

# Jorge Barba

How to stop an ego from blocking innovation

## Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Jorge Barba

## Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello, everyone and welcome to another expert interview. Today, live from the border between America and Mexico, we have Jorge Barba, an innovation insurgent with us who is the leader at the Baja Innovation Center,

Jorge, it's lovely to have you on the line.

**Jorge Barba:** Hey, Nick. Thank you for having me.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely no problem. So Jorge, you work at the Baja Innovation Center. What is that? And why don't you tell us a bit more about it?

**Jorge Barba:** A large co-working space we have here in Mexico where basically tech – not tech companies but companies that have something to do with tech, different variations have their offices there. And there's also a very large co-working space where people just come in and do their work, hang out with people and get to know people who love tech and the good stuff.

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's such a trend in the industry now to have a co-working space. I love the fact that it gives small companies a place to do their innovative work. But do you also find that having different people from different companies and different mindsets together facilitates sort of more ideas and more innovation happening?

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah. One of the issues that we can say that with this particular co-working space is that because you have offices, most people spend their time on the offices. So you rarely get to have the interaction. And I've worked in other where I've had co-working space plus offices and what I used to tell because they used to be a client mine was, we have to create the conditions for people to come out so people can crash into each other and have those impromptu conversation because people are not wired to – they just go straight to their desk.

**Nick Skillicorn:** It's the curse of thinking that you need to be busy the whole time and that busyness translates to success. It's actually something that hurts a lot of innovations and a lot of companies. Do you find that as well?

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah. And yet, I'll tell you a quick little story. Here in the Innovation Center, there is a Korean who is working from here. So he came from Las Vegas in the US just to start his project here. I can't talk about it because it's hush-hush. But it's something very technological-advanced, let's put it that way. And he has got people from – local people working on the project.

And his demeanor and his way of approaching people are completely different from the people do. Like when he approached me, I was like, "Who is this guy?" We just start talking and we hit it off. And I've been helping with his project to help him push it forward. But his way of doing it is – people are kind of like, "Oh, this guy is like – he doesn't care. I mean he doesn't speak the language." He speaks English.

So my point is that when you bring people who are not from local, different approach when you see it. And I love that.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Absolutely. There's so much to be said about diversity in the workplace actually leading to new ways of thinking and new ideas. And I think when you talk about the culture of innovation, there's a lot to be said about bringing in these new perspectives. Do you have a view on how you can improve the culture of innovation and companies?

**Jorge Barba:** The culture is the key. So I get asked about – everybody like a question, so how did we innovate on other kind of stuff? And I always ask, what are you not doing? Or what are you doing that's stopping that from happening? So let's start from there because there are blockers to behaviors from people. And one of those blockers that we were just mentioning is bringing outsiders and letting them hang out, giving them a voice.

The key is not what you want to do. Add more activities to what we already do. Eliminate activities that are standing in the way of these activities that are what I call innovation breeding habit because one of the key things is people need to ask questions and challenging – having these I would say like rough debate where tension exists.

How many questions, how many people here challenge executives? When was the last time anybody challenged you? And you actually paid attention into whatever the other guy was saying. Those are types of questions that people are – they find that very – getting in their comfort zone. But that's kind of like what the culture is. It's not something that you draw and like take this activity and put it here like the plug and play. It's more of let's really ask ourselves how are we helping ourselves from not doing – how are we getting in our own way?

It's like people, we got in our own way to pull ourselves and we kind of like close off our view and not consider other possibilities. Then it's the same thing. So that's how we start this. Opening their eyes to what they're doing that's not letting that in.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Could you elaborate a bit more on what you found in your experience working with companies that is stopping them? So the sort of problems that companies and individuals and leaders might be facing that they might not necessarily be aware of.

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah. So there's a company called Capital One. And I'll say them because when they came to, they had already had their epiphany moment. So usually, that's not how it works. You have to help them find that epiphany in some way. But for me, they approached me when they found their epiphany and they said, "We understand that we've been doing vanilla coffees for quite a while now and we need to stop this because it's not resulting in anything."

And I was like, wow, you rarely get those types of conversations where they already made up their mind. And the transition was easier. And one of the key challenges was that in their case, it's like they have like an innovation consultancy within or they have one. And then that actually was there "catalyst" but their strategy was reactive. So what is going on and then how do we move faster to copy that? So basically like a fast follower but not really fast follower when they're actually improving on anything. And they figured that out on their own because nothing was going on.

And so I helped them kind of look at that and say, "How do we collaborate between people who are not in this innovation consultancy within?" Because they had like this lab and then they didn't talk to each other. And I'm like, "How is that possible?" They are supposed to talk to each other. And they are not talking to each other. They are kind of competing with each other. I'm like, "No, no, no."

So that's – like the communication part is key because of ego part, the ego part of people. If there's competition between groups, I mean it's ego. I mean it's very simple. It's not any other thing. I mean it's ego. And you have to change that. And the way to change it is either eliminating those egos, restarting from new or taking the long-term approach which is more of a coaching, trying to get people together.

And in my experience, that really works. It works. But very, very long and it's not fast because it's getting into people's comfort zone, breaking their habits. And one way to do that is changing their routines.

So one thing I had them do was, "Let's switch groups. Let's switch people. You take one guy – a couple of guys from this group, you put them in this group over here and do the same. Let's start swapping people." And they were like, "Oh my God! That's kind of like ..." Well, basically, I said, "Listen, if they're going to get along, you got to start somewhere." We got to start somewhere. And that's how we do it.

I mean you don't bring – you don't create camaraderie just out of thin air. I mean you have design for it and it's something you got to force, which is a lot of people think that like being aggressive is like forcing things. And I'm like you are designing conditions and sometimes you have to force them because people are lazy. We're stubborn.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I know. Sometimes you need to really help the company along to change the behaviors that are holding back. And it's something that so many people say, "Oh, if you just do like what this other company does, like just think more like Netflix or think more like Uber." It's so easy in theory to do but getting the behavior to actually change is something that's a lot harder.

**Jorge Barba:** It's contextual and you just don't import their mindsets. You're importing practices but not their mindsets. I'll give you a quick story. Last year, I was consulting for a local restaurant. This chap is a friend of mine from early days in school. But that's his first go around starting a restaurant and he's very keen on the culture part. So we understood each other. We understood each other.

And up until that point he would just bring any people randomly to help them with their customer experience in terms of the employees. And that was a big no-no for me. And I said, "Listen, if we're going to – if you want like a Disney experience," because that's what we're talking about here man, I said, "Listen, if you want people to remember this place, to remember the place not just because of food but because they actually like being here, no, we have to be very, very strict with the type of people that are going to help you create that experience."

And I did a benchmark with Starbucks. So we went in and because I was also consulting for Starbucks, I made that match. And I said, "We don't have to travel up to Seattle. We just go here, to one Starbucks down here. I mean they basically do the same anywhere across the world with the same practices. They'll tell us everything." And that's what we did. We sat down for two hours. We asked key questions to the manager. He gave us all the different practices that they use. And I said, "OK, so let's take a few of these that we like, that we like to have and then let's implement them but in our own little ways." And that's what we did.

But that was like – when I told him we're going to Starbucks and we're going to talk them, he was like, "What?!" But it made sense when we sat down. And then we pick and choose kind of different things as to how they manage the customer experience, how to make it sustainable and consistent, which was important. And then we took some of those practices and we implemented them. And then the hiring changed also in terms of the focus that you want to have.

So you create – you design culture. You don't let it design you. Otherwise, you will always be reacting to it.

**Nick Skillicorn:** An interesting thing you just talked about because a lot of people watching and listening, they might listen to that story and see, “Oh, I see what you mean about sort of taking best practices from somewhere.” But other people will listen and sort of challenge you and say, “You’re just copying what some other company did and where is the innovation in that?”

**Jorge Barba:** No, because it’s like taking something that works elsewhere. At the end of the day, it’s customer experience. And that was important. Because like what I told him, “Listen, we don’t want a benchmark against other restaurant. We already know what happens.” The only thing he’s going to do is going to be a little bit better. It’s an incremental thing.

But if we benchmark like craft different resell areas, expand your view, and I said, “Let’s talk to Starbucks.” I mean they have a consistent experience. It’s a worldwide brand. They know what the hell they’re doing and it’s consistent all the time anywhere you are in the world. It’s like yes, it’s Starbucks. Let’s see what we can learn from them.”

And they weren’t the only ones that I’ve talked to. We also talked to another company called Anthropologie. You’ve heard about that company?

**Nick Skillicorn:** Is it – it’s a store, isn’t it?

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah, it’s for women. It’s like all these different – I think it’s like a theme park for women because they spend a lot of time in there. But the thing for me or what’s interesting is, listen, every location is completely different from the other one. So the location here is different from the ones over there in Los Angeles. And I have a contact that works in one of these.

So I went to her and the same thing, I start asking questions. I said – and I told my friend, “Listen, obviously Anthropologie spends ...” the objective was let’s find and learn from companies that invest in the customer experience as their marketing and they don’t invest in any other tactics to promote. So I said, “Let’s focus on the customer experience being the thing that actually gets people to talk about.”

So that’s the reason we chose these Starbucks, Anthropologie and then other like – I have a background with Disney so these types of things come naturally for me to think about and then to connect the dots and then let’s go and execute it.

Now, we did – we took some extreme examples like this other restaurant in Colombia called Andres Carne de Res where basically like the – well, there are lots of things that they do. But the people – the employees there are actors. They are actors. They entertain you. So it’s very, very unique experience. So we also kind of like studied that and said, “That’s really wild.” But I said, “That’s something to inspire us.” So let’s see what we can learn from that and then transport over here.

So it's – so when people say that like you were saying, for me, it's like a creative – creativity of connecting dots at the end of the day. Whatever we did over here is unique to – or Capital is not unique to Starbucks or Anthropologie. We just kind of took some pieces and mix them up and there you go.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I know. It's one thing to think that if you are taking inspiration from best practices from somewhere else that it's just copying. But the actual innovation quite often happens in how you execute it in each individual company because that's where the rubber meets the road and it's actually about how the innovation happens. And execution unfortunately is where quite often the best ideas tend to fall apart.

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah. What I tell people is let's focus on learning from the guys who were great, the companies who have these very, very focused extreme thinking about certain things because that's where you learn the most because they're pushing it. And the same methods everywhere.

So for me, it's no point to go and see, "Oh, this guy runs his restaurant this way." I mean come on, we can – I mean this guy can exchange in place with that guy and nothing is going to change because they're wired the same way. But what happens if we exchange employees with them? Their culture is going to change. And I said, that's the key. That's the idea we want to plant on people's head that if you go to Carl's Jr. for one day or a week, their whole thing is going to change because we have a different mindset.

**Nick Skillicorn:** What about things like the difference between these pretty sage incremental innovations and more breakthrough innovation and is that something that you have a view on on sort of the way that you approach them differently?

**Jorge Barba:** Yes. So this is one thing that I think people rarely think about and even business leaders rarely think about when they're approaching the questions regarding innovation monthly. And they don't think about because they are just going what's up their heads. But mostly, 99% of the time, they're going with something incremental.

Yeah, I can say this. So last year, I was talking to the leader of a very, very big company down here in Mexico. They have dealerships across like 50 dealerships across Mexico. So they have like Hyundai, Land Rover and stuff, Porsche, BMW. And we had a chat and he was asking me stuff about technology, artificial intelligence, and all these things. And he's somebody who has been around, who knows a lot of people, and he likes talking about these topics, the future topics.

But what I was anticipating was OK, you like talking about these topics but do you like to execute them? And he's a completely different personality. So we started talking about them. I started figuring out what I could tell him and I did in terms of customer experience and stuff like that.

And basically what I said, “Listen, how do we automate certain things within your services?” And when I did the presentation, he goes like, “Oh my God! This is ...” He was like, “This is the future.” And I’m like, “Yeah, this is the future. This is the future, sir. But we haven’t done anything. We haven’t done anything.” So for him, the questions when I was presenting these things were, how do we make it more incremental? And not, how do we pursue this in a way that it’s not so risky? So it’s completely different questions.

And I said, “Listen, the question was, I don’t want this to be an experiment.” And I said, “There is no innovation without experimentation. We have to experiment. I mean nobody figured this out. But I am giving you the options where I can help you figure it out. This is not something that we go and copy and paste from somebody who is doing this. I mean nobody has figured this thing out yet.”

So you know what I mean? It’s pursuing the next – the future of your service versus trying to just – how do you make it smaller? How do you make it less risky? How do you make it – I mean it’s different, right? And people don’t – it’s different set of options that you pursue a breakthrough like this guy I was telling you about, the Korean. What he’s doing right now is all technology but he has given it a different application. He’s from the military. But he’s giving it a different application to the commercial world.

So what’s he’s doing, people telling me, that’s hocus-pocus. And I’m like no. Actually, yesterday we did the first demonstration and it’s working. So that’s a breakthrough right there. Whereas, most of the things that we do with our – in incremental side is somewhat in the disruptive side of things but it’s different. And when I’m talking to people, I can tell you immediately, I get pitched all the time and I’m like, “Well obviously, you’re doing that.”

For them, that’s like something new in their heads. For me, it’s like you’re just following the trend but what is it about? What are you doing that differentiates it from across the border? You know what I mean? It’s funny. It’s a funny conversation. But people don’t think about like the strategy they are pursuing. If they thought about it, the options and the view of how they approach it would completely change. And sometimes I’m the one who has to show them that to open up their mind.

**Nick Skillicorn:** How exactly do you do that with a client? How do you get them to think about strategy and innovation in a way that’s more helpful to them?

**Jorge Barba:** It’s a little bit aggressive. But that’s my style. My style is to ask them questions and then get them to think. So I mean I get seen as coaching people but it’s my nature to help people their eyes. Don’t get stuck in their habits. And these questions, when was the last time in the industry or something like something interesting happen? When was the last time that you guys do something interesting?

And then that question of interesting is let’s go to the norm, what is interesting to you compared to what? And then I get them to – it’s like get them to reflect on what they do and



then having them figure out that what they're doing wasn't really – there was this company, Comex, it's a big company in Mexico, a painting company. And they were telling me, this was a while ago but I remember very clear because they were telling me, "Oh no! We're innovators." And all this stuff and then I was with the board. And I was like, "Innovators? You guys sell paint. Well, can you tell me exactly what you did?" "Well, we painted a mural when you enter the store." That was innovative for them.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Yeah.

**Jorge Barba:** And I said, "That's not innovative. That's just visual stuff." I mean that's great, right? That's great. But if it's innovative, you are changing your behavior and you're also changing somebody else's behavior. You are improving somebody else. That's innovative. So talk to me about that. And when I said that, it was like people were just scrambling for answers. They couldn't figure out. They couldn't come up with something very – and that's why it's innovative like oh my god.

So usually when these things happen, people – the signals that I get is people start using their brain they never use for a while and they're like, "Jorge, it has been a while since I've used up so much brain resources in a quick hour." And I'm like, "Well, that's a good sign." And that's how it started. That's how it starts because it's a lot – as I was saying, it's a lot of challenging your assumptions and that's not normal.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Jorge, it has been wonderful chatting with you. We're coming up to the end of the session but like I do with all the other experts, can you give our listeners and viewers sort of one piece of actionable insights that they can try out, something they can give a go at this afternoon or this week?

**Jorge Barba:** Yeah. This is from a – actually, this is from a company called Future Thing and when I knew about this, I was like, "Well, I actually do that." But they give it a better name and better framework to work with. So it's basically, kill the stupid rule.

You sit down and you say, "Let's write down all the things that if we could eliminate, it will completely change an outcome." All these stupid rules that we just completely just go with and assumed that's the way it's done and sit down and write them down and then each one, put them on a graph that's like high impact and low effort. Map them out. And pick and choose the ones that are higher impact because those, if you eliminate those, those are the bottleneck. They're the big headache.

If you take them out, all those stupid rules and stupid rules are things regarding processes like, "Oh, this thing takes too long." Then why are we doing it that way? I mean it doesn't have to be that way, right? Stuff like that like checking in. Like this company here that has all these different check-ins to do something, so they have to check like with five people to do something, that's a stupid rule. They move so slow.



So I mean that's a key thing that people can put into action immediately. That's the simplest thing I can come up with. And very, very powerful because it's like, I'm telling you, when I get people doing this, they're like, "Wow! The whole set of options just appear out of nowhere." They haven't thought it through.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Jorge, I love that. Kill the stupid rules. So easy to do. I think a lot of people are going to give that a go. We're also going to get all of the links to Jorge's work down in the description on the screen. And Jorge, why don't you quickly tell them where those links are going to take them so that they can find out more about you and what you do?

**Jorge Barba:** Sure. So my link to my blog is game-changer.net. That's my blog. I usually write two times a week and I used to write a little more. But now, I try to be consistent and hopefully you guys like what I have to talk about. And you can also find me on Twitter, @JorgeBarba and I'm very active on Twitter. That's the quickest way to get in touch with me. I usually answer immediately. If I don't, I will. And I'm always up for meeting new people and having interesting conversations.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Jorge, it has been wonderful having you here.

**Jorge Barba:** Well, thank you so much for having me and for the invite.