


Chapter 1

The Cost of Cheap Insight:

A Proposal to Innovate Leadership Through Deep Learning

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ABSTRACT

Many hope that leaders will be able to bring new insights to advance their organizational goals. Those ‘Aha! Moments’ are often illusive, however. Far too often, leaders ground decisions in cheap insight rather than develop and use systems that generate genuine insight. In contrast to cheap insight, genuine insight costs time, money, and resources. Genuine insight is costly insight. In this chapter, I will explore the idea of cheap versus costly insight, identifying three key characteristics of insight that define each: (1) deep understanding of the problem-space, (2) strategic insight generation, and (3) creative insight use. Then, using case examples drawn from both industry and education, I will describe how leaders can enact innovative leadership through deep learning by leaning into the costs of genuine insight. Based on these examples and the literature, I propose that the design-based research model best supports the characteristics of costly insight and has the potential to accelerate the instance of ‘Aha! Moments’ that drive meaningful change.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a general (and very real) sense that the world is moving faster today than it did even a couple decades ago. While Moore's law applies specifically to technology, rapid acceleration in the economy has contributed to a sense of urgency to innovate, improve, and "win" in our personal, business, and communal lives (Friedman, 2016). This macro-level acceleration and subsequent micro-level anxiety to "do more and faster" (Newport, 2023) have led some scholars to suggest that today's institutions should not be "built to last" but rather "built to change" (Lawler & Worley, 2006).

Building institutions to change is a paradigm shift in organizational management. In the past, leaders created and managed organizations that were built to last. They designed organizations around principles of stability, consistency, and efficiency (Lawler & Worley, 2006). For example, an organization might make a particular product – like reusable plastic containers for storing food and other items. The goal was to make a quality product at an affordable price to customer needs. If you are the Tupperware company, you not only make an amazing product that last but empower women in the economy through "Tupperware parties," cementing your position in the market for decades to come. This single-focus concept and production no longer seems to be sustainable today; Tupperware filed for Chapter 11 (bankruptcy) in 2024, citing rise product costs, reduced demand, and ineffective online marketing (Selyukh & Marx, 2024). "Building to last" only lasts so long.

Lawler and Worley (2006) argue that today's organizations need to build to change – to embrace transformation, learn quickly, and stay aligned with market trends. This new paradigm requires organizations to innovate in continuous and systematic ways that enable agile adjustments to the macro-level accelerations Friedman (2016) describes. In such a paradigm, insight is the currency of innovation, which leaders are responsible for managing. Leaders are responsible for developing systems of innovation which rely on both being insightful about their own organization and being able to draw on insights from other sectors to sustain innovation. In an organization that is built to change, leaders play a critical role in managing insights to support and sustain continuous and systematic innovation.

Too often, though, organizations are not prepared to support continuous and systematic innovation. Short-term performance metrics (often related to efficiency) are often prioritized over organizational systems that can sustain continuous, systematic innovation (DeGrandis, 2022; Lawler & Worley, 2006). When short-term performance metrics are preferenced, insights intended to develop innovation and growth often become a future expense for the company. As this chapter will explore, prioritizing short-term performance metrics leads to **cheap insight** – "Aha! Moments" that confirm leaders' suspicions about a problem and are "purchased"

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