

The Culture of Learning as a Non-technological Innovation in Organizations

My Letter to Innovators is addressed to entrepreneurs and businesspeople who are constantly looking for better practices in their organizations. I am writing this letter to them about innovation as the implementation of educational actions in organizations. The demand for competitiveness and innovation leads organizations to a continuous search for best practices. In this sense, the implementation of a learning culture, particularly knowledge management (KM) and organizational learning (OL), becomes an important tool for innovation. In other words, such a cultural change is considered one of the most important innovative actions in the management of your business. At the same time, a learning culture is a driving force for innovation in the company; it is an innovative powerhouse. Consequently, it aims for sustainable business success in the face of constantly changing internal and external forces.

The implementation of a learning culture is therefore a management innovation that is doubly present in companies, as an action and an innovative power. In more detail, management innovation is classified into two classic categories. There is technological innovation and non-technological innovation. Technological innovation is carried out through processes and the development of products that can be codified, as in the example of the Internet of Things. Non-technological innovation, on the other hand, is carried out through processes and the development of organizational, strategic, structural and procedural changes that involve a complex social system made up of different stakeholders and human relationships. This is the case with management innovation, as in the example of the company implementing a new stock management process based on the Internet of Things.

That said, how do KM and OA fit into the context of management innovation? KM is a set of activities that deals with knowledge based on the management of information, data, experiences and knowledge in the workplace. OA, on the other hand, is a set of activities that deals with learning based on cognitive and social processes. Specifically, OA is a construct applied in companies with a variety of objectives. These include: enabling individuals to obtain new knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) and share them within the organization; detecting errors at tactical and operational levels between what was planned and what was executed; investigating the formal and informal theories and visions in use in the company; interpreting and sharing values and perceptions among employees, leaders and owners; developing ideas, knowledge and associations between past organizational experiences, present actions and future strategies, among others.

Regardless of the objective, the fact is that both CG and AO are constructs that are permanently included in companies' managerial and procedural actions. They are innovations that deal with different current competitive aspects, such as: market dynamics; competition and competitive pressure; rapid changes in technology and purchasing and consumption behavior; economic uncertainties; environmental dynamism; arbitrary political and legal scenarios; skills gaps among leaders; lack of initiative and motivation among employees; the formation of characteristics and attitudes; the need for self-learning or learning to learn; the manager's attitude towards innovation, among others. These challenges place KM and OA as promoters of learning as a competitive advantage for the business.

Today's competitive landscape scares all types of organizations, since there is a certain need to seek competitive advantages and organizational survival in increasingly uncertain environments; regardless of the nature of the business, management style, production processes, competitive bargaining forces with suppliers and customers and access to and quantity of resources to promote innovative actions. In fact, it is essential for organizations to develop a collaborative learning culture with external or inter-organizational networks in order to boost their ability to respond to their challenges. This is an important step towards establishing competitive

advantage through management innovation. At the same time, with the collaborative learning culture come innovative actions aimed at knowledge management and learning actions aimed at TD&E. Such innovations can set a company apart from the rest, characterizing it as a non-technological innovation that its competitors will not be able to copy easily. For this reason, it is worth emphasizing that a collaborative learning culture is an innovation that brings an important competitive advantage.

These advantages through inter-organizational collaboration can occur on at least three levels: vertical, or collaboration with suppliers and clients; horizontal, or collaboration with competitors; and transversal, or collaboration with consultants, universities and public and development agencies. Vertical collaboration can be characterized by advantages in different ways, such as: productivity gains, agility and flexibility in decision-making, the ability to manage the production process, market intelligence, cost and expense reductions, the adoption of new technologies, adjusting products to consumer demands, analyses of purchasing and consumption trends, and the development of new products, among others. Horizontal collaboration can bring bargaining power with suppliers, as in supermarket chains or joint purchasing consortia, sharing distribution centers and transport resources, among others. Finally, transversal collaboration can be characterized by advantages in different ways, such as: access to new technologies and the development of managerial, scientific and technological knowledge.

In short, a collaborative learning culture mediates between external collaboration networks and internal innovation. In other words, since it enables employees to access a variety of external knowledge and incorporate it into their activities, it enhances the creation of management innovation processes as well as non-technological innovation in organizations. By taking this seriously, the company will have professionals responsible for acquiring, disseminating, interpreting and managing the necessary knowledge, as well as making it available through educational activities for employees. This requires the direct adherence of those at the head of organizations. I therefore hope that by reaching out to entrepreneurs and businesspeople, this letter will convey the message of the fundamental importance of investing in, promoting and implementing a collaborative learning culture in their businesses.

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Further reading:

Khosravi, P.; Newton, C.; & Rezvani, A. (2019). Management innovation: A systematic review and meta-analysis of past decades of research. *European Management Journal*, 37(6), 694-707.

Martínez-Costa, M.; Jiménez-Jiménez, D.; & Rabeh, H. D. (2019). The effect of organisational learning on interorganisational collaborations in innovation: an empirical study in SMEs. *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, 17(2), 137-150.