TUNNEL VISION:
Digging for Breakthroughs

by Mitchell Ditkoff

True innovators rarely follow the straight and narrow path. Not only do they march to a different drummer, they're often not even on the same playing field as most people. Take Seymour Cray, for example, a legendary designer of high-speed computers. According to John Rollwagen, ex-chairman of Cray research, Seymour Cray used to divide his time between building the next generation super computer and digging an underground tunnel below his Chippewa Falls house. Cray's explanation of his tunnel digging is consistent with the story of many other creative individuals throughout the ages who have understood the need to go **OFFLINE** periodically. Bottom line, when they're stuck on a particularly difficult problem, they simply walk away from it for a while. They know, from experience, that more (obsession, focus, effort) is often less (ideas, solutions, results). And so they simply unplug from the challenge they are working on and do something different.

Explained Cray, "I work for three hours and then I get stumped. So I quit and go to work in the tunnel. It takes me an hour or so to dig four inches and put in the boards. You see, I'm up in the Wisconsin woods, and there are elves in the woods. So when they see me leave, they come back into my office and solve all the problems I'm having. Then I go up (to my lab) and work some more."

Explains Rollwagen, "The real work happens when Seymour is in the tunnel."

• In what ways can you go offline with a current project?

• When is the best time for you to take a break?

• What is your version of Cray's tunnel?

This article is excerpted from **BANKING ON INNOVATION**, *a 172-page workbook that accompanies Idea Champions' 2-day creative thinking training.*
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