



# *element ten:* INCUBATING

## PRACTICING THE 13 ELEMENTS OF ALCHEMY

**1 PROTECTIVE SPACES.** Incubation is not just the skill of generating a new idea—it is also the skill of protecting and growing ideas. Great ideas may die early for lack of adequate nurturance. Without special protection they cannot survive the forces of inertia or outright opposition. Innovation is a radical political act that redistributes power and perks. For it to take hold, it must be given a protective space. In organizations this may begin with a board mandate for innovation that creates permission and direction—a safe harbor. Ideas develop within an alembic that provides a special place, budget, philosophy, methodology, and team.

**2 FOUR PRIMAL ELEMENTS.** An ideal incubation space for ideas contains all four primal elements: fire, air, water, earth. Fire is the power that *inspires* the idea, air is the thought that *structures* the idea, water is the emotion that *nurtures* the idea, and earth is the grounding that gives it *form*. Too much fire and people burn up with intensity—too little and they become fatigued and lose interest. Too much air and the idea is over rationalized and dissipates—too little and it is under rationalized and unreachable. Too much water and emotion sweeps everything away—too little and there is not enough passion for the idea to flourish. Too much earth and the idea becomes rigid and bound—too little and it never takes form.

**3 INVOLUTION & EVOLUTION.** Everything in expression is part of either an *involutionary* or *evolutionary* current. An involutionary current spreads an idea from the one to the many. An evolutionary current merges the contribution of the many back to a collective, more powerful idea. Ideas not adequately evolved often end in watered-down products and services that become increasingly isolated and disconnected from everything around them.

**4 TAKING HOLD.** Some ideas simply need to be expressed to take hold—they are an extension of the collective mindset. The Internet is a good example. Other ideas can take hold only if there is a fundamental shift in the way people think. The discovery and harsh rejection of the sun-centered planetary model is a good example of the *unbelievable* as the *unseeable*.

**5 EVERYTHING IN ITS TIME.** You don't plant a garden in the middle of winter—even if you have a really good seed. It is important to understand the optimal conditions for an idea to take hold. Some ideas only take hold when there is great stability. Others prosper more easily when there is threat or chaos. As an alchemist, it is essential to know when to seize the moment.

**6 GOOD FAILURE.** Being intentional about designing the conditions for good failure is as important as designing the conditions for good success. Most of our learning comes from our failures. And the best failures create maximal learning with minimal negative consequence—taking just the right amount of risk. We should celebrate good failure as much as good success.

**7 EXCESSIVE REDUCTION.** Some of the best ideas are killed by the good intentions of others to know *exactly what they are*. Great ideas often have very little form initially—and they are not easily worded or shared. If we reduce another person's idea too quickly to something familiar that we can easily understand, we may reduce the soul out of the idea. Because of this, it's important to give the idea a lot of space. You may not know exactly *what it is*, but you may notice what it feels like, what it reminds you of, or other ideas it stimulates.

**8 RISK.** Risk is essential to innovation and rapid leaps in performance. Often we discourage risk in ways we don't fully appreciate—like celebrating successes while neglecting bold attempts, or funding only those things that are proven. One way to assess risk tolerance is to look at our number of failures. If there are few, it indicates an overly-conservative approach.

**9 CONTEXT.** Some of the best ideas work really well in some places and not so much in others. A single condition can radically alter the potential for success. The context an idea rests within is as important as the fundamental merit of the idea itself. Great alchemists can shift almost any context to provide the supporting conditions for success.