

Ascendant

Building a *Culture of Innovation* Through *Design*

Designing Innovation in Culture, Capacity, and the
Architecture of What's Possible

Prepared for the Organization Design Forum: 2026

Session *Agenda*

- 01 Overview and Welcome

- 02 What does an Innovation Culture Look Like?

- 03 The Innovation Maturity Model Diagnostic

- 04 The Designer's Toolkit

- 05 Closing and Discussion

Ascendant Overview

OUR VISION

We *empower* organizations to build a *culture* of innovation, solve *complex* problems in *new* ways, and develop *creative* products, programs, experiences, and services that *transform* people's lives.



WHO WE ARE

We are a team of visionaries, strategists, listeners, and creatives

Introducing Ascendant, a certified women owned small business, where visionary leadership and innovative design converge to shape a better world. It was created by our Founder and CEO, Stephanie Wade, whose goal was to create a customized boutique consultancy that delivers more than off the shelf, typical solutions.

To do this the Ascendant team embeds with clients to deeply understand their true organizational and innovation needs, and collaboratively craft unique solutions that generate meaningful and measurable results – be it strategic, cultural, service, product or performance – based.



BACKGROUND & OVERVIEW

Founder & *CEO*

Stephanie Wade, Founder and CEO, is a global leader in innovation, bringing expertise as a human-centered designer, government expert, strategist, and change-maker.

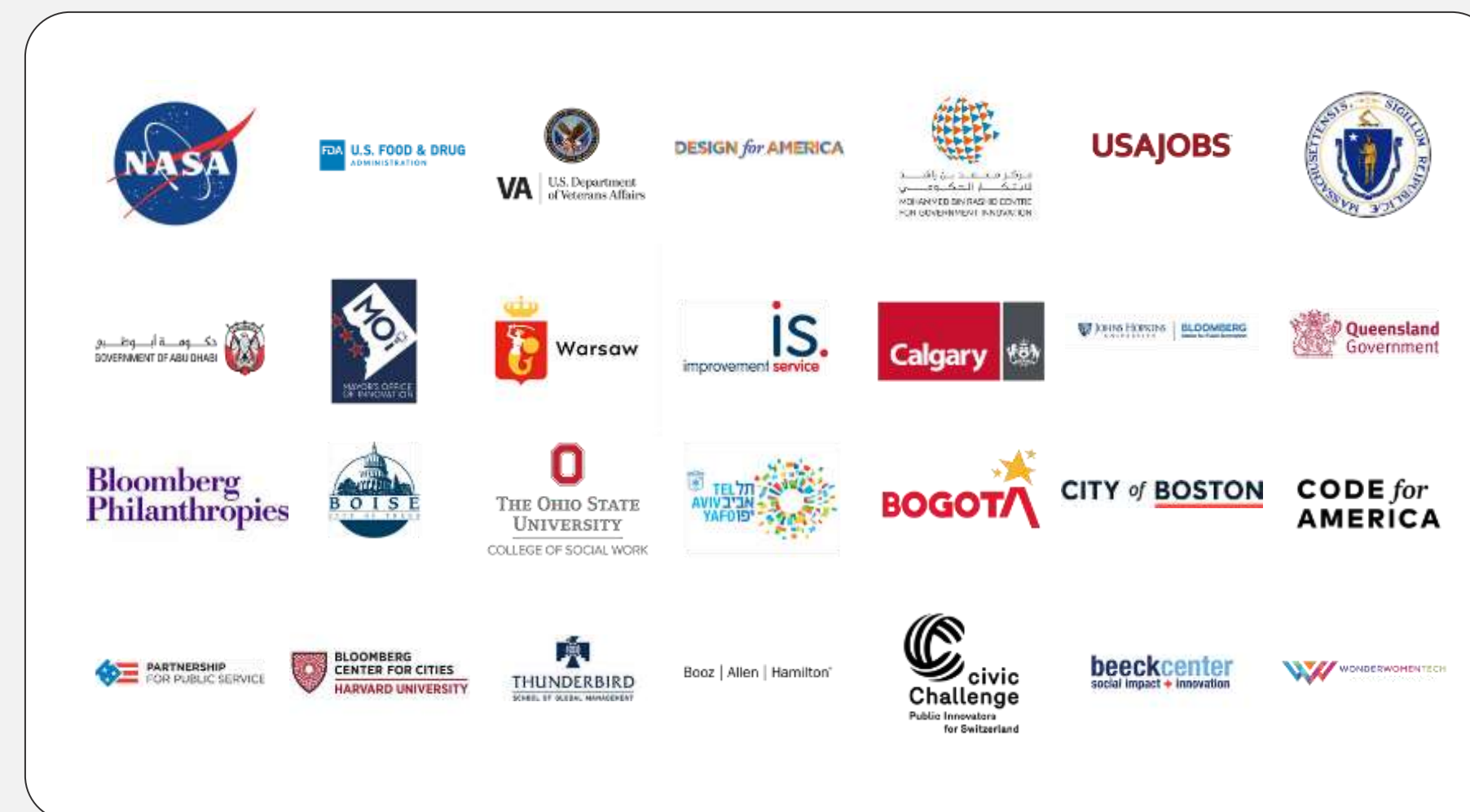
With a track record that includes directing the U.S. Federal Government's first design-based Innovation Lab, and building and implementing a \$65M innovation portfolio for governments around the world at Bloomberg Philanthropies, Stephanie is committed to fostering cultures of innovation and delivering impactful innovation projects around the world.

She is a keynote speaker, adjunct professor, and has a Masters in Public Policy from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and an BA from Boston College in Sociology and Studio Arts.

She is an expert human-centered designer, strategist, keynote speaker, teacher, and change-maker working to build a better world.

Global *Innovation* Leader

- We have worked with some amazing partners:
- National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA)
 - The International Monetary Fund (Washington, D.C.)
 - United States Department of Veteran Affairs (Washington, D.C.)
 - Dubai and Abu Dhabi Governments (United Arab Emirates)
 - Bloomberg Philanthropies (New York)
 - The Government of Oman (Oman)
 - civicChallenge (Switzerland)
 - Queensland Department of Resources, Sports, and Innovation (Australia)
 - The City of Warsaw (Poland)
 - Booz Allen Hamilton (Virginia)
 - The City of Pomona, CA
 - The City of Boise, Geothermal Energy Division (Idaho)
 - The Commonwealth of Massachusetts
 - The City of Boston (Massachusetts)



OUR SERVICES

What do we *do*?

Ascendant is a world leader in helping organizations build a culture of innovation, solve complex problems in new ways, and develop innovative products, programs, experiences, and services that transform people's lives.

We are experts in combining multiple innovation approaches to generate the best outcomes for your organization. This includes: human-centered design, community engagement, digital technology and innovation, data analysis, behavioral economics, strategic planning, and performance management. By combining these skills and developing a customized engagement that meets your specific needs, we can help you deliver results that have measurable impact.

We will help you:

- Uncover the root causes to your most complex social challenges
- Generate and test creative ideas, and
- Implement new physical and digital services, programs, and experiences that measurably improve lives.

Additionally, we help public, private, and social sector organizations transform their culture by:

- Building a culture of innovation, even in the most bureaucratic environments,
- Training a team of innovators and creative problem solvers, and
- Developing ground breaking ideas that transform your impact.



Strategy & Transformation

From a clear innovation mission and vision to operational metrics and a staffing plan, we will help you define a clear path to build a culture of innovation and feel confident in the steps to get you there.

Training & Capacity Building

We customize our world-class human-centered design curriculum and teaching methods that have been tested with thousands of people around the world to help your organization tackle complex problems in new ways.

Solutions & Impact

By coaching or embedding in your existing teams, we will apply our time tested innovation approach to help you understand root causes of challenges and build successful physical and digital services that generate impact you can measure.

OUR APPROACH

Innovation is more than a buzzword;
it's about creating *measurable* impact through
specific mindsets, expertise, and a tailored
human-centered approach that combines
diverse innovation frameworks and methods.



Q



DISCUSSION QUESTION:

Think about the last genuinely new idea you .

Share one word describing what happened to it?



What Does an *Innovation*
Culture Look Like?



Q



MOVING FROM MYTH TO OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOURS

What does innovation mean to *you*?



Q



MOVING FROM MYTH TO OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOURS

What makes innovation *successful*?



IMPACT

Increasing *Electric Vehicle Adoption* in the US



The United States of America

Working with an major private sector company, we identified areas of business growth to pursue that would create new value propositions in the electric vehicle market that address the infrastructure and service instability challenges in the near and long-term future.

Highlights

- Conducted an electric vehicle ecosystem map and market analysis to identify the nexus of the company's mission alignment with opportunities to impact the electric vehicle space.
- Conducted qualitative research with potential and existing electric vehicle customers around the country
- Generated innovative new ideas to bring to market
- Built prototypes of several ideas that we tested to improve the ideas before moving them forward



IMPACT

Driving Innovation in the *U.S. Federal Government*

A

Overview

Served as the Director of the first human-centered design lab in the US Federal Government (Lab@OPM) to develop and deliver innovation curriculum to Federal civil servants, partner with Federal agencies to generate and implement innovative solutions to their challenging problems, and build a community of practice that breaks down silos and shares lessons learned.

Highlight

Partnered with the United States Food and Drug Administration to increase access to healthy school lunches for children around the country and saved \$600M in taxpayer dollars. This was the first government project to win first place in the Design Management Institute's Design Value Award.

HELPING CHILDREN GET HEALTHY MEALS AT SCHOOL

BY THE LAB AT OPM

Concerns

Improper payment data indicated challenges

15.7% = \$1.8 Billion
FY13 application error rates In improper payments



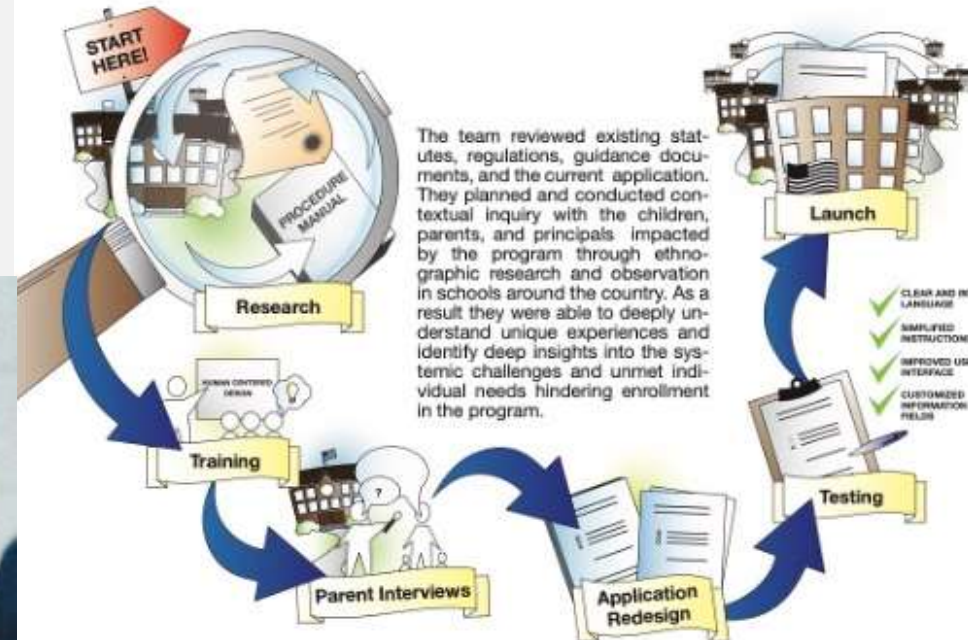
Objective

Improve children's access to healthy school meals



Process

Research insights, deliverables, and recommendations

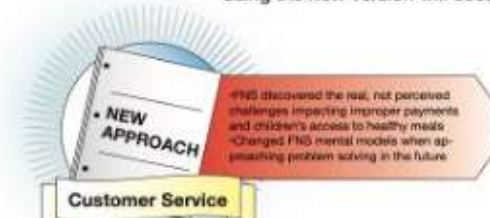


Impact

A shift in approach creates solutions for change



The solution was implemented in May 2015 and sent to 14,000+ school districts running over 100,000 schools. The first application cycle using the new version will occur in Fall 2015.



IMPACT

Redesigning the Hiring Experience in the *U.S. Federal Government*



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Highlight

Partnered with the USAJOBS program which oversees the federal hiring system for the United States Government, including the management portal www.usajobs.gov which serves 2 billion people a year. We worked with the organization to apply the first human centered design approach to deeply understand the needs of applicants and hiring managers to redesign the web portal in order to create an easier and more effective, and hiring experience.





IMPACT

Improving *Customer Experience* for Boston's Department of Innovation & Technology

A

The goal of the training was to enhance self-awareness, empathy, and facilitation skills, empowering DoIT staff to improve customer experience for the city through more communication and conflict constructively management.

Overview

To improve internal and external communication, Boston's Department of Innovation & Technology implemented a two-part training series: Effective Listening and Facilitating Conversations & Managing Conflict. These sessions equipped staff with key listening, facilitation, and conflict-resolution skills to enhance team collaboration and client interactions.

Key Takeaways:

- Improved Team Dynamics: Strengthened internal communication through self-awareness and active listening.
- Enhanced Facilitation Abilities: Empowered staff with strategies to guide discussions effectively.
- Practical Tools & Resources: Participants left with actionable resources to apply in real-world scenarios.

85%

of participants reported feeling confident they could apply the strategies learned in the training to their daily work

IMPACT

Tackling challenges to: *Rapidly respond to crisis*



Seattle, Washington

In collaboration with other departments and partners, collected more than 700,000 pieces of PPE early in the Covid-19 pandemic. The i-team also helped design the front-end customer interface of the City's testing program.

Paris, France

Transformed the city's public school yards into climate refugees, or 'Oasis Schools,' making them public shelters during heat waves. Three pilot schoolyards were redesigned in Paris in 2018 and 28 additional schoolyards were transformed in 2019. The City plans to continue scaling this work and reach all 760 schoolyards by 2040/2050.



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INNOVATION AS AN EVENT VS A CAPABILITY

What does it look like when
organizations treat innovation
as an *event*?





Q



INNOVATION AS AN EVENT

What are some of the observable
behaviors?



INNOVATION AS AN EVENT

What are some of the observable *behaviors*?

Language Without Substance

The organization uses vague language about being innovative but has not developed a shared language around what it means, what it looks like, and what defines success in applying it.

Messaging Without Accountability

Innovation values or mindsets are posted in the lobby that no one references in a performance review.

Words Without Action

Leaders who say "we need to think differently" in all-hands meetings and reject the ideas shared with them.

Encouragement Without Resources

Leaders approve ideas that are shared with them but do not provide the resources to get them implemented.



Q



INNOVATION AS AN EVENT

What are the observable *events*?



INNOVATION AS AN EVENT

What are the observable *events*?

Hackathons

Hackathons are a time-boxed performance of innovation that generates energy and ideas without building the organizational capacity to sustain either.

One Day Trainings

These are a great way to build interest in innovation but without structure at all levels to help them put their trainings into practice, these turn into events that transfer information without changing.

Suggestion Boxes

These collect ideas from people who are often not enabled to act on them and do not provide transparency around what happens to the ideas.

Shark Tanks

Exciting events that can spur creativity but does not change how decisions get made, how risk gets tolerated, or how people are rewarded for trying something new.

Q

INNOVATION AS A CAPABILITY

What does it look like when
organizations treat innovation
as a *capability*?



Q



INNOVATION AS A CAPABILITY

What are the observable *behaviors*?





INNOVATION A CAPABILITY

What are the observable *behaviors*?

Systems for Accountability

The innovation strategy connects directly to how the organization hires, buys, builds, and measures and shows up in job descriptions, contract vehicles, technology choices, and departmental performance goals, not just in slide decks.

Redesigned Workflow

Leaders and teams make honest assessments about what work to stop doing, continue doing, and start doing aligned to achieve innovation goals.

Modeling Behavior

Leaders approach uncertainty and roadblocks by saying “How might we?” and “I don't know, let's test it” in public and private settings.

Psychological Safety

People pitch a half-formed wild idea out loud because they trust the room will build on it rather than shut them down or bury it.

Dedicated Resources

Teams quickly get resources to experiment in a rapid, iterative process where learnings are shared, incorporated, and used to improve ideas that are actually implemented.

Q



INNOVATION AS A CAPABILITY

What are the observable *events*?





INNOVATION AS A CAPABILITY

What are the observable *events*?

Problem Framing

Beginning projects by building a shared understanding of the opportunity or challenge rather than starting with solutions.

Qualitative Research

Uncover the real rather than perceived needs of your customers and other stakeholders by making the full human experience visible to decision makers who rarely see it firsthand.

Co-Design Workshops

Organizations regularly have co-creation sessions with people closest to the problem or opportunity to help ideate, prototype and pressure test ideas alongside the team building them.

Sprint Debriefs

Dedicated reflection after every sprint where outcomes are documented and shared across the organization, not just filed internally.

Portfolio Reviews

Regular sessions where leadership evaluate the full innovation pipeline against strategic priorities and makes real resource decisions based on evidence.

Case Studies



British Airways announced its innovation lab in March 2013, named "UnGrounded," earning *"first innovation lab in the sky"* headlines for a hackathon held in the air featuring Silicon Valley figures.

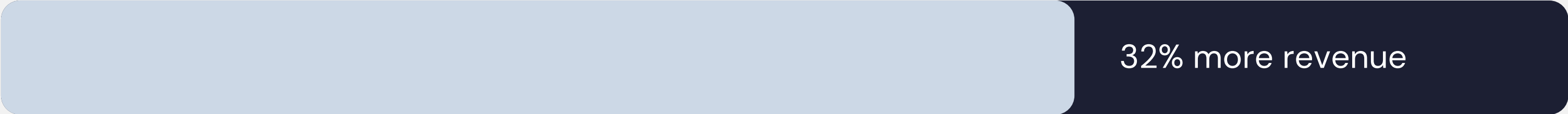
The last UnGrounded update appeared on the BA website in June 2013, just months after launch. The initiative was never mentioned again, and the UnGroundedThinking.com domain eventually went up for sale.



Amazon has codified *16 leadership principles* that drive its culture, including Customer Obsession, Invent and Simplify, and Bias for Action.

These principles guide decision-making at every level and create a shared understanding of the organization's priorities. The design move that makes this presentable: Amazon's "Working Backwards" process requires teams to write a press release for a new product idea before any resources are committed to clarifying customer value first. AWS, Alexa, Kindle, and Prime all came through that same structural process, not a hackathon.

According to McKinsey's Design Index, businesses that embrace design generate 32% more revenue and 56% more shareholder returns on average, which held true across different industries

A horizontal bar chart with a light blue segment on the left and a dark blue segment on the right. The dark blue segment contains the text '32% more revenue'.

32% more revenue

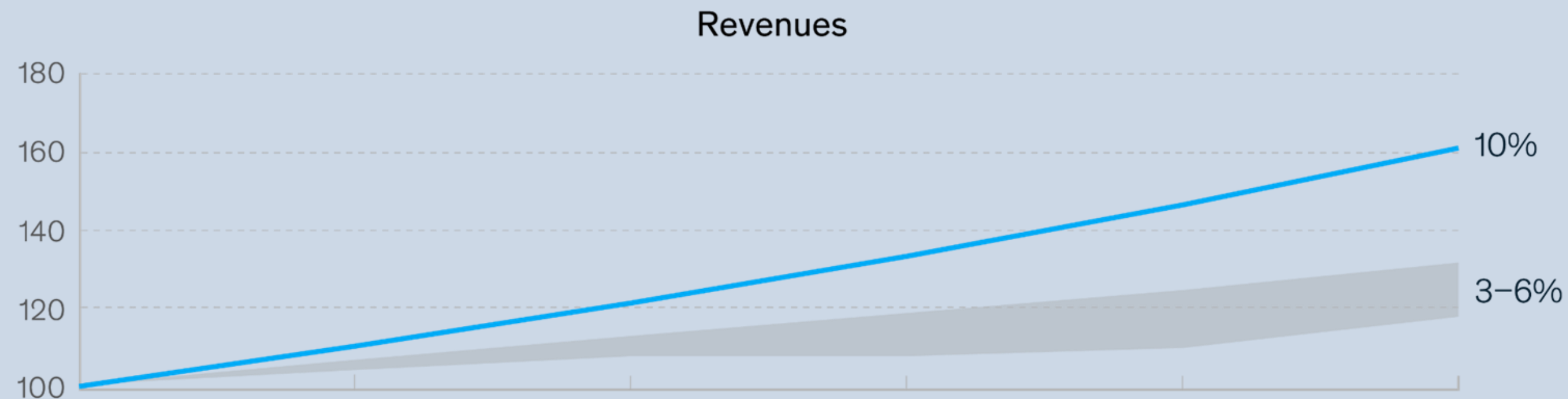
A horizontal bar chart with a light red segment on the left and a dark red segment on the right. The dark red segment contains the text '56% more shareholder returns'.

56% more shareholder returns

Companies with top-quartile McKinsey Design Index Scores outperformed industry benchmark growth by *two to one*

Annual growth (normalized), %

— Top-quartile McKinsey Design Index performers
■ Industry benchmarks¹



The Innovation Maturity Model *Diagnostic*





DISCUSSION QUESTION

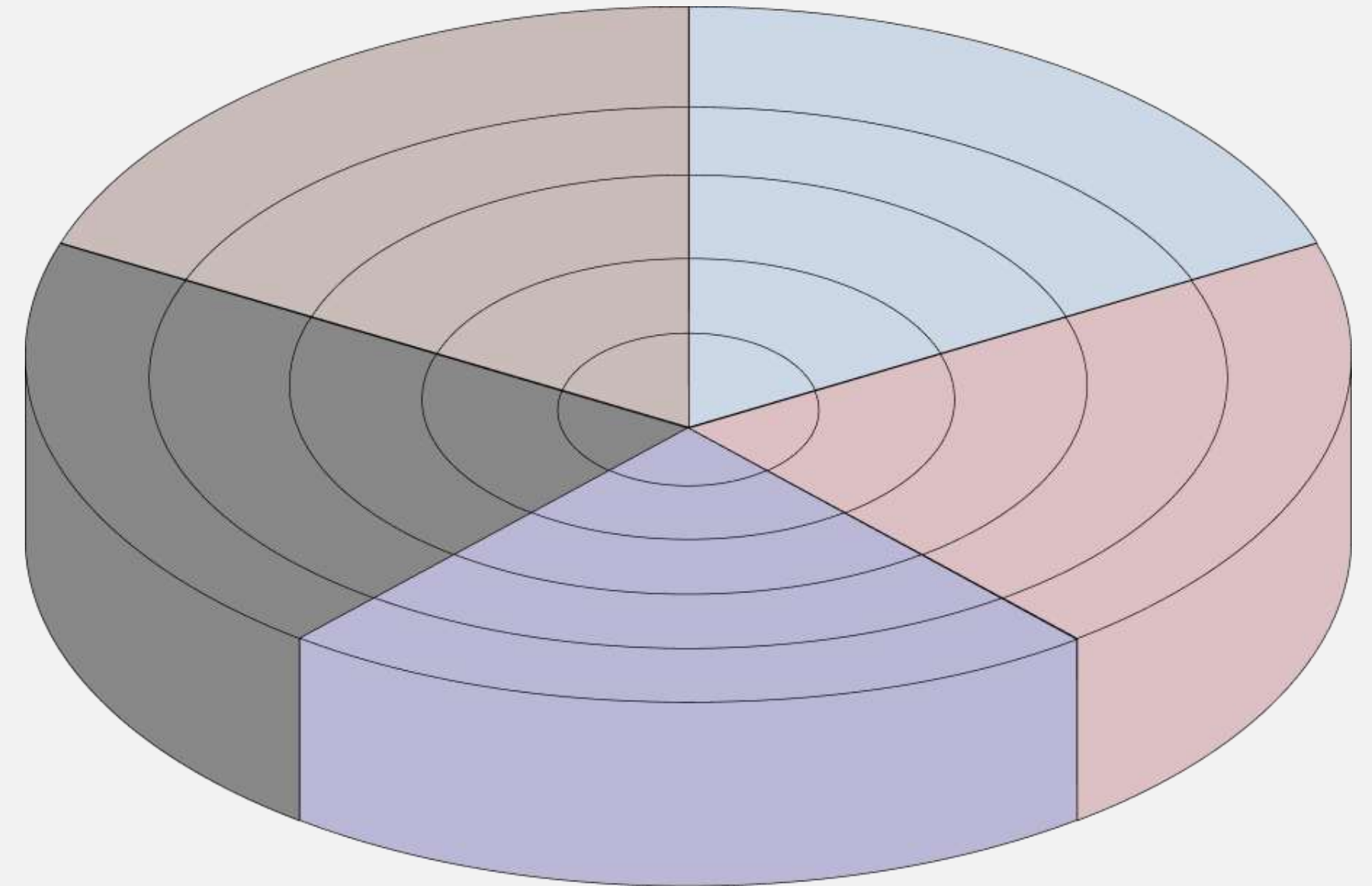
In your organization, where do you think innovation *often stalls*?

ASCENDANT'S INNOVATION MATURITY
MODEL

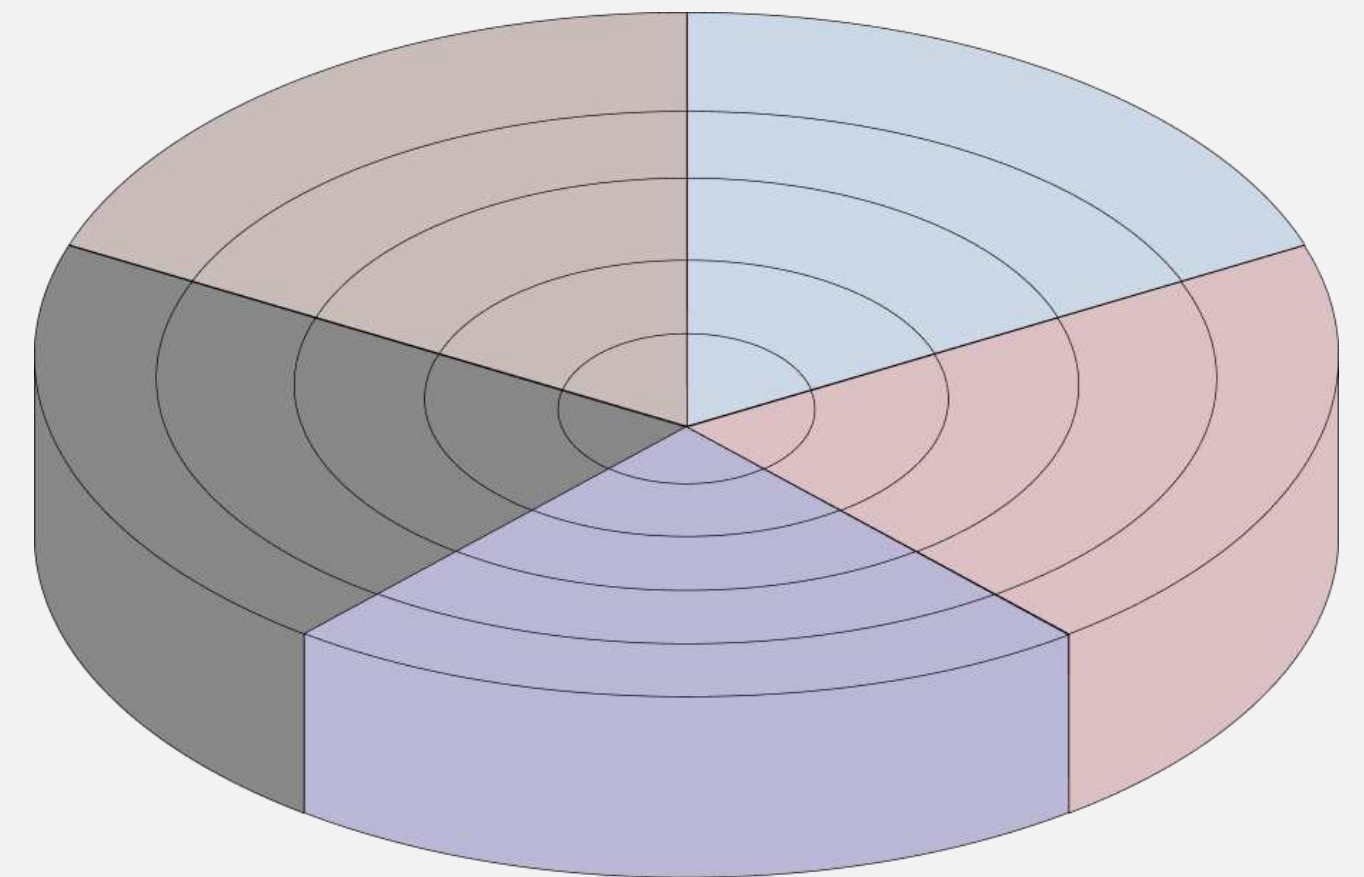
Innovation Maturity Model

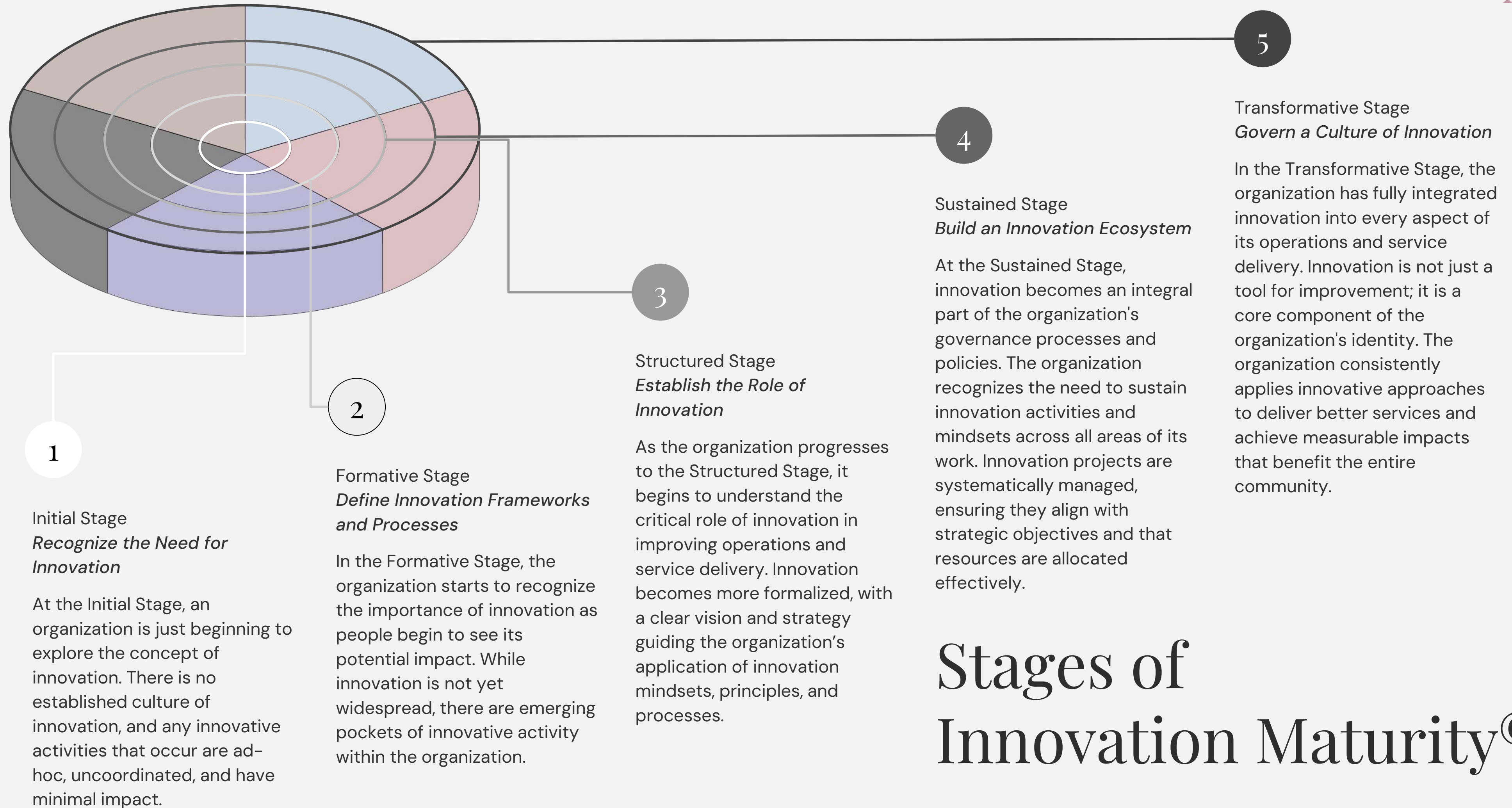
The Innovation Maturity Model® developed by Ascendant assesses innovation capacity across five stages of innovation, each with five categories of assessment, and multiple detailed subcategories of innovation capacity, totaling 115 points of assessment categories in total.

This model recognizes that innovation within organizations is not merely about adopting new technologies or processes but requires a transformative shift in culture, strategy, and operations to better serve communities and respond to evolving societal needs.

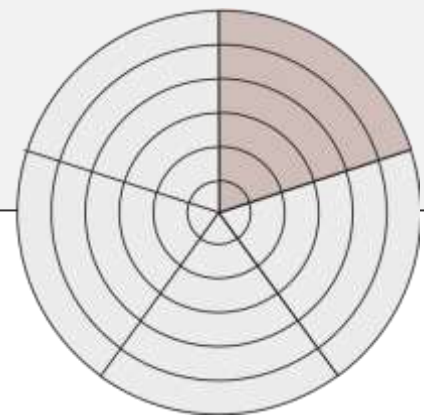


Innovation Maturity is not a prescriptive ladder to climb, but a *diagnostic instrument* for organizations ready to create a shared language for innovation, be transparent and honest about where they actually are, and define where they want to go and what they need to get there.



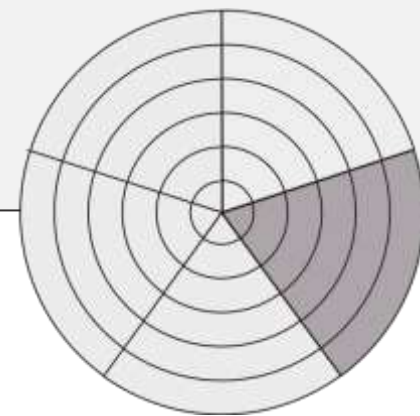


Categories of Assessment[©]



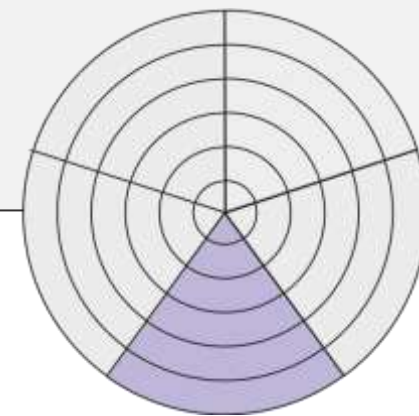
Culture

Innovation culture evolves from risk aversion to embedded creative problem-solving, guided by strategy, leadership, and environment. As organizations mature, innovation shifts from minimal support to a core strategic vision, with structured frameworks and advanced tools enabling scalable, impactful collaboration and service improvement.



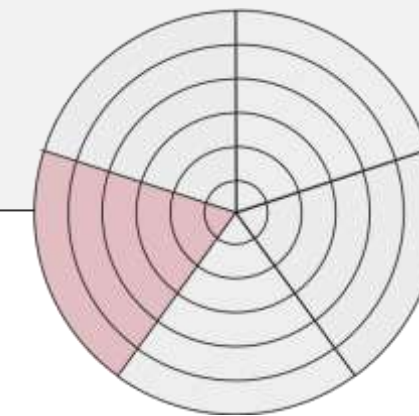
Capacity

Innovation capacity grows from minimal resources to a fully integrated system supported by technology, funding, staff, and training. Organizations progress from ad-hoc efforts to dedicated teams, formal systems, and strategic investments, ensuring innovation is sustainable, well-funded, and embedded at all levels for continuous improvement and adaptability.



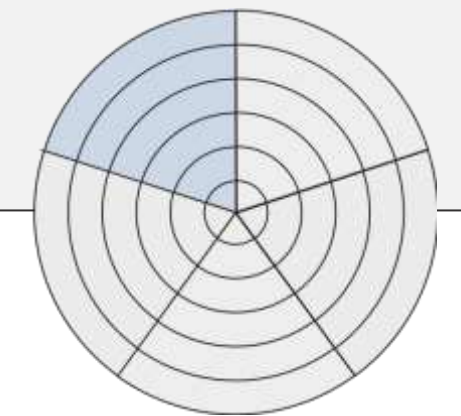
Skills

Innovation skills evolve from informal use to systematic integration, embedding data, human-centered design, behavioral economics, and strategic foresight. As organizations mature, these competencies drive evidence-based solutions, enhance operations, and foster a culture of continuous, forward-thinking innovation.



Impact

Innovation impact evolves from unclear metrics to data-driven decision-making, guiding service improvements and equitable outcomes. As organizations mature, robust analytics drive strategic decisions, fostering continuous enhancements and transformative change in the organization and the broader community.

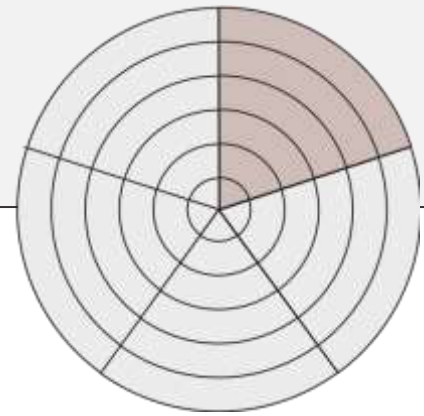


Ecosystem

Innovation ecosystems grow from informal collaboration to structured, strategic partnerships. As organizations mature, cross-sector alliances with residents, service providers, and industry drive deeper insights, diverse solutions, and greater collective impact on service delivery and community well-being.

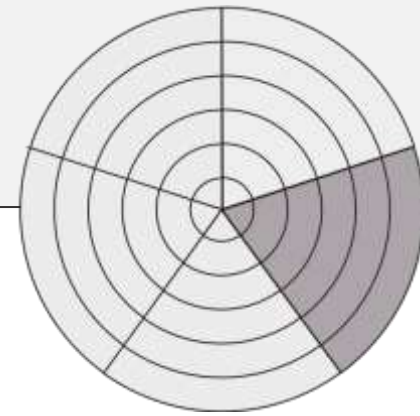
Breakout Moment

Pick one of the five categories of assessment in the Innovation Maturity Model[©].
Discuss where your organization is today and one structural reason it is stuck there.



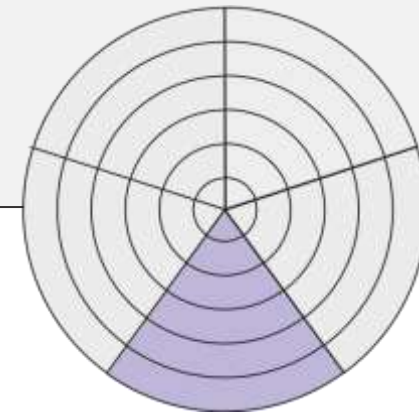
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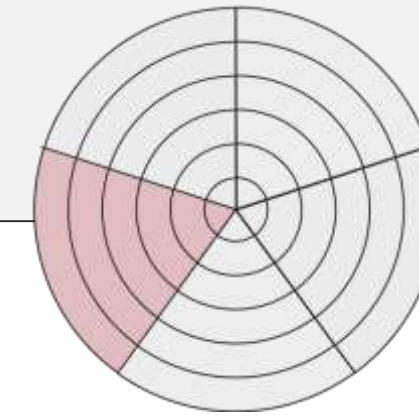
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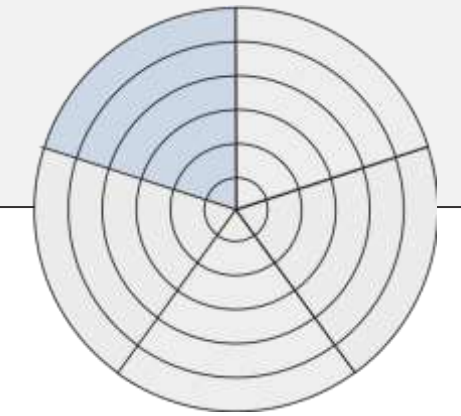
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INNOVATION MATURITY
MODEL

Igniting a Culture of Innovation to *Shape the Future* of the City of Pomona, CA



Measuring Impact

As part of our Innovation Initiative, we conducted a thorough baseline assessment to understand how innovation is shaping Pomona today and how it can drive the city's future. We spoke to City Hall Staff and Community Members to identify strengths, challenges, and create a roadmap for sustainable progress.

[Read the Baseline Assessment](#)

We are helping Pomona develop its first-ever citywide Innovation Strategy—a bold, collaborative initiative to reimagine the city and drive equitable outcomes across all neighborhoods.

Overview

The Innovation Strategy will offer a clear roadmap for advancing innovation in Pomona by integrating community input, staff insight, and proven best practices. The strategy aligns with the city's long-term goals for economic vitality, public safety, sustainability, and social equity.

Key Outcomes:

- **Service and Customer Experience Improvements:** Pomona's Innovation Strategy is designed to improve the services the city delivers and enhance customer experience, building more equitable outcomes for everyone who lives, works, and visits there.
- **Community Collaboration:** We work closely with the community. Through workshops, interviews, and feedback sessions, we learn from local knowledge and lived experiences. This helps create programs and services that are more inclusive, effective, and meaningful.

The Designer's *Toolkit*

5

DESIGNER'S TOOLKIT

Shifting from *what is* to *what can be done*

Innovation maturity built through deliberate organizational design choices about where innovation lives, who is equipped to lead it, and what behaviors get practiced and reinforced every day.

When structure, talent, and rituals are aligned around innovation, it stops being something your organization does occasionally and starts being something your organization is.

Let's focus on these three subcategories of innovation maturity.

Structure & Governance



How decision rights are distributed signals what kind of thinking is welcome. Who owns the innovation function and what does ownership actually mean in practice? How does the budget process either protect or eliminate exploratory work? What happens to accountability structures when a new idea crosses departmental lines?

Talent & Training

Who gets hired, promoted, and celebrated is the most honest signal an organization sends. What does the talent model reward—execution, or execution plus exploration? Are teams designed for diversity of thought, or for alignment efficiency? What would it take to make "learning from failure" a performance norm rather than a platitude?

Rituals & Behaviors

Culture lives in repeated behavior, not stated values. What are the rituals, the regular, structured moments that either build or erode innovation capacity? Leadership communication, meeting design, recognition systems, onboarding architecture. Each one is either reinforcing the culture you want or undermining it

Q

DISCUSSION QUESTION

Of these three categories, structure, talent or rituals, which one does your organization have the *most leverage* to change right now?





The Question *Worth* *Taking Home*

REFLECTION QUESTION

If someone walked into your organization tomorrow and looked at your org chart, budget allocations, meeting agendas, and performance reviews, what story would they tell about whether innovation is welcome?

Would it match the story you'd tell yourself?





Q&A

Let's keep the conversation going

PRESENTED BY:



Stephanie Wade

She/her
CEO & Founder

Thank *you*

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