

LEADING INNOVATION IN ASIA

Key themes from our dinner discussion about the challenges of leading innovation in complex organizations across one of the world's most dynamic regions



THANK YOU.

We enjoyed last week's dinner conversation and have landed the most interesting themes that emerged in this little summary.

Since our dinner, some of you shared some exciting thoughts on how we might take this program further. Stay tuned for the next invitation — we promise it will be interesting!

In the meantime, we hope this evening gave you plenty of insight and inspiration to bring back to work with you.

Alex & A-Young



8 THEMES FROM OUR EVENING TOGETHER

01.

**Careful With The
“Innovation” Word**

02.

**Design Thinking Is
Eating Innovation**

03.

**Keep An Eye On Your
Legacy Track**

04.

**Innovation In Asia: A
Hustler’s Practice In An
Entitlement Culture**

05.

**Incentivising
Experimentation In A
Risk Averse Culture**

06.

**Great Innovation People
Are Independent**

07.

**Regional Insights
Need To Go Beyond
The Obvious**

08.

**Innovation Centers
Need To Get Their
KPIs Right**

01 CAREFUL WITH THE INNOVATION WORD

“Don’t you guys think that innovation has kind of jumped the shark?”

Our fellow dinner guests felt innovation has become an overused word that has lost meaning and power. The core function of turning new opportunities into tangible impact is as important as ever, but the people contributing most to this practice are less likely to have the word “innovation” in their title. Meanwhile, those people working under titles and teams called “innovation” seem to be having their value questioned more and more.

While this echoes what we hear in other parts of the world, the prevalence of inexperienced innovation “experts” in Asia Pacific paired with a shortage of qualified talent has created an abundance of innovation teams that should be delivering much more.





02

DESIGN THINKING IS EATING INNOVATION

“Is design thinking eating innovation?”

The sense that Design Thinking was replacing innovation, but much discussion around what that really means. Some felt that the word design suggested a tangibility that innovation has failed to deliver. One leader saw the design driven approach as helpful in unpacking problems and designing solutions methodically. Others felt that the structure of design thinking (which some found rigid) offered a way to scale an innovation function with less seasoned staff (as appreciated by the same people who struggled with its rigidity).

“I’m doing more and more design thinking at work, but I struggle to call myself a designer.”

The word design was a double edged sword for some who felt the fact that they aren’t a designer negatively impacted their credibility as design thinkers.



03

KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR LEGACY TRACK

“It’s about your body of work over the course of a lifetime of work. You need to step back from the day to day to keep perspective.”

There are major challenges of thinking longer term in large organizations where performance is tracked annually. Everyone in the room stressed the importance of a longer term view but was disappointed by their ability to stay focused on those longer term goals in the face of short term performance objectives. One leader talked about being mindful of **“the legacy track”** as well as immediate priorities when making day to day decisions.

“Ask yourself, where do you want to be in 10 years without constraints? Then bring the constraints back into the picture to get to something real. You might have to let go of some of the details in that process but at least you’ll have something.”



04

INNOVATION IN ASIA: A HUSTLER'S PRACTICE IN AN ENTITLEMENT CULTURE

"There is a culture that if I work for X number of years I should have title Y. There's no sense of hustle to get ahead."

A culture of entitlement that spans beyond the workplace is one of the biggest barriers to innovation in Asia Pacific.

"It comes down to the prevailing culture in this part of this world: I'm the oldest son so I get the business. The oldest person speaks first. This part of the world values entitlement over accomplishment."

This culturally ingrained way of thinking about careers overlooks impact delivered when people think about their value. As a result, the payoff of taking a calculated risk does not factor into the way people plan to get ahead professionally.



05

INCENTIVISING EXPERIMENTATION IN A RISK AVERSE CULTURE

“In this part of the world, if someone takes a risk and something great happens the response is ‘meh’. The upside is tiny. But if they take a small risk and fail, the consequences are huge.”

The consequences of failure outweigh the rewards of success for people in large organizations in Asia Pacific. This isn't anything new, but is unanimously seen as the biggest barrier to innovation in this part of the world.

Jim talked to us about how Google actually celebrates failure as a means of progress. An epic failure that took down all of Google for several minutes resulted in the engineer getting an award in front of the entire organization because it resulted in the identification of a bug.

“In our group, one of your KPIs is to fail at something every year and learn from it.”



06 GREAT INNOVATION PEOPLE ARE INDEPENDENT

"I'm assuming everyone at the table isn't afraid to be fired or they wouldn't be able to do this. You can't be successful in an innovation role if you want an iron rice bowl."

The spirit of independence was recognised in each other, and the leaders agreed this is a powerful red thread among people who are successful at making innovation happen in large organizations.

"[Innovation] is an art and science but at the end of the day it's about courage and having conviction."



07 REGIONAL INSIGHTS NEED TO GO BEYOND THE OBVIOUS

“I’m struggling to get the deep insights into this part of the world that my team really needs.”

There is limited ability to get insight work that delivers a deep and rich picture of consumers in this part of the world. Too much insight work focuses on pointing out the obvious with many agencies hiding behind the mantra of “Asian consumers are different,” without really giving any meaningful insight into the nuances of one of the world’s most culturally dynamic and diverse parts of our planet.

“I need to work with people who don’t think the obvious is interesting.”



08 INNOVATION CENTERS IN APAC NEED TO GET THEIR KPIs RIGHT

“Too many of these innovation centers have the wrong KPIs in place. They end up being spaces set up for tours and don’t really generate much real impact.”

Innovation centres have become prevalent in the region. While the first round of these were not massively successful in Asia, these experiments offer insight into how to get these things right in the future.

Many of these centres in the region have been designed around ceremonial KPIs (an innovative looking space designed for visitors and gaining publicity) rather than hard market impact (e.g., number of products in market). Innovation centres can succeed when they prioritise impact over protocol and get the right people into place.





IF YOUR PEERS HAD FIVE PIECES OF ADVICE

01

MAKE EXPERIMENTATION A KPI

Change happens when you put structures and incentives around the behaviours we want to see in our teams. If we want to see more experimentation, then experimentation should be a KPI we measure people against. Some of us are already doing this.

02

GROUND YOURSELF IN THE POWER OF INDEPENDENCE

If you're looking for an "iron rice bowl" there are other corporate jobs for you. Great innovation people have a presence and conviction that comes from a genuine independence.

03

BUDGET ENERGY FOR GREAT BIG LONG TERM GOALS

Nurture your personal discipline of maintaining a longer term horizon legacy track your day-to-day work. Your priorities will naturally be shaped by your organization's priorities, but even if your great big long term goal just inches along, you'll eventually get there.

04

SUBVERT THE ENTITLEMENT CULTURE BY REWARDING IMPACT

If the mental model in the region around career progression is rooted in entitlement, do your part to undermine that by rewarding people whose experimentation deliver impact even if that impact comes through a smart failure that teaches the organization something valuable about getting things right.

05

PRIORITIZE RUTHLESSLY

In a job that ultimately lives or dies based on the impact it delivers to the business, focusing on the areas where you can deliver that kind of impact is key to success. Don't let the noise distract you from the few things that really matter in moving your organization forward.

PROPELLERFISH ➤➤

THANK YOU.