Alignment for responsible & purpose-driven innovation

Dealing with competing demands through an integrated shared purpose

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A key aim of this research was to identify how to assist leaders with building a sustainable innovation culture. The focus in this paper is on purpose-driven culture.

The studies

The relevant research phases took an in-depth methodological approach and included:

- **68 leader interviews:** semi-structured interviews with global leaders responsible for innovation in both for-profit and not-for-profit organisations to identify challenges with strategizing for and implementing responsible innovation.
- **2 year-long case studies:** immersion in innovative organisations to understand the dynamics of how innovation paradoxes are navigated by leaders – including 27 observation opportunities of naturally occurring workshops and meetings.

The originating regions of the organisations represented in the interviews included Asia Pacific (43), North America (21), and Europe (4). The types of organisations included Finance (10), Manufacturing (7), Education (7), Government (6), Consulting (6), IT (5), Pharmaceutical (3), Media (3), Food and beverage (2), Telecommunications (1), Transport (1), Medical (1), Hospitality (1), Service (1) and Not-for-Profit (14). The organizations ranged in size from small (up to 50 employees (21)), to medium (up to 1000 employees and over $10 million turnover (19)), and large (1000+ employees and up to billions of dollars in revenue (28)).

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<td>C-Suite and board members</td>
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<td>Medical, Automobile</td>
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<td>Medium</td>
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<td>Executive Directors (32)</td>
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An important finding of the research program was that ‘magnetic alignment’ is important for purpose-driven innovation. It was identified that leadership teams can transition from mere survival during times of crisis to productive functioning and thriving when there is a shift in sensemaking practices that enable this alignment.

The study demonstrates that it is possible to achieve magnetic alignment from oppositional orientations where leaders in the team are compelled to rally around a clear sense of purpose that embodies polar positions simultaneously.

This paper outlines how it is possible to apply these principles in practice.

**Key research insights**

Identifying oppositional orientations to be held in tension for navigating responsible purpose-driven innovation.
The world has become incredibly interconnected.

One person’s actions, one community’s actions, one country’s actions - these can all now have a global impact.

Think about how careless environmental stewardship can contribute to universal global warming. Higher carbon dioxide emissions in one part of the world can lead to flooding another. Consider how a basic disregard for humanitarian rights can be traced through supply chains around the world. Purchasing goods in an individual’s home in one country can support slavery and forced labour somewhere else.

Our interconnectedness means that we all now have a greater responsibility. We can no longer rely on special interest fringe groups to take responsibility for the planet’s social and environmental issues. The outcomes will impact all of us, and we all now need to step up to the challenge.

Try visualising any large city skyline.

No doubt you will be picturing how corporate skyscrapers dominate the landscape. They would tower over the religious steeples and government edifices that still feature in contemporary urban cityscapes. Any more traditional tribal village totem poles or chiefs’ longhouses would certainly appear greatly diminished in this context.

This tells us something about who should be leading the way for change. While once it would have been the tribal heads, religious authorities and governmental agencies, these are institutions no longer considered to be the major leaders and influencers in society. This responsibility now often lies instead in the commercial sphere and with private agencies.

It has become accepted that and often repeated that with great power comes great responsibility. There is the expectation that commercial enterprises will not only support societies financially, but also socially and ethically.

Temporary surface greenwashing solutions will not stick. The true underlying colours will soon show through. Instead, deep ethically grounded approaches will need to be developed, approaches that originate from strong core values.

Innovation has become the ‘the buzzword of the decade’.

The need to innovate to survive is now generally accepted by organisations. Most recognise that it will only be through innovating that we will be able to deal with the wicked problems and grand challenges we now face locally and globally.

Yet there is another caveat that needs to be emphasised. Organisations must now also innovate responsibly. Without doing so there is a risk of perpetuating the problems.

The good news that responsible innovation has been linked with superior performance and results. Research has identified that the strategic implementation of socially responsible innovation leads to a number of benefits, including new products, new markets, and productivity gains.
A link has also been found between social and environmental responsibility and economic value in the strategic interactions and the differentiation of products\textsuperscript{vi}.

Corporate social investments are opportunities for innovation\textsuperscript{vii}, and social investments are increasingly seen as important for technological and managerial innovation\textsuperscript{viii}.

Seeking to deal with the competing demands of responsible innovation can feel like walking a tenuous tightrope.

This is because there is therefore a challenging paradox embedded in the imperative to innovate responsibly. The rapid pace of change triggers the need for innovation, but at the same time change is accelerated by innovation. This can result in increasingly complex social and environmental challenges.

Not only is there a requirement to innovate faster for economic survival, but at the same time organisations need to do this in more socially responsible and sustainable ways.

Attempting to pursue both social and business goals can also lead to divergent values and identities\textsuperscript{ix}, and this can result in ethical dilemmas. Socially responsible and environmentally sustainable practices can often appear to contradict economic imperatives\textsuperscript{x}. As an example, an ethical dilemma may emerge between reaching a profitable outcome and using only ethical means (eg sourcing products from factories using child labour or environmentally unsustainable factories).

Inclusive and sustainable economic development needs to consist of important environmental factors (known as the environmental ceiling). Equally important, economic development also needs to have a strong focus on social factors, which have been found to contribute to social resilience\textsuperscript{xi}.

Sustainable development has been found to be related to the interconnectedness of economic profit, environmental integrity, and social equity\textsuperscript{xii}, and sustainable development will only be possible when these goals are pursued simultaneously\textsuperscript{xiii}.

These three foundations are often referred to as the triple bottom line, and getting this triple bottom line right is rarely easy. Tensions in attempting to simultaneously pursue social, environmental and economic goals can include:

- Belonging tensions
  \textit{eg identifying with social mission vs identifying with business mission}
- Organising tensions
  \textit{eg hiring for social skills vs hiring for skills that support efficiency and profitability}
- Learning tensions
  \textit{eg focus on long term development vs short term gains}
- Performing tensions
  \textit{eg social goals to address stakeholder concerns with qualitative metrics vs goals that address a narrow group of shareholders with more quantitative metrics}

The irony is that attempting to tackle multiple influences and expectations such as these typically leads to excessive change, which can then impact the ability to solve complex problems\textsuperscript{xiv}. It’s hard to break the vicious cycle of increasing tensions and rapid change to really break away and get ahead!

For-profit \textit{AND} for-purpose?

It is just as important for ‘for-profit’ organisations to hold the tension between the three core pillars as it is for ‘not-for-profit’ organisations, although the balance will be a little different in each case.

While the financial imperatives of corporations are inherent, there has been a growing recognition of the need for these organisations to also focus on responsibility\textsuperscript{xv}. ‘For-profit’ organisations usually seek a balance through ‘corporate social responsibility’ programs\textsuperscript{xvi}.
These goals can appear to be polarised, as a focus on economics and profit can see organisations ignoring or taking shortcuts with corporate responsibility. Yet if the organisation wants to remain competitive and viable over the long term there must be both.

Corporate responsibility has been referred to as ‘a forum for sensemaking, diversity of opinion, and debate over the conflicting social norms and expectations attached to corporate activity’. This will inevitably lead to diverse expectations that will ‘conflict with each other and change over time’.

A number of tensions are likely to arise from designing and implementing sustainable innovations. The fact that corporate responsibility is a multi-level concept also inevitably leads to tensions. There will be different experiences and outcomes at the different levels, so individual, organisational and systemic tensions typically arise. Specific tensions are likely to be in the areas of strategic direction, domain, and strategy implementation.

‘Not-for-profit’ organisations with a clearer social or environmental mission also face a unique set of challenges. These are often related to the need to consider both capacity and sustainability in order to maintain services and resiliency, and must face both long-term and short-term concerns. As the GM of one of the not-for-profit case organisations reflected when describing the tensions in the leadership team:

Tension can play out where some people are thinking big picture and talking big picture, and being expansive, where others are struggling to get there and are thinking more, immediacy and on a lower level an internal focus, and that—that definitely plays out as a tension.

A focus on social responsibility can be seen to imply the need to sacrifice profit, so not-for-profits must often seek a balance by ensuring economic sustainability, although.

Social enterprises are then positioned at the intersection between the two polar positions. Hybrid organisations like these are particularly susceptible to tensions, as there can be the need for a focus on both social purpose and profit along with other paradoxical demands inherent in organisations that need to be financially accountable.

Ensuring socially responsible and sustainable practices while meeting economic imperatives in the innovation context has also been explored in the literature. This tension can lead to conflict in leadership teams unless core values and priorities are not clarified. Yet few studies that have provided specific insights into how this tension can be identified and effectively managed.

The pressure is particularly on leaders to lead for responsible innovation.

Leaders themselves must now also become morally accountable in the strategies they develop and the decisions they make as the "core drivers of sustainable development". Their strategic actions and decisions impact the whole organisation.

Sustainable development is not a ‘fixed state of harmony’, but rather a ‘process of change’ in which both current and future needs require attention.

Although leaders must typically deal with the ambiguities of these contradictory yet interrelated factors, when they have different perspectives on ethical issues it can lead to values clashes.

Leaders may not be adequately prepared for dealing with the tensions that emerge as the organisation seeks to meet the needs and preferences of important financial stakeholders and customers. Yet leadership teams need to be able to come up with innovative solutions to these challenges so that these solutions can be identified and implemented at all levels.

Becoming ambidextrous

The most versatile jugglers are ambidextrous. Ambidexterity, or the ability to use the right and left hands equally well, leads to much greater flexibility and adaptability.
Similarly, we now know that leadership ambidexterity, or the ability to deal with multiple competing demands simultaneously is essential sustainable innovation.

The leadership skills required for the future will include knowing how to come up with creative new approaches and systems for dealing with contradictions. Leaders will need more flexibility and adaptability to deal with ambiguities related to new developments and innovations. They will need to be both consistent and stable, as well as courageous and passionate.

Yet few leaders have developed these unique cognitive capabilities.

The research study found that leadership for responsible innovation is a complex rapidly shifting process involving a constant awareness of diverse core values and rapidly transitioning contexts.

Much like a magnetic compass is constantly shifting according to each different position and each new context and position, leaders can never find the ‘perfect’ position to settle in and must constantly refer to core ‘magnetic’ principles (values and vision) to navigate the best way forward. This enables leaders to “rally around a shared sense of values and purpose”.

The challenge in leadership teams is that each individual, team and organisation will have their own core principles, and each will take their bearings differently.

A key to success will be understanding and identifying different core principles and perspectives, and using these as a guide for determining how to achieve ‘magnetic alignment’. The success in moving forward effectively depended on how well leaders were able to identify and navigate two specific polar constructs:

1. **NORTH / SOUTH:**
   The ‘exploration / preservation’ polar pairing was found to be a core principle associated with the desire to identify and explore new opportunities or maintain current systems. The ‘exploration’ pole was associated with breakthrough innovation, while the ‘preservation’ pole was associated with more conservative maintenance functions and with more gradual incremental innovations.

2. **EAST / WEST:**
   The ‘purpose / profit’ polar pairing has also been identified as a key paradoxical tension in responsible innovation. In this study this construct appeared to characterise different individual and organisation values.

The most interesting finding, which has not yet been explored in previous studies, was the dynamic between these core paradox pairs along with how that dynamic was actively navigated. Rather than being a single dimension, navigation of multiple competing demands is more like navigating an intricate web.
Navigating different orientations

The direction leaders take in each new situation depends on how aware they are of the different orientations at play. Typically there will be a focus on either, and the only way these opposing concepts can be effectively held together in tension is through a clear integrative core purpose.

Navigating these oppositional elements works in the same way that a ship's captain or a pilot will use navigational equipment to actively guide the plane to its final destination, eg in an east / west direction in relation to the north / south positions.

Just as migratory animals often rely on a range of different cues to identify their orientation and to navigate to the most ideal environments, often detecting the direction of the north/ south magnetic field along with having an awareness of the sun’s position for an east / west orientation, it is important for leaders to identify the impact of multiple competing demands.

As the Former Chief Technologist for Innovation of a multinational IT company framed it:

For me, the innovator is more like the navigator on the ship, the person who understands the weather, the changing environment, who can read the charts and understands the ecosystem that the ship is sailing through.

The power of paradoxical cognition

An awareness of individual orientations in relation to the paradox pairings of both the exploration / preservation and the purpose / profit paradoxes will need to be considered to effectively navigate changing environments and conditions. This requires paradoxical thinking, or the ability to hold different paradoxical elements in tension simultaneously, for greater leadership ambidexterity.

The following quote from the Head of Corporate Administration of a multinational chemical company framed the challenges of navigating the paradoxical elements well. Note that paradoxical thinking provided the cohesive force to hold the polar positions in tension:

### Quote analysis

One of the biggest challenges is the complexity of sustainability and sustainable social innovations, because social innovation is only a social innovation, from my point of view, if it’s **financially sustainable**. So you have to develop a model and an approach where you can ensure that, given certain market drivers, solutions can get reach to the market in a sustainable way, which also ensures financial sustainability.

### Focus area identified

- **Indication of tension** – priority is financial
- **Social/environmental factors**
- **Paradoxical thinking for ambidexterity cognition**
- **Financial/business factors**
As the Head of Innovation for a large not-for-profit organisation described the process:

**Quote analysis**

The purpose-driven perspective usually (focuses on) satisfying multiple objectives... so that can create quite a lot of competing or misaligned objectives. 

The purpose-driven perspective focuses on satisfying multiple objectives... so that can create quite a lot of competing or misaligned objectives. You really are constrained by resources, and that’s both in terms of financial as well as people-related resources...

So what you have to do is to learn to work with what you’ve got. The problems are enormous, and therefore trying to identify which are the problems you solve and which that you let go. It can be quite challenging, especially when you got resources, people who joined the organisation with strong passion about particular issues, and that’s where you have interesting and heated debate about what to do and what not to do.

So alignment of focus, of direction, choosing what to do and what not to do is probably more pronounced... I suppose the rules are less clear, decision rules.

**Focus area identified**

- Social/environmental factors
- Paradoxical awareness for ambidexterity cognition
- Financial/business factors
- Indication of tension
- Dynamic magnetic alignment

**Dynamic navigating**

The process of negotiating these paradoxical tensions at the leadership level can be described as a process of *dynamic navigation*. The concept of the ‘navigation’ for organization leaders is a recurring concept in the academic literature, as well as in popular management narrative, and this study extends the concept of navigation by focusing on the

The data analysis indicated that there was a need for active facilitation of the process of negotiating exploration / preservation tensions in innovation contexts. The ‘Magnetic Alignment’ model was developed to help illustrate the principles that emerged from the data. This model is based on physics principles, and it clarifies how the navigation process might work in practice through using the concept of the magnetic fields around the earth, which operate as dipoles.

So in the sample quotes above, both leaders exhibit paradoxical awareness for ambidexterity and both show they are able to hold polar positions in tension. But while both are similar in expressing a concern for practical ‘execution’ elements, they each have different orientations when it comes to purpose and profit. The Head of Corporate Administration of a multinational chemical company demonstrates he is coming from a ‘financially conservative utilitarian’ perspective, while the Head of Innovation for the large not-for-profit organisation came from more of a ‘purpose-driven pragmatic’ perspective.

It was also observed that in leadership teams different leaders would often take on different positions to enable dynamic equilibrium in the team as a whole. For one of the not-for-profit case organisations, for example, although three key senior leaders in the management team were committed to the cause, they had taken different perspectives to balance each other out.

While the entrepreneurial founder CEO was clearly driven by passion and was both idealistic and opportunistic, in terms of constantly expanding and innovating to best serve the needs of the clients, the GM and head of innovation took the positions of purposeful pragmatists to help ensure organisation sustainability. Further, finance and board roles also helped to provide a pragmatic grounding for the idealism of the CEO. The GM was identified as being a highly paradoxical thinker.

In contrast, in some cases leaders are clear about the core vision of the organisation and select a distinct position without being able to hold the diverse elements in tension. They can only think in black and white, as indicated by this quote from the Head of Quality Innovation and Engagement of a multinational pharmaceutical company in describing a member of the leadership team:

She (executive team member) said, “But be mindful that we’re not pursuing a big cause or whatever. We need to make money.” And I said, “Yea, but, you know, you can, like, it’s shared value, creating shared value,” and she said, “Oh yea, yea, I know, but no one’s interested in that. We’re really aiming at selling more.”
The particularly interesting dynamic comes when you have people coming from different backgrounds and perspectives negotiating. This can happen, for example, when one leader has come from a for-profit organisation to a not-for-profit organisation, as the research found they will often prioritise financial and business factors, which can lead to significant tension where there is no paradoxical awareness for ambidexterity.

Inevitably it was found that an ambidextrous facilitator or bridge builder was required to bring the diverse elements together and bridge the potential chasms. A conscious and active facilitator was identified as being critical to work through the tensions and challenges of the diverse perspectives.

Sometimes this facilitator or ‘bridge builder’ was external, such as when an outside consultant was engaged, or when a workshop was facilitated. In these cases the external facilitator was often able to see the different positions more clearly. Less often someone inside the leadership team was successfully able to take on this role.

As one Innovation Consultant (a former Head of Innovation at a multinational) summarised:

I think the biggest problem is that you gotta get the right people in the room, in an environment where they’re willing to share their ideas and co-design the features, and that’s where I see one of the biggest barriers, is there’s all these mini silos.

The Head of Quality Innovation and Engagement at the multinational pharmaceutical company identified the challenges and revealed the explicit facilitation approach her company had taken to bridge the gaps as they navigated the innovation process. She had taken on a specific facilitator role to manage the tensions in the following way:

So my work currently is the work of facilitator of a movement, of a social movement we’ve created in the workplace, to have people get together and decide on what they should do to improve the way they work together, instead of what we did before that, was to tell people how to manufacture in the right way... We’re still doing that, but we acknowledge that people need to be free and the passion has to come from them... I have strategized change, from a social movement perspective, replicating in the workplace the tools and techniques of social movements, so that's what I do. I'm the facilitator, I'm the chief facilitator of a social movement in the workplace. I call that "corporate activism", whereby mobilising people around having a social movement and using social media internally, and that kind of thing, and purpose-driven action, we are able to achieve the performance that we aim for policy wise.”

Tapping into the passion of individuals, which can be done by engaging them in a clear shared values and vision based on purpose, will often help to create this dynamic principle-based movement.

When individual and organisation core values are most openly recognised and acknowledged there can be more transparency and more opportunities for alignment under a unified vision.

The Head of Innovation for a consumer goods company described how in her organisation there was a clear point of realisation that ultimately the motivation needed to derive from the organisation’s core values and become intrinsic to the organisation’s way of working:
So there is a pivot moment, and it was decided we’re not gonna have an eco line anymore because that attitude needs to run across everything we do. And part of that was being driven by the bigger retailers, like, Walmart was saying, "Show us that you’re reducing your carbon footprint, show us that you’re doing these things to be more sustainable," as well as the company itself wanting to, you know, be a good, kind of, worldwide citizen…. I felt, like, five years ago, at least for consumer goods in the US, there was that pivot point where it went from, "Oh, and I suppose we should do an extra eco, sustainability line too." That thread needs to run across everything we do and say. It has to be just inherent to our brand’s DNA. It can’t be an afterthought or an extra add-on, little skew. You know, we’re gonna ignore the environment on these nine skews, and then on the 10th, you know, it’s, like, no. That’s part of everything we do.

Vision, mission, passion

The GM of a medium sized social enterprise alluded to the challenge of holding the tension between vision and practice, stating that it is important as an innovation leader to ensure ‘that everybody has the shared vision’ while ‘trying to make sure there are enough support structures in place’.

The diagram below maps the basic elements in the process of active facilitation that enable this bridge building process to take place, as uncovered through the research. Where leaders were able to identify and ‘make sense’ of the competing demands (through a process known as sensemaking), or where there was a clear mechanism for identifying the tensions and seeking alignment — such as through a facilitative bridge building process — leaders managed to navigate the challenges and reach magnetic alignment.
In the same way that a ship’s captain or airplane pilot will use navigational information to actively guide the plane to its final destination, executive teams should be able to work together to navigate these paradoxes effectively when there is an awareness of the relevant signals.

A unique contribution of the models developed from this research is that the tension from opposing yet interrelated innovation orientations can be related to underlying chaos from ambiguity and competing demands, but a shared vision and values can provide the opportunity for alignment, particularly when a facilitator helps to bridge the gaps.

The findings from this research may also assist with identifying key paradoxical factors to be plotted, mapped, and navigated according to polar positioning approach (e.g. identifying orientations) and providing a strategic planning approach for preparing for responsible innovation.
Overall, the research provided unique new insights into the complex paradoxical nature of innovation. It also helped to reveal some of the unique interrelated dimensions embedded in ambidextrous innovation and change management.

**IMPACT ACTIONS**

The principles identified through this research can be applied through practical action areas such as:

**Profiling**
- Individual profiling of ambidexterity for purpose-driven and responsible innovation can be conducted using the iCLi (Innovative Change Leader Inventory) measure, and team / organization profiling can also be conducted using the ICi (Innovative Change Index) to identify individual / team / organization strengths and fit. A 360-degree version of the iCLi version is also available for comprehensive feedback. Useful for feedback, coaching, recruitment, individual and team management etc: [https://the-innovation-race.com/icli-survey/](https://the-innovation-race.com/icli-survey/)

**Awareness Education**
- Education sessions, workshops and/or motivational presentations help to introduce the concepts and build awareness of the need for ambidextrous approaches to change and innovation leadership at all levels. These can assist individuals and teams with managing uncertainty and change for sustainable innovative development through a business simulation approach and / or by providing practical strategies and tools.

**Strategic Planning Models**
- The Magnetic Alignment tool developed from the research provides a valuable frameworks for development.

**Navigation Tools**
- The Polar Positioning (PoP) tool developed from this research enables discussion of mapping current state, ideal future state and action steps needed to reach the desired state. This can be done with individuals, teams and - and is especially effective with senior executive teams. The extended workshop session can include case studies and interactive exercises designed to provide practical navigation insights and strategies

**Individual & Team Development**
- The insights gained from the tools and workshops can assist with identifying areas for individual development, as well as how to put together and develop innovative teams for projects, for more effective business units, etc

**Measurement & Evaluation**
- Through this process it is possible to assess areas of need, target appropriate actions, and measure progress. The instruments provide useful feedback and assessment tools for the process.

**INTEGRATED IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES**

Extended organization intervention programs have demonstrated how these actions can be integrated for a comprehensive culture development, change management and / or innovation development journey.

Integrated implementation strategies can include:

**STAGE 1:** Diagnosis of current state and needs
- Can include profile assessments, interviews, focus groups, observations, surveys etc

**STAGE 2:** Co-design of integrated development program
- Feedback of initial research results to key leaders, and co-design of integrated program in consultation with relevant stakeholders – eg use design thinking model to identify target areas

**STAGE 3:** Delivery of integrated development program
- Focus can be on awareness education (workshops, seminars, motivational presentations), coaching, strategic consulting, analytical redesign plans etc

**STAGE 4:** Evaluation of development program
- Can include follow up profile assessments, interviews, focus groups, observations, surveys etc to measure shifts and identify recommendations – delivered as report
References


Additional References:


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