Why Innovation Stalls

Idea In Short

Treat scaling as a boundary-crossing leadership problem, not a handoff problem. When a promising innovation starts to stall, the cause is often not the idea itself but the failure to align the people, incentives, systems and decision rights required to carry it into the core business. Leaders should therefore identify a bridger early, give that person authority across functions and design the work around partner trust, shared language and explicit integration choices. Formal governance still matters, but it will not substitute for the leader who can recruit the right partners, translate across their constraints and keep them committed when friction rises. This article explains why strong innovations fail to scale, what bridgers actually do and how organizations can build more of them

Strong ideas often lose momentum not when they face the market but when they have to move through the organization that claims to want them. The difficult part is rarely invention alone. The difficult part is getting multiple groups with different incentives, vocabularies, constraints and measures of success to act as if the innovation belongs to all of them.

Scale breaks at boundaries

The source article makes a clear argument: many innovations fail to scale not because the breakthrough is weak, but because collaboration across internal and external boundaries breaks down. That diagnosis matters because many companies still treat scale as a later-stage operating problem rather than a leadership challenge built into the design of the effort from the beginning. Once an innovation depends on business units, information technology [I.T.], compliance, marketing, operations, regulators, suppliers, or outside partners, the odds of friction rise sharply.

As complexity increases, no single team or enterprise holds all the capabilities, authority, or assets required to take an idea from prototype to broad adoption. Research and executive commentary on cross-functional collaboration reinforce the same point: companies struggle

to break down silos even when the strategic case is obvious1. The result is familiar. A project that looked promising inside a small innovation team begins to slow the moment it must enter the operating core.

> Breakthrough solutions aren't enough. New ideas can't flourish without "bridgers"

Firms do not fail only because they lack ideas. They fail because they underestimate the work required to connect those ideas to the people who must trust, fund, adapt, run and defend them.

The handoff is the trap

One of the most useful parts of the source text is the composite story of Sarah, whose team creates a promising new product and then hands it to information technology, marketing and other functions for implementation. The prototype tested well. The energy was high. Yet the initiative started to break when the receiving groups had to confront legacy systems, unfamiliar customer needs and doubts from leaders about the strategic upside.

That pattern shows why handoff thinking is dangerous. It implies that early innovation and later scaling are separate activities carried out by different groups in sequence. In reality, the constraints of the scaling system should shape the innovation long before the first handoff occurs. If the technology stack cannot work with current architecture, if the operating teams do not have the needed skills, or if the business case will not survive executive scrutiny, the innovation has a scaling problem from the start, not at the end.

A Harvard Business School summary of the same article makes this point directly. Innovations fail when teams and organizations struggle to collaborate across boundaries and the article frames the solution around leadership that can keep diverse partners aligned. That is less a critique of execution than of the assumption that execution begins only after ideation is complete.

Structure is not enough

Companies usually respond to this problem with structure. They form cross-functional teams, appoint program managers, build innovation labs and negotiate governance arrangements with outside parties. The source article does not dismiss these mechanisms. It argues that they are insufficient because innovation requires people across the system to experiment, learn and accept risk together. People rarely do that on the strength of an org chart alone.

Trust is the missing mechanism. When functions carry different risks, they interpret the same project through different lenses. Product teams want progress. Compliance wants control. Technology teams protect uptime and integration integrity. Senior leaders want proof that the initiative deserves scarce capital and management attention. Structure can convene these groups, but it cannot make them trust one another's intentions, language, or priorities.

Related work in Harvard Business Review on innovation partnerships reaches a similar conclusion. Companies need partners with distinct strengths, but those partnerships often stall because each party brings its own concerns and incentives2. The managerial error is to believe that contract, governance and process can substitute for the social and interpretive work that true collaboration requires.

What bridgers change

The article introduces a specific answer to this recurring failure: the bridger. Bridgers are leaders who help innovations move across boundaries by curating partners, translating across differences and integrating their efforts. They matter because partnerships do not fail only on process. They fail on misread motives, hidden fears, weak ownership and unresolved differences in how success is defined.

The original text is careful not to describe these activities as neat steps. Bridgers move among them throughout the life of the initiative. That is important. A scaling effort does not begin with partner selection, move once into translation and then settle into integration. New stakeholders arrive, risk perceptions shift, priorities change and resistance surfaces at different moments. The bridger keeps the coalition workable as those conditions move.

The deeper contribution of bridgers is relational and political. They create mutual trust so people will take risks together, mutual influence so no single group dominates decisions

prematurely and mutual commitment so energy does not evaporate after setbacks. In practice, that means the bridger is often managing the invisible work that determines whether the visible work can continue.

Curating the right partners

The first job is not broad inclusion for its own sake. It is selecting and attracting the people whose capabilities, authority and support the innovation will need across its life cycle. The source article shows this through the example of Raja Al Mazrouei and the Dubai International Financial Centre [D.I.F.C.] Fintech Hive, where startups, financial institutions and regulators all had to be brought into the same system early enough to make innovation possible.

This part of scaling often receives too little attention because companies prefer to believe that the right stakeholders will engage once the innovation proves itself. But scale does not usually work that way. The more regulated or operationally complex the domain, the more the innovation depends on early involvement from people who can expose constraints before those constraints become blockers.

Research on cross-silo leadership supports this emphasis on people who can connect expertise across organizational divides. Harvard Business School describes such leaders as critical for breaking silos, broadening networks and helping groups learn from people who think differently3. The point is not merely access. It is selecting partners who can make the innovation real in the world it must eventually inhabit.

Translating across different worlds

Once the right people are in the room, misunderstanding becomes the next risk. Different groups interpret the same issue through different experiences and incentives. Engineers hear architecture and feasibility. Business sponsors hear revenue and strategic fit. Compliance teams hear exposure. Operations teams hear instability. External startups hear speed, while incumbents hear liability.

Bridgers do not smooth over those differences with generic language. They expose them, interpret them and make them discussable. The source article's example of Garry Lyons at Mastercard shows this well. He translated emerging technologies into concrete prototypes

and business-relevant stories so that nontechnical leaders and board members could engage with them without feeling excluded. Over time, that translation changed the quality and speed of strategic conversation inside the firm.

This aspect of bridging matters more than many executives assume. Innovation does not stall only because stakeholders disagree. It stalls because they cannot tell whether the disagreement reflects technical limits, risk exposure, bad incentives, or simple failure to understand one another. Cross-boundary research likewise notes that effective collaboration depends on people who ask better questions, take other viewpoints seriously and broaden the network through which understanding travels. Translating is therefore not a communications flourish. It is a way of reducing friction that would otherwise keep the innovation from moving.

Integrating work under pressure

Even when partners understand one another better, the work can still fail if no one integrates it. Someone has to define a shared intention, clarify how decisions will be made, assign roles, align handoffs and keep the effort from dissolving into endless negotiation. The source article calls out this integrating function in its description of how bridgers help collaborators co-create an operating model and define joint criteria for milestones and investment decisions.

The Mastercard Labs example gives this idea a practical form through a shared framework that assessed customer value, technical feasibility and strategic viability. What matters is not the acronym itself. What matters is that different groups now have a common basis for judgment. Without that shared basis, each function keeps re-litigating the project from its own standpoint and the innovation spends more time defending itself than progressing.

This is also why bridgers need a bias toward movement. They cannot allow every disagreement to trigger another cycle of abstract analysis. They must know which disputes require escalation, which can be settled by shared principles and which must simply be decided so the work can continue. That is integration in practice:

> not administrative coordination alone, but disciplined choices that let a coalition operate despite difference

Trust changes risk behavior

The article's strongest insight may be that innovation is not just operationally hard. It is socially risky. People are being asked to back uncertain outcomes, divert attention from core targets, expose themselves to failure and support work that may change their own routines or power. In that setting, trust is not a soft issue. It is a determinant of whether the partnership will carry the weight of experimentation.

This is why formal governance without relationship depth disappoints so often. If the parties do not trust one another, every missed deadline becomes evidence of bad faith, every request for adaptation feels political and every unresolved issue widens defensive behavior. The source article repeatedly shows that bridgers lower this risk by helping people understand one another's environments, constraints and stakes. Once motivations become legible, conflicts become easier to work through without damaging commitment.

A broader view of ecosystem and alliance work also points to the same requirement. Deloitte's descriptions of innovation ecosystems and alliance networks emphasize combining the strengths of multiple stakeholders to accelerate market impact, which only works when the system is designed to connect different interests productively4. Trust is what lets that design operate under strain.

Delta's lesson in integration

The Delta Air Lines example in the source article is especially useful because it shows how resistance often contains useful information rather than simple obstruction. When Delta's information technology group lagged on a biometric boarding initiative, the cause was not laziness or incompetence. The team had lived through a costly outage and now treated stability as its core responsibility. Working with a startup felt dangerous because it threatened the metric by which the team was judged.

Nicole Jones and her team responded by reconnecting the project to a shared ambition and by showing information technology that its role was central, not subordinate. That move did two things. It acknowledged the team's context rather than dismissing it and it turned a reluctant function into a partner with real agency in shaping the initiative. In many organizations, that single shift determines whether a scaling effort accelerates or dies

slowly under polite resistance.

The Initiative Canvas that emerged from this experience is also instructive. It forced partners to define the problem, name deliverables, identify sponsors, surface skeptics and describe what success would look like. This is integration as disciplined conversation. It brings buried assumptions into the open early enough to improve decisions.

How companies build bridgers

The source article is realistic about the fact that bridging is demanding work. It often goes unseen because bridgers make others successful rather than centering themselves. Companies that want more of these leaders therefore need to identify people who already work effectively at boundaries, then give them experiences that deepen that capability rather than trapping them inside one function.

Role rotation, cross-functional assignments, geography changes, external community involvement and exposure to different power structures all help. These experiences build contextual intelligence because they teach future bridgers how different units actually operate, what they value and how decisions get made. They also build the networks that later make partner curation possible.

The organizational support piece is just as important. Senior leaders need to give bridgers air cover, protect them from short-term pressure when the work is still taking shape and make their contribution visible. The source article describes exactly this kind of executive backing at Mastercard and Delta. Without it, bridgers burn out or get penalized for doing necessary but politically inconvenient work.

What leaders should do now

The article's lesson is practical. If scaling depends on cross-boundary collaboration, then companies should stop staffing innovation only for ideation, product design, or technical build. They should also staff for translation, coalition building and integration. That means treating bridgers not as unusual personalities who appear by accident, but as a leadership capability the organization can identify, develop, reward and deploy.

1. Name the functions, stakeholders and outside partners the innovation will depend

on before the prototype stage is complete
2. Assign a leader with authority and credibility across those boundaries, not just within the originating team
3. Surface hidden constraints early, especially risk metrics, legacy system dependencies and unresolved ownership questions
4. Create shared decision criteria so each function does not keep evaluating the project through a private framework
5. Reward the leaders who make collective progress possible, even when their work is less visible than product creation itself

Innovations do not scale because a prototype impressed a room. They scale when organizations create the relationships, translation and integration required to move uncertainty through the system without losing momentum. That is the work bridgers do and it is why they are becoming indispensable in companies that want ideas to survive contact with reality.

- 1Making Collaboration Across Functions A Reality
- 2What Makes Innovation Partnerships Succeed
- 3Cross-Silo Leadership
- 4Innovation Ecosystem

Summary

Promising innovations rarely fail because nobody recognized their technical potential. They fail because organizations treat scale as a downstream execution task after the interesting work is done. In reality, scaling begins when multiple parties with different incentives must trust one another enough to share risk, adjust plans and keep investing effort through conflict. That is why bridgers matter. They connect groups that do not naturally work well together, turn hidden concerns into shared decisions and maintain a common direction when momentum starts to break. Companies that want better innovation outcomes should not rely on structure alone. They should develop leaders who can curate partnerships, translate across boundaries and integrate work in ways that make bold ideas operationally possible