

Investigation into how small breakthroughs can scale up to widespread innovation

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Learning with the intention of innovating and renewing work practices takes place in the workplace. Small experiments are typically the way to kickstart this type of learning. This study wants to learn more about the way in which small experiments, and initial 'movements' in the day-to-day work of one department can become contagious to other groups in the organization. Indeed, we want to know how a small movement can grow in a way that is meaningful for the organization or even the society as a whole. For this purpose a conceptual framework was developed. Reconstruction interviews and case studies are planned to answer the research questions.

Keywords: Workplace learning; Innovation; Experimenting

Theoretical background and earlier research results that this study is based on

Learning with the intention of innovating and renewing work practices doesn't take place in classroom settings (Verdonschot, 2009). The outcome of this kind of learning is unknown beforehand, and so is the learning path. It requires creative learning (Ellström, 2002) for which the work itself serves as a learning environment. The learning process that leads to innovation is characterized by getting stuck (Verdonschot, 2009), and making mistakes (Frese & Keith, 2015). Participants in this process need to persevere in order to reach breakthroughs in the innovation process (Lucas & Nordgren, 2015). Known is that learning with the intention of innovating doesn't occur as a result of careful planning (Wee & Taylor, 2017). Rather, this type of learning is typically fostered by starting small experiments (Edmundson, 2002). Less is known however about how these small starting points can come together into a big movement or transformative change (Bushe & Kassam, 2005).

Research questions

What does it take to make innovations that have started small - in a group or team -, grow into a bigger movement in the organization or society? How do they 'level up'?

We aim to answer this main question by focusing on three levels:

- What makes initial and new participants keep up the energy and personal drive that typically fuels the learning process in the early stages and what can cause them to lose this energy?
- How do several breakthroughs and successful experiments evolve into a new sustainable way of working? Is it a random or unpredictable process or can we discern mechanisms or patterns?
- In what way can these learning processes be facilitated and directed in order to maximize success?

Research design

The research consists of a literature review in order to learn from state-of-the-art research on the subject. The empirical research consists of two approaches. First, reconstruction studies.

Reconstruction studies are a form of case studies in which a particular phenomenon that has already occurred, is reconstructed in order to learn more (Verdonschot, 2009). We will interview 15-20 people who were involved in realizing bigger movements in their organization. We use a history line/biographical interview as a way to capture their story. Second, parallel research will be done.

Parallel research is a form of case study design that studies ongoing processes (Bitektine, 2008). We will visit 5-10 workplaces that aim to foster and connect their innovation initiatives. Based on literature we develop a diagnosis instrument that enables us to track down critical factors during interviews and observations. During the field visit we make a 'picture' of the way they are working.

Contribution to practice-based research and contribution to practice

When we have learned more about the factors that stimulate and hinder innovations to level up to a bigger movement, we have valuable knowledge to improve practice. First, for professionals and management it is worthwhile to get a grip on ways to capture the energy of people involved. It can help them to foster intrinsic motivation. This is especially important since we know that autonomous motivation of employees promotes both high-quality performance and employee wellness (Deci, Olafsen & Ryan, 2017). Second, in order to make better use of innovation initiatives in an organization, we need knowledge on the way loose breakthroughs can be combined to a bigger innovation. Third, since we know that careful planning does not contribute to a bigger movements (Wee & Taylor, 2017), it is important to learn what strategies are effective in fostering these small initiatives.

Questions that we like to discuss

- We do not want to limit ourselves to traditional innovation literature. Which studies could we examine in order to learn more about this phenomenon of ‘small moves turning into a bigger movement’? E.g. ecological, sociological, or anthropological studies.



- We are curious where you see small movements that grew big. Please share your stories and examples with us.



- Please let us know the questions that our research triggers with you. We would like to hear what your critical reflections, curious questions, and bright ideas are.



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