The Ambidextrous Organisation

– when operations and renewal must succeed at the same time

By **Mads Cronquist** · Cronquist Consult ApS

Take a pen and write your name. Now write it again – but with the other hand. Difficult, isn't it?

Most of us have a favourite hand. The other hand has not received the same attention and training. It is the same in organisations: Most are good either at running the existing business efficiently or at creating the new. Very few are equally good at both.

This article is about how management trains the organisation to use both hands – and why it starts with the leader.

Both hands – at the same time

Organisations that master this balancing act are called ambidextrous. The concept comes from research: As early as 1991, James March described the dilemma between exploring new possibilities (exploration) and exploiting and refining what you already know (exploitation). Michael Tushman and Charles O'Reilly later made "the ambidextrous organization" well known.

I wrote about it myself in my CBA thesis "LeaderShop – the key to successful strategy" in 2012. The point that caught my attention then is still the same today: The ambidextrous organisation has room for both maximum process efficiency and capacity for development at the same time – and within one and the same business unit. Not an innovation department on one side of the corridor and operations on the other.

John Kotter described the difference between management and leadership: Management is about creating order in complexity. Leadership is about coping with change. The ambidextrous organisation needs both – and leaders who know when to switch hands.

Operations always win – unless someone acts

The car park for good ideas and intentions is full. Many will recognise it from classic New Year's resolutions, this week's strategy fanfare and the speeches at the town hall meeting. The ideas are there. Putting them into action is the hard part.

The explanation is simple: Operations always have a deadline, a customer waiting and a budget to meet. Renewal rarely does. That is why operations win the battle for time, unless management deliberately makes room for the new.

Roger Martin has described it as a knowledge funnel. At the top you explore the mysteries and work out what the right thing to do is. At the bottom you refine knowledge into stable procedures, where reliability is everything. Many skilled professionals – engineers, finance people, IT specialists – have a natural preference for jumping straight to the bottom of the funnel and finding the right solution. From there it is hard to see the light when you look up. It is a small glowing dot – and rarely a shining guiding star.

This is reinforced by the zero-error attitude that prevails in many operations-driven companies. It is excellent for building bridges that do not collapse. But it blocks experimentation and new thinking, because the top of the funnel is where all the failures are.

> *It is not the ideas that are missing. It is the room to put them into action.*

Ideas, innovation and entrepreneurship

Earlier this year I visited Zenegy, which in 10 years has created an integrated platform for payroll, expenses and accounting that will soon serve 10,000 companies. We talked about the organisational balance between constantly being exploratory and at the same time delivering maximum efficiency.

Zenegy has shown the courage to go from a really good idea through innovation and entrepreneurship to a fully grown company with strong forces on board, both internally and among its owners. That is exactly why it is once again about the balance between the exploratory and the efficient. Strategic considerations may lead a company to deliberately shift its focus towards one extreme or the other for a period. That is perfectly legitimate – as long as it is a conscious choice and not something operations have chosen for you.

What moves us often happens at the outskirts of the known universe, where there is room for both the emergent and a secure base. Those who succeed start from a solid foundation, but also dare to take the leap into deep water.

Innovation in the middle of operations

Renewal does not necessarily require a development department. It can emerge in the middle of operations – if leaders notice it.

When I was head of HR development at Christiansen & Essenbæk, a site manager told me that one of our hourly workers, Kenneth, had invented something clever. He had borrowed his mother's sack truck and built a "double-barrel" rig for drilling holes for anchors in motorway bridges. Several thousand holes had to be drilled, which normally means a lot of bending and lifting a heavy drill every day. The double-barrel drilled two holes at a time, and the drills pulled themselves downwards. It spared backs and reduced wear on the expensive drill bits by more than 50%.

We made a point of telling the good story. His manager made sure Kenneth got some good chocolate and wine – and his mother got a new sack truck. This is user-driven innovation at its best: Not a management project, but an employee who sees a better way, and leaders who notice it and celebrate it.

The same applies in administration. When I was HR director at Eltel Networks in 2007–09, we developed the ECOL system in a couple of months for DKK 75,000. Afterwards the processes took less than half the time, with zero errors and 75% automation. It freed three quarters of those involved for other tasks and saved around EUR 1 million. The renewal did not come from a strategy plan, but from people who were tired of the hassle and dared to try something new. I hardly dare think how quickly and even more effectively we could have built ECOL with AI involved as well.

An organisation cannot disrupt itself

In their brilliant book "The Innovator's Solution", Clayton M. Christensen and Michael Raynor point to an uncomfortable truth: It is very difficult to change the basic assumptions and values embedded in a culture. The new idea gets "hugged" by the mothership until it looks like everything that was there before. In knowledge-heavy organisations, knowledge is power – so new knowledge can be perceived as a threat to territory.

That is why external change also challenges the inner innovation of every single leader. You have to change yourself before you can renew the business.

The book emphasises that you should develop the leaders of the future by giving them tasks and responsibilities for which they are not yet qualified. Some of the old school believe this means throwing the young lions straight into deep water to see if they can swim. It does not. It requires gradual training, systematic onboarding and a management team that takes responsibility for filling the competence gaps. That was the idea behind my LeaderShop model, which I describe in my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (in Danish).

Can one leader learn to use both hands?

Yes – but most have a clear preference for one of them. I know it from myself. As a boy I loved building with LEGO, rarely following the instructions, and once the project was finished, I did not really want to play with it any more. On to the next one. That is also how I am in my working life: A distinctly visionary project person. I have learned operations and can do it perfectly well, but others are far better at it.

That is exactly the point. Innate preferences do not disappear, but the craft can be learned. That is why the ambidextrous organisation is both about the individual leader training their "weak hand" and about the leadership team being deliberately composed and working so that both hands are strong together.

It requires everyone in the organisation to train and develop all the time. Unfortunately, many leaders stop training once they are in the executive chair. Very few football stars have won championships after they stopped training. Ambidexterity can be trained – and it is best trained through learning by doing, as I have described in "Action Learning in Practice". It was also one of Gordon R. Sullivan's points, which I wrote about in "Hope Is Not a Method".

How to train the ambidextrous organisation

Five levers for management:

- **Make the balance a conscious choice:** Decide how much of management's time goes to operations and how much to renewal – and when you deliberately turn up one or the other.
- **Measure both:** If all KPIs and bonuses are about operations here and now, no one will want to work at the top of the funnel, where the failures are.
- **Celebrate innovation in the middle of operations:** Notice your employees' double-barrels, tell the story and make it legitimate to try.
- **Ask "What if...?":** Challenge conventional assumptions – including your own – before experience locks you into the past.
- **Develop leaders before they get the responsibility:** Give them tasks they cannot yet solve – but with training, support and systematic follow-up.

Three questions for the leadership team

Ask yourselves:

- Which is our favourite hand – operations or renewal? And is that a conscious choice?
- When did we last notice and celebrate an employee's "double-barrel"?
- What do we train as a leadership team – beyond what we are already good at?

Conclusion – train the other hand

The ambidextrous organisation is not a structure you introduce. It is a capability you train. Operations will always demand their share, and they should. But if they are allowed to win every time, there will be no room for what must secure the future.

It starts with the leader: With the courage to challenge your own assumptions, the will to train your weak hand and the ability to see – and celebrate – renewal when it emerges in the middle of operations.

So try writing your name with the other hand again. It gets easier every time you practise.

This article builds on my LinkedIn articles "De tre I'er: Ideer, Innovation og Iværksætteri" (2026) and "Kilden til innovation – om disruption og transformation" (2016), my book "Lederens inspirationsguide" (2012) and my CBA thesis "LeaderShop – nøglen til succesfuld strategi" (2012).

Does your organisation need to succeed with both operations and renewal?

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