be aware that we cannot know what will happen in the future, and almost anything can happen, and we should prepare for that. Humility is admitting our own smallness when facing the future.

Even though I said that we should be humble when facing the future, I also encouraged not being subservient. By this I mean that we all can change the future and affect its course. Perhaps each of us is not capable of the great deeds of the great men and women in history, but we can affect the future of those in our immediate circle and, above all, our own future with our actions.

The important term for creating the future is innovation. Innovation is not the same thing as an idea or creativity. An idea is a good start for innovation, and ideas come from creativity, but innovation as a concept also contains turning the idea into a functional product or service for the market. Baumgartner separates innovation and creativity from each other: Creativity is producing new ideas. Innovation means implementing new ideas, in order to create value, usually with lower operational costs, increased income or both.¹

Innovations can be classified into different types according to what they are related to. There are innovations that concern the product or service itself, the (production) process, society, market, technology, strategy or structures. Innovations can also be classified according to how the innovation has happened: has it been evolutionary (gradual, slow) or radical?² Innovations can also be classified according to its novelty
value. In this case, innovations can be called sustainable (product 2.0), significant or revolutionary innovations.3

Innovation is fair activity in the sense that it is open and possible for all actors, regardless of family, gender, nationality, age or title. Anyone can innovate. Innovation does not require impressive surroundings, vast office spaces, bottles of champagne or plates of caviar. Innovations often come about in the humblest of circumstances. In fact, the best innovations often spring from situations where the people have to come up with something new in order to be able to carry on with their lives. In an environment where things do not seem to be going well, people have the tendency of developing new things to make their lives easier and to make it more comfortable (to put it the other way around: “development ends with contentment”).

Creativity Professor Alf Rehn praises Lagos as the nest of creativity in his book Dangerous Ideas.4 Lagos is the capital of Nigeria with nearly eight million inhabitants, many of whom live in quite unpleasant circumstances compared to, for example, Europe. Rehn describes Lagos as a city where “creativity is not planned by the inhabitants but something that helps them survive”. Survival and need force people to innovate. Afrigadget (afrigadget.com) is one of my favorite blogs, because it introduces such creativity. In a touching blog post, there was a picture of small boys playing football. Since the boys could not afford a real football, they had thought to put plastic bags on top of each other and tie this creation with a string into the form of a ball. The game was ready to be played.

In war times in Finland in 1940s, when there was lack of almost everything, innovation culture was at its best in Finland. Untamo Utrio’s (1943) book Away with Lack and Shortages (Pois pula ja puutteet)5 is one of the prime examples of innovation literature of this time. The book lists different recipes for coffee substitutes, tea and tobacco. When there were no coffee beans and one still wanted coffee, it could be made out of dandelion roots, chicory, red beets, peas, parsnips or other suitable products (Figure 7.1).

In my view, innovation is closely related to creating the future, and preferably an even better future. The methods for anticipating the future, weak signals in particular, have much to give in terms of innovation. In this chapter, I introduce different methods for how weak signals can be used as tools for innovation.

In my own work, I use a method I developed in my doctoral dissertation, the Futures Window, Strategic Serendipity and the Futuropoly game (which I sometimes use as the framework for teaching). I also review