

Change Language:  

## THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

*Jason Hensel*

High-impact thinkers, doers, and innovators interest Polly LaBarre. She has spent two decades seeking them out so she can share their status quo shake-ups with the rest of the world.

“I love sharing the stories of these vanguard organizations and leaders with audiences—and most importantly, making sense of their progressive (sometimes radical) approaches and offering up insights on migration paths toward the future for even the most entrenched organizations,” LaBarre said.

LaBarre is the keynote speaker for VenueConnect in Portland, Oregon, July 26-29, and she hopes to leave attendees inspired, energized, and equipped for making their organizations more resilient and innovative.

“I’ll make a case for management innovation—fundamentally rethinking how we organize resources and mobilize people to productive ends—as the most powerful source of competitive advantage today,” she said. “I hope to stretch attendees’ thinking around and offer up a set of bold, original, and yet, practical approaches to tackling these crucial challenges: How do you build teams and organizations that are capable of changing as fast as the world is changing? How do you create a genuine culture of innovation? What does it take to build an organization as human as the human beings who work inside of it? And, how do you conduct yourself as a leader day in and day out to keep yourself and your team moving with the times?”

### A Sense of What’s Possible

LaBarre has worked as a business journalist, exploring every kind of work environment imaginable.

“I spent more than my fair share of time enduring mind-numbing presentations in bland-on-bland conference rooms, looking for signs of life in cubicle farms, and visiting rigid and uninspiring plant floors,” she said.

She questioned why any human should spend so much waking life in these conditions and came to the conclusion that everyone deserves the opportunity to engage in meaningful work and make real impacts on their organizations.

“This was around the time I met Alan Webber and Bill Taylor and joined the founding team of Fast Company magazine, which was dedicated to telling the story of the most progressive organizations and leaders—and making that conviction a reality,” she said. “Our first issue, now 20 years ago, read: ‘Work is Personal, Knowledge is Power, Computing is Social, Break the Rules.’ Those sentiments are now alive and well in the vanguard of organizations—my work is focused on helping the rest become truly fit for the future (and genuinely fit for human beings).”

Becoming fit involves investing in a set of values that inspires your employees, your customers, and yourself.

“This isn’t about crafting an elegant mission statement and engraving it on the wall—it’s about articulating and advocating a set of ideas that fundamentally reshapes people’s sense of what’s possible,” she said. “It’s about connecting the conversation and behaviors on every level to those higher ideals every day, so that the ‘invisible’ decisions people make moment to moment are made on purpose. The most ‘winning’ organizations don’t just make great products or offer spectacular service, they stand for something—and all of their people (and usually most of their customers and partners) can make a case for why what they do really matters.”

### Management Innovation

Flipping modern work paradigms is not easy, because most of the organizations where we’re employed are not built for adaptability or engagement.

“The ‘modern’ organization was invented over a century ago to solve for very different challenges than we face today—to maximize standardization, specialization, predictability, and control,” LaBarre said. “Today, when the challenge is to become ever more resilient, innovative, inspiring, and engaging, we have to fundamentally rethink what it means to manage organizations, define leadership, design work, and measure value.”

LaBarre calls this “management innovation.”

“It’s without a doubt the most powerful source of competitive advantage today,” she said. “All of my work over the last several years and with the MIX (Management Innovation eXchange) has been devoted to engaging a global community of management activists and innovators to make collective progress on this challenge—rethinking organizational design principles and management approaches to create organizations that are resilient enough to change as fast as the world is changing, innovative enough to continually imagine new sources of value, and engaging enough to inspire people to bring their best gifts to work every day.”

One example of a management maverick is Rich Sheridan, cofounder and CEO of Menlo Innovations, a software company based in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

“What’s his winning approach? One little word: Joy. Yes, joy,” La- Barre said. “As Sheridan puts it, ‘It’s a concept that has no place in the corporate world. It certainly doesn’t sound profitable.’ Yet, ‘joy is the core belief of our workplace...It defines what we do and how we do it. It’s the single shared belief of our entire team.’”

Menlo Innovations has become a laboratory over the last 12 years on how to organize a modern workplace.

“There is no chain of command at Menlo. There are no bosses, no managers, no secrets, no rules, no walls, and no fear,” LaBarre said. “What they have instead are a series of clever mechanisms and radically practical approaches to cultivating collaboration, collective decisionmaking, focus, and performance— from working in pairs (and rotating partners on a weekly basis) to a strict (and strictly humane) 40-hour work week to a peer-led approach to hiring called ‘Extreme Interviewing’ to a wholly original (and refreshingly analog) paper-based approach to planning and setting priorities to daily 13-minute, all-hands meetings and weekly ‘show & tell’ sessions with customers.”

### Staying Curious

When LaBarre isn’t thinking about how to create better working environments, she engages in something a little more hands-on.

“I spend my time figuring out which exotic leafy greens and how many varieties of tomatoes I can shoehorn into my garden,” she said. “There’s nothing better than pulling a bunch of leeks out of a foot of snow and discovering a still-thriving bunch of kale to make a homegrown soup in the dead of winter!”

Discovery: That’s the key word in a successful organization. Finding what works, what doesn’t, and having the intelligence and courage to divine the difference.

“The great news is that we’ve [MIX] created a real discovery engine for the most cutting-edge approaches and experiments, developed real insight into the driving principles behind ‘Management 2.0,’ and created a vibrant community of in-the-trenches management innovators who keep advancing the game, together,” LaBarre said. “I’m excited to share what I’ve learned with the IAVM audience.” FM

Jason Hensel is the senior editor of Facility Manager.

[VIEW ALL ARTICLES](#)