



# HOW BUSINESS LEADERS CAN TURN CULTURAL CHAOS INTO POSSIBILITIES AND SOLUTIONS

In chaotic periods, the knee-jerk reaction is to go narrower and defensive. But what is needed is wider, proactive imagination.

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Are you tired of the Chicken Little narrative of societal collapse? Sure, volatility, complexity, chaos and post-truth behavior are colliding. For business leaders, this can feel dangerous but also productive.

Because inside cultural tension there is energy.

At the core of today's tensions are ideological reversals. Traits once seen as stabilizing — empathy, humility, shame — are recast as liabilities in a world that prizes speed, dominance and certainty. These reversals look like the following:

- **Sin of Empathy:** Empathy and humility are reframed as weaknesses.
- **Reflection Aversion:** Pausing to contemplate is treated as hesitation.
- **Speed Over Safety:** Progress must move at maximum speed, regardless of risk.
- **Limits Seen as Problems:** Guardrails are framed as barriers rather than protections.
- **Outcomes Over Ethics:** “Does it work?” replaces “is it right?”
- **Subtlety Equals Doubt:** Ambiguity and nuance are rejected for bold narrative.
- **Authenticity Trumps Accuracy:** Emotional conviction outweighs fact.
- **Proudly Unapologetic:** Refusing to apologize is framed as strength.

Many of these trends suppress innovation's core ingredients: curiosity, reflection, constraints and ambiguity.

Yet paradoxically, these ideologies are themselves innovative. They disrupt norms and rewire power. The challenge for business leaders is looking past the chaos to find the opportunity.

## **Uncertainty: Yes and No**

Businesspeople have never had so much data — real-time, qualitative, quantitative, exotic and big — plus AI tools to parse it. Surely this should mean more intelligence and certainty.

So why the fixation on “uncertainty”?

More information is not the same as predictability. Not everything that counts can be counted. I lead creative, digital and content teams, as well as makers developing new products and services, so I know how hard it is to fuel creativity and inventiveness against the backdrop of chaos-anxiety and mounting pressure to be more efficient and productive. KPI culture clashes with creator culture.

But even the best cultural strategists struggle with vibes. Because everything is interconnected, change moves faster. People react sooner and systems absorb less shock.

Public opinion once moved through mainstream institutions. Today it's fragmented across platforms, tribes, influencers, bots, niche communities and algorithmic feeds. In complex systems, small disruptions escalate.

## **Innovators Outperform During Chaos**

BCG found that **top innovators beat the market** by 2.4 points annually, with especially strong gains during the Great Recession and Covid. Yet in 2024, while 83% of executives **ranked innovation as a top or top-three priority**, only 3 percent of companies were innovation-ready.

This is the argument for Chaos Innovation: Disruption rewards prepared risk-takers. Chaos creates openings, but only organizations with clear strategy and the ability to *act* convert turbulence into value.

## **Behold the Chief Solutions Officer**

“Solutions” is the new buzzword for “innovation” because it signals applied innovation tied to outcomes. The Chief Solutions Officer asks, “What high-value

problem can we solve repeatedly, at scale and profitably?” That is an easier story for CEOs and boards in chaotic times.

Businesses are fixated on optimization, so solutions alone are not the goal. Optimal solutions are the aim of the CSO.

## **Converting Panic Into Possibilities**

The destabilizing forces listed above reveal unmet needs, emerging desires and openings for growth. Cultural tensions signal market shifts. Successful leaders see possibilities where others panic.

Ask what need is hiding beneath the new ideology. If a culture prizes bluntness, ask where honesty has been missing. If speed becomes fetishized, ask where friction has become intolerable. If anti-elite sentiment rises, ask whether your category has become too distant.

Where there are headwinds, there are tailwinds. In this environment, successful businesses will be those that convert volatility into insight and cultural friction into innovation.

## **Building a Chaos Innovation Muscle**

Most organizations are overwhelmed by cultural chaos. They default to reactive brand statements and trend-chasing campaigns. A different approach is to operationalize tension through a repeatable system that turns cultural disorder into business action.

- **Map Tensions:** What worldview clash is happening here?
- **Decode Demands:** What are people really reaching for?

- **Spot Business Openings**: Where is there unmet need or outdated convention?
- **Design Counterbalance**: What stabilizing value can we add?
- **Test At The Edges**: How can we test an MVP before fully committing?

Shorten decision cycles but lengthen reflection before major bets. Build diverse teams that interpret signals from multiple angles. Reward people for spotting anomalies. Use scenario planning for multiple outcomes. Protect curiosity.

In chaotic periods, the knee-jerk reaction is to go narrower and defensive. But what is needed is wider, proactive imagination.

## **Design Thinking Meet Exotic Thinking**

When was the last time your business encouraged you to think *exotically* about something?

AI LLMs are designed to give the statistically most common response. Relying on AI contributes comes at a “**cognitive cost**,” according to one small MIT study. It can also lead to innovation slop. Design thinking cannot overcome this. It is a slow, linear process for a less chaotic era. Sure, systematizing innovation with design thinking makes problem solving process more efficient (predictable), but the quality of the solutions are “meh.” So I’ve been experimenting with “strategic imagination” techniques — such as exotic thinking — to generate solutions that are rapid and remarkable.

Exotic thinking is an invitation to strategically use disorder for discovery. Like fighting fire with fire.

Today's business context demands turning anomalies into opportunities. When the world is upside down, turn your thinking upside down. What feels weird or extreme may be right. Esoteric ideas can generate non-obvious insights and solid solutions.

In business, thinking exotically can spot what others dismiss and imagine what others are too panicked to explore. For example, we used the exotic thinking technique of looking for taboo/shadowy behaviors that people are not proud of to identify a non-obvious creative insight, which we used to create a fresh approach for a financial services brand. Our team had intimate conversations with ChatGPT, regarded as taboo, which unlocked the insight that people want to be fully seen without being judged or penalized. This exotic thinking technique revealed an opportunity: high intimacy plus zero consequences. People are messy, inconsistent and flawed even when it comes to finances, so we used that to highlight the financial services company's nonjudgmental approach to managing financial messes. We didn't go through a design thinking process; we plunged into thinking exotically.

Exotic thinkers ask:

- **“What assumptions can I invert, and tropes can I topple?”**
- **“What fringe behaviors today might become mainstream?”**
- **“What anomalies or flukes are we dismissing?”**
- **“What contradiction contains a hidden opportunity?”**
- **“What taboo or outsider behavior reveals a future need?”**
- **“What exotic world has already solved the problem differently?”**

Businesses that only see chaos as threat will retreat. Businesses that see it as opportunity and possibility can leap forward. Those that think exotically, in these most exotic of times, can thrive. ®