



Follow the technology or follow the leader? Radical innovation and strategic leadership at a crossroads[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Radical innovation and strategic leadership research share a foundational challenge of theorizing how firms make choices about an uncertain future that shape their competitiveness, survival, and long-term performance. Yet, each field has developed a distinct explanatory signature. Radical innovation research has followed the technology, tracing how the architecture and trajectories of technological discontinuities determine organizational fates. Strategic leadership research has followed the leader(s), tracing how the cognition, composition, and interactions of those at the organizational apex shape organizational choices. We argue that this productive division of labor is being jointly frustrated by four shifts in contemporary organizing: *structurally*, innovation is migrating from firms to ecosystems; *technologically*, AI is transforming both the creative process and the cognitive conditions of leadership; *relationally*, permeable boundaries are redistributing influence across actors; and *culturally*, evaluative criteria are expanding from performance to purpose. We identify the foundational assumptions these shifts unsettle and propose four research frontiers organized around where, how, with whom, and why radical innovation happens. We conclude with key reflections from three foundational scholars on the future of the field.

1. Introduction

Radical innovation redefines the future of organizations, industries, and entire economies (Schumpeter, 1934; Tripsas, 1997). Scholarship on radical innovation revolves around discontinuous changes, often driven by technology, that redefine existing processes, products, and business models (Abernathy and Clark, 1985; Dosi, 1982). These radical innovations promise significant performance improvements or cost reductions (O'Connor and McDermott, 2004; Slater et al., 2014), but also risk rendering established investments obsolete. For instance, rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) are transforming manufacturing and finance, mRNA vaccines are revolutionizing healthcare, and

CRISPR-Cas9 is opening new frontiers in biotechnology. Companies at the forefront of these radical innovations can accrue lasting advantages, while those that fail to adapt may face dire consequences (Henderson, 1993; Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000).

Accounts of radical innovation are often synonymous with the legacies of strategic leaders who spearhead these discontinuities, steer their companies through disruption, and adapt to their consequences. Textbook examples have long documented the intertwined relationship between strategic leaders and radical innovation. Xerox's Ursula Burns, Apple's Steve Jobs, and Ren Zhengfei of Huawei illustrate how strategic leaders are credited with reshaping industries, societies, and everyday experiences. Contemporary cases are no less striking. Jensen Huang of

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Nvidia recognized the potential of graphics processing units for AI long before it became mainstream. Lisa Su engineered a major technical and strategic turnaround that repositioned Advanced Micro Devices as a high-performance computing leader. Özlem Türeci, co-founder and Chief Medical Officer of BioNTech, spearheaded the mRNA vaccine platform that reshaped the global response to COVID-19. These cases point to an enduring association between radical innovation and strategic leadership.

Inspiring as these examples may be, scholarly interest at the intersection of radical innovation and strategic leadership has been more incidental than deliberate. On one hand, innovation scholars contribute valuable insights into intra-organizational (Ettlie et al., 1984; Katila and Ahuja, 2002), inter-organizational (Ahuja, 2000; Schilling and Phelps, 2007), and larger macro forces (Abernathy and Clark, 1985; Nelson and Winter, 1982; Perez, 2002) that foster radical innovation. This tradition has long made insightful contributions to theory and practice, often *without* the explicit need to incorporate strategic leaders into its models. On the other hand, strategic leadership scholars *start* from the premise that an organization's senior-most leaders are vital in strategic choices around innovation (Cortes and Herrmann, 2021; Kurzahls et al., 2020; Steinberg et al., 2022), with radical innovation being but one of many possible firm outcomes they can influence. While both fields have been influential in their own right, there is an opportunity for more deliberate engagement between them, as they can collectively produce insights that neither field, working alone, is positioned to generate.

In this perspective, we advocate for a more concerted discourse at the nexus of radical innovation and strategic leadership, while honoring each field's identity and traditions. Both fields, at their core, grapple with a shared predicament of theorizing choices about an uncertain future that shape competitiveness, survival, and long-term firm performance. Yet each field has developed its own explanatory signature for addressing that predicament. Radical innovation research has typically *followed the technology*, tracing how the nature, trajectory, and architecture of technological discontinuities determine which organizations prosper and which are displaced. Strategic leadership research has *followed the leader*, tracing how those at the apex of organizational hierarchies shape the strategic choices that determine organizational fates.

We argue that this productive division of explanatory labor is now being jointly challenged by several shared shifts shaping the reality of contemporary organizations. *Structurally*, the locus of innovation is migrating from firms to ecosystems, undermining the firm-centered explanatory logic on which both fields rely (Adner and Kapoor, 2010; Altman et al., 2022; Randhawa et al., 2026). *Technologically*, developments like artificial intelligence (AI) are reshaping how radical innovations are conceived and how strategic leaders engage in their pursuit, unsettling the assumption that agency in both domains is exclusively human (Lou et al., 2025; Raisch and Krakowski, 2021; Verganti et al., 2020). *Relationally*, increasingly permeable organizational boundaries are redistributing knowledge creation and leadership influence across actors with no shared hierarchy, stretching the unit of analysis that each field has privileged (Altman and Tushman, 2017; West et al., 2014). *Culturally*, the evaluative criteria by which both innovation and leadership are judged are expanding from only competitive performance to include societal purpose (Henderson, 2021; Krause and Miller, 2020).

These shifts have upended foundational assumptions in both fields, but so far each has responded to them independently. Connecting the two along these shifts can surface research frontiers for answering questions that neither following the technology alone nor the leader alone can fully address. To advance this conversation, we bring together scholars whose vantage points span the emergence and maturation of both fields across multiple decades, ranging from those actively building research programs at this intersection to those who shaped its foundations. These positions are differently placed to see what has settled into orthodoxy and what remains genuinely open, and the dialogue between them runs through every section that follows. We begin by mapping the

most important developments in each field and identifying key theoretical, methodological, and practical challenges to their integration, then advance four research frontiers organized around where innovation happens, how it happens, with whom it happens, and why it happens.

Together, these research frontiers are intended to catalyze a more deliberate and sustained engagement between radical innovation and strategic leadership scholarship. The piece culminates with forward-looking provocations by three co-authors whose foundational contributions have materially shaped these fields: Mary Tripsas, Zeki Simsek, and Donald C. Hambrick.

2. Radical innovation and strategic leadership research

Research in both radical innovation and strategic leadership is evolving in response to fundamental changes in how contemporary organizations function, and those shifts are unsettling the foundational assumptions that have long anchored inquiry in both fields. We organize our discussion around four analytically distinct but empirically intertwined shifts in structural, technological, relational, and cultural assumptions.

Structural shifts concern where strategic influence and innovative activity are located. As the locus of radical innovation migrates from the firm to the ecosystem (Adner, 2017), and when executive authority fragments across hyper-specialized roles (Menz, 2012), the question of who governs innovation, through what mechanisms, and on whose behalf becomes newly complex (Altman and Tushman, 2017). *Technological shifts* concern how (new) technology is used to solve problems and make decisions. When AI transitions from a support tool to a constitutive element of both innovation and strategizing, the cognitive foundations on which both fields were built require reexamination (Simsek et al., 2024). *Relational shifts* concern the scope and permeability of organizational boundaries. When innovation depends on knowledge distributed across actors with no formal hierarchy (Dahlander and Wallin, 2020; West and Bogers, 2014), and when strategic leadership operates through interfaces rather than individual agency (Simsek et al., 2018), the unit of analysis that each field has privileged becomes inadequate. *Cultural shifts* concern the purpose and legitimacy of organizational action. When the criteria for what counts as valuable innovation expand beyond market performance to encompass purpose (Henisz, 2023), and when leaders are expected to serve stakeholders beyond shareholders (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Krause and Miller, 2020), the normative foundations of both fields become upended.

Together, these four shifts in foundational assumptions frame a set of new opportunities for research at the intersection of radical innovation and strategic leadership. As a starting point for understanding the evolution of each, we provide a brief non-exhaustive overview of the intellectual footprint of radical innovation and strategic leadership and summarize how the four shifts are influencing the evolution of each field (see Table 1).

2.1. The enduring legacy of radical innovation research

Research on radical innovation has a long intellectual history, anchored in Schumpeter's (1934) foundational account of creative destruction (Abernathy and Clark, 1985; Dewar and Dutton, 1986; Tripsas, 1997). The field distinctively emphasizes technology and technological change as a paradigm for understanding organizations and the evolution of industries (Agarwal and Tripsas, 2008; Dosi, 1982; Sood and Tellis, 2005). Radical innovation is defined not by improvement but by discontinuity (Garcia and Calantone, 2002). It often renders existing solutions obsolete rather than refining them (Freixanet and Rialp, 2022; Slater et al., 2014).

This focus on technological discontinuity also distinguishes radical innovation from the related but distinct concept of disruptive innovation (Christensen, 1997). Whereas radical innovation is defined by the magnitude of technological change and its capacity to render incumbent

Table 1
Key shifts in radical innovation and strategic leadership research.

Shift	Radical Innovation	Strategic Leadership
Structural	<i>From Firm to Ecosystem</i> Innovation increasingly depends on coordination among interdependent actors beyond firm boundaries (Adner, 2017; Baldwin et al., 2024)	<i>From a Compact C-Suite to Hyper-Specialization</i> Executive teams are fragmenting into differentiated CxO configurations that reallocate attention and authority (Georgakakis et al., 2022; Menz, 2012)
Technological	<i>From Human Search to Artificial Intelligence</i> AI increasingly performs the inventive operations of generation, search, recombination, and evaluation once carried out by people (Agrawal et al., 2024; Qu et al., 2026)	<i>From Bounded Rationality to Augmented Strategizing</i> AI redraws rather than removes the cognitive bounds under which strategic leaders operate, easing the limits that once made executive characteristics explanatory (Lou et al., 2025)
Relational	<i>From Closed to Open Knowledge Creation</i> Innovation is migrating to distributed networks of actors with no shared hierarchy or employer (Dahlander and Wallin, 2020; West and Bogers, 2014)	<i>From Individual Leaders to Leadership Interfaces</i> Leadership is increasingly understood as interactions among multiple actors, not the province of individual executives (Asad, 2025; Simsek et al., 2018)
Cultural	<i>From Performance to Purpose</i> The criteria for radicalness are expanding beyond technological discontinuity to include societal transformation (Falcke et al., 2024; Voegtlin and Scherer, 2017)	<i>From Strategic Choice to Societal Voice</i> Leaders are increasingly expected to serve broader stakeholders beyond conventional economic mandates (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Krause and Miller, 2020)

competences obsolete, disruptive innovation is defined by a market trajectory rather than a technological one. Disruptive entrants take root in low-end or previously non-consuming segments with offerings that are initially inferior on the attributes mainstream customers value, then move upmarket to displace incumbents (Christensen et al., 2018). The two dimensions are independent such that a radical, competence-destroying technology may well reinforce incumbents rather than unseat them, while a disruptive innovation may involve little technological novelty. Our focus throughout is on radicalness in the technological sense.

Technology sits at the center of the radical innovation models, and from them follows the field's most durable insight, that the assets, routines, and commitments that make firms successful under existing conditions become liabilities when those conditions are overturned. This logic has been captured as competence destruction (Tushman and Anderson, 1986), architectural displacement (Henderson and Clark, 1990), cognitive inertia (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000), and organizational identity threat (Tripsas, 2009). It has been documented as established firms faltered across industries such as photolithography (Henderson and Clark, 1990), typesetters (Tripsas, 1997), and photography (Tripsas and Gavetti, 2000).

A central concern has therefore been how firms generate radical innovation rather than merely respond to it, through distant search that draws on unfamiliar knowledge or recombines existing knowledge in novel ways, with returns to distance that rise and then fall rather than increasing without limit (Ahuja et al., 2008; Fleming and Sorenson, 2001; Katila and Ahuja, 2002). In addition to conceptualizing distance as spanning technological boundaries, scholars have shown that breakthroughs are more likely when firms span organizational boundaries (Rosenkopf and Nerkar, 2001), divisional boundaries within a firm (Miller et al., 2007), and public-private boundaries (Henderson and

Cockburn, 1994). Although established firms often struggle with new generations of technology, research has also found that organizational design levers can improve performance (Gilbert, 2005). For example, by separating old and new technology development efforts, firms can create a more innovative culture and mindset, resulting in what Tushman and O'Reilly (1996), building on the distinction of March (1991) between exploration and exploitation, call an ambidextrous organization. Ultimately, firms operate in a world organized around established technologies, while facing the threat of disruption, or being that threat themselves (Ansari et al., 2016).

Although this foundational research remains indispensable, the conditions under which radical innovation is produced and governed have changed in ways that extend beyond the scope of these earlier frameworks. Below, we elaborate how the structural, technological, relational, and cultural shifts are unsettling long-held assumptions and opening avenues for theoretical development.

2.1.1. Structural shift: From firm to ecosystem

For much of the field's history, the central questions of what drives radical innovation and why incumbents struggle with technological change were posed and answered at the level of the individual firm. That framing, while foundational, no longer fully accounts for where radical innovation increasingly originates or how it is governed (Altman et al., 2022). Across industries, innovation now depends on system-level coordination among interdependent actors, as no single actor holds all the capabilities, resources, or institutional positioning required to drive complex technological and market transformations (Hannah and Eisenhardt, 2018; Kapoor, 2018). This dependence on coordination beyond the single firm is not itself new. The innovation systems tradition long emphasized that technological innovation arises from interactions among firms, universities, and public institutions, and from the learning these interactions generate (Freeman, 1987; Lundvall, 1992). Contemporary ecosystem research shares this premise but reframes it by emphasizing interdependence and value co-creation among autonomous actors (Thomas and Ritala, 2022). The difference is one of degree that becomes a difference in kind, since interdependence now reaches into radical innovation itself and not only its diffusion.

Inter-firm modularity, where end consumers combine components from multiple firms to create a system-level solution, has existed for decades in industries such as stereo systems (Langlois and Robertson, 1992) and telephony (Staudenmayer et al., 2005). This phenomenon, which is prevalent in many ecosystem governance structures (Adner and Kapoor, 2010; Jacobides et al., 2018), is often accompanied by a locus of radical innovation that extends well beyond the boundaries of any single organization (Baldwin et al., 2024; Walrave et al., 2018). Ecosystems are characterized by modularity, complementarity, and non-generic interdependencies that must be deliberately configured and sequenced (Jacobides et al., 2018; Kapoor, 2018). In some cases, a focal or orchestrator firm assumes responsibility for articulating the system architecture and specifying the interfaces required to support coordinated innovation (Reiter et al., 2024). In others, such as the residential solar power ecosystem, a decentralized set of players comes together to deliver solutions, with firms entering and exiting different components to exploit shifting bottlenecks (Hannah and Eisenhardt, 2018).

These coordination challenges intensify when the innovation in question is radical. Here the value architecture is emergent rather than established, complementors face deeper uncertainty about returns, and the interdependencies often lack historical precedent. Even when a champion organization exists, complementor firms may have little incentive to commit to an unproven technology, particularly if the legitimacy of the initiative and the alignment of internal and external stakeholders remain contested (Ellis et al., 2025). This difficulty is compounded when ecosystem-level innovation requires collaboration among firms accustomed to leading their own domains, since reaching agreement on who leads the alignment and who accepts a subordinate role is a persistent source of paralysis (Adner, 2016). Much of what

scholars have attributed to firm-level strategic choice or firm-level inertia may, in ecosystem contexts, be better understood as a coordination or orchestration problem that no single firm can resolve unilaterally, and that calls for leadership exercised through orchestration rather than command (Altman and Tushman, 2017). The movement is not unidirectional, since some firms integrate vertically and some ecosystems close, and firms often keep core knowledge in-house even while outsourcing production, with the balance depending on product architecture (Brusoni et al., 2001), as recent shifts in electric-vehicle production illustrate.

2.1.2. *Technological shift: From human cognition to artificial intelligence*

Radical innovation has always relied on human cognition. That is now changing, as AI, and especially generative AI, becomes an active participant in the inventive process itself. Its promise for radical innovation lies in the prospect of a technology that does not merely yield breakthroughs but accelerates the process by which they are found. AI now performs operations once carried out by humans. It generates ideas, raising their average creativity even as its effect on the very best remains unsettled (Pescher and Tellis, 2025); it guides search by predicting, across a vast combinatorial space, which possibilities are worth the cost of testing (Agrawal et al., 2024); it recombines previously unconnected knowledge, bridging domains to surface combinations that were once infeasible (Qu et al., 2026); and it evaluates alternatives at a level approaching expert judgment (Csaszar et al., 2024), though only when its inconsistent individual assessments are aggregated (Doshi et al., 2025).

This shift, however, is not a uniform gain. Its effect on radical innovation is differentiated rather than uniform, benefiting some firms and types of AI while doing little for others (Grashof and Kopka, 2023), and reviews across the innovation process find its effects stage-dependent and fragmented (Mariani et al., 2023; Vallé et al., 2026). On present evidence, AI improves performance on tasks inside its capabilities but degrades it on others of seemingly similar difficulty, a jagged frontier that field experiments have only begun to map (Dell'Acqua et al., 2026). The pattern emerging so far is that AI is most capable where problems are well-structured and weakest at the open-ended exploration radical innovation depends on, with the most recent frontier models showing a marked weakness in managing strategic uncertainty (Allen and McDonald, 2026). These observations describe the current generation of models, which continue to advance, though the gap between structured competence and open-ended exploration remains what matters most for radical innovation.

These developments expose the limits of the field's existing apparatus. From absorptive capacity (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990) to search theory (Katila and Ahuja, 2002) to technology life cycles (Anderson and Tushman, 1990), that apparatus was built for a world in which the cognition driving innovation was human and the pace of change was bounded by human processing speed. Search, recombination, and evaluation are now partly performed by machines, so the unit that produces radical innovation extends beyond the firm and its people to a configuration of human and machine cognition, each with its own strengths and blind spots.

2.1.3. *Relational shift: From closed to open knowledge creation*

Radical innovation has traditionally been understood to depend on proprietary knowledge generated within the firm. Increasingly, it relies on knowledge created across organizational boundaries, drawn from and built with external actors whose contributions no single firm owns or controls (Baldwin and Von Hippel, 2011; Laursen and Salter, 2006; West and Bogers, 2014). Who radical innovation happens with, and through what relationships, is being redrawn. The shift is not toward more openness alone but toward different forms of it (Dahlander et al., 2021).

These relationships draw on different kinds of contributors. Firms innovate with users, who supply not only needs but solutions, at times

developing innovations themselves before producers do (Chatterji and Fabrizio, 2014). They organize contribution from distributed communities through platforms, technological architectures whose open interfaces let independent innovators build on a shared core without central direction (Gawer, 2014; Kretschmer et al., 2022). They co-create core technological components with independent developers through open-source arrangements, in which external contributors inspect, modify, and extend the underlying technology (Hoffmann et al., 2024; Nagle, 2019). And they draw on universities and public research, channeling scientific knowledge into commercial innovation across the public-private boundary (Perkmann et al., 2021). Across these forms, what shapes innovation is not only access to external contributors but the relational positions they occupy within and across communities (Dahlander and Frederiksen, 2012).

This relational shift brings challenges of its own. Drawing on knowledge the firm does not own exposes it to appropriability risks, since the knowledge that makes a firm worth collaborating with is also the knowledge most easily lost (Laursen and Salter, 2014). The difficulty is therefore less about whether to open up than about how leaders govern these relationships, who gets access, on what terms, and who captures the value created when contributions are shared (Felin and Zenger, 2014). What sustains contribution over time is not openness but the way control is structured around it (O'Mahony and Karp, 2022). Governing them well also means recognizing that such relationships have a lifecycle, since the interdependencies they create across firms and technologies are not easily unwound when they end (Holgersson et al., 2022).

2.1.4. *Cultural shift: From performance to purpose*

Radical innovation has been pursued and judged by financial criteria such as shareholder value, profitability, and survival (Freixanet and Rialp, 2022; Hill and Rothaermel, 2003; Sorescu et al., 2003). What is changing is not the technological character of radical innovation but the broadening of the criteria by which radical technologies are judged. Increasingly, radical technologies are directed at societal challenges such as climate, health, and sustainable production (Falcke et al., 2024), and evaluated by their contribution to those challenges as well as the harm they may cause (Voegtlin and Scherer, 2017). This does not mean that financial performance ceases to matter. In the innovation-intensive, long-horizon settings where radical technologies take shape, the pursuit of societal value *and* of profit often proves complementary (Gartenberg, 2023).

This reorientation stretches the field's frameworks beyond their original purpose. They treat the market as the arbiter of value, explaining how radical technologies disrupt industries and how firms capture the returns. They have much less to say about innovation whose direction is a societal choice rather than a market outcome (Schot and Steinmueller, 2018), whose value lies in consequences the market does not price, and which is organized as much by purpose as by market signals (Henderson, 2021). Directing innovation toward societal ends also raises questions the field has barely begun to address, such as who sets those ends, how competing societal claims are adjudicated, and how strategic leaders legitimate the direction they pursue.

2.2. *The enduring legacy of strategic leadership research*

Leadership is one of the most studied aspects of organizations (Eva et al., 2025; Liden et al., 2025). While leadership presents itself in different parts of an organization, strategic leadership as the field of study “focuses on the executives who have overall responsibility for an organization — their characteristics, what they do, how they do it, and particularly, how they affect organizational outcomes” (Finkelstein et al., 2009, p. 4). Building on this, Crossland et al. (2024) define it as the study of an organization's most senior decision-makers, including how they set vision, manage stakeholders, shape product-market strategies, and configure organizational structure.

The executives who are the subject of strategic leadership research can be individuals (e.g., chief executive officers or division general managers), groups (e.g., top management teams, TMTs), or other governance bodies (e.g., boards of directors) (Samimi et al., 2022), with recent extensions also arguing for the role of middle managers (Heyden and Ambrosini, 2026; Tarakci et al., 2023). Strategic leaders exert disproportionate effects on the fates of their organizations (Quigley and Hambrick, 2015; Withers and Fitza, 2017). This association holds across levels of the executive hierarchy, evident in how CEOs envision and champion radical change (Ardito et al., 2025; Howard et al., 2024), how TMTs allocate attention and resources toward radical initiatives (Wilden et al., 2023), and how boards of directors govern the risks these commitments entail (Genin et al., 2023; Mack et al., 2025).

Much of strategic leadership research has leaned on upper echelons theory (UET), formalized by Hambrick and Mason (1984). Serving as the legacy framework within the discourse on strategic leadership, UET traces its intellectual lineage back to the Carnegie School (Cyert and March, 1963; March and Simon, 1958), incorporating the concept of bounded rationality of decision-makers operating at the strategic level (Child, 1972, 1997). Accordingly, strategic leaders operate under bounded rationality; their psychological, behavioral, and social attributes act as lenses that shape their attention patterns, beliefs, and strategic choices (Bromiley and Rau, 2016; Georgakakis et al., 2023), and in turn shape organizational outcomes, including those pertaining to radical forms of innovation (Genin et al., 2023; Kraft et al., 2025; Lee et al., 2025).

The evolution of the field is well documented across multiple reviews and meta-analyses (Krause et al., 2022; Pavićević et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2024). The field's central premise that strategic leaders' choices explain meaningful variation in organizational outcomes is now being tested by the same four shifts we traced above in the radical innovation literature. We proceed to discuss four shifts that are reshaping those foundations and carry direct implications for how strategic leadership intersects with radical innovation.

2.2.1. Structural shift: From the core executive team to C-suite hyper-specialization

In recent years, the composition of the C-suite has undergone a visible structural change. Where executive teams once consisted of a relatively small number of core roles supporting the CEO (Roberto, 2003), such as Chief Financial Officer (Shi et al., 2019), Chief Operating Officer (Marcel, 2009), and occasionally Chief Marketing Officer (Nath and Mahajan, 2008), the modern C-suite has proliferated into a far more differentiated and specialized configuration through the creation of a new range of CxO roles (Georgakakis et al., 2022). The creation of such roles as Chief Digital Officer (Firk et al., 2021), Chief Innovation Officer (Bendig et al., 2023), Chief Strategy Officer (Menz and Scheef, 2014), and Chief Purpose Officer (Steller and Björck, 2025) reflects adaptations to the heightened demands placed on executive roles (Hambrick et al., 2005), organizational complexity, and changes in the discretion of CEOs (Hambrick, 2007). These roles also signal to stakeholders that the organization is committed to a strategic focus on contemporary challenges such as digitalization or sustainability.

Proliferating titles are blurring the definitional boundaries of the top management team (TMT), making the already unresolved question of who ought to be included in the TMT even more pressing for both theorizing and measurement (Krause et al., 2022; Van Doorn et al., 2022). The distribution of power across an increasingly specialized C-suite raises questions about whether CEO influence is being diluted or concentrated. These adaptations were designed to manage complexity within the firm, and they sit awkwardly with the cross-boundary coordination, tolerance for ambiguity, and decision-making speed that radical innovation demands. Whether the specialized C-suite is well positioned for the boundary-spanning demands of ecosystem-level radical innovation is a question the field has only begun to examine.

2.2.2. Technological shift: From bounded rationality to augmented strategizing

UET builds on the strengths and limitations of bounded human ability (Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Strategic leaders are boundedly rational and cannot attend to everything, perceive without selection, or process information without bias (Pavićević et al., 2025). Therefore, their personal characteristics act as lenses that filter what they notice and how they interpret it, and it is through these lenses that who a leader is comes to shape what the organization does (Bromiley and Rau, 2016; Crossland et al., 2024). This bounded rationality is the very condition that makes executive characteristics explanatory. As firms embed AI-enabled systems into strategy making, the attention, perception, and information processing that bounded rationality describes are increasingly augmented by, or delegated to, machines. For example, Lou et al. (2025) find that firms with greater AI investment are better positioned for exploratory innovation following CEO turnover, partly through AI's role in mitigating the myopic management and information overload that new leaders typically face.

While earlier technologies assisted strategic leaders as tools they directed (Kurzahls et al., 2020), AI may ease the limits that once made executive characteristics explanatory (Chatterji et al., 2026). As those limits loosen, a new capability emerges at the human-machine intersection, one largely unrelated to the qualities that traditionally made leaders effective (Krakowski et al., 2023). Influence shifts away from the analytic work AI increasingly absorbs and toward the relational and judgmental work it does not, the forming of coalitions, the exercise of judgment under genuine uncertainty, and the legitimization of radical innovation to those it unsettles.

This technological shift redraws the boundaries of human rationality. Some old constraints fade as search costs fall and memory matters less. Others replace them, the opacity of how AI models reason, the bias built into the data they are trained on, and the new scarcity of attention once analysis becomes cheap to produce. Strategic leadership now works under a re-bounded rationality, a different set of limits that come from the technology itself, where the bounds that gave executive characteristics their explanatory power have changed rather than vanished.

2.2.3. Relational shift: From individual leaders to leadership interfaces

Strategic leadership research has long privileged the individual leader. The field's central constructs, from CEO personal attributes to top executive demographics to managerial discretion, locate the source of strategic influence in the attributes and choices of discrete actors at the top of the organizational hierarchy. There is growing recognition, however, that strategic leadership is not only about who strategic leaders are, but also about how they act and interact with others in decision-making (Crossland et al., 2024; Simsek et al., 2018).

This shift toward an interactionist perspective highlights the distributed nature of strategic leadership, viewing it as an unfolding set of actions and interactions among multiple actors involved in strategic choice (Georgakakis et al., 2022; Junge et al., 2025; Van Doorn et al., 2022). This departure from examining lone actors has been captured by a budding research stream examining strategic leader interfaces (Asad, 2025; Firk et al., 2022; Raes et al., 2011). Simsek et al. (2018, p. 283) define strategic leader interfaces as “the interdependent social situations in which the attributes, aspirations, and/or activities of strategic leaders and/or salient stakeholders come into contact with and influence each other.” These interfaces can be internal, such as those among a CEO, the TMT, and boards of directors (e.g., CEO–TMT, TMT–board, CEO–TMT–board), or external, such as those with investors, regulators, alliance partners, or community actors.

Without acknowledging these interfaces, research risks overlooking the various actors, both within and outside organizational boundaries, who may exert greater influence on strategic choices than previously assumed. As strategic influence migrates from individual actors to distributed interfaces, the field must ask whether the attributes of individual executives remain the primary drivers of radical innovation, or

whether the features of strategic leadership interfaces operate as a distinct explanatory level.

2.2.4. *Cultural shift: From strategic choice to societal voice*

At the heart of strategic leadership research is the premise that executives shape organizational performance through the choices they make, and the field has built a formidable body of evidence showing how and why (Crossland et al., 2024; Samimi et al., 2022). The normative foundation, stated or unstated, has been that strategic leaders primarily serve the economic interests of the firm and its owners. This premise is now being supplemented by a broader and increasingly heterogeneous set of expectations.

Scholars increasingly study the antecedents and implications of strategic leaders who visibly play a larger societal role (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021; Wowak et al., 2022). This emerging theme introduces a more normative dimension to traditional models of strategic leadership, where executives may serve as societal leaders responsible for a multitude of non-traditional stakeholders (Krause and Miller, 2020). These new executive roles expose new flanks of complexity. For instance, former Danone CEO Emmanuel Faber saw his public commitment to stakeholder capitalism become entangled with investor conflict, contributing to his departure from the company in 2021. Similarly, the co-CEOs of Ben & Jerry's have faced periodic tensions with parent company Unilever over their consistent advocacy for social movements.

Shareholder value remains central to the firm strategic leaders serve. However, legitimacy and survival increasingly depend on how leaders answer to stakeholders beyond shareholders. This line of inquiry has also drawn attention to the political ideologies of strategic leaders and the recognition that strategic choice is not exerted in a socio-political vacuum (Chin et al., 2013; Gupta et al., 2025); indeed, strategic leaders today find themselves under growing pressure to speak publicly on political and social issues (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021). This shift reinforces the premise that executives' personal values are central to the UET model (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), but it also calls attention to the question of whose values strategic leaders serve and amplify through their choices.

3. Productive tensions and challenges to integration

The preceding discussion provided salient research themes in both radical innovation and strategic leadership fields, as both fields respond to broader shifts in structural, technological, relational, and cultural assumptions of contemporary organizing. These themes intersect in ways that open fertile ground for relevant and timely research. However, such research also entails navigating several theoretical, empirical, and practical challenges. We embrace these productive tensions and argue that, if engaged deliberately, they can enable cross-fertilization and open new pathways.

3.1. *Theoretical challenges*

Bridging radical innovation and strategic leadership invites at least three interrelated theoretical challenges (Simsek et al., 2022). When distinct fields intersect, their foundational assumptions often diverge. Such differences impede theoretical integration and risk producing parallel but disconnected lines of reasoning (Modell et al., 2017; Zahra and Newey, 2009). Some of the most notable divides concern assumptions about agency, the unit of analysis, and the nature of explanatory mechanisms.

3.1.1. *Agency*

Innovation scholarship typically treats novelty as an emergent, socio-technical outcome arising from users, entrepreneurial entrants, complementors, and research labs, increasingly shaped by digital infrastructures and platform governance (Baldwin and Von Hippel, 2011; West et al., 2014; Yoo et al., 2024). Focal firms participate in, rather

than control, the recombination and coordination that yield radical innovations. This reflects the field's explanatory signature: it follows the technology, and in doing so locates agency in the emergent dynamics of technological systems rather than in the decisions of individual actors.

Strategic leadership research, by contrast, follows the leader(s), and in doing so concentrates agency in the attributes and choices of those at the organizational apex. We suggest that the reconciliation lies not in choosing between distributed and leader-centered accounts, but in reconceptualizing what leadership agency means under the conditions we have described. In ecosystem contexts, leaders may not control innovation outcomes directly (Altman and Tushman, 2017). But they shape the conditions under which radical innovation becomes possible through agenda-setting, interface design, attention allocation, and the governance of knowledge flows across organizational boundaries.

3.1.2. *Unit of analysis*

A second tension concerns where each field locates the phenomena of interest. Innovation scholarship tends to operate at macro levels, examining ecosystems, industries, and inter-firm networks where technological evolution unfolds through punctuated shifts that reshape competencies and system boundaries (Dosi, 1982; Schilling, 2015; Sood and Tellis, 2005). Strategic leadership research, by contrast, locates its explanations at the micro and *meso* levels within firms, examining how top managers and boards perceive, interpret, respond to, and occasionally anticipate such disruptions (Gerstner et al., 2013; Maula et al., 2013). Thus, their meaningful integration might require cross-level and multilevel perspectives that connect micro processes of leadership cognition and behavior to macro outcomes such as shifts in technological trajectories, industry architectures, and ecosystem dynamics. Such level-informed theorizing could be especially generative to illuminate feedback loops, showing, for example, how macro technological shifts shape radical innovation through their influence on the discretion, attentional demands, and power of strategic leaders.

3.1.3. *Fragmented mechanisms*

A further challenge lies in the fragmentation of core theoretical mechanisms. Each domain advances multiple explanatory logics, including behavioral, cognitive, motivational, institutional, and structural, yet the underlying mechanisms are rarely examined explicitly in individual studies and systematically across studies. Consider, for instance, the claim that a CEO's psychological characteristics drive radical innovation. The proposed mechanism might invoke attention allocation toward bold initiatives, risk tolerance in resource commitment, or the social dynamics of a TMT that defers to a dominant leader. Each of these is a plausible pathway, but they carry different observable implications and different boundary conditions. Without specifying which mechanism is operative and what evidence would distinguish among them, the field cannot determine whether it is explaining the same phenomenon through genuinely different causal pathways or merely relabeling the same process.

To us, the diversity of theoretical mechanisms across the two fields is not inherently problematic (Bunge, 2004; Cornelissen and Werner, 2026). What is problematic is that they mostly remain unobserved and fragmented, with little systematic comparison or validation, constraining the development of more precise and cumulative explanation (Davis, 2006). Under-specified mechanisms, those invoked by name but not traced through observable steps or empirical identification, limit conceptual precision and create the illusion of explanatory depth (Bunge, 2004; Gross, 2009; Hedström and Ylikoski, 2010). Future efforts may involve identifying categories of distinct mechanisms, organizing observable implications of specific mechanisms, and specifying the boundary conditions under which mechanisms are expected to operate (Cornelissen and Werner, 2026). Moreover, advances in computational social science, such as agent-based simulations and machine learning techniques, are opening new avenues for examining those mechanisms and for evaluating their plausibility under varying theoretical

assumptions (Fioretti, 2013). A more precise approach would begin not with the label, whether cognitive, motivational, or institutional, but with the observable sequence of events through which a strategic leader's choice translates into an innovation outcome, specifying at each step what must be true for the mechanism to operate and what evidence would distinguish it from competing accounts.

3.2. Empirical challenges

Researchers seeking to bridge radical innovation and strategic leadership encounter methodological challenges rooted in a narrow contextual focus, entrenched research conventions, and construct inflation.

3.2.1. Methodological focus

Research on radical innovation draws on both quantitative and qualitative traditions, but some of its most influential contributions have relied on rich qualitative designs, including comparative case studies, historical analyses, and longitudinal fieldwork, that are well suited to tracing the emergent, non-linear processes through which technological change unfolds (Lifshitz-Assaf, 2018; Tripsas, 2009). Strategic leadership research, by contrast, typically leverages longitudinal archival panels to establish whether and to what extent CEO attributes and top-team composition predict firm-level outcomes (Quigley and Hambrick, 2015). Each tradition has produced important knowledge. Yet work at the intersection tends to draw more heavily on the methodological conventions of strategic leadership than those of radical innovation research. This has produced valuable large-scale evidence on whether leadership characteristics predict innovation outcomes but has been less well equipped to illuminate the causal mechanisms, actor-level interactions, and emergent processes through which leadership and innovation intersect.

The way forward requires combining both strengths. Process-oriented studies should uncover whether and how strategic leaders pay attention, allocate resources, and create meaning during periods of radical technological change (for notable exceptions, see Vuori and Huy, 2016, 2022; Vuori and Tushman, 2024). Large-scale analyses, in turn, should evaluate when and where such leadership actions translate into sustained innovative performance across firms, industries, and institutional contexts. Methods such as configurational comparative approaches (Fiss, 2011), comparative historical analysis, simulation modeling (Harrison et al., 2007), and multilevel modeling techniques (Hitt et al., 2007; Mathieu and Chen, 2011) offer significant potential for capturing the causal asymmetries and cross-level dynamics inherent in the co-evolution of radical innovation and strategic leadership.

3.2.2. Contextual blind spots

A second empirical limitation concerns the range of contexts that have informed most work at this intersection, which remains disproportionately anchored in large, publicly traded corporations within mature economies (Cortes and Herrmann, 2021), while radical innovation research has additionally drawn heavily on outlier case studies of high-growth ventures. Both sampling strategies, while productive, leave underexplored the conditions under which radical innovation and strategic leadership intersect in the vast middle ground of established but non-public firms, smaller organizations, and non-Western institutional contexts.

These intersections are likely to differ fundamentally in smaller firms, where a single leader's discretion may be greater but resources are thinner; in privately held organizations, where the pressures of quarterly reporting do not constrain long-term innovation commitments; and in non-Western institutional contexts, where the relationship between state, firm, and innovation follows different logics entirely. Research on China is among the most burgeoning of these areas, yet the strategic leadership assumptions on which much of this literature rests may not travel intact to firms operating within its distinctive corporate-

governance and state-firm arrangements. If the field's empirical base remains confined to a narrow set of organizational forms and institutional settings, the theories it produces will reflect the boundary conditions of those settings whether or not scholars acknowledge the limitation. Broadening the contextual range is not a matter of inclusivity for its own sake but of building theories that are more generalizable and can inform a more diverse set of realities.

3.2.3. Construct inflation

Empirical work is further complicated by construct inflation in both fields. In innovation research, definitional pluralism has long persisted, as terms such as radical, discontinuous, breakthrough, architectural, and disruptive are often used interchangeably to approximate the same idea (Garcia and Calantone, 2002). Strategic leadership research faces a parallel problem (Neely et al., 2020), caused by the sheer range of constructs that span diverse dimensions of a leader, including demographic (e.g., age, tenure, career horizon), psychological (e.g., states, traits, biases, emotions, cognition), governance (e.g., duality, independence, equity ownership), and social (e.g., interfaces, formal and informal networks). The result is the familiar problem of "jingle" and "jangle" fallacies (Shaw et al., 2018), where similar labels denote different concepts or different labels describe the same concept. When two fields converge, this problem compounds. A researcher attempting to study how CEO cognition shapes radical innovation must simultaneously navigate ambiguity in what "radical" means, what "cognition" encompasses, and what counts as a leadership effect versus an organizational or environmental one. Without greater conceptual precision, the fields risk not just empirical contradiction but the appearance of cumulation where none exists.

3.3. Practical challenges

A third set of challenges arises not from theory or data but from the institutional and disciplinary structures that shape how scholarship is produced, evaluated, and rewarded. The two traditions originate from different intellectual lineages. Research on radical innovation has deep roots in economics, industrial organization, and policy studies, where the emphasis lies on market dynamics, technological trajectories, and system-level change (Lundvall, 1992; Schumpeter, 1934; Teece, 1986). Strategic leadership evolved from the Carnegie tradition, which emphasized bounded rationality and the social psychological foundations of managerial decision-making (Cyert and March, 1963; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). These lineages yield distinct research processes, preferred methods, and standards of evidence.

Disciplinary architecture reinforces this divide. Journal specializations channel innovation and leadership research into separate publication outlets with different reviewer pools, different methodological expectations, and different citation networks. Doctoral training tends to deepen expertise within one tradition rather than build competence across both. Tenure and promotion criteria rarely reward the slow, uncertain work of integration over the faster returns of contributing to an established conversation within a single field. These are concrete concerns about which questions get asked, which collaborations form, and which papers get written.

We would be remiss if we did not mention that the collaboration underpinning this perspective piece has itself required the authors to surface deep-seated assumptions, negotiate a common vocabulary, and make deliberate choices about which literatures to draw on, a process that mirrors the broader integration challenge we describe. From this firsthand experience, we acknowledge that bridging this divide will require sustained effort and time. Joint conferences, cross-disciplinary doctoral consortia, and editorial spaces that welcome hybrid designs can help scholars develop shared expectations. Interdisciplinary teams that bring together economists, psychologists, and management scholars are well positioned to examine how radical innovation and strategic leadership interact across levels of analysis. But such efforts will remain

episodic unless the incentive structures of academic careers are adjusted to support them. Importantly, the same developments that create challenges for integration also create traction for it. The four shifts we have traced do not merely unsettle each field's assumptions in parallel. They produce empirical phenomena that cannot be adequately explained by following each perspective in isolation, including ecosystem coordination failures, AI-augmented decision-making, distributed knowledge governance, and the political contestation of innovation purpose.

4. Promising research opportunities

The four shifts we have traced each open new research frontiers (see Fig. 1). Across both fields, these developments cluster around four fundamental questions that each field is being forced to revisit, namely *where* innovation happens, *how* it happens, *with whom* it happens, and *why* it happens. We organize our research agenda around these questions, consistent with this Special Issue's aim of identifying new pathways through which strategic leaders engage with radical innovation. Each frontier pairs a shift in radical innovation with a corresponding shift in strategic leadership, surfaces the assumption their convergence unsettles, and advances research questions designed to move both fields forward. Table 2 summarizes these questions.

4.1. Research frontier I: Where innovation happens

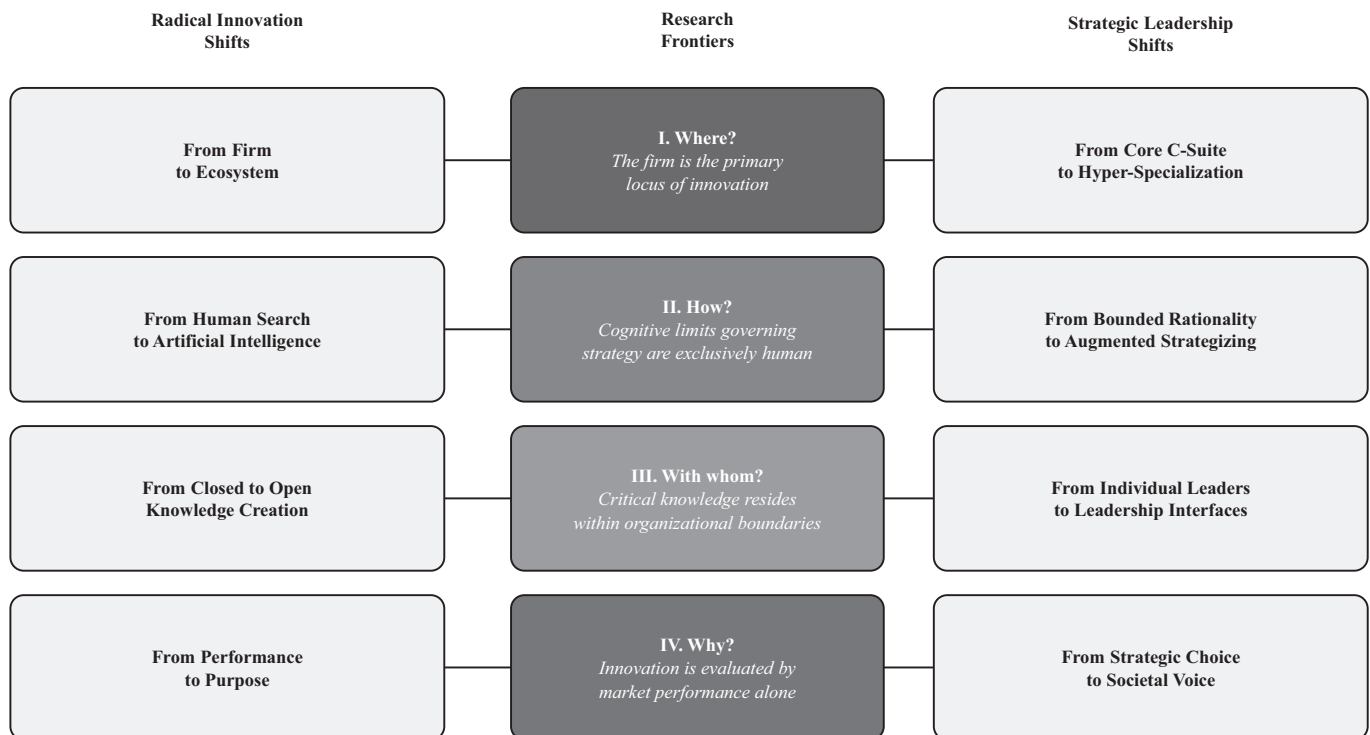
Drawing on capabilities from beyond the firm is not new; inter-organizational collaboration has long supported radical innovation (Powell et al., 1996; Rothwell, 1994). What has changed is the structure of these arrangements. Ecosystem interdependencies are increasingly non-contractual and reciprocal rather than the sequential, contractually governed flows of traditional supply chains, and as problems grow more complex, single organizations are less able to solve them alone (Adner, 2017; Kapoor, 2018). Radical innovation is increasingly pursued across ecosystems, even as internally the C-suite fragments into hyper-

specialized roles. These two structural shifts, one outward in the locus of innovation, one inward in the architecture of executive teams, are rarely examined together, but they are interdependent.

As the locus of radical innovation expands beyond the single firm, the demands on leadership are changing (Altman et al., 2022; Altman and Tushman, 2017; Shylina et al., 2024). Leaders increasingly need to coordinate across boundaries without hierarchical authority and align actors with heterogeneous interests (Goodrich and Altman, 2024). Whether the reconfigured C-suite is suited to these demands is unclear. For example, a Chief Innovation Officer appointed to manage firm-level complexity may be poorly equipped, or ideally positioned, to lead ecosystem-level coordination. The field cannot yet say which, because innovation scholars have studied ecosystem structure without asking who leads it, and strategic leadership scholars have studied executive team design without attending to the ecosystem contexts in which those teams increasingly operate.

Several questions follow from examining the two shifts together. First, does C-suite specialization facilitate the boundary-spanning leadership that ecosystem orchestration demands, or fragment attention and authority when integration across boundaries matters most? Second, when ecosystem leadership is collective and negotiated rather than exercised from the apex of a single firm, established models of CEO influence and TMT composition lose explanatory power; this raises a prior question of what determines whether radical innovation is best pursued within the firm or across an ecosystem, and how leadership must differ across these configurations. Third, sustained ecosystem coordination may itself reshape the executive teams of participating firms over time, altering their composition, required competences, and distribution of authority. Research pairing longitudinal study of ecosystem formation with analysis of the executive teams of participating firms would connect the two levels the fields have addressed separately.

For policy, the frontier surfaces a pressing mismatch. The instruments through which governments have supported radical innovation, such as R&D grants, intellectual property rights, and public



Each frontier connects a shift in radical innovation with a corresponding shift in strategic leadership, surfaces the assumption that their convergence unsettles, and advances new research questions.

Fig. 1. Research frontiers connecting shifts in foundational assumptions.

Table 2
Promising research questions at the radical innovation (RI)–strategic leadership (SL) nexus.

Research Frontier	Converging Shifts	Assumption Unsettled	Policy implication	Promising Research Questions	Illustrative Competing Predictions
I <i>Where innovation happens</i>	RI: From Firm to Ecosystem SL: From the Core Executive Team to C-Suite Hyper-Specialization	That the firm is the primary locus of innovative activity, and that executive team design is an internal organizational matter	Firm-centric policy instruments (R&D grants, intellectual property rights, procurement) risk entrenching incumbents rather than enabling the cross-actor coordination that ecosystem-level innovation demands	■ Does C-suite specialization facilitate the boundary-spanning leadership ecosystem orchestration demands, or fragment attention and authority? ■ What determines whether radical innovation is best pursued within the firm or across an ecosystem, and how must leadership differ across these configurations? ■ How does sustained ecosystem coordination reshape executive team composition and authority over time?	H1a: Specialized CxO roles enhance ecosystem orchestration by creating dedicated attentional capacity and clear accountability for cross-boundary coordination. H1b: Specialized roles fragment authority when ecosystem orchestration requires rapid integration, weakening orchestration capability.
II <i>How innovation happens</i>	RI: From Human Search to Artificial Intelligence SL: From Bounded Rationality to Augmented Strategizing	That cognitive limitations governing strategic choice are exclusively human, and that the tools of innovation are stable background conditions	Intellectual property law and R&D incentive systems built for human inventors face structural mismatch as AI transitions from innovation tool to innovation co-generator	■ Does sustained interaction with AI decision tools make leaders better or worse at identifying genuinely radical opportunities? ■ If AI redraws the cognitive bounds under which leaders operate, which configurations of human and machine cognition produce radical innovation, and do their blind spots reproduce or diverge from human ones? ■ Is AI creating structural inequalities in the capacity to innovate that no amount of executive talent can overcome?	H2a: Leaders who integrate AI decision support develop sharper pattern recognition, identifying weak signals of discontinuous change earlier. H2b: Sustained reliance on AI decision tools degrades independent judgment through cognitive offloading, reducing capacity to identify opportunities outside the AI's training distribution.
III <i>With whom innovation happens</i>	RI: From Closed to Open Knowledge Creation SL: From Individual Leaders to Leadership Interfaces	That critical knowledge resides within organizational boundaries, and that leadership can be understood by studying leaders in isolation	Open innovation arrangements create asymmetries in knowledge rights and value capture that existing competition policy frameworks were not designed to govern	■ Do the features of leadership interfaces predict open-innovation success better than individual executives' attributes? ■ Who within the leadership structure governs knowledge flows when innovation processes are opened to external contributors? ■ How are power asymmetries in open innovation arrangements governed, and who decides the terms of knowledge sharing and value capture?	H3a: The composition of leadership interfaces predicts open-innovation success better than individual executive attributes. H3b: Individual executive attributes remain the dominant predictor; interface features add little once leader characteristics are accounted for.
IV <i>Why innovation happens</i>	RI: From Performance to Purpose SL: From Strategic Choice to Societal Voice	That innovation is evaluated by market performance alone, and that leaders serve the economic interests of the firm and its owners	Public funding criteria built around technological discontinuity and commercial diffusion do not capture innovation whose value lies in societal contribution, and steering innovation toward societal ends can suppress the experimentation it seeks to encourage	■ How do leaders navigate environments where the very definition of legitimate purpose for radical innovation is politically contested? ■ How do leaders distinguish purpose that drives radical innovation from purpose that constrains it? ■ Is the expansion a genuine shift or convergence, and does purpose mean something different where firm-state relations differ	H4a: Framing radical innovation around societal purpose builds stakeholder coalitions that sustain the long commitment horizons radical innovation requires. H4b: Purpose framing invites ideological contestation that destabilizes leadership tenure and shortens commitment horizons when radical innovation demands the longest ones.

procurement, were designed largely with the firm as the unit of analysis. As governance migrates to ecosystems, the question is whether these instruments can be adapted or whether new policy architecture is needed. Such architecture would have to address how the same

structures that enable ecosystem coordination can generate distributional failures, with dominant actors capturing disproportionate value and crowding out the complementor diversity on which breakthroughs depend (Jacobides et al., 2024).

4.2. Research frontier II: How innovation happens

AI can itself be considered a radical innovation (Pescher and Tellis, 2025), yet its significance for this intersection runs deeper. While algorithmic tools have informed innovation for decades, generative and agentic AI reaches into tasks once reserved for human cognition and reshapes the conditions under which firms govern innovation (Lou et al., 2025). Strategic leaders are governing a transformation in the innovation process, and the conditions under which they govern are themselves being altered by the same technology. This recursive loop is largely absent from existing frameworks, which treat the technology being governed and the cognition doing the governing as separate.

On the innovation side, AI increasingly performs the generative and evaluative operations once reserved for people yet remains weakest at the open-ended exploration radical innovation most requires (Dell'Acqua et al., 2026). On the strategic leadership side, the bounded rationality that made executive characteristics explanatory is now augmented by machines (Chatterji et al., 2026; Lou et al., 2025), reshaping what leadership requires rather than thinning the ranks of those who lead. Taken together, the unit that produces radical innovation is becoming a configuration of human and machine cognition rather than a firm and its people alone (Anthony et al., 2023), yet neither field has examined the two shifts together even though the same technology affects both.

This frontier raises several questions. First, when AI performs the generation, search, recombination, and evaluation that once defined the inventive process, but performs them unevenly, how do boards and executives oversee innovation decisions whose underlying logic is opaque? Second, if strategic leaders now operate under a re-bounded rationality, where old limits of memory and search give way to new ones of model opacity and training-data bias, does working through these tools sharpen or dull their judgment of genuinely radical opportunities against incremental ones dressed up in novel language? Third, AI is strongest at well-structured operations and weakest at open-ended exploration, the very capability radical innovation most depends on; does this divide the leadership task, leaving the exploitative work to machines while the exploratory judgment that distinguishes leaders becomes more decisive, not less? Fourth, AI capability is concentrated among a few dominant firms (Bessen, 2020); if access to frontier AI becomes a precondition for radical innovation, does strategic leadership still shape innovation outcomes equally across firms, or does advantage shift from how leaders steer innovation toward whether they can reach the infrastructure that now underpins it?

Policy is arriving more slowly than the technology it must address. Patent law assigns inventorship to people, yet AI systems already generate molecular compounds, materials configurations, and engineering designs no individual scientist fully conceived. How governments revise intellectual property law, research and development incentives, and public science funding for a world in which the cognitive agent behind radical innovation is not only human is among the harder regulatory problems ahead, and one innovation scholars are well placed to inform. For strategic leaders, these shifts carry direct consequences, since how they position their firms against evolving IP regimes, and whether they build proprietary AI capability or rely on shared infrastructure, will increasingly shape the returns from radical innovation.

4.3. Research frontier III: With whom innovation happens

Radical innovation increasingly depends on knowledge that no single firm controls (Dahlander et al., 2021; Holgersson et al., 2024; West et al., 2014), while strategic leadership operates more through interfaces rather than individual agency (Asad, 2025; Georgakakis et al., 2022; Simsek et al., 2018). Together, these shifts raise a question neither field has adequately addressed. With whom does radical innovation now happen, and who leads the relationships through which it does? The novelty lies not in leaders engaging outsiders, which they have long

done, from Microsoft's cultivation of independent developers around the early PC to Toyota's coordination of innovation across its supplier network, but in the fact that radical innovation now depends on contributors a firm neither employs nor directs. Influence over them cannot be exercised through hierarchy; it works through the relationships that connect the firm to its partners.

Each field has seen only part of this picture. Innovation scholars have shown that radical innovation depends on knowledge the firm cannot control, while largely approaching its coordination as a matter of firm-level design. Leadership scholars have shown that influence runs through interfaces, while largely situating those interfaces within the firm. The opportunity lies in joining the two. Leading open innovation is itself a relational problem, exercised through interfaces that now extend beyond the firm to the external contributors on whom radical innovation depends. It also means knowing when and how to end these relationships, since closing an open innovation tie is not the reverse of opening it; the interdependencies that accumulate across partners must be actively managed, a leadership challenge distinct from the decision to open up (Holgersson et al., 2022).

This frontier raises several questions. First, when a firm opens its innovation process to external contributors, who within the leadership structure oversees the resulting knowledge flows, and how is that responsibility distributed across the executive team? Do boundary-spanning roles such as heads of open innovation genuinely manage external knowledge, or do they create an illusion of control over processes that unfold largely outside formal oversight? Second, do the features of leadership interfaces, their composition, quality, and structure, predict which open innovation efforts produce radical breakthroughs better than the attributes of individual executives do? This question extends the relational shift to its sharpest form, treating the interface rather than the individual leader as the explanatory variable. Third, openness involves power asymmetries that the field has only begun to theorize. When a large incumbent invites contributions from independent solvers, user communities, or university researchers, the terms of exchange and the allocation of value are shaped by leadership choices that can leave contributors exposed to conditions they did not negotiate. How far these dynamics generalize, and how leadership is distributed across them, remains open, since the form and extent of open innovation vary across industries and national institutional contexts.

Policy has rarely confronted the leadership choices on which open innovation turns, though they decide who benefits from it. When incumbents orchestrate open innovation, they capture value from contributors who cannot enforce the terms on which they contribute. Designing frameworks that preserve the benefits of open knowledge creation while ensuring that the rewards of radical innovation are shared equitably among those who generate it is a question for innovation and strategic leadership research as much as for policy.

4.4. Research frontier IV: Why innovation happens

Radical innovation research has long defined radicalness by technological discontinuity and measured it by market disruption (Tripsas, 2009), and strategic leadership research has judged leaders by their contribution to firm performance (Quigley and Hambrick, 2015). Both criteria are now too narrow. Radical technologies are increasingly pursued and judged for what they contribute to societal challenges, not competitive advantage alone (Voegtlin and Scherer, 2017), and leaders face expectations to serve a wider set of stakeholders (Krause and Miller, 2020).

That leaders answer to societal as well as shareholder interests is not new; in many corporate-governance systems the relationship between firms, owners, and other stakeholders has long been configured more broadly than in shareholder-centered ones (Aguilera and Jackson, 2010). What is new is the volatility of these expectations. The same orientation is mandated in one jurisdiction and contested in the next, and taking a public stance can provoke politically polarized backlash

(Hou and Poliquin, 2023) and division within an increasingly ideologically split workforce (Dewan et al., 2026). The leader pursuing purpose-driven radical innovation must therefore hold together objectives the two fields have kept apart, commercial viability and societal contribution, short-term returns and long-term transformation, under public scrutiny and at personal risk (Hambrick and Wowak, 2021).

Examined through both lenses, purpose-driven radical innovation is neither a technology choice nor a leadership stance. It is what happens when strategic leaders decide what an innovation is for, and that decision reshapes who supports the effort inside the firm and who judges it outside. Several lines of inquiry open up. First, who decides what counts as a legitimate purpose for radical innovation, and how do leaders pursue it where that legitimacy is itself contested? Second, mandating societal purpose can suppress innovation as readily as it can direct it, so a central question is how leaders tell purpose that drives radical innovation from purpose that constrains it. Third, the apparent expansion of societal expectations may be less a single shift than a convergence, with some systems adopting arrangements long established in others; and where the relationship between firm and state differs fundamentally, purpose-driven innovation may mean something altogether different, which is why an account drawn only from Western publicly traded firms will travel poorly. Indeed, upper echelons theory and much of strategic leadership research developed in largely North American, Anglo, and European settings. Comparative work across settings where the relationship between firm, state, and society differs (most visibly in China), paired with longitudinal fieldwork inside organizations pursuing such innovation, would give this frontier its empirical footing.

For policy, the frontier exposes a measurement problem at the center of public investment in research and development. Metrics built around technological discontinuity and commercial diffusion do not capture innovation whose value lies in societal contribution, yet steering innovation toward societal ends can suppress the very experimentation it seeks to encourage. The task is to build evaluation frameworks that separate genuine transformative ambition from performative signaling (Melloni et al., 2023) on one side and innovation-chilling regulation on the other. Until then, the gap between what public funding rewards and what societal challenges demand will persist.

5. Concluding reflections

Forty years ago, Tushman and Nadler (1986, p. 74) observed that “in today’s business environment, there is no executive task more vital and demanding than the sustained management of innovation and change.” This statement remains strikingly relevant. But the contexts in which radical innovation unfolds, and in which strategic leaders operate, have changed in ways that extend beyond the conditions either field was built to explain.

We have argued that by reflecting on the shifts in foundational assumptions and productive tensions we can identify fundamental frontiers that the field can jointly explore, to address where innovation happens, how it happens, with whom it happens, and why it happens. Each frontier reveals a productive intersection between radical innovation and strategic leadership that existing frameworks have not been fully able to address. Critically, these four shifts do not operate independently. They interact, compound, and in some cases create tensions with one another. An organization pursuing ecosystem-level radical innovation (structural) may simultaneously need to govern AI-enabled search processes (technological), manage knowledge flows across permeable boundaries with external contributors (relational), and justify its innovation agenda to stakeholders whose evaluative criteria extend beyond financial returns (cultural). The cumulative effect is that neither radical innovation nor strategic leadership can any longer be adequately theorized from within the assumptions that each field developed under simpler conditions.

Integration of this kind will not proceed without friction. Scholars remain attached to their theoretical traditions, and for good reasons. Disciplinary depth yields cumulative advantages. But depth without breadth risks insularity, and the questions we have posed about ecosystem leadership, AI-augmented strategizing, the governance of distributed knowledge, and the expanding normative demands on both innovation and its leaders, will not yield to either field working alone. Our aim has been to show that the conditions for such convergence are already in place. In that sense, the research agenda ahead requires scholars to follow the technology and the leader together, rather than treating either as background context for the other.

This perspective piece was authored by a team whose scholarly vantage points span the emergence and maturation of both fields it seeks to connect. We close by drawing directly on three co-authors whose foundational contributions have shaped either or both fields, posing a simple question. Knowing what you know now, what would you study if you were entering this intersection today? Their answers, presented below in their own words, reinforce the agenda we have outlined while pushing it in directions the rest of this perspective has only begun to explore.

5.1. Mary Tripsas

The rapid adoption of digital technologies, particularly AI, has fundamentally reshaped the nature of innovation. Even in traditionally non-digital sectors, innovation is now deeply interconnected, with inter-firm relationships extending from R&D and product development to commercialization and distribution. Customers increasingly purchase bundles of inter-connected products that are part of a multi-firm ecosystem or web of nested ecosystems (Altman et al., 2026) rather than standalone products from a single firm. In addition, digital technologies have blurred the lines between industries with, for instance, telecommunications firms entering banking, and automotive companies becoming digital platforms. As a result, when guiding innovation efforts, senior leaders face novel, poorly understood challenges. Given the high level of interdependency among firms, how can strategic leadership best align not only individuals within an organization, but individuals in multiple organizations with potentially conflicting incentives and cultures? How can leaders maintain a consistent organizational identity as industry boundaries blur and products/services of multiple firms are embedded in ecosystems that might have their own distinct identity? Future research should investigate these dynamics, focusing on how leadership can guide inter-firm interactions to maximize value creation and capture in an increasingly blurred industrial landscape.

5.2. Zeki Simsek

I encourage research toward what I call *Ambidextrous Leadership 2.0*. Although organizational ambidexterity research often treats exploration and exploitation as tensions that can be structurally or temporally separated (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Simsek et al., 2009; Tushman and O'Reilly, 1996), today's radical innovation (illustrated by the AI landscape) also demands simultaneous value creation and destruction. Leaders must dismantle legacy offerings while investing heavily in unproven, capital-intensive infrastructures. In this condition, where value destruction and creation are deeply intertwined and compressed in time, the core leadership task also shifts from balancing dual structures and temporalities to sustaining organizational identity and investor confidence amid contradictory signals (O'Reilly III and Tushman, 2013; Tushman et al., 2011). This dynamic is exemplified by ServiceNow, which as a platform-based SaaS provider confronting AI-driven shifts, needs to leverage margin-rich legacy offerings while building new capabilities, such as their ‘AI Control Tower’ initiative, despite market skepticism. A critical question, then, is how leaders articulate and

legitimize radical shifts to stakeholders who prioritize certainty over ambiguity. For instance, ServiceNow CEO Bill McDermott recently argued that “ServiceNow is not and never has been a SaaS company and is being erroneously ‘lumped in’ with the SaaS category” to frame how the market thinks about the company now and its future (Evans, 2026). Moving forward, research should explore not only how leaders manage radical innovation, but also how they frame, justify, and politically sustain these efforts when short-term disruption and market pressure obscure long-term value creation.

5.3. Donald C. Hambrick

As I consider the totality of our paper in light of recent macro developments, a couple of reflections come to mind. First, given the increasing ubiquity and capabilities of AI, any theoretical perspectives that picture executives as only boundedly rational, or as limited in their information processing powers, must be sharply questioned. For instance, strategic leadership scholars (particularly those relying on upper echelons theory) have argued that firms vary in their adoption of radical technologies because their executives vary in their awareness and assumptions about the promise of those technologies. But if AI gives everyone access to a common set of facts, forecasts, and working assumptions, then executives' cognitive limitations essentially evaporate. Perhaps scholars will need to comprehend new, or additional, types of differences among CEOs/TMTs. For instance, perhaps some TMTs are more willing to rely on AI tools or their outputs than are other TMTs. Or perhaps some TMTs have greater skillfulness in posing AI inquiries, including about embryonic technologies, or greater insights about integrating multiple AI tools to generate improved forecasts, compared to other TMTs.

Second, scholars need to start considering how a company's economic payoffs from radical innovation are due not only to executives' technological insights but also to their communications and public affairs insights. These days, after all, many breakthroughs frighten or annoy major portions of society. Think of vehement public backlash to AI, self-driving cars, robo-taxis, mRNA vaccines, and social media platforms. In these cases, and numerous others, the challenges facing TMTs extend beyond coming up with breakthroughs themselves, necessitating skills in forming coalitions, or ecosystems, and persuading the public and policymakers that the societal benefits of these innovations exceed their risks. The executive skillsets required for engaging in economically valuable radical innovation may be far more encompassing than scholars have previously considered.

6. Conclusion

Taken together, these reflections do more than restate the argument. Tripas centers on where and with whom innovation happens, on nested ecosystems and the work of aligning actors across organizations whose incentives and identities conflict. But she presses further than either frontier alone. As telecommunications firms enter banking and automotive companies become digital platforms, the question is no longer only where innovation happens or with whom, but whether the firm and the industry still hold as the units through which we theorize it at all. Simsek takes up how innovation happens and, in the same breath, why. Value creation and destruction, once separable in time, now arrive in the same moment, and leadership under AI becomes the work of holding an organization together while it builds and dismantles at once. His claim turns on legitimation, on how leaders frame and sustain radical shifts before stakeholders who prize certainty over ambiguity. Hambrick, too, reaches how and why, beginning from the cognitive foundations of leadership. If AI equalizes access to facts and forecasts, the bounded rationality at the heart of upper echelons theory no longer distinguishes firms, and the explanatory weight shifts to which leaders use AI more shrewdly, posing better questions of it and combining its outputs to sharpen their forecasts. He too moves toward why, arguing that the

returns to radical innovation now depend as much on persuading a wary public and skeptical policymakers on the breakthrough itself. What is most telling is not that each reflection lands on a frontier but that none stays within one. Each begins in a single question and is carried, by the logic of the problem, into another. The frontiers are fertile on their own, yet the harder and more significant problems lie where they meet, where governing an ecosystem, augmenting judgment with artificially intelligent machines, opening knowledge to outsiders, and answering to society cease to be separate tasks and become one. It is there, more than within any single frontier, that the next generation of scholarship in both fields will have to work.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sarosh Asad: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Mariano L.M. Heyden:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Conceptualization. **Lorenz Graf-Vlachy:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Elizabeth J. Altman:** Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Donald C. Hambrick:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Zeki Simsek:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Mary Tripas:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest, material or perceived, to disclose.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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