The Role of Leadership in Innovation

A quantitative analysis of a large data set examines the relationship between organizational culture, leadership behaviors, and innovativeness.

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OVERVIEW: Organizational and corporate culture clearly play a role in innovation effectiveness, but little work has been done to explore the exact nature of that relationship. To address that gap, the IRI Research-on-Research working group on Innovation Culture analyzed data from the Center for Creative Leadership's KEYS to Creativity and Innovation survey. Key conclusions include that while challenging work is important in all organizations, the importance of organizational encouragement and work group support differs by organizational factors. The impact of organizational encouragement is most pronounced for organizations with low-control, high-support, or high–risk-aversion cultures. Work group support, while important across all segments studied, has less effect than challenging work or organizational encouragement. This information can be used by managers to drive more effective innovation in the context of an organization's particular cultural characteristics.

KEYWORDS: Innovation leadership, Innovation culture, Talent management

Culture has been shown to account for between 20 and 50 percent of the differential in performance between organizations in the same industry (Heskett 2011). Yet, although there have been in-depth studies exploring what aspects of organizations affect culture (Human Capital Institute 2013), little is known about what leadership behaviors can improve the culture for innovation. The Industrial Research Institute's (IRI) Innovation Culture Research-on-Research working group, formed in February 2013, sought to understand how leadership behaviors might shape a company's culture, and thus increase its innovation performance.

Using data from an established, large-scale survey, the group considered the effect of specific leadership

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IRI Research Profile

Innovation Culture

Examining how an organization's culture and leadership affect its innovativeness.

Goal: To identify what kinds of leadership practices are most likely to enhance innovation for a given type of culture.

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attributes and behaviors in the context of particular types of environments—from high-control, risk-averse companies to those that are more open and freewheeling in their approach. Ultimately, the analysis revealed three leadership dimensions that correlated with employees perceiving an organization as innovative; the relative impact of each dimension depends on the organization's specific culture type.

Literature Review

Innovation is the product of a combination of creativity and productivity; a number of factors affect both of these elements. For instance, one study on intrinsic motivation, based on a meta-analysis of 40 years of literature, found that the presence of intrinsic motivators such as important, meaningful work were medium to strong predictors of performance, and particularly productivity (Cerasoli, Nicklin, and Ford 2014). That study also found that intrinsic motivators (such as being recognized as a valuable resource) led to a better *quality* of output, while extrinsic motivators (such as a salary increase) led to a greater quantity.

Creativity is influenced by identifiable cultural elements. Studies point to strength, openness, and supportiveness in the relationship between supervisors and employees as necessary for a creative environment (Amabile 1979; Kimberly 1981; Kimberly and Evanisko 1981). Clarity of goals is also important (Bailyn 1985), as is freedom to make independent decisions about work. Research has also found that a sense of control over one's job, the complexity of the work, time pressure, and supervisor support are directly related to creativity in the workplace, particularly when these characteristics are part of the work group's or organization's cultural climate (Ohly, Sonnentag, and Pluntke 2006).

These attributes can be nurtured by a number of best practices identified in the literature on innovative culture. Rao and Weintraub (2013) suggest that resources, processes, values, behavior, climate, and success all influence the development of an innovative organization. Engaging employees in an organization's innovation success is one such best practice. Rite-Solutions, a software development company, accomplishes this through an internal "idea market" in which employees allocate virtual funds to the ideas that they feel have the most value. Ideas that attract the most "funding" are progressed through the company's development process. IDEO, a design company known for its innovation in product development, puts high value on linking creativity to playful behaviors; the company's culture encourages role-playing to build empathy for users, learning through hands-on building, and child-like exploration that generates new ideas. However, it is not clear which of these attributes or practices are most important, where organizations should direct their focus, or whether the focus should differ depending on an organization's culture.

The Innovation Culture working group attempted to address this gap by examining the effect of key leadership behaviors and practices in the context of particular cultures. The ultimate goal was to identify what kinds of practices are most likely to enhance innovation for a given type of culture.

The Study

The group began its work with an informal survey of IRI members to identify factors respondents perceived as boosting or inhibiting innovation in their companies. This exercise produced a number of great stories and useful suggestions for best practices; it also convinced the team that developing and validating a new survey tool was beyond the scope of the team's objective.

Consequently, the group looked for an existing survey whose data set might be repurposed for the intended study; surveys from the Center for Innovation Management Studies (CIMS) and the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), both organizations known for their groundbreaking work on innovation and creativity, were considered. The team chose to partner with the CCL because of its large data set ability to probe specific leader behaviors, and willingness to partner with IRI.

Specifically, the group used data from the CCL culture survey KEYS to Creativity and Innovation, which the center administered in partnership with Teresa Amabile (Amabile et al. 1996). The CCL KEYS survey consists of 78 statements to which participants respond on a four-point Likert scale, from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). The statements are designed to elicit employees' perceptions of their organization's work environment across eight cultural dimensions, all of which are amenable to influence from leaders. These Leadership Dimensions are a collection of behaviors exhibited by leaders that either support or inhibit creativity (Table 1).

Innovation is the product of a combination of creativity and productivity.

TABLE 1. The KEYS leadership dimensions

Dimension	Definition
Management Practices	
Freedom	The ability to decide what work to do or how to do it; a sense of control over one's work
Challenging work	A sense of having challenging tasks and important projects
Managerial encouragement	Having a boss who serves as a good work model, sets goals appropriately, supports the work group, values individual contributions, and shows confidence in the work group
Work group support	Having a diversely skilled work group in which people communicate well, are open to new ideas, constructively challenge each other's work, trust and help each other, and feel committed to the work they are doing
Organizational Motivation	
Organization encouragement	An organizational culture that encourages creativity through fair, constructive judgment of ideas, reward and recognition for creative work, mechanisms for developing new ideas, an active flow of ideas, and a shared vision
Lack of organizational impediments	An organizational culture that does not impede creativity through internal political problems, harsh criticism of new ideas, destructive internal competition, an avoidance of risk, or an overemphasis on the status quo
Resources	
Sufficient resources	Access to appropriate resources, including funds, materials, facilities, and information
Realistic work expectations	Absence of extreme time pressures, unrealistic expectations for productivity, and distractions from creative work

The KEYS data set includes 113,860 survey responses collected by CCL from the 1990s to 2015; each record includes multiple demographic data points, including the respondent's gender, tenure, and function and level within the organization, as well as the industry in which the organization operates.

Two analyses were conducted using this rich dataset, with two goals:

1. To identify which of the leadership dimensions are statistically correlated with innovativeness as perceived by employees.
2. To identify which of the leadership dimensions are most important to success for different firm cultures.

The group used this rich data set to determine which of the eight Leadership Dimensions had the most direct impact on workplace creativity and productivity in the organizations surveyed.

Next, the team looked at the impact of those dimensions on organizations with particular types of organizational styles. The organizational styles were segmented across four dimensions of organizational behavior—control, risk aversion, support, and openness to new ideas (Table 2). These behavioral factors were selected because they are explicitly assessed by KEYS survey items and they are readily observable by employees. We carried out reliability analyses and constructed multiple linear regression models to find the strongest predictors of innovation and identify the key stimulants to innovation in the workplace for each organization type.

TABLE 2. Organizational style segmentation

Behavioral Factor	Low State	High State
Control	This organization is never or only sometimes controlled by upper management.	This organization is often or always controlled by upper management.
Risk taking	Top management never or only sometimes wants to take risks in this organization.	Top management always wants to take risks in this organization.
Support	My boss never or only sometimes supports my work group within the organization.	My boss always supports my work group within this organization.
Openness	My boss is never, or only sometimes, open to new ideas.	My boss is always open to new ideas.

Analysis

The KEYS leadership dimensions are measured by responses to several related survey items that ask about particular leadership behaviors and organizational attributes. For instance, items for the Organizational Encouragement dimension include:

- People are encouraged to solve problems creatively in this organization.
- This organization has a good mechanism for encouraging and developing creative ideas.
- People in this organization can express unusual ideas without the fear of being called stupid.

To establish the innovativeness of each organization as perceived by employees, we created an Innovation variable, which was captured in 12 survey items that define the two elements of innovation—creativity and productivity (Table 3). A statistical analysis of responses to the 12 items revealed that the items were all highly correlated and can therefore be combined to capture a singular concept. We defined a "highly innovative" organization as one whose Innovation variable measure (the average of the responses to those 12 items across all responding employees) is greater than the mean score plus one-half of a standard deviation.

TABLE 3. Survey items used to define the Innovation variable

Category	Statement
Creativity	My area of this organization is innovative.
	My area of this organization is creative.
	Overall, my current work environment is conducive to my own creativity.
	A great deal of creativity is called for in my daily work.
	Overall, my current work environment is conducive to the creativity of my work group.
	I believe that I am currently very creative in my work.
Productivity	Overall, this organization is effective. My area of this organization is productive.
	My area of this organization is effective.
	Overall, this organization is productive.
	Overall, this organization is efficient.
	My area of this organization is efficient.

Findings

Our principal finding is that there are three leadership dimensions that lead to an organization being considered innovative by its employees:

- Providing organizational encouragement,
- Ensuring challenging work, and
- Fostering support within the work group.

Companies whose cultures were perceived by their employees to have these three traits were also seen as significantly more innovative by employees than were those that did not. However, the relative importance of each of these dimensions varied depending on the dominant organizational styles. In organizations that exercise a high level of control, for instance, it is more important that management provide challenging work, while providing organizational encouragement is much more important in organizations that exercise low control. Additionally, in an organization that offers a lot of support to its employees, providing organizational encouragement will have the greatest positive impact on innovation. In contrast, if the organization generally exhibits low levels of support, then ensuring employees have challenging work to do is the most important thing leadership can do to increase innovation.

TABLE 4. Survey responses over time

	Post-1999 Values		1999 & Earlier Values	
KEYS Leadership Dimension	***Mean***	***SD***	***Mean***	***SD***
Freedom	2.94	0.55	2.94	0.18
Challenging work	2.95	0.55	2.99	0.22
Management encouragement	3.13	0.58	3.02	0.17
Work group support	3.08	0.54	3.12	0.17
Organizational encouragement	2.60	0.55	2.62	0.23
(Lack of) organizational impediments	2.83	0.49	2.79	0.24
Sufficient resources	2.89	0.54	2.92	0.22
(Lack of) workload pressure	2.49	0.56	2.42	0.18
Creativity	2.69	0.58	2.70	0.22
Productivity	2.97	0.53	2.94	0.24

Leadership Dimensions Correlated with Innovation

First, we sought to determine which of the eight KEYS leadership dimensions led to a perception of high innovativeness. To begin this process, the team first looked at whether responses changed significantly over time by comparing responses from 1999 and earlier to post-1999 responses (Table 4). In this analysis, the mean of each of the KEYS dimensions showed almost no difference between the 1999 and earlier and the post-1999 data sets; the changes in the variability of responses (captured in the standard deviations) can be explained by the development of a more diverse sample of respondents over time. In other words, trends in the data have not changed significantly since the KEYS tool was created, and therefore the entire data set can be used to determine which of the leadership dimensions are most influential in an organization's innovation effectiveness.

Next, we attempted to determine the relative contribution of each variable in predicting innovation, using several statistical techniques to show which of the leadership dimensions best predict performance on the Innovation variable. This analysis revealed that the three most important leadership dimensions for innovation across the entire survey population were Organizational Encouragement, Challenging Work, and Work Group Support.

Organizational Culture and Leadership Dimensions

The next challenge was to identify the effect of organizational style on innovativeness in the context of the leadership dimensions. For each of the four organizational behavior dimensions examined in this segmentation analysis—control, risk aversion, support, and openness to new ideas—the group identified relevant survey items and sorted organizations into high and low segments. "High" and "low" were based on the standard deviation of an organization's mean scores from the mean for all responses to these statements. For instance, a "high control" company was one for which the mean of the response to the item asking about control was one-half standard deviation or more above the mean for the entire survey population; a "low control" company's score was one-half standard deviation or more below the mean.

We then performed a logistic regression for the low and high state of each behavioral dimension against the leadership dimensions to ascertain the effect of each leadership dimension on the organizations' performance on the Innovation variable. All

TABLE 5. Relative impact of leadership dimensions across behavioral segments

Behavioral Segment	Organizational Encouragement	Challenging Work	Work Group Support
Control			
Low	33.8	19.6	9.9
High	15.7	19.3	7.7
Risk Taking			
Low	16.6	17.7	9.3
High	11.0	16.0	7.0
Boss Support			
Low	12.9	20.2	7.1
High	23.3	16.4	8.6
Openness			
Low	16.2	16.7	7.8
High	17.6	18.5	8.5

of these analyses yielded results that were statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

We expressed these results in terms of an odds ratio. In statistics, odds ratios are used to quantify and compare how strongly the presence or absence of a certain situation is associated with an outcome of interest in a given population. In other words, the odds ratio can be used to determine whether a particular situation is a contributor to an outcome, and to compare the magnitude of the contribution to an outcome of several situations. In this study, the odds ratios indicate the relative impact on innovativeness (as captured by the Innovation variable) of moving from a low to a high state for a Leadership Dimension for each of the behavioral dimensions. For instance, in a low-control company, increasing Organizational Encouragement from low to high increases the likelihood of the organization scoring as highly innovative on the Innovation variable by 33.8 times (Table 5).

While the three leadership dimensions shown to be most important to an organization's Innovation score (Organizational Encouragement, Challenging Work, and Work Group Support) are the same for all eight segments (high and low control, high and low risk aversion, high and low support, high and low openness) as in the total population, the relative impact of each dimension is different for different behavioral dimensions. For instance, Challenging Work has a significant positive impact in all behavioral segments, but it is particularly important in a low-support culture (Figure 1A). Organizational Encouragement is particularly important in low-control and high-support cultures (Figure 1B), and Work Group Support is relatively more important in low-control cultures (Figure 1C).

This analysis yielded some insights regarding the impact of particular leadership dimensions on innovation (as measured by the Innovation variable):

1. Challenging Work always has a high impact on innovation, for all segments.
2. Organizational Encouragement has a significant impact in all segments of the sample, but it is most important in low-control, high-support, and high risk-aversion organizations. This leadership dimension shows the greatest variation in impact across the behavioral dimensions examined.
3. Work Group Support, while important across all the dimensions studied, has less effect than Challenging Work or Organizational Encouragement and is not highly differentiated between the different organizational behavior segments.

Discussion

These findings are of more than academic interest. Indeed, a manager who understands the nature of an organization's culture can use this analysis to better understand how its innovation productivity might be improved. Such an effort should focus on the Leadership Dimensions we identified as most important to innovation—Challenging Work, Organization Encouragement, and Work Group Support.

Our analysis shows that Challenging Work plays a significant role in creating an innovative culture. A number of cases from the literature support this finding. For instance, when the automobile infotainment division of Harman International found that its traditional R&D methods were not achieving success, leaders set aggressive goals with daunting constraints. This approach, including a challenge to find a way to produce "all the features at half the price and one-third the cost," sparked creativity in its workers that resulted in novel solutions and an increased level of innovation (Govindarajan 2012). In the public sector, Homestead Air Force Base had a goal of flying 17,000 sorties within a year. This challenge gave the maintenance and supply crews a clear incentive to be innovative in finding ways to repair airplanes more quickly or developing ways to maintain the planes so they needed fewer repairs (Behn 1995). Significantly, providing challenging work has also been shown to be important in employee engagement and retention as well as in overall organizational effectiveness (Pink 2011; Stevens and Swogger 2009).

We also found that Organization Encouragement is a key leadership dimension for innovation. Here, too, the literature supports the importance of this attribute in fostering

A manager who understands the nature of an organization's culture can use this analysis to understand how its innovation productivity might be improved.

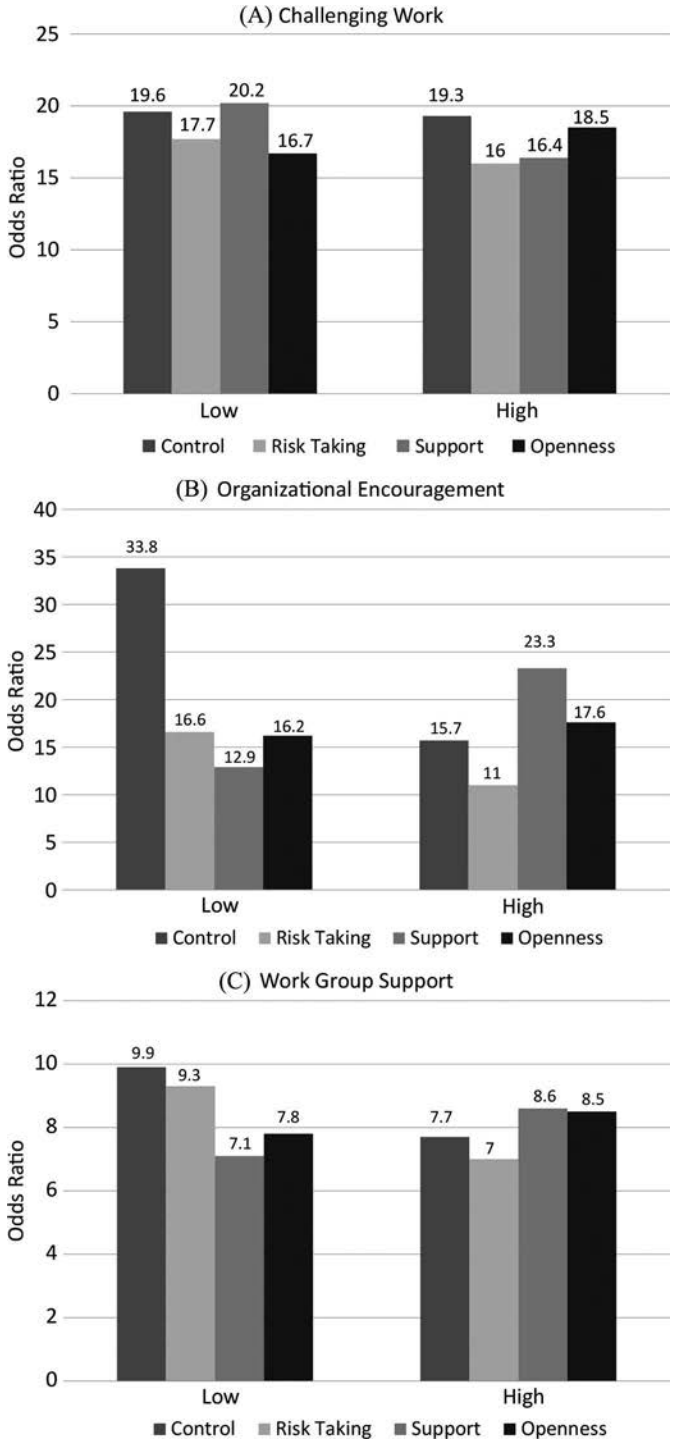

FIGURE 1. Impact of most important leadership dimensions on innovation by behavioral factor

a culture of innovation. For instance, during her tenure at Google, Sheryl Sandberg committed an error that cost the company several million dollars. CEO Larry Page's response was, "I'm so glad you made this mistake, because I want to run a company where we are moving too quickly and doing too much, not being too cautious and doing too little. If we don't have any of these mistakes, we're just not taking enough risk" (Kaplan 2013). Beyond tolerating mistakes, organizational encouragement also can be shown by giving employees freedom to pursue new ideas. This may include policies that explicitly encourage employees to develop their own ideas, such as 3M's policy expecting every employee to use 15 percent of their time to explore new ideas (Freifeld 2013). Software company Atlassian encourages employees to take paid days off to work on any problem they want; these days are called "FedEx Days" because the employees are expected to deliver something of value 24 hours later (Kaplan 2013). And Shell has established an idea portal called GameChanger through which employees can submit their ideas for support and development. The program is backed by an annual budget of $40 million; employees may receive $300,000 to $500,000 in initial funding to develop their ideas into business plans. The success of the program is clear—40 percent of all the development projects in Shell's exploration and production business started out as GameChanger ventures (Wagner et al. 2014).

The third most significant leadership dimension in innovation is Work Group Support. Work group support may take any number of forms; one is small tokens of recognition. For example, Colgate employees give wooden nickels to colleagues who make noteworthy contributions to projects; token recipients then pass them on to others who chipped in on projects they had led (Kaplan 2013). Software development company Menlo has a flat organizational structure with no bosses; employees work in pairs to develop code. Pairs are switched weekly, so everyone in the company knows what people are working on and can get involved to help solve problems (Sheridan 2013).

Conclusion

Our analysis shows that there are fundamental leadership dimensions that can influence how innovative an organization's employees perceive it to be. The relative importance of the three most important leadership dimensions for innovation—organizational encouragement, challenging work, and work group support—varies depending on the organization's culture.

There are several potential areas for future study. The KEYS survey relies on self-reporting of staff, providing an internal view of the organization. Other innovation ranking methodologies form opinions about the innovativeness of organizations with only an external perspective. We believe there is an opportunity to attempt to integrate internal and external perspectives on innovation level of organizations, and understand the underlying behaviors influencing them. Additionally, the study examined results from the entire KEYS results database but did not attempt to examine results specific to IRI member companies. IRI member companies may find a narrower examination of the results more meaningful. Finally, the research group used an a priori segmentation approach to examine how specific leadership behaviors affect the relative impact that the KEYS leadership dimensions have on innovation. A cluster analysis of the KEYS data might elucidate new groupings of leadership behaviors to examine.

This study demonstrates the importance of particular dimensions of leadership behavior and organizational culture

on the perceived innovativeness of an organization. This analysis suggests that a clear understanding of the organization's culture and the role of particular leadership dimensions within it might help managers to increase innovation productivity.

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