Breeding a Culture of Experience Innovation: A Case Study of Co-Existing Values

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Abstract

In the past decade, consumer spending on experiences relative to material goods has increased dramatically. Despite the vast quantity of innovation literature in business, much of the empirical research focuses on new product development in the manufacturing context. In contrast to the traditional product/service paradigm, innovation in experience firms is collective, incremental, and ongoing. An updated perspective on developing and maintaining organizational capacities for continuous innovation in the experience economy is needed. This study employed an organizational ethnography approach to examine a zoological attraction's culture through rich description of the firm's operations at varying levels. Data was collected in three phases and included front of the house and back of the house observations, interviews and conversations with 42 employees and 5 senior managers, attendance at new hire orientation and senior management meetings, and review of internal documents. The summary findings are presented as a case study, providing a rare back of the house view of the workplace practices of an organization that espouses experience innovation as its overriding objective. Important themes are revealed to include coalescing the past, present, and future, balancing cooperation and competition, trust and transparency, and business and emotion. Findings also highlight that in experience-centric organizations, the core experience serves as the lever for innovation activities and design decisions.

Keywords: experience economy, innovation, organizational culture, absorptive capacity, organizational ethnography, purpose driven organization, innovation capacities.

Introduction

Alvin Toffler, in his book *Future Shock* (1970), was the first to envision experience industries as emerging sectors of the future economy. Pine and Gilmore (1998) extended this notion by discussing experience as a distinct economic offering. The authors' work created extensive interest in adopting the principles necessary to transition from a service to an experience economy. Central to the economic theory posited by Pine and Gilmore is that services have become commoditized, so competitive advantage has to come in the way of experiential offerings that engage customers in unique and memorable ways. A key implication of the experience economy paradigm is the need for experience firms to continuously innovate and differentiate their offerings.

Despite the vast quantity of innovation business literature, much of the empirical research comes from the new product development context in manufacturing. Innovation in the modern marketplace is considered a human-

centric, organization-wide challenge. In experience centric firms, innovation is collective, incremental, and ongoing. Managing innovation requires ongoing efforts to encourage and support creativity from people within and outside the firm as well as cultivating organizational strategy, culture and procedures that can turn novel ideas into enhanced customer offerings and improved business performance (Kindstrom & Kowalski, 2014). Contemporary innovation frameworks in business emphasize the importance of aligning culture, mission, core values, and competitive strategies (Allahar, 2018).

In the past decade, consumer spending on unique experiences (like vacations and concerts) relative to consumer spending on material goods (like vehicles and clothing) has increased dramatically. In the United States, a recent national survey of the millennial generation (age 18-34), 78% (n=507) indicated they would rather spend their money on experiences than purchasing desirable things. Thus, organizations with capacities for continuous experience innovation are well positioned to take advantage of the experiential nature of the millennial generation. An updated perspective on developing and maintaining organizational capacities for continuous innovation in the experience economy is needed.

In experience organizations leaders do not have direct control over customer perceptions or employee behavior (Sundbo, 2015). Cultivating a compelling innovation-oriented culture may be one of the few influence tactics available for senior managers. Since stronger organizational cultures exert greater influence on individual and group behavior (Trefry, 2006), organizations competing in the experience economy would do well to foster an innovation oriented, customer experience focused organizational culture. The salient question becomes, what does this organizational culture look and feel like?

This study employed an organizational ethnography approach to examine a zoological attraction's culture through rich description of the firm's operations at varying levels. The summary findings are presented as a case study, providing a rare back of the house view of the workplace practices of an organization that espouses experience innovation as its overriding objective.

Theoretical Foundations
Organizational Capacities for Innovation
Creativity has been defined as the production of new and useful ideas developed by an individual or small group (Amabile, 1988). In business, innovation expands this definition to include both the development and implementation of new and novel ideas. Thus, while a creative individual or group may generate many new and novel ideas, for any of these to be defined as an innovation, it must be combined with successful introduction to the consumer (Garcia & Calatone, 2002). At the organization level, this involves both idea generation (exploration)

and idea implementation (exploitation). An enduring theme in the management of innovation literature is that organizations are challenged to develop their capacities for exploration while simultaneously exploiting their existing resources. March (1991) recognized that exploitation is more conducive to short-term results in organizations while exploration is necessary to achieve long-term success. The inherent tension brought about by trying to divide organizational attention between exploration and exploitation activities was labeled *the innovator's paradox* in the business literature (Christensen, 1997). The author suggested firms create subdivisions that would focus either on exploring new (disruptive) products and technologies or focus only on exploiting the firm's (sustaining) products and technologies.

Research and development divisions familiar to manufacturing firms are inconsistent with the dispersed and incremental nature of innovation in experience-centric organizations. As the economy shifted and the traditional product/service paradigm became less relevant, research focused on the ways organizations could pursue the need to balance the old and the new for continuous innovation. Innovation researchers use ambidexterity as a metaphor to describe organizations that are equally proficient at exploration and exploitation activities. Structural ambidexterity is suggested as a means by which organizations can "simultaneously pursue both incremental and radical change" (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996, p. 24). The authors argue that leaders can influence innovation by structuring departments to focus on either innovation or execution. Contextual ambidexterity refers to the behavioral capacity to demonstrate both alignment and adaptability activities simultaneously (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). Unlike structural ambidexterity, which emphasizes either/or as a mechanism for managing the inherent tension of innovation, contextual ambidexterity promotes the dual capacity (both/and) within the organization. Senior leaders, then, are responsible for cultivating a context that "encourages individuals to make their own choices as to how they divide their time between alignment and adaptability activities" (p. 211).

The related concepts of absorptive capacity and knowledge management are considered important innovation enabling capacities in contemporary organizations (Leal-Rodriguez et al, 2015). Senge (1990) popularized the notion of the learning organization as a metaphor for ongoing innovation in businesses. Cohen & Levinthal (1990) argued that absorptive capacity is the organization's ability to identify, assimilate and exploit knowledge from the environment. Other scholars (Mowery & Oxley, 1995) conceptualized absorptive capacity as the spectrum of organizational capabilities that enable companies to both effectively manage externally derived knowledge and implement it in daily routine tasks. Zahra and George (2002) distinguished absorptive capacity as a firm's ability to develop and refine the routines that facilitate combining existing knowledge with newly acquired and assimilated knowledge. Their approach

offered a novel perspective. *Potential absorptive capacity* was conceptualized as an organization's ability to acquire and continually assimilate new knowledge sourced from the external environment. *Realized absorptive capacity* was distinguished as the capacity of the organization to transform and exploit the incoming knowledge. These authors suggested that both potential and realized absorptive capacity was necessary for modern firms to create competitive advantage through innovation.

Enabling Innovation Capacities in Experience-Centric Firms
Reframing absorptive capacity within the experience industry context provides a unique lens to examine workplace practices that enable organization-wide innovation that is collective, incremental, and ongoing. A recent empirical study examined the context specific leadership practices that enabled organizational innovation in the hospitality and tourism industry. Three capacities the author labeled *Refresh*, *Energize*, and *Connect*, were significant predictors of innovation outputs and improved business performance (Sipe, 2016). The *Refresh* capacity comprised leadership practices that broadened the view of the business and the pool of ideas for incremental change. These included encouraging employees to visit best practice organizations and share findings with others and bringing in new perspectives to challenge assumptions and business as usual (Sipe, 2016). In experience firms, these practices may also enable potential absorptive capacity through perspective taking. Fostering self-efficacy, through practices like perspective taking, is critical to experience companies' innovativeness, underpinning the ability to engage in exploration (Grant & Berry, 2011). New perspectives enhance employees' professional growth, enabling them to initiate more innovative actions in response to customer needs and set higher goals for themselves in their guest interactions (Leal-Rodriguez et. al., 2015).

The *Energize* capacity from the Sipe study (2016) illustrated the role senior managers play in aligning employee passions with projects to implement improvement ideas. They included providing ways for employees to contribute to the firm's purpose beyond day-to-day job requirements and matching employees with work assignments based on their interests and passions. Innovation activities are more ad hoc and dispersed in modern organizations than product companies. Employees engaged in experience-centric firms operate in a boundary-spanning role between the firm and its customers and are intimately involved in the implementation of the firms' strategic initiatives, serving as either catalysts or barriers to new ideas and improvements of the guest experience (Sundbo et al.2015). They are also critical to create customers' awareness of new experiential offerings and in their adoption. The leadership practices comprising the *Energize* dimension, then, serve to enable realized absorptive capacity in experience-centric firms.

The most compelling finding from the study, according to the author, was the importance of the leadership practices that involved developing a shared understanding of an experience company's unique guest experience. The practices that made up the factor labeled *Connect,* had the largest impact on organizational innovation outcome variables (Sipe, 2016). According to the author, rethinking and reimagining the collection of offerings that comprise the essence of the unique experience is where innovation starts. Continuous enhancement of the guest experience begins with a deep understanding of what makes it special and valuable. What memories are created for these guests? What is the essence of the value as perceived by the guest? Best practices tend to be easily copied in the hospitality and tourism context, where benchmarking is easy, and customer switching costs are usually minimal. "The implication is that differentiation then, requires a commitment to dive deeply into conversations about the unique aspects of the total experience offered by the organization" (pg. 82).

Organizational Purpose and Culture

Other research has highlighted shared purpose as a key enabler of innovation at the organizational level. Amabile (1988) emphasized the importance of purpose as a motivator for creativity and innovation, for example. At the individual level, she found that people were more creative under conditions conducive to intrinsic motivation. "Domain relevant skills and creativity relevant skills determine what one is capable of doing, but the presence or absence of intrinsic motivation determines what that individual actually does (p. 157)". She argued that the same held true at the organizational level, identifying a compelling vision as the motivation to innovate. A meta-study of innovation capacity in the social sector called the connection to purpose *mission clarity* and outlined three ways it enabled organizational innovation. It made idea generation more relevant to the organization's goals. Common mental models lowered the hurdles of communication and diffusion of the ideas. And stronger connections to the purpose meant lower levels of push-back for new ideas and change (Seelos & Mair, 2012).

In experience-centric organizations, the core experience serves as the lever for innovation activities and design decisions. In the emerging field of experience design, for example, holistic experience design links the guests' subjective interpretation of the core experience at all levels with the strategic direction of the company (Tussyadiah, 2014). Pine and Gilmore (2014) extended the notion of core experience as a driver of experience innovation in an article discussing the implications of their theory. The authors contend that authenticity has become the new consumer sensibility. What this means is that consumers make purchasing decisions based on how well the offerings conform to their own self-image. Hence, companies in the experience economy will need to enhance the organization's capacity for *rendering authenticity.* To render authenticity with

customers the organization first needs to understand its own identity by asking questions like "what is the essence from which all our values flow, and what is the self to which we and our offerings must be true?" (pg. 29).

Viewpoints on organizational identity and culture are numerous and varying. Some view culture as something the organization *has.* For example*,* Scott and Bruce (1994) operationalized a culture of innovation with an instrument comprised of factors intended to measure vision, participative safety, support, and task orientation. Another approach views culture as something the organization is—the organization and culture are indistinguishable. This "root metaphor" (Smirchich, 1983) approach is more descriptive in nature and identifies the meaning connected with the culture. Using an anthropological approach, the richness of an organizational culture is identified by shared cognition, shared symbols and unconscious processes (Driskill & Brenton, 2005). A definition provided by Ogbonna & Lloyd (2002) is consistent with experience-centric viewpoints. Culture is the "collective sum of beliefs, values, meanings, and assumptions that are shared by a social group and that help to shape the ways in which they respond to each other and their external environment" (pg. 12). Schein (2004) has been the most influential in studies of organizational culture in the business literature. He distinguished three levels of organizational culture. Artifacts are easily identifiable things that one might see or hear when confronted with a new environment. Values are the goals, norms, and principles held by the organization. At the deepest level are assumptions. These are the unconscious beliefs, perceptions, and feelings of the organization that are a source of action.

Research Methodology

Organizational culture is a complex phenomenon that lends itself to examination at varying levels. The richness of various cultural components is not likely to be revealed by just one or two pieces of information. Attempts to find patterns using multiple sources must be balanced by the inevitable time constraints and accessibility issues in business organizations. This study's main method of inquiry was cultural analysis, adapting ethnographic methods to analyze an organization's culture through rich description of the firm's operations at varying levels. Characteristics of the interpretive ethnographic approach in business are (Ybema *et al*, 2009):

- it combines field work methods of observing, conversing, and reading
- it is context sensitive
- it represents multiple voices
- it involves meaning making and interpretation
- it requires heightened researcher self-awareness

The study's research site, a non-profit attraction located in the United States was purposely selected because of its reputation as an innovator within the zoological community as well as its global status as a tourist attraction. Although the park has operated for 100 years, senior managers say their internal mantra is "we're on a path toward constant evolution of the guest experience." Given this study's focus, the analysis of the organization's culture was viewed through the lens of innovation in the experience economy. Hence, the research aimed at identifying the elements of organizational culture that enable its capacity for ongoing innovation of a unique guest experience. Figure 1 summarizes the methodology.

Data Collection

Data was collected in three phases. In the first phase, I attended the research site as a visitor and documented the experience from my perspective as a park guest. During each park visit, I created an experience map, a chronological summary of my activities, interactions, and memories listed in order of occurrence alongside times of the day. During the second phase, I observed the company's hiring orientation, attended two idea generation sessions, and sat in on a senior management meeting. In the third and last phase of data collection, I conducted interviews with the park's director/general manager and four other senior level managers at the attraction. Throughout the three phases of data collection, I was given mostly unfettered access to all employees, both front of the house and behind the scenes. This afforded me the opportunity to have short, informal discussions with employees of various lengths of tenure, levels, and departments.

Data collection was facilitated by customized tools I developed to organize field notes, descriptions, quotes, and interpretations. For park visits as a guest, I adopted techniques used in experience design research called customer journey mapping (Zomerdick & Voss, 2010) to document my guest experience. *The Experience Map* was helpful during the park visits to record what I perceived to be innovative elements of the guest experience. I could reference these observations when talking with employees and managers. For example, I noted on one day's experience map that being privy to the back-area work of the elephant keepers was a touch point that made me feel like an insider from the guest perspective. I was able to reference this description during informal chats with employees and interviews with managers. Rather than asking them to "tell me about how your organization goes about innovating the guest experience," I could begin with a front of the house observation, prompting them to talk about how this component of the guest experience, and other innovations, came to occur.

The Cultural Analysis Guide was used throughout the workplace observation as a framework to support cultural analysis. This tool was adapted from the culture

audit created by Testa & Sipe (2013). Ten areas of investigation, supported by the organizational culture literature, are outlined in this tool. They include physical characteristics, customs and norms, ceremonies and events, rules and policies, measurement and accountability, leader behavior, rewards and recognition, training and development, communication, and structure. The guide, and its accompanying questions, offered helpful prompts for informal chats, and it served as an organizing tool for observations, quotes, and interpretations.

The Interview Guide framed the conversational interviews conducted during the last phase of the data collection process. Sections of the guide comprised open-ended questions about innovation at the organization to include strategy, culture, idea generation and implementation, processes, and outcomes. These broad, open-ended questions, allowed for each of the interview subjects to provide input from their own operating perspective while encouraging responses related to the role of the senior management team in experience innovation and organizational culture. In addition, during the course of the interviews, I was provided five documents—an email sent by the park's new general manager to the senior management staff, the company's performance appraisal form, the strategic plan, an organizational chart, and a document about the employee suggestion program.
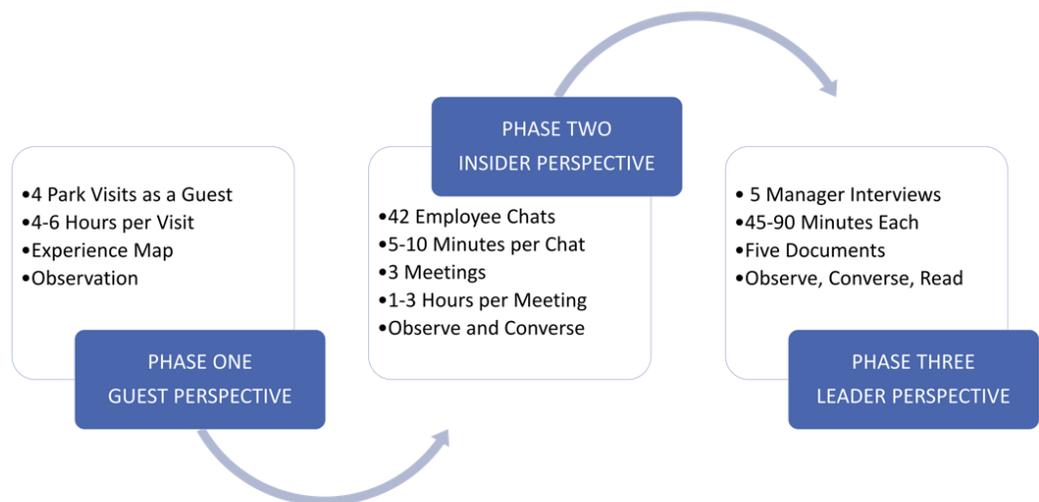

PHASE TWO
INSIDER PERSPECTIVE

- 4 Park Visits as a Guest
- 4-6 Hours per Visit
- Experience Map
- Observation

PHASE ONE
GUEST PERSPECTIVE

- 42 Employee Chats
- 5-10 Minutes per Chat
- 3 Meetings
- 1-3 Hours per Meeting
- Observe and Converse

- 5 Manager Interviews
- 45-90 Minutes Each
- Five Documents
- Observe, Converse, Read

PHASE THREE
LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Figure 1. Phases, data sources, and tools.

Analysis and Synthesis
When using qualitative methods of analysis, the researcher becomes the primary tool, and qualitative researchers use a variety of methods to analyze their data. In this study, I adopted the broad schema offered by Glesne (2006) as a guide for categorizing, summarizing, and interpreting the collection of

qualitative data. Due to their complexity, organizational cultures are not easily revealed (Schein, 2004), so my approach to the analysis was to mine the levels of cultural data for deeply held assumptions revealed through the guest experience, mimicked to some extent in the employee experience, aligned with the streams of literature guiding this inquiry, and useful in some way to scholars and practitioners. If the data made its way through this process, then I would have some level of comfort that the patterns would serve to "expand the range of interpretations available to the research consumer" (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 194).

First, I read through all of the data in its raw form and highlighted what might be called meaning units (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Second, I organized the meaningful data using the three data tools outlined earlier in the data collection section. The third step was to develop categories based on frequency and depth, as well as conforming to the study's unit of analysis—experience innovation. The next level of analysis involved creating theme templates. A category's evidence was summarized in three columns—front of the house, back of the house, and commentary/support. If the category had ample evidence across the columns, it became a working theme. A partial theme template, for the data category of transparency is provided in Table 1. Finally, the theme templates were synthesized into a case study, summarizing the patterns evidenced by data, in a narrative illustrative of this organization's culture of innovation. Charmaz (2006) describes sorting, diagramming, and integrating memos as strategies of theoretical sampling. Her depictions of these inter-related processes are consistent with the pattern-seeking activities used with the qualitative data.

Table 1. Sample theme template synthesizing data around the theme of transparency/

Front of the House	Back of the House	Commentary/Support
• Seeing inside the back areas on the tour bus • Tour guide talking with keeper about her own experience at Backstage Pass • Webcams for pandas • Signage – get an inside look • Messy leftover event easily seen by guests	• Wild ideas online forum for suggestions are posted and answered by managers in blog form • Chat with volunteer about authenticity of the experience • GM interview regarding hybrid nature of guests- need to have manufactured and authentic	• Unlike other theme parks who want to sterilize behind the scenes • Mystique vs. involvement • Transparency and trust connection – Gen Y literature

Summary Findings
Coalescing the Past, Present and Future

A large earth-toned sign hangs on the right-side wall of the entry plaza to the world-famous California attraction, reminding visitors that the park was founded in 1916. The worn graphic depicts the park's founder atop an elephant. On the opposite wall of the plaza hangs another sign, similar in size, but much more complex in its design and vibrant in its color scheme. The multi-hued graphic interweaves a variety of exotic animals and greenery onto a rich canvas banner atop a staffed ticket booth. On this side of the entry plaza, visitors are given the opportunity to purchase a unique behind the scenes experience allowing up-close connections with the park's wildlife. The co-existence of the park's past and future, celebration of the old and the new, are evident throughout the attraction's guest experience and key to the organizational culture.

Some of these seemingly contradictory artifacts seem intentionally paired, like the pay phone booth located within twenty feet of a recycle bin available for guests to discard their old cell phones for recycling. Other evidence of the old blending with the new is subtle, like the contrasts in language used to honor donors on dated signage and the verbiage integrated into newer exhibit art where contributors' own words are integrated. As expected for a facility almost one hundred years old, some of the animal enclosures are primitive, small, and cage-like. Newer facilities are expansive, and boast state-of-the-art design, husbandry equipment, and technology. As interpreters introduce guests to the animals on guided tours, it is interesting to note that the older animals tend to have names like Victor and Orson, while those animals born recently are introduced with more exotic, culturally sounding names like Taraj and Karroo. When asked about the different sounding names, one exhibit volunteer supported the notion that "everything evolves, and culturally sounding names are in right now: they're more contemporary."

The theme of balancing the old and the new is evident behind the scenes as well. The board of the non-profit attraction, as well as the senior management team responsible for day-to-day park operations, comprises a balance of young and old members, some boasting tenure of more than forty years, and others hired within the past two years. When asked if this blending of the tenure is intentional, one senior manager commented that the board make-up had changed dramatically in the past ten years due to natural attrition, but the senior management team at the park looks much different now than it did just five years ago because of an "intentional strategy to bring in new perspectives from other segments of the hospitality industry—people with equal levels of passion for our product, but more systematic approaches to the business side of things."

Remember the roar

Passion for animals, conservation, and education are values shared by the majority of the employees at this attraction. These values are key to the organization's brand identity and are prevalent components of the park's marketing strategy as well as internal training and communication efforts. Employees throughout the park are happy to share pride-filled testimonials as world famous providers of animal preservation, regardless of whether they work directly with the animals. Of the forty-two informal conversations I had with non-management employees and volunteers, encountered during six weeks of observations in the park and behind the scenes, only six of the comments recounted to me were unfavorable. The majority of employees offered passionate testimonials similar to Barbara, a food service employee with seven years of service who gushed, "I love telling friends and family where I work. I feel such a sense of pride knowing that I am making a difference in animal education."

Innovation and change is not always met favorably, and those with passion and pride in the organization's legacy can pose the loudest opposition to unexpected change. Tom, a member of the executive team with 15 years of service, shared the following story:

We learned the hard way about the importance of communication when it comes to changing long-standing traditions. Some employees were not so happy to find out about our name change at our other property, and they used the power of new media to quickly blog about their roaring displeasure about the change. Our well-planned and well-timed media plan was quickly overshadowed by the passionate, but misdirected energies of these employees who were not happy at all. Their passionate opposition became the story. I don't know why we were so surprised, and we talked about it afterward. We celebrate longevity in our organization. We hold ceremonies for length of service and write stories about our traditions. We see it as a good thing. Our communication plan should have started internally. We learned a valuable culture lesson, and we now have what we call ROAR, which is all about honoring our values while paying it forward.

ROAR is a cornerstone of employee orientation, aptly named for the collection of core organizational values. An upcoming employee climate survey will be entitled ROAR Back.

Stability and change

The park's executive team talks about the connection between honoring their core values and innovating the guest experience as key to their ongoing innovation strategy. A slide at one of the management team meetings I observed referenced a quote from Jim Collins (2002) reminding the attendees

that great organizations keep clear the difference between their core values (which never change) and operating strategies (which endlessly adapt to a changing world). After the meeting, I asked one of the more vocal managers to describe how this past/future connection helps move the park along the path toward an ever-changing guest experience. She replied that many of the employees feel a responsibility to stay current with best practices in animal care because of their reputation as world famous. Perhaps more important to ongoing innovation and change, she added: "It is our capacity to link to our legacy of successes, to leverage our world-famous foundation, that allows us to attract the most energetic minds, the newest ideas. Being world-renowned lets us use our longevity in pursuit of higher level thinking people passionate about the future of our industry".

It is tempting to dismiss the co-existence of old and new, past and present, stability and change, as simply a natural by-product of any organization that has been operating for almost one hundred years. In the case of this park, though, it appears to be at the core of what allows them to continuously innovate around the essence of their guest experience—conservation, wildlife preservation, and making a difference. As it says on one of the signs in this attraction's award-winning elephant exhibit, "what once was old is new again." The sign is intended to tap into the guest's desire to recycle. It also reminds visitors that one of the oldest facilities in the park has been replaced by this state-of-the-art habitat for elephants. The sign's sentiment may be precisely what stirs the internal firm's passion to remember the ROAR and make a difference.

Balancing Collaboration and Competition
Within the current operating context, the organization seems to have struck the right balance between collaboration and competition, structure and flexibility, and transparency and new ideas; all anchored by trust. Evidence of these co-existing values are illustrated throughout the guest experience, articulated in employee programs and processes, and aligned with the organization's performance appraisal system.

Structure and flexibility
Employees were happy to share their opinions about some of the programs and procedures the organization provides to encourage idea generation and enhance performance. Molly, who personalized her uniform with animal pins, described the *Wild Ideas* program, an online forum where anyone can post an idea for improving the park. What is "great about it is that you get to see your idea and the manager's answer to the idea pretty much within a couple of days." This blog-oriented idea-sharing forum is really just a starting point for the idea implementation process. A team of managers is responsible for transferring each idea to one of three places. Most ideas are sent to the appropriate member of the management team for a response to include plans (if any) to

address the idea. The idea may get forwarded to the *Tech Transfer* team, whose job it is to vet ideas that have potential to become patented innovations. Revenue ideas are forwarded to the *Entrepreneurial Council* whose mission is to generate new sales based on the core areas of expertise in the company. The combination of these three formal mechanisms for idea evaluation and implementation complement the flexibility afforded each department to improve the guest experience in their own ways and report those improvements as part of the *Lynx* Program.

Lynx is the name given to the organization's strategic management system that is aligned with the performance appraisal document. The document contains three sections, offering a combination of structure and flexibility. In the first section, three goals are selected from the drop-down list developed annually by the society board, and two additional goals are created for the employee. In the second section employees are appraised in six areas (30 items) comprising job knowledge, quality of work, professionalism, adaptability, teamwork, and interpersonal relations. The third section is a development plan where three customized objectives are outlined. Bruce, a tour guide sporting a well-trimmed beard and tattoos he described as tribal, gave the *Lynx* program good marks, especially what he described as the 2.0 version, where you could customize some of the annual goals. "I like that *Lynx* 2.0 includes our own objectives that my lead and I create in addition to the plan goals. It gets us all working on projects, keeps things moving along" were among his compliments.

Transparency and trust

Bruce was among the guides I interacted with during the five bus tours I took while visiting the attraction. Each tour guide drove the same route, each tour lasted 35 minutes, and each guide concluded the tour with the exact same phrase. Other than those shared elements, though, each experience was quite different. I noted the presence of the following themes, in personalized ways: 1) Using superlatives that positioned the attraction as the best (largest, biggest, oldest, first, rarest, tallest, youngest, biggest baby, and other firsts) 2) Pointing out the personal favorites of the particular interpreter (none of the favorites were shared) 3) Discussing partnerships around conservation by name 4) Recommending the opportunity to purchase the new behind the scenes experience (varied from mentioning it to raving about having done it) 5) Interacting with back of the house staff. The combination of structure and flexibility, as well as the blending of competition and collaboration was clearly demonstrated by the tours, but what struck me was the transparency of the experience. I mentioned to Lars, a lead in his thirties, who spoke during the new hire orientation I attended, how unusual I thought it was that we were able to see into the back areas during the bus tour, in contrast to some of the other well-known California attractions who take great pride in the hidden nature of their backstage goings on. Lars offered an inspired explanation, highlighting the

uniqueness of the park's experience and insight to the culture: "We're real here, animals are messy, we're not like Disney where you're supposed to feel transported to a fantasy world. We try to offer authentic experiences. That way you can go out and make a difference in the world.

When the tour guide engages with the elephant keeper on a personal level it certainly makes me feel like an insider, glimpsing the connections the employees have with the animals and deepening my own connections with the work of the organization. But the notion of transparency has implications beyond the domain of the guest experience.

Here's what we're doing-have a look

For an organization that displays animals in captivity, exposing guests to behind the scenes areas and activities builds trust. The treatment of the elephants is less likely to be a contentious issue when millions of guests are privy to the animal/keeper interactions. Transparency breeds trust. Trust is central to the park's mission. And trust inspires contributions. "People want to have their name and their dollars associated with state-of-the-art endeavors aimed at making a difference in the world," stated the park's senior marketing executive. Donors are critical to facility improvement and ongoing innovation for the non-profit animal attraction. Trust is central to harnessing the pride and passion of an organization teeming with employees deeply connected to the mission of the park. Based on conversations with the park's general manager, the near future will be characterized by "each manager upping their game, winning the hearts of the guests, and accelerating the pace of change as a team." The influence of the park's high-energy director, just two years into his tenure, who attests, "I am not a maintainer," will certainly continue to be felt throughout the culture.

The director's preference for action, "making sure my direct reports are juggling a lot of projects" is clear, but so is his commitment to trying and failing as a team. "As long as you're on board with the strategies, and you're trying to improve, I don't care if projects fail." He also recognizes his direct approach, while trustworthy, means he "needs to check in emotionally with the management team." He also makes himself visible to park employees during park rounds, soliciting improvement ideas in an informal way as well as holding structured forums each month. The managers I talked with concur that the competitive approach and energy the park director brings has been "an important part of refreshing us for the next generation experience."

Integration of Business and Emotion

The executive team at the non-profit attraction understands the importance of experience. The essence of their park's experience, conservation, wildlife preservation, and making a difference are central in decision-making and messaging. Like other non-profit organizations, employees are deeply connected

to the mission. Unlike some other non-profits, though, this organization embraces the business side of organization's like theirs in the business of experiences.

Sustaining financial growth

Evidence that business and emotion can co-exist is substantiated throughout the organization's culture. The attraction charges admission, but its non-profit status means contributions from private sources are an important funding source. Donors are cultivated and celebrated, through external media, special events, and graphics throughout the park. Core areas of expertise are leveraged as potential revenue sources. For example, the park's unique facilities and on-site food services staff are used for special events like corporate parties, weddings, and proms. Unique animal experiences are offered at premium prices for those patrons who desire specialty programs, camps, and up-close encounters. The focus of new idea programs like *Wild Ideas, Tech Transfer*, and the *Entrepreneurial Council*, are recent initiatives aimed at generating, evaluating, and implementing revenue enhancing and patent worthy innovations. Breeding financial stability is one of the values of the Roar program. Financial stability is communicated as supporting the central mission of the organization. One department head described this espoused value: "Most of us are here because of our desire to be altruistic. But we have a sense of urgency toward the greater good we can provide our extended family of animals. Fiscal responsibility allows us to make a difference. People find meaning beyond the numbers, but revenue generation is a path toward preserving wildlife and natural resources."

Tapping into emotions

The essence of the park's culture lies in the shared passion for wildlife preservation and conservation, but they support this passion by operating a world-class attraction that provides experiences for almost four million guests per year. They are governed by the same business fundamentals of their peers in the attractions industry, balancing initiatives in the product, customer, employee, and financial areas. Key to their balanced culture is the integration of business and emotion. Throughout the park, guests are reminded of the emotional nature of their business operation. Printed on the park map and posted on signs near the food services facilities, we are assured that the proceeds of our purchases go directly toward the society's efforts to save endangered wildlife and to fund conservation efforts. Executives don't abandon this emotional connection once they enter the boardroom either. Intangibility co-mingles with the operational excellence, prompting phrases like "we need to operate at the intersection of ration and passion" and "I consider myself a return on mission guy."

Conclusions

For many years, the predominant divisions of economic offerings have been goods and services. With the growing importance of intangible offerings and experiential consumption, the traditional product/service paradigm has become less relevant. Traditionally, innovation in business has been viewed through a sequential—ideas to outputs—lens. The experience industry context, with its emphasis on the unique, co-created, and memorable guest experience, provides a unique opportunity to take a broader perspective on innovation theory. This study systematically explored organizational culture at a non-profit attraction that espouses experience innovation as an overriding organizational objective. The findings contribute to the ongoing scholarly dialogue in innovation theory and provides insights for practitioners transitioning to the experience economy.

The three broad patterns of co-existing values illustrated in this case study appear to be key to the organization's stated objective of constantly innovating the guest experience. The concept of ambidexterity—in this case a unique blend of past and future, collaboration and competition, and business and emotion—is consistent with a both/and approach. Idea generation and sustaining ongoing operations occurred simultaneously in a collective manner. Several programs and processes motivated idea generation at all levels of the organization. The deeply held assumption, however, was that innovative ideas were a way of honoring the organization's heritage and legacy. Idea implementation was facilitated by energizing the collective sense that it was not okay to simply maintain the status quo because that's just not who they are.

This study illustrates the power of an integrated front of the house and back of the house connection to the core experience. Consistent messaging to the guests that wildlife is endangered and that guests can make a difference aligned with the organizational identify espoused by employees and managers. As discussed, the transparency theme was also a deeply held assumption. What made them unique, was their focus on authentic connections. If results are any indication, the organization's focus on what Pine & Gilmore called rendering authenticity, paid off for this organization. The attraction experienced increasing attendance in an industry that was struggling with negative perceptions about animals in captivity. While many zoos are free, the organization in this study was able to charge a price premium.

Since the findings are based on data collected at one research site, it does not make much sense to discuss how the results might be generalized to the larger population of the experience industry in the same way that quantitative studies are generalized. Instead, the results are best consumed as a unique story that may nudge the reader/scholar to think differently about organizational culture, specifically or generally. Although cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete (Geertz, 1973), the findings presented in this paper offer a rare behind the

scenes glimpse of a place where most of us would not usually have the opportunity to goText

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