

Strategic Leadership and Cultural Dynamics: Pioneering Innovation in Organisational Ecosystems

Teresa Dieguez*

Abstract

The interplay between leadership and organisational culture is pivotal in fostering innovation within businesses. This study investigates the role of leadership in cultivating an innovation-centric culture and explores the factors necessary for developing a robust management framework to evaluate and enhance such cultures. Employing a quantitative approach during the COVID-19 pandemic, data collected from Northern Portugal's small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) reveal the importance of entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, continuous learning and collaborative behaviours. The findings underline leadership's capacity to shape cultural and strategic transformation, offering practical insights for organisations to align cultural dynamics with innovation strategies.

Keywords: Innovation, Leadership, Culture, Strategy, Behaviour, Entrepreneurship

Introduction

In an era of rapid technological evolution and market disruptions, further amplified by the lingering effects of the global pandemic, innovation has emerged as a critical driver of organisational growth and sustainability. The crisis catalysed a profound shift in organisational thinking, compelling companies to adapt swiftly and rethink their traditional value creation models. The concept of innovation transcends product development, encompassing systemic transformations in culture, processes and leadership (Sivam et al., 2019). Effective

leadership acts as a catalyst, nurturing an environment where innovation flourishes by leveraging cultural strengths and aligning them with strategic imperatives (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Innovation stands at the heart of organisational growth and resilience in a world increasingly shaped by rapid technological advancements, global market competition and shifting societal demands. As organisations emerge from the disruptions caused by the pandemic, innovation now plays an even more pivotal role in navigating recovery and ensuring long-term success and sustainability. Far from being limited to groundbreaking inventions, innovation encompasses systemic transformations in how organisations think, operate and create value (Dieguez et al., 2023). It manifests in new products or services and redefined processes, cultures and leadership approaches. However, fostering a sustainable culture of innovation remains a formidable challenge for many organisations, largely because of the complex interplay of leadership, strategy and cultural dynamics (Dieguez, 2023, June).

Leadership plays a central role in shaping the environment where innovation can thrive. Effective leaders cultivate conditions that inspire creativity, encourage risk-taking and foster collaboration (Ahsan, 2024). They act as visionaries, bridging the gap between strategy and execution and as architects, building a culture that embraces experimentation and resilience (Ismail et al., 2024). However, the path to cultivating such an environment is rarely straightforward. Organisations must navigate cultural resistance, structural inertia and resource constraints, all of which can hinder innovation. In this sense, leadership emerges not only as a key driver

* CiTUR, Polytechnic University of Cávado and Ave, Portugal. Email: tdieguez@ipca.pt

of innovation but also as a transformative force that ensures the alignment of organisational values with a forward-thinking strategy, fostering sustained innovation even amidst global uncertainties (Baporikar, 2024).

Innovation today is also deeply intertwined with the global forces of digital transformation and sustainability. Emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, big data analytics and the Internet of Things (IoT) are reshaping industries, forcing organisations to rethink traditional business models and adapt to unprecedented levels of disruption. Simultaneously, the growing urgency of addressing climate change and social inequality has elevated the importance of sustainable innovation, where leaders must balance financial performance with environmental and social accountability (van Niekerk, 2020). In this new paradigm, leaders must possess technical expertise and a profound understanding of innovation's ethical and cultural dimensions (Dieguez et al., 2021).

Cultural diversity adds yet another dimension to the innovation equation. As organisations expand across borders and embrace multicultural teams, harmonising diverse perspectives becomes essential. Diversity in thought, experiences and values can be a wellspring of innovation, enabling organisations to solve complex problems in novel ways (Smith & Lewis, 2022). However, managing this diversity demands inclusive leadership - leaders who can foster trust, empathy and collaboration while ensuring that cultural differences enhance rather than hinder innovation efforts (Bhatia & Whig, 2022).

Cross-industry comparisons further underscore the universality of the leadership-innovation dynamic (Christofi, 2022). Whether in highly regulated sectors like healthcare and finance or fast-moving industries like technology and retail, leaders face similar imperatives: empowering employees, aligning processes with strategic goals and leveraging both internal and external networks. However, the specifics of implementing innovation strategies vary, shaped by market conditions, technological readiness and organisational maturity (Onufrey & Bergek, 2021).

This study investigates the crucial connection between innovation culture and leadership in light of these complex issues. It seeks to pinpoint the essential elements required to promote an innovative culture that lasts and provides

information on how to create instruments that businesses can use to assess and improve this culture. This study adds to a better understanding of how businesses might prosper in a quickly changing environment by analysing the subtleties of leadership styles, cultural influences and strategy alignment.

Literature Review

The Nexus of Leadership and Innovation

Leadership is regarded as a critical enabler of organisational innovation (Alblooshi et al., 2021). Effective leaders set the tone for innovation by creating environments that encourage risk-taking, creative thinking and collaboration. Leadership theories such as transformational and servant leadership provide valuable insights into how leaders can inspire teams to achieve beyond expectations and challenge existing norms.

Transformational leadership, characterised by vision, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration, fosters employee engagement and motivation, driving innovation outcomes. Leaders who exhibit transformational traits promote trust, empower teams and encourage experimentation, all foundational to innovation. Research highlights that these leaders often balance short-term performance with long-term innovation goals, sustaining competitive advantage (Davis, 2023).

In contrast, servant leadership emphasises the growth and well-being of employees. Servant leaders focus on nurturing followers' development, fostering a sense of purpose and cultivating psychological safety. Studies show that servant leadership correlates with enhanced creativity and resilience, as it prioritises employees' needs, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to innovation processes (Quy et al., 2024).

Innovation Culture and Organisational Dynamics

The interplay between culture and innovation has garnered significant attention in management research. Organisational culture represents the shared values, beliefs and assumptions that guide employee behaviour

and decision-making. A culture of innovation is distinct in its emphasis on adaptability, openness and proactive problem-solving (Saha & Sharma, 2020). These traits are supported by five key cultural dimensions: leadership support, team cohesion, individual creativity, resource allocation and external collaboration (Davies et al., 2022).

Several theoretical models shed light on how organisational culture influences innovation: 1) The ETOILe Framework and 2) the Building Blocks. The ETOILe Framework (External links, Teams, Organisations, Individuals and Leaders) identifies Leadership as a central component of innovation culture. Leaders play a dual role in fostering internal cohesion and enabling external partnerships to drive innovation outcomes (Davies & Buisine, 2024). The Building Blocks of Innovation Model highlights six essential components: Values, Behaviours, Climate, Resources, Processes and Success. This model provides a structured approach to evaluating how cultural and operational factors intersect to support innovation (Davies & Buisine, 2018).

Methodology

To investigate the relationship between leadership and innovation culture, this study employed a quantitative approach, collecting data from 95 professionals working in small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Northern Portugal. The professionals surveyed were from 19 different organisations, primarily Portuguese companies, all certified at least with ISO 9001. These companies had an average workforce of 150 employees and operated mainly in the textile or automobile industries. Notably, these organisations were also the workplaces of the students who collected the data.

The data collection was conducted by students from the Polytechnic Institute of Cávado and Ave (IPCA) as part of a study in the curricular unit “Innovation and Quality,” which is included in the master’s degree program in Integrated Management Systems for Quality, Environment and Safety. This master’s program, offered by IPCA, aims to provide students with both technical and scientific knowledge on essential topics such as Quality, Environment, Occupational Health and Safety, Social Responsibility and Innovation, as well as their practical applications in organisational settings.

The program qualifies graduates to perform a range of professional functions, including:

- Independent implementation of Quality, Environment, Safety, Social Responsibility and Innovation systems, as well as their integration;
- Addressing and contributing to customer satisfaction by identifying and meeting their requirements throughout the management process;
- Driving continuous organisational performance improvement through risk prevention, environmental aspect control and product enhancement.

Additionally, the program awards certificates for internal auditors in quality, environment, safety and integrated management systems, which are issued by an accredited certification body. It also grants access to the professional title of Senior Occupational Safety Technician, in accordance with Law No. 42/2012, of August 28. The curricular unit “Innovation and Quality” is part of the first-year curriculum and is offered in the second semester of the two-year master’s program.

Students were selected for their direct ties to these companies, facilitating access to participants and enabling them to understand better the respondents’ profiles and knowledge of the subject. The survey was conducted between March and April 2021, with data collected via email. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was validated by two academics and two field experts. Participants were contacted and fully informed about the survey’s purpose.

The research leveraged a structured survey based on validated frameworks, including the “ETOILe model” and the “Building Blocks of Innovation.” These frameworks were chosen for their strong theoretical foundations and practical relevance, with the ETOILe model offering a systemic perspective on how leadership fosters innovation by aligning organisational culture, strategy and employee engagement and the Building Blocks framework providing a comprehensive analysis of key drivers - values, behaviours, strategy, resources, climate and success - by linking leadership practices to measurable outcomes and organisational innovation performance. Together, these two frameworks provide a comprehensive approach. The ETOILe model explains the big picture of how leadership integrates with culture and strategy. At the same time the Building Blocks framework breaks it

down into clear, actionable elements that make it easier to assess and improve innovation in practice. The survey

comprised six categories: Values, Behaviours, Strategy, Resources, Climate and Success (Table 1).

Table 1: Full Set of Components Proposed for Evaluating Innovation Culture

Values	Entrepreneurial		Strategy	Communication
	Creativity		Resources	People
	Learning		Climate	Collaboration
Energize		Safety		
Behaviours	Engage		Success	External
	Enable			Entreprise

The survey comprised six categories: Values, Behaviours, Strategy, Resources, Climate and Success. Participants rated their perceptions on a Likert scale (1-5), enabling a comprehensive analysis of leadership’s role in shaping innovation culture. The demographic and organisational data collected provided additional context for understanding cultural and strategic differences across industries.

between 23 and 37, with significant representation from engineering and quality management sectors. Most respondents worked in SMEs, with 50% engaged in manufacturing and 43% in extractive industries.

The survey items were designed to assess employees’ perceptions across six key domains: i) Values (13 items); ii) Behaviours (13 items); iii) Strategy (7 items); iv) Resources (3 items); v) Climate (12 items) and vi) Success (7 items).

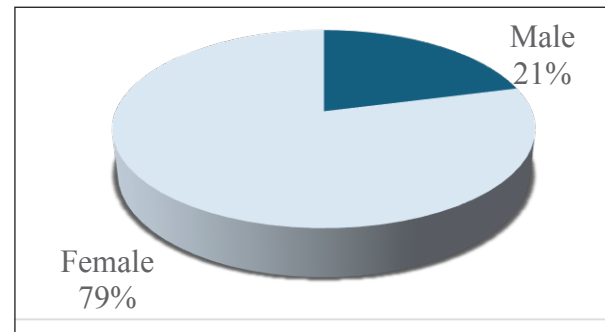


Fig. 1: Gender of Respondents

These questionnaires were distributed within the organisations where the students were employed, with each student collecting input from five colleagues. This process resulted in 95 responses (5 surveys *per* company).

Despite varying levels of social responsibility certification, a common emphasis on innovation emerged across sectors. Of the certified individuals, 28% are accredited with the SA 8000 international certification, whereas 7% have the ISO 26000 certification. This highlights that, regardless of the specific social responsibility framework, there is a shared commitment to not only meeting social and ethical standards but also to fostering an innovative culture within organisations. The presence of these certifications suggests a heightened awareness of corporate responsibility and sustainable practices, which likely influences the approach to innovation by embedding ethical considerations, social engagement and environmental stewardship into innovation strategies. Furthermore, organisations with these certifications may be more inclined to integrate innovation in ways that align with broader social objectives, making them more adaptable and competitive in the long term (refer to Fig. 2).

A majority of the students were affiliated with the Quality and Safety Department, and they made a deliberate effort to gather insights from skilled professionals representing various departments. This approach was predicated on the belief that every employee contribute meaningful value to the organisation over the medium and long term. The demographic and organisational data collected provided additional context for understanding cultural and strategic differences across industries.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Insights

The sample included professionals from diverse backgrounds, predominantly women (76.8%), aged

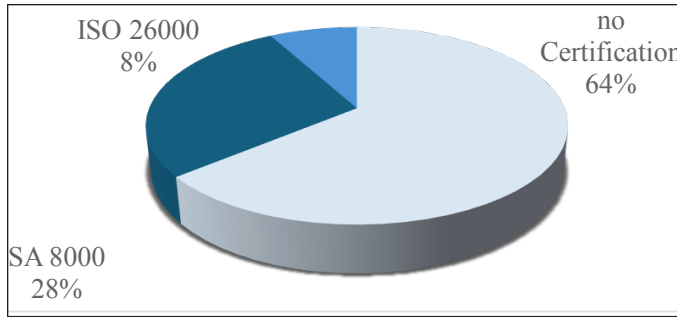


Fig. 2: Certifications Obtained in Social Responsibility

Leadership’s Role in Innovation Culture

The analysis revealed a strong consensus regarding leadership’s influence on innovation culture, with an average agreement score exceeding 3.75 across survey dimensions. Key leadership behaviours included promoting psychological safety, encouraging creativity and fostering collaboration. Leaders who actively engaged with employees and championed innovation were instrumental in creating environments conducive to transformative change.

Table 2 provides a complete set of components and survey questions for assessing innovation culture.

Table 2: Complete Set of Components and Survey Questions for Assessing Innovation Culture

Building Blocks	Factors	Survey Questions	Average
Values	Entrepreneurial	We want to explore opportunities and create solutions	4,5
		We desire and tolerate ambiguity when seeking new opportunities	4,1
		When we identify new opportunities we quickly try to put them into practice	4,1
	Creativity	We stimulate new ways of thinking and solutions from distinct angle	4,3
		Our workplace offers us the freedom to pursue new opportunities	4,7
		We want to be spontaneous and not anxious to joke at ourselves	4,6
Learning	We are good at asking questions in the pursuit of the unknown	4,4	
	We are constantly experimenting with our innovation efforts	4,1	
	We are not afraid to fail, and we treat failure as a learning opportunity	4,2	
Behaviours	Energize	Our leaders inspire us with a vision for the future and communication of opportunities for the organization	4,7
		Our leaders often challenge us to think and act entrepreneurially	4,6
		Our leaders model the right innovation behaviours for others to follow	4,6
	Engage	Our leaders dedicate time to coach and deliver feedback on our innovation efforts	4,0
		In our organization, people at all levels proactively take initiative to innovate	3,8
		Our leaders provide support to project team members during both successes and failures	4,0
Enable	Our leaders use suitable influence strategies to help us pilot around organizational blockages	4,2	
	Our leaders can modify and change the course of action when needed	4,5	
	Our leaders persist in following opportunities even in adversity	3,8	
Strategy	Communication	The organisation has a clear and shared innovation strategy, involving employees in its definition	3,9
		The innovation strategy translates into an action plan with quantitative objectives and targets	3,9
		The organization has a marketing strategy that supports and values innovation activity	3,8
		The organization monitors the external environment, which it uses to define and implement its strategy	4,0
Resources	People	We have committed leaders who are willing to be champions of innovation	4,3
		We have access to innovation experts who can support our projects	4,4
		We have the internal talent to succeed in our innovation projects	4,5
Climate	Collaboration	We have a community that tells a common language about innovation	3,8
		We appreciate, respect, and leverage the differences that exist within our community	3,8
		We work well together in teams to capture opportunities	4,2
	Safety	We are coherent in actually doing the things that we say we value	4,6
		We question decisions and actions that are inconsistent with our values	3,8
We can freely voice our opinions, even about unconventional or controversial ideas	3,8		
Success	External	Our customers think of us as an innovative organization	3,9
		Our innovation efforts have led us to better financial performance than others in our industry	3,8
		Our customers think of us as an innovative organization	4,1
	Entreprise	I am satisfied with my level of participation in our innovation initiatives	4,0
		We reward people for joining in potentially risky opportunities, nevertheless of the outcome	4,6

The table provides an analysis of how various factors are tied to innovation culture were evaluated by participants, with each factor linked to survey questions and corresponding average scores. The results reveal

a strong organisational focus on values, particularly entrepreneurial behaviour, creativity and learning. The organisation demonstrates a proactive approach to exploring opportunities, tolerating ambiguity and quickly

implementing new ideas, with scores between 4.1 and 4.5. Creativity emerges as a particular strength, with the highest score of 4.7 reflecting workplace freedom to pursue new opportunities, complemented by employees valuing unique perspectives (4.3) and maintaining an open, spontaneous attitude (4.6). A robust learning culture is evident, where employees are encouraged to experiment, ask questions and treat failure as a learning opportunity, as shown by scores between 4.1 and 4.4.

Leadership behaviours are highly rated for their ability to inspire employees with vision, entrepreneurial challenges and modelling innovative behaviour, with scores reaching 4.6 and 4.7. However, engagement-related behaviours such as coaching, providing feedback and fostering proactive initiative at all levels scored slightly lower (3.8–4.0), indicating areas for improvement. Leaders were also rated well for enabling innovation through adaptability and influence, although persistence in adversity received a slightly lower score of 3.8.

The organisation's innovation strategy is moderately clear and actionable, with scores of 3.8–4.0 reflecting efforts to involve employees, translate strategy into objectives and monitor the external environment. Despite this, there may be room to refine communication and integration of innovation strategies. Resources were highly rated, particularly for internal talent (4.5), access to innovation experts (4.4) and committed leaders (4.3), indicating substantial human capital supporting innovation efforts.

Regarding climate, collaboration and respect for diversity are moderately strong, with scores of 3.8–4.2. However, there is potential to strengthen a shared innovation language. Employees feel a strong sense of coherence (4.6) but slightly less freedom in expressing unconventional ideas or questioning inconsistencies (3.8). Success metrics show that customers view the organisation as innovative (4.1) and link innovation efforts to improved financial performance (3.8). Internally, employees are satisfied with their participation in innovation initiatives (4.0) and appreciate being rewarded for taking risks regardless of outcomes (4.6), highlighting strong internal support for innovation.

Overall, the organisation fosters creativity, leadership-driven inspiration, a learning culture and resource allocation, all receiving high scores above 4.5. However, there are opportunities for improvement in

engaging employees more effectively, refining strategy communication, fostering collaboration and enhancing external success metrics related to financial performance and customer perceptions. These insights reflect an organisation with a strong foundation in leadership-driven innovation but with the potential to strengthen key areas for sustained growth and innovation success.

Cultural Dynamics and Strategic Alignment

The findings underscore the importance of aligning organisational culture with strategic objectives. Companies with well-defined cultural values like adaptability and teamwork demonstrated higher innovation performance. Leadership's ability to navigate cultural resistance and instilling a shared vision was critical in overcoming barriers to innovation.

Just as everyone possesses a unique personality, every organisation embodies its own distinct climate, shaped by the characteristics perceived by its members. These elements significantly influence employee behaviour in terms of organisational structure. A positive organisational climate fosters frater commitment among employees, strengthening their connection to the organisation (Dieguez et al., 202; Edmonson, 2018). Pride in one's workplace plays a vital role in employee engagement and is often overlooked. This sense of pride drives individuals and teams to achieve more, enhance communication and effectively utilize each other's strengths (Schneider et al., 2013; Fu & Deshpande, 2014).

Regarding success, the impact of innovation can be assessed through three key extensions: external, organisational and individual. External success reflects how a company's innovative efforts are perceived by customers and competitors and align with the financial outcomes generated. At an organisational level, success reinforces core values, behaviours and operational practices, shaping future decisions and actions such as reward contribution, hiring practices and project prioritisation (Dieguez et al., 2022). This study highlights the critical elements required to foster a culture that embraces and prioritises innovation within an organisation. These elements are depicted in Fig. 3. The findings align with the research conducted by Dieguez (2023) and Lima et al. (2022).

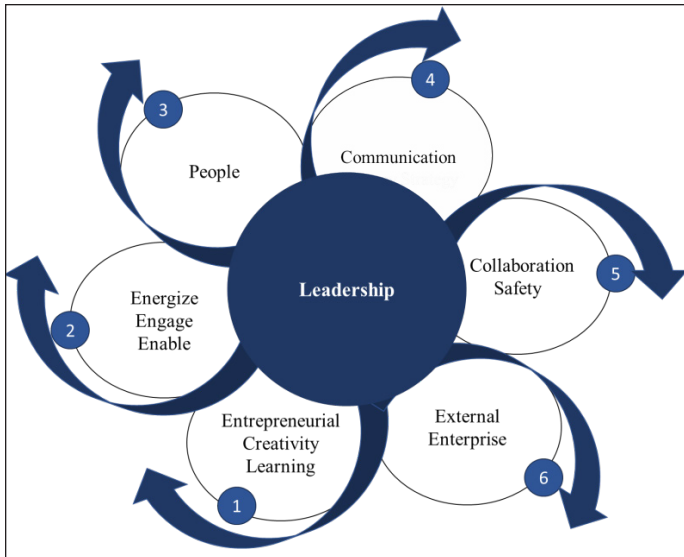


Fig. 3: Full Set of Components Proposed for Evaluating Innovation Culture (Own Elaboration)

Practical Implications

This study offers valuable insights for organisations aiming to cultivate a robust innovation culture, providing actionable strategies for leaders, managers and HR professionals to implement in their daily operations. The findings emphasise the importance of aligning leadership styles with organisational values to foster an environment that encourages creativity, risk-taking and continuous improvement.

In what concerns Leadership Development, organisations should focus on developing leaders who exhibit transformational and inclusive leadership qualities. Such leaders can inspire innovation by creating psychologically safe environments where employees feel encouraged to propose new ideas without fear of failure. Training programs for leaders should emphasise emotional intelligence, empathy and conflict resolution, skills essential for managing diverse teams and fostering collaboration.

As for Cultural Alignment, companies must ensure that their organisational culture supports innovation at all levels. This can be achieved by clearly defining and communicating the organisation's values around creativity, risk-taking and collaboration. Encouraging cross-departmental communication and recognising

innovative efforts across different teams can also help embed innovation into the company's culture.

Resource Allocation (both time and financial) to innovation projects is essential. Companies should prioritise innovation initiatives in their strategic planning processes, ensuring they have the budget, talent and tools to succeed. Furthermore, setting up dedicated innovation teams or innovation labs can help streamline the process of turning ideas into actionable outcomes.

Empowering employees at all levels to contribute to innovation is key to sustaining a culture of creativity. Managers should encourage employees to take ownership of projects, allowing them to experiment and collaborate with colleagues across departments. Implementing mechanisms like idea submission platforms or innovation workshops can actively engage employees in the innovation process.

Organisations should establish continuous learning environments where employees are encouraged to acquire new skills, stay updated on industry trends and engage with external networks. This could include offering professional development programs, fostering partnerships with external innovation hubs, or attending industry conferences.

Regularly measuring innovation outcomes and impact through clear metrics—such as new product development, market share growth, or customer satisfaction—allows organisations to track progress and adjust as needed. This data can inform decision-making, helping leaders to refine innovation strategies and allocate resources effectively.

Conclusion and Future Research

This study offers a deeper understanding of the intricate relationship between organisational leadership and innovation culture. The findings underscore the role of Leadership in shaping and nurturing an environment where innovation can thrive. Effective Leadership is about strategic direction and fostering a culture that encourages creativity, risk-taking and collaboration. The analysis reveals that leadership styles must be adaptable, inclusive and visionary to create a lasting impact on an organisation's ability to innovate and sustain competitive advantage.

The research highlights several key components that contribute to building a robust innovation culture. First, aligning organisational values, behaviours and leadership practices with innovation goals are fundamental. Second, a clear commitment to investing in human and financial resources is necessary to enable innovation processes. Furthermore, fostering an organisational climate that values experimentation and learning rather than simply focusing on results is crucial for long-term innovation success. In addition, the study emphasises the importance of creating diverse, collaborative teams that leverage various perspectives to drive creative solutions.

One of the most significant contributions of this research is identifying measurable dimensions of innovation success: external recognition, organisational impact and individual outcomes. These metrics allow companies to track the effectiveness of their innovation efforts and understand how innovation influences market performance, internal processes and employee engagement. Companies can refine their innovation strategies and enhance their long-term sustainability by focusing on these success factors.

However, the study also presents several important limitations that provide valuable opportunities for future research. A primary limitation is the diversity of industries and organisational contexts included in the analysis. Future research could explore how leadership and innovation culture differ across various sectors, such as healthcare, technology, or manufacturing, to uncover sector-specific insights that could refine the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the study primarily relies on qualitative data, which, while rich in context, may limit the ability to draw broad, quantitative conclusions. Future research could incorporate larger, more diverse samples and utilise quantitative methods to assess the relationship between Leadership and innovation on a broader scale.

Another limitation is the temporal scope of the study. Given the rapidly changing business environment, especially post-pandemic, the findings may not fully account for ongoing shifts in organisational priorities and leadership practices. Longitudinal studies could offer deeper insights into how leadership and innovation culture evolve, particularly in response to external shocks or sustained technological advancements.

Furthermore, while the study examines the internal dynamics of leadership and innovation culture, it does not fully explore the impact of external factors, such as regulatory changes, geopolitical events, or global economic conditions, which could significantly influence innovation outcomes. Investigating how these external pressures interact with internal organisational elements would provide a more holistic understanding of innovation in contemporary contexts.

Lastly, the study does not sufficiently address the role of individual leader traits, such as emotional intelligence, decision-making styles, or leadership experience, which may influence the effectiveness of innovation strategies. Future research could explore how these individual characteristics impact the ability of leaders to foster innovation within their organisations.

Finally, the findings suggest several avenues for practical application. Organisations looking to foster a culture of innovation must take a holistic approach, focusing on leadership development, resource allocation and creating an environment that supports continuous learning and experimentation. Future studies could also explore the role of emerging technologies and digital transformation in shaping the future of innovation cultures, providing organisations with even more tools to stay ahead in an increasingly competitive global marketplace.

In conclusion, fostering a culture of innovation requires commitment, foresight and strategic alignment. The insights from this study offer valuable guidance for leaders and organisations aiming to build sustainable innovation ecosystems. By continuously evolving leadership practices, investing in employee development and embracing a culture that values creativity and experimentation, organisations can position themselves for success in an ever-changing world.

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