



Vanguard Tradition: Design Thinking and the Birth of the Salvation Army

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Abstract

While philosophies of innovation shun the past as cumbersome and archaic, history provides a map from which to rediscover ideas and avoid inefficient reinventions. This paper illustrates the value of history by exploring how the founders of The Salvation Army applied design thinking principles to tackle the wicked problem of bringing the gospel to East London in the nineteenth century. Catherine and William Booth's personalities combined analytical mastery and intuitive originality to craft elegant solutions for this challenge. Utilizing Roger Martin's *Knowledge Funnel*, the paper explores the organizational journey of this movement from mystery to heuristic to algorithm. The lessons gleaned from small experiments in East London were vital in refining the strategies to scale the mission worldwide. The Booths designed an organization that was both efficient and agile with constant reinvention built into its structure.

The Past: Friend or Foe of Innovation?

The word “innovation” is often associated with the breaking free from the shackles of tradition to embrace something new and disruptive. In *Leading the Revolution*, Gary Hamel suggests that “we have developed the capacity to interrupt history - to escape the linear extrapolation of what was. Our heritage is no longer our destiny.” Placing the *old guard* against the *vanguard* and *incumbency* against *imagination*, this philosophy of innovation tends to be the dominant perspective.

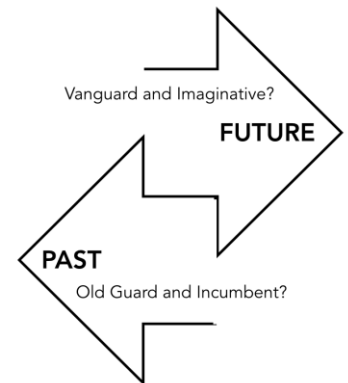


Diagram 1
Author's Research

What if this idea is entirely wrong? What if it is not *history*, but rather what Carol Dweck calls a “*fixed mindset*” that stunts innovation? Is it possible that a person who values the future can be as *fixed* as a person who values the past (see Diagram 1)? The research of Sinead Mullally and Eleanor Maguire has shown evidence of an intimate link between memory, imagination, and predicting the future. If a “*growth mindset*” has been cultivated in the innovator, then *history* is an endless *reservoir of ideas*. There are very few who would tolerate a driver who has been lost for hours but refuses to use a map. Unfortunately, many organizations refuse to look at their *historical map* to guide the innovation process, leaving many going down endless dead-ends. Simon Sinek in *Find Your Why* suggests that:

To uncover our WHY we must bring together our standout memories - our defining moments - and examine them to find the connections. For tribes, the WHY also comes from the past - either the origin story of how the company was founded or from specific stories shared by other members of the tribe that represent what makes them proud to be a part of the tribe.

To approach history and study it through the lens of innovation requires an honest and demythologized approach. In *The Myths of Innovation*, Scott Berkun clarifies this point:

The result is that our interests, as students of innovation, diverge with those of many historians and the general population. We want to understand the challenges of the past as if we were there, trying to innovate in that time with those constraints. We seek tactics to reuse our mistakes to learn from: we do not want convenience - we want the truth. And to that end, there's no greater myth worth dispelling in the history of innovation than the idea that *progress happens in a straight line*.

This paper will illustrate the value of history by providing an overview of some of the most significant developments in an organization Peter Drucker called, “the most effective organization in the United States.” The Salvation Army has a rich, one-hundred-and-fifty-year history in which it has defied many of the theories of organizational life-cycle. To return to the defining moments and standout memories provide incredible insights for students of innovation.

An Age of Experimentation: Design Thinking From Above and Below

The Industrial Revolution during the Victorian age was an era of grand experimentation and expansion. The power of steam fueled by coal mechanized the Empire of Pax Britannica. Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man Theory" celebrated cultured heroes who generated armies, managed factories, and designed grand schemes like Isambard Kingdom Brunel's Great Western Railway. Matthew Arnold in 1869 would define *culture* as "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know... the best which has been thought and said in the world." Progress fueled utopian ideals as the civilized few sought to bring the anarchistic world into order - one way or another. It wasn't *God's glory* filling the earth so much as *man's glory* "sequencing and designing" it as "all the world of power is *mine*."

While the "great men" built their empires, *history from below* told a very different story. Queen Victoria said, "we will not have failure - only success and learning," but *the masses* working in and being churned out of industrial factories represented an unexpected consequence of the opulence and civility of London's west end. East London's "Mile End Waste" was where Arnold's anarchists were swept under the metaphorical rug. Fearing the uprisings in France, Victoria believed if she gave her people "plenty of beer, good beer, and cheap beer" that they would "have no revolution among them."

Sadly, the church followed suit, charging premium prices for pews while ignoring the cries of the poor and justifying the social engineering of Britain's elite. Millennialism fueled the idea that London was the New Jerusalem and would be where Christ returns to celebrate "the best of humanity." This enlightened thinking cast a shadow on the darkest part of England. The "heathen" were not to be found at the edges of Britain's colonial reach around the world, but rather at her doorstep. This "utter and unmistakable separation between the church-going and the working-class population" was a blight best ignored by the gentry until a viable solution could be engineered.

While Karl Marx walked the streets of London, he argued that religion was the "opiate of the masses," but when a young William Booth walked through the Mile End in July 1865, it became obvious that *true religion* was the only viable solution to what he saw as a manifestation of hell on earth. Returning home to his wife Catherine, who had been preaching in south London, he cried to her, "*Darling, I have found my destiny*." While initially hesitant, Catherine recalls how she quickly "got the victory." If Brunel could be considered a cultured design thinker as Tim Brown proposes, it is possible to also view Catherine and William Booth as design thinkers *from below* who aimed to seek the temporal and eternal salvation of those forgotten and ignored. Their story and the founding of The Salvation Army provides insight into how design thinkers can tackle wicked problems in today's world.

Wicked Problems and Elegant Solutions

In August 1865, William Booth wrote to disrupt the church's conscious ignorance of this plight:

“The moral degradation and spiritual destitution of the teeming population of the East of London are subjects with which the Christians are painfully conversant. While many true-hearted and zealous laborers are toiling in the spirit of the Master to stem the mighty tide of iniquity, and to pour the glorious light of the gospel in upon the dense darkness everywhere abounding... these laborers [are] only a few lone stars, whose light but reveals the surrounding darkness and the great ocean of sin and misery.”

The term “wicked problem” was introduced by Horst Rittel to identify complex problems, where solving one could introduce several others. Every wicked problem is novel and requires trial and error to solve. What William and Catherine witnessed in East London was a quintessential wicked problem. Design thinking is a process where wicked problems are empathically studied to converge on the root issues and to ideate, prototype, test, and evaluate possible solutions. Connecting the right solution to the right problem is necessary to identify elegant solutions which are truly innovative.

William Booth “chose the salvation of men and the extension of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ as the supreme object for which I would live and labor.” Upon completing her preaching tour, Catherine joined her husband in East London to determine the most *practical* way to compel the masses to be saved. A passion for souls combined with an audacious vision forged a relentlessly experimental and innovative process to determine the best way to accomplish this goal. Their mission was to tackle the wicked problem of the temporal and eternal consequences of *sin* and how to expose the largest number of people to the elegant solution of salvation.

Catherine and William Booth: Design Thinkers of the Victorian Age

In his book, *Change by Design*, Tim Brown refers to Isambard Kingdom Brunel as “one of the earliest examples of a *design thinker*,” as he reimagined a global transportation system with the development of the Great Western Railway during the 19th century. William and Catherine Booth would soon be heralded by Britain's famed Commander-in-Chief of the British forces, Sir Garnet Wolseley as two of the most significant organizational minds of the Victorian Age. Like Brunel and other great experimenters of the day, the Booths also designed an organizational system but did so with a vision for how to practically realize the salvation of the world.

William says that this “led him to carefully study the lives and conduct” of others “who had achieved any remarkable success in religious warfare, and from whom I might hope to learn something bearing on the work before me.” In *Creative Confidence*, David and Tom Kelley define creativity as, “using your imagination to create something new in the world” and this

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happens “wherever you have the opportunity to generate new ideas, solutions, or approaches.” On his eightieth birthday, William Booth would insightfully highlight this culture of creativity:

“No greater mistake can be made with respect to The Salvation Army than to suppose that it is not a school for thought. Perhaps more theories have been produced and more schemes invented by us for gaining the highest ends of the Christian faith... than by any other religious movement in existence... you must have the constant evolution of new plans and contrivances for that purpose.”

Analytical Mastery and Intuitive Originality

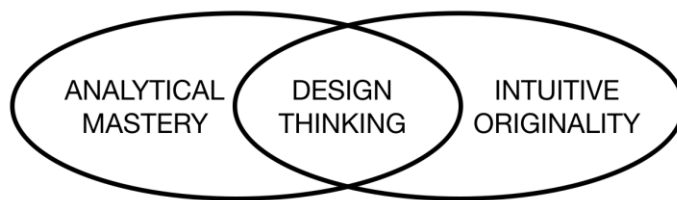


Diagram 2
Adapted from Roger Martin,
The Design of Business

Roger Martin in *The Design of Business*, introduces the term “design thinking” to describe the balance of “analytical mastery and intuitive originality in dynamic interplay” (see Diagram 2). This combination was fused together in the uncommon egalitarian co-leadership of the Booths, where Catherine’s analytical mastery and William’s intuitive originality created sparks of creativity that would ignite a

revolution that would spread from East London to the four corners of the world in twenty years.

Catherine was born in Ashbourne, Derbyshire to John and Sarah Mumford. Her mother was a devout and stoic Methodist with a keen intellect who exposed her precocious daughter to the works of theologians and social reformers like John Wesley and Charles Finney. Her father was a carriage builder who was an advocate of the temperance movement but struggled with alcoholism and his Christian faith. At a young age, Catherine would take up the social cause of teetotalism, writing under a pseudonym to convince people of the logic of this position. While she was physically frail and had a shy personality, she did not allow her gender or age to inhibit the natural flow of conviction and persuasion.

William was born thirty miles east in Nottingham to a financially struggling Samuel and Mary Booth. This shire was a politically charged town due to the industrialization of lace textiles. A microcosm of what was happening throughout England, Nottingham was known for having some of the worst slums in the nation, giving rise to movements like the Luddites and Chartists. Survival in this world required William to exercise intuitive ingenuity to make ends meet - and he had to support his family by becoming a pawnbroker’s apprentice. While his family was religiously nominal, a middle-aged couple invited the young leader to Broad Street Wesley Chapel, where at age fifteen William Booth was saved. When he encountered the transatlantic revivalist James Caughey who came to lead revival services, Booth resolved that “God will have all there is of William Booth.” With a vision to follow in Caughey’s footsteps, William set out to preach the gospel to the masses.

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In 1852, the analytical Catherine met the creative William and immediately fell in love. During their courtship, they exchanged ideas and aligned convictions to ensure both were committed to the same goals. The beliefs and methods of the revivalist and reformer Charles Finney combined with the systematic methodology of John Wesley were key subjects which fused these two minds and hearts together. They were not just equal *marriage* partners, but also *mission* partners.

Joining the Methodist New Connexion in 1855, they began to experiment with *new measures* to reach those lost in sin. When they served in Gateshead in 1858, the local population referred to their 1,250-person Bethesda Chapel as “the converting shop” as so many lives were being transformed. While William had encouraged Catherine to engage in public speaking, it was only in 1860 following her defense of fellow revivalist, the American Phoebe Palmer that Catherine chose to preach. Once she gave her first public address, what had previously been limited to private letters and conversations was now capable of impacting hundreds and thousands. By 1862, the creative ministry of the Booths led to conflicts with the New Connexion, and they stepped into independent itinerant ministry - sometimes together, but often in two different directions. During this time, they continued to experiment - creating “Hallelujah Bands” of converts who traveled town to town like a circus troupe, with posters advertising them in their former notoriety as horse-racers, prizefighters, pugilists, and poachers to attract the masses and share the message of salvation through testimony. Together, the Booths were what David Galenson calls “experimental innovators,” as they were continually searching for better ways to see the largest number of people saved.

THE DESIGN OF THE SALVATION ARMY

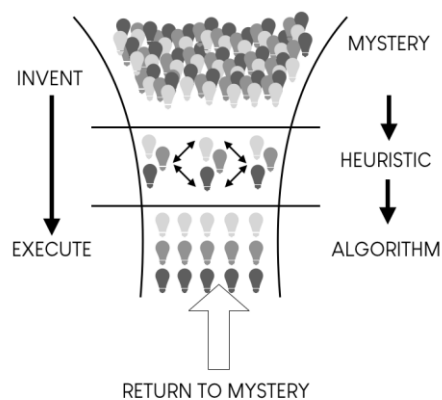


Diagram 3
Adapted from
Roger Martin
The Design of Business

In *The Design of Business*, Roger Martin introduces a knowledge funnel (see Diagram 3) as a way to illustrate how organizations are invented and grow through phases. At first, there is a great deal of experimentation and a variety of options for what might be. This phase is driven by a *mystery* in which the founders operate on hunches. Through trial and error, some rules of thumb (or *heuristics*) are established based on what has proven to work. For new individuals who join, they learn this *tacit* knowledge by doing work alongside the founders and other leaders. As success takes place and scaling increases with opportunity, those principles are codified into *algorithms* and made *explicit* through training manuals, rules, and the growing culture. Success can be deceptive once it is achieved unless the organization

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continues to return to *mystery* to evaluate and evolve the organization.

This act of reinvention introduces a change which requires an organization to differentiate what Gary Oster in *The Light Prize* calls *doctrine* and *dogma*. The doctrine or *essence* of an organization must be distilled from dogma or *expressions* for it to differentiate the metaphorical baby from the bathwater. Resilient organizations develop what John Kotter in *Accelerate* refers to as a “dual-operating system.” This system continues to run *reliable and efficient* algorithms while at the same time providing spaces in the organization where there is an opportunity to return to mystery to enhance *agility and speed* (see Diagram 4, which illustrates Martin’s Knowledge funnel from above to illustrate the incorporation of Kotter’s dual-operating system model). In the story of the founding of The Salvation Army, we see this progression from mystery to heuristic to algorithm and then the return to mystery.

Mystery: Messy Beginnings in East London

A fixed-oriented organization tends to emphasize flawless execution with no mistakes. A growth-oriented organization is experimental and therefore allows for a trial and error culture. Failure is a part of the discovery process. Any organization which is just beginning in the mystery phases tends to be *messy* as very little is established. While this presents a danger, it also opens up the possibilities of new opportunities.

By the time Catherine and William had arrived in East London in 1865 at age 36, they had ten years of what K. Anders Ericsson calls “*deliberate practice*” of a series of values, beliefs, and methods to see the gospel transform society. Despite this prior experience, East London presented a whole new challenge which was going to test those theories and methods to the extreme. William and Catherine asked the design thinking question, *how might we* compel them to come to faith?

William Booth initially partnered with the East London Special Services Committee and preached under a tent in the Mile End. When a wealthy manufacturer and philanthropist, Samuel Morley heard of the success of William’s tent meetings, he began to fund this mission. They formed the “Christian Revival Association,” renaming this in January 1866 as “The East London Christian Revival Union Temperance Society” and set to work recruiting members. Catherine and William began to iterate and refine their strategies moving into several temporary locations including Professor Orson’s Dancing Academy, the Three Colts Lane Wool Store, the “Dingy Cradle,” the “Pigeon Shop,” and several halls and theatres. They adapted irreverent songs from the music hall like “Champagne Charlie is me (sic.) name” and reappropriated the

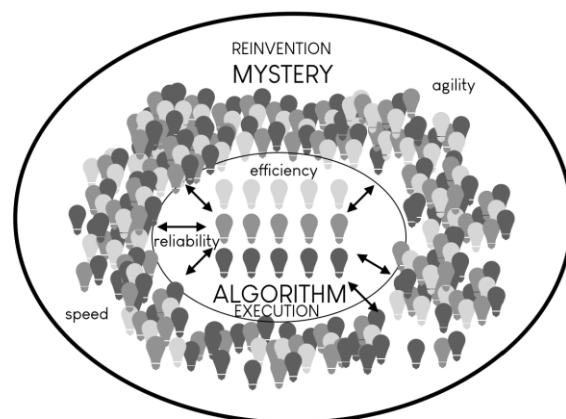


Diagram 4
Fusing Roger Martin’s Knowledge Funnel
with John Kotter’s Dual-Operating System
Author’s Research

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tune with the lyrics, “bless his blood He sets me free!” When on the streets, roughs would throw mud, stones, and even fireworks at them, yet they remained resilient. A cholera outbreak of epidemic proportions in East London exasperated the mission, but they aimed to distribute food, clothing, and other forms of care.

After a year of relentless work, they had a mere sixty members. Those who resisted said they did not like their teachings on holiness and the emphasis on repentance. Others did not approve of the methods used from the incorporation of penitent forms, an American methodology for public conversion; nor the use of open airs - despite this being modeled a century earlier by British heroes like John Wesley and George Whitefield. Robert Sandall in *The History of The Salvation Army* comments on how “the records show no sign that William Booth was dismayed at the turn events had now taken; rather they indicate that he went to work more vigorously.” In *Little Bets*, Peter Sims explains how seasoned entrepreneurs “push ideas into the market as quickly as possible to learn from mistakes and failures that will point the way forward.”

Heuristics: Scaling the Mission

An organization which transitions from mystery to heuristic begins to gain greater focus and begins to establish rules of thumb. By 1867, William and Catherine were not sure if they could sustain this strategy, but they continued to faithfully endure believing that it was God who called them to this work. A miracle was to come in the form of financial support from the Evangelisation Society. This additional support allowed the Booths to begin to experiment with scaling their ideas.

In *The History of The Salvation Army*, Robert Sandall elaborates on some of the major developments that year:

- Acquiring its first headquarters.
- Securing the theatre for Sunday meetings
- Systematizing the financing of the Mission
- Identifying prominent leaders
- Having paid workers on staff

As they began to mobilize their staff, they were able to teach principles which other “Evangelists” were able to replicate. As they scaled, they looked to design thinkers like Brunel. James Dowdle, a critical first generation member, and future leader, joined the movement. He had previously worked on the Great Western Railway and was now partnering with the Booths as an evangelist. As more mission halls were obtained in East London, the railway term *Mission Stations* was introduced to illustrate the interconnected and expanding nature of the East London Christian Mission. In 1868, they began to think about “The Evangelization of London” and how to reach the “heathen” of their land. By 1870, these “rules of thumb” in East London were capturing significant attention in towns and cities throughout England. Several of these inquisitors invited the Booths to share the stories of their battle for the soul of East London and

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to expand this work to all of England. As the movement grew, this necessitated a change to “Christian Mission” to incorporate the ever-expanding territory.

In 1872, William Booth published, *How to Reach the Masses* to share with the broader Christian community the story of the Christian Mission and some of the tried and true methodologies. This pamphlet attracted a young George Scott Railton, who became William Booth’s chief secretary. Railton, another creative thinker, began to introduce all sorts of fresh ideas about how to amplify and accelerate the mission. The vision grew broader as they started to think about the salvation of the whole world, which would require even greater efficiency and effectiveness. These seed ideas were planted in the pages of the Christian Mission Magazine, where Railton regularly wrote to rally the troops.

Algorithm: The Mission Becomes An Army

By 1875, a significant crisis confronted the Christian Mission. A series of evangelists wanted to abandon the new measures methods that had been central to the success of the mission. This divide created a significant rift in the organization and threatened to undermine the essence of the work. This crisis led to a serious evaluation of what was non-negotiable. It was during this time that there was a realization that a restructuring of the organization needed to take place. Militarism in the broader culture provided a helpful source of inspiration. The British military was in the midst of a restructuring to incorporate aspects of the Prussian Army’s mechanistic structure. A careful study of how an Army is organized to be regimented yet agile inspired the Christian Mission leaders to refer to their work in a similar vein. The algorithmic precision of the British Army provided a structure for scaling their mission worldwide. The further this design idea was explored, the more it made sense. The decision was made that they were to be an army of salvation taking the *blood* of Jesus by the *fire* of the Holy Spirit into all the world! In 1878, the Mission officially became The Salvation Army, with Catherine as Army mother and William its General.

The success which they had witnessed in the Christian Mission *accelerated* with increasing speed with this change. The goal was to replicate in every recruit an unwavering commitment to the salvation of souls and holy living. They were committed to bringing the whole gospel to the whole person, *everyone* had a place in the salvation war - as long as he or she agreed to (eventually eleven) *Doctrines* and followed *Orders and Regulations*, written by Railton and inspired by Sir Garnet Wolseley’s *Soldier’s Pocket Book for Field Service*. Strategies and structures were set in place to have a lean command structure which focused on the transformation and mobilization of recruits who all had a role to play in the warfare. Young women known as “Hallelujah Lasses” were trained in these methods then deployed to *invade* towns, attracting thousands to their meetings. Children in 1881 were made “Little Soldiers” and mobilized to reach the next generation. The Salvation Army expanded globally, with soldiers and officers being recruited from every ethnicity where the Army flew its flag. While a myriad of local and contextual expressions developed all over the world, they were all united by the beliefs, values, and practices of *Salvationism*.

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Glen Horridge in *Origins of The Salvation Army* charts the exponential growth from 1878 to 1883. This expansion was the work of the Holy Spirit, who used a logically designed simple and methodical system or algorithm that was replicated over and over again by individuals whose supreme business was the salvation of the world. By 1881, The Salvation Army came under some sharp criticism inside and outside the church. They were “playing toy soldiers,” and the organizational structure was a mere “rope of sand.” Catherine took up the mission of speaking in the West End of London and advocating for *Aggressive Christianity*, silencing many of these critics and garnering further support for the ever-expanding mission committed to one of the most audacious goals.

By 1890, Catherine had contracted cancer and was “promoted to Glory” just before they launched the *Darkest England and the Way Out* social scheme which introduced the further algorithm of systematic salvation of *both worlds* - the temporal and eternal. This was a mission that would never end until Christ returned.

Return to Mystery

Twenty-five years after the Booths began in East London, *The Contemporary Review* reflected on the birth of this movement and its organizational development. Having witnessed several organizations whose “soul has died out of them, the author commented”:

The Salvation Army has been constructed from the first on the principle that when the soul goes out, the thing must die. ‘I do not want another ecclesiastical corpse encumbering the earth,’ said General Booth to me many years ago. ‘When the Salvation Army ceases to be a militant body of red-hot men and women whose supreme business is the saving of souls, I hope it will vanish utterly.

The author, W.T. Stead warns that The Salvation Army “has grown so rapidly and has evolved so many agencies, built so many edifices and created, in short, so substantial a temporal skeleton and material tabernacle that, even if it lost its soul, its corpse would be a terribly long time in decomposing.” This warning concerned the widowed Booth, so he empowered his son, Bramwell to institute Youth Councils. At this event, gate-keepers of The Salvation Army would meet with grassroots young leaders and discuss the essence of the organization - differentiating doctrine from dogma and allowing fresh expressions to emerge. This rite of passage continues worldwide to this day.

Another pivotal development occurred in 1929 when The Salvation Army created the “High Council” to *elect* a General and limit the time an officer could spend in a position of power. A procedure of appointments has resulted in continual movement in the organization - allowing fresh ideas to stimulate The Salvation Army on all organizational levels. Each of these represents a return to mystery in the midst of an algorithmic structure.

Conclusion

In this paper, the value of history to innovation has been illustrated in the story of the founding of The Salvation Army. Gary Oster in *The Light Prize* observes that “innovation is a dynamic process in which God and man willingly choose to work together, despite the unequal partnership.” He uses the Jewish term *Tikkun Olam* to describe the role of innovation, that “God intentionally left undone some creative work in the world so that mankind could joyfully partner with Him in its completion.” Since creation, innovation has been part of *history*; it is worth studying the vanguard moments of the tradition of organizations. Tracing the steps the great cloud of witnesses have traversed before us will lead innovators much more quickly to uncharted territory where new wicked problems can be met by elegant solutions.

About the Author

Steve Bussey is the co-director of **Salvation Factory**, the Innovation Department of The Salvation Army’s U.S.A. Eastern Territorial Headquarters. Alongside his wife and team, they develop strategies, resources, and training aligned to the founding vision and mission of the movement to create a culture of continuous innovation throughout the organization.

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