Beyond Usual: [Six] Ways Leading Firms diverge from Business as Usual

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Twenty Word Introductory Note (26 words)

Mintz and Knight propose six principles firms should employ to create industry-changing innovations, developed from their unique experiences as delegates on an international innovation trade mission.

Executive Summary

Firms must innovate to sustain their long-term profitability. However, few firms successfully manage to innovate continually. Thus, this article proposes six principles for firms to employ to create breakthrough industry-changing innovations and maintain their success afterwards. It proposes the six principles based on the authors multidisciplinary academic backgrounds and their unique experience as delegates on an innovation mission that enabled them to visit and engage with executives from leading firms in the Silicon Valley and Seattle regions. The mission trip enabled the authors to visit many of these firms back-to-back over a short period of time and also continuously engage with their delegation about what was being learned on the trip. This, in combination with a review of the academic business literature, enabled the authors to put together a set of best innovation practices repeatedly employed by those leading firms that should be implemented by other businesses looking to innovate continually.

50-Word Author Bios

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Introduction

Steve Jobs once inspired university graduates by telling them that "innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower."[i] However, over the course of history, only a small handful of firms are able to become industry-leaders through breakthrough innovations, i.e., offering substantial, new benefits for customers through new-to-the-market products, such as creating the first iPhone.[ii] Even fewer of those firms remain industry leaders once they created industry-changing innovations: an estimated three-quarters of firms that develop such products fail to gain adoption by the mainstream market.[iii] And, even fewer of those firms are able to supplement original breakthrough innovations with incremental innovations to sustain long-term industry leadership, i.e., continually offering minor benefits for customers through product extensions, such as releasing new versions of the iPhones.[iv]

Thus, to better understand how leading firms established best innovation practices, the authors were part of an Australian Sustainable Innovation Mission delegation of business leaders, government agencies, and educators that visited the Silicon Valley and Seattle regions in the US.[1] The week-long trip with a day-to-night agenda included site visits with firms such as Amazon, Apple, Boeing, Facebook, Future Ventures, Instacart, Planet Labs, Salesforce, Starbucks, Tesla, and Visa, among others. The trip enabled us to have a unique in-person ability to observe, learn, and engage in discussions with executives from a couple dozen leading firms that have created industry-changing products, successfully continued to innovate, and been able to sustain their success. Further, the trip enabled us to visit many of these firms back-to-back over a short period of time and also continuously engage with the Australian delegation about what we were all learning on our trip, so we could put together a set of best innovation practices repeatedly employed by those leading firms.

From those qualitative observations, we built on our multidisciplinary backgrounds in marketing, management, and innovation and further employed academic research from the entrepreneurship[v], finance[vi], innovation[vii], marketing[viii], and management[ix] literatures. The combined insights from our site visits and review of the academic literature enabled us to propose six principles that leading firms' organizational cultures emphasize to successfully continually innovate. Figure 1 offers a visual depiction of the six principles and how they act as an interlinking structure, similar to the structure of a house, with an aspirational ceiling (e.g., articulating a clear vision), a foundational base (e.g., establishing a customer centric organization), and four pillars (e.g., organizational risk-appetite, proactively avoiding the status quo, establishing an uplifting mission, and encouraging diverse leadership approaches) to support the link between the base and ceiling.

Next, we detail each of the six principles. Then, we describe how all six principles need to work together in an interlinking process to develop the foundation of an innovative organizational culture structure. Finally, we provide a checklist for companies to gauge their own support of an innovative organizational culture and enable recommendations to further develop these cultures.

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[1] The Sustainable Growth through Innovation Trade Mission was co-organized by the Australian-American and Australian-Israeli Chambers of Commerce, and included site visits and discussions with firms such as Amazon, Andersen, Apple, Boeing, Facebook, Future Ventures, Impossible Foods, Instacart, Planet Labs, Salesforce, Starbucks, Tesla, Telstra Ventures, Unity Technologies, Visa, and various government agencies.

1) **Imagine the world you and your customers want to live in.**

Leading firms are singularly focused on the outcome of how they believe their customers want to see the world. Competing with rivals is inevitable, and banking on existing technology will always be important. But leading firms often come from a philosophical point of view: imagining and clearly articulating a kind of world they and their customers wish to live in before it yet exists.

Academic research suggests that ensuring all firm stakeholders clearly understand the future vision of the firm is important for strategy implementation and role clarity since employees and customers understand the greater goal of the firm.[x] On our trip, many executives of leading firms stated that this end-outcome focus and approach was critical for the development and success of their products. A good example is Planet Labs, which possessed a single-minded desire to build satellites that can take daily pictures of all corners of the Earth, so government agencies, first responders, and environmentalists could document everyday occurrences across the planet. Another example is Impossible Foods, which had an intense determination to create a plant-based food that is similar in taste and appearance to meat, as a necessary response to climate change.

However, just as importantly, articulating a clear vision often generates greater employee and customer enthusiasm and devotion.[xi] This helps firms generate positive word-of-mouth effects to acquire a greater number of devoted potential employees and customers, without which even the most advanced innovative product will not be able to succeed in the market.[xii] Tesla offers an example that we were able to witness. The firm continuously displayed an unwavering dedication to build an electric car that could be considered, at a minimum, the same quality as luxury, non-electric cars, since they understood this would be what customers would demand from their automobiles. And Tesla has been able to achieve remarkable financial market success based in large part due to developing some of the most devoted its customers and employees for any type of product.

2) **The customer is king and a customer centric focus cuts through politics.**

Repeatedly, we heard on our trip that a firm's lifeblood is its customers; and a firm's employees' ability to interact with customers and foster this relationship is how a firm can thrive. The resulting customer-centricity, i.e., a firm's customer centric focus that prioritizes its customers' interest above all else,[xiii] is important as numerous academic studies have established that customer-centricity enables firms to achieve greater results in a number of diverse outcomes: financial, employee productivity, and long-term relationships with its customers.[xiv]

Establishing a customer centric focus is also critical for firms to create long-standing industry-changing products and sustain their success, as executives from Amazon, Impossible Foods, Instacart, Planet Labs, Salesforce, and Tesla each detailed. This is because creating industry-changing products requires firms to identify current product limitations from a customer's perspective[xv], understand how customers' wants and needs are evolving[xvi], and enact product development strategies that overcome current limitations and match customers' future wants and needs.[xvii]

Further, customer-centricity is not just good business, it is also good politics. Where firms start with multiple co-founders (Salesforce), have lost visionary founders (Apple), or have

experienced exponential growth in a short-time (Instacart), there may be competing agendas and views that could destabilize such organizations. However, to cut through the politics, leading firms emphasize that the customer's point of view rules. For example, at Amazon, we learned how employees are forced to write mock press releases and FAQs about how their new product or service innovations would solve a problem their customers face, prior to the development of the actual innovation. This resulted in Amazon's employees to consider the implications of their innovations to its customers above all other considerations.

3) **It's about risk appetite, not just risk-taking.**

We all know firms need to take risks to produce game-changing innovations. Further, tolerance for short-term failure and rewarding long-term risk-taking are well-known effective strategies to encourage such innovations.[xviii]

But leading firms went one step further: they actively considered their risk appetite as a mechanism to improve and continually innovate customers' experiences, even if it conflicts with current norms. Hence, leading firms actively and continuously encouraged their employees to take risks with their products and services to improve the customers' experience. For example, Apple managers described how their employees are evaluated on their level of innovation in their performance evaluations. In addition, firms such as Salesforce, Planet Labs, Amazon, Tesla, and Starbucks described that learning from failure was a key for their employees and firms learning and development. Thus, leading firms risk appetite is high, and their employees innovation failures when attempting to create new products and services were not punished but actually encouraged. And academic research has found support of this approach: one study in the *Journal of Finance* found rewarding short-term failure in innovations was more conducive to producing innovations than punishing or remaining neutral about such failures.[xix]

Leading firms also used data to enable successful innovations. The reason: data analysis allowed firms to identify opportunities based on evolving customer trends and also empowered employees to take risks and test their "gut" instincts by empirically verifying whether those innovations solved customers' problems.[xx] For example, we heard from Unity Labs about how their use of a data + employee "gut" instinct process enabled the firm to expand from video game development to become an augmented reality (AR) product provider, and the use of data also enabled the firm to verify its product innovations were successfully solving customers' problems previously unaddressed in the market.[xxi]

4) **Status-quo is the kiss of death.**

Leading firms are restless places because the status quo is never good enough. In fact, on our trip, it appeared that stating "this is the way it has always been done" and variants of this statement were one of the most punishable and derogatory offences to those who stated it, with procedures actually in place to report those who did state it.

Instead, leading firms' cultures heavily emphasize experimentation to move beyond the status-quo in an effort to continually improve their current products, customer experiences, and test innovative product offerings.[xxii] For example, Facebook, described to us how it conducts thousands of weekly experiments so it can continually improve its services. Leading firms also employ experimentation as a tool to learn which innovations are likely to match customers' future wants and needs in addition to the likelihood such innovations will be

adopted.[xxiii] Hence, Starbucks houses a taste center in its corporate headquarters that operates daily so its managers can directly gauge customer responses to its ever-expanding assortment of new flavors and product offerings.

However, critically, leading firms often employ low-cost experimentation so any potential failures are not too damaging to their bottom-line. In addition, employing low-cost experiments enables leading firms to continually test, learn, and create faster and better implementation of their innovations so that they can move beyond the status-quo.[xxiv] Thus, Planet Lab engineers credited the firm's ability to experiment with relatively low-cost satellites as a critical factor that enabled the firm to continually improve their once industry-changing satellites innovations with incremental innovations that better match customers' current needs.

Further, leading firms described implementing an adaptable approach not relying on the status quo as a critical mindset complementing an organizational emphasis on experimentation. For instance, Instacart and Salesforce both described their adaptably and continual innovation as a necessary pre-condition to best cater to their customers' and employees' changing demands in relatively new industries growing at rapid rates. Consequently, without encouraging and facilitating adaptably, firms will be unable to challenge the status quo, and academic research has found that unadaptable firms will not employ or invest the necessary resources to ensure successful findings from their experiments are employed.[xxv]

5) **Make the world better.**

We mentioned that leading firms know the world they want to create. However, they also have a mission to make that world better. Leading firms' uplifting and positive missions can create a purpose, a guiding philosophy, and a central image that potential and current employees and customers can identify with; as long as there is continual buy-in, authenticity, and coherence throughout the organization.[xxvi]

Employee and customer identification with the products' purpose can lead to an increased devotion to their firms. Further, it is often a must for firms creating industry-changing innovations to "cross-the-chasm" from niche products to gain mainstream adoption.[xxvii] For example, we were able to witness how Impossible Foods' mission "to make our global food system truly sustainable" and Tesla's vision "to accelerate the advent of sustainable transport by bringing compelling mass market electric cars to market as soon as possible" seemed to provide an intense devotion and motivation to many customers and most employees working for their respective firms. And, in both of these firms, their mission to make the world better was not just lip-service. Instead, their missions were strongly reinforced from the top-down, which helped make these missions a reality.

However, not every organization's mission is so grand that they are attempting to change the world. For these types of firms, we observed how leaders focused their uplifting mission on directly helping customers, and how these missions were continually reinforced through internal and external corporate actions.[xxviii] Amazon supplemented its mission "to be earth's most customer-centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online" by creating a one-page summary of the organization's defining characteristics that reinforced this mission; and consistently forcing their employees to refer back to this summary throughout many organizational settings (i.e.,

organizational meetings, communications with customers, etc.). Starbucks' mission "to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighborhood at a time" is placed around the walls of their headquarters and is accompanied by an organizational culture that values and rewards employees for creating customer devotion through their customer interactions. Consequently, academic research has found that establishing a well-known positive and uplifting mission is an important driver of firms creating and sustaining industry-changing innovations because it enables firms to attract top talent and to inspire and encourage employees and customers' enthusiasm for the company.[xxix]

6) **Finally, firms need a mix of leaders that can both inspire and support innovation.**

Top executives in leading firms are not commonly perceived as possessing the most humble personality type (e.g., Richard Branson, Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk, and Mark Zuckerberg). This is because not being humble is an often needed personality trait that innovative firms need in order to inspire and clearly articulate their future vision to customers and employees. However, this personality trait may not provide a supportive enough environment for employees to develop the innovative products and also may blind executives from changing course when needed or over-changing course when not needed.[xxx]

Hence, leading firms also rely on executives that are more focused on supporting and encouraging employees as counter-weights to their more-famous leaders.[xxxi] Those less famous executives are often highly cherished by their employees since they support the processes that allow for collaborative decision making and for employees to feel comfortable challenging the status-quo.[xxxii] And, we were able to observe first-hand the respect and power when leaders possess a humble and supportive personality. For example, we witnessed how Robyn Denholm, Chairwoman of Tesla, garnered so much genuine enthusiasm and respect from both white and blue-collar Tesla employees based on her affectionate personality, strong leadership skills, and ability to ask sharp, inquisitive questions, while remaining supportive, encouraging, humble, and not overly out-spoken.

In addition, we saw that enthusiasm by top executives matter. Leader enthusiasm has been found to inspire employees to be more commitment and "work the extra mile" to achieve the firms' primary objectives.[xxxiii] We were also able to observe how Darryl Havens, VP/Distinguished Engineer at Amazon, was so enthusiastic about implementing cutting-edge technologies, that he was able to cross-cut across what seemed to be every different Amazon silo to improve the efficiencies of Amazon's warehouses. Hence, leading firms were able to create a leadership team whose personalities were able to inspire employees through different, yet effective mechanisms. Further, there was not a single suit and tie in Silicon Valley and Seattle. Why? Because they don't want to enforce hierarchy: the next best idea might come from the latest graduate to join the company; and this graduate may be inspired by a mix of humble, enthusiastic, and gregarious leadership.

How the Principles Interlink

To summarize, the six principles proposed in this article are how leading firms create an organizational culture that emphasizes innovation through continual improvement and learning focusing on current and potential customer outcomes. The interlinking process between the six principles can be thought of as similar to developing the foundation of an innovative organizational culture structure, such as in Figure 1. First, emphasizing that the customer as the king is the base of the organizational culture that is needed to create and

sustain successful innovations, so firms can successfully identify product-based innovation opportunities through understanding customers' evolving unmet wants and needs. Second, creating a clear, articulated vision of how innovations will provide a world customers want to live in is the ceiling or aspirational goal of the organizational culture that builds the employee and customer enthusiasm required to innovate. Finally, organizational risk-appetite, avoidance of the status quo, establishing an uplifting mission, and encouraging inspiring and humble leadership are the four interlinking pillars that provide support between the base and the aspired innovation goal. Simply, customer-centric innovative products will not reach firms' aspirational objectives without providing an organizational culture with a risk-appetite that enables employees to challenge the status quo based on a customer devotion to a positive or customer-centric cause continually inspired and supported by leaders in the organization.

Consequently, while not all firms will enact all six principles, without a base (customer centric focus with the customer as the king) or aspirational ceiling (clear vision imagining the world you and your customers want to live in) it will be difficult for firms to create the organizational culture structure needed to achieve game-changing innovations. And, without one or more of the four interlinking pillars, firms can still build an innovative culture structure, but the structure becomes a little bit less stable and likely to sustain any industry-changing innovations with incremental innovations. Thus, we encourage firms aspiring to continually innovate to employ all six principles together to provide the innovative customer centric organizational culture structure supportive of their aspirational goals.
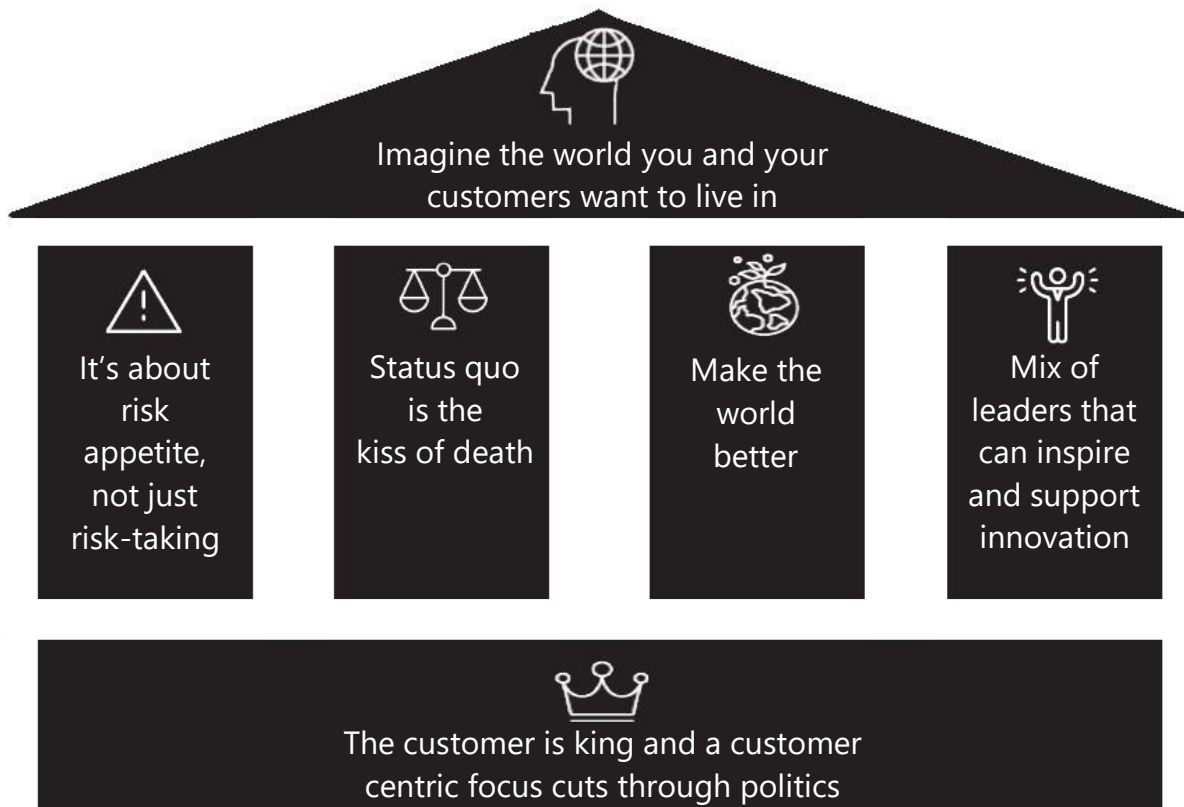
Next Steps: Assessing and Implementing Steps to Improve your Firm's Innovative Organizational Culture

To consider your whether your firm is supporting an innovative organizational culture, we now provide a checklist of questions that managers should ask themselves. This serves as an informal way to evaluate your firm's culture relative to each of the six identified principles. These checklist questions are not intended to be exhaustive. Instead, they are intended to prompt the kinds of questions that allow for a better understanding of how your firm is applying the principles of truly innovative organizational cultures, as well as a pathway to move in the right direction.

Principle	Checklist questions
Imagine the world you and your customers want to live in	• Does your strategy contain a customer-centric vision? • Do you have short, medium, and long-term strategic planning horizons? • Does each horizon link to a meaningful progression in the vision for how your customers with evolve their benefits with you over time?
The customer is king and a customer centric focus cuts through politics	• Do you have a clear knowledge of who are your customer segments and personas? Do you regularly collect and analyze data to understand your customers' needs and desires? • Are your marketing and product management teams working together on

	making customer journey and customer experience? • How are conflicts managed in marketing, sales, and product development decisions? Are customer insights guiding those resolutions?
It's about risk appetite, not just risk-taking	• Where and how do teams talk about risk appetite in the context of the organization's culture? • What are the structures and processes that support appropriate risk taking relative to risk appetite? • How is risk audited and reviewed to ensure appropriate risk is taken?
Status-quo is the kiss of death	• How is experimentation fostered and enabled within your teams? • How are experiments measured? What are lead indicators of success? • How do experiments get scaled up into more substantial commitments?
Make the world better	• Do your employees know and identify with the company's mission statement? • Do your customers identify with the company's mission statement? • Do you have regular interactions within the firm to ask 'what does this mission statement mean to us and our customers? How do we fulfil our mission'?
Mix of leaders that can inspire and support innovation	• What did your skills assessment of your leadership team reveal about diversity of skills and attributes? • How are you ensuring that the mix of leaders is appropriate? • How are you ensuring that your senior leaders are leading and supporting change within their respective teams?

Figure 1. The Culture Leading Firms Build to Produce and Sustain Game-Changing Innovations

Imagine the world you and your customers want to live in

It's about risk appetite, not just risk-taking

Status quo is the kiss of death

Make the world better

Mix of leaders that can inspire and support innovation

The customer is king and a customer centric focus cuts through politics

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