

When Organizational Culture and Climate Stimulate Our Creativity and Accelerate Innovation

Marcel A. van der Ven

Innovatiekracht

Corresponding author's email: www.innovatiekracht.com, meer@innovatiekracht.nl

doi: <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.154.20>

ABSTRACT

Purpose – Methods and techniques help us foster creativity and accelerate innovation. But it isn't helpful if the environment does not motivate, is not safe and does not offer support?

This article shows managers how their attitude and behaviour influence the innovation climate in a team or an organization. A method with twelve clarifying perspectives enables the reader to create an innovation climate in his own team or organization that stimulates creativity and accelerates innovation.

Design/methodology/approach – This article brings science to the workplace. It is a summary of the recent published book *Innovatiekracht; over organisatiecultuur en hoe mensen het verschil maken*. (see references). In this book, 35 years of experience in leading creative teams is enriched with the results of more than 200 scientific studies on attitude and behaviour of people in organizations. Concepts that are as unambiguous as possible have been developed that are recognizable and influenceable for a manager in practice. The key question was "what is the cause of this?". Once that question remained unanswered, only the essence of what drives people to behave innovatively within an organization remained.

Originality/value – Much has been written about the influence of culture and climate in organisations, but never so specific and measurable in relation to creativity and innovation. What makes the method especially valuable is, on the one hand, the perceptual framework that is provided with which managers can interpret situations and, on the other hand, a common language is available for communicating about something as difficult to grasp as the organizational culture.

Keywords: Creativity, Innovation, Organizational Culture, Organizational Climate

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the concepts of creativity, innovation, organizational culture and organizational climate in order to limit differences in interpretation.

Innovation starts with new ideas. To get those new ideas, we need creativity. Creativity is an indispensable competence for innovation. Innovation is the development of ideas into successful implementation. But innovation takes more than creativity: persistence and acceptance.

Creativity is a cognitive trait with which we break through limitations in our perception and thinking. Creativity allows us to develop and communicate new insights and meaningful connections.

Innovation is recognizable by three properties: novelty, resolution and style. For that reason, 'incremental innovation' is not innovation. The result of 'incremental innovation' is an improvement, but it is not a novelty. Innovation stands for an improvement that is also a novelty.

An organizational culture is the set of values, norms and beliefs that has been taken for granted over the course of the organization's existence because it has proven effective in adapting to the environment and maintaining internal cohesion. The organizational culture keeps us together and makes us resilient to changes in the environment. Culture is by definition a conservative force. That is not to say that culture works against innovation. Innovation can also be a way to maintain an organization. The only question is



which experiences from the past no longer matter and we better let go. Which norms, values or beliefs can we exchange for others, in order to see innovation as a way of survival.

In contrast to organizational culture, the organizational climate can be observed through daily events and influenced in the short term. The organizational climate is the entirety of observable patterns in attitude and behaviour that are characteristic of the day-to-day functioning in the organization. It is an aggregation of the psychological climate as experienced by each individual in a team or organization. The organizational culture influences the organizational climate and the organizational climate in turn influences daily behaviour (see illustration 1a). The behaviour of one directly influences the behaviour of the other. Behaviour influences the organizational climate in the short term while the organizational climate will influence the organizational culture in the long run.

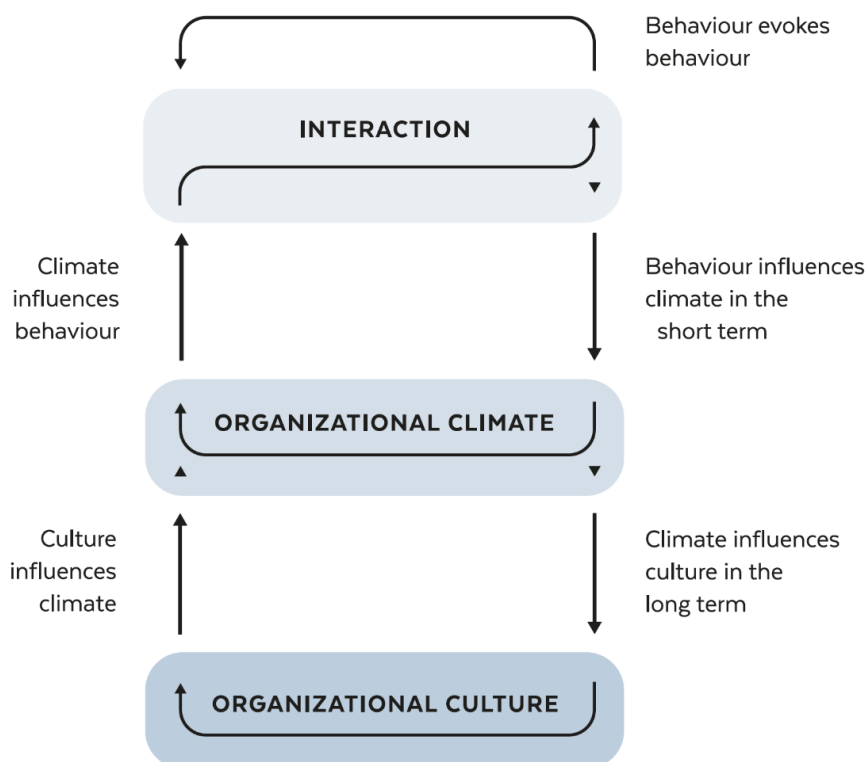


Figure 1a: Influence of organizational culture, climate and behaviour (edited, after: Denison, 1996)

2 Dimensions of the Innovation Climate

An organizational climate is always tied to a team, department or organization. An organizational climate optimized for innovation, or the innovation climate, makes it possible that:

- employees develop and use their creativity in their work;
- the most creative ideas get a chance by being developed into applicable and successful solutions (innovations);
- the number and speed of innovations is increased by a more effective elaboration and implementation of new ideas.

Of all the factors that influence the organizational climate, the twelve most influential for creativity and innovation are described in this article. Together they create the three conditions that must be met to stimulate creativity and accelerate innovation: intrinsic motivation, organizational support and psychological safety, or simply Motivation, Support and Safety.

Each climate dimension has four qualifications (see illustration 2a). The lowest qualification seriously hinders innovation. The second qualification creates room for incremental improvement. The third

stimulates innovation the most. When the climate dimension is overrepresented (fourth qualification), it no longer contributes or is even counterproductive to innovation.

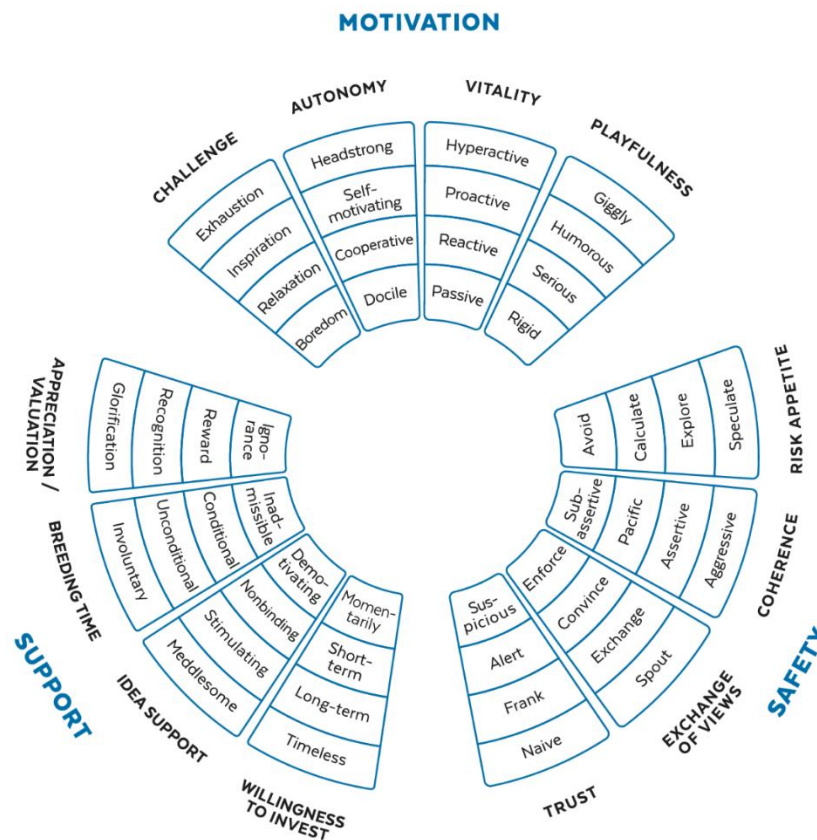


Figure 2a: Twelve dimensions of an innovative organizational climate

2.1 Motivation

Motivation is the energy that drives us – that which intrinsically motivates us to tackle an innovation issue and to continue when things go wrong. *Our motivation* is *sparked* when we feel challenged by the issue. Autonomy, vitality, and playfulness are dimensions of the organizational climate that keep the fire burning. The following four paragraphs describe how to create an innovation climate that fuels our motivation (challenge and autonomy) and retains it (vitality and playfulness).

2.1.1 Challenge

An organizational climate in which our knowledge, experience and motivation determine our level of challenge stimulates innovation. We are developing and can take on ever greater challenges. We experience this organizational climate as inspiring. We do not know boredom or exhaustion.

Organizations with core values such as challenge, personal development and significance, develop an inspiring organizational climate relatively easily, provided they act accordingly. These organizations work from the conviction that challenges keep people sharp, that talents must be used and that everyone has the need to be meaningful. It is generally accepted that we seek a challenge that suits us and makes us feel good. Challenge in the organizational climate contributes to innovative strength throughout the entire innovation process.

2.1.2 Autonomy

Autonomy is the freedom to determine for ourselves how we do our work. Our manager focuses on results – not on working method or physical presence. An organizational climate where autonomy leads to a high degree of self-motivation makes us more creative and persistent. We feel responsible for achieving the agreed results and are accountable for this. A clear common goal provides direction and we can therefore make many decisions in our work ourselves.

We can expect organizations that use core values such as freedom, ownership, or jurisdiction to encourage self-motivation. They work from the conviction that you get more out of people if you let them free, and that people would rather do something they came up with than what they are told to do. Autonomy contributes to innovative strength throughout the entire innovation process.

2.1.3 Vitality

Vitality stands for the willingness to change and action orientation in an organization. Innovation benefits from a proactive organizational climate. A proactive organizational climate manifests itself as lively and resilient. We are open to new insights and respond flexibly to changes. The boundaries of the organization are permeable: we look for something outside the organization just as easily as within it. Energy flows through the organization. The mood is optimistic.

Core values are decisiveness, flexibility, customer satisfaction, or similar. We see stagnation as decline. Change is the only thing that is certain. Keep moving is the norm. Nothing is cast in concrete. Structures, processes, systems – we see them as tools. We let them go when they limit us in our work. Vitality in the organizational climate contributes most to innovative strength in the front-end of the innovation process.

2.1.4 Playfulness

Playfulness helps us to look at a situation from different perspectives. With playfulness we allow ourselves to manipulate words, habits, beliefs, concepts, or technical possibilities. Playfulness invites us to let go of control. Uncertainty, unpredictability and ambiguity suddenly become a source of inspiration instead of having to be removed. This gives room for free association and makes it easier to break through patterns. In a humorous organizational climate, play and humour are a natural part of our work. There is a casual atmosphere. The control is smooth.

Core values that suit a humorous organizational climate are, for example, humour, imagination or optimism. Attitude and behaviour are governed by norms such as 'be at work as you are at home', 'cherish the child in you' and above all 'don't always take yourself so seriously'. Playfulness contributes most to innovative strength in the front-end of the innovation process.

2.2 Support

Support refers to the time and resources we are given and the support and appreciation we receive from colleagues and supervisors. We can come up with new ideas to a certain extent ourselves, but the elaboration and implementation of those ideas requires nutrition from the organization.

The following section discusses the appreciation we receive from colleagues and managers and how this influences our intrinsic motivation. Idea support revolves around attitudes towards the ideas of others. Are we open to that and are we willing to cooperate? Breeding time is time that is exempt from production targets and intended to be spent specifically on developing ideas. What does it mean to have time for which we don't have to account for the outcomes? Then there is the organization's willingness to invest in

innovation. What part of the revenue are we prepared to use for innovation? And is it permissible that the revenues from those investments only come in the long term?

2.2.1 Appreciation

Showing appreciation for a result achieved in the form of a material reward has the opposite effect on innovation. With the (non-material) recognition, we value what an employee has full influence on: intention and commitment. Recognition is about openly expressing our appreciation for the person. The more the recognition focuses on the effort made instead of on the result achieved, the more it stimulates innovative behaviour. When we receive recognition for our intention and commitment, our efforts remain focused on the road to the result instead of the result to be achieved.

Significance and talent development are core values that help to create an organizational climate of recognition. The main belief is that people function better if they work from personal motivations and use and develop their talents. Attitude and behaviour are characterized by norms such as 'follow your heart' and 'develop yourself'.

Appreciation in the organizational climate contributes most to innovative strength in the front-end of the innovation process.

2.2.2 Breeding Time

Work time that is exempt from production targets enhances the creative performance of employees. In a strong innovation climate, we are offered breeding time unconditionally. We use it to think about improvements and innovations that can benefit the organization in the long run. There are no requirements for our results. We decide for ourselves how, when and where we spend breeding time. Organizations that have institutionalized breeding time have a long-term orientation. Management understands the art of letting go of control.

Core values such as continuity, imagination and trust help with this. We are convinced that creativity pays for itself in the long run and that new insights only come when we distance ourselves from our daily activities. The norm is that the long-term takes precedence over the short-term, and we should not disturb a brooding hen.

Breeding time contributes to innovative strength at the front-end of the innovation process.

2.2.3 Idea Support

Idea support means being open to the ideas of others and willing to contribute in a stimulating way. A colleague or manager with or without idea support is the difference between a supporter and a spectator. A supporter does not go for his own gain, but for making an idea a success together. In an organizational climate in which we provide stimulating support, we help each other to realize ideas based on the common interest. Collaboration is encouraged and structures and systems facilitate that.

We work on the basis of core values such as open-minded, opportunity-seeking and teamwork. We are convinced that every idea can be of value and that together we know more and achieve more than alone.

Idea support in the organizational climate contributes most to innovative strength in the front-end of the innovation process.

2.2.4 Willingness to Invest

Willingness to invest is a combination of making resources available and the term orientation that we have in doing so. Resources include money, manpower, knowledge and equipment. If an investment has to pay for itself immediately, there is no time available to develop something completely new. In an organizational climate with a *long-term orientation*, we focus on future successes and rewards. We are not tempted by short-

term successes that do not serve the long-term goal. Organizations with a *long-term orientation* are vision-driven. They work with a collective intention to realize that vision. We are frugal with our resources. We maintain reserves to finance innovation. Disappointing results within the operation are dealt with within the operation. The budget for innovation remains undisturbed.

Core values that help us with *long-term orientation* are, for example, continuity, thrift and loyalty. We work from the conviction that investing in the future pays off. We therefore also invest in long-term relationships. Willingness to invest contributes most in the phase of elaboration and selection of ideas – thus globally in the middle of the innovation process.

2.3 Safety

Safety refers to the psychological safety we experience. Safety makes us confident that we will not suffer any adverse personal consequences if we express opposing views or if experiments fail.

When we experience trust, we are less alert to threats. Our attention and energy goes completely to work. We are productive and engaged in the work. If there is coherence, we don't feel the need to defend ourselves. We show our uniqueness more and that leads to a greater diversity of ideas. We speak out more when we have a highly developed exchange of views. The different views are more clearly visible. This increases our cognitive mobility and that leads to more innovative ideas. If we have a high risk appetite, failure affects us less personally. We experiment more with different ideas. There is a greater chance that highly creative ideas will be further developed and come to innovation.

2.3.1 Trust

We have faith in another when we expect that person to have genuine intentions for us. We feel safe in the relationship and dare to make ourselves dependent. In an organizational climate where frankness predominates, we experience a secure and fixed base from which we work. As a result, we dare to introduce different perspectives and we look for new and sometimes contradictory information. We are strong in devising and developing unconventional and difficult to implement ideas.

We work from the conviction that someone can be trusted until the contrary is shown and that you can achieve more if you can count on each other. Core values that support trust within the organization include loyalty, credibility and integrity.

Trust contributes to innovative strength throughout the entire innovation process.

2.3.2 Exchange of Views

An exchange of views is the sharing of differing points of view without directly forming an opinion about it. If we stand up for our views more, it will lead to more innovation. If the sharing predominates, we introduce a multitude of angles. If we share we exchange ideas and arguments from equal positions. We listen actively and ask questions. We build on ideas that others bring in and use arguments from others to change our perspective. We postpone our judgment and do not seek to prove ourselves right. Our aim is to find the most valuable perspectives and to get the most creative ideas from there.

An organizational climate with a strong exchange of ideas is more likely to arise in organizations that work on the basis of core values such as listening, curiosity or receptivity. They are organizations that are convinced that there must always be more knowledge available outside the organization than within it.

These organizations want to have knowledge to innovate, but do not necessarily have to have it in-house. Exchange of views in the organizational climate contributes most to innovative strength in the front-end of the innovation process.

2.3.3 Coherence

Coherence occurs when we feel emotionally connected despite our differences. The stronger the cohesion, the less likely relationship conflicts will arise. Effective conflict management contributes to a sense of security and, as a result, to creativity and innovation. In an assertive organizational climate, the preferred conflict management strategy is 'resolution'. When weighing up interests, we do our best to also represent individual interests within the common interest. We discuss conflicts from the moment they arise. We do not accept that tension lingers between each other. We stay in touch with each other.

Core values that contribute to cohesion are, for example, connection, teamwork or loyalty. We are convinced that we need each other and that we can achieve more together than alone. We are open to the other, are keen on working together, and we honour the together-from-home-together principle.

Coherence contributes to innovative strength throughout the entire innovation process.

2.3.4 Risk Appetite

Risk appetite is the degree to which we dare to fail because we can trust that we will not personally suffer any adverse consequences. The more we can rely on our managers not to penalize failure, the more risks we take in generating and developing new ideas. That's because risk taking increases the chance of particularly creative ideas, but more importantly, because the most creative ideas have a better chance of being developed. In an *exploratory* organizational climate, managers see failure as a step in a learning process. We accept that this is a quest that we must adjust after each experience.

Cultural values such as curiosity, adventure and perseverance are important. In organizations with an *exploratory* organizational climate, beliefs such as 'the surprise lies in the unknown', 'you don't ask, you never know', and 'the best thing about a goal is the way to it'.

Risk appetite in the organizational climate contributes to innovative strength throughout the entire innovation process.

3 Conclusions

Ten years preceded the development of this method. In those ten years, experience has been gained with effective interventions. To make the effect measurable, an online assessment has been developed that measures the initial situation and the situation after three-quarters of a year of targeted interventions (van der Ven, 2022).

What makes the method especially effective is the concrete perceptual framework with which managers can interpret situations as well as the common language that facilitates the communication on cultural aspects. This is an important step in positively influencing the organizational culture in order to stimulate creativity and accelerate innovation. It is simply a subject that is easily talked about without realizing it.

Regardless of demographic or ethnographic culture, organizational culture and organizational climate influence creativity and innovation. We must take into account that there can be a difference in the *relative influence* and the *influenceability* of certain climate dimensions. The influence of a geo- or ethnographic culture on creativity and innovation has only been partially investigated. It should be higher on the research agenda. Research can contribute to mutual understanding in multicultural teams, allowing those teams to innovate faster than they do now.

4 Publisher's Note

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How to Cite

Marcel A. van der Ven. (2023). When Organizational Culture and Climate Stimulate Our Creativity And Accelerate Innovation. *AIJR Proceedings*, 179-186. <https://doi.org/10.21467/proceedings.154.20>

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