

Implementing Innovations and Gaining from it at the Team Level: A Proactive Approach

*Sarit Rashkovits¹, Yael Livne²

¹(Department of Health Systems Management, Yezreel Valley College, Israel)

²(Department of Human Services, Yezreel Valley College, Israel)

Corresponding Author: Sarit Rashkovits

Abstract: Although innovation is a strategic imperative, failures to implement innovations and to achieve the expected performance gains are common. This study specifies two different roles of proactive behavior of team learning in overcoming these challenges. First, we test the indirect effect of team learning on team performance that is mediated by team innovation implementation. Second, since there is a need to increase the fit between the implemented innovation and the specific team setting, we test the moderating role of team learning in increasing the effect of team innovation implementation on team performance. Data were obtained from two sources: a total of 448 employees consisting of 77 work groups that rated team learning, and their team leaders who rated the team's innovation implementation and performance. A moderated mediation analysis supported the research model and hypotheses showing that the indirect effect of team learning on team performance was stronger in the presence of high rather than low team learning, thus indicating that team learning contributes to team performance. The study points to the importance of proactive team behavior rather than compliance in advancing team innovation implementation and the resulted team performance.

Keywords: team learning, innovation implementation, team performance, moderated mediation, proactivity.

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I. Introduction

As a consequence of ever-increasing levels of competition and rapid changes, organizational innovation is vital.[1,2,3,4] Nevertheless, failures to implement innovations, as well as disappointments in achieving the expected performance gains from implemented innovations, are common.[4,5,6]

Organizations often encourage norms of compliance, thus leading employees to assume that change initiation is inappropriate, and resulting in negative career consequences and social costs.[7,8,9,10] However, scholars argue that in today's dynamic and unpredictable environment employees need to reveal not only proficiency and adaptability, but also proactivity for achieving the required performance. Elaborating on this argument at the team level, we aim to specify the contributions of the proactive behavior of team learning to team innovation implementation and team performance. We suggest that for implementing innovations and gaining from it there is a crucial need not only in employees' adaptivity, rather than passively accepting the innovation, but also in their proactivity, meaning their change initiation orientation and behavior.

Scholars claimed that: "Understanding how new technologies in health care and elsewhere can be more successfully implemented — and how they rely on team and organizational learning to realize performance advantages — remains a critical area for research".[11, p. 29] Work teams are considered a crucial element in organizational life and in its innovation advancement.[12,13,14, 15] Therefore, the present study responds to the need in investigating the role of team learning, the proactive spiral process of reflection and action performed by team members,[16] in team innovation implementation and the associated team performance. Team learning is a group process comprising several concrete learning behaviors,[16,17,18] defined as "an ongoing process of reflection and action, characterized by asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes of actions".[17, p. 353] It is a proactive team activity that aims to bring change and improvement.[19,20,21,22] It assists not only in team adaptation to prescribed innovations,[23] but also in proactively initiating required changes for adjusting the team routines to the innovation as well as for adjusting the innovation to the team's setting and needs.[24,25]

An innovation is defined as an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by the unit of adoption.[3,26,27] In the dynamic environment innovation considered essential for organizational success.[28] However, surprisingly, there is very little research that tests the contribution of team innovation implementation to team performance.[3,11] Prior research has surprisingly tended to separately investigate the contribution of team learning activities to team innovation implementation, and to team performance.[29,30] The present study, first, aims to fill this gap and test the team innovation implementation- team performance link.

Second, team innovation implementation is achieved when the innovation is assimilated into the team's practices, meaning fully deployed by the team.[4,31] This assimilation process includes the initial awareness and evaluation of the team to the innovation, making the team decision to use the innovation, and adjusting the team's routines for integrating the innovation into the team activity.[32] Prior research points to the contribution of team learning to each of these phases.[31,33,34,35,36] Accordingly, we suggest that team learning facilitates team innovation implementation.

Third, taken together both propositions meaning, that team learning facilitates team innovation implementation, and that team innovation implementation facilitates team performance, we suggest an indirect effect of team learning on team performance that is mediated by team innovation implementation.

Fourth, an innovation is a general prototype of an idea, practice, or technique.[3,37] Therefore, when an innovation is implemented "as is" its contribution to the team performance might not be optimal. Innovation must often be modified to fit the specific team setting and needs if all possible performance gains from its implementation to be achieved.[3,4,5,11,27] For advancing this adjustment there is a need in the spiral activity of reflection and action the implemented innovation can be adjusted to the specific setting and needs.[24,25] Hence, team learning activity might be an important lever for increasing the contribution of the team innovation implementation to its performance. However, the role of team learning behavior in enhancing the team innovation implementation– performance link has been previously neglected. Filling this gap, we also aim to test the moderating role of team learning.

Fifth, taking into consideration these roles of team learning, this paper proposes and tests a moderated mediation model in which team learning is (a) indirectly contributes to team performance by facilitating team innovation implementation, and (b) moderates the team innovation implementation–team performance relationship so this indirect effect is stronger when team learning is high rather than low (see Fig. 1).

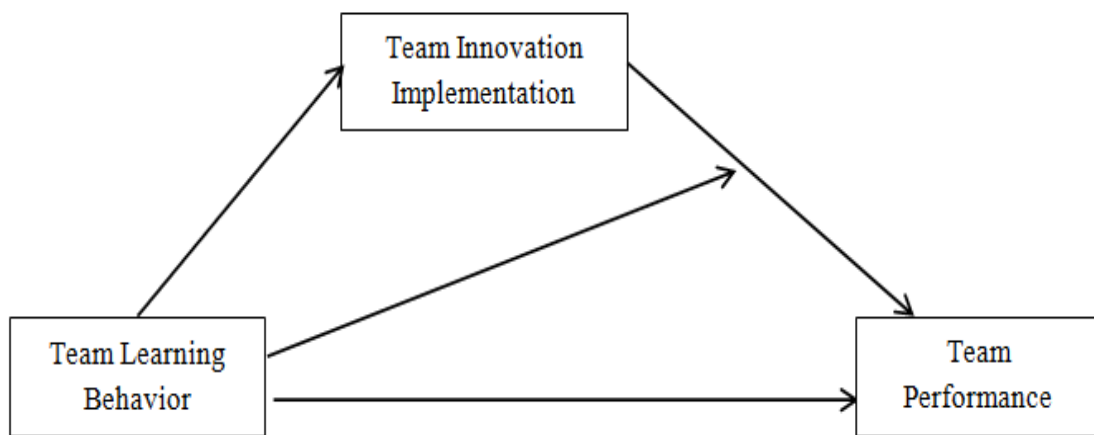


Figure 1: The conceptual model

II. Literature review and hypotheses building

2.1 The Role of Team Learning in Facilitating Team Innovation Implementation

Team innovation implementation is achieved when the innovation is assimilated into team practices such that the innovation is widely, skillfully and consistently deployed.[4] Scholars identify three phases of innovation assimilation.[32] The first phase, *innovation initiation*, refers to the initial awareness and evaluation of the innovation regarding its potential benefits to improve team performance. Team learning contributes to innovation initiation not only by leading the team to come up with innovative ideas of its own,[38,39] but also by increasing team awareness of innovations in its environment. In particular, team learning behaviors of seeking new information lead the team to acknowledge innovations in its environment. Scholars previously identified "learning what" as team learning activities that seek to identify current best practices in the team's surroundings.[35]

The second phase, *innovation adoption*, is defined as making the decision to use the innovation. Team learning increases innovation adoption by enhancing decisions to adopt innovations instead of avoiding and rejecting them. Scholars argue that team reflexivity, considered an essential component of team learning, promotes the quality of team decisions by reducing information-processing failures since it ensures that teams discuss and assess the implications of team information for team goals, processes and outcomes.[40] Similarly, it was found that team learning from failures positively affected the quality of top management teams' decisions.[41]

Finally, the phase of *innovation routinization* is the stage in which the innovation is widely used and is integrated into the team activity. Team learning assists in innovation routinization by facilitating the adjustment of team practices to the innovation.[32,33] Since deploying the innovation requires a new way of coordinating team members' actions, a collective "know-how" has to be developed to allow the innovation to be integrated into the team's practices.[11] Learning new routines that are needed for employing the adopted innovation necessarily means unlearning old routines. These routines are typically tacit and taken-for-granted and, and therefore, unlearning them is difficult.[42] Consequently, the change in routines may be a slow evolutionary process unless the team spends time reflecting on outcomes of previous iterations of the routines.[33] Furthermore, team learning behaviors of reflection and planning create a conceptual readiness for and guide team members' attention towards relevant opportunities for action and means to implement the innovation.[34,40,43] Therefore, the following hypothesis is presented:

H1. Team learning will have a positive effect on team innovation implementation.

2.2 Team innovation implementation and team performance

Firm innovation capability is considered as most important for gaining a competitive edge and it was found to positively affect its performance.[28] Nevertheless, there is a surprisingly little research on the effect of team innovation implementation on team performance or effectiveness.[11]

Implementing advanced information systems and other technologies, or work methods can enhance the team functioning and effectiveness. For example, a field study of 47 ministries and agencies in Korea's public service found that electronic documentation systems implementation success positively contributed to their performance.[3] Consequently, the following hypothesis is introduced:

H2. Team innovation implementation will have a positive effect on team performance.

2.3 Team innovation implementation as mediator in the effect of team learning on team performance

Prior research raised considerable support for the beneficial effect of team learning to team outcomes.[15,44,45,46,47,48] However, Edmondson[17] asserted that: "learning behavior consumes time without assurance of results, suggesting that there are conditions in which it may reduce efficiency and distract from performance, such as when teams are responsible for highly routine and repetitive tasks with little need for improvement or modification, for teams facing change or uncertainty, however, the risk of wasting time may be small relative to the potential gain". [17, p. 354] This means that team learning contributes by implementing innovations and promoting changes. It can be concluded that the effect of team learning on team performance is achieved by implementing new work strategies, techniques, equipment or other innovations generated by the team or adapted from outside. Accordingly, this study suggests that team innovation implementation mediates the team learning- team performance relationship.

H3. Team learning will have a positive indirect effect on team performance mediated by team innovation implementation.

2.4 The Role of Team Learning in Moderating the Team Innovation Implementation - Team Performance association

Since innovation is a general prototype of an idea, practice, or technique,[3,37] the implemented innovation often needs to be adjusted to increase its fit to the specific team's characteristics, mission and context. For example, it was found that contextual work differences between two hospitals prevented a project team in one hospital from applying specific fixes developed in the other hospital.[49] When innovations are employed 'off the shelf', with no further adjustments for the specific team, the possible effect of the innovation implementation on the team's performance is relatively limited. Therefore, it is often necessary to experiment with the innovation in order to customize it for the target team.[24,25,35] Accordingly, the results of a comprehensive field study demonstrated that the effect of implementation of the ISO 9000 quality standard on organizational performance was dependent on learning mechanisms of "adaptation-in-use",[24] which is the ongoing fine-tuning of the innovation to the specific organizational context. By experimenting with the innovation and reflecting on the subsequent benefits and shortcomings in its specific context, the team is able to initiate changes and adjust the innovation to its specific needs. Hence, team learning assists in gaining insights regarding possible accommodations to be made in the innovation and in introducing them. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H4. Team learning will moderate the relationship between team innovation implementation and team performance, such that this relationship will be stronger when team learning is higher.

Overall, this study proposes a moderated mediation model (presented in Fig. 1) that poses team learning as both facilitating team performance through team implementation, and moderating the path between team implementation and team performance. Accordingly, it is hypothesized that:

- H5. The indirect effect of team learning on team performance through team implementation will be moderated by team learning in the path from team implementation to team performance.

III. Method

3.1 Sample

The study comprised 525 employees from 77 work teams (448 team members and 77 team managers) in various service industries as education, restaurants, call centers, and healthcare. Organizational size varied considerably, with an average of 504 employees per organization (SD=1,452). The average size of the teams was 10 members (SD= 6). 62% of the team managers were men; their average age was 39 years (SD = 11 years); their average job tenure was 7 years (SD = 7 years); and most were full-time employees (96%). 54% of all participants were men; their average age was 31 years (SD = 10.5 years); their average job tenure was 5 years (SD = 6 years); and 67% were full-time employees.

3.2 Procedure

The participants were approached by research assistants in the workplace after getting the consent of the relevant supervisors. The research questionnaire was administered to participants after receiving an explanation regarding the anonymity of their responses and confirming that their participation was voluntary. The research assistants were available for any question of the participants.

3.3 Research Variables and Measures

For reducing common source bias different sources of data were used.[50] Team members' responses were used for measuring team learning, while team managers' responses were used for measuring team innovation implementation and team performance. These sources were used based on scholars' assertion that team members and managers have different viewpoints regarding work processes; while team members are interested in creating a productive and pleasant atmosphere, managers are interested in the realized output. Furthermore, team members have specific information about team interaction and tend to have schema that link internal processes to performance. They may label their team as high performing if it exhibits the processes thought to be linked to performance. Managers, on the other hand, are more distant from the team processes and tend to base their performance evaluations on concrete visible output of the team.[51,52]

Team learning. Team learning was measured using six items based on Edmondson[17] and scored by team members on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate). A sample item: "In this team someone always makes sure we stop and reflect on our team work processes". The Cronbach's alpha reliability for this scale was 0.83. The average rwg(j) score of 0.76 indicated strong within-group agreement, justifying the view that team learning existed and could be aggregated to the group level. Furthermore, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that team learning varied significantly across teams ($F[77, 367] = 7.97, p < .001$); the ICC1 value (0.40) was above the typical median value of 0.12. The ICC2 value (0.88), was above the minimum acceptable criterion of $ICC(2) > 0.70$. [53, 54, 55 56] Therefore, the data satisfied the conditions for being aggregated across team members to obtain an average.

Team innovation implementation. Team innovation implementation was measured using a four-item scale[57] and scored by team managers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate). A sample item: "This team succeeds in implementing new working methods or techniques". The Cronbach's alpha reliability for this scale was 0.91.

Team performance. Team performance was measured with a scale capturing goal achievement and effectiveness based on the performance dimension in the well-recognized definition by Hackman:[58] "meeting or exceeding the performance standards of the people who receive and/or review the team's output" (p. 323). The scale comprised five items[48] and was scored by team managers on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very inaccurate) to 7 (very accurate). A sample item: "This team achieves its goals." The Cronbach's alpha reliability was 0.87.

Control Variables. In order to control for the variety stemming from both the team manager and the team, two control variables were included in all analyses: team leader's tenure (in years) and the size of the team (number of team members). Team size and tenure were previously found as important for team processes such as learning and innovation.[16,59]

3.4 Analytic approach

The indirect effect of team learning on team performance via team innovation implementation was tested using Model 4 in SPSS PROCESS.[60] PROCESS is a computational tool for path analysis-based moderation and mediation analysis as well as the combination of the two as a "conditional process model"[60] Using this approach, a mediation effect is confirmed if the bootstrapping bias-corrected confidence intervals for the indirect effect don't include the value of zero. This analysis includes three steps: a) Testing for the effect of the independent variable (team learning) on the mediating variable (team innovation implementation); b) Testing for the effect of the mediating variable

(team innovation implementation) on the dependent variable (team performance); c) Testing for the conditional indirect effect of the independent variable (team learning) on the dependent variable (team performance) via the mediating variable (team innovation implementation).

For testing the theoretical moderated mediation model (see Figure 1), a procedure designed to analyze conditional indirect effects by SPSS PROCESS was employed.[60] Formally, moderated mediation occurs when the strength of an indirect effect depends on the level of some variable, or in other words, when mediation relations are contingent on the level of a moderator.[61] In the present model, the independent variable (i.e., team learning) is also the moderator.[62] Therefore, Hayes' Model 74 [60] was used. Model 74 includes three steps: a) Testing for the effect of the independent variable (team learning) on the mediating variable (team innovation implementation); b) Testing for the interaction effect of the moderating variable (team learning), and the mediating variable (team innovation implementation) on the dependent variable (team performance); c) Testing for the conditional indirect effects of the independent variable (team learning) on the dependent variable (team performance) via the mediating variable (team innovation implementation) at levels of the moderating variable (team learning). This condition, which is the essence of moderated mediation, establishes whether the strength of the mediation differs across the levels of the moderator.

IV. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

As seen in Table I, there was a significant positive correlation between team learning and team innovation implementation ($r=0.31$, $p<0.01$). There was also a significant correlation between team innovation implementation and team performance ($r=0.63$, $p<0.01$). However, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) for the items of these two scales yielded a good fit of two-factor model (team innovation implementation and team performance) to the data ($\chi^2=23.95$, $df=19$, $p>.22$; $GFI=0.92$; $RMSEA=0.058$). Nevertheless, the one-factor model didn't yield a good fit ($\chi^2=31.95$, $df=20$, $p<0.05$; $GFI=0.88$; $RMSEA=0.093$). Moreover, the AIC of the one-factor model (63.95) was inferior compared to the AIC of the two-factor model (57.37). Finally, there was a significant positive correlation between the control variable of team leader's tenure and team innovation implementation ($r=0.25$, $p<0.05$).

Table 1: Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations between the study variables

	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
Team learning	76	4.27	0.92	1	0.31**	0.21	0.13	0.03
Team innovation implementation	77	5.16	1.21		1	0.63**	0.25*	0.02
Team performance	76	5.71	0.84			1	0.08	-0.11
Team leaders' tenure	75	7.24	6.58				1	-0.07
Team size	77	8.16	5.48					1

* $p<0.05$; ** $p<0.01$; *** $p<0.001$

4.2 Hypotheses Testing

Indirect effect analysis (testing Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3). The indirect effect of team learning on team performance via team innovation implementation was tested using Hayes's [60] Model 4 in SPSS PROCESS. To assess this mediation model, three conditions were examined. In the first step, a multiple regression analysis yielded a significant effect of team learning on team innovation implementation ($t=3.19$, $p<0.002$). Second, in line with Hypothesis 2, there was a significant effect of team innovation implementation on team performance ($t=6.99$, $p<0.001$). Finally, supporting Hypothesis 3, there was a significant indirect effect of team learning on team performance through team innovation implementation ($ab=0.26$, $CI\ 95\% [.12, 0.45]$).

4.3 Moderated Mediation – Model 74 (testing Hypotheses 4, and 5)

The indirect effect of team learning on team performance through team innovation implementation, whereby team learning also moderates the path between team innovation implementation and team performance, was tested using Hayes's [60] Model 74 in SPSS PROCESS. To assess this moderated mediation model, three conditions were examined:[62]

As seen in Table II, Step 1, supporting Hypothesis 1, indicates team learning significantly predicted team innovation implementation ($t=3.19$, $p<0.002$). This step is identical to step 1 in Model 4 which is described above. Step 2, supporting Hypothesis 4, yielded a significant interaction effect between team innovation implementation and team learning ($t=3.82$, $p<0.0003$) on team performance.

Table 2: Moderated Mediation Analysis for Testing the Research Model

<i>Step1: Effect of team learning on team innovation implementation (Hypothesis 1)</i>				
Team Innovation Implementation ($R^2= 0.19$)				
	Estimate	SE	t	Boot 95% CI
Team managers' tenure	0.20	0.10	1.96	[-0.004, 0.41]
Team size	0.003	0.01	0.34	[-0.02, 0.02]
Team learning	0.35*	0.11	3.19	[0.13, 0.57]
<i>Step 2: Interaction effect of team learning and team innovation implementation on team performance(Hypothesis 4)</i>				
Team Performance ($R^2=0 .55$)				
	Estimate	SE	t	Boot 95% CI
Team managers' tenure	-0.12	0.09	-1.71	[-0.27,0.02]
Team size	-0.05	0.01	-0.87	[-0.02, 0.01]
Team innovation implementation	0.67***	0.10	8.19	[0.51, 0.83]
Team learning	0.02	0.10	0.27	[-0.14, 0.19]
Team innovation implementationXTeam learning	0.27***	0.09	3.82	[0.13, 0.42]
<i>Step3: Conditional indirect effect of team learning on team performance mediated by team innovation implementation at levels of team learning(Hypothesis 5)</i>				
Condition (Values of Moderator: Team learning)	Indirect effect (SE)		Boot 95% CI	
Low team learning (Mean- SD)	0.15 (0.06)		[0.06, 0.29]	
Mean team learning	0.24 (0.08)		[0.08, 0.41]	
High team learning (Mean+1SD)	0.33 (0.12)		[0.10, 0.58]	

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

As shown in Fig. 2, team innovation implementation was more strongly related to team performance when team learning was high rather than low. Step 3, supporting Hypothesis 5, indicated that the indirect effect of team learning on team performance was stronger for high (mean +1SD) team learning (ab=.33, CI 95% [.10, 58]) than for low (mean -1SD) team learning (ab=.15, CI 95% [.06, 0.29]). Accordingly, there was also a significant moderated mediation effect of team learning on team performance (ab=.10, CI 95% [.03, 0.20]).

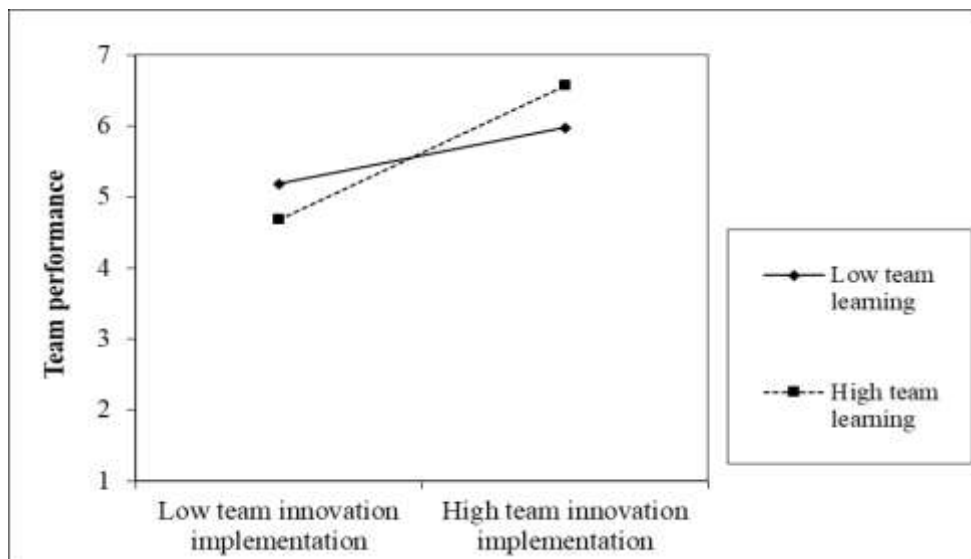


Figure 2. Interaction effect of team innovation implementation and team learning on team performance

V. Discussion

Although innovation is a strategic imperative for organizations,[3,4,47] failures to implement innovations and to achieve the expected performance gains are common.[4] Based on scholars' interest in the role of proactive behaviors in the dynamic and uncertain environment,[19,20,21,63] our findings specify the roles of team learning behavior in promoting team performance both by enhancing team innovation implementation, and by enhancing the team innovation implementation - team performance link.

More specifically, it was first found that team learning facilitated team innovation implementation. This result is in agreement with previous research on the importance of team learning for innovation implementation that found team learning to enhance team awareness of the innovation,[35] enhance decisions to adopt innovations,[40,41] and promote the integration of the innovation into the team activity by adjusting the

team's routines.[11,32,33] Second, our results provide direct support for the contribution of team innovation implementation to team performance. Third, the findings point to an indirect effect of team learning on team performance that is mediated by team innovation implementation, thus support former suggestion regarding the need in team learning in dynamic rather than stable environments.[17]

Forth, an interaction effect was found for team innovation implementation and team learning on team performance, meaning that team learning enhances the contribution of team innovation implementation to team performance. The cyclic team learning behaviors of reflecting on the outcomes of innovation implementation in the specific context, and accordingly initiating changes in the innovation and further experimenting with the modified innovation, enhance the relationship between team innovation implementation and team performance. This finding is in line with previous findings at the organizational level, which demonstrated that "learning by doing", and more specifically "adaptation-in-use", i.e. adjusting the innovation to the specific context, moderated the effect of implementing ISO 9000 on organizational performance.[24] This result is also in line with another finding at the organizational level regarding 12 types of process innovations frequently used in modern companies (such as Business Process Reengineering and Just-In-Time Production) which found that the greater the organizational climate for initiative and for psychological safety, the stronger was the positive relationship between process innovativeness implementation and the organizational performance.[5] However, the effect of climates that support initiative,[21] and psychological safety[17,64] manifests by learning behavior.

Finally, the moderated mediation analysis shows that team learning not only facilitates team innovation implementation, and thus has an indirect effect on team performance, but that it also moderates this indirect effect by further enhancing the relationships between team innovation implementation and team performance. This moderated mediation effect suggests that the routine, frequent and consistent use of the innovation (i.e., its implementation), is not sufficient for achieving maximum team performance gains. Rather, there is also a need for team learning behavior for enhancing the fit of the innovation to the specific team's setting.

In the highly dynamic environment in which the need for innovation implementation is common, it seems important to continuously nurture team learning and proactive role orientation instead of encouraging compliance and status quo adherence. The importance of proactive behaviors might be overlooked when managements aim to enhance employees' compliance to a prescribed change or innovation implementation. Furthermore, when the managers of a planned change are concentrated in the innovation implementation "as is" rather than in encouraging the proactive accommodation of the innovation to the unique team's context, the team implementation–team performance association might be relatively disappointing.

5.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study addresses team learning processes in real-world work teams, employing a cross sectional field design. Consequently, the causality of the associations that were found between the variables might be somewhat open to debate. Following scholars' recommendations,[50] this disadvantage was limited by using different sources for assessing team learning (the team members) and for assessing team innovation implementation and team performance (team managers), and thus avoiding common rater bias. Further, although team performance and team innovation implementation data were obtained from the same source (team managers), this does not hamper our attempt to reveal the difference in the strength of the association between team innovation implementation and team performance at the different levels of team learning. Nonetheless, future research might further support the present results by employing a longitudinal design as well as by referring to other indicators of team performance or team innovation implementation.

5.2 Practical Implications

The common assumption in organizations is that employees need to comply rather than initiate change and improvement.[8,9] However, we found that the proactive behavior of team learning is important not only for enhancing team innovation implementation, but also for boosting the relationship between the team innovation implementation and the team's performance. Therefore, for enhancing team innovation implementation and the possible team performance benefits associated with the implementation, it is recommended to cultivate a proactive work orientation. Scholars suggested that proactive motivation consists of "can do", "reason to", and "energized to" motivations.[21] In particular, team psychological empowerment was found to enhance team proactive behavior.[65] Therefore team autonomy, efficacy, discretion and impact may assist in nurturing team learning. Nurturing of team learning also requires the fostering of a team climate of psychological safety and support for initiative.[5,64,66]

Lastly, it should be taken under consideration that quantitative overload is especially harmful for proactive behavior[67] in general and specifically for team learning,[68] therefore adequate time resources are needed to foster it.[46] It is recommended to provide teams with the resource of time for team learning, not only during the assimilation process but also afterwards, to enhance the benefits of the implemented innovation.

VI. Conclusion

Team learning behavior is important for implementing innovations in the team, and furthermore for enhancing the relationship between the innovation implementation and the team performance. Consequently, in the highly dynamic environment in which the need for innovation implementation is common, it seems important to continuously nurture team learning and proactive role orientation instead of encouraging compliance. The importance of fostering proactive orientation of teams might be overlooked when managements aim to enhance compliance to a requirement to implement an innovation, and moreover, when the managers are focused on implementing the innovation "as is" rather than on accommodating it to the unique team context.

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