SUMMIT SPOTLIGHT 2025
Reinventing the enterprise from the inside

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PHIL LE-BRUN: Today we want to embark on a bit of a journey which is sci-fi themed. You may recognise a little bit of it. What we want to drive the conversation around is how do you tackle some of these critical changes in your own organisation. Transformation sounds great. But how do you really drive them? What are some of those practical steps? What we want to do is offer you some practical advice today. Not everything we can think of but a few things to really stimulate some action. So let's begin by stepping into an enterprise that isn't far away.

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PHIL LE-BRUN: So for any lawyers in the audience any passing resemblance to famous films is a coincidence. But the frustration of a once successful empire, or enterprise, that is now in decline is unfortunately a common story, struggling to get out of their own way. And you may recognise that story from your own careers, from some of your own organisations. Yet these very organisations still have the DNA of reinvention, the DNA that got them to the place where they have been successful.

And today what we believe is we can reawaken some of that DNA, some of that desire to innovate, and bring organisations into the 21st Century. So welcome to our little rebel alliance. This rebel alliance is more powerful than afflicting a simple one time change. Has anyone been through a digital transformation and got to the end of it said oh my god we're on time, on budget, how easy was that? Anyone? One person. Well, very brave. We'll be calling on you later.

We have this profound opportunity to change, powered by technology. In the next 25 minutes what I want to show you is some of the opportunity and how organisations are going about it. I want to show you what you people are doing to reject the status quo, that nice comfortable status quo that we often gravitate towards because it's so familiar. And I want to show you how you can get started on your own journey if you haven't already in a bit of a different way from a traditional transformation.

Let's just talk about the technology briefly because what I find fascinating is when I was a kid, when I was starting in industry it was often technology that couldn't support what we were trying to do. But we live in these incredibly exciting times where technology can pretty much do anything we can imagine if we can imagine it.

Quantum computing could solve decades long issues across the world. We already see financial service companies like Fidelity and Goldman Sachs using the technology, using Amazon Quantum Braket, to do things like reimagining their portfolio optimisation approach and managing risk and risk analysis. Similarly with digital twins, this ability to model physical plants and be able to use that to optimise them.

Bosch partnered with AWS on such a project. They've helped industrial customers digitise their plants, provide contextual real time data, and use that to create 3D models of plants to drive efficiencies and effectiveness. Now they're developing self-learning digital twins because the problem traditionally has been how to keep them up to date. So now we're in an era where you can build digital twins and use automation to keep them relevant to your business. And has anyone not heard of generative Ai and where have you been? Of course there's generative AI, a general purpose technology, which is already revolutionising industries by those leaders, people like Matt and Teresa, who are looking at what they've done traditionally and reimagining it. Lexus Nexus for instance are using it to reinvent legal work for lawyers. NASDAQ is using it to automate the detection of financial crime. These solutions and many more are running on AWS Bedrock which Rianne touched on earlier. It's made, this technology is making it easy for anyone to consume, anyone to experiment, anyone to try things differently in their own organisations.

And of course all of this runs on the cloud. So 36 regions are now available. The only provider that has three or more availability zones in each region. The ability to manage your costs. The ability to experiment and scale good ideas quickly anywhere. While also reducing your carbon footprint. But that's the technology. And what I've found in the last five years at AWS is often what's held us back isn't the technology, it's our imagination and skillsets. So we spend nearly two trillion dollars annually across the Western economies on digital transformations.

70 to 90% of digital transformations don't work. So, the next year we spent two trillion dollars on digital transformations. These projects often get stuck in quicksand. It's like rewiring your entire organisation and us humans don't take well to being rewired. The large-scale change, even if it's successful, is as I imagine, many have found out quite exhausting. You start to become internally focused, taking your eye off the customer because of the scale of change. Our reaction often to the problems we face is to blame resistance to change, and the obstacles in our way. We use those obstacles to actually become less ambitious in our desire to change.

But we can learn from the humble goldfish and the way it grows to fill its bowl. There's a fascinating parallel in terms of how organisations actually operate. So in 1955 there was a naval historian by the name of Parkinson. He made an observation. As the British Navy shrunk in size the ranks of leadership grew. Does that sound familiar? It's a paradoxical situation that actually became known as Parkinson's Law. He found that organisations that behaved like goldfish expanded to fill the time available to them. If you have a year to run a project it'll take a year. If you have five years it'll take five years. And in fact he quantified it. It's a bit like compound interest, your own bureaucracy grows five to seven percent a year if you do nothing. When I say it's like compound interest, it's like compound interest but undesirable. So the good news is as you sleep your own bureaucracy is growing.

No investment of effort on your behalf. And you know our processes and projects and governance all designed to manage this often increase the complexity in our organisations. Our instinctive response is to demand more resources, more time, more money, more people. And it actually traps us in this cycle of bureaucracy. So in that way we're like goldfish in organisations we expand to fill the time that's been given to us. But fortunately, if you haven't noticed, we're not goldfish.

What does this mean? So we have this saying about being busy. We get incredibly busy in organisations. We view constraints as an obstacle but what would happen if we started to view constraints as an accelerator. We believe in things like frugality, and focus, and agility within Amazon. These are the things which actually power our innovation. In fact we talk about being scrappy. Just getting going to figure out what works, what doesn't work. It really forces us to focus on what's important, and not fill our time with bureaucracy. It's not about finding the ideal conditions to innovate in. It's about taking the opportunity right now and starting.

But we also need to change the language. I'd encourage you to think about this in your own organisation. How many of you personally want to be disrupted, transformed and changed managed. Doesn't sound particularly pleasant. And yet this is the language we use with our own people. What our own people want is they want ownership. They want that feeling that they actually own something they can drive into a meaningful conclusion.

That they're doing not just a job. They want clarity. They want to understand what's important to you, what the priorities are. And yet in most organisations the stats tell us about two percent of employees know what their company's purpose and priorities are.

And they want to be curious. That uniquely human skill to experiment. To be close to the customer and say I wonder what would happen if I did something. Now none of us have the right to innovate if we don't get the foundations right. A foundation of resilience, cost effectiveness and security as Teresa touched on.

But with that in place every single person in an organisation can become a leader. They have a unique purview in their role. And it makes experimentation not an exceptional thing but a normal thing that everyone undertakes. Then every single one of us can actually become those rebel leaders, just like we saw in that famous film I can't mention.

For all of you who felt like that rebel in your own organisation now is the time to act. There's never been a better time with the technology we have. And when we're tempted to react in the same way as we've always done you ask yourself do we want to be a prisoner of our past or do we actually want to be inventing the future.

This is a time that calls for leaders. Not leaders in title, but those people who are prepared to act as leaders to try things differently. We've identified three levers we can pull to help this come to life.

That you as leaders can start your own rebellion with. Let's start with the first lever which is elevate. Transforming leadership itself. Sounds high-faluting. But this is practical advice we want to share with you. It's time to elevate what we do as organisations beyond the mundane stuff we're so used to. Secondly we'll talk about energise. Most of us have people as our number one priority in our strategies. But now is the time to really make that come to life, to give people the skills and the purpose to actually help you invent your organisation. And then thirdly at the heart of innovation it's envisioning a new future for your organisation. As Matt talked about, if you're not inventing the future someone else is. And this where humans and technology unite to do some incredible things. There's no blueprint for this change. Anyone who sells you a blueprint for this change, they used to peddle snake oil back in the 1800's.

The most important thing with this is to get started. We often spend a lot of time trying to come up with the perfect plan for transformations which don't work. So what I want to share with you is nine practical things we've chosen a little randomly. There's QR codes on each so you can go deeper. But what I'd ask you to take away from this is how you can apply this mental model in your own organisational change. This isn't about what you can do some day, this is about what you can do today. So let's start with elevate.

We've grown very comfortable with our own bureaucracies. Many of us have grown up in bureaucracies. The bureaucracy got us to the point where we are today. But it's also something that holds us back in organisations. So imagine being tasked with an impossible task, breaking an unbreakable code which could protect millions of people. And not only that you have 24 hours each time to break that code.

At the height of World War II in the 1940's that's what a group at Bletchley Park were actually tasked to do. Like our rebel alliance, they were outmatched, and out resourced, and under relentless pressure. So what did they do? Well they brought together a cross-functional team.

Think of it as a two pizza team in the days before two pizzas. And there was no guide here. They brought together mathematicians, linguists, and puzzle experts. Gave them a clear mission to pursue and let them get on with it. They empowered every team member at every level with trust, and the desire to collaborate against a common problem. And they solved what was thought to be an unsolvable problem, and they made history in doing so.

Our first lesson from Bletchley Park, who didn't have the IT expenditure we all have today, was you need to break free from some of the constraints. They were under-resourced. They didn't have the money they needed and yet they still solved the problems. I find it amazing that optimistically we spend about 70 to 80 percent of IT budget in organisations on just keeping the lights on. Doing important stuff but stuff that doesn't actually make us competitive.

We accumulate technology debt. We allow compliance requirements to become more and more manual work which subsumes even more budget. And then there's all of this hidden cost in organisations buried between those inefficient handoffs between silos and the stuff that people are still doing manually which may actually be hidden from your sight.

Now often I feel like I need to apologise at a point like this because much of the advice we give isn't rocket science. But what I would say is if it's not rocket science why are some of these practices so rarely adopted.

So things like implementing zero based technology budgeting, really understanding what are those things that people have done every year because they've always done it, and where can that money be freed up to spend on things of competitive advantage to you. Reward people, bring people together to drive efficiency. Not necessarily to drive down what you're spending but to drive more money into areas of innovation.

We found this to be really interesting in the era of generative AI. Using generative AI to drive efficiencies, freeing up people and money to then invest in innovation.

Having modern FinOps practices. Still probably in a minority of customers we see this. And then looking to not just build new stuff but retire applications and consolidate applications.

There is so much money on the table with technology in the average organisation that can be freed up just by stepping back and saying where we are actually wasting money today. Secondly, how do we actually empower teams to solve some of the problems like they did at Bletchley Park. So a colleague of mine, a former CIO of Homeland Security Mark Schwartz faced this. You can imagine the US Government how long it took to get a rack server provisioned or a firewall rule to be changed. All of these things required endless paperwork and meetings.

Centralised functions created bottlenecks. Lots of handoffs, often invisible, created delays. And to address that we put more and more traditional governance in place.

So I found it really interesting when Mark came up with something which was quite counter cultural, which was why don't we actually decentralise more of what we do, push it to the frontline by default. But then the stuff we centralise, centralised platforms which are actually going enable those frontline teams to innovate faster.

Those platforms, your data lake and the like. But very deliberately. This isn't centralisation because there is an assumed deficiency. It's decentralisation and centralisation used in tandem to drive speed. And then where you do need to centralise for things like compliance or governance, look at automation. Where are those manual tasks being done today, where are those tickets being raised.

When we could actually take the human out of the loop and free them up to do something more important.

A final lesson from Bletchley Park is about values, is about the idea of purpose and values in organisations. We see a lot of values in organisations which people can't recall. They're not actually used. They're not useful. They're website decorations.

Things like my favourite value from a real customer not in this region was we will not harm our employees. You have to ask what happened when they had to write that down. Or another one we are family was one of the values as they laid people off. Don't try this at home with your wife or husband. But they become meaningless. When you do values right they become specific and actionable. For those who've spent a lot of time around Amazon you're probably sick of us talking about leadership principles but we don't talk about them we actually use them in everyday language, is this the most customer obsessed thing you can do.

Is this the most frugal use of our time? Some of those principles are going to have natural tension. This doesn't replace-place judgement. It supplements it. How can you think big and dive deep? Well it depends on the situation you find yourself in.

So I know principles are working in organisations when I hear them enter everyday language. And they evolve. Amazon's principles continue to evolve. So these are living principles which you as leaders actually reinforce and use in organisations. And many of you have seen our own principles. Customer obsession translates into a mechanism. What problem are we actually trying to solve for the customer? Do we really understand it? I found these incredibly powerful. But don't do it as a checkbox exercise. Really commit. You don't need 16 leadership principles.

Three principles that permeate the organisation are better than none, that are better than 16 which no-one uses.

History also teaches us about how small teams won at Bletchley. We need adaptable structures. Our typical silos and hierarchies were brilliant in the 19th Century but now when we're solving complex problems we need to be able to have teams that can be nimble close to the customer. It means trying to balance speed and quality. We believe speed forgives a lot of sins. If you make a mistake quickly then you can backtrack quickly. We often like to make mistakes over many years in organisations. So giving a team the ability to drive a meaningful outcome is amazingly motivational for that team.

The second topic is energise. Back to people. So we chip away at the bureaucracy we have in our own organisations. But how do we actually power up our people to take advantage of the technology and this new found agility.

We need to give them the tools and the skills needed. And I'll give you a simple story. Imagine stepping into a 19th century workshop. It's 1876. Thomas Edison is there with his band of what he called muckers. Inventors, engineers, people who are super excited about inventing something new. He knew that invention, Edison knew that invention didn't come from one person alone, that it took creative tension and different skills set to actually bring that to life, and it required a shared vision of what innovation looked like. So these innovators worked tirelessly. I think it was Edison that said he failed 10,000 times, but he innovated quickly to find the right answer to his particular problem. There were no rigid hierarchies or narrow roles. People were free to step over boundaries, to challenge people, to have constructive debate, all aligned to the purpose he was going after. They all believed in the mission. I'd encourage you just in your own workplace to ask 10 people what your top three priorities are, and what your company's purpose is or your organisation's purpose. I think you may be unpleasantly surprised about how many answers you get.

So some advice. First lesson is about organisational speed and things which actually slow us down in organisations. Your organisation's ability to innovate is as fast as the slowest bottleneck. And often we don't realise where those bottlenecks are. Approval processes up here in your hierarchy that are far removed from the customers we're trying to innovate for. Dependencies between teams.

If I have eight people working on something part time that's 28 communication paths. If I have to reach out to the CFO, QA, the CFO, every one of these introduces delays. We often aren't aware of how many dependencies we actually have in our organisation.

So if we're going to build truly autonomous teams, then start small. Put together your own version of a two pizza team, eight to ten, eight to twelve people. Give them a mission to go after. Give one person in your organisation the job of waking up every morning and saying are we making progress towards a meaningful outcome. Often we run digital transformations, and someone owns the requirements, someone owns the customer, someone owns deployment, but no-one actually owns the outcome.

Remove approval processes or start to chip away at them. And put guardrails in place instead of gatekeepers. And then measure success through customer outcomes nor did IT build the requirements, nor did marketing write the requirements. 'Cause everyone does their job, but nothing works. But what is that customer outcome? Is everyone truly aligned around it?

This is one of my favourites 'cause it's at the heart of innovation. What worked in Edison's day was everyone was willing to give each other feedback. If you look at traditional feedback in organisations sometimes it's once a year at the end of the year where your boss tells you that in January at the start of the year you did something that he or she wasn't happy about. Very useful and actionable. Secondly, performance reviews, which are which are a monologue. And then thirdly, just an ability to give or receive feedback. It's very unnatural in some ways.

It's like a corporate colonoscopy. We tend to try and avoid giving feedback 'cause we want to be liked. And yet if you give feedback in a way designed to improve someone, to help them, it is the most powerful thing you can do from a personal development point of view. This isn't about criticising people or saying what you've done wrong. It's also about pointing out what people are brilliant at. It's about two way feedback. You as the boss also get feedback about what you're doing well or not. And critically it's about psychological safety. Psychological safety built at a team level.

Teams who are willing to sit there and give each other genuine feedback. It's hard. I don't want to make this easier than it sounds because you're sitting there in the room and you're making a decision in your brain without even thinking about whether you feel safe in speaking up. You get this right, magic happens. Barriers disappear, dependencies disappear, innovation happens.

And then training. We spend the same amount on training an individual in an organisation today as we did about ten years ago, and that's without inflation. We send people on courses to learn. Did anyone do a Six Sigma course or total quality management, then went back to the workplace and never used it again, so someone could say yeah check done we're a TQM organisation. I did.

You know it's, I want the skills to be successful. It's a motivator for me. And yet often we send people on training courses without the ability to use them. And then we don't give them feedback. We don't give them the opportunity to actually practice those skills in the workplace.

So some of the things we've seen work. I mean firstly make these human centric opportunities to learn. Gamify them.

There's nothing like a bit of competition about who's got the most badges. If you've been around Amazon you've probably heard us talk about phone tools. It's amazing how motivational a little icon in your profile is. The things we do to get that icon are just unbelievable.

Balance intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. I actually want to learn because it gives me a sense of achievement. It's not about, it's not always about the money, it's about what I am I developing as a human being. Do you give me a career path which is clear and doesn't force me down a single route into management.

And then are you actually measuring how effective this engagement is with your training. Simple things. All of these things if we step back we can do relatively simply in an organisation. And we find good teams that want ownership. They are curious. They want to ask questions. They want clarity on what great looks like and they want the mastery of the skills to be successful. In these organisations teams don't follow orders. They pursue a purpose that you've set as leaders.

So we've got motivated, trained people. We've decimated the bureaucracy. That's not a one-time activity by the way. Parkinson comes back with a vengeance, as does the goldfish. But then how do you reimagine your own future? If you look at the typical US company, their lifetime's 10 to 20 years. We have no right to exist as organisations. And I was inspired by a story. In 1993 Samsung was known for its cheap electronics, and had less than one percent market share. And the chairman Lee Kun-Hee visited a store in Frankfurt and said where's my product. And the store manager said it's at the back where the poor people shop. That went down really well. Now I don't advise you to do what he did next 'cause it's environmentally unfriendly. But it sparked one of businesses biggest transformation. He went back to one of his factories, in South Korea, gathered all the workers around, took all of their existing products and set them on fire. Like I said do not, I'm not suggesting this as one of your hacks in business. But it was a bold declaration that mediocre was no longer acceptable. Out went rigid hierarchies, in came global talent. They put innovation centres all around the world. And they got people to reimagine their own business. And within a decade their focus on innovation and excellence had seen Samsung turn the corner. And it's a powerful reminder that a bold vision and an understanding of your customers allows you to do amazing things. Does anyone remember ITIL? Does anyone still have the manual on their, does anyone remember those people who took the manual and implemented the processes as is?

I pick on ITIL just as an example. But we often do that. We put these processes in place. And then we start using terms like business and IT. Is anyone guilty of that? Is anyone still using that? Yeah. Please stop. Yeah. Free advice. That's a real easy one. Don't say business and IT. We put these processes in place. You raise a ticket to do the most mundane thing. And that rigidity stifles our own innovation. And it actually becomes a barrier. I need to talk to IT through a ticket, not I need to talk to John because I'm trying to solve a problem.

As we think about processes in general, how do we use them to facilitate action? How do we break down the barriers between technology and the rest of the business? How do we make the rest of the business actually technology literate as Matt talked about. How do we put automation in place so if I need a new EC2 instance I don't need to raise a ticket, I can take accountability for doing it myself. And how do we continue to chip away at those organisational barriers that worked so well in the 19th Century but today prevent us from actually advancing our organisation.

Second thing we see is we need to confront the brutal truth about our own software delivery. Is anyone delivering software too fast at the moment? Enough said. We've got so much work in progress in organisations it actually cripples our ability to be successful. They're, your-your people are probably drowning in constant context switching. Every time you switch context you tend to lose about 30 minutes. I normally ask people how-how many folks think they're good at multi-tasking. Let me help you. Our brain, our neurological architecture does not support multi-tasking. So just that constant multi-tasking adds delays. And then we have all of this work continuing to pile up and never reassessed.

So some simple things you can take from the manufacturing industry. Focus on completion. Stop starting and start stopping work. Start with small pilot teams. How can you reinvent, how can you rethink your software development process. One report says that an average enterprise software developer spends five hours a week developing so by Monday lunchtime they're done. And then we say we don't have enough developers. And that developer's waiting on people, dependencies, waiting for someone to take a decision sitting in meetings. There's so much opportunity there. So figure out what works for you through small pilot teams. Your own software teams know this. Give them the opportunity to experiment.

Secondly long development cycles. Anyone get a six year SAP programme running at the moment? I'm not judging, I'm just asking. There's this pervasive fear of experimentation. What I find fascinating is we believe for some reason experimentation is riskier than not experimenting. I want to learn quickly and be able to move on. Not to fail over a long period of time.

I don't care how many features have been released or how many downloads of my App there have been. They're vanity metrics. I need to measure things which are useful. So how can we take that theory of constraints and compress things into 30 days. How can we bring customers in and do rapid prototyping? Not even necessarily using technology. How can we focus on minimum loveable products not minimum viable products? In my day an NVP was the least amount I, least amount of work I needed to do to not get my butt kicked. An MLP is something where a customer sees it and thinks actually I never thought that was possible. And then how do you drive decisions quicker, pushing decisions down.

So Samsung's motto became quality is my pride. Within a decade that ashamed company, with the chairman walking into the German store, became a technology leader just because one individual thought mediocre wasn't good enough. It wasn't about the resources. It was about the ambition the chairman had in Samsung. There's no reason we can't all have that ambition in our own organisations.

Transformations don't need to be soul destroying undertakings, as many are today. We've seen over 300 patterns of success and failure in transformations. We'd be delighted to share those with you. But each of them starts with leadership. Each of them starts with us as leaders really acknowledging the reality of our own organisations. Each starts with your own team. Each with your ability to enable your own team to drive changes themselves. I've just shared nine lessons. It's a path forward. There's many more lessons. All I ask is please take one and try it. It's low risk. Organisations can advance their capabilities continually. It's what we call a day one culture in Amazon. This dissatisfaction with the status quo, that every day drives me to just get a little bit better every single day. So it's up to us in our rebellion alliance about whether we're going to do this or not or whether we continue to be the evil empire. Trade mark and all that.

Whether we are willing to accept the status quo or whether we're going to truly lead in our organisation. So I'd encourage you to be different, think differently, be that leader we all aspire to be that rebel in your own organisation.

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