



Leading Innovation in Hospitality: Navigating the Paradoxes of Innovation Leadership

Michel Brokke, Breda University of Applied Sciences
Michel Altan, Breda University of Applied Sciences
Hugo Mutsaerts, Breda University of Applied Sciences

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how hospitality executives in the Netherlands navigate the complexities of innovation leadership through the lens of Hill et al.'s (2014) six paradoxes framework. Based on 11 in-depth interviews with industry professionals experienced in innovation management, the study reveals how leaders manage tensions between collaboration, learning, and decision-making. Findings highlight industry-specific challenges, such as balancing brand and service consistency with improvisation. Innovation leadership in hospitality seems to be less about directing solutions and more about enabling diverse viewpoints, creating psychological safety, and aligning experimentation with operational realities. The study extends theoretical insights and offers practical guidance for hospitality leaders seeking to strengthen innovation capacity by actively reflecting upon, rather than resolving, paradoxes.

Keywords: *Hospitality Innovation, Innovation Leadership, Innovation Management, Qualitative Research, Semi-Structured Interviews*

Track: *The Future of Talent Management*

Focus of Paper: *Industry/Educational*

Type of submission: *Paper*

Introduction

Innovation is essential for hospitality organizations striving to remain competitive in an increasingly dynamic environment. It is both a process and an outcome, shaped by tools, methods, and human behaviour. While innovation tools and methods are standardized, and therefore well documented, the volatile behavioural dimension remains underexplored (Dodgson et al., 2013; Tidd & Bessant, 2020). For practitioners, particularly current and future hospitality managers, facilitating innovation requires a leadership approach distinct from operational management. For academia, this highlights the need to deepen our understanding of how leadership influences innovation processes in hospitality contexts. This research addresses that gap by examining the lived experiences of innovation leaders in the industry, following the structure of the 6 paradoxes of Innovation Leadership (Hill et al., 2014).

1. Literature

Innovation & Leadership

Innovation takes many forms and lacks a singular definition. It may be radical or incremental and applies to products, services, processes, or organisational changes (Hill et al., 2014). However, scholars broadly agree that innovation entails the creation and implementation of novel ideas (Dodgson et al., 2013). Implementation remains a persistent challenge in innovation, particularly in the hospitality sector (Kabangire & Korir, 2023).

Research points to leadership as a critical enabler of innovation (Hill et al., 2014; Bessant, 2003; Dyer et al., 2019). Hill et al. (2014) emphasise that successful innovation depends on leaders who can act as ‘social architects’ by finding the balance between six paradoxes, as outlined in Table 1. The paradoxes are categorized into three groups and represent the tension between unleashing and harnessing innovative behaviour.

Table 1 The 6 Paradoxes of the Innovation Leader (Hill et al., 2014)

	Unleashing		Harnessing	
Collaboration	1	Individual	-	Collective
	2	Support	-	Confrontation
Discovery-driven learning	3	Learning & Development	-	Performance
	4	Improvisation	-	Structure
Integrative-decision making	5	Patience	-	Urgency
	6	Bottom-up	-	Top-down

The Paradoxes of Innovation Leadership

Hill et al. (2014) identify collaboration as essential to innovation, emphasizing the paradox between promoting individual creativity and building a collective identity. This tension mirrors Hofstede’s (1984) distinction between individualism and collectivism and is empirically explored by Eisenberg (1999), who found that individualistic cultures reward personal innovation, while collectivist cultures support group-driven creativity. Bessant (2003) similarly argues for developing shared innovation routines within organizations to create a collective culture. Dyer et al. (2009) expand on this by highlighting networking and collaboration with diverse individuals as key to broadening perspectives, echoing Hill et al.’s view that diversity fuels innovation. O’Reilly & Tushman (2004) approach collaboration through the lens of “ambidextrous organizations,” which balance creative autonomy with shared strategic goals, aligning with Hill et al.’s paradox of integrating individual and group contributions.

Discovery-driven learning involves balancing exploration (novelty and experimentation) and exploitation (efficiency and refinement), a paradox foundational to innovation (March, 1991). Hill et al. (2014) recognize this balance as vital, resonating with O’Reilly & Tushman’s (2004) notion of ambidexterity. Bessant (2003) frames this tension in challenges like “dealing with discontinuity” and “continuous learning,” emphasising the iterative nature of innovation. Dyer et al. (2009) support exploration by highlighting behaviours like questioning and observing, practices that enable leaders to spot unmet needs and novel insights. However, unlike Hill et al., Dyer et al. place less emphasis on the tension with exploitation.

Hill et al. (2014) discuss the paradox of integrating urgency with patience and top-down control with bottom-up inclusion. This aligns with Bessant’s (2003) “Why Change?” challenge, which emphasises strategic direction in innovation processes. Dyer et al. (2009, p.63) emphasise that breakthrough innovations are driven by “the ability to successfully connect seemingly unrelated questions, problems, or ideas from different fields.” O’Reilly & Tushman (2004) reinforce the importance of leadership vision in enabling ambidextrous strategies. Across these studies, the leader’s role in setting a unifying purpose while synthesizing diverse perspectives emerges as essential for successful innovation.

Together, these frameworks, as illustrated in Table 2, stress that innovation leadership requires managing paradoxes across collaboration, learning, and decision-making, while balancing these tensions rather than resolving them.

Table 2 Comparison of Studies on Innovation Leadership

	Hill et al. (2014)	Bessant (2003)	Dyer et al. (2019)	O'Reilly & Tushman (2004)
Collaboration	- Individual versus collective - Support versus confrontation	Challenge 4: Building an innovation culture	Skill 5: Networking	Ambidextrous organization
Discovery-driven learning	- Learning & Development versus performance - Improvisation versus structure	- Challenge 5: Continuous learning - Challenge 7: Dealing with discontinuity	- Skill 2: Questioning; - Skill 3: Observing Skill 4: Experimenting	Exploitation and exploration
Integrative-decision making	- Patience versus Urgency - Bottom-up versus Top-down	Challenge 1: Why change?	Skills 1: Associating	Vision

2. Methodology

To develop an understanding of the issues at stake when considering the paradoxes of innovation leadership, the data for this study has been collected through 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with industry executives from the field of hospitality and facility management. In-depth interviews are considered to be the most appropriate method for collecting data in this specific context, rooted in the tradition of exploring the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of respondents (Corbin and Strauss, 1991). Expert sampling was used, selecting respondents with demonstrated or known expertise in the area of innovation management (Kumar, 2019). Despite the small sample size and risk of selection bias, this approach focusing on respondents with particular criteria (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015) offers nuanced insights into complex operational challenges and strategic decision-making processes. Professional standing and experience of the respondents lends authority to the results, especially when considering the aim of bridging the theory-practice gap in the field.

The data collection process was iterative in nature, enabling a continuous reflection on perspectives and a re-evaluation of assumptions among the researchers involved in the interviews. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour each. After conducting and recording the interviews, a transcript was written up through GoodTape. The 6 innovation leadership paradoxes of Hill et al. (2014) were used for coding the interview transcripts, exploring different interpretations of a subject (Saunders et al., 2019).

To address concerns about using a qualitative approach, each unit of analysis (interviewee) under scrutiny was studied individually before moving on to a cross-case analysis, whereby comparisons and contrasts were used (Eisenhardt, 1989; Stake, 1994). Although achieving replication (whether this be literal or theoretical) is complicated because of the particularities each executive operates in, the innovation leadership framework developed by Hill et al. (2014) offers a strong structure that keeps the context constant. However, generalisations to a wider population beyond the 11 industry executives should be treated as indicative rather than definitive. An overview of the characteristics of each respondent is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Profile of the Respondents

Interviewee	Organization type	Role
1	Restaurants	Creative strategist
2	Restaurants	Owner
3	Events	Owner
4	Facility management	Director Digital Transformation
5	Hotels	Vice President
6	Healthcare	Innovation Manager
7	Consultancy	Innovation Manager
8	Hotel technology	Product Manager
9	Hospitality consultancy	Owner
10	Food delivery	Product owner
11	Consultancy	Product Owner

3. Results and discussion

Results

Reflecting on the six paradoxes of leading innovation, as outlined by Hill et al. (2014), the first paradox concerns the tension between individualism and collectivism. All respondents agreed that rather than envisioning innovation independently, leaders must cultivate a shared vision of innovation within their organizations. Respondent 5 illustrates this approach, stating: “My role is not so much about innovation itself, but more about facilitating the mindset and the environment, so that general managers and hotels can embrace it as well.” Facilitation necessitates the recruitment of creative individuals within a team. This paradox undoubtedly requires a delicate balance, making it essential to provide space for individual expression within an organization while simultaneously reinforcing collective achievements. Respondent 7 emphasises that collective genius can be encouraged by instilling in the group a sense that they have collaboratively created something exceptional, drawing from her experience as a senior innovation manager. The managerial support role is further exemplified by respondent 6, who remarked: “But yes, I don’t deliver solutions; I deliver change power and a change in culture.”

The second paradox explores (2) support versus confrontation in fostering innovation, with respondents acknowledging that provocation and confrontation can be beneficial to the innovation process when managed with care. Respondent 4 illustrates this perspective, stating: “In my view, arguing is fine, if it focuses on the content and involves seeking out that friction with one another. That’s why I always make a conscious effort to include people in the team who challenge my opinions, precisely because I know that otherwise, people might feel uncomfortable sharing such things.” While refining this approach, respondents 6 and 7 highlight how successful innovation within an organization depends on establishing mutual understanding and developing effective communication among team members. Such communication ensures that roles, responsibilities, and actions are clearly aligned, alongside constructive feedback for problem-solving and idea reinforcement. These perspectives emphasise the significance of cultivating a culture of collaboration and transparency to drive innovation, even in instances where differing viewpoints arise. Respondent 7 further underscores the importance of recognition and appreciation, demonstrating how initiatives such as annual awards and additional efforts to acknowledge contributions can inspire teams, build support, and ultimately enhance innovation.

The third paradox examines (3) learning and development versus performance, balancing exploration and exploitation within an organization. Respondents emphasise that effective leaders cultivate a culture of experimentation and learning while recognizing failure as an essential component of the innovation process. In this context, respondent 5 emphasises the necessity of providing trust, space, and resources to encourage experimentation. Conversely, respondent 3 cautions against excessive failure, noting that it may undermine both confidence and initiative. Leaders should mitigate this risk by guiding team members to learn from their mistakes

and refine their future approaches, thereby ensuring that experimentation remains both constructive and empowering. Respondent 3 remarks in this regard: “You must accept that mistakes will be made by the team you’re working with, and that’s absolutely fine. When something goes wrong, it’s simply part of the process, and it ultimately enhances the learning experience.” Nevertheless, leaders must also recognize when to discontinue efforts that do not yield the expected outcomes. This perspective reveals the importance of timing and adaptability in the innovation process, reinforcing the need for leaders to evaluate and manage development efforts in a strategic manner. Respondent 6 nuances this argument by emphasizing the value of recognizing “soft” results, such as employee engagement and qualitative impacts, by enabling employees to articulate their successes. Similarly, Respondent 7 stresses that intangible outcomes, such as engagement, often lack formal key performance indicators (KPIs) yet remain crucial for driving innovation.

Within paradox (4) improvisation versus structure, respondents agreed that while structure provides the necessary alignment with organisational goals, improvisation advances creativity and exploration. Respondent 4 stresses it is the leader’s job to maintain this balance by strategically switching between exploration to boost creativity and structured focus to ensure progression. This switching creates the freedom to generate new ideas while maintaining progress toward organisational objectives. In line with this phased approach, respondent 7 refers to using divergent versus convergent thinking. These perspectives stress the importance of flexibility in adapting to different phases of the innovation process to achieve optimal outcomes, as illustrated by respondent 7: “So, there’s a time for divergent thinking and there’s a time for convergent thinking, right? And so as long as you stay in the open mindset, in the growth mindset, while you’re collecting the ideas, while you’re having the creative sessions, eventually you do have to get down to the nuts and bolts of the business as well and seeing what works best.” While structure provides essential guidance, excessive structure can hinder the innovation process. Despite his preference for a structured approach and his role as an innovation manager, respondent 4 emphasises that his responsibilities include questioning the purpose and value of existing structures to ensure they do not stifle creativity. Furthermore, when excessive structure constrains creativity, respondent 6 considers that leaders should intervene to restore both creativity and employee engagement. In the field of hospitality, respondent 5 seeks to balance innovation with the maintenance of brand and service standards. This tension is illustrated in respondent 5’s quote: “In the end, there are a few key points. Initially, any innovation must fit within the brand standards we have. However, innovation doesn’t always align well with brand and service standards, which often leads to discussions. And that’s a good thing.” However, innovation also implies looking beyond traditional industry norms to identify new opportunities and integrate novel ideas, thereby encouraging employees to explore beyond the industry (respondent 3). In doing so, the risk of disruptive innovation from competitors or other sectors is reduced by moving beyond the conventional confines of hospitality. At an operational level, creativity is a prerequisite to customer satisfaction, as illustrated by respondent 2: “Even if I have to drop everything, if a guest wants something unusual, I think, I will do my absolute best to make it happen outside the system, outside the structure. I believe that putting guests at the centre can bring out the best in my business.”

Paradox (5) examines the need to balance patience with urgency. All interviewees stated that innovation takes time and often involves inefficiencies and learning through failure. Respondent 6 highlights that patience promotes understanding and collaboration among team members, which is essential for innovation. However, respondents also recognize the importance of urgency. Respondent 3 notes that balancing urgency with patience is challenging but essential, highlighting that a leader must recognize when team members are facing time pressure and provide guidance: “You need to try to put yourself in that person’s shoes to understand the reason behind it because there’s usually a good reason for it.” Showing empathy is important here, and experiences can often serve as valuable lessons, as illustrated by respondent 3: “I’ve found the balance between urgency and patience through my seniority, my age, my children, and the young people I’ve trained within my company over the years.” Nevertheless, at times urgency can play a positive role in enhancing creativity and flexibility during the innovation process. He observes that constraints and pressure can motivate teams to think creatively and take decisive action, with respondent 2 noting that pressure often enhances innovative thinking. Interestingly, respondent 3 mentions that urgency can create an innovative environment in times of crisis: “If there’s one thing that has been great for our creativity, it’s been the COVID-19 period.”

The last paradox (6) addresses the bottom-up versus top-down dynamic, with respondents generally favouring the former. Stimulating a bottom-up approach is important because employees who interact with customers daily often provide the most valuable insights. In sectors where top-down management is the conventional approach, respondent 6 stresses the importance of bridging the gap between top-down directives and bottom-up ideas. This approach enables organizations to benefit from the knowledge and experience of their employees, thereby making innovation more relevant and impactful. Most respondents emphasise the importance of leadership in providing creative direction and making clear decisions. Respondent 4 highlights the value of having an innovation manager to make decisions and explain the rationale behind them to ensure understanding. This respondent also views the innovation manager as a hands-on leader who empowers team members by leveraging their strengths and clearly defined his role as the manager of innovation during the interviews. In contrast, respondent 6 questioned the necessity of an innovation manager within an organization. She argued that innovation should be distributed across the organization, empowering all employees to contribute. By doing so, the organization supports a collaborative environment where the role of an innovation manager becomes redundant: "There is no need for a separate innovation manager role in an organization." These contrasting perspectives illustrate the debate within this paradox about whether leadership should rely on directive methods or adopt an approach that stimulates collective responsibility and collaboration. Despite the differing opinions, both approaches indicate that there needs to be a clear vision for innovation.

All six paradoxes share fundamental tensions between seemingly opposing forces that leaders must actively balance rather than resolve. Each paradox requires contextual awareness and adaptive leadership, recognizing that neither extreme is optimal. The paradoxes emphasize the importance of organizational culture, clear communication, and leadership flexibility in fostering innovation. They all acknowledge that innovation is inherently messy, requiring tolerance for ambiguity and the ability to hold contradictory approaches simultaneously.

Discussion

This study explores the six paradoxes of innovation leadership proposed by Hill et al. (2014) within the hospitality sector. The empirical findings largely support the theoretical framework, while offering nuanced elaborations and hospitality-specific challenges.

The paradox between individualism and collectivism aligns strongly with the literature. Hill et al. (2014) and Bessant (2003) argue for balancing personal creativity with collective purpose. Respondents confirmed this, emphasizing the leader's role in facilitating shared vision rather than being the sole source of innovation. The focus on enabling environments for teams rather than direct idea generation substantiates Hill et al.'s notion of the innovation leader as a 'social architect'. Interestingly, the respondents also emphasise recognition and appreciation, an aspect less prominent in the literature but evidently key to sustaining collective engagement in hospitality settings.

The tension between support and confrontation also parallels prior theory. While Hill et al. (2014) and Dyer et al. (2009) discuss the value of diverse perspectives, the data adds granularity by showing that constructive confrontation, when combined with psychological safety, is essential.

The paradox between learning and performing, well-theorized by March (1991) and O'Reilly & Tushman (2004), was affirmed but complicated by operational realities. Leaders acknowledged failure as part of learning, in line with Bessant's (2003) call for continuous improvement. However, respondents added a condition: too much failure can lead to frustration or reduced motivation among staff. This tempers the theory's often idealized view of repeated trial and error, highlighting the need for carefully timed experimentation, particularly in high-pressure service environments such as the hospitality industry.

On the improvisation–structure paradox, the findings validate Hill et al.'s (2014) claim that flexibility is key but go further by illustrating how leaders actively phase between divergent and convergent thinking. Respondents' pragmatic use of both creative freedom and their brand and service standards reflects the hospitality industry's dual demands for innovation and consistency, a sector-specific tension less emphasised in general innovation literature.

The patience–urgency paradox also found empirical support. The idea that innovation requires both long-term commitment and short-term responsiveness resonates with Hill et al. (2014) and Bessant (2003). Yet, respondents offered rich examples of how crises (e.g., COVID-19) can catalyse creativity, suggesting that urgency may not merely be a constraint, but also a creative catalyst, a nuance underexplored in the literature.

Finally, the top-down vs. bottom-up paradox presented contrasting perspectives. While the literature points to the benefits of ambidextrous leadership (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2004), respondents were divided on the role of a formal innovation manager. This reveals a need to organize embedded innovation cultures, where innovation is integrated into daily practices across the organization rather than relying too much on centralised innovation leadership.

In sum, the findings support the literature's emphasis on managing innovation through paradoxes, but extend it by revealing contextual nuances, particularly within hospitality. They suggest that successful innovation leadership lies not only in balancing tensions, but also in dynamically adapting strategies to fit organisational realities.

4. Implications & recommendations

This study points to the critical role of leadership in cultivating innovation within hospitality organizations. It recommends that leaders adopt a reflective approach when navigating the inherent paradoxes of innovation leadership. Specifically, the paradoxes of collaboration, discovery-driven learning, and integrative decision-making are complex and require ongoing self-awareness and thoughtful reflection by leaders. For larger hospitality organizations, this implies that leadership training should focus on navigating paradoxes. Additionally, HR strategies should be reviewed to promote decentralization in decision-making and to refine KPIs by including qualitative innovation metrics.

For the academic community, these findings invite further investigation into the dynamics of innovation leadership, particularly regarding the factors that influence how leaders balance these paradoxes. Future research can enhance our understanding of how specific leadership behaviours, such as recognition and appreciation, contribute to successful innovation outcomes across diverse hospitality settings.

References

- Bessant, J. (2003). Challenges in innovation management. In L.V. Shavinina (Ed.), *The international handbook on innovation* (pp. 761-774). Pergamon. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-008044198-6/50052-8>
- Dodgson, M., Gann, D. M., & Phillips, N. (2013). *The Oxford handbook of innovation management*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199694945.001.0001>
- Dyer, J., Gregersen, H., & Christensen, C. M. (2019). *The innovator's DNA: Mastering the five skills of disruptive innovators*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Eisenberg, J. (1999). How individualism-collectivism moderates the effects of rewards on creativity and innovation: A comparative review of practices in Japan and the US. *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 8(4), 251–261. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8691.00144>
- Eisenhardt, K. (1989). Building theories from case study research, *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 532-50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258557>
- Hill, L. A., Brandeau, G., Truelove, E., & Lineback, K. (2014). *Collective Genius: The art and practice of leading innovation*. Harvard Business Review Press.
- Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Kabangire, J., & Korir, J. (2023). Innovation and creativity in hospitality management. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, 3(3), 20-41. <https://doi.org/10.47672/jht.1666>
- Kremer, H., Villamor, I., & Aguinis, H. (2019). Innovation leadership: Best-practice recommendations for promoting employee creativity, voice, and knowledge sharing. *Business horizons*, 62(1), 65-74.
- Kumar, R. (2019). *Research Methodology: a step-by-step guide for beginners*. Sage Publications.

- March, J. G. (1991). Exploration and exploitation in organizational learning. *Organization science*, 2(1), 71-87.
<https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2.1.71>
- Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E.J. (2015), *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, John Wiley & Sons.
- O'Reilly, C. A., & Tushman, M. L. (2004). The Ambidextrous Organization. *Harvard Business Review*.
<https://hbr.org/2004/04/the-ambidextrous-organization>
- Saunders, M. N. K., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). *Research Methods for Business Students*. Pearson.
- Stake, R. E. (1994), Case studies. In Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 236-247). Sage Publications.
- Tidd, J., & Bessant, J. (2020). *Managing Innovation: Integrating Technological, Market and Organizational Change* (7th ed.). Wiley.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1991), *Basics of Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications.