



# LEADERSHIP & THE FUTURE OF WORK

---

INSIGHTS ON HOW TO  
LEAD & INNOVATE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

By Mark Stuart

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mark is a sought-after speaker, trainer, and executive coach, specialising in Leadership and Innovation, based in Singapore.

Mark is Co-Founder of corporate training company which won the British Chamber of Commerce's "Future of Work" award at the 19th Annual Business Awards in September 2018 for their work in helping organisations transform through Innovation, Design Thinking and Ideathons.

Mark works with over 150 government and corporate clients in Singapore, Asia and the UK through his training company, through Innovation keynote speeches, workshops, and Ideathons, in a wide range of industries from finance, to tech, to education.

Mark also designs and delivers innovation, soft-skills, leadership, and management workshops for corporates, accelerators, and government agencies in Singapore, Asia and around the world. He is also a leadership and executive coach for C-level executives in Asia.

Prior to training, Mark has had over 15 years of international management and investment banking experience in the UK, Australia and Asia for Morgan Stanley, Schroders, Goldman Sachs, Abbey National and Salomon Brothers.

Mark is a Professional Member of the Asia Professional Speakers Singapore, and a Group Representative of the British Chamber of Commerce Singapore, Entrepreneur & Small Business Committee.

# CONTENTS

The Role of A Leader in Innovation

Page 4

Corporate Leadership with a  
Start-up Mentality

Page 8

A 5 Minute Guide to  
Innovation & Design Thinking

Page 12

# 1

## THE ROLE OF A LEADER IN INNOVATION



Over the past 18 months, I've run Design Thinking workshops and 'Ideathons' for dozens of organisations.

Whilst we always finish the sessions with an excellent range of pragmatic, ambitious and some down-right crazy ideas, the problem with most corporate innovation initiatives is the follow-up, or lack thereof. Or, more specifically, does this suggest a lack of innovation strategy from the leadership team?

Admittedly Design Thinking has become a bit of a trend nowadays, but I still see it as the best way for a company to obtain a common terminology, and a framework for the non-designers among us, for the increasingly essential innovation. It doesn't matter anymore what industry you're in, innovation is one the top 3 topics occupying the CEO's mind. Even traditional firms are now recruiting ex-tech data scientists without even fully understanding what they do, how they do it, and what potential there is from leveraging the data.

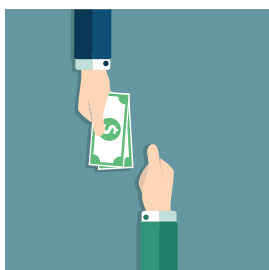
What happens therefore, is the participants come away from the sessions excited, motivated, full of ideas and confidence, and then hit the corporate brick wall. Boxes have been ticked, employees are happy with the training, but the follow-through just seems too difficult and time-consuming.

So, if you're a leader trying to help drive innovation within your firm, what should you be doing to ensure a higher chance of success? Following are some of the characteristics I've observed from corporate leaders when it comes to innovation training:

“Design Thinking has become a bit of a trend nowadays, but I still see it as the best way for a company to obtain a common terminology, and a framework for the non-designers among us”

#### • 1- Head in the Sand, Not Needed.

These leaders don't see a need for change or innovation, and weren't supporters of the training in the first place. In their eyes, things are working fine, and innovation will just cost a lot of time and money, and bring about a loss of jobs.



#### • 2- Not My Job, I'm Paying for the Training.

Sometimes you meet leaders who know something needs to change, are prepared to pay for the training, however don't see it as their job to follow up afterwards. They sit on their lofty perch directing orders but fail to realise the overwhelmingly positive impact of leaders fully buying into the process.

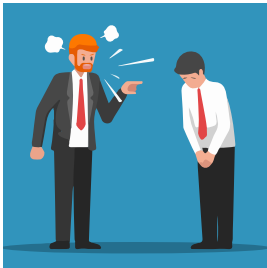
### • 3- Mean Well, But Doesn't Have a Clue.

This is a 'nice' leader who wants to help and shows enthusiasm but everyone in the group knows they might not understand how to implement change or innovation. Ideas suggested are the same as old initiatives or expose a huge gap in their knowledge.



### • 4- Wants to Help, Won't Keep Quiet.

Everybody knows this type of leader and there are plenty of them! They genuinely want to help, but don't realise they dominate every conversation and impose their ideas onto a subordinate group. In their haste to contribute, they forget the power their position gives them and stifle the ideas from the quiet members of the team.



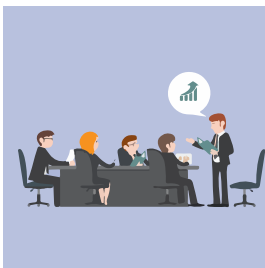
### • 5- Very Keen, in the Trenches.

Now, that's more like it. This leader helps drive the workshop, understands the need for it, and participates in the training. They believe in being alongside their team and contributing towards the conversations. Fully immersed, they sometimes forget their role as leader, but is that a bad thing?



### • 6- Fully Supportive, Knows their Role, Sets Direction.

This leader is helping to set the innovation strategy for the firm, and knows the value training can have when implemented properly. They've initiated a 6-month firmwide challenge, and made funds available to further develop winning concepts. They don't have to be involved directly in the training but will visit and talk to participants, ensuring they follow up with their direct reports. This leader is rare, but they do exist and can help drive a company forward to keep market position.



So, there you have it, six types of leaders I commonly see in my work. It's not all bad as there is some fantastic work being done out there, just not enough in my opinion.

What I have seen some companies do well is to publicly throw their support behind the newly generated initiatives, most commonly through something like an 'Innovation Challenge' where the prototypes are viewed and voted on by top management. Some also provides funds to the winners to further develop their prototype into a minimum viable product. The added value this brings to the employees is that they feel they're being heard and their ideas are being taken seriously, even though they might not be involved in the implementation.

Like most corporate training, it's vital that there is a follow-up plan if you want to maximise ROI. It can be as simple as line managers following up with their team members post training and providing support for them to display newfound behaviours. In innovation, the question I hear most is, 'what next?' and it's a valid one. The next article will suggest some ideas for what can be done next, but like most good things, it starts with a plan!

**“ What I have seen some companies do well is to publicly throw their support behind the newly generated initiatives, most commonly through something like an ‘Innovation Challenge’ where the prototypes are viewed and voted on by top management ”**



# 2

## CORPORATE LEADERSHIP WITH A START-UP MENTALITY



In the past 5 to 10 years, the leadership development industry has been dominated by terms like VUCA. If you're not familiar with this term, it suggests that we're now (or have been) living in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous world, and that successful leaders need to be able to adapt to the new environment we find ourselves in.



So, what about the next 10 years? Actually, with the speed of transformation, 10 years is too long to start planning for, so let's address the next 3 to 5 years. More recent Leadership industry terms have included Authentic, Servant, Situational or Charismatic but I don't fully buy into these. Yes, leaders need to demonstrate these qualities, but effective leaders know how to adapt their style to the situation and not be as one-dimensional as some of these styles suggest.

In fact, after working with close to 100 firms over the past 2 years, I see a different set of skills required by our leaders if their firms are going to continue growing and capturing market share.

**“ The pressures being placed on corporate leadership are akin to those traditionally faced by startup founders ”**

The pressures being placed on corporate leadership are akin to those traditionally faced by startup founders: innovating at pace, flatter organisational structures, increased demand for flexible working, and even more of a 'startup culture'.

This is a drastic change to 10 years ago, when those very same leaders would go about their work in a slower, more methodological pace following traditional hierarchies. There wasn't anything particularly wrong about it at the time – as everyone was doing it – however the problem now is your competitors are starting to up their game. They're launching products faster, meeting the needs of the younger workforce, and not abusing the power that comes with a leadership position.

Let's look at 3 of these start-up traits in more detail, and how corporate leaders can adapt them to suit their environment:

#### • 1- Innovating at Pace

In a startup the mantra is more 'innovate or die' rather than the more sluggish 'let's form a committee to talk about forming an innovation team'. The startup has already released their next product by the time someone has made a decision in a large organisation. Leaders need to act quicker and not always wait for perfect information or the 'ideal time'. The idiom 'you snooze, you lose!' has never been more relevant. The key here is to let go of prior frameworks and misconceptions about how things should be done and try something different. You'll rarely get ahead without taking some form of calculated risk or being the first mover. 'Fortune favours the brave' as another idiom goes.

## • 2- Flatten Organisation Structures

I'll start by starting I'm not a fan of zero hierarchy, such as Holacracy, which advocates self-directed teams and doing away with traditional management structures. However, there is a strong argument for reducing the number of layers someone has to go through to get a decision made or access top-level management. Many firms are still using structures from the industrial times, when they made sense. In today's world, this is an archaic way of working that will ultimately hold you back.

Leaders need to empower their teams and not stand in the way of progress by running every decision up the chain, and then wait for the answer to come back down again. Spotify are famous for using squads where teams are comprised of the respective specialists, and the product manager has the power to initiate and deploy releases without senior management approval. This allows them to move with speed without being hampered by hierarchy and politics. As a corporate leader, what would need to happen for you to further empower your teams?

**“ Leaders need to empower their teams and not stand in the way of progress by running every decision up the chain, and then wait for the answer to come back down again ”**

## • 3- Flexible and Redefined Job Roles

In start-ups, especially during their growth phases, employees often have to take on multiple roles and pitch in where needed. This can result in them working on several projects across different functions, in addition to their core day-to-day role, which has its pros and cons.

On the positive side, it provides new and interesting projects to work on and increases their knowledge across the firm. On the downside, it can leave you feeling like you're being pulled in different directions, with different priorities, from different bosses. However, on a broader note, it allows the firm to move faster when required by leveraging on its best resources as and when is needed.

There's no waiting for one project to finish before you can put the ideal team in place. In a large organisation that can take anything up to a year for all the pieces to fall into place. By having a flexible workforce, leaders can create a more flexible firm that's able to adapt to market conditions and get the jump on their competitors.

That flexibility doesn't just stop with job roles, but also working conditions.

Approximately two-thirds of firms in the UK and Singapore now have some form of flexible working arrangements in place and it's no longer just the smaller firms doing this. Many of the leading listed companies are leading the charge and have implemented policies in response to the demands of their workforce.

**“ Approximately two-thirds of firms in the UK and Singapore now have some form of flexible working arrangements in place ”**

Flexible working has become a key item in contract negotiations and can range from flexible start/end times to unlimited vacation days. Multiple research papers show it leads to an increase in productivity and engagement, however it still has some way to go, with many workers highlighting they still feel left out of key discussions and regarded lower than their office-dwelling peers.

It's clear that if corporate leaders are going to adopt some or all of the above strategies something needs to change, starting with them. It takes a new skillset to manage a remote or flexible workforce, but technology is there to help you. It takes a change in mindset to drive innovation at all levels and move faster without having all the information you might have previously had, but there are numerous case studies and online resources there to help you.

Can start-ups still learn some critical skills from corporate leaders? Of course, it goes both ways and perhaps fewer startups would fold with more corporate discipline, however with innovation and technology driving the majority of new business, corporate leadership is the one I would tackle first.

# 3

## A 5 MINUTE GUIDE TO INNOVATION & DESIGN THINKING



**D**esign Thinking. It's a hip and trendy buzzword dominating the corridors of firms across the globe from product design companies to corporate accountants. But what is it really, and does it hold any value in helping drive change and innovation?

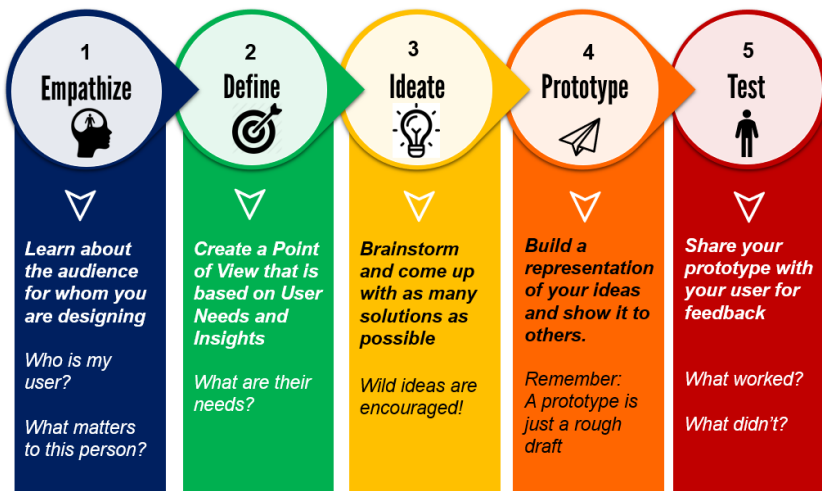
“ I first came across the term a few years ago, and being a finance professional it meant nothing to me. ”

I first came across the term a few years ago, and being a finance professional it meant nothing to me. I approached projects from a traditional Waterfall methodology and whatever our bank's IT project team had decided to adopt (Six Sigma, Lean, Agile etc.). What ensued was normally a slightly haphazard and prolonged period of frustration filled by delays, rebuilds and sometimes not even fixing the problem it was originally trying to change.

I can drive innovation and change at a corporate level but if there's one thing I would never describe myself as, it's a designer. What I love about Design Thinking are two key things: firstly, the aim is to innovate with the customer in mind, hence empathy and seeking out customer feedback are essential parts of the process. The second key distinction is that it gives non-designers like me a framework to implement and drive change I was looking for. Since then I've been able to use it to better structure change initiatives from processes to products to service.

“ I've been able to use it to better structure change initiatives from processes to products to service. ”

For my own training, I was certified in MIT's 3-month design thinking course which followed the Stanford's d.school framework highlighted below. This 5-step process clearly lays out the key stages involved to arrive at a solution that meets your customers' (often latent) needs.



### Very simply the 5 steps are:

- **Empathy:** The first part is to identify your customer's unmet needs. Trying to do this for them never works as well. The easiest way to achieve this is to interview as many as you can. Start general and then go deeper using the '5 Why' technique, which involves asking why to every answer until you get a detailed-enough response. It feels strange at first but is remarkably effective. You might only get to the second or third Why before you get your answer.
- **Define:** This section refines your responses, and highlights themes and insights that you can draw from them. This allows you to then define a problem statement that will be used to drive the brainstorming in the next section.
- **Ideate:** The Ideate phase is when you can unleash your creative thinking in coming up with solutions to your problem statement. The most common technique used here is brainstorming, which if done correctly, can be highly effective however many facilitators get this wrong. There are several different brainstorming techniques to employ, however some of my favourite include:

- Nominal Group Technique
- Group Ideation
- Buffets 5/25 Rule
- Crazy 8
- Associative Brain writing

Some simple rules to have in place at the start to ensure the sessions run smoothly, include:

- Defer judgement
- Encourage wild ideas
- One person speaks at a time
- Build on the ideas of others
- Express ideas visually

Some facilitators then advocate some form of voting to identify the 3 to 5 best ideas to follow up on. This leads to the Prototype phase.

- **Prototype:** Prototyping is where we get to build what we're discussing or proposing. This is more obvious for product design (you just need a good supply of materials for them to build with), but how do you prototype a service or online product. Here, you might need to use your imagination but could involve sketching how a web page might look, or finding a way to trial a new process or service. Can you write out a procedure or process document that team members would need to follow?

- **Test:** The final phase is of course testing. Does it actually work? Is it measurable? If the answer is no, then we move back through the phase and start again. You might only need to go back to the Prototype phase, other times you might need to readdress your problem statement.

At the end of the process, we're looking for some good implementable innovation that can benefit your company in the short to medium term. It should remain a fun process, involving a diverse group of people to ensure you get a wide range of ideas.

Design Thinking is a process that works when done effectively, and best of all, you no longer need to be a designer to utilise it.

“ At the end of the process, we're looking for some good implementable innovation that can benefit your company in the short to medium term. ”



# MARK STUART

Asia's Leading Innovation Expert  
Engage Mark for your next workshop  
or ideathon!



## INNOVATION & DESIGN THINKING

What Asia's leading companies are  
doing to build a culture of innovation



## LEADERSHIP

Managing remote and tech teams,  
leading, motivating and engaging teams  
in a digital age



## FUTURE OF WORK

Managing the workforce of the future

**Mark is available for workshops in Asia and around the world.  
Enquire with your training partner today.**