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Sequencing the First Segments of Apple's DNA

1.1. The gene, domain and cultural bias

Every once in a while, a unique individual appears capable of accomplishing changes and, by the same token, showing the rest of us the way to create new paradigms. This seems to happen at the precise moment when mankind needs it. Nikola Tesla was the luminary inventor who harnessed electricity in the first part of the 20th Century. In the arts, John Lennon was an inspiring soul in the time of the Beatles. They acted as accelerators of certain energies. And Apple, fueled by a unique individual, was the company that helped carry technology to new computing and entertainment paradigms.

All these exceptional individuals share a singular way of thinking about things. Nikola Tesla tested his amazingly complicated apparatus mentally until he found functional proof, whereas John Lennon coined sentences that still propagate around the world, each with an enhanced thinking signature, free of linear structure. Where does such an ability come from? What is the DNA sequence of that nonlinear thinking? Where are the genes which account for a sustained capacity in a given domain? Do we all share them within ourselves? How do we locate and possibly activate them?

Can science fiction come to the rescue? If we imagine these genes as time capsules that are already available – but which we normally find ourselves unable to open – it would perhaps seem appropriate to iconize them with a pictured cryptic diagram. These would be the application icons to operate. The following chapters feature a little icon to remember this possibility within ourselves. Not as fancy as those on your iPhone, but simply a handy recalling factor. These are your time capsules available for launching.

To pinpoint these genes, we will begin by listing a number of key domains of concern which often puzzle entrepreneurs. These are subject matters for debate in academic circles and they are often bound to cultural prejudices. What is it that distinguishes Silicon Valley from other regions of the globe, if not a radically different ambient culture? We tend to view business culture as a frequency, where each of us resonates to some of these frequencies and much less to others.

Cultural biases are formed throughout our formative years and mature into *fixations*, mental constructs inhibiting change. Some are good or even necessary, because they ensure we hold on to something valuable. For instance, acquired skills usually lead to fixation. Or they can be detrimental to change and to thinking outside the box – i.e. breaking the rules – by stopping a mental dynamic for learning or improving something. We always tend to create fixations, but we lack the mechanism to know when to overlay them and when to not. The point is this: when a company outrightly breaks fixations, it may venture into a golden unknown or risk its future. Where do we draw the line?

From a given domain of business relevance (e.g. "competition" in the first column), Table 1.1 establishes that line in the form of one or more questions to ask (the middle column) as a potential breaking axis. These questions are meant to trigger progress, which involves revisiting the way in which we consider a given relevance domain. Finally, from these questions we draw one core issue ready to be debated by antagonizing "the Apple way" and "the business school way".

1.2. Nine DNA segments of rare importance

This book bases its findings on the biological metaphor of DNA that every living organism is bound to sustain life. Sustainability is both the aim and the capability that a living entity strives to ensure. Sustainability is the only core determination that underpins all others. It is a difficult subject matter, in good part not well understood and there are few methods for making it a reality, be it at a company, nation or planet level [MAS 15a, MAS 15b]. Despite a great amount of work in the sustainability domain, there is no such science of sustainability yet.

As pointed out by Diamond [DIA 05], some past civilizations followed a path which lead to their collapse (Mayan civilization, Easter Island society, etc.). This cannot be designated as a collective suicide: societies never consciously commit suicide, but they may take disastrous decisions, which produce the same effect. The same analysis can be applied at a company or individual level.

Recognizing sustainability as the primary objective, for any organization, at any level of size or complexity, is not enough: the real question is how to achieve this goal.

In this simple recognition of the living imperative, nine domains of consideration pop up together that are usually considered independently in the business spheres, taught separately by respective experts and executed in distinct branches or services. They are actually connected to each other, and express an even simpler global concept:

How can a striving firm be made sustainable?

Let us now scan each of the nine core issues in Table 1.1.

	Key business issues	***The associated fundamental, often hidden, questions to consider***	**Traditional thinking versus Apple approach**
#	*Typical issues that CEOs consider (and make them so busy)*	*This is not the traditional way to think about the domains of interest*	*Reformulating the domain to reveal inner impact*
1	Uncertainty	*Where is risk? Where is opportunity? (not what, but where)*	Risk Taking
2	Products	*Which products to offer and those to not offer? (saying 'no' before a 'yes') Form of function? Where's the optimum trade-off?*	Product design
3	Markets	*Does the market really know about tomorrow?*	Market studies
4	Competition	*Where is competition? Where it is not? (not what, but where)*	Giving up some fights
5	Leadership	*Are markets solid things or just alterable identities?*	Entering new markets
6	Skills and talents	*What's in a failure: a test or a lesson? An exit or a ticket to success?*	Apple, the Learning Company
7	R&D	*Can R&D be decoupled from cost? Is innovation coupled to R&D?*	On R&D
8	External growth	*Is success correlated market share? Where's value?*	On company acquisition
9	Software versus Hardware	*Is software development manageable? How differently?*	Managing Software development

Table 1.1. *In free market economies, firms face eternal issues to consider. Exploring their core subsets reveals hidden issues to bring into consideration*