

# ACCELERATING POTENTIAL TO INNOVATE

INTEGRATE A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF HOW WE HUMANS CREATE EXPERIENCE, WITH TEAMS' AWARENESS OF THE VIBE IN THE SPACE BETWEEN THEM, AND THEIR POTENTIAL TO FIND SUPERIOR SOLUTIONS ACCELERATES AT PACE

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## Executive summary

### *The problem we need to solve*

Put the aftermath of the pandemic alongside frequent extreme weather events and there's a new-found, existential impetus behind this familiar question - *If not this then what?*

Much that was once considered normal has been thrown up in the air. Leaders everywhere are and will continue to shape their different responses. Most want solutions that work for employees, suppliers, investors, clients and society alike. Thriving - through reducing unnecessary suffering and being a force for good socially and environmentally - matters. Perhaps now more than ever.

The vibe in the space between those searching for new answers either helps them get there at pace, or not. What slows them down is a widespread misunderstanding of how potential and innovation work.

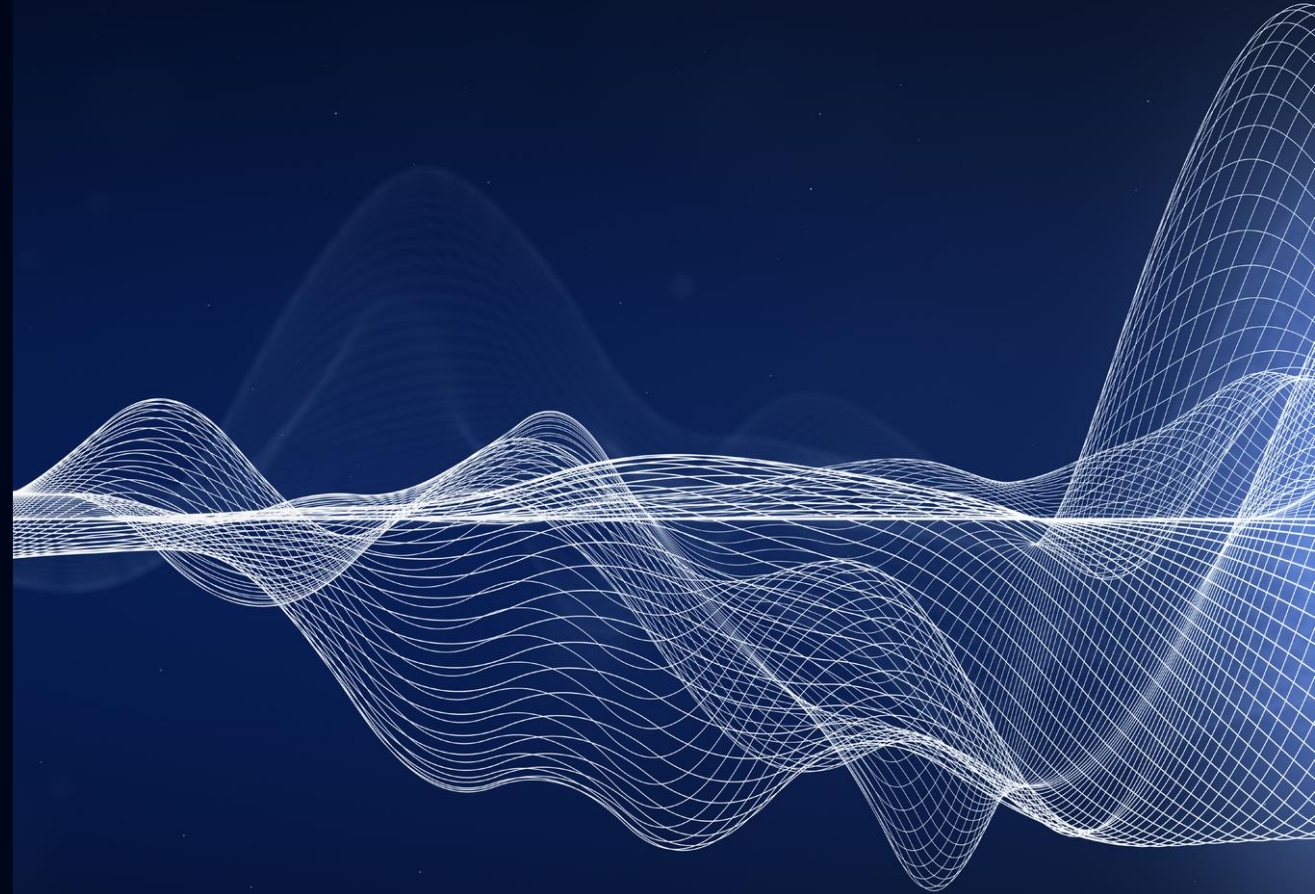
If we understand potential as our ability to learn and adapt in the face of complexity and uncertainty, it's quite different to relying solely on knowledge that already exists. Knowing stuff and sticking to it, inhibits learning, which is about creating new dots and joining existing ones in new ways.

If innovation is our ability to create solutions that are superior to what was previously available (in terms of elegance, cost, time, risk, feel-good factor, environmental impact etc.), its success is rooted in users' experience. That's where 'the wow' resides. However, it's often conflated with small, incremental improvements, carefully crafted by experts and rolled out to those they intend to help.

A low vibe has its roots in such misunderstandings. You will have witnessed the behaviour it produces: poor quality listening, unhealthy disagreement, going round in circles. And the results: marginal, temporary gains. Many assume that's a function of the human condition. "It's just the way it is around here." "Little can be done to change it."

### *The new solution waiting in the wings*

New findings in neuroscience, which confirm much of what's been written on the philosophy of experience across millennia, points in a different direction. They help us understand how any human experience emerges from the linkage between consciousness, thought, feelings and behaviour. They offer up the opportunity for groups to notice and interrupt understandable-if-ingrained mindsets that aren't helpful in every situation. They help leaders maintain a vibe that brings out potential and accelerates innovation.





## Executive summary Cont..

### *Making the solution work for you*

Developing and executing value-adding strategies that are right for your organisation, or parts of it, has always been your focus of attention. And it seems to us that in the new context in which we all find ourselves, stakeholders will increasingly expect these to directly or indirectly respond to the bigger challenges facing societies everywhere. We have in mind challenges such as how we'll feed ourselves in the future, take carbon out of the atmosphere, make the air cleaner, develop new policies rapidly, take out waste, reduce mental ill-health, tackle inequality, turn around stubborn problems that have beset an industry for some time, and so on.

We're a collective of three companies that are here to stand alongside you as you grapple with issues like these. What we bring to the table is a way of helping you and your teams bring out often latent potential and innovate at pace.

The medium we work in is human experience itself: how it's created, ingrains people's views of life, and changes. It's a medium that helps strategists, operational people and other subject matter experts answer five vitally important, interrelated questions:

1. *If you accelerated your potential to innovate, what could you get done swiftly that currently proves difficult?*
2. *What's the key, inspirational question that ignites your imagination and desire to innovate?*
3. *How can your team/s create the right innovative vibe from the start or reboot if they're struggling?*
4. *What makes magic, game-changing moments show up?*
5. *How do you build your capacity to bring out more teams' potential to innovate?*



## 1. If Not This Then What? - The Mega Question Facing We Humans

Since The Enlightenment in the late 17<sup>th</sup>- 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, our ingenuity has led to significant advances across several indicators of human wellbeing. Collectively we live longer for example, there are less mother and infant mortalities, we're wealthier, more connected, better educated and less likely to die from war than at any other time in history.

The 2020 Coronavirus pandemic however, has raised questions about the sustainability of this rate of progress. Coupled with social unease over inequality and frequent, extreme weather events that cause fires, floods, wealth erosion and mental ill-health, the impacts on many people's lives and livelihoods is plain to see. We humans are more conscious of existential risks.

Whilst apocalyptic predictions are not new and can be found in religious scriptures, green politics and Hollywood movies, they do seem to be right here, right now. They've lodged this mega question in the zeitgeist – *if not this then what?*

'Not this' is broad and narrow. It covers big issues such as preventing and responding differently to new crises. Whether the land, oceans, air and biodiversity that nourish us can cope with the demands we place on them. Whether politics and economics - at governmental and organisational levels - enable or inhibit inequality and radical change. Whether our media can develop a narrative of hope and common cause rather than separation and despair. More locally, many people's new-found sense of fragility and community brings questions about what needs to be regenerated and created anew in our families, neighbourhoods and enterprises.

Our responses matter. Our ability to survive and thrive could depend on them, whether you're a government minister or the prime minister, an executive in the boardroom or a student in the classroom, in the civil service or professional services, a project director or inspector, a theist or atheist, an entrepreneur or an intrapreneur, an investor or a protester, a tech giant or a real giant, a teenager or a parent wondering about the future on behalf of generations to come.





## 2. Our Potential To Innovate

Einstein kindly left us with two warnings:

- *'Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results'* and
- *'You can't solve problems using the same thinking that created them.'*

Whilst no one person has a monopoly on wisdom, we do all have in-built potential to generate innovative new answers to the challenges we face and organise around them. The problem is we misunderstand this.

How we frame challenges determines where our thinking, investment and efforts go next. This can inspire or limit us.

On climate change for example, the widely-accepted frame of *'getting to net zero emissions sustainably'* is shaping our response to what's described as *'the climate crisis.'* Another frame is *'helping humans become a net positive to nature.'* Being conscious of both focuses minds on damage-limitation as well as regeneration possibilities. It brings (say) restoring carbon in the atmosphere to pre Industrial Revolution levels into focus, not just limiting current emission levels. Stay wedded to either one of these frames and we set up a dichotomy that might be false.

Furthermore, however framed, we approach unfamiliar challenges - characterised by many unknowns - as though they're familiar and solvable from existing knowledge. Inadvertently, our differing worldviews and silos of expertise can side-track us into unhealthy disagreement and drain the mental energy we need to innovate.

If potential means *our ability to learn and adapt when facing increasing complexity and uncertainty*, and innovation means *our ability to create solutions that are superior to what was previously available (in terms of elegance, cost, time, risk, feel-good factor, environmental impact etc.)* new findings in neuroscience that confirm much in the philosophy-of-experience field, accelerate both simultaneously. In essence: realising how experience forms via the intricate links between our consciousness, thoughts, and feelings, makes seeing why we get stuck easier and frees mental space for creative adaptations.

This new understanding of why we experience life the way we do, presents teams with an opportunity to take a fresh look at how they innovate. When they ensure latent potential is brought to the surface, as they work on pressing challenges in real-time, and notice whether the vibe in the space between them is helping or not, they heed Einstein's warnings.



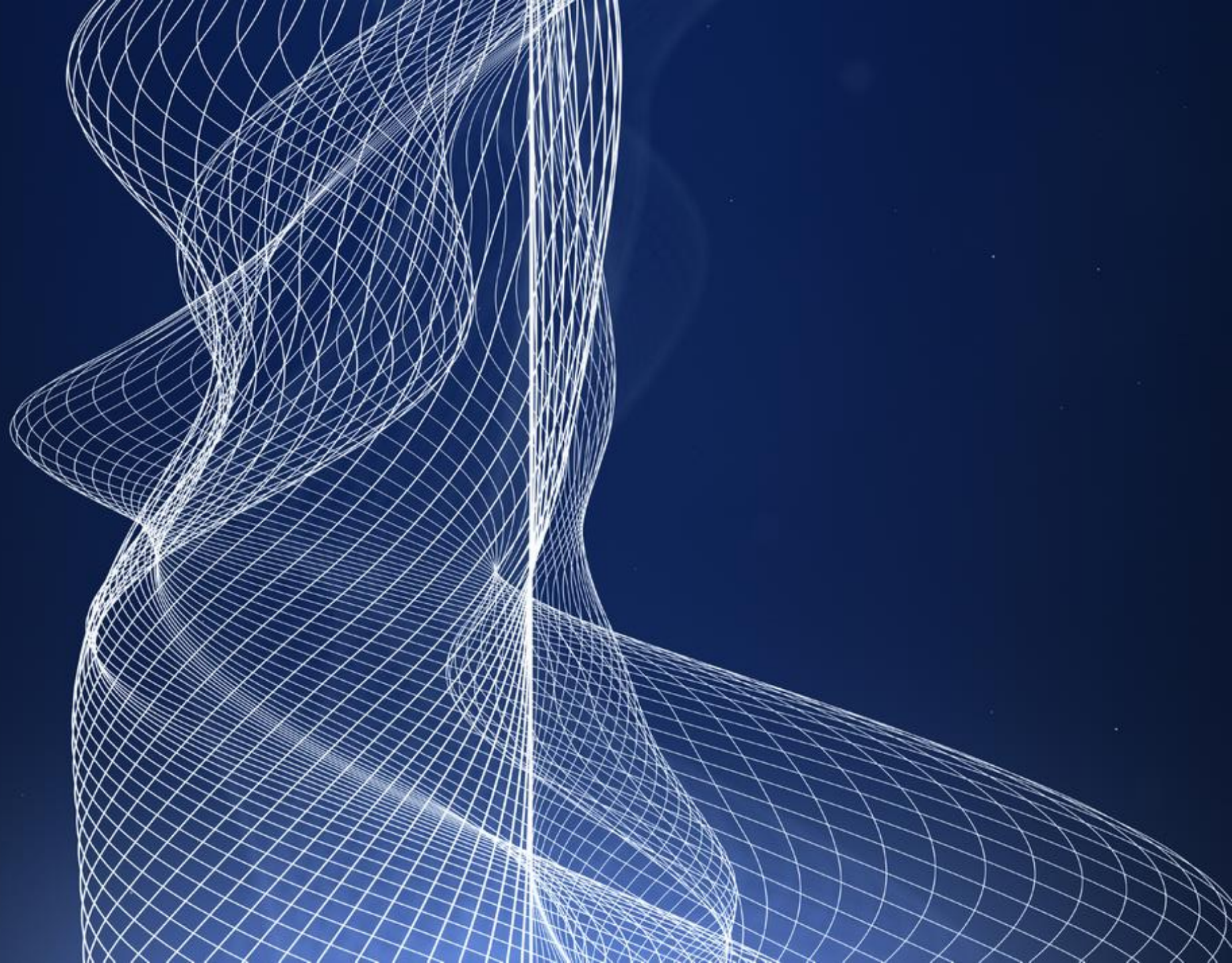
### 3. Sensing The Vibe In The Space Between

Your recall may not be immediately available, but you're already aware of your own potential and innovation qualities. You've had occasions when a problem on one day felt quite different to the day before.

You're designed to have new insights once rumination weakens. They typically arrive unexpectedly, completely shift your perspective and often compel you to follow a new course of action. They're what breakthroughs and paradigm shifts are made of: our ancestors once experienced the world as flat right?

You notice the presence and absence of these two qualities in groups too. Your senses quickly pick up on the vibe that lives in the space between you and whoever else is with you. They let you know whether to feel calm, cautious or uncompromising.

Greater awareness of the vibe, alongside a willingness to articulate it, helps groups track whether they're moving towards or away from their potential to innovate on the challenges before them.





#### 4. What moves the vibe up?

When in any size group you form part of the vibe. It can fluctuate from moment to moment. It emanates from what you and others are conscious of and the thoughts and feelings this generates.

Think about a helpful vibe you've been in. You and those around you are likely to have felt a lightness and a sense of calm about...

##### ..your purpose:

You're excited about getting stuff done in service of a cause that's bigger than you. You know who's depending on your work and what it means to them.

##### ..your potential:

You avoid the trap of only operating from your existing knowledge base and realise that learning together matters more. Creating new dots and joining up existing ones in new ways is fun. Curiosity comes easily. Giving and getting a good listening to is the norm.

##### ..your innovativeness:

Dialogue is generative and embraces healthy disagreement as a necessity not a threat. You work practically; your interest is in people's lived experience of your creations and what works and irks, not grand plans devised solely by experts. You're searching for the key variables, which can't be known at the beginning, but which make a massive difference.



## 5. What brings the vibe down?

Sometimes, even very talented groups are unable to sustain a good vibe. They, like any of us, can get caught up in mindsets when contemplating problems. We feel discombobulated as a result. With lightening speed, our senses trigger habitual trains of thought – often called mental short cuts or rules of thumb - that are not rational, but from which our experience of the issue at hand forms. Recognise any of these examples?

- **Life is a zero-sum game**  
We think for every winner there must be a loser
- **The Master-Servant relationship**  
We think another – a client say - calls all the shots
- **Murphy's Law**  
We believe what can go wrong will – we catastrophise
- **Confirmation bias**  
We seek only information that confirms pre-existing beliefs
- **Dichotomies**  
We set up binary, either / or choices at the expense of both/ and
- **Stereotyping**  
We attribute qualities to someone based on certain social groups rather than who they individually are
- **Optimism bias**  
We underestimate how long future tasks take and anchor ourselves to figures we know to be wrong believing 'It'll be alright on the night.'

Mindsets evolve across generations, and are crafted from experiences. They're useful on occasion – if your life is in danger the immediate freeze, fight or flight response produced by the zero-sum game mindset can be pretty important! Similarly, they're triggered when what you hold dear seems under threat: if your expertise is to weigh up likely and freak risks, Murphy's Law will kick in to counteract others' over optimism.

Mindsets become unhelpful when they automatically drive our behavioural responses outside our consciousness. E.g. we feel defensive, subservient, ill at ease, limited etc. but we're unable to see the lens we're wearing (the mindset) that creates these emotions and our subsequent behaviour. Innocently, we live with an emotional blindness. We don't see what's shaping how we make sense of events and circumstances, and creates the vibe between members of a group.

Whilst mindsets are personal and stored in memories, groups can become aware of when their senses trigger them unhelpfully. They can learn to gauge whether their vibe is conducive to accelerating potential and innovation or not. But willingness to explore *how* they work simultaneously with *what* they're working on, is key.

It's not always abundant though, for good reason.



## 6. The seemingly complex problem that needs a simpler solution

Intellectually understanding the mindset-triggering mechanism that churns away invisibly inside our head, and causes a vibe to fluctuate, is one thing. But a willingness to discuss it in real-time is another. Whether because of time pressures, or fears about therapy-like prying into people's inner thoughts and feelings, groups tend not to do it. They're just left with an overall sense about what it's like to be with and work alongside each other, which typically they keep to themselves.

In the same way a fish doesn't know it's wet and takes water for granted, this has consequences. When lightness, clarity and mutual respect are in short supply, group members inevitably struggle to learn and adapt. They may feel the low vibe, often over many years, but in the absence of discussing its cause, they simply assume 'that's the way it is around here.'

Such inertia keeps the status quo firmly in place and in extreme cases leads to teams presiding over failure. For example, mindsets created banks we can't trust with our money (2008 crash), hospitals and care homes unable to care for our health (Stafford and Winterbourne View) and buildings that are unsafe to call home (Grenfell.) The vibe in these cases was low - not conducive to learning and adapting so rendering innovation impossible.

We compound this problem with conventional remedies. In good faith we've understandably assumed behavioural change (designed to create a new vibe) requires groups to agree shared values, make pacts, introduce incentives, be regulated, get coached, or be trained in listening, conflict, creative thinking skills etc.

Yet studies show 70% of change programmes fail to meet expectations. Intended gains are often temporary. Tick-box cultures flourish. The power of mindsets is underestimated so people revert to type once a programme ends and attention turns elsewhere. Problems persist. To boot, busy senior teams, who some describe as egotistical or hubristic and are in most need of development, are understandably sceptical of these methods. Consequently their potential to innovate remains limited.

***Our potential to innovate on big and small challenges needs to rise. Low vibes remain unexplored. Problems therefore persist. Well-intentioned remedies are inadequate. Complex.***



## 7. A simpler solution

A simpler solution is to help groups be continuously aware of their vibe's impact on their potential to innovate. In other words to help them notice what's causing it to fluctuate in real time: as they work to solve real-life, 'what-next' challenges.

There are three main benefits to this approach:

**More wow** - As potential rises, innovations with a 'wow' factor happen faster across multiple domains – cost, time, risk, effort, value, wellbeing, aesthetic etc.

**Self-adjustment** – When a group's vibe drops, as it inevitably will, they don't let it stay there for long. Knowing the fall is rooted in unhelpful mindsets, which are transient unless group members hold onto them, helps adjustments to be made more easily. Groups 'get' how mindsets form and what removes those that hold their potential to innovate back. (To illustrate: life is not a zero-sum game in every situation, but if we believe it is, we have no choice but to behave according to that reality we create for ourselves. We 'play to win' therefore. We become defensive when under attack etc. Notice how such realities are created in real time however, and that choice is no longer elusive. We can self-adjust, authentically, by not taking our zero-sum thinking too seriously, when appropriate to do so. Being ready, willing and able to make such real-time modifications keeps a group's vibe intact.)

**Shared experience** – innovation with a wow factor provokes others to marvel. They wonder how-did-you-do-that. Groups that have used this simpler solution can not only articulate *what* they did to create their innovations but also share their lived experience of *how* they worked together. Understanding 'the how' builds other groups' potential to innovate.

This simpler solution has its roots in understanding the neuroscience and philosophy that's always at work in the space between members of a group. Making it easily accessible, in real time, produces stunning new answers to stubborn as well as brand new problems.

It may help to consider some examples.



## 8. Innovation in action

The if-not-this-then-what question has spurred on innovation across time. In the physical realm you could go right back to the invention of the wheel, the combustion engine, the internet and the touch pad.

Innovation is a continuous process. It responds to new threats and opportunities as they emerge. Currently, for example, we know of innovations in new ways to plant trees at scale, grow crops on less land, produce meat less intensively, capture solar energy, restore coral reefs, generate safe nuclear energy, build electric forms of transport, eradicate disease, maximise resource use via the sharing and circular economies and much more.

The 'more wow,' cumulative benefits of one innovation is not always obvious. For example, hiring driver-less e-cars could increase vehicle utilisation from around 30% to 65%. This reduces demand for parking lots in cities, which could be repurposed as green spaces with knock-on benefits of improving air quality and wellbeing.

Similarly, inside organisations, developing a new approach to (say) diversity and inclusion or mental ill health has knock-on benefits for other goals such as productivity, winning new business or culture change.

It goes without saying that the value created from new ideas that solve real problems can be huge.

Innovation in the social realm is coming more sharply into focus. The following illustrate topics we've heard leaders say they'd like to make progress on but often find difficult.

- Speeding up the way policy development and decision making work
- Reducing the number of people living a precarious existence: economically and psychologically
- Rejuvenating high-streets and regional under investment
- Developing trustworthy media whose overall narrative is constructive: it balances what's going wrong with what we're doing to put it right. (A narrative of inspiration and care not just separation and despair.)
- Expanding emotional intelligence so reducing mental ill-health, ADHD, discrimination and other forms of suffering and disengagement in our schools, workplaces, homes and online
- Reducing crime and prisoner re-offending to a trickle
- Bringing 9 out of 10 mega projects in on time and below budget instead of the other way round
- Creating agile, value-adding enterprises that sense and respond to clients' changing needs less so predicting and controlling
- And so on...

*There are massive upsides to much-needed leaps in humans' potential to innovate.*





## 9. Accelerating Potential To Innovate At Scale

In our experience there are five interrelated questions that, once answered, build the vibe groups need to get to innovative solutions faster.

### ***i. If you accelerated your potential to innovate, what could you get done swiftly that currently proves difficult?***

This question teases out what the qualities of potential and innovation mean to a team. It helps them explore the extent to which meaning is commonly shared. It uncovers whether these qualities are misunderstood and what impact that has on their ability to get important stuff done. It makes tuning into the idea of the vibe between them easier to grasp. It also sparks discussion on what new thinking is needed if latent potential is to come to the fore and more breakthroughs to become a way of life.

Exploring this question is useful when building momentum amongst colleagues for a different way of looking at how to get to where they want to be faster.

### ***ii. What's the key, inspirational question that ignites your imagination and desire to innovate?***

Innovation begins not with a Eureka or Aha moment but with a carefully crafted, magic-like question that energises those who will lead the search for solutions. As Einstein said if he had an hour to solve a problem on which his life depended, he'd spend the first 55 minutes working out the right question.

When opportunities seem daunting or problems loom large, questions understandably arise out of a fixing-the-deficit mindset. "How do I get my leadership team to up their game?" is an example. But when the team itself uncovers a different question, for which finding answers feels exciting - *what will it take for our followers to willingly join our quest to do some good in the world (say)* - the desire to innovate soars.

Well-managed discussions about the different ways colleagues are thinking and feeling on a particular opportunity or challenge, unveils what they care about and what holds them back. They're where that magic question, to which finding new answers feels really important, gets uncovered. Done early, either when approaching a new opportunity or wondering how to stop going round in circles on a particularly stubborn problem, it ensures teams avoid the waste associated with answering the wrong question.

## 9. Accelerating Potential To Innovate At Scale cont..

### *iii. How can your team/s create the right vibe from the start or reboot if they're struggling?*

Even very talented teams with great intentions and an uplifting question can innocently get bogged down in their attempts to innovate. Typically they struggle with listening well, open dialogue, empathy, letting go of what's known and embracing the unknown, creativity, healthy disagreement, decisiveness, courage. Realising how such difficulties arise in an individual first and then spill over into a group's way of working, is at the heart of this question. It helps innovation teams in two ways.

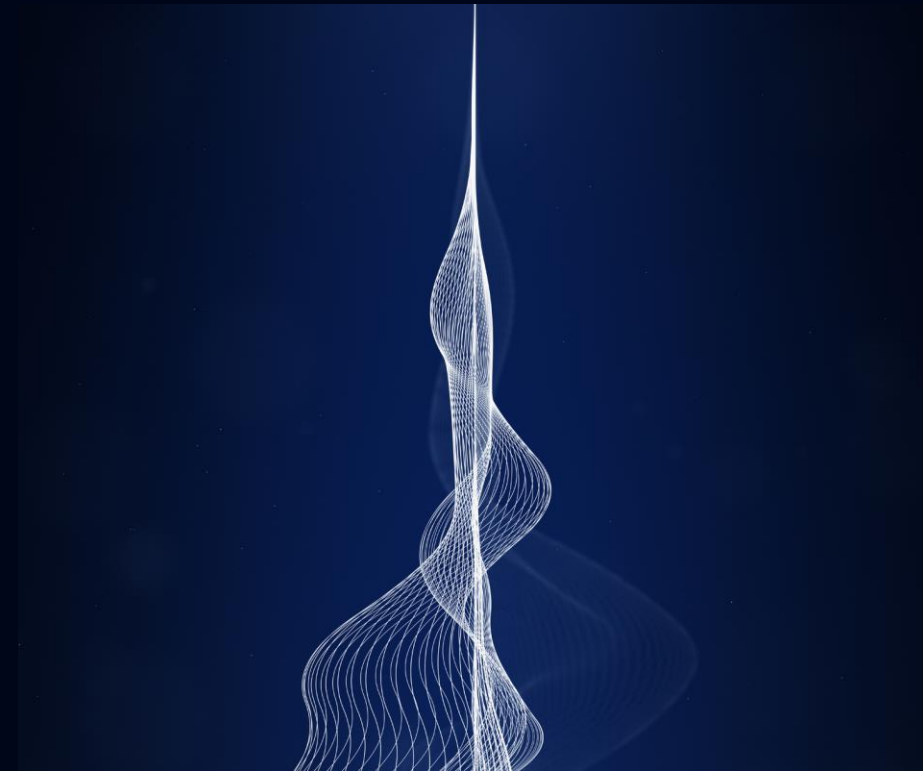
First, they notice fluctuations in their own moment-to-moment vibe, and given they understand what causes this, surface problems swiftly and nip them in the bud early. Second, a new-found understanding of how anyone creates their experience of life, sheds new light on the opportunity or problem they're solving for. Groups see what's at the root cause of so many of the challenges facing governments and businesses everywhere.

Engaging with this question is useful as an innovation team forms or where an existing one falters (or fails) and is looking to start afresh; from a new beginning.

### *iv. What makes magic, game-changing moments show up?*

Good solutions become superior ones when tested in different environments. They emerge out of paying close attention to people's lived experiences. Uber for example disrupted the taxi sector worldwide by observing the magic customers felt in the 10 seconds it takes to order a cab, rather than hail one, and the delight they took in not having to spend 5 seconds haggling over a tip when the ride was complete. The value is in those 15 seconds, which all their clever algorithms support.

In paying attention to others' lived experiences of a new idea, innovation teams often suffer from confirmation bias. They see what they've pre-conceived, or only hear what they're already attached to because it meets some other agenda they're working on. This question helps them mitigate such very human risks! It's useful during the testing and implementation phases of a project.



### *v. How do you build your capacity to bring out more teams' potential to innovate?*

Our vision is simple: to help leaders be an even greater force for good through unlocking stakeholders' potential to innovate. We believe they will need their own internal capacity to do this: in the form of champions, enablers, facilitators, sounding boards, critical friends, designers of meetings and innovation events. This question addresses how.

We tailor-make internal programmes for clients based on the previous experience of participants. Some for example are seasoned change agents whereas others are starting out. Each programme has the neuroscience-and-philosophy-based understanding of how humans create experience at its core. Participants learn from working on real-life issues, with our support initially, as an integral part of their programme.

This question is useful to explore when setting up a new change / transformation capability or looking to redirect the efforts of your current one.



## 10. About us

The Accelerating Potential To Innovate Initiative is a collaboration between three firms. We have worked in the transformation and development space for many years.

We came together during the Coronavirus lockdown. We spoke to leaders, entrepreneurs, investors, furloughed and non-furloughed employees, supply chain members, and more. In their reflective and somewhat concerned vibe, one question was common: 'if not this then what?' It struck us as significant. It seems people's visceral responses to the pandemic provoked deeper inquiry into environmental and social issues too.

We felt compelled to do what we can to help.

How became clear quickly. Now is the time to innovate on the way we innovate. Time to bring out latent potential and transform the vibe in the space between those searching for superior, lasting solutions.



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THE MINDSET DIFFERENCE

 the vibrant company

**zoom**  
CREATES