Driving renewal – Hosted by Satu Rekonen

Season 2, Episode 2: Plumbing and poetry – guest Tuomas Manninen, Finnair Oyj

Satu: Welcome to the Driving Renewal podcast. This is a podcast series from Aalto University's Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, where I discuss organizational renewal with various experts. My goal is to understand what renewal looks like in different work environments, what it means in practice, and what it requires from us as people. I am Satu Rekonen, a university lecturer.

In this episode, my guest is Tuomas Manninen, Vice President in Brand and Customer Experience Design at Finnair. He has held leadership roles in design and customer experience for over 20 years at companies such as Nokia, OP Financial Group, and Veho, and he also founded Finland's largest internal design agency at OP. In his current role, he is responsible for Finnair's customer experience across all channels, as well as design, branding, and customer insights.

Tuomas is particularly interested in the strategic development of customer experience and the advancement of design maturity. He has co-authored several articles on fostering design maturity within organizations and also lectures on the topic at Aalto Executive Education programs. Welcome to the *Driving Renewal* podcast, Tuomas.

You've worked in various roles related to developing customer experience and increasing design maturity within organizations. To start, I'd love to hear what's inspired you in these roles?

Tuomas: My academic background is in interaction sciences, and at times in the design world, I've experienced a bit of an existential crisis since I don't have a formal design education. But I always return to my background in interaction sciences.

Largely, whether we talk about digital services, customer interactions, product design, or service design, for me, it always comes down to *interaction.* And now, in this era of artificial intelligence, it even extends to interactions between machines. Somehow, I always find myself returning to these themes, and that's something I find incredibly fascinating.

And it's probably rooted in that endless reservoir of different possibilities, interpretations, and ways to enhance human interaction, service interactions, product usability, and everything related to that.

Satu: In your current role at Finnair, you oversee both brand and customer experience. How do you see branding, customer experience, and customer insights connecting with one another?

Tuomas: I’ve defined it quite classically for myself—though I certainly didn’t come up with this—that in the business world, *brand* creates expectations. It sets the expectations for what it means to engage with a company, organization, product, or service beyond just its features.

To me, that’s what brand is: it *promises.* However, the reality unfolds in the *interaction* with the product, service, or organization. And this is where customer experience comes in—it *delivers* on that brand promise.

That’s why, in my view, they are closely linked—not hierarchically, where one is more important than the other, but as two sides of the same coin. One cannot really exist without the other.

A brand without tangible actions is empty and meaningless, just as actions without a guiding principle create a scattered approach in companies and organizations. In customer experience, the brand provides a *North Star* for designing and developing experiences and, most importantly, guiding daily actions.

Satu: What kind of initiatives or activities related to these areas are currently underway in your role at Finnair?

Tuomas: In all the organizations where I've held roles like this, customer experience efforts always come down to two clear areas, and that's also the case in my current role at Finnair.

There are certain fundamentals, and then there are differentiating factors. You could say there are hygiene factors, and then there are differentiators. In English, I've learned the term "plumbing and poetry," meaning you have the infrastructure, and then you have the poetry. At Finnair, just like in my previous roles—and I'd argue this is quite universal—the focus is especially on getting these fundamentals right.

And it sounds simple and straightforward, but it becomes quite complex when you start considering the company's business and processes, then translate that into the customer perspective, and begin to understand which fundamentals need to happen every single day. This is the point from which I've always started in every role I've had.

In addition, there are these special moments in the customer journey or interactions that leave a lasting impression—moments people talk about, share with their friends, and which generate recommendations. Those moments represent the poetry or the highlights of the experience. Understanding these two aspects has always been my starting point, and it's also an ongoing effort. Because customer experience, to me, is fundamentally quite simple: we need to identify the customer's need and fulfill it in a way that creates a competitive advantage in the market. It's straightforward—recognize the customer's need, meet that need effectively, and in addition to covering the fundamentals, do something extra that leaves a positive memory and makes people talk about it.

But the challenge arises from the fact that in this constantly changing world, customer needs also keep evolving. Individual needs vary widely: If I'm traveling for work, taking a weekend trip with friends to Copenhagen, or going on vacation with my family, I'm still the same person—but for the same type of travel, I have three completely different sets of needs. Understanding these complexities is the genuinely challenging part.

And this has been a long answer to your simple question, but it's something I always come back to: understanding customer needs, identifying the fundamental aspects, and then figuring out how to create those differentiating, memorable moments—those star moments—within the customer journey. These are the experiences that generate stories, the ones people share with friends and colleagues, and that ultimately make customers return to the brand, the product, or the service again.

Satu: When thinking about Finnair as an industry, customer experience is perhaps more vulnerable to crises. It is easily impacted by external factors, and recently, Finnair has been in the news due to emissions concerns, pilot labor disputes, and flight cancellations. How do you think about responding to these situations from a customer experience perspective?

Tuomas: I have been in this role for just under five months, and while the industry is new to me, it has quickly become clear that it is highly susceptible to disruptions. Here in the Nordics, weather is a major factor, frequently causing operational disturbances. It is simply a part of this business.

Disruptions can come in many forms. Sometimes, they are entirely outside our control, like weather events. Other times, they are industry-specific realities, such as labor agreements and operational constraints. The pilot negotiations you mentioned are one such example.

From a customer experience perspective at Finnair and in this industry, I see it as follows: disruptions are inevitable. Flight cancellations happen. While over 99% of our luggage arrives on time, there are instances where bags are delayed. These are unfortunate situations that create negative customer experiences if not handled well.

What matters is having clear, well-prepared processes for handling these situations. And this is exactly the same lesson from my previous roles as well: for instance, in the automotive industry, if your car breaks down by the roadside, how the situation is handled is almost more important than how quickly the actual issue is resolved.

Of course, in our case, if you're on the other side of the world and you need to get home, and flights get cancelled or rerouted, it's obviously about more than just whether you’re taken care of. Naturally, how the situation itself is resolved matters—but from a customer experience standpoint, what matters even more is how well you're taken care of in that moment.

And this is where our focus needs to be in these types of situations. It is important to remember that at present, we operate between 200 and 300 flights per day, and out of those, fewer than 10 are canceled, and despite the weather conditions we manage. So, in the vast majority of cases, everything runs smoothly. But as is the case in organizations in general, attention is drawn to situations where things do not go as planned—and the same applies to us.

Perhaps I would add here that in our case, the Finnair brand is one that inherently sets an expectation of reliability and a certain standard of operation. Naturally, this is a moment where our brand is being tested. However, what I find encouraging is that, based on my conversations with customers and reading through customer feedback, there is still a fundamental sentiment among the public that people genuinely want Finnair to succeed.

That is not something to be taken for granted. It is not automatic that the general public has a genuine emotional investment in wanting an organization to succeed. For us, that is something to be deeply grateful for, and it is something we must take care of and cherish. We must ensure that we manage our operations properly because we are in a very unique position in that regard.

Satu: You previously mentioned the automotive industry, and before joining Finnair in your current role, you worked at Veho as the director responsible for customer experience and the development of a customer experience strategy. I would be interested to hear about that journey—how did you go about creating the strategy, what was your vision, and what were the key milestones in that process?

Tuomas: I have always been drawn to industries undergoing transformation. I have worked in the financial sector, which was heavily digitalizing, and in the automotive sector, where electrification was not only changing the technology of cars but also the entire ecosystem of services related to cars—how they are maintained, sold, and used.

When I joined Veho, my task was to create a customer experience strategy for Veho across Finland, the Baltics, and Sweden. Veho sells, services, and imports Mercedes-Benz passenger cars, vans, and trucks. Since Mercedes-Benz is Veho's principal brand, Veho operates in close alignment with the manufacturer. Around the time I started, Mercedes-Benz had launched a new strategy based on luxury, meaning they were shifting their brand and product lineup towards a more premium positioning.

This concept of luxury, however, does not resonate in the same way in the Nordic markets as it does elsewhere. So, we started by conducting an almost ethnographic study to understand what luxury means to customers in our specific markets—Finland, the Baltics, and Sweden.

Rather than going into too much detail, I'll summarize by saying that the key was understanding customer needs. We knew that the car lineup was evolving in a certain way—that was determined by the manufacturer, Mercedes-Benz, not Veho. Our challenge was to determine what we could do in terms of experience design to complement the product shift. The product lineup attracted a certain type of customer, the brand appealed to certain segments, so what did this mean from an experiential perspective?

We realized fairly quickly that there had been a paradigm shift in luxury. It used to be about physical artifacts—owning premium objects—but now, luxury had become more about intangible experiences. People no longer aspired to showcase status symbols to their neighbors but rather sought unique, personal experiences. For example, one customer told us that for them, the greatest luxury was being able to go to their summer cottage in spring, plant something in the soil, and watch it grow throughout the summer. That is a very different kind of luxury compared to the traditional materialistic approach.

We were then able to clearly identify—again coming back to the concept of plumbing and poetry—four distinct categories of needs, arranged in a clear hierarchy. We deliberately used a pyramid model, similar to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, because the structure closely mirrored the way customer expectations were layered. These four need areas were divided into basic hygiene factors—things that must always be in place—and differentiating factors—elements that set us apart from the competition. Some of these were functional and emotional needs that had to be met daily as baseline expectations, while others were related to social identity and self-expression, which, if addressed properly, created competitive advantage.

This was the core of the strategy. We identified key touchpoints in the customer journey, carefully mapped them across all channels, and defined how customer interactions should be handled at each stage.

We also had metrics in place, allowing us to continuously monitor how successfully we delivered those highlight moments in terms of customer experience. Naturally, we gathered feedback to understand how we could further improve them. We created a process where, on a monthly basis, we systematically analyzed customer feedback—although we did analyze it more frequently, we took a deeper look each month—and then made an action plan for continuous improvement. The following month, we would look at the impact of the previous measures and plan new ones. We had a fairly structured process around this. I'm actually quite proud of how we started from a very abstract concept of luxury—and it certainly wasn't overnight, it took a couple of years—before we arrived at, let's say, "tentative steps" in applying that framework in our day-to-day leadership to improve the customer experience.

I call them tentative steps because, although we had a process and tools to use it, the culture in which things like figures, euros, and market shares were traditionally the metrics being monitored made it a cultural issue to introduce a somewhat different perspective alongside those metrics. And that kind of work in any organization is essentially endless.

And that leads me to my other favorite topic: design maturity. But the fact is, a strategy remains just a strategy if it's not translated into everyday operations. One of the biggest, most valuable lessons from my time at Veho was figuring out how we created a leadership model and a concrete process at a practical level. It was essentially a continuous improvement model rooted in customer insight, and that's what the strategy ultimately boiled down to.

Satu: I would love to hear more about how you actually developed the strategy at Veho.

Tuomas: As I mentioned, we started with a very ethnographic approach. We had researchers spending time with our customers, discussing brands. We talked about what role a car plays in their life—whether it's just a functional means of getting from A to B or if it carries additional significance. And unsurprisingly, in the Mercedes-Benz category, it often had much deeper meanings. But fairly soon after that initial phase of understanding, we moved on to planning concrete actions.

I refer to it that way—essentially, "What does this mean for us in practice?" Once we had our understanding of the overarching vision and what luxury entails, we began translating it, because, for instance, the term *luxury* doesn't really resonate in our market. Even if we didn't present that specific term to customers, within the organization—and within our culture—choosing the right words is crucial. I've noticed this with customer experience and design: individual words carry tremendous weight when it comes to internal adoption. So, we started running co-creation workshops in different countries, with various individuals, especially those on the front lines of customer interaction.

We did it in a way that we had a clear vision of the goal and the strategy, and then we presented real customer stories—cases where things hadn't gone quite as intended or hadn't resulted in a customer experience that would provide a competitive edge. Using co-creation methods aligned with that strategy, our employees then transformed those somewhat unfortunate stories into positive ones.

And from that, we developed our operating principles. We talked about these as behavioral standards, meaning how Veho employees should act in customer situations. This was distilled into four key themes, and then we defined specific processes, tools, and methods to support them. After this, we moved forward and carried out a significant training program following the finalization of our strategy and we introduced what we called the CX Playbook, or the Customer Experience Playbook.

And then, when we started training for this new way of working, the rollout was much easier because the behavioral standards and agreed ways of working were not something dictated by a consultant or leadership, but rather something that had been created together with over a hundred employees in the company.

And in those training sessions, we always had a kind of "get out of jail free" card for when someone questioned what we were doing. If someone asked, "Who came up with this?" or "Who decided that this is how we should work?" we could respond, "Well, actually, your colleagues were involved in developing this." That immediately removed a great deal of resistance to change.

This was also an important lesson for me, because although co-creation has always been part of design work, I had not previously applied it in such a strategic context. I had used it more in the context of products and services. And this approach was not fast. Organizing these kinds of workshops in five different countries, involving over a hundred people, and conducting nearly ten sessions took time.

But I always used to say at Veho as well how grateful I was that we were given the time to do things properly. It's not always a given. I'm not saying that at Veho we spent a year and a half just working on strategy without making any improvements. Of course, we were making continuous improvements. But they genuinely allowed space for long-term planning and understood that by laying a solid foundation, it would be easier to build upon.

As I said, we then moved on to the monthly improvement process. If we had rushed the foundational work, it would have been much harder to implement that process. Because we were allowed to establish a strong foundation, we were able to work far more flexibly on further refinements. We had a staff who were committed to the strategy and who truly understood what we were aiming for—and who agreed with the goal. The process benefited from a deeply rooted qualitative and quantitative customer understanding, which we had built relatively efficiently, and from the co-creation element. The result was a strategy with real substance behind it.

Satu: You mentioned earlier that strategic change is always also a cultural change when an organization starts doing things differently. Did you face any challenges along the way, and if so, how did you overcome them?

Tuomas: This is something I consider a universal challenge that appears in all organizations, at least to some extent.

Customer experience efforts are often perceived as something warm and fuzzy happening "over there," while the "real business" is happening elsewhere. I have encountered different organizational models that try to better integrate customer experience into core business operations, but no structural model alone can fully solve the cultural challenge. This is a challenge that exists in nearly every organization I have been a part of. At Finnair, I have faced this less than in some of my previous experiences, but I still think a few key factors are crucial.

The first is having a certain critical mass. It usually starts from senior management, or at least there needs to be a so-called sponsor in leadership who supports the initiative. Or, if you yourself are in a leadership position, you need to be prepared to continuously push the agenda and advocate for it.

The second is being able to demonstrate the connection between customer experience and business performance. It is not easy. I have never been able to do it in a completely airtight way or in a way that makes it fully understandable. Nor has it always been clearly recognized what the direct relationship is, because the connection is not straightforward. What we do today in terms of customer experience typically translates into business benefits only later.

So you need a sufficient buy-in, a critical mass behind it, and then you also need to be able to demonstrate results.

And then the third factor—I often say that a very useful trait is a stomach that can handle a lot of coffee, because this work involves sitting in meetings, constantly repeating the same points, and keeping the agenda alive. In many cases, especially in an organization like OP, you had to be present and wait for the right moment. And when that moment came, you had to recognize the opportunity: *"Now I have a chance to plant a seed for customer-centric thinking, now I have to act on it."* These moments often have a very skewed effort-to-reward ratio—you spend a lot of time just being there, waiting for the right opportunity to untangle a knot or shift someone's perspective. And yes, this means drinking a lot of coffee in meetings. But the rewarding part is that once in a while, something truly significant happens. For example, at OP, a major shift began when one business leader participated in a Design Sprint and then started spreading the word within their own network like *"Hey, we can develop concepts in a different way. We don't need to create 100-slide PowerPoint presentations and sit in endless meeting rooms. There's a team here that follows a methodology where they use deep customer insight to generate ideas, prototype them, and even validate them with real customers—so that we actually know what direction we should take."*

And then, through planting this seed—which took a moment to take root—suddenly, demand, understanding, and change started to emerge. A cultural shift was set in motion.

Satu: Interesting, you really need to know how to seize the right moment.

Tuomas: Yeah, exactly.

Satu: This is a good transition to your career at OP Financial group. You also mentioned earlier that design maturity is one of your favorite topics, and at OP, you worked on advancing the organization's design maturity while also founding Finland's largest in-house design agency. To start, I'd like to ask: how do you personally define design maturity, and why is it important for an organization?

Tuomas: These are terminological issues, which I referred to earlier. I'll explain with an anecdote: When I moved from OP to Veho and started talking about design maturity with a supervisor—who was very knowledgeable about customer experience and had done truly great work in that area, with a strong strategic mindset—the term design maturity just didn't resonate at all. I was puzzled, because we were talking about the same thing and were able to discuss concepts at a strategic level. So why wasn't it clicking?

Then, at some point, I simply swapped the word "design" for "customer experience" while keeping the rest of my explanation the same. Suddenly, we found common ground. Just changing one word made all the difference. Instead of talking about design maturity, I said customer experience maturity, and suddenly, the conversation flowed effortlessly. That experience really solidified my own understanding: design maturity is, at its core, about the maturity of customer-centric thinking within an organization.

The English word "design" carries a much broader meaning than the Finnish word "muotoilu", which can sometimes be too narrow. That's why terminology in this area can be tricky.

But ultimately, for me, design maturity means how customer-centric an organization truly is.

Satu: How do you personally see the connection between customer-centricity and business growth?

Tuomas: If I think back to my journey at OP, I initially joined as an internal customer experience consultant.

There were already designers in the organization, but they were somewhat scattered, primarily working on digital channels and mainly focused on user interface design. Now, coming back to the example I mentioned earlier—after various stages, we conducted our first full-fledged design sprint, sponsored by a business unit leader who actively participated in the process.

We were developing a digital service that would shift a traditionally person-to-person service into an online channel. Based on customer insights, we initially designed a service with 12 functionalities. Then, as we started validating it, we prototyped it quickly and tested it with customers. As is typical in sprint-based design, the sample size was small, but we gained valuable directional insights. Out of the 12 functionalities, every single customer told us that there were three core features that they considered essential—the ones they would be willing to pay for. The remaining nine functionalities were seen as "nice to have" but not crucial.

Now we come to the benefits. From the business leader's perspective, their understanding increased significantly: "Aha, instead of investing in a development project that produces all 12 functionalities at once, we should still plan to build all 12, but after just the first three, I can already bring this to market and then develop the rest incrementally."

Plus, we gain significantly more insight by bringing it to market in this manner. The investment is smaller, the development timeline is considerably faster, and we can begin realizing actual business results much sooner. In my experience, this is exactly how it all comes together.

You can show them—for instance, I have plenty of these examples in my back pocket—but they won't really resonate in another organization or business area until people have personally seen and understood how a customer-centric mindset and customer-focused methods can produce results in their own context or business.

I have never found another way to make this happen. Of course, raising awareness, sharing case studies, and internal advocacy all play a role, but the real breakthrough only comes through action.

Satu: So, at OP, you were involved in creating Finland's largest in-house design agency. What do you think made it possible for something like this to happen at OP?

Tuomas: There were probably many factors, and at the same time, the same key elements I mentioned earlier regarding top management support. At that time, there was a strong belief from the CEO that this type of customer-centric development model was the right approach for OP. A lot of the discussion revolved around service design—and here again, we run into the terminology issue. At that time, anything related to design, whether it was customer insight, user interface design, or broader design thinking, was referred to as service design. Even though it wasn't the most precise term, we had to accept the language that was understood within the organization. It was a matter of recognizing that the terminology might not be perfect, but if it helped communicate the core idea effectively, then that was what mattered. This was one of the key enablers, and I referred to something similar earlier about Veho as well—the fact that there was a certain level of openness at the top management level. There was a sense that *"this approach might have potential, and it could create something differentiating for us."*

That was one factor. The second was, as I mentioned earlier, that through these individual actions—which I've now referred to multiple times—it started generating positive outcomes. There was also, as I said, this fortunate design sprint, which happened to be the first proper one we conducted. After that, a demand for design sprints emerged within the organization, and of course, we responded to that demand. Looking back, we learned that focusing solely on design sprints was not the right long-term approach in many cases, but at the time, we wanted to meet the demand that had surfaced. One important lesson from this is that it's okay to do things imperfectly if there is organizational demand for that kind of work.

I have come across this quite a bit in this field—there is often a very purist mindset about how things *should* be done. My approach is that it's always worth seizing the opportunities that are available and then, within the limits of that opportunity, guiding things in the right direction.

This was really good, I still remember—it was May 2015—and by the end of the year, we realized that our internal offering had to be more than just Design Sprints. Design Sprints were incredibly empowering for people who had never worked with design or customer-centric methods before. Many had never even been involved in validating a service with actual customers. For them, the experience was eye-opening. They would come out of it telling stories like, *"I never would have thought that a person could see things this way!"* And that's when real learning happens—when people see and experience something completely new.

But really, we applied it to so many different business challenges that, as I said, I think the key lesson here was similar to what happened at Veho: they gave us time and space to do strategic work, and at OP, I'd argue there was also a significant opportunity in that they provided a chance—not just a one-time opportunity, but an environment where we were allowed to learn, to learn together, and it wasn't a case of, "Oh, this didn't work out, so we'll scrap it and move on somewhere else." Instead, the culture was such that it fostered continuous learning, which in turn made possible a new and fundamentally different way of working from what had gone before.

Satu: In the eighth episode of our first season, we had Pia Hannukainen from OP as a guest, where she talked about how she was building the customer capability team at OP. I'd be interested to hear how your design team and her customer capability team related to each other and what kind of collaboration you had?

Tuomas: We have referred to this in many of our writings—how design maturity and customer insight maturity go hand in hand. For design maturity to grow within an organization, it needs to be supported by a strong level of customer insight maturity alongside it. But this wasn't something we had a clear understanding of from the beginning. Instead, it emerged from a practical need—a kind of efficiency vs. inefficiency challenge.

We noticed that a lot of customer validation and research was being conducted—both large-scale and small-scale studies—but the insights often remained within individual projects. We also saw that the same things were sometimes tested or validated in multiple projects because there was no visibility or centralized way to track insights across the organization. This created a clear need for a design research function, where customer insights could be systematically collected, channeled, and built upon cumulatively. This was one scenario and then another one was to create a customer insight function alongside OP's market intelligence operations and formalize it so that it was not just a part of design, but rather a broader function that served the entire organization. The goal was to ensure that customer insights were not only used in the design process for products and services but were also available to support decision-making across the company.

And from that, the customer insight function you referred to was established, and we ended up working very closely together. In practical terms, this meant that no customer insight-related activity, big or small, happened without going through the Customer Insight function. This ensured that: a) customer understanding was accumulated systematically—not just in theory, but in practice and b) we gained efficiency because we could leverage previously conducted research instead of duplicating efforts. Since everything was channeled through one place, insights were further enriched and refined.

This was the second major benefit. As I mentioned, the Customer Insight function served many other parts of the organization beyond just design, but it was a crucial element in the maturity of the design function. Strengthening customer insight capabilities was essential for advancing design maturity. Looking back, we’ve come to understand that design maturity can only grow to a certain level on its own—beyond that, it requires a strong customer insight function alongside it to continue evolving.

And actually, the same applies to what we are experiencing at Finnair right now. We do have a strong Customer Insight function, but we have come to realize that we could reshape its profile to some extent, and we are on that same journey. It’s not that anything has been done poorly or incorrectly—just like at OP, customer insight was not handled badly. But when an organization works on developing design maturity and fostering a customer-centric culture, it becomes increasingly clear that the maturity of the Customer Insight function is a crucial part of that growth as well.

Satu: As we've heard from many of your examples, you have worked across very different industries—for example, banking, automotive, and aviation—all in roles related to customer experience and design maturity, or however one chooses to define these concepts. I’d be interested to hear: What differences and similarities have you observed in how these aspects are developed and, on the other hand, in how they are implemented?

Tuomas: Someone might see it as if I deliberately choose industries that have a high environmental impact. In a way, that’s true. But on the other hand, I believe that people will continue to drive cars and fly to some extent, so the goal should be to make more sustainable choices within those industries. That’s the way I see it. But I’ve also been open about the fact that when you look at my CV across these industries, it might raise some questions. But yes, as I mentioned earlier and have illustrated with examples, for me, customer experience is fundamentally about understanding the customer’s need and then fulfilling that need in some way. Of course, we can also create new needs.

At OP, for example, we had cases where we were able to create a need that ultimately made the customer’s life easier. This, in turn, enabled us to build a closer relationship with the customer, which naturally opened up new business opportunities for us. No matter the industry, everything in my thinking always comes back to this same fundamental principle.

The nature of customer needs, whether they are existing or latent, naturally varies by industry. One key difference is how rapidly those needs change. Some industries are very stable, where customer needs remain relatively constant over time. Then, there are industries where customer needs evolve more frequently. This is where the main difference lies.

In customer experience, I find that the most interesting situations are always those where we realize that customer expectations and needs do not originate from our industry at all. For example, at Veho, when a customer brings their car in for servicing, they don't have a mental model specifically for how car maintenance works across different brands.

We have some kind of expectation of how it should work, based on our past experiences, but also heavily influenced by other, unrelated experiences. For example, *if my refrigerator broke down last week and I scheduled a repair, I might assume that booking a car service works in a similar way.* These kinds of mental models, thought structures, expectations, and needs often come from completely different industries rather than the one in question.

Just like in banking, like mobile banks, most of us don't actively use multiple banking apps at the same time. But we do use Spotify, Netflix, Facebook, Instagram, and other digital services—so our mental model for how a banking app *should* work actually comes from those platforms, not from other banks. The usage conventions and expectations are shaped by completely different industries, and that, to me, is fascinating. But ultimately, it still comes down to the same core principle—understanding customer needs and fulfilling them.

Customer needs, as I've mentioned many times, differ across industries, and how those needs are met is always specific to the organization and the industry. Each organization has different capabilities, and industries have different constraints, but in the end, it always comes back to the same principle. I often refer to the definition of skill used by John Wooden, the legendary U.S. college basketball coach, who was named the Coach of the Century in the U.S.—across all sports. He defined skill as *"the ability to understand and execute the fundamentals systematically."*

That is what skill is. And this is what I always come back to—do we know the fundamental aspects of customer experience? Do we recognize them, do we have the capability to execute them, and most importantly, can we do it systematically? What I see as a common issue across industries is that customer experience is often too dependent on whether it's a "good day" or a "bad day."

An amateur's performance curve is one where there's a lot of variation between good and bad days. It's like my own tennis serve—sometimes, it lands perfectly in the service box at high speed, but in the same game, it might also go completely off target, and I have no idea why. That's because I'm an amateur.

But professionals can consistently deliver their serve at a certain level, hitting the service box reliably. This is a very simple example, but people tend to remember the highest moments and the lowest moments. In customer experience, regardless of the industry, if we can raise the baseline, meaning we reduce those moments where things completely fall apart, and our "bad day" doesn't significantly affect our basic performance, then we usually also stand out from the competition. And I would argue that this applies across all industries.

Satu: Let's talk for a moment about leading creative teams. Tuomas, in your current role at Finnair, you lead teams responsible for brand development, design, and customer experience. I'd be interested to hear—what have you learned about leading creative teams, and what do you think is important to consider in that role?

Tuomas: Boundaries and love. That's really what it comes down to. And this is, once again, a question of organizational culture—how much freedom is allowed within a team. I'm not talking about the freedom to break agreed-upon rules—that's not what I mean. High-functioning teams have shared ground rules, and those rules are followed. And if they're not followed, there are consequences.

Those are the boundaries, but within that sandbox, people should be free to explore and experiment. Personally, I prefer to be the one fueling the fire rather than constantly reminding people of the rules. In a corporate environment, the rules tend to reinforce themselves anyway. You have to allow a certain level of chaos. And as I mentioned, this is context-dependent—the chaos of creating an artistic masterpiece is very different from the chaos of a digital service design process in a corporation.

So, the boundaries of the sandbox must always be clear. That's essential because it allows people a certain freedom to work and create in their own way. For me, this is what "love" means in this context—giving people the space to be themselves and work in a way that suits them. But those boundaries must be well-defined in advance. We have a set schedule, we have a clear goal, and we need to work toward that outcome.

And this is perhaps one of those things—designers and creatives are sometimes unfairly criticized for not understanding business. I don't agree with that. Of course, in different roles, there are people for whom business objectives matter more and others for whom they matter less. But these are the fundamental aspects that everyone needs to be aware of.

And maybe in this creative chaos, or at least knowing that the creative process is not linear, keeping things aligned with the agenda is one of the most essential aspects of leadership. At the same time, I've also led teams that are more straightforward, more operational, perhaps even more execution-focused—and that's a completely different way of working. I enjoy that as well. But what I still find most rewarding in this job—every single time—is when I can go to the airport, take some time, just observe, talk to our people, and talk to customers. And every time, I have those moments of realization: *"Oh, right, I never thought about it that way"* or *"Oh, so that's how you actually use this service"* or *"Ah, I see, that's the kind of issue you're running into with self-check-in"*. And that's something I want to encourage—that sense of ongoing curiosity, the drive to keep learning and discovering new perspectives.

I believe that creative teams naturally attract people who are inherently curious about many things. But that curiosity also needs to be nurtured and maintained. It's important to provide the right stimuli, opportunities where people can channel their own motivation and engage with work in a way that keeps their curiosity alive.

Satu: I'd like to ask about this a bit further—what kinds of practices or structures help support collaboration within creative teams, or even between different creative teams?

Tuomas: The content and context of work in a corporate environment are so diverse that the way we operate varies significantly depending on what we are working on. When we're doing strategic-level planning, it's a very different process than when we're designing a broader concept. Similarly, designing an individual service within that concept is different, and even within that service, designing a single functionality follows yet another approach. So, the way we work depends heavily on the scope and level of the task at hand.

Integrating design work into the existing processes of an organization—whether it's strategy planning or product development—has been one of the key lessons for me. What I've learned is that design-specific methods or processes, when treated as something separate or isolated, don't tend to go very far within a corporate environment.

The ability to adapt to the way the broader organization operates is absolutely crucial. But that does not mean simply submitting to it—rather, you can contribute to it and help evolve the way the organization works. Some of my worst experiences—but also my biggest learning moments—have come from cases where we tried to create a completely separate way of working, disconnected from how the rest of the organization operated. Then, when the time came to present our work, it became a situation where: *"You did it this way, and we did it that way—how do we bring these together?"* The answer? We never truly bring them together—because they were never developed together in the first place. This, by the way, is one of the fundamental problems of many innovation incubators when scaled up in larger organizations. So, once again, I want to emphasize: the ability to adapt does not mean surrendering. It means having the ability to develop and refine existing organizational processes, steering them toward a more customer-centric approach. Because at the end of the day, the fact remains—customer-centric organizations are simply better organizations.

Whether we measure it by productivity, business results, or any other metric, customer-centric organizations have a strong mandate to develop and improve the way they operate. At the same time, it's important to recognize that not everyone shares the same perspective on how this should be done. This means that sometimes, you have to sell the idea internally, and at other times, you have to take a more active role in influencing the process. There are moments when you need to say: *"No, actually, we're going to do it this way."* Or: *"Hey, what if we tried this approach instead?", "What if we quickly built a prototype and tested it with customers?"* Sometimes, a small initiative like this can suddenly lead to a much bigger realization, such as: *"Wait a minute—shouldn't we be developing our strategy this way too?"* For me, the key takeaway is that there are no separate processes for customer-centric design.

Satu: Let's take a final look at how you see the future of customer experience and brand development. Do you see any changes in their role within companies? Is there any shift in their importance on the horizon?

Tuomas: It's hard for me to say—I don't think I have the necessary distance or perspective to clearly identify a major shift. I'm probably too close to the subject to make a broad statement about change. However, one thing that we are actively discussing right now for example in relation to brands, traditionally brand functions have acted as a kind of gatekeeper, deciding what is allowed and what isn't—giving a simple *yes* or *no* to whether something aligns with the brand.

Right now, we are moving strongly toward a more enabling and inspiring approach to brand leadership. Rather than being just a gatekeeper, brand management is becoming a platform that guides and supports everything—whether it's customer experience, marketing, or any other area. It's about creating the right boundaries while also providing creative freedom—that balance of structure and flexibility. This shift is significant because brands have often been seen as rigid entities, where the brand team acts as a gatekeeper or enforcer. Even if the people working in brand management don't think that way themselves, that's how it has often been perceived. The real transformation is that branding is no longer just about strict guidelines that others must follow. Instead, it's about constant dialogue. Brands today exist in the moment, and they can even take on entirely new forms when they are exposed to customers and users. Sometimes, the image that emerges from customer interactions is different from what the company originally intended. Traditionally, branding followed a top-down approach—*"this is how we want to be perceived."* Now, I see us shifting toward a more flexible, adaptive brand thinking—where we listen, observe, and evolve based on how customers actually interact with and perceive the brand. This is the kind of discussion we are actively having right now at Finnair.

But again, I come back to customer experience. I don't know if this is really a change—probably not—but I always return to the idea that the ability to recognize and systematically execute the fundamentals is key. Often, in discussions about customer experience, the focus tends to be on small, one-off initiatives—almost like campaign-based efforts. These are the things that get attention, but what's often missing is the understanding that the foundation needs to be solid.

At Finnair, we talk about "brilliant basics"—and they need to be executed systematically. We cannot allow volatility in the customer experience—where it depends on the day, the person, or other variables. The fundamentals must always work, consistently. Right now, we are in the process of defining exactly what those basics are. Of course, we already have a pretty good understanding, but we are still working to make sure that we've identified the right ones.

That is certainly one key aspect. And then there's the whole agile way of working, both in brand development and customer experience. As I mentioned before, there must be a strategy—whether we call it brand strategy, customer experience strategy, or something else.

There has to be a clear goal, but at the same time, we need to be able to continuously improve, take action, and respond to feedback. It's also crucial to recognize the nature of feedback—is this just an isolated complaint from a vocal customer, or is this a broader pattern that we need to address? Is this something that needs to be fixed, or is it actually an opportunity for us?

It has to be agile. If something is identified today, it should already be tested or implemented in some small way by next week. I don’t know if this is a change, but at the very least, this is what it takes to succeed in this field—the ability to move quickly and iterate continuously.

Satu: Yeah, really great insights. Throughout this discussion, you’ve shared many valuable lessons, and I’m sure our listeners have gained a lot of food for thought from your experiences.

At the end, I’d love to hear your thoughts on this—if an organization wants to strengthen its customer-centricity, where do you think is the best place to start?

Tuomas: My approach has always been that, whenever I try to get people engaged or bring new team members on board, I always start by reading customer feedback.

What are the customers actually saying? We can sit in a meeting room with decades of experience in the industry, but in the end, it's still just our own interpretation. When we truly start reading customer feedback, seeing what they actually write, it changes the perspective. For example, at Veho, we ran a pilot where every week, the sales director and the service director at one location called five customers who had recently visited. They simply asked: *"Hey, is there anything we could improve?"*

It wasn't exactly easy to get this initiative started. But the kind of learning that came out of it was extremely valuable. These weren't big issues necessarily, but when you actually hear the customer say it out loud, it becomes much clearer—it's no longer just someone in the organization saying, *"I think we should do this."* That internal viewpoint might be right, but it could just as easily be wrong. So, where to begin? You have to expose yourself directly to customer feedback—either solicited or spontaneous. For example, by simply calling customers and asking: *"Hey, could you spare a couple of minutes? Where did we do well, and where do you think we could improve?"*

This type of approach usually leads to a significant first step forward.

Satu: Thank you so much, Tuomas, for joining us. This has been incredibly interesting. Thanks!