

Ugly ideas, beautiful outcomes:

Why C-suite challenges
need more creative thinking.

A report by Born Ugly



Introduction

In a world of constant technological, social and economic shifts, change is the only constant. And, the rate of change is accelerating. It's a difficult environment for businesses that demand stability and predictability.

At the same time, a shift from a product and experience economy towards a values economy is underway. Brands are more trusted than authorities such as governments, or social and economic experts. If businesses don't embrace the change needed to align with people's demands, they face a growing risk of irrelevance and being outmanoeuvred by their ever-changing competitive environment.

Too many organisations remain stuck in their status quo whilst the world around them keeps changing.

Instead, they need to identify the human and brand bedrock that maintains their ability to stay relevant and distinctive. They must become a driver of change themselves, to get ahead of it and not become a victim of it.

To find and strengthen this bedrock they need an unconventional process that breaks down widely held assumptions, challenging received wisdom. Not reacting to the short-term or firefighting, but setting a long-term vision and doing what's right for the customer.

At Born Ugly we call this creative problem-solving. We define it as:

A process that solves complex problems in unconventional ways. ✨

It applies human-centred thinking and uses unconventional inputs, diversity of thought, and adaptable problem-solving processes, to allow for a broad exploration of open-ended, sometimes seemingly implausible solutions. Reserving judgement until later in the process, creative problem-solving challenges generally accepted assumptions to inspire new, unexpected and innovative ideas and solutions to complex challenges.





With all of this in mind, we wanted to assess the business attitudes of the C-suite towards internal and external barriers to change, and how to overcome them. To do so, we surveyed 100 leaders at UK companies. They told us:

- Their business mission is unclear.
- This lack of clarity makes many firms reactive and defensive.
- There is a stifling unwillingness to change.

But they also reveal:

- Unconventional problem-solving is a risk worth taking.
- It offers multiple positive outcomes.
- A holistic, human-centred approach tears down barriers to change and growth.

We work with some brilliant business leaders who are already calling on a more creative approach to transforming their businesses. *Read on to discover why you should too.*

Methodology

We ran a quantitative survey with 100 C-Suite employees between June 1st and June 5th, 2023, to understand the importance of creative problem-solving as an approach to overcome the challenges faced by their business.

The survey also included several other questions relating to the following:

- Benefits of creative problem-solving.
- Internal and external barriers preventing their business from successfully overcoming their challenges.
- Ways they would like help to overcome some of these barriers.



The C-suite and Creative Problem- Solving ✨

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Mission impossible?

01

A funny thing happens when business leaders are asked to consider their company's mission.

Three quarters of them state they are very clear about the mission and how to deliver it. A further 22% state they are somewhat clear.

So far, so good.

But, when quizzed about the barriers that prevent their business from successfully overcoming their challenges, almost half (42%) name having a clearer brand vision, mission and values as their primary solution.

So, what does this apparent inconsistency really tell us about company strategies?

It suggests organisations are paying lip service to it. A definition might exist but the mission itself may not be fit for purpose; a tick-box exercise.

A mission towards a clear vision for the brand isn't something that can simply be displayed in reception, or on a customer-facing website. It should guide every action taken by every employee, every day. It must be viewed as a vital tool to drive motivation and smarter decision making.

Often, missions are confused with financial or business targets. But targets are not a means

to achieving a vision. They are just measures of it, and do not motivate action from the people inside the business - emotive missions and visions do.

It also speaks to linear 'what'-driven thinking as the lowest common denominator internal stakeholders could agree upon, rather than the more difficult, non-linear 'why' thinking needed to create a compelling vision and 'how'-focused thinking needed to deliver that vision. This ignores the ugly truth of a world in flux outside the walls of the business. This also means the need for ugly, challenging ideas to stay ahead of or even lead change is overlooked.

A more creative approach is non-linear, human-centred and – most importantly – reserves judgement.

This ensures doors aren't being closed on those ugly, but game-changing ideas before they are fully formed and explored.

This makes businesses more prepared for change – and leadership.



Reactive elements rule

002

Alongside their uncertainty around business mission, almost as many of the C-suite respondents (39%) say their business is reactive in responding to challenges as those claiming it is proactive (42%).

The dangers of remaining reactive are clear: your organisation is effectively flotsam and jetsam on someone else's sea. Random decisions are made due to a lack of direction: sales teams targeting sectors for short-term gain rather than longer-term value; product and marketing teams misaligned; employees feeling rudderless and unclear on the right decisions to take due to a lack of vision, mission and values.

Being reactive rather than proactive also means decisions are harder to make with any sort of certainty. In the absence of vision or mission, that's all a business can be, however.

So, to overcome barriers, businesses must change their footing and lead their own destiny.

This is, of course, perceived as difficult and risky; not quite what shareholders and stakeholders want to hear. It's why management consultancies focus on mitigating risk.

Yet not taking risks means not changing, which is in itself possibly even riskier in this climate, meaning organisations risk being overtaken and becoming irrelevant.

Creative problem-solving gives seemingly risky ideas a chance to be explored, so the organisation has the opportunity to get on the front foot and unlock growth. Notably, two thirds of senior business leaders think such a model is an essential strategy for overcoming obstacles. An additional 27% believe it is somewhat important.

But, do businesses really understand how to use creative problem-solving to face down their challenges?

Stifled creativity

03

**The answer
seems to be NO.**

As the Cheshire Cat said to Alice:

**“If you don’t
know where
you’re going,
any road will
lead you...**



there.”

According to 37% of C-suite respondents, a lack of innovative, creative thinking is the top internal barrier to preventing their business overcoming challenges.

As with the earlier figure for proactivity, this proportion may also be higher than it appears, since people are often reluctant to admit they aren't employing creativity in their role.

It's also worrying to see a third of respondents confirm the widespread business attitude that "the old ways are the best"; conformity bias in action. Verbatim responses are similarly revealing about stifled creativity at businesses:

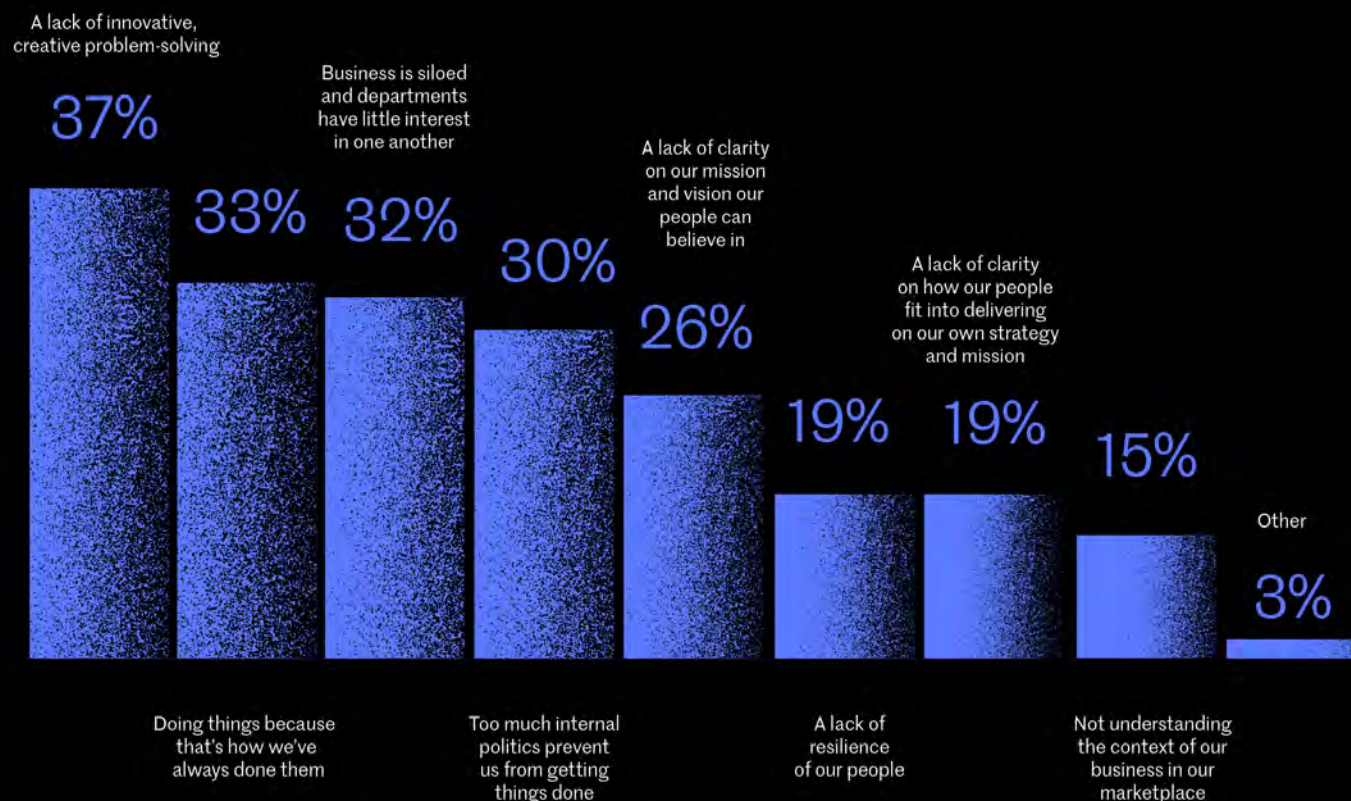
- **A culture of 'this is how we've always done it.'**
- **Too many older board members unwilling to move with the times.**
- **Lack of buy-in to try new technologies – we don't keep up with change.**
- **No freedom to try ideas.**
- **Fear of taking risks.**

The latter point was raised regularly by respondents. The survey data backs this up, with 60% of the C-suite saying taking creative approaches to solving business problems is a risk, which is a concern.

But this group also feel creative problem-solving can bring rewards. Which begs the question, what's stopping them?

What are the initial barriers that prevent your business from successfully facing and overcoming your challenges?

Selected answers are shown below



Risk equals reward

04

There's an element of self-preservation in the change-aversion on show.

When every penny counts and we're constantly required to justify our role internally, taking perceived risks doesn't always seem the best option.

In the context of an uncertain world this may seem sensible. A range of external factors cause the C-suite to pause for thought.

All of this serves to put the brakes on a collective mission to make positive change and drive the business forward.

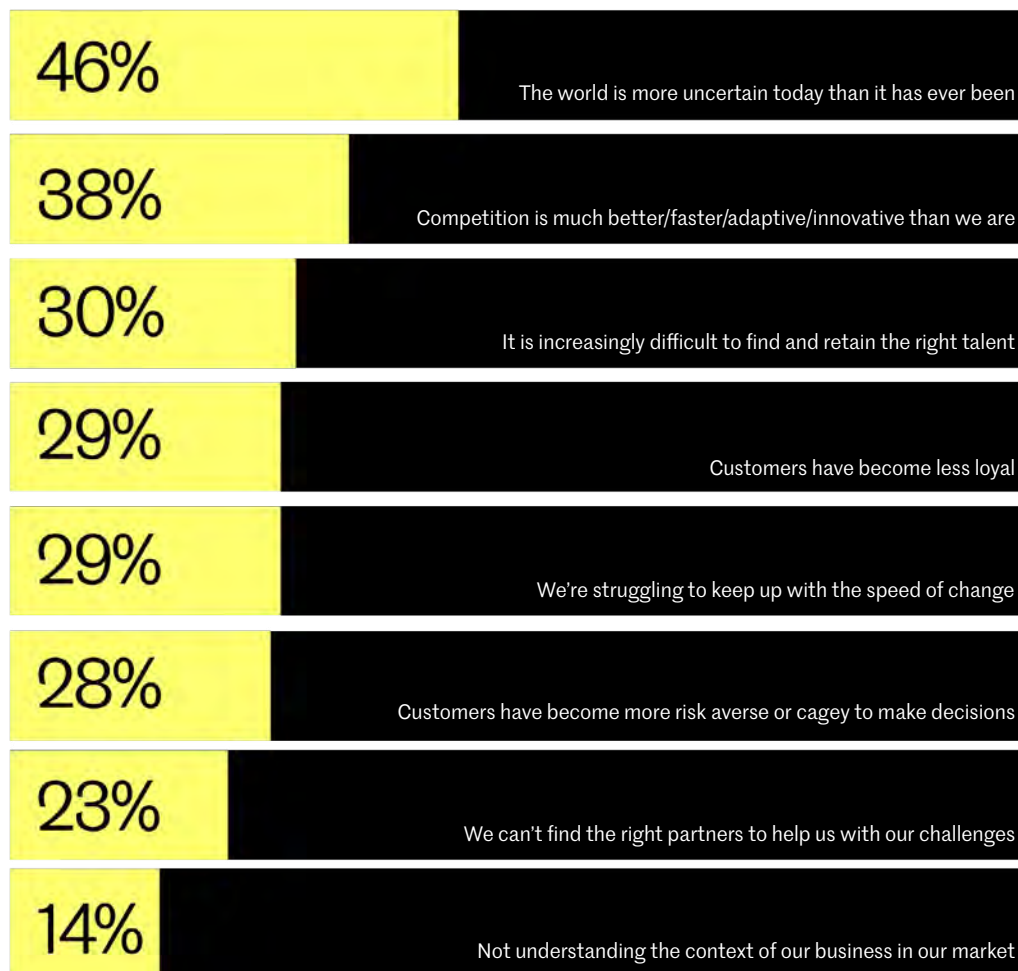
It's also the case that pockets of creative problem-solving tend to exist within organisations, rather than running throughout all aspects of operation. Almost a third (32%) of respondents say their departments have little interest in each other. A 'safe' approach to strategy, taking few risks, precludes the collision of ideas that is so often the cradle of innovation.

The beauty of a creative approach to problem-solving lies in gathering the views of all internal and external stakeholders. Fusing these perspectives offers new, ugly solutions. It sells growth as a tangible opportunity. The best solutions do involve risk, of course. But, not finding a fresh approach can prove even more dangerous.

Moving out of the path of an oncoming truck, for example, seems sensible not risky. Businesses need to think about how to create a culture that celebrates and embraces risk taking, but with fail-fast safety valves in place, of course.

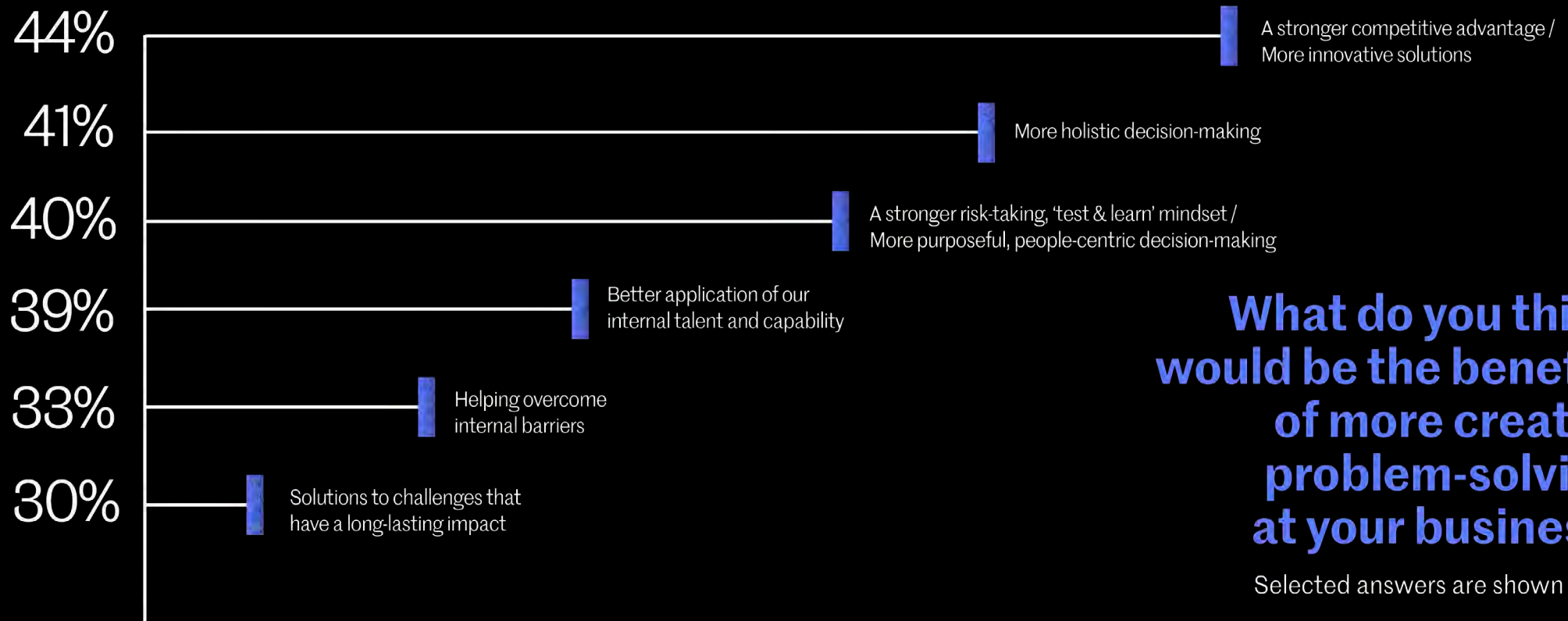
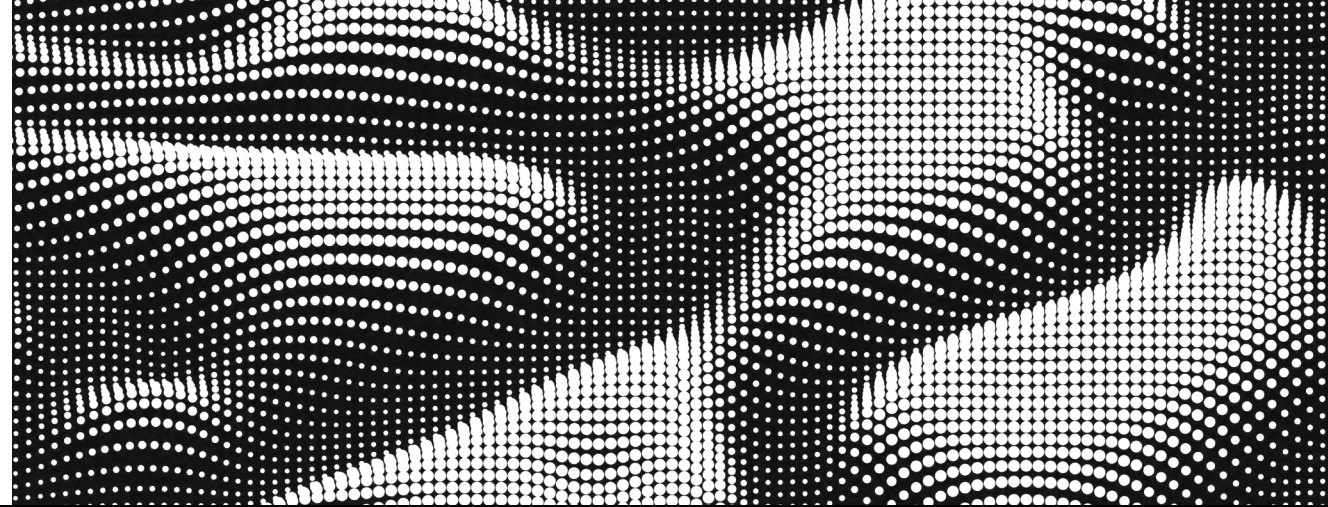
What are the initial barriers that prevent your business from successfully facing and overcoming your challenges

Selected answers are shown below



We work with lots of brilliant business leaders who are prepared to face challenges head-on and take a creative problem-solving approach to tackling them. They recognise it might require a certain degree of risk-taking, but are also certain it's the best way to find white space in their sector. In fact, there are multiple benefits, as our respondents attest.

All of these are outcomes every business should aspire to. With so many obstacles in their way, though, what can leaders do to create the opportunity to make them happen?



**What do you think
would be the benefits
of more creative
problem-solving
at your business?**

Selected answers are shown below

Seeking support

05

We've seen that many C-suite leaders feel a more creative approach to overcoming challenges is as beneficial as it is vital. They also voice frustration at the stifling effect of common company culture and structure. Yet they know that if things were different, their business could get a big boost.

With that in mind, they identify several potential solutions. Many revolve around clearer mission, greater collaboration and a realisation of the potential benefits of doing things differently and trying new things.



What would help your business overcome these barriers?

Selected answers are shown below

42% - A clearer definition of our mission, vision and purpose as a business

39% - A more honest dialogue with my peers about the challenges we face

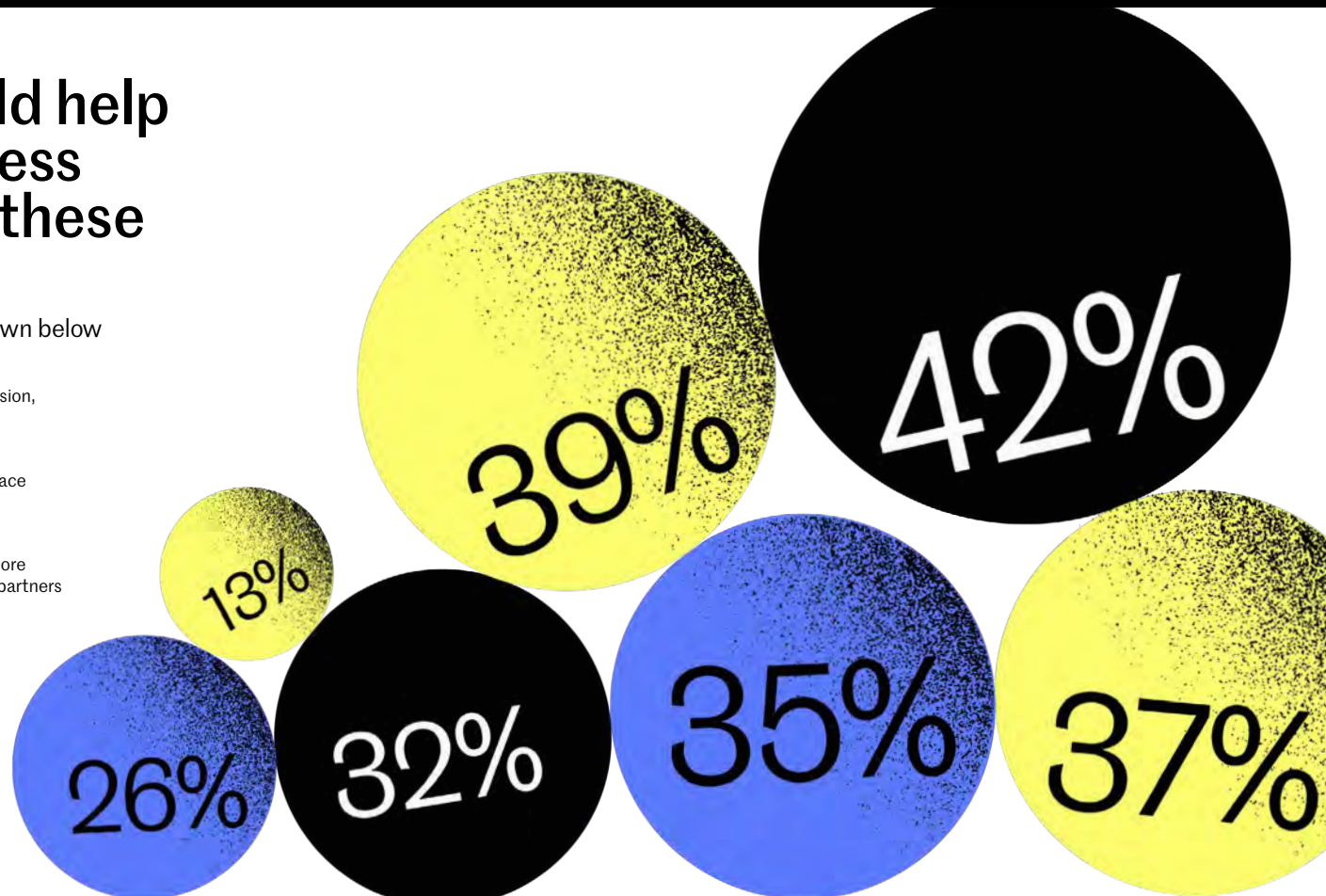
37% - Stronger leadership

35% - A stronger internal culture/ more creative, innovative, nimble external partners

32% - A more risk-taking/ test & learn culture

26% - Breaking through the silos of the business

13% - Less internal navel-gazing and more focus on what is going on outside of the company



When it comes to seeking external support to become more creative and nimble, (35% of) organisations can be unsure where to look.

Creative agencies are the first choice (34%), followed by management consultancies (15%). But both come with a note of caution.

Advertising agencies seem attractive as sources

of 'new thinking', but tend to lean towards wanting to sell an ephemeral idea rather than solving a challenge. This won't move the dial for most businesses for the long-term.

Management consultancies are adept at setting out robust strategy, but tend to use cookie-cutter, templated approaches and solutions geared towards maximising profit and mitigating risk,

not taking it. This leads to reductive outcomes – such as a narrowing of business focus – rather than progressive game-changing opportunities.

That leaves the C-suite on the hunt for a new approach to finding creative solutions to the challenges they face today.

The background is black and features several abstract, colorful geometric shapes and patterns. In the top left, there's a blue squiggly line and a black and white halftone pattern. In the top right, there's a yellow and black halftone pattern and a large white circle. In the middle right, there's a blue and black halftone pattern and a yellow circle. In the bottom left, there's a yellow circle and a white circle. In the bottom right, there's a black and white halftone pattern and a blue squiggly line.

 **How creative
problem-solving
can propel
your business**



Customers are looking towards brands and businesses, rather than government, to create a better life and a better world. In response, businesses have a huge opportunity to help shape a brighter future.

However we've discovered organisations don't have even the fundamentals in place to enable them to either benefit from the chances gifted to them by the changing world around us, or proactively defend their position when change hits them.

Our study has also found that even if they want bigger, different thinking, organisations are not set up to embrace creative risk-taking that could deliver new opportunities, nor do they know where to seek support outside their business for a more creative approach to today's problems.

Creative problem-solving allows business leaders to rise above the noise and chaos of their market. It helps them to strike out for the white space that will define their role in the world and differentiate their organisation, bringing game-changing leadership – not just incremental gain.

Creative problem-solving is a non-traditional, non-linear approach, reflecting the emotionally-driven nature of being human. It is expansive, not reductionist. It can drive individual businesses but also the economy as a whole. And it can be applied to all aspects of business: strategy, operations, decision-making, innovation and culture.

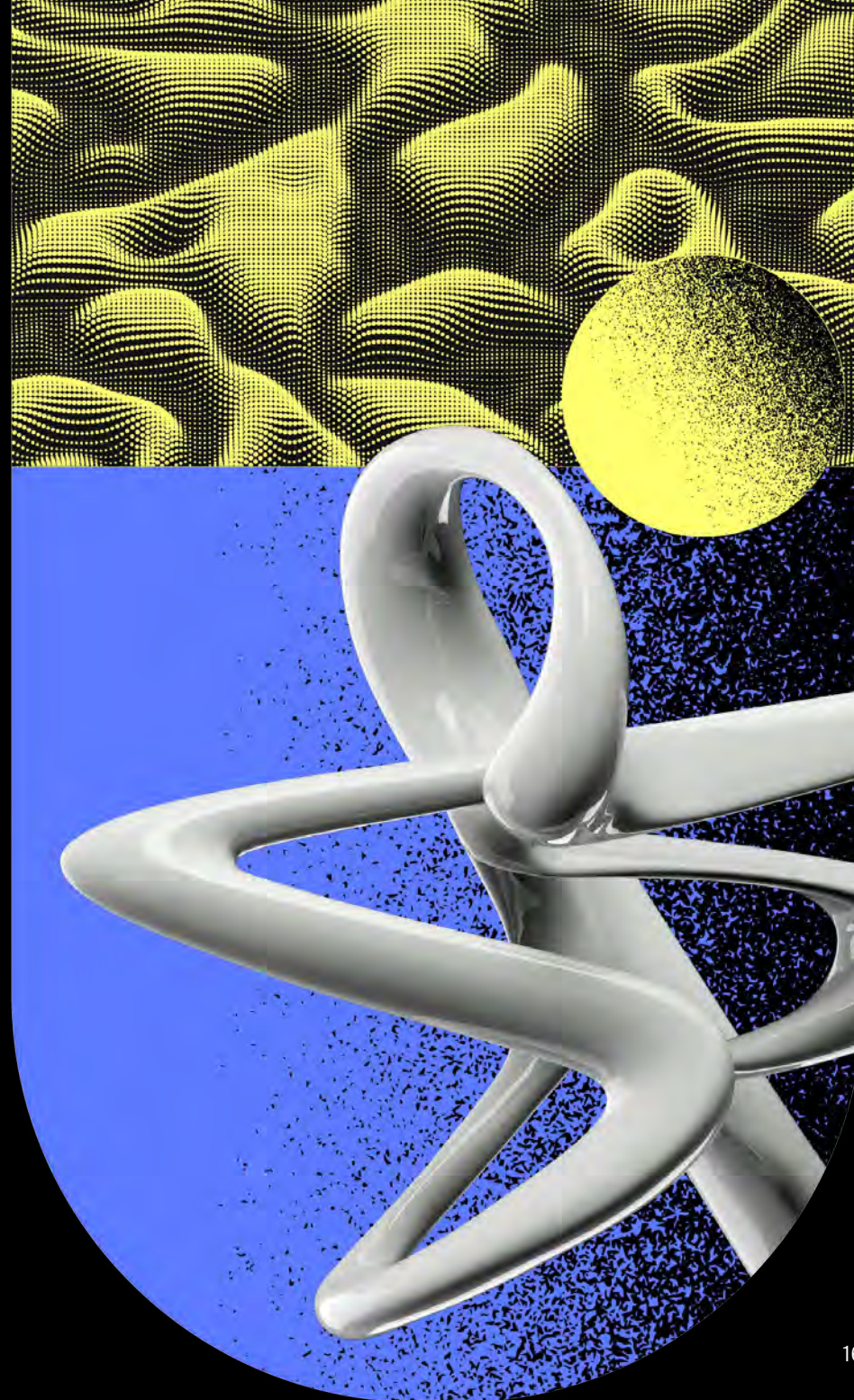
Unique positioning is defined during an extensive investigation of the views and values of all internal and external stakeholders. They become deeply engaged by the process, building energy and motivation.

We gather the embers of what they believe is true of the business and fan the flames to establish a mission and vision that can move it beyond the status quo. This provides clarity of where the organisation is headed. It also ensures teams are armed with the right information to help them respond to challenges by making confident and correct decisions at a time of constant change.

This environment enables the most challenging and change-making ideas to be born. These are often perceived as the ugliest ideas because, at first, they can seem scary.

Born Ugly's job is to nurture these ideas into fully-fledged, fully thought-through and safe solutions that present the business or brand with an opportunity to change.

Importantly, it allows the C-suite to tackle today's business challenges in a different way to other approaches, finding new ways to succeed. This is creative problem-solving in action.



Don't just take our word for it

"This is the body of work
that I'm most proud of
in my career.

When we chose Born Ugly as our
strategy and brand transformation
partner, they immediately injected a
wealth of experience, expertise and
capability into our team."

John Marshall: CMO, MitoQ

"Born Ugly's process and vision
highlighted opportunities far beyond
our original brief and they continue
to inspire us."

Matthew Glover: Co-Founder, VFC

"Born Ugly was
instrumental in showing
us what the future
could look like."

**Liz Hancock: Head of Global
Communications, MitoQ**

"Throughout the journey, Born Ugly
have continued to delight us with
insight, brought our brand story to life,
and driven creative thinking
in our boardroom!"

**Nikki Matthews: Senior Brand
Manager, Long Clawson**



We'd love
to hear from you

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Thank You!

