

WHAT TRIGGERS MANAGEMENT INNOVATION?

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ABSTRACT

There is a popular tendency in management science towards what could be called “theory denial”: the denial of the significance of theory for the development of management thought and action. We contend that this theory denial is just wrong, in the light of empirical evidence, and that is a damaging idea, because it diverts the attention of the scholarly community away from the core issues of the field. In this paper, we consider two variants of this theory denial, purporting to reveal the serious problems in their justification.

First, the approach stressing the importance of studying how ideas are translated into solutions by organizations is considered. It is shown that there two unsubstantiated assumptions, first about the relative lack of importance of the (solution) idea, and second about the prior existence of such ideas.

Second, a recent influential view on management innovation and the process through which it emerges is examined. This view focuses on the individuals (from inside and outside the organisation) who drive the innovation process and on the phases of the innovation process itself. The motivation for change is represented as coming solely from a perceived shortfall between the organization’s current and potential performance. Ideas, it would seem, arise spontaneously to fill this gap. We present historical examples to argue that the genesis of innovative management thinking can be much more closely accounted for and that ideas can themselves have a role in motivating change. Through exemplary cases, we contend that new concepts of production have operated in a way resembling the role of a scientific paradigm, as defined by Kuhn. A leading aspect of such a paradigm is that it defines criteria for choosing problems. The concept precedes and drives the innovation, functioning as a paradigm which guides the development of detailed solutions to problems which otherwise would not be visible. Indeed, the developments of new concepts of production seem to have triggered a long-standing stream of interrelated management innovations. Thus, rather than arising spontaneously in response to organisational need, “management ideas” have arisen in the context of an emerging theory of production.

Thus, we contend that the role of management scholars is not only to come up with creative ideas or to address the translation of ideas, as held in the mainstream view, but rather they should develop new concepts and theories on phenomena relevant for management (such as production), based also on a critical scrutiny of present ones, clarify and make explicit concepts in use that are implicit, and co-develop new methods based on proven or promising concepts.

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