



**START-UP
ENTERPRISES**

The Blues-Print for Innovation

January 2026

Structure, collaboration, reading the audience

Goals for tonight's segment



What's the connection between music and innovation?

What you will get from tonight's talk:

- How to identify the bad structures that kill great ideas
- Why you need collaborators and how to pick the right ones
- How to change your focus from “your product/service” to “providing a solution to your customer's problem”

Improvisational music is a great metaphor for innovation:

- Both require a blend of discipline, creativity and risk-taking
- I'll provide examples, using music to illustrate my points

My background: Business, Innovation, Music

- Founder & CEO – four startups with Harvard Medical School MDs
- CEO of publicly traded company, (HK exchange) – turnaround
- Various executive positions
- Mentor to > 100 companies and high-growth entrepreneurs: MIT's Venture Mentoring Service, Pipeline Entrepreneurs

- Princeton (neuroendocrinology), MIT Sloan MSM (MBA + thesis)
- Author: *The Start-Up Starter Kit*; International industry speaker
- Two issued patents
- After hours: Performing musician
- Volunteer musician – homeless shelters



Innovation, like improvisation, is a skill set

1

You may not have developed that skill set - yet

2

You will make mistakes while you are learning those skills

3

You'll get better at it the more you do it

4

Make your plans allowing for a few mistakes. (called "pivots.")



Nancy

Classically trained, very skilled, perfect pitch – great asset to the band

I guess you'd better teach me how to improvise...

Three pillars of innovation

1 Totally understand the structure – in the market and within your company

2

3

4

Structure: in the marketplace

Easily overlooked → fatal



Major food company – successful line of soups

Decided to promote consumer health

Built new line of products, clinical trials – it worked

Products: sold in refrigerated section of stores

Didn't understand supply-chain – refrigerated

Had no contacts with buyers for refrigerated →

Didn't know how to deliver it

Didn't know who would buy it

FAIL!

(I made the same mistake with Regain...)



The take-away for founders

Understand the entire chain of steps that run from “your idea” to “money in your bank”

That includes manufacturing, distributing, promoting, selling, billing, collecting and more

Structure: with corporate partners

Easily overlooked → fatal



Major CPG company – Fortune 50

CEO: innovate internally as well as outsourcing!

But: thousands of veteran employees intensely trained in old ways, designed to lower risk

- Stage-gate review processes
- Needed approvals everywhere from people who were deeply uncomfortable with risk
- Financial hurdles incompatible with innovation

FAIL!



Structure: for intrapreneurship

Innovation inside a company



Major healthcare insurer – Top 5 in market
Decided “We need innovative new products”
Assembled a group to do this - talked with me

- Who’s in the group? Any innovations?
- Who do you report to? Boss ever innovated?

Smart, talented, had not acquired the skill set

NO THANKS

Sidebar: Dinner with the Russians...



Structure: Someone who did it right E

Lockheed: get them off-campus, go fast

Lockheed Martin Aircraft Design, circa 1940
Airforce: we need a jet fighter – immediately
Engineers moved off-site into smelly bldg –
Skunk Works – walled off, closed to ~ everyone
143 days later: Lockheed Shooting Star – first
jet fighter used by USAAF in World War II
Tradition continues; trademarked by Lockheed
“... a group within an organization with a lot of
autonomy, unhampered by bureaucracy...”
SUCCESS!

The take-aways for corporate innovation

Understand the backgrounds, habits and mind-sets of your corporate structure

If the mold won't support innovation, either say, "No," or break the mold

Three pillars of innovation

- 1** Totally understand the structure – in the market and within your company
- 2** Pick the right collaborators
Your team is everything
- 3**
- 4**



Salem Beer Works

Loud, brightly lit, no one was there to hear the music

Gentlemen, let's just jam → terrible note → now what?



What just happened?

- “Mistake” led to “improvisation”
- Now it’s no longer a mistake (feature, not a bug)
- We accidentally captured a disinterested audience
- “Just a gig” became “That was fun”

What made us good collaborators?

- Skilled – knew our instruments and many songs →
DOMAIN EXPERTISE
- More important: we could listen as well as play → team players
- Not afraid to take chances → non-negotiable for innovation
- Didn't quit after 1st mistake, rolled with dubious notes
[example: glue]
- Willing to declare “This has gone far enough. Let's move on.”

What do you want in your collaborators?

- Caution: favorite founder mistake – trying to do it all yourself
- You want collaborators who complement your strengths
- Said differently: They'll happily do the stuff that you could do but somehow don't ever do
- You trust them
 - When they say, "Cheer up – we'll figure this out."
 - When they say, "Look – you're going down the wrong road here."
- You get stuff done – and hold each other accountable for that

Three pillars of innovation

- 1** Totally understand the structure – in the market and within your company
- 2** Pick the right collaborators
Your team is everything
- 3** **Read the audience - know your customers, understand their problems**
- 4**

Examples: music & commerce

Who are they and what do they want?



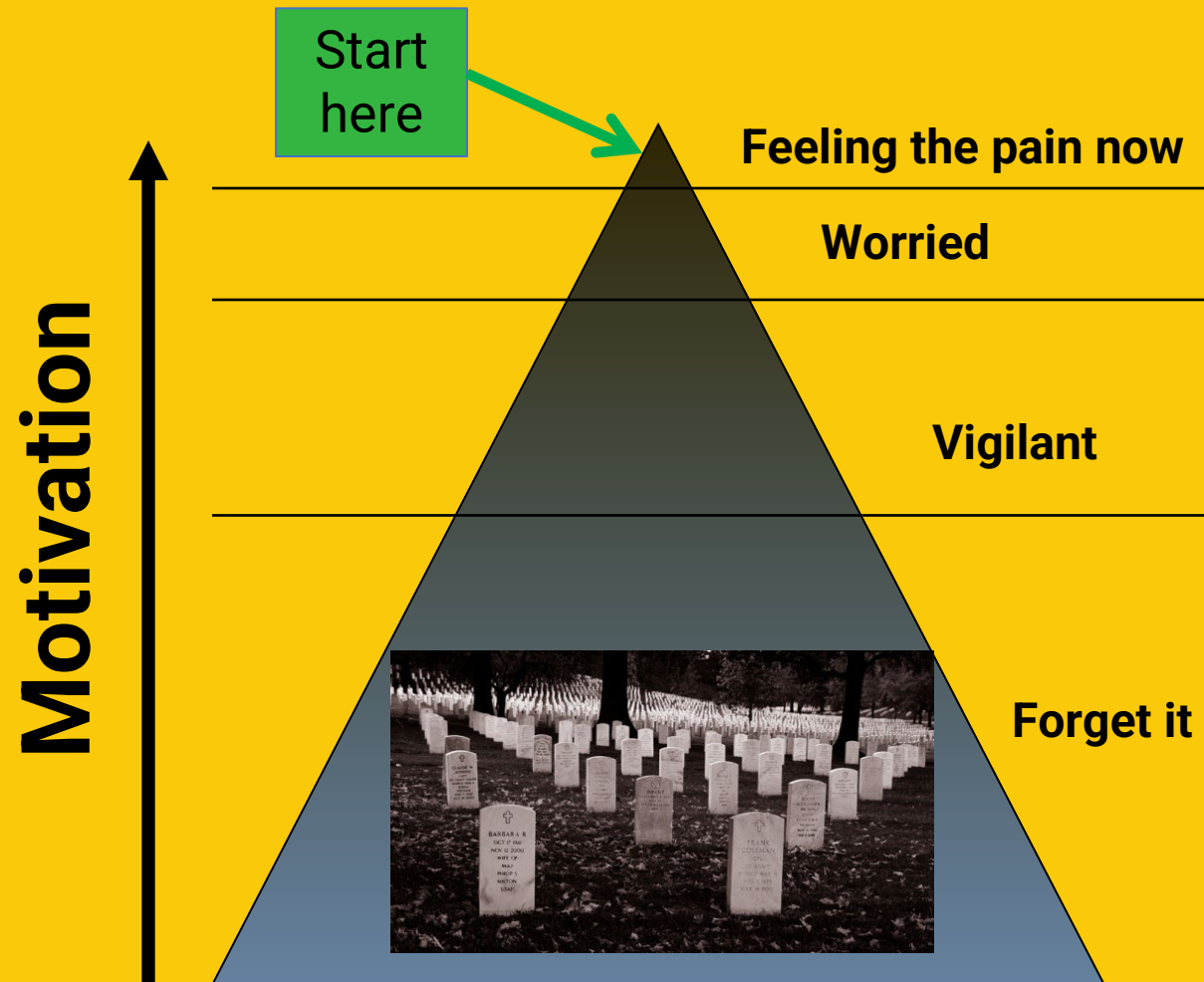
- Club owner, pursued by lots of bands
 - “We’re a great band!”
 - “We pull a great crowd, and we’re easy to work with”
- Testing weight-loss product: mall in Springfield, MA
 - Low glycemic index carbohydrates, prevents hyperinsulinemia
 - You’ll lose weight without ever feeling hungry
- Re-positioning tofu - Mabel
 - Healthy Asian diet
 - “Like chicken” – needs spices, flavors, recipes
 - Chef → Wal-Mart



Take-aways for every innovator

- 1** You're not selling a **PRODUCT**, and you're not selling a **SERVICE**
- 2** You're selling a **SOLUTION** to a someone's **PROBLEM**
- 3** And it's a problem that they will cheerfully **PAY YOU TO SOLVE**
- 4** Therefore: solve a problem profitably for a large audience – build a company

My view: market segmentation



The point

- Figure out who will find your offering to be both important and unique (or at least, better...) ← your audience
- Figure out how to find them, tell them about your SOLUTION to their PROBLEM
- Take their order

Three pillars of innovation

- 1** Totally understand the structure – in the market and within your company
- 2** Pick the right collaborators
Your team is everything
- 3** Read the audience - know your customers, understand their problems
- 4** (Find some good luck...)

Your turn

Questions? Comments?

Comments?

**Want to stay
in touch?**



The Blues-Print for Innovation

Master the structure

Pick the right collaborators

Read the audience – solve a problem
for your customers



THANK YOU

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