

Beyond Dualism: Innovation as an Expression of the Interdependence between Stability and Change

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Organizations thrive on fetishes, and one of the most ubiquitous is the fetish for change. As a result, many organizational change processes that aim for greater innovation paradoxically end up generating greater inertia. How, then, can we measure the level of change in pursuit of innovation? In a not-so-recent essay, Moshe Farjoun offers a dense and provocative theoretical reflection on the relationship between stability and change, two forces traditionally treated as antagonistic. By challenging this dichotomous reading, the author demonstrates that stability and change not only coexist but are mutually constitutive, broadening our understanding of how innovation emerges and sustains itself in organizations over time.

The Limitation of Conventional Dualism and Its Effects on Innovation

Much of the literature on management addresses stability and change as opposing poles that require distinct and often conflicting organizational logics. A classic example is James March's discovery vs. efficiency model, according to which organizations need to balance the efficiency derived from existing routines with the search for novelty. Still, the model emphasizes conflict: exploration requires experimentation and risk, often perceived as threats to operational reliability, while stability tends to crystallize practices and restrict innovation.

This dualistic view supports the idea that organizational mechanisms such as routines, procedures, structures, and controls favor either stability or change, but rarely both at the same time. As a result, traditional innovation management strategies resort to structural separation, creating units dedicated exclusively to innovation, while others remain focused on operational efficiency. Although functional in certain contexts, this approach reinforces a logic of isolation that limits the diffusion of innovative learning and obscures the complexity of real organizational processes.

From Opposition to Interdependence: Stability as Infrastructure for Innovation

Farjoun proposes overcoming this dualism by conceiving stability and change as an interdependent duality. Unlike dualism, which separates and opposes elements, the notion of duality recognizes the deep and dynamic connection between them. From this perspective, stability and change are not alternating states, but simultaneous dimensions of the same organizational phenomenon.

Under this framework, innovation is no longer seen as pure disruption but is understood as a process often anchored in stable structures. Organizational routines, for example, can ensure predictability and efficiency, but also serve as platforms for experimentation, incremental adaptation, and recombination of practices. Similarly, rules and controls, far from merely restricting creativity, can create “safe spaces” that reduce uncertainty and enable innovation in a controlled and sustainable manner.

Organizational Mechanisms as Vectors of Stability and Change

A central point of this argument is the need to understand organizational mechanisms in a less rigid and more procedural way. Routines, controls, and institutions are not inherently stable or innovative; their role depends on how they are mobilized, reinterpreted, and reconfigured over time. Consolidated routines offer reliability, but when deliberately revisited, they can generate continuous incremental innovation. Similarly, institutionalized practices that appear rigid can, paradoxically, enhance innovative capacity by providing clear boundaries for experimentation.

Innovation, in this sense, emerges not from the absence of stability, but from the interaction between established patterns and deliberate variations. The thoughtful use of these mechanisms allows organizations to combine operational efficiency with creative adaptation, sustaining trajectories of change without compromising performance.

Management Implications: Innovate Without Disrupting

Adopting a duality perspective implies a profound revision of traditional innovation management strategies. Instead of treating stability and change as competing forces, managers are called upon to explore their synergies. Ambidextrous organizations remain relevant, but under a more integrated logic, in which different units or temporalities of action remain connected by flows of knowledge, learning, and shared practices.

In this context, stability is understood as a strategic resource for innovation. Maintaining relatively stable routines, cultures, and decision-making patterns can reduce risks, facilitate organizational learning, and create conditions for continuous and cumulative experimentation. Innovation is no longer episodic or disruptive by definition, but rather a sustained process over time.

Practical Applications for Innovation-Oriented Organizations

Recognizing the duality between stability and change has concrete implications for everyday organizational life, among which the following stand out:

1. **Integrated Ambidextrous Structures:** Develop units focused on innovation and stable operation, but with institutional mechanisms that promote interaction, the circulation of ideas, and the transfer of innovative practices.
2. **Routines as Experimentation Platforms:** Treat routines not as ends in themselves, but as revisable foundations that enable controlled testing and incremental innovation.
3. **Adaptive Controls:** Replace overly rigid controls with flexible systems that preserve efficiency while encouraging learning and creativity.
4. **Dialectical Organizational Culture:** Encourage values that recognize the importance of both reliability and experimentation, reinforcing the legitimacy of continuous innovation.
5. **Mutual Reinforcement Systems:** Integrate mechanisms focused on reliability (audits, standardization) with those that stimulate creativity (feedback, ideation spaces), so that they mutually reinforce each other.
6. **Longitudinal Perspective on Innovation:** Value gradual and cumulative processes of change, recognizing that sustainable innovation often results from continuous adjustments, not just radical transformations.

Conclusion

Stability can also generate innovation. By offering a more sophisticated and realistic view of the relationship between stability, change, and innovation, Farjoun makes a significant contribution. By treating them as an interdependent duality, organizations can structure their processes, routines, and cultures to simultaneously exploit efficiency and creativity. This, in turn, can generate sustainable innovation, continuous adaptation, and organizational resilience in contexts of high uncertainty.

In practice, managers and leaders can use this framework to design more flexible structures, promote cultures oriented toward experimentation, and reconfigure control mechanisms in ways that simultaneously sustain operational performance and innovative capacity. Thus, the paradox between stability and change ceases to be an obstacle and becomes a lasting source of competitive advantage.

Source:

Farjoun, M. (2010). Beyond dualism: Stability and change as a duality. *Academy of Management Review*, 35(2), 202-225.

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