

# The ambidextrous organization: integrating managers, entrepreneurs and leaders

Philip A. Dover and Udo Dierk

Philip A. Dover is Associate Professor of Marketing at Babson College, Babson Park, Massachusetts, USA. Udo Dierk is Professor of Leadership, Entrepreneurship and HR Management at Paderborn Business School (FHDW), Paderborn, Germany.

## Introduction

The continued sustainability of companies depends on effective management of the present combined with imaginative ideas for the future. On the one hand, firms need to optimize processes, organizational structure, staffing procedures and the like, to be faster, more cost efficient and responsive to current markets. Such focus allows success in the present and near future. But this does not at all ensure continuity in the longer run. In order to achieve this, companies must also regularly assess their vision, encourage innovation, be willing to adjust or change strategies, products and markets and more. In order then to sustain both short and long term futures companies must work simultaneously on doing the same things better while stimulating and responding to change (doing things differently). A term increasingly used for these phenomena is the ambidextrous organization (O'Reilly and Tushman, 2004). It may well be that the emphasis shifts from current optimization to future change management and backwards like a pendulum, depending on such factors as the situation at the individual company, market forces, and the socio-economic environment.

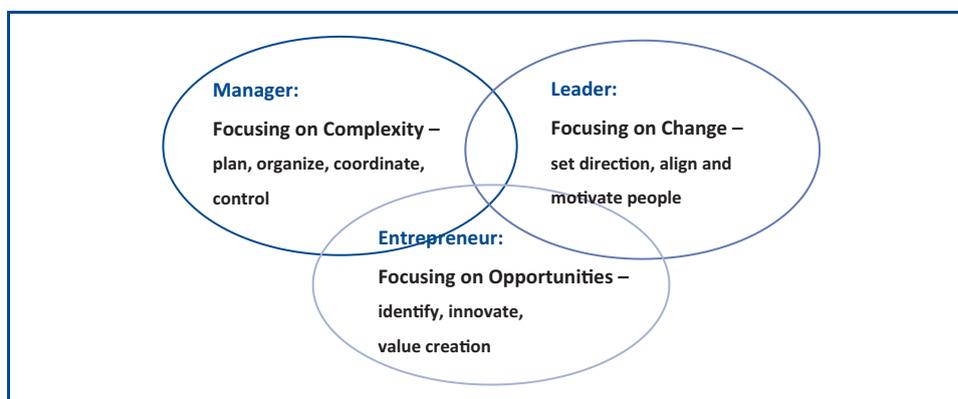
Many organizations struggle to attain this delicate balance with the result that otherwise adept companies often fail in rapidly changing markets. Following many years of observing and working with both SME's and large international corporations, the authors became fascinated by the concept of the ambidextrous organization and by the formal and informal roles played by various personnel in longitudinally guiding the firm. The decision to commence this applied multinational research project started with the *a priori* view that strategic and operational success depends, in large part, on the combination of skills evident in the leadership team of a firm. In particular, we became interested in the integrative impact of three types of personnel – managers, entrepreneurs and leaders – in the sustainable fortunes of the organization.

This basic conceptual building block for our research – that three major decision making archetypes exist – receives some support from the business literature (e.g. Kotter, 2001; Thornberry, 2006). Initial evaluation of this secondary research suggests that managers, entrepreneurs and leaders bring different skills and capabilities to their company roles. We have tentatively summarized them as “focusing on current complexity (Manager), focusing on change (Leader), and focusing on opportunities” (Entrepreneur). Figure 1 summarizes the archetypes and suggests that they exhibit areas of interaction. The extent of this interaction is explored in the research project.

While the management literature is quite well represented by work on the similarities and differences between leaders and managers (e.g. Zaleznik, 1992) – and has started to address, if somewhat less completely, the associated role of corporate entrepreneurs (e.g. Ireland *et al.*, 2006) – it is largely silent on the combination of skills required of executives to guide the short and long term development of the organization. This led us to muse on a number of intriguing questions:

The authors wish to sincerely thank the Babson Faculty Research Fund, the Glavin Center for Global Management and FHDW for their kind support of this research.

**Figure 1** Archetypes: manager – entrepreneur – leader



- What is the weighting of these managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership practices that result in optimal short and long-term corporate performance? How are these weights impacted by contextual variables such as industry maturity, technological intensity and cultural norms?
- If different kind of capabilities are required to simultaneously work on both short and long term initiatives, how can they be balanced to ensure smooth operations and minimize conflict? How does attaining (or failing to attain) this skill balance impact the innovation profile of the organization?

These broad questions were then translated into the following specific research goals:

- To develop and validate a measurement instrument (the MEL-Index) that will allow an organization to assess the managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership capabilities of its key personnel as well as for the company as a whole.
- To correlate MEL-Index profiles with company performance metrics (profitability, market share, customer loyalty, etc.) and perceived level of innovation activity.
- To offer prescriptive guidance to corporations on achieving an appropriate balance between managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership capabilities.

This paper reports on an extensive pilot study carried out to better understand the perceptions of European and American executives on the role and required skills of the manager, entrepreneur and leader. It also assesses how these archetypes can best be measured and interpreted, both individually and organizationally.

### Building a conceptual framework

How can the collective activities of managers, entrepreneurs and leaders best sustain innovation within corporations? To help classify innovation, we adopted a typology of commercial development projects devised by Wheelwright and Clark (1992). Each of their three project types requires a unique combination of development resources and management styles.

Derivative projects (often referred to as incremental innovation) range from cost-reduced versions of existing products to add-ons or enhancements for an existing production process. In both cases, minimal changes are required in ongoing management procedures. Breakthrough projects (or radical innovation) are at the other end of the development spectrum because they involve significant changes to existing products and processes. Here executives need to give development teams considerable latitude in designing new processes, rather than force them to work with existing plant and equipment, operating techniques, or supplier networks. Platform projects are in the middle of the development spectrum and entail more product and/or process changes than derivatives, but do not

introduce the untried new technologies or materials that breakthrough products do. Because of the extent of changes involved, successful platforms require considerable upfront planning and the involvement of not only engineering but the interaction of marketing, manufacturing, senior management and others.

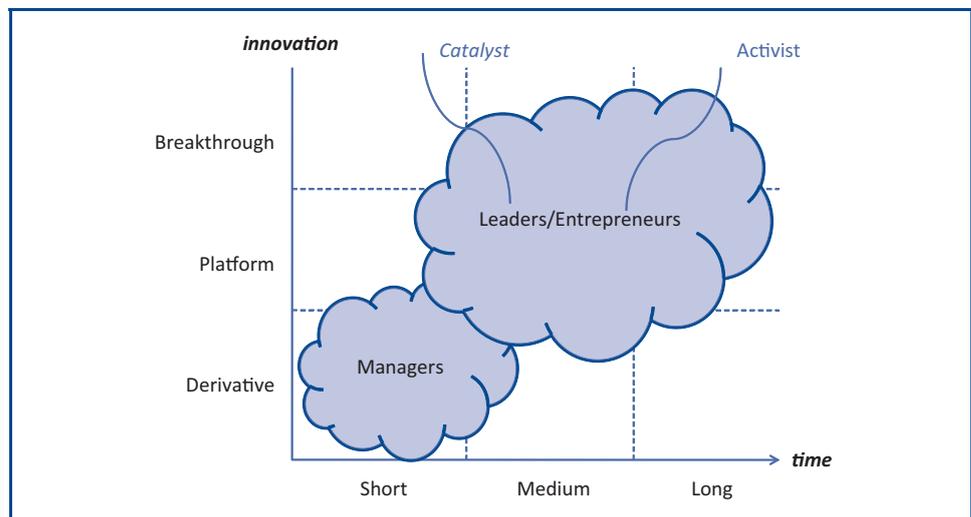
Platforms, in particular, offer considerable competitive leverage and the potential to increase market penetration, yet many companies systematically under-invest in them. The reasons vary, but we believe that managers over-emphasize the importance of derivatives as they strive to optimize the efficiency of current practices. Although the desired mix of projects will vary by industry type and market condition, an allocation of development resources of around 50 percent to new platform growth is advocated (Laurie *et al.*, 2006) This is not the current allocation in most organizations where most investment is regularly earmarked for derivative improvements.

It is helpful to diagrammatically show our thinking so far. If we represent “innovation type” and “time” on the axes, we can picture the differential roles of managers, leaders and entrepreneurs in pursuing innovation strategies over varying time horizons. It is thought that leaders play more of a catalyst role in the identification of platform and breakthrough projects, creating the climate for the entrepreneur to flourish as an activist (see Figure 2).

An additional dimension in the operation of the ambidextrous organization is that of perceived risk. Managers, driven by short-term objectives and clear metrics, tend to be risk averse. Entrepreneurs, in their obsessive search for opportunities, strongly reflect risk takers. Leaders, it would seem, need to take a middle course. They must show, through vision and future orientation, a propensity for risk. At the same time, they must carefully search for a balanced portfolio of innovation opportunities. This requires substantial due diligence with the aim of risk minimization. These traits can be represented as shown in Figure 3.

The significance of these variables is impacted by the moderating influence of business conditions (or “Zeitgeist”) facing a decision maker at any point in time. It appears that context matters. Mayo and Nohria (2005) noted that “entrepreneurs were uniquely skilled at sensing emerging opportunities or the potential of nascent technologies and through perseverance and determination build successful new enterprises.” Adding to these macro-factors, we are particularly interested in measuring the impact of corporate (e.g. privately versus publicly owned) and national (e.g. European versus US) culture, as well as stage of the industry life cycle, as contextual variables that can influence the focus of innovation activity.

**Figure 2** Archetype roles in innovation



**Figure 3** Archetype risk perspective



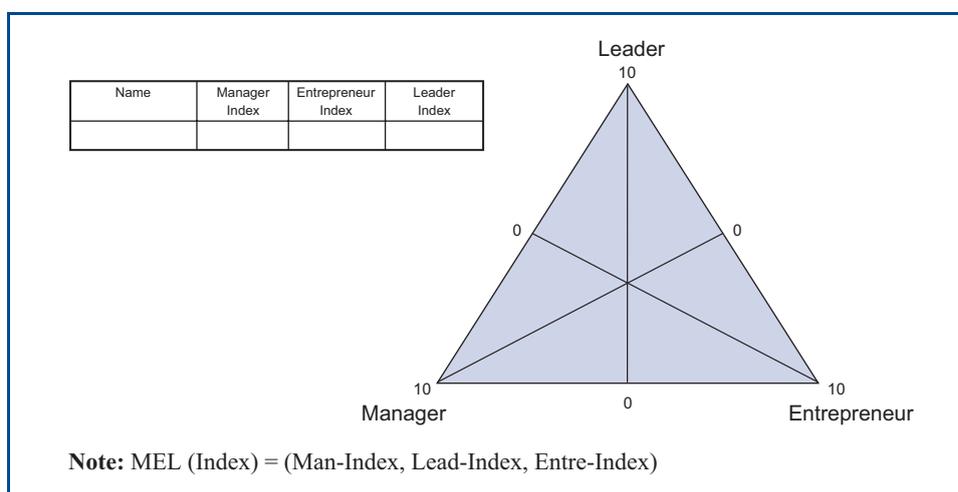
### Measuring MEL

The research to date has been conducted with senior management, including Board members, and “high potential” personnel who are seen as the “future of the company.” These were thought to be essential players in the ambidextrous organization. 20 extensive, face-to-face interviews, each lasting 45 to 60 minutes, were conducted in five large, multinational corporations (two European, three North America). A total of 54 briefer interviews were carried out with two German SMEs.

A specific project goal was to develop and validate a measurement instrument (the MEL-Index) that allows an organization to assess the managerial, leadership and entrepreneurial capabilities of its key personnel. We decided to use a triangle (see Figure 4) to visually represent executive perceptions of individual and organizational competencies on the three archetypes. Respondents were asked “Please take a look at the triangle. We would like you to rank yourself/company on the manager, entrepreneur and leader dimensions. On each of the dimensions allocate yourself/your company a score between 0 and 10, with 0 equaling no capabilities and 10 indicating truly outstanding skills.” In addition, we collected considerable open-ended information from the participants. This included a description of their current job, perceptions of the generic roles and responsibilities on managers, entrepreneurs and leaders as well as verbatim comments on their own and their company’s capabilities on these archetypes.

As the research is exploratory in nature we employed both a case study methodology and a convenience-based approach to sample selection. Although the sample size is small, we

**Figure 4** The MEL triangle



**“The middle managers saw the heavy focus on management skills by the Head of R&D as leading to a rigid and cautious innovation process exemplified by a conservative risk profile.”**

found that all participants were highly involved in the study, were very willing to openly discuss the issues, and were keen to be informed of the results on completion of the project. Indeed, we had trouble at times closing the interview, so intrigued were participants in analyzing their own and their companies MEL capabilities!

## Interpreting MEL findings

### *Describing the archetypes*

When we asked respondents to describe the roles and responsibilities of managers, entrepreneurs, and leaders the findings supported and extended our a priori assumptions that managers focus on current complexity, leaders focus on change and entrepreneurs focus on opportunity (see Figure 1). The task of the manager is seen mainly to revolve around efficient operations (e.g. create and drive processes; pursue plans through to action) while the traits of a sound manager include being thorough and detail oriented, analytically capable, and somewhat risk averse. Leaders' tasks involve creating vision/strategy/direction for the future and building an entrepreneurial environment. This is accomplished, in part, by an ability to inspire/motivate people through strong communication and self-belief. Finally, the entrepreneur focuses on identifying market opportunities, forging effective support teams, and other such new venture activities. He/she employed such skills as passion, tenacity, tolerance of risk and a mixture of creativity and pragmatism.

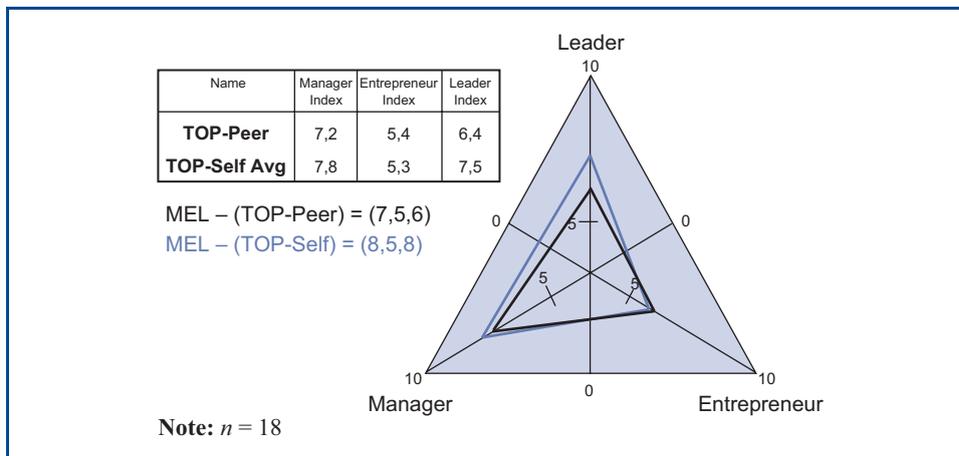
### *Measuring the archetypes: a case study*

Participants found the concept of a triangle and the three 0-10 rating scales easy and logical to operate. Although the purpose of this article is not to evaluate the measurement methodology – this can be examined further in Dover and Dierk (2009) – it is worth looking briefly at examples from a case study of the diagrammatic representation of findings. Figure 5 shows the mean peer and self-evaluations of senior executives at a German automotive supplier. The consistency between the peer and self-evaluations suggests agreement that the company has, at best, modest leadership and entrepreneurial capabilities in the higher ranks of the organization. These findings may be influenced by the sluggish growth of the company in recent years and its struggle to establish strategic clarity and direction in an increasingly competitive environment.

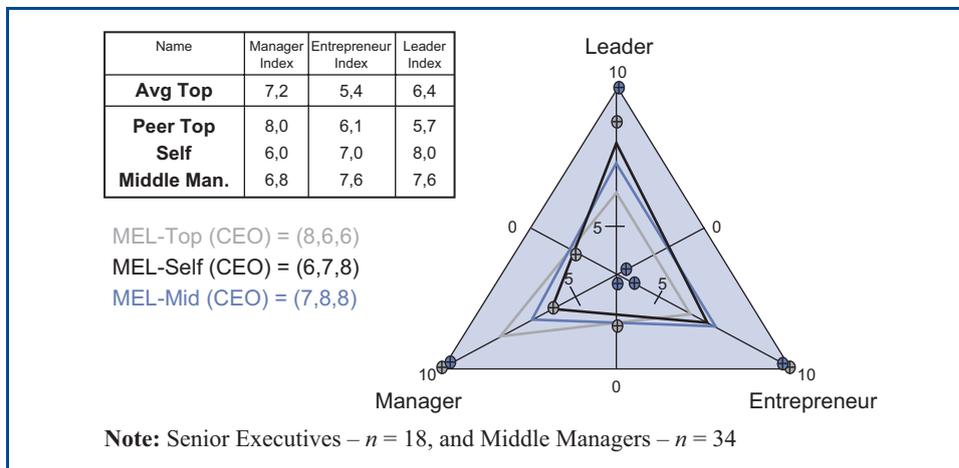
Figure 6 reveals the specific evaluations for the CEO. The CEO sees himself as a leader, while his peers view his strengths as more of a manager. This should register a warning light, as the general expectation of a CEO is for him/her to be a strong leader. When asked to explain their ratings, the management team observed that the main feature of the CEO's operational style was a penchant for day by day micromanagement. On the other hand, as the CEO believes himself a sound leader, he may feel little need to change.

The ratings were similar for two other pivotal senior officers – the chief financial officer (CFO) and the head of research and development (CTO). Both were seen as managerially adroit but less adept at leadership and entrepreneurial capabilities. This balance of skills seems to have greatly influenced the innovation activities of the firm. Subsequent discussions with middle managers revealed that several high potential opportunities for platform innovation

**Figure 5** Senior executives at German automotive supplier – aggregate peer and self-evaluation



**Figure 6** CEO self and peer evaluations by senior executives and middle managers



had been rejected by the top team, including the CTO. The middle managers saw the heavy focus on management skills by the Head of R&D as leading to a rigid and cautious innovation process exemplified by a conservative risk profile.

When the MEL ratings were shared with the senior management team, they voiced surprise at their own individual and peer evaluations. In subsequent discussion there was general agreement that stronger leadership was needed at the head of the company. In addition, concern was raised at the weak entrepreneur scores. It was felt that the company's top executives should be much more future oriented, exhibiting leadership (and perhaps entrepreneurial) skills that stimulate continuous innovation. Subsequently, two middle managers with leadership orientation have been promoted into the top team. In addition, as the current financial crisis took hold, the CEO and the CFO were asked to leave and quickly replaced. This move was initiated by the head of the advisory board, a family member and the previous CEO, out of concern for the company's health and progress. He had run the company for about 25 years and was evaluated as a strong entrepreneur and leader. Our MEL findings revealing the weaknesses of the CEO and the CFO did not directly precipitate their leaving, but it did draw the attention of others to the need for more leader-and entrepreneur-capabilities at the head of this company.

### *Measuring the archetypes: early findings*

Although the research program is ongoing, some interesting initial observations have emerged. As we are employing a case based approach, additional data collection will add confidence to our experiential and inductive learning. Early findings include:

1. It was possible for an individual to have high levels of two of the dimensions without conflict. The exception was for the “manager” and “entrepreneur” combination which represent very different skill sets (e.g. risk averse versus risk tolerant). Importantly, this finding was also replicated at the organizational level. This implies that companies find it difficult to efficiently manage the present while at the same time creating a climate that encourages future entrepreneurial vision. Note that this can work both ways. Struggling companies find it hard to be enterprising while entrepreneurial firms often grow too quickly to build effective management processes. It is a tough balance to find! A few examples help illustrate this:

A senior manager at a struggling European semiconductor manufacturer – where MEL ratings on the Manager dimension averaged 8.0, for Entrepreneurs 4.5 – noted:

Entrepreneurship is one of the company's biggest weaknesses. We invest too much into mature businesses and are too keen to take the easy opportunities.

A highly visionary COO at a US mechanical and electrical construction company – seen by participants as entrepreneurially strong (9) but managerially lagging (5.5) – summarized his own weakness:

I intend to learn to be less quick to judgment. I have always had a low tolerance for non-leaders. I must appreciate the need for balance and use, for example, the CFO as a counterweight to my own ideas.

2. Our early results suggest that successful companies were just as likely to be critical of their balance of capabilities as less successful ones. For example, the need for a greatly improved entrepreneurial spirit has become critical at a European computer manufacturer now that they have resolved their short-term, operational difficulties (managerially strong – 7.5; modest leadership – 5.5; entrepreneurially weak – 4). The Head of a major SBU remarked:

To date, operational efficiency has been the key. In such a climate it is hard to risk and do something new and different. But now we recognize that there is an innovation problem.

On the other hand, the search for enhanced entrepreneurial skills at a German Fiber Composites firm, an apparently flourishing enterprise, results from fast growth coming mainly from acquisition rather than in-house innovation. The MEL results show a company that is relatively strong on management (7) – much needed to assimilate acquired companies – but less impressive on both leadership (6) and entrepreneurial (5) capabilities. This led the founder and CEO to question whether there was an appropriate balance of executive skills available to a company so ambitious and growth oriented. Following discussion of the ratings, an initiative was launched to identify new personnel with high entrepreneurial and leadership profiles. In part, this revolves around retaining and motivating strong leaders and entrepreneurs from acquired companies rather than having them leave to find new ventures.

**“[...] companies must work simultaneously on doing the same things better while stimulating and responding to change (doing things differently). A term increasingly used for these phenomena is the ambidextrous organization.”**

3. We are very interested in the extent to which moderating variables such as business context and company type impact ratings. Our early results posed a number of intriguing questions:

- Three of our sample companies were privately owned (two European, one US). What are the challenges of the owner as entrepreneur? How is the leadership/entrepreneurial baton shared with others? What happens to the entrepreneurial spirit when leadership succession occurs? We noted earlier in the case of the German automotive manufacturer that the CEO, the son of a highly entrepreneurial father, had to be replaced due to weak vision and poor innovation. The comments of a BU Head in a privately owned North American oil company further underlines these concerns:

My high entrepreneurial score for the company (7.5) is based on the owner. He is very forward looking – but more people need to be involved. The skills can't rest with the owner alone. We also need these capabilities at the operating levels.

- In two of the participant companies, major changes in organizational structure have been made to better stimulate the innovation process. The German Fiber Composites company was recently split into two operating units. The first is the original firm, involved mainly with stable and organic growth in precision carbon fiber and metal tubes for the paper and printing industries. The second is a recent and dynamic start-up, focusing on technology leadership in high-end composites. However, restructuring does not ensure an entrepreneurial mindset without the recruitment of appropriate personnel. This may not be easy if the comments of a member of the new Board – responsible for Sales and Business Development – are typical:

This job requires more than I can bring to the table. I am not an entrepreneur – I need structure and backing.

In the case of the North American oil company, an innovative retailing idea (discounting petrol prices through a loyalty program) had limped along unsuccessfully inside the parent company for two or three years. It was then spun-off as a separate operating company with startling positive impact. The parent company (7,000 employees) is seen as managerially strong (8) but entrepreneurially challenged (4.5). The new company (40 employees but growing quickly) has strong entrepreneurial traits (8) with – as yet – not as well developed managerial capabilities (6). Moreover, its CEO is seen as both an outstanding leader (9) and entrepreneur (9). As he notes:

This company is driven by entrepreneurial questions. How can we give customers free gas? How can we disrupt a huge industry? Once you have one good idea, many others occur.

### Further developing the MEL-Index

The findings of this project are not generalizable to the greater population of businesses in Europe and North America due to the convenience nature of the sample. However, as we continue to collect data from a growing number of companies we will increase in confidence at the inferences we can draw from our case-based examples. Moreover, conducting in-depth interviews offers substantial insight into interviewee perceptions on the MEL archetypes, suggesting important questions for future exploration. These include:

- Do Europeans value entrepreneurial skills as much as North Americans? What impact does economic vs. social sustainability have on the MEL capabilities sought? How does private vs. public company ownership mediate the balance of capabilities required?
- How best can we correlate MEL ratings with innovation activities within a firm? We have developed an innovation index for each participant firm that measures the percentage of revenues generated by products and services introduced in the past three years as well as classifying innovative initiatives as derivative, platform or breakthrough.
- Whose views on MEL capabilities should we be collecting? To date we have interviewed both senior executives and high potential managers. As most innovation projects are now

**“[...] managers focus on current complexity, leaders focus on change and entrepreneurs focus on opportunity.”**

the realm of specialized innovation teams, we will add such team members to our sample personnel.

### Using the MEL-Index

We believe that the roles of the manager, entrepreneur and leader are critical in guiding the ambidextrous organization. Moreover, the development of the MEL-Index provides a simple but effective measurement tool for assessing the balance of capabilities required to both manage the present and prepare for the future. Although still at an early stage of design and testing, these initial results hold much promise for both the business and applied academic communities.

In addition to the aggregate inferences that can be drawn from the findings, results applied at the level of a participating company can have significant operational implications. They can help in recruitment activities where personnel with desired levels of managerial, entrepreneurial and leadership skills can be sought to fill gaps in current capabilities. Furthermore, MEL-Index findings can drive internal review processes that place personnel with certain MEL skill sets where they will best meet the short and long term needs of the company. These findings also allow for the design of executive training programs that help bridge gaps between current and desired capabilities in the search for future sustainability. We have seen the diagnostic impact of the MEL-Index in the German Automotive Supplier where recognition of weak leadership and entrepreneurial competencies influenced a change in senior management composition. Similarly, growth through acquisition was seen as an insufficient long-term strategy in the German Fiber Composites Company, leading the CEO to launch an initiative to identify new personnel with high entrepreneurial and leadership profiles. We believe that there are enormous potential benefits for participating companies in undertaking such pragmatic research.

### Conclusion

Early findings from this pilot work suggest we are at the outset of a very exciting research journey. We will now look to conduct deeper analysis on the MEL ratings (e.g. examine the variance between MEL scores), improve our measurement of key contextual variables (e.g. utilize an innovation index) and expand the sample personnel interviewed (e.g. include members of innovation teams). We will continue to use a case-based approach although we will start to collect data from multiple companies from single industries (e.g. financial services; pharmaceuticals; medical devices) in order to compare MEL profiles (and their associated short and longer term performance correlates) within a business sector. Because we feel that this topic of guiding the ambidextrous organization is so important, we have created a web site ([www.mel-institute.com](http://www.mel-institute.com)) that invites comments on the studies and encourages visitors to suggest how the research initiative can be further expanded and improved. We are hopeful that this work will stimulate other researchers to explore the MEL interface and further open an important, applied research stream within the field of management studies.

*Keywords:*  
Managers,  
Leaders,  
Entrepreneurs,  
Innovation

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## About the authors

Philip A. Dover has spent much time of his academic career in executive education. He also worked in marketing positions for BP and Nestlé and is now Chair of the Marketing Division and Faculty Director at Babson Executive Education, Babson College. Philip A. Dover is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [dover@babson.edu](mailto:dover@babson.edu)

Udo Dierk is Professor of Leadership, Entrepreneurship and HR Management at Paderborn Business School in Germany.

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