

Fast-Lane Innovation

*How to Accelerate Growth And
Leave The Competition Behind*

Stuart Cross

Fast-Lane Innovation: *How to Accelerate Growth And Leave The Competition Behind*

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Introduction: The Innovation Imperative

This book has been written as a result of my firm's work with market-leading corporations in developing and delivering new, high-growth products, services and businesses. It focuses on how you can lead and drive innovation and growth for your organisation.

Strategic advances are made when organisations become the first to find a profitable way to exploit new opportunities. These opportunities may be created by changes in customer tastes, technology, economics or other external factors.

Strategic advances are not made through problem solving. Resolving problems is about dealing with the past, not the future. Problem solving may help you drive performance – or at least return it to previous levels – but it will not dramatically improve your strategic position.

It is innovation that drives long-term profit growth. Successive reports and studies confirm that high-growth, high-profit companies are those that are best able to drive innovation.

Your innovation may or may not be focused on new products. Creating superior supply systems, new organisational approaches or new customer communication media are all forms of innovation. But whatever your focus, you will only deliver ongoing profit growth, customer enthusiasm and a dynamic organisation if you are able to systematically innovate.

This book is designed to help you focus on building an organisation that can make innovation a way of life. I have called it 'fast-lane innovation' because I want you to accelerate growth and see the competition recede in your rear-view mirror as you focus on the road ahead.

Before we get started in earnest, look at the table on page 7 and identify whether you spend more time in the fast-lane or the inside-lane of innovation.

Are you an “inside-lane incrementalist” or a “fast-lane innovator”?

Inside-Lane Incrementalists	Fast-Lane Innovators
<i>Survive</i>	<i>Thrive</i>
<i>Follower</i>	<i>Leader</i>
<i>Urgent</i>	<i>Important</i>
<i>Travelling without a map</i>	<i>A clear direction</i>
<i>What next!?!</i>	<i>What if?</i>
<i>No choice</i>	<i>Endless possibilities</i>
<i>Rushed decisions</i>	<i>Rapid learning</i>
<i>Overwhelmed</i>	<i>Focused action</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Us</i>
<i>Dealing with the past</i>	<i>Focused on the future</i>
<i>Risk avoidance</i>	<i>Prudent risk-taking</i>
<i>Problem solving</i>	<i>Raising the bar</i>
<i>‘To Do’ lists</i>	<i>... and ‘To Don’t’ lists</i>

The book is not about creativity techniques; there are plenty of other materials out there to help you with that (including on my own website, www.morgancross.co.uk). Instead, it is focused on the leadership, strategic and organisational principles that underpin successful, fast-lane innovators.

I have divided the booklet into three sections: leading innovation, sources of innovation, and building the innovative organisation. Each section has five focused and punchy lessons with three “key actions” per lesson for you to consider and implement.

Overall, there are 15 lessons and 45 actions. How many apply to you is a matter of personal circumstance. I’ve tried to set out the most important insights to help you become a true innovation leader, and I wish you good luck in driving your organisation’s future growth in the fast-lane.

Stuart Cross
Newark-on-Trent, Nottinghamshire
July 2010

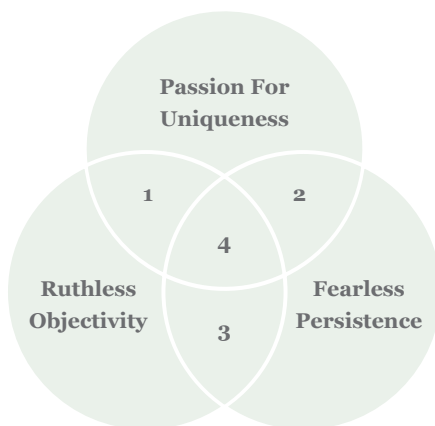
1. The Attributes Of Fast-Lane Innovators

Innovation is a leadership issue. It is the CEO that sets the rhythm to which the organisation dances, and unless the CEO's mindset is focused on innovation, it is unlikely that the business will be particularly innovative.

But why are some business leaders naturally and effortlessly able to guide their organisations to the creation of products and services that fill needs customers never knew they had, while others struggle to keep up with me-too offerings? The chart below sets out the three factors that give innovators their ability to drive change where others had simply failed to take action:

- **A Passion For Uniqueness.** Innovators are driven. They want to make a difference to the world and aren't shy about letting people know about it. Without passion, nothing will ever get started.
- **Ruthless Objectivity.** Innovators face the facts. They don't delude themselves, but take a learning-based attitude that allows them to keep what's working and ditch what isn't.
- **Fearless Persistence.** Innovators keep on keeping on. Never giving up in the face of repeated failure is the hallmark of all great innovators. Some of Silicon Valley's top entrepreneurs were surveyed on what drove their success. Their #1 answer was their ability to 'experiment fearlessly' and that requires persistence.

The 3 attributes of fast-lane innovators



If these three characteristics are critical to successful innovation, where are you on the chart?

- 1. Dabblers.** These people have the energy and passion to generate ideas and the ability to sort the wheat from the chaff. However, they don't have the discipline, resilience or the fearlessness to persist.
- 2. Blind Obsessives.** These people have the energy to get started and will carry on trying. However, they are blinded to the realities of their experiments and are unable or unwilling to learn from them. Consequently, their ideas seldom make it to successful outcomes, and their mistakes can be expensive.
- 3. Implementers.** These people have objectivity and persistence, but are unable to lead. They are great supporters and 'right-hand women' but don't have the passion to get things started, build early momentum and engage others.
- 4. Fast-lane Innovators.** These people are the ones who turn ideas into innovation. They combine the vision, the energy, an ability to learn and adapt and the chutzpah to make things happen and can overcome any obstacles put in their way. Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Tim Berners-Lee, Richard Branson, Anita Roddick, Vivienne Westwood and James Dyson all immediately come to mind.

True fast-lane innovators may not be the easiest people in the world to work with, but they are the heroes that keep driving our species' amazing progress. Where do you sit against them, and what could you focus on to be more innovative?

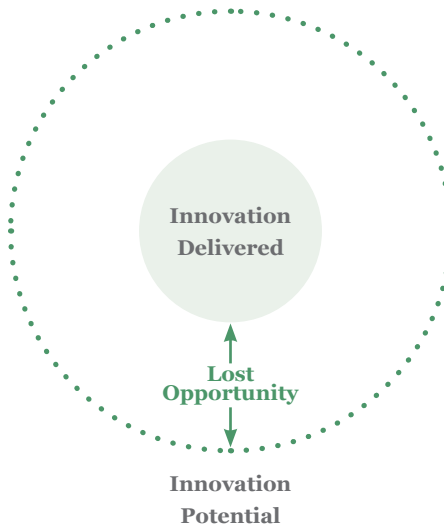
Three Key Actions

1. Review your leadership style and characteristics against the three criteria.
2. Assess the level to which you could improve on each of the criteria, and what behavioural changes would help you to achieve those improvements.
3. Identify three specific behavioural changes you wish to achieve and commit to a daily action plan.

2. Achieving Your Innovation Potential

In most organisations there is a yawning gulf between senior leaders' rhetoric on innovation and the reality on the ground. As set out in the chart, the potential for innovation across an organisation is generally far greater than the actual innovation delivered.

Actual Innovation vs. Potential Innovation



The creativity, invention and commercial acumen that is required for fast-lane innovation exists in most organisations. It is just that in some businesses it is better hidden than in others. Like a gardener preparing the beds for the best blooms, your job as a leader of your business is to nurture, protect and feed your people's willingness and ability to identify and deliver a stream of innovation.

And, as any gardener will tell you, to make that happen you must first get rid of the weeds. The 'lost opportunity' set out in the chart is not generally a result of poor intentions, but is a consequence of specific barriers that lurk unseen in many businesses.

I call these barriers the ‘innovation killers’, and they fall into three types:

1. **Strategic Killers** – which include incremental goals, focusing resources on defending existing businesses at the cost of creating new income streams, and excessive and conflicting priorities.
2. **Organisational Killers** – which include unclear accountabilities, too many management layers, low levels of cross-functional collaboration, a dependence on a small R&D or equivalent team for all innovation, and an over-reliance on planning.
3. **Attitudinal Killers** – which include a desire for a magic pill solution (rather than a daily exercise regime), a belief that customers can simply tell you what new innovation they want (when, in fact, customers are poor at predicting their own future behaviour), a requirement to ‘get it right first time, every time’ and, most importantly, an intolerance or fear of failure.

Achieving your ‘innovation potential’ requires you to attack and eliminate these killers. And, as with personal success and development, changing your attitudes and beliefs will have the biggest and most sustainable impact on your company’s performance.

Three Key Actions

1. Sit down with your team to consider the ‘lost opportunity’ that exists in your business.
2. Review the three types of innovation killer and identify which have the biggest impact in driving the ‘lost opportunity’.
3. Create an action plan to remove these innovation killers.

3. The Top 5 Innovation Killers

Innovation has never been more important to companies as it is now. Economic, technological and social turbulence is creating new needs, and new forms of value are needed to fulfill them.

As we have seen in Section 2, many companies fail to achieve their innovation potential. So what holds our companies back, and why is breakthrough innovation so rare?

Here are my top five killers of successful innovation.

- 1. An intolerance of failure.** The #1 top tactic for innovation, according to expert innovators, is to 'experiment fearlessly'. Nothing works first time, so you may as well get it wrong as soon as you can. If you cannot accept failure you are unlikely to see too much innovation, no matter how much money you throw at it.
- 2. An excessive customer focus.** Professional managers are great at using customer research to improve existing products and services. But, faced with a radically new proposition people are poor predictors of their own future behaviour. Italian designer, Alberto Alessi has described how he eschews market research and, instead, evaluates new ideas in order to help take informed risks and not as a simple yes/no exercise.
- 3. A desire for a magic pill, not a daily exercise regime.** This requires that innovation is set up as a way of life rather than as an isolated change programme. 3M is the avatar of this approach, allowing its developers to spend a proportion of their time on their own development projects as a way of encouraging a stream of bottom-up ideas.
- 4. An unwillingness to cannibalise sales.** The only way to prolong success is, paradoxically, to destroy it and create something even more valuable. Technology companies know that they must consistently add new features at lower prices if they want to stay ahead in the market. The same principles are true in other markets. Gillette has consistently strengthened its leadership in razors through its willingness to make its existing ranges redundant and introduce new, higher performing products and brands.

- 5. A reliance on a small cadre of innovators.** Relying on a small development team to identify, create and deliver game-changing innovations is unrealistic. You have to cast your net much wider. In the past five years Procter & Gamble has dramatically increased its willingness to source ideas from, and work with, external organisations and now aims to develop at least half of its new growth ideas through these external networks.

How many of these factors are present in your company? Once you are willing to welcome failure, lead rather than follow customers, involve your whole organization and beyond, cannibalise your existing businesses and see innovation as a way of life, you're likely to make real and material progress.

Three Key Actions

1. For each of these five innovation killers score yourself on a scale of 0-10 on its relevance to your business (where 0 = completely irrelevant, and 10 = completely endemic).
2. For each killer which scores 5 or more, work with your team to identify the root causes of its existence and to assess ways in which it can be removed.
3. Create an action plan using the root cause analysis, create an action plan to rid your organisation of these insidious and inhibiting innovation killers.

4. Get Over Your Fear Of Failure

Get it right first time may be the mantra that drives your existing operations and processes, but is exactly the wrong approach to innovation. Here, the route to success is, paradoxically, to welcome failure.

Many large corporations, however, detest failure. For their executives the word ‘failure’ brings to mind images of a P45 and a black bin bag of hastily collected office belongings. As a result, the desire to protect current business performance overwhelms any wish to radically change the organisation’s customer offer or business model.

I once hosted a roundtable discussion of strategy officers from some of the UK’s leading companies. Their collective view was that the key for large companies to innovate better was for them to be willing and able to fail more quickly and cheaply than they currently do.

Failure, they realised, is at the heart of all progress. As Woody Allen once said, *“If you’re not failing every now and again, it’s a sign you’re not doing anything very innovative.”*

It is this mix of experimentation, failure and persistence, rather than immediate breakthrough, that typifies most innovations. For example:

- Tesco needed over five years of testing of its Express format before they found a model that could be rolled out. They now have a multi-billion pound business from this store format in the UK alone.
- It took Sergey Brin and Larry Page over four years to turn their initial concept for Google into a business with a clear (pay-per-click) model for making money.
- Sir James Dyson and his team needed five years and over 5,000 prototypes to perfect the design for their iconic, bag-less vacuum cleaner.

Overcoming your fear of failure is, to a large extent, an attitude of mind, but here are three steps you can take to increase your chances of persisting.

1. **Clarify your objectives.** Have you set specific and grounded objectives and do you know what success actually looks like? For Tesco, it was to develop a profitable convenience store format, and for James Dyson it was to develop a bag-less vacuum cleaner. Can you state your objectives with similar levels of clarity and precision?

2. **Separate tactics from objectives.** Your initial attempts at finding a solution are simply tactics to achieve your objective. It is likely that the final solution will be very different from your first try. You need to be flexible with your tactics, but you need to be consistent with your objectives.
3. **Fail as quickly and as cheaply as possible.** The secret to breakthrough innovations is an ability to fail quickly and cheaply. This means rapid prototyping, a relentless focus on pace and learning, and avoiding major investments until you are confident in your business model.

I am not against instant, overnight success. On the contrary, who doesn't want to find the winning solution with their first effort?

But, experience tells me that this isn't the way it works. Instead, demonstrating the necessary determination to overcome the inevitable failures, and having an insatiable appetite to 'find a way' are the keys to fast-lane innovation.

Three Key Actions

1. Sit down with your team and identify opportunities you have failed to pursue as a result of your fear of failure.
2. Identify 3-5 specific innovation objectives where you wish to see material progress in the next 12-18 months.
3. Pick one of these objectives and fast-track the innovation process so that you get an initial prototype together within 2 weeks.

5. From Customer-Led To Ideas-Led

Being customer-led is a key objective for most businesses. However, in today's dynamic world this is not enough to guarantee success.

Increasingly, success only happens when the customer proposition is truly distinctive, rather than customer-led. But why isn't it enough to simply follow the customer? There are two reasons:

- 1. Customers don't notice incremental changes.** There have been two key consumer trends over the past few decades – ever-increasing choice, and ever-decreasing time. Faced with thousands of new products every year in every category, a myriad of media messages and less time to absorb them, customers just don't notice a new product even if it's an improvement on current ones.
- 2. Customers can't predict the next big thing.** When Renault designed the Twingo in the late 80's, they tested this innovative small car with consumers. A majority did not warm to the car, but a small minority loved it. Renault held their breath and went with the launch. The Twingo went on to be one of their greatest successes but, because it was so innovative, many customers needed time to appreciate its benefits.

There are five ways that you can overcome your organisation's desire to simply ask customers what they want and respond accordingly, and help your business to become more innovative, more distinctive and more successful.

- 1. Change the rules of the game.** Most companies go along with the accepted rules of an industry seeking to compete on incremental improvements. Other companies create breakthrough growth by actively changing those rules. Southwest Airlines, for example changed the rules of the aviation industry by replacing hub and spoke connections, different seating classes, seat assignments and free in-flight drinks and meals with a focus on aircraft utilisation, frequent point-to-point departures and simple, friendly service.
- 2. Focus on early-adopters.** Many companies try to get an immediate jackpot selling their innovative product to the mass of mainstream customers. A better solution is to focus on the customer groups who like change. It is the early adopters who will sell the idea to the majority, not you. Design your offer so that it captures the attention of these innovative customers and help them to sell it to other customer groups.

3. **Create a stream of ideas not a one-off win.** Some companies live in fear of cannibalisation. Yet others set out to make their own products obsolete before the competition does it for them. Gillette, for example, has consistently grown by creating a stream of innovations. The Sensor razor created the initial breakthrough, before being superseded by the Mach3, which has, in turn, been overthrown by Fusion.
4. **Understand and overcome internal barriers.** Perhaps the biggest barrier to adopting a distinctive strategy is internal. For example, Stanford management professor, Robert Sutton, has described how, following its early success with Lotus 1-2-3, Lotus brought in new senior managers to take the company forward. The problem was that they were big company managers, and innovation stalled. As an experiment the chairman pulled together the CV's of the first 40 people to join Lotus, disguised them, and sent them to the recruitment team. Not one of the 40 was offered an interview, signalling that the company was screening out innovative people.
5. **Feel the fear and do it anyway.** One truth of breakthrough ideas is that they will be noticed, and will receive criticism. Many managers, through experience, fear criticism and only pursue ideas where there is already mass customer support. As a business leader, overcoming these fears starts with you.

Three Key Actions

1. Review your recent new products and/or services, and determine how many of them were truly new ideas to the market and, conversely, how many were minor iterations of what already exists.
2. Set a goal of “new-to-market” product or service launches for the coming years, ideally with a ratio greater than 20%.
3. Identify what actions, accountabilities and other factors need to change to increase your chances of achieving your goal.

6. Aligning Innovation With Strategy

Innovation is not just about new product development. Most of the innovation literature focuses on the companies that excel in developing new game-changing products and services, but this is only one aspect of innovation.

It is also possible to innovate around your operating system, your organisational design, your use of certain assets, and how you inspire and motivate your people. The critical factor is that to drive consistent success, the focus of your innovation should be aligned and integrated with your strategic priorities.

There are five generic business strategies:

1. **Product Leader.** These companies want to have the latest and best products for their target customers. Examples include Apple, Sony, Singapore Airlines, Ferrari.
2. **Cost Leader.** These companies offer amazing prices to their customers. Examples include Tata Cars, Aldi, Primark.
3. **Convenience Leader.** These companies offer clear standards of performance and value, deliver against them every time and are essentially hassle-free. Examples include McDonalds, Dell, Amazon.
4. **Service Leader.** These organisations attract clients as a result of their expert advice and support. Examples include John Lewis, Nordstroms, Home Depot, Lexus.
5. **Solutions Leader.** These businesses tailor their offer to individual customers, creating bespoke solutions. Examples include McKinsey, IBM, Harley Davidson.

Each of these strategies requires a different innovation focus. McDonalds, for example, as a convenience leader, doesn't spend all of its time re-inventing the Big Mac. Instead, it finds new, more efficient and reliable ways to manage its supply chain, and improve the convenience for its customers (e.g. drive-thru's, 24-hour restaurants).

Conversely, a product leader, such as Nike, will be relentlessly introducing new products and technologies, managing their life cycle and, as demand declines, withdrawing and replacing that particular model. Nike's managers will be less concerned about finding new ways to keep costs to an absolute minimum, although this will be the prime focus for the executives at a cost leader such as Aldi.

The table sets out the critical capabilities for each of the five generic strategies, and the focus of innovation that is most likely to create leadership. What is your strategic focus, and what does that mean for your innovation priorities?

Aligning Innovation With Your Strategic Focus

Strategic Focus <i>And customer take-outs</i>	Key Capabilities	Innovation Focus
Product Leader <i>"It costs more, but it's worth it"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New product development • Ad-hoc project management • Managing product life cycles 	Products that set, not follow, customer demands
Cost Leader <i>"I can't believe the value"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost management • Offer and process simplification • No-frills operations 	Cost and price reduction
Convenience Leader <i>"It's all so hassle-free"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operating excellence • Standardisation and systemisation • Process management 	More reliable, efficient and convenient operations, services and products
Service Leader <i>"They offer such great advice and support"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Front-line technical expertise • Operating excellence • Front-line people skills 	Helping customers every step of the way
Solutions Leader <i>"It's exactly the solution I was after"</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing bespoke solutions • Building strong, effective customer relationships • Empowering front-line teams 	Customisation and personalisation

Three Key Actions

1. Determine which of the five generic strategies best fits the capabilities and opportunities of your organisation (if you are struggling to do this, please use the resources in my companion booklet, *The CEO's Strategy Handbook*).
2. Identify the capabilities required to deliver your strategy, and the relevant focus for innovation.
3. Within your innovation focus identify specific areas of opportunity that will enable you to attain leadership in your chosen markets.

7. Focus Your Innovation On What Won't Change

Most companies build their strategy by focusing on the latest market changes and dynamics and extrapolating their impact into the future.

But this approach has a big problem. The pace and scale of change in the business and financial environment continues to accelerate and is increasingly non-linear. Technological advances and the connectedness of the global economy mean that new developments can quickly overwhelm the less agile competitors - just ask some of our largest and (once) most successful banks!

Some companies take a different approach. Amazon's leadership team, for example, has agreed the key themes that they believe will *not* change in the midst of all the noise and turmoil of today's business environment.

For Amazon's consumer business, the executives have identified three themes which they believe will stay relevant to customers over the next 10 years: greater choice, lower prices and faster delivery.

Perhaps this doesn't sound like rocket science, but the power of the Amazon approach lies in the focus and relentlessness with which the management team pursues its agreed priorities. There are two immediate advantages:

- 1. It creates organisation-wide focus for innovation.** Amazon's three themes are simple to understand for everyone in the organisation, and enables clarity of focus for radical innovation.
- 2. It enables true leadership and avoids defensiveness.** The Amazon team is prepared to take ongoing leadership decisions within these three areas. In this way they are continuing to stay ahead of their competitors and maintain a leadership position.

So what's the catch? Why don't all companies follow this approach? There are three major consequences of this approach that executives and organisations need to come to terms with:

- 1. Accept cannibalisation.** Constant innovation on these themes is likely to develop new ideas that make existing solutions redundant. It is better that you cannibalise your own sales than allow your competitors to do it for you.
- 2. Accept the chaos.** Innovation is a messy, disordered process. Ongoing prototyping, testing, improvement and implementation activities require an entrepreneurial mindset across the business. Not everything will work, especially to start with, and most projects require several iterations to get it right.
- 3. Be right.** Perhaps the most important issue for Amazon is make sure that they have picked the right themes to focus on. Only time will tell if Bezos and his team are right, but, critically, they have made some clear choices and are willing to live (or die) by them.

Three Key Actions

1. Identify and discuss with your team the key themes that you think will not change for your business and its markets.
2. Follow-up your initial views with relevant research and analysis to confirm, refine or change your areas of focus.
3. Focus your innovation efforts within your agreed themes and develop new business opportunities around them.

8. Exploit The Unexpected

Managers value predictability; it gives them a sense of control over external events. In my experience, results that do not match initial expectations are not normally welcomed, and actions are quickly put in place to restore performance to expected levels.

Even results that are way above original forecasts are treated with suspicion and scepticism. Once, when I was leading a trial of a new retail format that delivered 25% sales growth, several executives bent over backwards to find reasons why the results weren't credible and should be ignored!

Unusual events can, however, be the catalyst for innovation. They represent an opportunity that should be exploited, not a random variation that should be quashed.

Spotting such opportunities requires an open, experimental organisation that is dedicated to delivering new growth, rather than simply protecting the status quo. Here are five sources of unexpected opportunities. Which of them could help accelerate growth for your business?

- 1. Unforeseen successes.** No7, the skincare brand of UK health and beauty retailer, Boots the Chemists, enjoyed a dramatic sales increase when one of the products in the range, Protect and Perfect, was shown on a TV documentary to actually reduce wrinkles. Boots massively ramped up production to meet the queues forming outside its stores, and has since leveraged this success with further brand and range developments to drive further growth.
- 2. Unexpected failures.** Despite favourable market research, sales of Coke declined when Coca-Cola introduced 'New Coke' in 1985. The company, however, re-introduced the old recipe, telling customers it had listened to them and re-emphasised the qualities of the original product. As a result, the company delivered significant sales uplifts.
- 3. Small victories within bigger defeats.** When Lou Gerstener joined IBM in the mid-1990s, he led a company that was making record corporate losses. Within the core computer hardware business, however, he realised that the technical support teams were highly valued by IBM's customers. Gerstener used his consulting background to turn this cost centre into a new business unit, and by 2005 IBM Global Services was delivering 35% of the group's profits.
- 4. Unexpected side-effects.** 3M, perhaps the avatar innovative company, only became successful when it moved into abrasives in the early twentieth century. This

move was driven by a desperate desire to do something with the minerals and grit the company had on its hands from its failed mining business (3M's name comes from its original title – Minnesota Mining and Minerals Company).

- 5. Unforeseen external events.** Economic shocks, technology breakthroughs, political changes and shifts in customer tastes can all dramatically affect product and service markets. Instead of bemoaning your fate, your focus should be in identifying what opportunity these changes create. Waitrose, the high-end UK grocer, for example, responded to the 2008 economic crisis by creating and launching its lower-priced Waitrose Essentials range which, within a year, accounted for 15% of its total sales, attracted new customers to its stores and increased the number of items purchased by shoppers on each visit.

Three Key Actions

1. Review your business and your markets for each of the five sources of opportunities. Identify both where you have made progress and where you haven't seized the initiative.
2. For those areas where you haven't identified new opportunities for growth, set up a small team to identify new business ideas, and select those with the greatest potential for further development.
3. In the face of unexpected events, create a mindset and approach that looks for the growth opportunity rather than one that merely seeks to minimise the risks.

9. Steal, Don't Imitate

TS Elliot once wrote, *“Immature poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”*

There is nothing new under the sun. Even Sir Isaac Newton commented that his groundbreaking laws of motion and gravity could only have happened because he had been “standing on the shoulders of giants.”

Innovation is no different. It generally involves taking something that already exists, changing it in some way, and creating something new.

Here are 7 ways in which you can steal, improve and innovate:

- 1. Find new applications for existing technologies.** Sir James Dyson’s bag-less vacuum cleaner technology was inspired by the way a local sawmill used a giant cyclone to lift and remove sawdust from the air.
- 2. Combine disparate technologies.** Apple’s iPod and iTunes, brought together the digital downloading technology pioneered by Napster, Creative’s MP3 player technology, and Apple’s existing software capabilities, to create an integrated, intuitive music system.
- 3. Take existing innovations into new markets.** B&Q’s management team looked to US DIY giant, Home Depot, when it first introduced its large, out-of-town stores into the UK, adopting many of the retail approaches that Home Depot had pioneered.
- 4. Dramatically improve the performance of existing products and services.** Gillette has created a stranglehold on the razor market as a result of its ongoing improvements to the “simple” technology of a blade attached to a handle.
- 5. Radically reduce the cost and accessibility of existing products, services and technologies.** George at Asda has become the UK’s #1 clothing brand based on the grocer’s ability to exploit its low-cost retail space, operating model and supply chain and offer its customers a significant price discount on everyday fashion.

6. **Make existing products and technologies far easier to use.** The detergent brand, Ariel, created a lead in its category by replacing washing powder with tablets, which are far easier for customers to handle.

7. **Translate successful business models from one industry to another.** UK train company, Chiltern Railways, has adopted the low-fare airline model to offer its passengers a low-price, no-frills (there are no first class carriages, for instance) rail service between London and the Midlands.

Three Key Actions

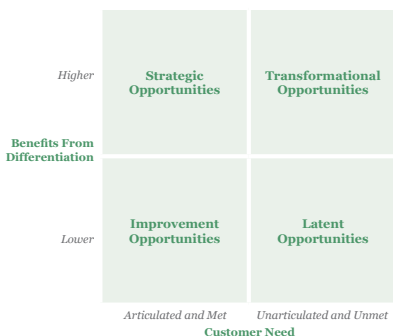
1. Establish accountabilities and approaches to systematically review companies in other industries for new growth ideas.

2. Encourage all your teams to find new ways to combine technologies, adapt business models and translate others' solutions to create better solutions for your customers and your business.

3. Undertake an annual review of your organisation's ability to 'steal' ideas from non-traditional areas to drive your company's success. Award prizes for the best 'steals'.

10. Mind The Gaps

If you are doing little to find solutions to your customers' unmet, and often unspoken needs, you will be unlikely to transform your business performance.



Transformational innovation occurs when a business finds a way to meet a need that customers didn't know they had. Low-fare airlines, on-line banking and texting services are all solutions to problems that never really existed.

The chart identifies four types of opportunity, based on whether the need is being met and the scale of opportunity from further differentiation:

- 1. Latent Opportunities:** Not all unmet needs are equal. Some are likely to have less value attached than others, although this may change over time. For example, cars delivering high miles per gallon were of limited value in the US a couple of decades ago. That situation has dramatically changed as oil prices have escalated, and has been a contributing factor to the success of Japanese and European manufacturers.
- 2. Improvement Opportunities:** These are focused on continuing to meet existing customer needs in better ways, but where the prize from innovation is likely to be lower. DVD's, for example, were a big step forward from VHS, but for most consumers BluRay is seen as a smaller-scale improvement.
- 3. Strategic Opportunities:** Finding exciting new ways to better meet existing needs is likely to deliver significant benefits for your business. For example, FedEx's operational excellence and efficiency in delivering parcels significantly raised the bar for all other mail carriers.
- 4. Transformational Opportunities:** Uncovering important but hidden customer needs can transform existing categories and create new ones. Sony established a new way of life when it first introduced the Walkman, which is carried through to today's MP3 players and smart phones.

Where are your innovation efforts focused? Ideally, you should be spreading your efforts in driving new growth across the quadrants. Many companies, however, focus solely on 'improvement opportunities'.

Here are five ways in which you can start to identify your customers' unmet needs and create transformational opportunities for your business:

- 1. Frustrations.** What makes your customers most frustrated when they are trying to use your or similar products and services? McDonalds drive-thru service was a response to the frustrations of queuing experienced by its customers.
- 2. Compromises.** What compromises do your customers make in order to get the results they're after, and how could you address them? NetJets, the fractional jet ownership company, helped affluent individuals and corporate executives overcome the excessive waiting times and fixed route schedules of the major airlines without the need to completely own a jet.
- 3. If Only.** What would transform your customers' experience of your product, if only they had the means to make it happen? Disney elevated the traditional amusement park into a true holiday destination and experience, appealing to the whole family.
- 4. Haves and Have-Nots.** What can wealthy customers afford to do that those on tighter budgets can't? How could you help these people turn a hazy dream into reality? Low-fare airlines, for instance, tapped into many people's desire for international travel.
- 5. Technology and Customer Convergence.** What changes in technology are emerging, and how could you link them with your products and services to create and meet new customer needs? When it launched, Egg, the on-line bank, delivered new levels of convenience for its customers.

Three Key Actions

1. Undertake an audit of your innovation pipeline to check the distribution of your current opportunities across the four quadrants.
2. On an annual basis, at least, review each of the five questions and establish small, cross-functional groups to develop initial answers and solutions.
3. Review all your new customer products, services and experiences on their ability to respond to one or more of the five 'gaps'.

11. Three Secrets To Success: Action, Action, Action

You cannot plan your way to innovation; you act your way to it.

Innovation without action is like expecting to score a goal at football without being willing to shoot. Yes, you may avoid some potentially embarrassing misses, but you will never get onto the score sheet unless you first strike the ball.

Creating a successful innovation happens when three factors align:

1. **Customer Concept.** You develop an offer that is sufficiently compelling to attract new customers;
2. **Operating Model.** You have the capability to deliver the customer concept in a way that is operationally feasible and reliable; and
3. **Financial Model.** You can charge enough for the product or service that, after the costs of operations, you receive an acceptable return on your investment.

Dealing with any one of these factors in the face of technological, social and economic change is difficult enough to achieve in a corporate planning office; combining the three elements makes this task impossible.

Who knew, for example, that a search engine company could create a successful mobile phone, that truck drivers would be willing to pay \$3 or more for a skinny decaff cap, or that millions of people want to let the world know what they've had for breakfast in 140 characters?

You have no alternative other than to find ways to get your idea out there, test it, learn, refine and improve it. Results only happen when you do something; up until that point you only have – often-unreliable – forecasts.

That is why prototype management is so important. You won't achieve perfection first time round. Instead, look to get something that is sufficiently attractive and deliverable out there, and then focus your efforts on learning from the early versions to refine and improve later ones.

Many of the world's most consistently innovative companies – Google, Apple, General Electric, LG Electronics, P&G, BSKyB – lead by taking action. By no means are they reckless; they are pragmatic, disciplined and focused. But it is action, and their ability to learn by doing something new, that has helped them succeed, create clear blue water against their competitors and deliver fast-lane innovation.

I can put it no better than Michael Bloomberg, head of the eponymous media giant. In his book *Bloomberg by Bloomberg* he wrote “*While our competitors are still sucking their thumbs trying to make the design perfect, we’re already on prototype version No. 5. By the time our rivals are ready with wires and screws, we are on version No. 10. It gets back to planning versus acting. We act from day one; others plan how to plan - for months.*”

Three Key Actions

1. Undertake a review of the time and cost it takes your business to develop new innovative solutions, and set new goals and targets.
2. Encourage all your teams to focus on building rapid, low-cost prototype solutions rather than ‘academic’ customer research as a way to drive the pace and success of innovation.
3. Reward your people on their ability to take focused action – whether or not it was ultimately successful – rather than their ability to prepare detailed presentations and proposals.

12. No Empowerment = No Innovation

No business can continuously and consistently deliver exciting new innovations without the drive, commitment and creativity of its people. As businesses grow, however, the entrepreneurialism that characterised their initial success can be ground down by the implementation of the more formal and structured processes that are demanded by larger organisations.

There are seven ways in which you can maintain and improve the level of engagement and empowerment (your people's willingness and ability to make their own decisions about the best way to achieve results) in line with the principles of fast-lane innovation.

- 1. Build and raise capabilities.** You must invest in the skills and capabilities required for effective innovation. These include creative thinking approaches, prototype development, team leadership and project management, as well as relevant technical and engineering skills. Not only should you invest in the development your existing teams, but you should also ensure that your new hires include a bias towards those with an innovation focus and flair.
- 2. Involve with integrity.** It is vital that people are given clear objectives and the broader context of the company's aims and ambitions. Only then can they really understand what is required to succeed. It is not enough to do this with centralised communications. Each manager and leader across the business must take the time to genuinely listen to their team members' ideas and help them to develop new products, services and improvements that are in line with the company's priorities.
- 3. Provide boundaries.** Empowerment does not happen in an organisation without boundaries. On the contrary, a lack of boundaries can lead to paralysis where no one is sure about what is expected of them. Let people know what their limits are. These might include the types of products, services and improvements upon which you wish to focus, investment and funding ceilings and decision rights.
- 4. Encourage small, organic project teams.** Many innovations are created by small teams (two or three people) working together on ideas, rather than by individuals working independently or as part of larger collaborations. What can you do to encourage these 'skunk works' in your business? Some companies, including Google and 3M let their people spend a proportion of their working week on projects that are of interest to a small group, rather than as part of a wider corporate initiative.

5. **Drive accountability.** Within these boundaries and objectives, give people full accountability for results. By giving them this freedom and responsibility, you will ensure that decisions are made as close as possible to the customer, rather than being driven back up the chain. It is vital that you don't always step in to prevent 'failure'. Such events are a critical part of your people's development and an unavoidable element of a way of working that will drive superior performance.
6. **Reward behaviours, not just results.** I have written elsewhere that failure is an intrinsic element of fast-lane innovation. Ensure that you support this reality by rewarding those that behave in ways that are likely to lead to innovation, even if not everything they have tried and developed has succeeded.
7. **Keep raising performance standards.** If performance standards are simply maintained, it is likely that your relative competitive position will decline. Continue to raise the bar, increase targets and demand improvements in standards of performance, including the time to market, the cost per initiative, and the number of ideas being generated, tested and reviewed.

Three Key Actions

1. Clarify, negotiate and agree the boundaries for each of your teams, including financial resources, people investment and decision-making responsibilities.
2. Ensure that you don't step into others' area of responsibility. Ultimately, you should be prepared to let your people fail and provide help in developing their capabilities, rather than doing their job for them.
3. Seek regular employee feedback on levels of empowerment and the approaches being used, so that you can amend and expand boundaries and accountabilities as your people become more comfortable with their powers.

13. A Simple Innovation Process

Most breakthrough innovation is developed and delivered by small and new-start companies with nothing to lose. Large corporations that are truly innovative are all too rare.

However, it need not be so. If innovation is to be sustainable in an organisation it requires a structured, repeatable process.

Which of these seven steps could your business implement to dramatically increase your chances of delivering breakthrough innovation and growth?

- 1. The CEO must lead the process.** Symbolically, this emphasises the importance of innovation to the company and encourages others to get involved. What's more, many organisational structures inhibit innovation. Top-level leadership helps you cut-through and overcome these barriers.
- 2. Expect and welcome failure.** Many businesses operate a "get it right first time" philosophy. That's fine when you're dealing with ongoing operations, but it simply doesn't work when you're trying something new. The CEO's leadership can also help overcome a desire to be 100% right before moving, but there needs to be latitude across the organisation and an understanding that not everything will work.
- 3. Clarify your strategic objectives.** Your managers will be able to contribute to innovation and growth if they understand your strategy. Are you clear on your target customer segments, the markets in which you wish to participate, and how you are seeking to compete and win in those markets? If so, how well have you communicated these insights to your managers so that they can turn your strategy into action?
- 4. Create standard approaches.** You need standard approaches so that managers and teams from different parts of the business can communicate and work together. Establish common ways of generating ideas, managing funding and reviewing performance.
- 5. Train managers on the process.** Your people must have the skills before they can contribute to your innovation process. As they apply these skills the results will improve, but common approaches to idea generation, understanding possible prizes, project management and seeking and securing funding are all areas where some initial education will pay off.

6. **Focus on rapid testing.** Having a central kitty to fund simple, early prototypes (no more than a few \$ thousands at any one time) allows you to test your ideas quickly with customers, and will give you a better understanding of what will work than a pile of academic customer research.

7. **Focus on the winners.** Rapid testing will give you a feel for what will work and what won't. This enables you to then focus on the winners. At this point you can create a balance between those ideas that are likely to give a rapid payback (say, less than 12 months) and those which will require longer-term investment.

Three Key Actions

1. Implement the process into your business in a way that minimises bureaucracy, maximises pace and delivers tangible improvements for your customers, your people and your business

2. After six months, review the success of your process and amend and refine accordingly. Repeat this exercise at least annually.

3. Publicly celebrate successes and the teams that deliver them to encourage others to take part.

14. Managing Risks Effectively

There is no innovation without risk. Or, as Winston Churchill once said, “*A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.*”

The important thing to remember, however, is that the risk of not innovating is greater than the risk of innovation. Even successful strategies erode over time – just ask Kodak, Olivetti or Woolworths!

The secret is therefore to embed effective and pragmatic risk management approaches into your innovation process and projects. Here are six ways that you can make this happen:

- 1. Ask yourself, what’s really the worst that can happen?** Many managers fear any kind of failure, but how big a loss is really at stake with your projects? In most cases the setbacks are temporary, can be locally managed and have a financial impact that can be absorbed by the business. They constitute minor damage to the deck, not a huge hole below the waterline.
- 2. Compare the downside risk to the upside potential.** The risk of a new project cannot be looked at in isolation. You must compare the worst-case scenario against the potential prize. You shouldn’t put your organisation at risk if the prize is not worth it but, equally, you shouldn’t let a small-scale risk prevent you from going for a big prize.
- 3. Establish preventative and contingent risk management plans.** Preventative actions are those which reduce the likelihood of the risk occurring; contingent actions reduce the impact of the risk if the worst happens. Office buildings for example have ‘No Smoking’ signs and health and safety training for the building’s users as fire prevention actions, and alarms and sprinkler systems as contingent actions. For each of your key projects, what preventative and contingent actions will best mitigate and reduce the risks you’ve identified?
- 4. Use rapid tests, trials and prototypes relentlessly.** Investing a little up-front to learn quickly whether you have a ‘hit’ or a ‘miss’ on your hands, and how you can improve the idea, can prevent you facing a big bill further down the line.

5. **Put your effort into learning-based action, not perfect planning.** A nuclear power station needs to operate perfectly from Day 1; the rest of us tend to operate with a greater tolerance for imperfection. In general it is better to get something that is good, but perhaps imperfect out there and learn from it, than it is to plan and plan so that you have perfection when you finally launch.

6. **Celebrate your failures.** Governments may choose to bury bad news to avoid criticism, but if you fail to learn from your mistakes, and are unwilling to share the lessons with others, you are little better than the bluebottles constantly buzzing into a window when there is an opening just inches away.

Three Key Actions

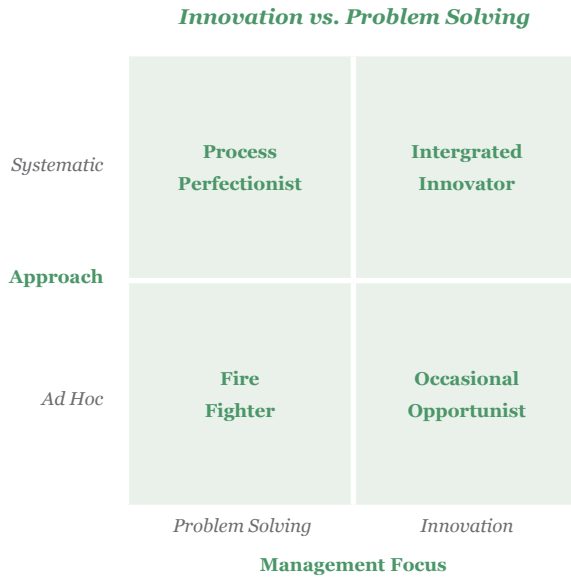
1. Develop objective risk assessment criteria that are understood across the business to ensure that new ideas are robust and can be implemented effectively.

2. Periodically review the level of risk across your projects, ensuring that you are not taking on excessive risk or, conversely, focusing all your efforts on low-risk, low-reward initiatives.

3. Establish a prize for the 'best' failure of the year, inviting people to share and celebrate the mistakes they've made in their pursuit of new growth for your business.

15. Making Innovation A Way Of Life

When it comes to innovation, I think there are four kinds of organisation, as set out in the chart below. Most businesses, in fact most people are, a mix of these four categories. If you were to divide all your time and focus what share would you attach to each quadrant?



In my experience, 70% or more of the attention of most chief executives is devoted to problem solving, and up to 50% of it is on 'fire fighting', resolving issues as they arise. If you wish to gain a stronger position in your market you must devote a bigger share of your time and effort to systematic innovation efforts – a fast-lane innovator must be systematic.

A systematic focus on innovation requires these five steps:

- 1. Make innovation your #1 priority.** As a leader of your business, innovation must be your #1 priority, driving your company's future growth. If you only give it ad hoc focus, your organisation will not believe that you are serious and will not give it the commitment you are after.

2. **Align your innovation focus with your strategy.** What is the thrust of your strategic direction, and what kind of company are you seeking to create? Use the table on page 18 to identify the focus for your innovation so that it will directly contribute to your strategic ambitions.
3. **Engage and empower the whole organisation.** Systematic, fast-lane innovation cannot be achieved by relying on a small team of R&D specialists; it requires the focus and commitment of the entire organisation and beyond (suppliers, partners, customers) if you want to create sustainable growth.
4. **Avoid bureaucracy.** I have described the need for capability development and some simple processes to aid the creation of innovation, but innovation does not respond well to rigid process management. Err on the side of chaos if you want to create breakthrough growth opportunities for your business.
5. **Commit to action.** As I have described, there is no innovation without action. You will trip and fail along the way, but the fastest way to success is to avoid seeking perfection. Instead, you should take action, learn and adapt your way to growth.

Three Key Actions

1. Critically review your time and identify the % spent on systematically driving and delivering innovation. Identify practical ways in which you can significantly increase this time.
2. Reward, promote and recruit those people that embody the principles and skills required for innovation.
3. Continuously find ways to involve individuals, teams and organisations – from both within and outside your business – in your innovation processes and projects, maximising the impact of their expertise on your future growth.

Summary: Select Your Own Three Key Actions Right Now

This booklet has sought to give you some of the tools and approaches necessary to create a faster growing, more innovative company. I have focused on practical ways that you, as the leader of your business, can continue to raise the bar, find and pursue new opportunities with focus and pace, and move your company into the innovation fast-lane.

If your business is to develop more successful innovation approaches and strategies, it is down to you to initiate and lead it. So my question to you is, now that you've read (at least some of) these pages, what will you do next?

My aim with this booklet is not to simply get you to think differently, but, far more importantly, to take action. On the facing page is a box with space for three actions for you to deliver as a result of reading this booklet.

Why three? Well, why not? You have to start somewhere, and if, after you've implemented these actions you want to pursue further steps, then I won't be complaining.

So, what are you going to do next? My recommendation to you is to:

- **Take the Innovation Scorecard Test overleaf and review the results**
- **Review the previous sections of the booklets and identify which of them most resonated with you**
- **Select from these sections the ideas and approaches you would like to see implemented in your organisation, modifying them for your own business environment**
- **Set out your specific actions in the box on the opposite page**
- **Make them happen by taking your first step today**

I wish you the best of luck, and hope that you enjoy the journey of creating and delivering the fast-lane innovation that will drive the future success and growth of your organisation.

My Three Key Priorities

Priority 1	
<i>Action 1</i>	
<i>Action 2</i>	
<i>Action 3</i>	
Priority 2	
<i>Action 1</i>	
<i>Action 2</i>	
<i>Action 3</i>	
Priority 3	
<i>Action 1</i>	
<i>Action 2</i>	
<i>Action 3</i>	

Appendix: Take The Innovation Scorecard Test

How to take the test

Simply score yourself and your organisation from 0 to 5 for each of the statements below, where '0' means you strongly disagree with the statement, and '5' means you strongly agree with the statement.

After completing the survey sum up your total score and find out what it means for you and your company by comparing to the summaries below.

Your score is less than 40

Inside-Lane Incrementalist. Although you may believe that innovation is important for your business, you are simply not walking the talk. You continue to play it safe and focus on making minor improvements to existing products, services and processes. You need to find ways to increase your organisation's appetite to experiment with new ideas, its willingness to accept and manage failure and its commitment to build the processes and capabilities necessary to drive the profit growth that the leading innovators enjoy.

Your score is in the range, 40-65

Middle-Lane Follower. Your innovation processes may be reasonably strong, yet you find that you are not making major advances. You are likely to be overly focused on copying and responding to your competitors' latest moves, and are reluctant to make the bigger steps that will drive your business forward. You should look at ways to increase your appetite and ability to take on and manage the risks of bolder innovation activity.

Your score is more than 65

Fast-Lane Innovator. Your company is set up to develop and deliver true innovation into your markets. You are likely to be seen as a leader in your market and achieve results that are superior to your competitors. The key watch-out going forward is to ensure that your innovation remains relevant in the context of fast-changing business environments. Remember, nothing fails like success; you must continue to be proactive in raising the bar and driving future growth.

To what extent do you agree with each of these statements?

SCORE
(0-5)

1. Do You Have An Innovation Mindset?

- **Ambitious goals.** We set demanding future goals that are a constant focus for everyone in the business.
- **Broad scope.** We want to create entire new businesses and product categories, attract new customers and enter new markets.
- **Experiment fearlessly.** We know that failure is inevitable in any new venture and use trials and prototypes for rapid learning.
- **Real customer insight.** We find new ways to discover customers unmet needs and ask ourselves how we can improve their lives.

2. Have You Created An Innovation-Focused Organisation?

- **Systematic approach.** We have simple effective processes and systems for generating, evaluating and investing in new ideas.
- **Broad engagement.** We involve the whole organisation in innovation and invest in skills and capabilities accordingly.
- **External relationships.** We don't try and do it all internally, and work with external partners to identify and drive new growth.
- **Performance management.** Our people are rewarded on the basis of their ability to develop and deliver new business ideas.

3. Are You Actively Driving Innovation?

- **Strategic Alignment.** We have identified priorities for innovation that are clearly in line with our strategic objectives.
- **'Stealing' Ideas.** We actively seek new ideas from other industries and markets.
- **Exploiting the unexpected.** We use unexpected successes and failures – our own and others' – as a starting point for innovation.
- **Exploiting external changes.** We actively track customer, social, economic and technology trends to identify new ideas.

4. Are You Delivering Results Through Innovation?

- **Sales and profit impact.** Over 40% of sales and 30% of profits come from products and services introduced in the last 3 years.
- **Brand enhancement.** Customers and staff are loyal to us because of our innovation track record.
- **Innovation pipeline.** Our current pipeline of new innovations is likely to grow the business by over 25%.
- **Company value.** Our excellence is rewarded by an advantaged competitive position and a premium in our company's value.

TOTAL SCORE (out of 80)

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About Stuart Cross

Stuart Cross is a consultant, coach and speaker who helps world-class companies dramatically accelerate profit growth. Since its launch in 2006 his firm, Morgan Cross Consulting, has attracted clients including Avon Cosmetics, Alliance Boots, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Groupe Aeroplan.

Prior to founding Morgan Cross, Stuart was Head of Strategy for Boots the Chemists, the UK's largest health and beauty retailer, is a chartered accountant (though he rarely divulges this information on a 'first date') and has an MBA from Warwick Business School.

In addition to his consulting, coaching and speaking work Stuart teaches on MBA courses at both Warwick and Nottingham University Business Schools. He is also a regular writer on business and management issues, and has a weekly article with the business website BNET.co.uk

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What People Say About Stuart Cross

*“Stuart writes clearly, intelligently and succinctly.
I find his lessons both provocative and practical.”*

David Stead, Chief Financial Officer, Dunelm Group plc

*“If you really want to get some breakthrough thinking into
your business then Stuart’s the guy to contact.”*

**Simon McCandlish, Director of Pharmacy and Healthcare,
Boots the Chemists**

*“Not only is Stuart a fantastic consultant in the UK,
he’s one of the best in the world.”*

Alan Weiss, author of Million Dollar Consulting

*“Stuart used his excellent strategic skills to help us create
a new agenda that will drive significantly higher levels of
growth for the business.”*

Stephen Ford, Vice President Strategy, Avon Cosmetics Europe

*“Stuart has that rare combination: real intelligence, deep
experience and a light touch in bringing concepts to life.”*

Jayne Mayled, Managing Director, Jupiter Design Limited

*“I would recommend Stuart to any company looking for
creative solutions to challenging strategic issues.”*

Rick Mills, Director of Corporate Development, Alliance Boots

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