
Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Apollo 11. He's Still Innovating

By Hal Gregersen

On July 16, 1969 at 9:32 a.m. EST, five F-1 engines lifted the 6.2 million-pound Saturn V rocket into space. (As a reference point, that's the equivalent of tossing about 400 full-grown elephants into the air at once.) Jeff Bezos, who was 5 years old at the time, was watching—intently. Four days later, on July 20, 1969 at 4:18 p.m. EST, the young Bezos was mesmerized by the words “Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed” when the lunar module gently set three men onto the moon.

Fast-forward 44 years to March 2013, and we hear: “Bezos Expedition Base, the F-1 rocket engines have surfaced.” (I'm not sure if anyone on the Bezos recovery team actually said it this way, but if they didn't, they should have.) Who would have guessed that a 5-year-old boy entranced with “The Eagle has landed” and “one small step” would be the same person who captured the world's imagination with the [recent recovery](#) of numerous F-1 engine components from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean? What an amazing ending to an amazing beginning.

Why did Bezos do it? It all started with a question—a question that Bezos cared about deeply. In his own words, “A year or so ago I started to wonder: With the right team of undersea pros, could we find, and potentially recover, the F-1 engines that started mankind's mission to the moon?”

I can't help but speculate how many business executives would ever wonder about questions like that, and even more important, how many would care enough to actually do something about it. But wonder is not just a word Bezos bandies for symbolic impact on employees or shareholders; I know firsthand it's a feeling deeply ingrained in who he is and how he goes about his work.

About 10 years ago, Jeff Dyer, Clayton Christensen, and I (co-authors of [*The Innovator's DNA*](#)) had the pleasure of interviewing Bezos. We were trying to figure out how he gets new ideas that disrupt the world, specifically discussing the genesis of Amazon.com ([AMZN](#)). From our discussion, it was crystal clear Bezos has always been an experimenter. Since he was a 5-year-old child (and even before) he would spend summers at his grandparents' ranch. Grandpa and Grandma were the ultimate do-it-yourself role models. If the tractor broke down, don't call the tractor mechanic; fix it yourself. If the animals were sick, don't call the vet (at least not immediately); diagnose and heal them yourself.

Bezos learned fast that rapid experimentation fixed things on the farm. Now, as an adult, he follows the exact same philosophy at Amazon, telling us that his fundamental job as a leader is to “reduce the costs of experimentation so that thousands, not hundreds, of experiments” take place. Not surprisingly, Bezos also has an off-the-job non-Amazon website called [Bezos Expeditions](#), where he captures and shares his current exploits. For sure, Bezos is—and always has been—an explorer at heart.

But it's not just Bezos who explores the world to get new ideas. About one-third of the disruptive innovators whom we interviewed or studied for *The Innovator's DNA* were experimenters just like Bezos (e.g., Guy Laliberte, founder of Cirque du Soleil). The other two-thirds were driven to disruptive, world-changing ideas by actively observing the world like anthropologists (e.g., Scott Cook, founder of Intuit ([INTU](#))) or by networking with people who didn't act, think, or look like them (e.g., Marc Benioff, founder of Salesforce.com ([CRM](#))).

Whether innovators explore, observe, or network to get new ideas, the best of the best are full of wonder about the world. A.G. Lafley, author of [Playing to Win](#) and former chairman and chief executive officer of Procter & Gamble ([PG](#)), wakes up every Monday morning wondering to himself, “What will I be curious about this week?” Brad Smith, CEO of Inuit, has the same insatiable curiosity about the world as Bezos.

Without a childlike sense of wonder, the world would not go round. In fact, it would still be flat (not as seen through [Thomas Friedman's eyes](#), but from a second-century historical perspective). Wonder is the antecedent to innovation. It rests at the core of the emotional plexus that powers creative action. Leaders who take the time to ponder “What if?” or “How might?”

question—regardless of whether such questions will lead to the Next Big Thing or remain unresolved—are the ones who change the world. Will you?

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