

Innovation as Mindset: Management's Moderating Role in the Relationship Between Organizational Culture and Human Resources

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Abstract: Innovation has been traditionally studied through two main lenses: innovation as product and innovation as process. Recently, a third perspective – innovation as a mindset – has emerged, focusing on the relationship between innovation, organizational culture and individual involvement. A review of the literature of innovation as mindset reveals fragmented field, lacking of a comprehensive definition and showing inconsistencies with established innovation management studies. This study investigates these inconsistencies, assesses the relevance of the mindset perspective to innovation studies, and examines the effects on innovation of three key actors: organizations, individuals, and management. Based on an analysis of three Italian SMEs, the research highlights the joint influence of organization and individuals on the innovation capability of the organization itself. In addition, it has emerged the moderating role of management in the relationship between organization and individuals. Management fosters a climate for innovation by enabling open communication, supporting individual expression, and translating organizational values into actionable practices. The study proposes a framework where the organization and the individuals have a direct impact on innovation, while management acts as a facilitator and moderator.

1 INTRODUCTION

Innovation has traditionally been conceptualized through two primary lenses: innovation as outcome, which focuses on the tangible results produced by innovation efforts, and innovation as process, which emphasizes the mechanisms and stages leading to those outcomes (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). While these perspectives offer valuable insights, recent scholarship argues for the necessity of a third lens: innovation as mindset (Kahn, 2018). This emerging perspective emphasizes how innovation becomes internalized by organizational members and highlights the critical importance of alignment between individual attitudes and organizational culture in driving innovation success.

Despite its increasing relevance, literature on innovation as mindset remains fragmented. This fragmentation has resulted in isolated studies examining organizational factors, individual characteristics, and managerial practices without sufficient integration of their interconnected influences. To address this gap, the present study adopts a multi-actor framework that examines three

key stakeholders in the innovation process: the organization, the individual, and management. For the latter actor, its moderating role between the organization and the individual is investigated.

Existing research demonstrates that organizational culture combined with leadership style generates superior innovation outcomes that ultimately enhance firm performance. (Hogan & Coote, 2014; Lertxundi et al., 2019). Simultaneously, extensive literature identifies specific skills and personality traits that signal an individual's innovativeness (Dyer et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2012; Hasan & Koning, 2019).

This study addresses the need for a more integrated understanding by exploring how organizational context, individual characteristics, and managerial practices collectively influence innovation processes within three Italian SMEs. Through qualitative interviews conducted with managers across various sectors, the research investigates the dynamic interactions between these three levels of analysis. The findings reveal that specific managerial practices – particularly fostering innovation-supportive environments, promoting team

heterogeneity, and facilitating effective cross-functional communication – can significantly amplify the innate innovation capacity present at both organizational and individual levels. By examining these interconnected relationships, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of innovation as mindset and provides practical insights for enhancing innovation capabilities in SME context.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In recent years, the concept of innovation has attracted considerable attention, becoming a focal point within organizational strategies and a recurrent theme in political discourse (Kahn, 2018). Although the widespread usage of this term has sometimes led to superficial interpretations, innovation continues to hold significant strategic value, influencing investment decisions at both governmental and corporate levels. Consequently, scholarly literature extensively investigates innovation through two main lenses: innovation as outcome, which emphasizes measurable results, and innovation as process, focusing on the mechanisms that drive these outcomes (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010).

However, in recent years, opportunities and intuitions have become sources of competitive advantage, underscoring the central role of human capital in innovation. Recognizing this human-centered dimension, Khan (2018) proposes innovation as mindset, which addresses the internalization of innovation by individual members of the organization and the advancement of a supportive culture throughout the organization (Kahn, 2018). Several studies support the view that both organizational and individual aspects have a direct impact on the innovation capability of the organization (Lertxundi et al., 2019). However, the mindset perspective introduces a novel angle by providing a unified lens through which to examine how these two dimensions, organization and individual, influence each other.

2.1 Innovation as Mindset: Organization Side

The organization is the first actor in the innovation as mindset framework. While research consistently demonstrates a positive relationship between innovation and the size of the organization, empirical evidence shows that size negatively moderates

knowledge sharing within the organization, which in turn affect innovation (Khosravi et al., 2019).

Organizational culture combined with the leadership style is recognized as the main driver of innovation outcomes (Lertxundi et al., 2019), which in turn positively impacts firm performance (Hogan & Coote, 2014). Organizational culture refers to the values and beliefs that establish norms and expected behaviors that employees might follow (Schein, 1994). However, excessive formalization of values and norms might lead individuals to be less likely to share non-normative information (Goncalo & Duguid, 2012).

Beyond the organizational culture, design thinking approaches are considered to have positive impacts as they stress the needs of end users, embracing an empathetic mindset (Kahn, 2018). Equally important is team composition, which significantly impacts the creativity promotion (Hansen & Levine, 2009). Indeed, fostering heterogeneity within teams has been shown to facilitate the avoidance of past biases (Majchrzak et al., 2023), as well as the sharing of unique knowledge and the generation of unconventional ideas (Goncalo & Duguid, 2012).

Through organizational culture, process design, and team composition, organizations can establish climate for innovation, which is defined as the extent to which team's values and norms emphasize innovation (Anderson, 1998). Climate for innovation – in its four dimensions: vision, participative safety, task orientation and support for innovation – combined with leadership style, work groups and problem solving style stimulate an innovative work behavior by employees (Scott & Bruce, 1994).

2.2 Innovation as Mindset: Individual Side

Individuals are the second actor in the innovation as mindset framework as innovation frequently is originated from individual insights and initiatives (Crossan et al., 1999). At the individual level, specific cognitive and behavioral capabilities determine one's capacity to contribute meaningfully to innovation processes.

Extant research identifies five critical skills that significantly enhance individual innovation performance: associating, questioning, observing, experimenting and networking (Dyer et al., 2019). When these skills are coupled with a pi-shaped profile – characterize by deep expertise in two domains and broad knowledge across multiple fields (Griffin et al., 2012) – individuals are better adept to bridge diverse

areas of knowledge and generate innovative solutions (Kahn, 2018).

Moreover, fostering connections among creative individuals is essential for generating new and valuable ideas, as creativity inherently resides at the individual level (Shalley et al., 2009). Additionally, several studies highlight the relationship between personality traits and innovation capabilities. Specifically, according to the Big Five personality traits theory, extroversion and conscientiousness have been identified as strong indicators of an individual's propensity for innovation (Hasan & Koning, 2019).

2.3 Innovation Management

Management is the third actor in the innovation as mindset framework as it represents the critical bridge between organization and individuals. While extensive researches have examined the influencing factors on innovation management, as organizational size or financial performance, the findings remain contradictory (Khosravi et al., 2019). This inconsistency underscores the complexity of managerial roles in innovation processes and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how managers mediate innovation outcomes. Research demonstrates that leadership functions as a mediating factor in fostering innovative work behaviour within teams. Managing cognitive uncertainty helps individual to navigate the ambiguity of innovation processes (Bernards, 2024). Notwithstanding, the manager of the innovation process has its own cognitive configuration that affect the decisional outcomes (Stroh et al., 2022), besides its relevance in the development norms that encourage innovative behaviors (Bhimani et al., 2023). In addition, managerial decision making is shaped by cognitive proximity, as managers are inclined to rely on areas closer to their existing knowledge base, thereby facilitating more effective communication (Marzi et al., 2023).

Furthermore, managers have to deal with tensions that Andriopoulos and Lewis (2009) conceptualized as innovation paradoxes which regards strategic intent (profits or breakthroughs), customer orientation (tights or loose coupling) and personal drivers (discipline or passion).

2.3.1 Knowledge Management

An additional dimension of innovation management is knowledge management, as knowledge resides within individuals and may exist in both tacit or explicit forms (Blackler, 1995).

Effective knowledge management necessitates the development of organizational absorptive capacity, which entails two dimensions. Potential absorptive capacity concerns the acquisition and assimilation of new knowledge; while realized absorptive capacity involves the transformation and exploitation of new knowledge by integrating it with existing knowledge (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Zahra & George, 2002).

The governance of knowledge and the structure of organizational networks further shape innovation outcomes. Knowledge Governance Mechanisms (KGMs) should combine formal and informal practices: formal mechanisms facilitate the rapid diffusion of best practices, while informal ones foster the development of absorptive capacity (Aslam et al., 2024). Moreover, network density influences knowledge flows, as dense network enhance trust and cooperation but may also generate redundancy and constrain divergent perspectives (Sethi et al., 2001).

3 METHODOLOGY

Despite the expansive volume and increasing trend of literature in the field of innovation, a review of the literature reveals the fragmentation of studies conducted in the area of innovation as mindset. The development of this perspective through independent and individual studies inevitably leads to contradictory findings. Moreover, the multitude of frameworks identifying skills that signal innovative attitudes creates conceptual ambiguity. In this context, investigating management's role and the levers available to enhance innovation performance becomes particularly relevant. Consequently the research question guiding this study is formulated as follows: *How innovation as mindset influence the organizational innovativeness and what role does management play in the relationship between organization and human resources?*

3.1 Research Design

Innovation as mindset is defined by Kahn (2018) as *"the internalization of innovation by individual members of the organization and advancement of a supportive culture throughout the organization"*. Drawing on this conceptualization, the present study examines the two central actors identified within this definition: the organization and the individual. Additionally, management is selected as the analytical perspective, given its intermediary role in

the relationship between the organization and individuals.

3.1.1 Organization Side

On the organization side, the analysis focuses on identifying and assessing the efforts and practices adopted by firms to enhance their innovation performance. In accordance with what has emerged from the literature review, it investigates the level of formalization of organizational culture, the role organizational culture plays, how innovation process is designed, how teams are composed, and the relevance of the climate within teams. Specifically, with regard to organizational culture, the role of values and how they are translated into concrete actions will be evaluated, following Schein's pyramid (Schein, 1994).

3.1.2 Individual Side

On the individual level, the analysis examines the presence of individual characteristics that signal a higher innovativeness. This dimension is particularly relevant, as innovation often initiated by individual intuitions (Crossan & Apaydin, 2010). The literature proposes various frameworks that identify skills (Dyer et al., 2019), attitudes (Griffin et al., 2012), or personality traits (Hasan & Koning, 2019) associated with innovative behavior. However, little consensus has been reached, underscoring the need for further empirical investigation. In addition, attention is directed toward the adoption of specific mechanisms for knowledge sharing, which is recognized as facilitator of innovation.

3.1.3 Management Side

The existing literature uses the term innovation management to examine predominantly demographic aspects of organizations, while employing the term leadership to focus on actions taken directly by the manager (Khosravi et al., 2019). With this side, the objective is to examine the mediating role that managers play in the relationship between organizations and individuals. Consequently, it is investigated how managers stimulate and foster innovation within their teams, considering where management's responsibility lies and where the responsibility lies with the organization.

3.2 Case Study Design

To address the research aim, a qualitative approach was adopted, involving in-depth interviews with

engineering managers and senior managers reporting directly to the CEO in three Italian SMEs. Open-ended questions were used to elicit detailed insights, particularly concerning managerial practices, organizational culture, and individual characteristics. To ensure confidentiality and encourage candid responses, all participants and their organizations were anonymized.

3.3 Sample of Analysis Criteria

The selection of companies is based on the EU Commission's definition of SMEs, which represents 99% of companies in Europe (European Commission, 2003). Moreover, the B2C sector is delineated as a criterion for selection, given its dynamism, which is attributable to its lower switching costs in comparison to the B2B sector. The AIDA database is utilised for the identification of companies, with filters applied to narrow down the search based on company size and ATECO codes.

This process resulted in a final sample of 40 companies, from which three companies from the travel, fintech, and retail industries were selected.

3.4 Data Analysis

All interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed through a thematic coding procedure. The interview protocol followed a semi-structured format, organized around three macro-areas (organization, individual, management). Each interview lasted on average 45–60 minutes. Data analysis combined deductive codes derived from the literature with inductive codes emerging from the transcripts. Two researchers independently coded a subset of interviews and discussed discrepancies to ensure consistency. Codes were then grouped into categories and aggregate dimensions, following the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013), to enhance transparency and replicability.

4 EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The results of the interview are summarized in Table 1.

4.1 Company A

Company A demonstrates well-defined and formalized organizational values that are systematically integrated into employee selection processes. However, some of these organizational values, such as passion, are not clearly reflected with

Table 1: Case study results.

	Company A	Company B	Company C
Innovation process	Formal innovation process	Agile approach	Formal innovation process
Organizational Values	Organizational values defined through a top down approach, context impacts innovation more than culture	Organizational values defines through a bottom up approach, culture is the measure of company innovativeness	Organizational values defined through a top down approach, culture explains how to achieve goals
Innovator characteristics	Curiosity and propensity for experimentation	Purposefulness and transversality	Learn quickly and find the simplest solution
Knowledge sharing	Hackathons and team meetings	Not formalized	Team meetings
Management's role	To carry the company perspective within the team	To establish the context enabling individual to innovate	To establish the context and to protect team members
How innovation happens	Innovation is delegated to individuals management has to assess proposals	Innovation is fostered through team heterogeneity and communication with each member of the team	Innovation is fostered through an effective communication with each team member
Obstacles to innovation	Bureaucracy, every project needs justification	Targets set by BoD are prioritized over organizational values	A change in ownership slowed innovation projects

concrete actions in daily activities. Nevertheless, organizational values fulfil a critical coordination function, facilitating alignment among individuals and thereby overcoming hard skills.

The innovation process has undergone progressive formalization in recent years, driven by organizational growth and the necessity of reporting to stakeholders.

At the individual level, Company A encourages autonomous experimentation, even though new innovative projects require the approval of C-level managers. Respondents assert that the characteristics that signal to him or her an innovative attitude are an innate curiosity and a propensity for experimentation. The organization emphasizes creating psychologically safe environments where individuals are free to make mistakes.

Knowledge sharing is facilitated through structure mechanisms including regular team meetings, hackathons, and occasional external partnership sessions where collaborative problem-solving occurs with other organizations.

Interviewees emphasize that team climate significantly influences innovation outcomes, with project success contingent upon alignment between initiatives and established organizational culture. The success of the project, however, is dependent on the extent to which it is aligned with the organizational culture.

4.2 Company B

In Company B, organizational values function as the primary competitive differentiator. The initiation of projects is founded upon a set of organizational values that are not regarded as a secondary consideration. Employees are asked to associate practical actions to each organizational value, and alignment with organizational values constitutes part of the compensation. This approach entails the capacity to engage with any given task, examine it critically, and adapt it when necessary, reflecting both embody these qualities are more likely to pursue innovative initiatives and seek professional opportunities aligned with innovation.

From a managerial perspective, managing such autonomous individuals is a highly onerous task. However, respondents note that once these individuals are effectively organised, managers may become functionally replaceable. Consequently, the role of the manager is to establish the context that allows individuals to freely express themselves. To establish the context, safeguarding freedom of speech, fostering team heterogeneity and the ability of managers to consider perspectives that may lie beyond their immediate areas of expertise emerge as crucial aspects. An additional capability deemed essential by the manager is to communicate in an effective way to each member of the team, considering its unique characteristics. In conclusion, the interviewees define organizational culture as the

extent to which the company is arranged to innovate. Nevertheless, at actual company's stage, target metrics set by BoD are typically prioritized over organizational values.

4.3 Company C

Company C has recently undergone an ownership transition, which significantly impact the interview findings. Organizational values are defined at corporate level and, combined with a long-term vision, define expected employee behaviours, while serving as hiring criteria.

The innovation process follows a structured approach: ideas emerge from any organizational function – business, product, or technology – and subsequently undergo managerial evaluation where requirements are defined.

At the individual level, rapid learning ability and solution simplification skills represent crucial innovation characteristics. Similarly to Company A, Company C organizes formal sessions for knowledge sharing, during which all participants are encouraged to propose improvements to the product.

Regarding managerial responsibilities, a particular emphasis is placed on the importance of managers in fostering an environment in which each team member can thrive and fulfil their potential. This encompasses not only fostering a positive and productive team climate but also ensuring the protection and well-being of team members. Effective communication strategies with each team member are a facilitator of innovation. Though, respondents acknowledge no universal approaches exist for this challenge.

In conclusion, organizational culture exerts a significant influence on innovation processes. A correlation has been observed between changes in organizational ownership and a decline in the efficiency of innovation processes. The results of this observation indicate that organizational culture plays a pivotal role in facilitating employee understanding of how to achieve specific objectives

5 DISCUSSION

The study's findings underscore the necessity for a holistic approach to innovation, emphasizing the interdependence of organizational culture, managerial practices, and individual characteristics. It is not possible to define an effective culture without considering individuals and the moderating effect of management. The present study confirms the

relevance of organizational culture to organizational innovativeness, as previously stated in numerous articles (Lertxundi et al., 2019). The interviews indicate that the function of culture is to define how the organization intends to innovate, thereby defining organizational culture as the measure that signals the company's willingness to innovate. It is also noted that the absence of a climate inclined to innovation negates the effect that culture has on innovation.

With regard to the elements indicative of an individual's capacity for innovation, insights obtained from the interviews largely align with existing literature, reinforcing the conclusions of previous studies (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Dyer et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2012; Zahra & George, 2002). Notably, openness consistently emerged as a key trait signalling individual innovativeness, consistent with the Big Five personality traits theory. Additionally, only company B specifically identifies conscientiousness as another significant personality trait supporting innovation, further substantiating earlier research highlighting a positive relationship between certain personality traits and innovativeness (Hasan & Koning, 2019).

In terms of how management can promote an innovative approach by human resources, creating a collaborative environment and facilitating knowledge renewal emerge as major levers. This perspective stands in contrast to the approaches delineated in Section 2.3, which underscores the significance of cognitive uncertainty (Bernards, 2024), characterized by the presentation of paradoxes to create space for novel approaches. It is crucial to acknowledge that the extant literature addressing the issue of stimuli for innovation has done so in a largely isolated manner, and the studies have been conducted in contexts that bear little similarity to the complex and multifaceted corporate environment. The composition of the team also emerges as a key lever for fostering innovation (Hansen & Levine, 2009). However, perspectives on this aspect vary among companies. Company C highlights the importance of communication, emphasizing the manager's need to personally know team members (Marzi et al., 2023). Company B, in contrast, underscores the value of team heterogeneity, arguing that diversity enables a more comprehensive approach to problem-solving (Majchrzak et al., 2023). This study proposes a framework that aims to present innovation as mindset through the three players that compose it: organization, individual, and management. The contribution of this study is represented in Figure 1.

To strengthen the originality of the proposed framework and enhance its theoretical contribution,

we move beyond the descriptive account of the case studies by formulating a set of testable propositions. These propositions are grounded in our empirical insights but articulated in a way that allows for broader validation across different contexts.

- P1: The alignment between organizational culture and individual innovative behaviors positively influences organizational innovativeness.
- P2: Management moderates the relationship between organizational culture and individual innovative behaviors by fostering communication, team heterogeneity, and trust-building practices.

By articulating these propositions, the framework moves beyond description and provides a set of theoretically grounded expectations that can be empirically tested in future research. This strengthens its originality by positioning innovation as mindset not merely as an interpretative lens, but as a generative theoretical perspective capable of producing falsifiable claims.

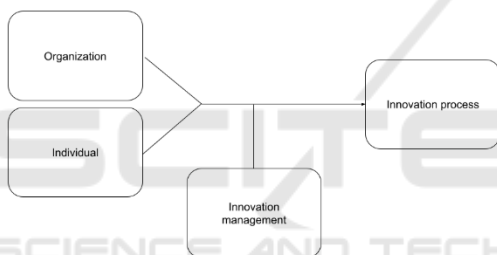


Figure 1: Innovation as Mindset Conceptual Framework.

6 CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

The innovation as mindset provides a comprehensive perspective for understanding how organizations and individuals collectively engage with innovation (Kahn, 2018). Existing literature consistently highlights the influential role of organizational culture in fostering an environment conducive to innovation (Lertxundi et al., 2019; Scott & Bruce, 1994), while other research underscores specific individual traits and capabilities associated with innovative behaviors (Dyer et al., 2019; Griffin et al., 2012). Within this context, this study explored how managerial practices mediate and enhance the interaction between organizational culture and individual contributions to innovation.

Findings from qualitative analyses of three Italian SMEs reaffirmed the pivotal role of organizational

culture in driving innovation, while the impact of distinct individual characteristics was less evident. Instead, managerial practices emerged as crucial facilitators, particularly through fostering effective communication grounded in managers' personal understanding of team members and maintaining team heterogeneity (Majchrzak et al., 2023). Such practices enable team members to freely express innovative ideas and contribute actively to organizational creativity.

Nevertheless, this research presents certain limitations, notably the restricted sample size and specific industry context, which limit the generalizability of findings. Future studies should broaden the scope by exploring larger and more diverse samples to validate these conclusions further. Additionally, research could benefit from examining innovation as mindset from an organizational governance perspective. The presence of innovation paradoxes (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009) identified in this study warrants deeper investigation into how these dynamics influence team climates and broader innovation outcomes.

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