Innovation Culture and Management in Moroccan Companies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the dynamics of innovation in Moroccan firms. The primary objectives are to explore both the views of middle managers regarding innovation dynamics in their organizations, and the way top management attitudes affect the creation of an organizational culture conducive to innovation. The research approach is exploratory in nature and attempts to provide insight into the relationships existing among organizational culture, innovation, and leadership or top management attitudes. The bulk of the data collected came from surveys and interviews with mid-level managers from various organizations in Morocco. The various industries included in the study involved financial, food, services, construction, textile, manufacturing, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical. One of the main findings of the study is that there appears to be a disconnect between top management and other layers of managers. This disconnect may cause a laid-back attitude among employees which in return, diminishes the organizational ability to innovate effectively. This disconnect also diminishes an organization's ability to get things done in a timely fashion. Findings from the study provide valuable empirical evidence regarding a set of enablers and obstacles of organizational innovations and their implications for Moroccan global competitiveness. These findings have immediate benefits for Moroccan managers and highlight some critical practical links between organizational innovation, leadership, and cultural values.

Keywords: Innovation, Morocco, Managers, Organizational Culture, Effectiveness, Performance.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on organizational innovation in Moroccan firms. In the last decade, several country-wide innovation policies and initiatives have been launched by the government of Morocco. The impetus behind these initiatives are: (i) high unemployment rates, especially amongst university graduates; (ii) global competitive threats to core sectors in the Moroccan economy; (iii) an increase in foreign direct investment; and (iv) a number of opportunities linked to free trade agreements signed with the EU and the USA.

Moroccan companies have to innovate in order to create quality jobs for the growing number of university graduates, and take advantage of country-wide innovation initiatives. Moroccan companies can't rely only on cost control and operational efficiency to create competitive advantages in local and global markets, so they have to pay more attention to innovation as a primary driver for growth and sustained business differentiation.

This paper examines the interplay between leadership and organizational culture and its impact on organizational innovation in Moroccan firms. This paper also highlights the role that top management could play in both instituting the policies, strategies, and procedures that enable innovation and eliminating obstacles that impede innovation in their organizations. Furthermore, this paper attempts to shed light on the corporate cultural factors that affect the creation of a sustainable innovation infrastructure.

The extant literature on the dynamics of organizational innovation in Morocco is fragmented and consequently, does not provide adequate guidance to managers and practitioners on how to foster an innovation culture in their organizations (Lagziri et al., 2013; Bentahar & Namaci, 2010; Azzioui, 2007; Ali & Wahabi, 1995). However, Moroccan managers can learn from new studies conducted in developing countries that could be useful for their organizations. For example, a recent study validated a framework that managers can use to enhance innovation in organizations based on their specific cultures (Bendak & Abdel-Razek, 2020). In another study, a model was tested that links entrepreneurial culture, innovation outcomes, and business performance. The results highlighted the importance of fostering an entrepreneurial culture to produce innovation-positive outcomes (Leal-Rodríguez et al., 2017).

Furthermore, new studies from Morocco point to the importance of facilitating a climate for creativity in organizations in order to implement management innovation. The climate for creativity will bring about new culture in organizations, such as focusing on recognizing employee creativity and increasing flexibility for change (Hassi, 2019). In another study, it was indicated that there is a shift in employers' perception about the type of skills they want their employees to develop and possess. The employers perceived "innovation and creativity as fundamental employability skills" (Tejan & Sabi, 2019). Concurrently, the entrepreneurial intentions among students are getting highlighted and encouraged (Benchrifa et al., 2017). In another study, researchers emphasize the need for studying innovation and its ecosystem in Morocco. They conclude that more research "in the Moroccan startup innovation field will help entrepreneurs and policy makers in their innovation capability building efforts" (El Hanchi & Kerzazi, 2019).

The results of this research provide insights to top managers in their efforts to transform their organizations so that a sustainable innovation culture is instituted. It will also help researchers identify variables that impinge on innovation and help them develop and analyze propositions and hypotheses that further this research stream. Furthermore, it will help practitioners when designing training and workshop programs in innovation.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

This research views innovation as a collaborative activity that entails contributions from various organizational elements, both internal and external. An innovation is an idea, product, practice, or service that is perceived as new by the organization (Rogers, 1995). Innovation may also be defined as the knowledge process that allows the creation, sharing, and assimilation of new knowledge in a particular context (Harkema, 2003). The multi-phase nature of the innovation process adds to the complexity of efforts aimed at fostering an innovative culture (Sharp et al., 2017; Tian et al., 2018). For example, organizational conditions that may facilitate idea generation may conflict with the forces that facilitate implementation (Watad, 2010; Burdon & Dovey, 2015).

Two major internal factors that affect innovation are organizational culture and types of leadership. Both have been reported to affect the success or failure of innovations. Culture and leadership were perceived by managers to be the most important barriers to the success of these initiatives (Mason, 2003). In a study on barriers of innovation in Morocco (Lagziri et al., 2013), culture and management strategy were identified along a host of external factors that are determinants of innovation.

Creating a culture that nurtures creativity and brings new ideas to fruition is not an easy task (De Jager, 2006; Watad & Perez, 2012; Jin & Lynch, 2018). Cultural influences may hinder or facilitate management efforts. However, one may argue that innovation requires national level policies aimed at expanding and integrating market networks, for example. As such, country level policies are as important as management efforts in designing company-based policies to foster an innovation culture. Furthermore, it is very important to align the "innovative organizational culture and flexibility-oriented operations strategy", as this has a substantial impact on a company's innovation process and outcomes (Wu et al., 2019).

In this paper, culture is broadly defined as the set of ideas, values, customs, and language that are shared by a large group of people. Specifically, this research considers organizational culture as a set of basic assumptions embedded in the organizational structure about what, how, and where to produce and deliver products or services (Ford & Chan, 2003). While Organizational Learning provides the framework for inventing and generating ideas, an innovation culture will provide the framework for transforming the new ideas into new products and services. Effective managers involve all units of the organization at all stages of the innovation process from inception, to design, to implementation. A culture that accepts change and has a reward system reduces organizational resistance to change. For example, knowledge creation, which is an integral component of organizational learning, may take place as a result of changes in organizational processes, such as structural design dimensions (Lioria & Peris-Ortiz, 2014). On the other hand, inadequate learning capabilities of an organization will constrain change efforts (Senge et al., 2014), thus hindering innovation (Watad, 2010).

Literature suggests that effective leaders need to tackle, at minimum, the following challenges in their organizations: (i) inspire a shared vision; (ii) influence members of the organization to act; (iii) encourage open communication; (iv) offer incentives for knowledge sharing; and (v) facilitate continuous learning (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Du Pessis, 2007; Waddock, 2007; Service, 2012) . Furthermore, the literature suggests that innovative managers rely more heavily on informal networks to establish goals, flexible teams to produce desired results, and customers' feedback to establish criteria for effectiveness (Pyka, 2002; Rodan, 2002; Rizova, 2006). Thus, top management attitudes and behavior are key catalysts for organizational

innovation and for the development of innovation capacity (Ligon et al., 2008; Thomas, 2017; Gil et al., 2018; Samsir, 2018).

However, in addition to attitudes and expectations, top managers must introduce mechanisms that foster innovation (Mokhber et al., 2018; Jia, 2018). For example, they need to facilitate the creation of an organizational culture that promotes quality and openness, thus moving their organizations from rule-based systems that focus on regulating employee behavior and procedures to mission-based organizations that emphasize outcome-based measurements. For example, it was found that positive work relationships have a positive impact on strategic innovation in Egyptian small and medium enterprises (ElKhouly & Marwan, 2017). In a study on the impact of ownership and leadership in fostering an innovation culture, it was shown that leaders and owners can enhance innovation through mediating variables, evaluation, and rewards (Villaluz & Ma Regina, 2019). Another study pointed out the importance of the role of transformational leadership in strengthening managerial innovation behavior in the SMEs, thus fostering innovation culture (Gashema & Gao, 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCEDURES

This project used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data-gathering tools, such as interviewing stakeholders, conducting surveys, reviewing reports and documents, and forming focus groups. In order to analyze what is happening in Moroccan organizations, an instrument containing closed- and open-ended questions used as a survey and reference for the interviews was developed to determine: (i) whether a sustainable innovation infrastructure exists within the organizations; (ii) what organizational cultural factors have an impact on the success or failure of innovations; (iii) what tactics are significant in the process of selecting innovations; and, (iv) what leadership attitudes, traits, competencies, and practices are key in fostering an innovative culture.

The bulk of the data collected comes from forty nine surveys and twelve interviews with middle level managers from organizations in Morocco. The data were collected over a period of four years, from 2014 and 2018. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format. The organizations and industries included in the sample were varied: financial, food, services, construction, textile, manufacturing, telecommunications, and pharmaceutical. The number of employees in the firms studied ranges from about 30 to 10,000; as such, the majority are small and midsize companies (SMEs). Managers' experience ranges between 3 to 24 years.

There has been some controversy in the literature on organizations regarding the usefulness of applying perceptual rather than objective measures. The perceptions of an organization's members are important in the sense that very often, perceived elements are used when making decisions. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, the sample size is smaller than that commonly used in survey-based, however, it is consistent with studies dealing with qualitative themes (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Tables 1, 2, and 3 present some of the results of the study. Table 1 measures the degree of agreement middle managers have concerning organizational culture factors (internal environment dimensions) that are crucial for promoting innovation. When examining the results as weighted averages of all responses, they are on average below 3.5 (out of 7) and leaning

towards disagreement on all cultural dimensions in the table. More precisely, only one out seven managers strongly agrees that there is a real-time information flow in their organizations (gets information when needed), and only one out of six managers strongly believes that top managers facilitate an organizational culture that promotes openness. Furthermore, five out of six managers strongly believe that there is disconnect between the stated values and how employees are allowed to behave. One out of four managers agreed strongly to feeling secure to say what is really on their mind, and three out of ten managers agreed strongly to feeling respected by top managers. This is in contrast to the literature which points out the importance of humble leadership in order to foster employee innovation behavior (Zhou, 2018). One out of five managers agreed strongly to thinking that their organization has a clear evaluation and promotion policies.

Table 2 presents middle-managers' perceptions concerning leadership actions and attitudes in their organizations. About 42% of the middle-managers think that top managers are inspiring employees to have a shared vision and encouraging open communications. About 41% of middle managers believe that top managers can influence organizational members to act, and that top managers are creating policies to advance continuous learning in their organizations. Only 15% of managers indicate that their organizations offer incentive for sharing knowledge. Knowledge sharing and creation is vital for fostering innovation (Watad & Perez, 2012). It seems that top managers are ignoring a vital area for fostering the creation of culture for innovation in their organizations.

Table 3 presents middle-managers' perceptions concerning what top managers need to do in order to facilitate innovation culture into their organizations. About 62% of the middle-managers think that top managers need to listen to and appreciate employees' ideas, and 59% think that top managers should promote trust and openness. About 53% believe that top managers should clearly communicate their expectations from their employees, and about 49% believe that top managers should rely more on customers' feedback to establish criteria for organizational effectiveness.

A key result of this study is that three out of four middle managers (76%) believe that innovation is very important. However, the actions of the top management do not match the high level of the perceived importance of innovation. Although efforts in the right direction are evident, additional efforts are required in order to close the gap between the perceived importance of innovation and the actual practice. One area top management should pay attention to is nurturing social capital both internally and externally. Social capital with both dimensions of relational capital and social network affects innovation culture and performance in SMEs (Hanifah et al., 2020).

These results are important for all stakeholders involved in the innovation process. They emphasize the need for top managers to (a) listen and appreciate employees' ideas; (b) encourage trust and openness; (c) clearly communicate their expectations from their employees.

As per the organizational issues mentioned by managers that may prevent advancing innovation culture, the following stand out:

a- There is a lack of awareness of the importance of innovation culture and its positive consequences on a company's performance. This is among top managers in the case of mid-size organizations, and among owners in the case of small firms. One reason is the long tenure of the leadership team (i.e., they come from the "old school"). The more seasoned top managers shy

away from an innovation culture and resist change. In addition, older employees resist the introduction of new technological practices within their companies.

b- Lack of strategic vision: Top managers suffer from a shortsighted vision; they focus on daily activities only, and efficiency instead of effective measures to create a path for excellence. The company bases all its decisions at the level of the top management. A manager stated, "Lower management levels can also be creative, and since the company gains market share every year, it is difficult to control all the functions of the company and insure that everything is running well. As such, top management must delegate some of their decision responsibilities to lower managers". Another manager stated that his company suffered from divergent visions and rigid processes.

c- A performance appraisal process that focuses on individual performance rather than on group or team performance results in an internal environment that is not conducive to knowledge sharing- which is most essential when it comes to increasing innovation and strategic renewal Lioria & Peris-Ortiz, 2014) . One manager stated, "The culture in this company creates a work environment in which employees are looking for their own interests rather than the firm's interest. Employees avoid failures at any cost and are willing to try new methods". As the manager noted, "the risk of failure is paralyzing the company".

d- There is a mismatch between the skills of people assigned to certain jobs and the demands that the job requires. As one manager stated, "some employees lack competence and criticize others without providing valid arguments". There is a lack of coordination between the departments- each one wants to maximize its own results. There is a need to improve internal communication and seek a flat organization concept. Establishing and nurturing fruitful relationships within a workplace will increase innovative output (ElKhouly & Marwan, 2017).

e- Working for foreign companies: A manager stated, "It is a problem when the top managers are foreigners who do not know either our culture or the Moroccan market well, and therefore they cannot implement effective local strategies." In addition, employees must execute the rules; they are not allowed to come up with new methods. Another manager stated: "Top managers only follow orders from the headquarters (usually located abroad) and do not push for innovation. They focus on sales and not on development". These differences in leadership approaches caused by cultural influences should be resolved (Bendak & Abdel-Razek, 2020).

Next, the following policy issues were generated from interviewing mid-level managers as to which policies top managers should establish in order to foster an organizational culture conducive to innovation and creativity.

a- Nurturing an innovative culture by putting in place innovation workshops, establishing a formal innovation funneling process, and involving all management levels in strategic planning. Top managers should assess the current culture, determine the significant role of innovation for their company, and create interventions to change the culture. Top managers should encourage employees to be more creative and propose and develop new ideas. As one manager indicated, "often you do not predict who will give you the right idea. Never underestimate employees' capabilities."

b- Effective communication patterns between top managers and their employees are necessary in any successful company. One manager stated: "Top managers should be not only managers but also good leaders". In addition, there is a need to improve horizontal communication by establishing frequent meetings and discussions, encouraging openness, and listening. Furthermore, sometimes the clients suggest some of the creative ideas, and therefore, a

formal two-way communication process with clients and suppliers should be established. All managers interviewed stressed the importance of creating an environment in which communicating with the top management becomes almost seamless. They also placed special emphasis on the importance of flattening the organization (reduce hierarchy) to allow both the flow of knowledge and the sharing of new ideas among different departments and cross-functional areas and knowledge workers.

   c- Creating a culture of shared vision by enhancing trust, sharing goals, and establishing organizational rituals to advance openness via a news flash, anniversaries of the brand, a suggestion box, continuous training, coaching and empowerment, and appreciating employees' ideas. This is reiterating the approach of building a sense of ownership amongst employees to foster a culture of innovation (Villaluz & Ma Regina, 2019). Moreover, enhancing training programs for line managers and team building.

   d- Align the reward system with innovation results by establishing an incentives and rewards program for employees, tolerating failure among subordinates. As one manager stated: "creating an environment where controlled failures are encouraged". This is aligned with working environments that have greater individualism amongst employees, where they are more comfortable with variability and change and thus produce more innovative output (Chen et al., 2017).

   e- Foreign company's practices: Several managers complained about foreign companies operating in Morocco. These companies should adapt their existing processes to the Moroccan culture and to the Moroccan context of doing business. In addition, as a manager noted, "Foreign companies should give Moroccan employees a chance to develop innovation rather than simply follow the rules". Another manager noted, "Local products should be developed by local people because they are most aware about the consumers' demands and expectations". They need to be flexible and accept local people's propositions and ideas in order to create the right product.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

   One of the main findings of the study is that there appears to be a gap between the perceived importance of innovation and the actual practices. Additionally, there seems to be a disconnect between top management and other layers of management. These two problems may create (or have created) a laid-back attitude (job frustration) among employees which in return impedes the organization's ability to innovate effectively. They may also diminish the organization's ability to get things done in a timely fashion. Moroccan companies may overcome these problems by improving the information flow among the various stakeholders of the firm by offering incentives to their employees for sharing knowledge. Sharing knowledge is an extremely vital factor in enhancing creativity, and consequently, innovation.

   However, this is not sufficient. The author believes that there is a need for radical changes in the mindset of top managers. This shift in mindset requires adjusting their managerial style in order to overcome some of the deeply entrenched cultural values and barriers in their organizations. Some of the embraced organizational values should be revisited and discussed openly. National culture plays a significant part in affecting corporate innovation. For example, companies in countries with higher levels of individualism are more comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty and produce higher innovative outputs and a higher number of patents. On the other hand, companies in countries exhibiting higher levels of uncertainty avoidance create fewer

patents (Chen et al., 2017). Companies should work to embrace a culture of individualism in order to be more innovative and foster change.

Top managers should pay special attention to values that transcend the boundaries of organizations. For example, it is alarming that only thirty percent of middle managers feel respected by top-managers, considering that respect is an extremely important value to people living in the Middle East and North Africa regions. There is a need to explore some relationships and understandings: for example, would ignoring an employee's idea be seen as disrespectful?

Findings from the study provide valuable empirical evidence with regards to a set of enablers and obstacles of organizational innovations and their implications for Moroccan global competitiveness. These findings have immediate benefits for Moroccan managers and highlight some critical practical links between organizational innovation, leadership, and cultural values. Furthermore, the study is useful to both management and policy makers in the promotion of practices that accelerate fundamental changes leading to the fostering of innovation within their organizations and countries. However, given the exploratory nature of this study, the findings may have limited generalizability. Additional studies and research in this area are needed.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Middle Managers Perceptions- Organizational Cultural Issues
(*gap between strongly agree to strongly disagree*)

Using scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), express your degree of agreement with the following statements			
	1&2	6&7	Average
My organization has real-time information flow (I get information when I need it)	34%	14%	3.2/7
The organization leaders facilitate an organizational culture that promotes openness	38%	17%	3.01/7
I feel secure to say what is really on your mind	47%	26%	3.05/7
I feel respected by my superiors	48%	30%	3.1/7
I think my organization has a clear evaluation and promotion policies	31%	19%	3.3/7
I think there is NO disconnect between the stated values and how employees are allowed to behave	43%	17%	3.2

Table 2: Middle Managers Perceptions about Top Management Attitudes

Inspiring a shared vision	45%
Encouraging open communication	43%
Offering incentives for knowledge sharing	15%
Influencing members of the organization to act	41%
Facilitating continuous learning	40%

Table 3: Middle Managers Perceptions about what Top Managers Need to focus on

Promote trust and openness	59%
Listen to and appreciate employees' ideas	62%
Clearly communicate their expectations from their employees	53%
Rely on customers' feedback to establish criteria for effectiveness	49%