

Innovation Washing: a discussion on the inconsistency between discourse and practice in corporate innovation

We live under the tyranny of the “new.” In today's corporate world, not being labeled as “innovative” is almost a death sentence for a company's reputation. For Jacko (2020), the word innovation and its derivatives (innovative, innovator, etc.) carry a strong positive connotation, suggesting that what is associated with them is “valuable, useful, and worthy of implementation and investment.” Because of this immense pressure, managers in all areas seek to fill their agendas with hackathons, scatter colorful post-its on glass walls, and include terms such as “disruption” in their Mission, Vision, and Value

This article discusses how much real value this movement generates, and to that end, I bring up some authors and concepts that address the inconsistency between discourse and practice regarding innovation in business, in the same way that greenwashing was once discussed, for example.

Recent research has brought to light the concept of “Innovation Theater.” Described by authors such as Monaco (2018) and Wang (2022), this phenomenon occurs when organizations adopt the aesthetics and vocabulary of innovation to satisfy institutional expectations, but keep their internal structures and processes unchanged. It is innovation only as a performative act to attract capital or attention.

The danger for managers is not only the waste of resources, but also falling into the trap of “pseudo-innovation,” a concept explored by Jacko (2020). Pseudo-innovation occurs when a company celebrates initiatives that appear to be novel but fail to deliver effectiveness, efficiency, or real value. According to Jacko (2020), this creates a culture where governance is designed for appearance, generating a dangerous disconnect between official discourse and everyday practice.

Based on articles on the subject, I offer practical recommendations for innovation to leave the stage and materialize:

- 1. Audit the consistency between “Talking” and “Doing” - The Theater of Innovation** thrives on inconsistency. If your company declares that innovation is vital but does not allocate a budget or define clear processes, you are stuck in the rhetoric described by Monaco (2018). Managers must ensure that each initiative has real resources and does not serve merely to signal virtue to the market.
- 2. Beware of “Performative Innovation”** - Wang (2022) warns against “Performative Innovation” where management is designed to “appear innovative” (by purchasing hardware or datasets).

3. Change the rule: measure results, not agitation - The Theater of Innovation loves vanity metrics (Monaco, 2018), such as the number of ideas or participants in events. To escape **Pseudo-innovation** (Jacko, 2020), you need to measure real outcomes. If the initiative did not save time, generate revenue, or improve efficiency, it is just corporate entertainment.

Genuine innovation requires consistency between discourse and practice. The invitation from these authors — Monaco (2018), Jacko (2024), and Wang (2022) — is the same: let's turn off the spotlight, step off the stage, and focus on solving real problems.

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Further Reading

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