

Why Innovation is Not So Innovative

Ever wonder why some leaders hit home runs—or even change the world—and why others don't?

I wonder about that all the time.

Recently I spent a few days in Silicon Valley, the tech and startup capital of the world—a strip of cities that run between San Francisco and San Jose California.

It was exciting for me. A number of podcasts I listen to are based out of Silicon Valley. For years, I've read and listened to stories of entrepreneurs, startups, venture capitalists and bootstrappers who have one thing in common—they live and work in Silicon Valley.

My wife and I roamed through San Francisco, Cupertino and almost everything in between. Our hotel was right on the border of Menlo Park and Palo Alto, literally five minutes from Steve Job's house. You can't get further into the heart of Silicon Valley than that.

We ate in restaurants frequented by VCs and entrepreneurs (one turned out to be a place where Tim Ferriss eats) and walked the streets where the founders of Apple, Google, Facebook, Nest, LinkedIn, eBay, Lyft, Uber, Twitter, YouTube, Box, Airbnb and more hang out.

There are lots of theories about why Silicon Valley has been so successful in being a hotbed of innovation ([like the ones this HBR article outlines](#)), but what struck me about Silicon Valley was what I *didn't* see.

Here are 5 quick and surprising leadership lessons I took away from my weekend in Silicon Valley.

1. Innovation Looks Surprisingly...Normal

I don't know what I imagined Silicon Valley to look like, but the truth is it looked surprisingly...normal.

I've had the privilege of traveling to hundreds of cities and communities across North America and around the world. Silicon Valley didn't look that different than many other places I've visited.

There were relatively normal office buildings that bore unusual names like [Nest](#) or [Greylock](#). The buildings weren't spectacular. What's happening inside them was.

Ditto for Apple's current campus. While their new campus looks like a spaceship, their current campus (which they'll continue to use) is beautiful but not that remarkable.

Palo Alto, Menlo Park or Cupertino are decent places for dinner or hanging out at night, but

they're not that different than many other towns and cities I've been in.

Stanford is right next door to many of the startups, as is Berkley. But again, there are hundreds of universities that don't produce nearly the entrepreneurs that these two schools do in Silicon Valley.

Sometimes as leaders we convince ourselves that we need a better building, a better location, or a better *anything* to be innovative.

Innovation almost always comes from otherwise normal looking environments.

2. Work Precedes Perk

In a similar way, stories about the perks of working at startups are legendary. Whether it's gourmet onsite kitchens and chefs, gaming and foosball tables, free gym memberships, stock options or big maternity/paternity benefits, stories abound about how generous Silicon Valley companies are to their employees.

Yet the perks didn't make any of these companies successful. The work did.

Perks follow work.

In an age of instant entitlement, many of us want the perks without putting in much work.

Apple started in Steve Job's parents' garage and Facebook was headquartered out of a dorm room long before anyone got preferred shares or free food. In fact, in the early days of any company or organization, nobody's thinking about the perks. They're singularly focused on the work.

Similarly, if you want to make progress, focus on the work, not the perk.

Take it a level further. If you've had some success and you're enjoying a few perks, the best way to kill your future is to focus on the perks and ignore the work ahead.

As soon as you start to love perks more than work, the end is near.

3. Overnight Success Is A Long Night

So what makes startups so successful?

A lot of it is years of hard work before breakthrough. If you look at most leaders and organizations who break through, there's a relentless pursuit of a goal.

Apple took off in the 70s and 80s, but almost died in the late 90s. Its real breakthrough happened in 2001 and again in 2007 with the introduction of the iPod and iPhone respectively. The iPhone came 31 years after Apple's founding.

Airbnb went through many incarnations and almost died several times before it reached its tipping point several years after its launch.

It's easy to dismiss someone as an overnight success. But you're missing the point.

Most overnight successes are preceded by a very long night.

4. Mindset Matters More Than You Think

I talk to leaders almost every day of my life. One of the things you can spot almost immediately in talking to a leader is their mindset.

One of my favorite quotes of all time on mindset comes from non-Silicon Valley entrepreneur Henry Ford who said: "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right."

What's prevalent in the Valley is a can-do mindset. It's populated by people who believe they can make a dent in the universe, that they can disrupt industries, that they can innovate in a way that changes the world.

And as a result, many do.

The mindset goes far beyond initial success.

As we walked around the Apple Campus, I saw a Steve Jobs quote on the wall that demonstrated how he thought about success:

"If you do something and it turns out pretty good, then you should go do something else wonderful, not dwell on it for too long. Just figure out what's next."

Convicting.

So, do you think you can or think you can't? You're right. (For more on how mindset makes or breaks churches, [read this.](#))

5. Synergy Is A Life-Line

One of the huge advantages to being in Silicon Valley is it surrounds you with innovative people.

Some of the most advanced thinkers on the planet have gathered there, along with creatives, engineers, designers, entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, investors and so many others.

Obviously, this is an incredible incubator for innovation, new ideas and fresh approaches to the problems we face. But it's deeper than just ideational synergy.

One of the greatest dangers of leadership is isolation.

Innovators tend to be outliers in their denominations, industry or field, and outlier often equals outcast.

It's critical for innovative thinkers to surround themselves with people who inspire them and challenge them, because normally what happens is your friends and colleagues shoot you down. This is one of the reasons so many denominations and industries are in trouble today: they shoot their innovators.

In many ways, Silicon Valley is the Island of Misfit Toys. Apple's famous ad makes even more sense when you consider the synergy in the Silicon Valley of people who didn't fit in elsewhere.

"Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square hole, the ones who see things differently."

Get enough people around you like that, and not only can you can disrupt the status quo, you probably won't quit when you're trying to do it.

Too many leaders quit moments before their critical breakthrough. If you surround yourself with support, you're far less likely to do that.

What Do You See?

Have you been to Silicon Valley or read up on it?

What do you see?

> [Read more from Carey.](#)