



The Importance of Vision, Brand and Strategy in Collaborative Innovation

Recognise, implement & maximise

The Corporate Innovation Club is a community of nearly 100 international and global corporate brands as well as some government departments and NGO's. All the members of the community share a common responsibility and ownership for their organisation's engagement with open and collaborative innovation.

The community is by invitation only and has grown now to be the largest community of Corporate innovators in the world. The community come together to connect with each other; learn from each other and, at times, collaborate with each other. The community meetup once every two months to discuss a topic or theme which has relevance to their innovation vision, strategies and execution. The discussions are held under Chatham House Rules to encourage open discussion and the meetings are always hosted by a member of the Corporate Innovation Club.

From November 2018 we will have also launched an online collaborative innovation platform for Corporates, Founders and Investors from around the world to connect, learn and collaborate. The platform will be free to use for all but is a private community where access is by request or invitation only. Find more details on the platform and register to participate at www.colinked.io.

Meeting Theme

The Corporate Innovation Club members gathered in the heart of London to discuss what place the methodology, convention and framework of branding and strategy have in informing and empowering collaborative Corporate innovation.

Arguably, however, a second theme permeated the meeting. As ever, lively discussion and an atmosphere that welcomed brain-storming and leftfield thinking without judgement defined the Club's assembly. As such, the sub-theme emerged organically; namely 'innovation with purpose'.

Existing members of the Club will know we have touched on purposeful innovation several times before. What is innovation with purpose? It is that which strives to deliver tangible results, or learning gained from failing forward. Meaningful innovation will mean different things to different corporations, and vary from initiative to initiative. But generally speaking 'purpose' in this context is about practising innovation not for the sake of it, and not to 'keep up with the Joneses', but to overcome defined challenges, support business, or benefit the experience of staff and customers.

As such the discussion and knowledge sharing ultimately looked at how the practice of brand and strategy can engender ever more purpose in Corporate innovation.



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Key Takeaways

What interest does your Corporate innovation serve?

Broadly speaking, brand captures the mission statement, attitudes, ambitions, moral compass and even personality of a business. Strategy, meanwhile, guides the direction, mechanisms and goals. Both those processes can be powerfully impactful when applied to Corporate innovation. Employing the framework of brand and strategy starts with a simple question. What interest does your Corporate innovation serve? Taking a look at the motivations behind any Corporate innovation strategy – and framing the desired outcomes – is a key first step in applying strategic theory to your efforts with innovation. Start by thinking of innovation as a means to an end.

Giving thought to the following can serve to aid zeroing in on purpose:

- What does your innovation strategy look like?
- Who do you report to?
- What constitutes success?
- Whose interests do you serve?



Brand and strategy serve the wider business as tools to guide and focus progress.



Start with goals and objectives

Corporate innovation is often hampered by disconnection, or a misconception of apparent disconnection. Innovation teams and labs can exist in isolation from their wider corporation. Corporates and Start-Ups can feel distanced by differences in their respective business culture and experience. Such disconnects can undermine the most well intended innovation initiative before it has left the runway.

Here brand and strategic thinking can offer a thorough solution. Brand and strategy serve the wider business as tools to guide and focus progress. Apply the broad theory of what brand and strategy are to the early days of any Corporate innovation strategy, and the focus they bring can help clarify what the purpose of your innovation is. That in turn can make it easier for those from outside the innovation team to understand the purpose, and connect with it. Start by shaping clearly defined, consistent shared goals, aims and – importantly – expectations. That will make conversations about how to innovate easier and more productive, and connect external partners and other internal departments with the ambitions of innovation.

Innovation is a flexible abstract

As much as it can be valuable to establish a strategy of Corporate innovation, it is equally vital to understand innovation in a broader context. Innovations happen every day across thousands of businesses in the UK alone. There are small innovations and there are those that will cause industry-wide disruption. Not every innovation needs to change the world. Indeed, not every innovation needs to be unquestionably new. An existing innovation applied to your corporation's work for the first time still has potential value.

Try not to assume your innovation initiative is special, revolutionary or a silver bullet. Equally, do not assume that it needs to be. It can be all those things, yet it is more important that you consider how it will impact your corporation. Wild innovation with no strategy or guidance is much less valuable than modest innovation with clear purpose.

Understanding innovation in terms of supply and demand

Comprehending and explaining the supply of innovation is relatively easy. There are innovation teams and labs, potential Start-Up partners, available budgets, emerging conventions with regard to process, and – ideally – enthusiastic C-suites providing approval. But as with wider business strategy, supply capacity is meaningless without demand. Ask yourself and your colleague why innovation is needed, and where the demand is. Again, we are talking about purpose. Return to the question: 'why does your innovation project exist?'

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Consider the ‘Start-Up culture illusion’

Start-Ups are understandably associated with lean methodology, bootstrapping and agility. As collaboration with Start-Ups becomes increasingly typical of the Corporate innovation process, some Corporate innovation leads are starting to experience misconception about their teams; often from other departments. Club members reported experiencing the belief that Corporate innovation labs and teams are themselves defined by bootstrapping and agility. It should be communicated to C-suite and elsewhere that core to the strategy of collaborative innovation is a combining of Start-Up and Corporate methodologies; not simply adopting Start-Up culture, convention and practice. An innovation team should not be made to run like a Start-Up. Often Start-Up culture is simply a reality of limitations, and not the ideal foundation for change.

Communicating realistic framework to the wider corporation

Part of a robust Corporate strategy is a frank perspective. That should be adopted by Corporate innovation teams, who should be as clear about timeframes, budgets and required headcounts as they are about targeted goals and outcomes.

Accepting when Corporate innovation isn’t the answer

Sometimes Corporate innovation doesn’t offer the most expedient or practical path to required change. Certain challenges may come from a business-wide or market-wide root, and require other internal changes, or proactive effort in wider economy or society. Employing Corporate innovation at the right time is key to it being purposeful and impactful. Inappropriate application of Corporate innovation may damage the reputation of innovation within a corporation.

Implementing internal collaboration

Corporate innovation is increasingly open and collaborative. While much focus on collaborative strategies looks at partnering with external entities such as Start-Ups, internal collaboration can provide a robust early foundation for most initiatives. Even when pursuing ideal external collaboration, partnering internally at the planning stage can engender a more meaningful process, and lead to more achievable results. Many start by working with the business unit or strategy team to identify problems where Corporate innovation is the ideal means to address certain challenges. That can only really be achieved if the problems and challenges are clearly defined at the outset.

After that, keeping other internal teams involved can prove be a powerful means to progress effectively. It was posited by several Club members that innovation projects can fail simply because internal partners have little to no ‘skin in the game’ beyond involvement in the planning of a new innovation initiative. It was recommended that securing considerable budgetary backing – up to 50 per cent – from internal partner teams keeps them committed to supporting and maintaining a given initiative through to its final output or impact.



A brand can be an umbrella representation of the many facets of a corporation



Does formalising the innovation process stifle its potential?

It was put forward that there is a potential contradiction in strategising Corporate innovation. It could be argued that true innovation thrives when free of formalised process. Indeed, there is a reasonable point to be made that innovation by definition should be a process independent of conventional structures. This point is an interesting one, but perhaps most useful as an academic exercise or thought experiment. It was suggested that for Corporate innovation to have purpose one should be realistic about the benefits of process.

Understanding corporation-wide branding can inform the process of an innovation initiative

Breaking out into groups, Club members took to whiteboards to list the values that define their corporation's overall brand. Many examples emerged such as 'stable', 'experienced', 'trustworthy', 'credible' and 'reliable'. Those traditional values tend to allude to consistency of business practice over time.

However, an equal number of more contemporary values were listed. Examples included 'fast', 'agile', 'innovative', 'personal' and 'socially responsible'. Those brand values are often associated with adaptability and change.

One could take away that brands can be contradictory. While that may be the case, contradictory brand values are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A brand can be an umbrella representation of the many facets of a corporation, and diversity of a brand's values is a strength. Thinking about how your innovation approach reflects the wider brand – or vice versa – can help you identify the values that underpin your innovation, and reasons you innovate. Being able to speak of the brand that guides your innovation provides a powerful, authentic tool for engaging and exciting internal and external partners.

Simply put, brand can serve to strengthen culture and clarify what you do, and how you innovate.

Consider establishing a 'departmental brand'

Building on the point immediately above, it can be worth establishing a recognised, bespoke version of the wider Corporation's brand, specific to your innovation team, lab or department. Many Corporations already have multiple brand variants; perhaps a public facing one, a business focused one, and an internal one. Look to those examples for inspiration as to how your Corporate innovation approach could establish its own brand approved by C-suite and recognised by the department. As with many points above, that can help clarify the conversation when looking for support or recognition within the wider company.



An 'innovation brand' can empower and enable the wider corporation's workforce, culture and community.



Brand can inform innovation. Innovation can inform brand.

It is entirely possible that over time the evolution of an internal innovation brand can inform and influence the overall Corporate brand, and the corporation itself. This influence may be tertiary to the core purpose of innovation, but should not be undersold internally. Furthermore, as with any well-considered brand, an 'innovation brand' can empower and enable the wider corporation's workforce, culture and community. An example was offered where the innovation team inspired the wider corporation to add 'try new things and do not be afraid to fail' to its mission statement.

For Further Consideration

- How can Corporate innovation teams demonstrate internally and externally that they serve wider interests than simply their own?
- Is there value in hiring an external entrepreneur to energise and guide a Corporate innovation team?
- Does your innovation team offer potential external partners enough reason to become involved, or simply rely on the wider corporation's own status, size, experience and resource, and assume those facets are enough of a reason for external collaborators to come on board?
- If brand informs culture, and culture permits innovation, what can be done to assure that brand fosters permissive culture?
- Why do people engage with your brand when it comes to innovation?

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