# Build This

## Your Culturematic Laboratory
### Grant McCracken

# You're standing in the doorway of your new laboratory.

There are new hires leaning into their laptops in one corner. In another, someone is working on a whiteboard. Across the room, a lively conversation has broken out between senior managers. Hmm, "lively" isn't the right word. No, in fact, they're actually shouting.

That's one of the advantages of having your own laboratory. It's a free zone and that means a "frank exchange" of views is expected. Unlike the boardroom or the committee meeting, truth is more important than courtesy or even politics. In your laboratory, people are expected to speak freely. (And to come to the laboratory wearing their thickest skin.)

Your laboratory is a ferociously, even feverishly experimental space. People don't have to be right to try something here. They don't even have to be plausible. They are free to try out stray ideas. They are free to chase hunches.

What they can't be is slow, ponderous, pompous or political. No, here the name of the game is rapid prototyping, iterative innovation, and getting it out here. The idea is to fail early and often. Try something and get it out there.

Your laboratory is ruled by the pragmatism that once was the spirit of American capitalism. This is the way Detroit invented the automobile and Hollywood invented the motion picture. The name of the game was not strategic thinking. The name of this game was investigating the possible. What if we attach this to that? What if we put the camera on a dolly? Often the best ideas game from raw trial and error. Try stuff. Keep trying stuff. In your laboratory, pragmatism is making a comeback.

Your laboratory is also ruled by play. We are beginning to see that we can't know what the future holds. Andy Grove and Michael Raynor tell us strategy is falling silent, that the future is harder and harder to read. There are black swans and blind side hits out there, plenty of unknown unknowns waiting to surprise us. So our future will depend on a steady stream of innovations. The discovery of blue oceans and white spaces, once optional, is now necessary. To prepare for this world, we are looking not for a few perfectly crafted ideas, but a great profusion of possibilities, and this profusion can only come from play.

Ruled by pragmatism and play, your laboratory is fast becoming the place you come to look out into the future. This the bridge from which you can look at your possible outcomes, examine your range of options, think about how to think the future. This place of furious inventiveness is a laboratory in the best sense of the term. It is testing for possible worlds.

**There are six particular reasons you have built your Culturematic laboratory.**

(For each of these, see my book *Culturematic* for details and references.)

## 1) **Labs create fountains of value.**

This is the kind of place that invented the Culturematics of fantasy sports and reality TV. The former is worth some $2.5 billion a year. The latter now supplies nearly half of the programming of prime time TV. Culturematic laboratories, or their equivalent, helped created Twitter, Apple and Starbucks. Culturematic laboratories are good at discovering blue oceans and surfacing hidden value.

## 2) **Labs are busting out all over.**

There is the IDEO lab in London, the Syyn Labs in Los Angeles, the Culture Lab in Mumbai, Le Laboratoire in Paris, the FreedomLab in Amsterdam, the Ars Electronica Futurelab in Austria, Gary Hamel's Mlab in Menlo Park. BBH has a lab. So does Ogilvy. Starbucks has one. P&G has one in the form of Clay Street.

Labs is it. Labs is now. Labs-r-us. Labs are the way lots of organizations are making ready for the future. If you'd done this two years ago, it would have been an act of eccentricity. Now, all CEOs are thinking about them.

## 3) **Your innovation process is stalled.**

You have been brain-storming for a couple of years now. When BusinessWeek and Fast Company announced the innovation economy, you were right there. You got out of the box. You embraced disruptive thinking. You went looking for blue oceans and white spaces. And now, if you are like many organizations, you have a surplus of good ideas.

It's time to start trying the new ideas out. If we turn each of them into a full-on launch, well, it's going to be very expensive and very risky. The Culturematic approach says try lots of little experiments and see which ones "phone home." Fire a lot of small experiments into the world and see what happens. Because Culturematics are inexpensive we can afford to make a lot of them, and we can afford to be wrong.

## 4) **The kids are getting restless.**

HR keeps telling you the organization is losing some of its best and brightest hires. These are the newly minted graduates you were thrilled to hire. But keeping their attention proves harder than it looks. They wander off to join or start start-ups. And the siren call is usually the same: do what you love, go with what you know. And what these kids love is getting involved in the world, taking their vast knowledge of popular culture and turning it into something interesting, engaging and fun. Culturematic laboratory makes your organization a place these young professionals want to work. And it gives you a chance to use all that stuff they know. Follow the Google example, and give them half a day a week to work in the lab. But don't follow the Google example and ask them to work merely on a single thing. The spirit of the Culturematic says run many experiments, not just one.

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## 5) **Hey, Lorne Michaels has one.**

When Lorne Michaels hires a new cast member for Saturday Night Live he is usually obliged to tell them to leave their friends at home. But when he hired Andy Samberg, he decided to include Samberg's friends from high school, Jorma Taccone and Akiva Schaffer. He agreed to allow Samberg and his friends to operate in loose orbit. Their tiny production company, The Lonely Island, was permitted to make "Digital Shorts" that Michaels was then free to use or not.

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In effect, Michaels was mandating a Culturematic laboratory, a place where three talented kids could experiment and see if they could do improve on the skits normally turned out by the team at Rockefeller center. As it turns out, the lab was a huge success. It produced "Dick in a Box" with Justin Timberlake, "Shy Ronnie" with Rihanna, "Jizz in my pants" with Molly Sims. The last has been viewed 100,000,000 times on YouTube, each viewing an ad for SNL. The Lonely Island lab gave SNL new and vital content. It also gave it a new media play at a time when new media looked like it might supplant TV altogether.

We are all Lorne Michaels now. Every organization needs a Culturematic laboratory like The Lonely Island. It gives the senior manager a "landing party" with which to search for navigable spaces, habitable worlds, futures we want as opposed to ones that will be otherwise forced upon us. Managers can wait for the future to "happen" to them. Or they can use Culturematics and choose. Culturematic labs are a new management tool.

## How to make a lab (if you don't already have one).

We need a big room, not quite an airplane hanger, but something large. There is a lively debate about whether this room should be onsite or offsite. The offsite argument says it is easier to think outside of the box when you are, er, outside of the box. I prefer onsite labs, especially because I want people to see that the spirit of the laboratory is not alien to the spirit of the rest of the corporation. We want this innovative attitude seeping out and going everywhere. That's tougher when the lab is a little building off the beaten track.

Add dividers and pods, so that the room can be configured. We want to accommodate the person who wants to build his or her own lab within the lab, and the groups of people who want to work on a common projects. There is a tension here. We want people to be able to focus on their

separate projects but we also want to encourage the idea that these projects are open to the inspection and collaboration of others in the room. Labs need to accommodate both impulses.

There should be lots of writeable surface. White boards work, but now it's possible to paint the room in a surface that works like a chalkboard. Physical scientists have an interesting "poster board" tradition that allows them to display their research in progress. It makes sense for the Culturematic makers to create their experiments "under glass," that is, with a transparency that makes them visible to other people. You never know when a passing stranger will supply the missing piece of the puzzle.

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The room should be porous. Robust internet feeds and high fidelity AV allows people in the lab to talk to people outside the lab. We need to be able to loop in people from a café in Amsterdam, an office building in Mumbai, the San Francisco office and even the corporate jet above. Our lab needs to be wired with an intense traffic in data moving into and out of the lab constantly.

Who to invite? We want junior players and senior managers. We want operations and marketing. This is our opportunity to give the organization a lingua franca, to pool our resources, get out of our silos, to see the world as a single problem. The lab should feel the way off-sites often feel. People need to put aside rank and protocol. It's all about the idea, not the ego.
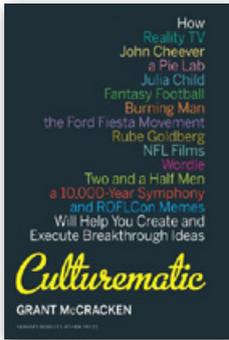
Good ideas have a way of moving to the top. Bad ideas go away on their own. All we really need are smart, dedicated people, charged with pragmatism and play. And they will find a way to make things happen.

The chief thing to furnish the lab with is that combination of pragmatism and play. This is not an academic exercise. It is not an imaginative activity. It is a brute inquiry into the world. **This is the advance guard, the first ones into the future we choose.**

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