



## Strategic Imagination: Use External Thought Leaders to Disrupt Your Mindset - and the Market

*Pushing Boundaries to Gain Future Foresight and Create New Growth Opportunities*

### Overview

An organization's inwardly-focused and historically-biased view of the world limits its capacity for "strategic imagination" that inspires new opportunities. Bringing in fresh, future-oriented perspectives from outside the organization is an essential catalyst for pushing the boundaries of individuals, teams and the organization. External "Thought Leaders" from a variety of domains can be brought into the innovation process to help a team develop strategic foresight – an informed yet imaginative perspective on the future including specific business opportunities that will positively surprise customers and leapfrog the market.

### Most leaders and organization are limited by an internally-focused world view

Companies often struggle to see beyond their own world view. Historically-biased data, inwardly-focused thinking, established mindsets, and outmoded innovation practices conspire to limit an organization's ability to envision new possibilities for growth. Innovation teams usually have no problem coming up with ideas, though the results of traditional "brainstorming sessions" are often disappointing – short-term ideas rooted in past and present thinking, that assume the battle must be joined under today's competitive rules. In many cases, the same people are generating the same pet ideas and there's no fresh thinking.

We can't expect teams to be imaginative and visionary if they hold an inwardly-focused world view. Pushing boundaries is the only way to think differently.

Organizations usually have no shortage of data (especially historical statistics and consumer research), but what they often lack is real insights that spark the imagination. While company employees bring essential subject-matter expertise, the downside is that they are encumbered by long-held operating assumptions and orthodoxies of an internally-biased world view.

Of course, it is necessary to continue building the core business and to "make the numbers", through "incremental" product iterations and line extensions. That said, forward-looking companies intentionally balance this short-term focus with a future orientation that seeks out bigger opportunities that will drive mid- and longer-term growth. In other words, they recognize the critical need to innovate strategically.

### "Getting out of the box" starts by looking over the sides

'Getting out of the box' is a very tired and overused expression, but the fact is: new thinking and breakthrough growth don't happen if the same employees look at the same data and have the same discussions every day. Forward-looking organizations have a fierce curiosity and a thirst to engage with fresh perspectives from the outside. They actively seek ways to stretch beyond their inbuilt set of experiences, orthodoxies, historical practices, "blind spots", technology capabilities, and business boundaries. They understand that looking at the world differently is the only way to dramatically increase their ability to identify truly new opportunities that will drive breakthrough growth.

External Thought Leaders – inspirational provocateurs and visionaries – are the essential catalyst for teams that seek breakthrough innovation.

So, how can we infuse fresh thinking? Who do we bring in to the mix? Inspirational, external thinkers and provocateurs are an essential catalyst for teams that seek breakthrough innovation and that want to push themselves to look beyond the obvious answers. In one of our core methodologies we refer to them as “Thought Leaders.”

There are several ways to involve them. These include: formal or informal, one-on-one conversations with industry or technology experts; creating “open innovation” networks; establishing an ongoing Innovation Advisory Board; conducting “immersion visits” with industry-leading companies; and bringing them together in a specialized forum to address specific business or technology challenges.

### External Thought Leaders push boundaries

A *Leapfrogging Growth Initiative* is an iterative process that may have several stated goals, such as: to identify potential opportunities and growth platforms; to conceive of new ventures, business models or products and services; to address organizational knowledge gaps or “blind spots”; to identify emerging trends; to foster new business partnerships; to create momentum around a stalled initiative; or to build internal alignment that accelerates decision-making and facilitates implementation.

#### Engage External Experts to Push Boundaries

##### Definition:

- The focal point of this iterative innovation process is the “*Leapfrogging Innovation Session*” – a custom-designed, unconventional one-day meeting with external experts, followed by a one-day synthesis and action planning session
- Thought Leaders are forward-looking provocateurs – experts in their respective fields: specialist practitioners, executives, potential partners, industry analysts/observers, academics, venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, consultants and “cultural creatives”

##### Goals:

- To identify strategic opportunities, growth platforms and product/service concepts – by understanding emerging trends; consumer insights; best practices; convergence of technologies and markets; blurring business boundaries; and seeking “white spaces”
- To stimulate “stretch” thinking – and to envision entirely new possibilities
- To ensure that short-term actions are anchored to long-term vision
- To create shared understanding and alignment among key stakeholders – to accelerate prioritization/decision-making and facilitate cross-functional support for implementation

##### Format:

- Bring together hand-picked visionaries – from inside and outside your industry
- Highly collaborative interactions between Thought Leaders and cross-functional innovation team
- Leverage (but goes beyond) factual information – combine with intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking”

During the process, a cross-functional team comprised of an organization’s own subject-matter experts and innovators is brought face-to-face with external “Thought Leaders” to explore, speculate and collaborate in a shirt-sleeves working environment.

Sourced from many different walks of life these forward-looking Thought Leaders are experts in their respective fields. They can be specialist practitioners, executives, potential partners, venture capitalists, industry analysts/observers, academics, entrepreneurs, consultants or “cultural creatives”.

#### It’s a process – not an event

The *Leapfrogging Innovation Session* is the “main event” of an iterative, divergent-to-convergent innovation process that includes several steps: scoping (defining the focus and desired outcomes), planning, session definition (identifying a provocative set of “focal areas” that address the business issue/need), Thought Leader recruiting, selection and coaching, the session itself, opportunity prioritization and development, roadmapping, and implementation planning.

Conducted in parallel with these steps is a series of consumer/customer insight,



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strategic thinking and market immersion activities that enable the innovation team (and other stakeholders) to fully participate in the session itself.

Combining visionary thinking with pragmatism, the *Leapfrogging Innovation Session* itself is a one-day, carefully orchestrated meeting. The session involves the Thought Leaders and key stakeholders from the company. Bringing them all together at once is significantly more effective than sequential, one-on-one interactions with because it exploits the interactions between all participants, and delivers new insights and a common experience for the company stakeholders. Inspiration comes when the Thought Leaders vociferously debate their different views on the future, and when they identify connections and opportunities at the intersections of their respective worlds. The session consists of a fast-paced series of non-traditional interactions that enable Thought Leaders and the innovation team to quickly move beyond static thinking and to take a future-oriented perspective that identifies breakthrough possibilities.

## Tap into emerging trends to find future foresight

### Defining a Leapfrogging Growth Initiative

The approach can be used to address a wide array of challenges – from technology- to business-focused, and from strategic to tactical. For example:

- What emerging trends will shape our world – and how can we leverage them?
- What growth platforms and products should we focus on – and how should we execute against them?
- What “white space” opportunities lie at the intersections of our business and other industries?
- How can we ensure our R&D investments are aligned with consumers’ emerging priorities?
- How should we define our-go-to-market strategy?

The initiative’s sponsor and the innovation team play a key role in scoping the opportunity/ issue to be addressed, and in defining the external Thought Leader “focal areas”.

While most companies use trends as part of their planning process the focus is often on the analysis of historical, established trends. But hindsight is woefully inadequate for future planning in an increasingly volatile and unpredictable world. It is essential to identify *emerging* trends – and to capitalize on them ahead of the competition.

By combining facts, right-brained intuition, speculation and “possibility thinking” an organization can develop “Industry Foresight” – an understanding of emerging marketplace drivers, non-obvious trends and possible dislocations. With Strategic Foresight an organization puts itself in a position to create a visionary and proprietary view of the future, and to ask: “What does this mean for us?” This underlies the development of pragmatic growth strategies to pursue potential “white spaces” and other untapped opportunities.

Organizations typically keep a relatively narrow set of trends on their radar screen – those directly and obviously related to their industry. But to innovate at a more imaginative and strategic level a more expansive view is required – one that also looks at trends that lie outside an organization’s normal field of view.

Strategic Innovation requires an organization to look at the intersections of emerging trends in many areas (social, demographic, technological, geographical, environmental, political, regulatory and competitive) – as well as others that might seem extraneous at first sight.

A visionary food and beverage company, for example, would look well beyond historical consumption data, gaps in its product lineup, or a snapshot of today’s competitive product landscape, and would also monitor the early growth stages of alternative distribution channels, novel business models, emerging technologies that originate *outside* (but could impact) their world, or try to imagine the marketing communications possibilities driven by the proliferation of consumer electronics and the emergence of social networks.

## Juxtaposition: stretching our thinking at the intersections of adjacent (and non-adjacent) worlds

By juxtaposing our conventional frame of reference with other worlds beyond our immediate field of view, it is possible to envision entirely new possibilities and opportunities for growth. The trick is to ask: How can we go well beyond our own internal expertise and drive our “strategic imagination” to new heights? “What can we learn and apply from “adjacent or non-adjacent worlds” such as fashion, sports, entertainment, cosmetics or high tech? For example, what could we learn about interface design from Apple; about rapid new product innovation from Mattel; about launching new brands from Virgin; or about communicating to women consumers from Avon? What non-obvious opportunities can be revealed at the intersections of their worlds and ours?



### Designing a session

There are a great many ways to design a Leapfrogging Innovation session. The following design demonstrates one possible configuration that could spark the “strategic imagination” of a food and beverage company seeking to explore strategic and product opportunities at the intersections of several areas, including: home entertainment, health & wellness, social media marketing, emerging work and leisure trends, next-gen food technologies, and high-end packaging.

### Synthesis and Strategic Roadmapping

Immediately after a *Leapfrogging Innovation Session*, structured debriefs engage the innovation team in identifying insights and drawing strategic and tactical implications. A shared vision, strategy and roadmap are then developed that provide the foundation for short-term implementation, including resource allocation, and longer-term opportunity development.

### Combining the Thought Leader approach with other methodologies

Engaging external Thought Leaders in the innovation process is very flexible – and extremely effective in combination with other methodologies. Whether using external experts to stimulate the work of internal innovation teams or using them to create advisory boards or innovation councils, the goal is the same: infuse an external perspective into the mix to push boundaries and help the organization generate new growth opportunities that leapfrog the market, and the competition.





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## About the Leapfrogging Alliance

The Leapfrogging Alliance helps innovative leaders disrupt the mindsets of their teams and organizations – in order to disrupt their markets with business breakthroughs that positively surprise customers and grow the top line. Our clients include Cisco, Colgate-Palmolive, Disney, Frito-Lay, JP Morgan Chase, PepsiCo, Kimberly-Clark, Medtronic, Roche, Visa, and many other market leaders. For more information visit [www.leapfrogging.com](http://www.leapfrogging.com).

## About the Authors



**Soren Kaplan** is the author of the Wall Street Journal bestselling book *Leapfrogging*. He helps innovative leaders disrupt mindsets and markets, and works with organizations including Disney, Kimberly-Clark, Colgate-Palmolive, Medtronic, Philips, PepsiCo, and numerous other global firms. Soren previously led the internal strategy and innovation group at Hewlett-Packard (HP) during the roaring 1990's in Silicon Valley and was a co-founder of iCoHere, one of the first web collaboration platforms for online learning and communities of practice. He is an Adjunct Professor within the Imagineering Academy at NHTV Breda University of Applied Sciences in The Netherlands. He has been quoted, published, and interviewed by Fast Company, Forbes, CNBC, National Public Radio, the American Management Association, USA Today, Strategy & Leadership, and The International Handbook on Innovation, among many others. He holds Master's and Ph.D. degrees in Organizational Psychology and resides in the San Francisco Bay Area with his wife, two daughters, and hypo-allergenic cat.



**Derrick Palmer** helps global organizations create novel solutions to the tough challenges of driving strategic, breakthrough growth. Using non-traditional approaches, and with 30 years of line management and consulting experience, Derrick taps into his work across many verticals – including consumer products, financial services, health care, high tech, entertainment, professional services, retail, automotive, and hospitality. He has extensive experience leading cross-functional teams 'from chaos to clarity', fostering collaboration across organizational silos, and facilitating decision-making among disparate (and sometimes disconnected) stakeholder groups. Originally from England, Derrick brings an international perspective. Having lived and worked in six countries, he knows what it takes to drive breakthrough results from culturally diverse teams. He holds a BA in Languages/Linguistics and a Masters degree in Marketing Management.