

Chapter 19

Knowledge and the Politics of Innovation: Insights from a R&D Company

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ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the relationship between knowledge management and innovation; specifically, it examines how knowledge in organizations affects the creation of new knowledge and what the implications are for innovation management. The core argument is that in a knowledge-based company, where competition is assessed at the edge of rare expertise and the development of innovations (Boisot, 1998; Drucker, 1993; Sveiby 1997), knowledge, which is always interwoven with power, becomes a precious resource, on the grounds of which struggles are inevitably enacted over its control (Foucault, 1980; Clegg, 1989). To argue this, the chapter brings together two related fields, knowledge management and innovation, which even though in principle they examine similar phenomena, i.e. the creation and sharing of new knowledge, in practice they appear disconnected (Asimakou, 2009b). To support the arguments, two innovation mechanisms in two business groups of a major oil company are discussed. The study used a set of qualitative techniques for data collection (in-depth interview, participant observation, documentary analysis) and a sample of 41 employees, which represented the groups participating in the innovation game (manager, scientists, assistant scientists, administration staff and students). I argue that two mainstream innovation management approaches (the rational planning and the cultural approach) have shaped the understanding and actions of the Business Groups in setting up the innovation mechanisms; however, power struggles at the individual, group and organizational level impacted upon the innovation processes to the extent that the latter became passive ‘technical solutions’.

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INTRODUCTION

The chapter starts by critically looking at the literature of innovation –the assumptions and the limitations of the dominant approaches. One observes that popular managerial press constructs the debate around certain core-themes, and presents innovation either as an administrative question or a technical problem, a social or a political matter (Carr, 2003; McFarlan & Nolan, 2003; Rogers, 2003; Brown, Durchslag & Hagel, 2002). Mainstream theories split innovation in various stages and attempt to control each of them with administrative or technical devices. I distinguish here two main approaches (Fonseca, 2002; Asimakou, 2009b): innovation as rational planning and innovation as culture, which, nonetheless, are grounded on the same assumptions, i.e. the controllability of ideas and innovation processes. Both approaches set out to manage innovation by controlling either directly the process or the environment/culture where innovation is supposed to grow.

In order to construct a counter-argument and identify the limitations of these approaches, I suggest that the theoretical progress of the knowledge management field should be contemplated, and in particular the literature on the nature of knowledge in organizations (Collins, 1993; Blackler, 2003). Studies that encapsulate these theoretical insights, have demonstrated the complexity so much of the structure of knowledge, as much as of the processes that produce it. It becomes evident that positivistic and functionalistic methodologies cannot fully explain knowledge related phenomena at the workplace. Hence, our understanding of innovation would only be enriched if alternative approaches are also applied. Furthermore, responding to the call for giving up the ‘*either structural or voluntaristic*’ approaches to understanding innovation, the chapter brings evidence that both approaches may co-exist in the organization -hence which one is the ‘right’ one does not form part of the current analysis.

I suggest then, that these co-existing approaches form discourses and actions, of which the analysis may reveal issues of power and order. The two dominant discourses on innovation management are viewed as one language game, where various players compete to determine adequate actions. The question then becomes, how current knowledge (i.e. regime of truth) impact on the possibilities for innovation and change, and how knowledge workers embark on a power game in their effort to influence organizational transformations. The chapter does not construct one more approach to add to the analysis of innovation, but rather examines what the already existing ones actually *do* to the organizational life. The analysis appeals to the theoretical concepts of discourses as regimes of truth and the political dimension of knowledge (Foucault, 1971; 1980; Lyotard, 1984; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). By adopting a discursive approach to the analysis of innovation, the chapter throws light into the political dimension of knowledge in a knowledge-organization, and into why organizations and individuals resist or support innovation practices.

To illustrate the arguments the chapter brings evidence from a R&D dept, while in the process of changing, i.e. conferring a new order by changing the hegemonic discourse, which aspired to stimulate new ideas and support innovation. Two innovation mechanisms in two Business Groups of a major oil company are presented and the enacted politics are discussed, as manifested at the organizational, group, and individual level. As said above, the methodology adopts a discursive approach, in other words, it conceptualises innovation as a new discursive formation, which contested the existing one; it uses a set of qualitative techniques for data collection (in-depth interview, participant observation, documentary analysis) and a sample of 41 employees, which represented the groups participating in the innovation game (managers, scientists, assistant scientists, administration staff and students). I argue that two mainstream innovation management approaches

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