

# *Anthropological foundations for innovation in organizations*

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## ANTHROPOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR INNOVATION

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### Abstract

The conception of the organization as a system and not as a mechanism allows a unique approach to the growth of organizations. In this approach, the heart of the dynamism of the growth of the organization is in the growth of people through their work in the organization. The anthropological requirements of such growth are studied, inspired by the reflections of Leonardo Polo, who assumes a systemic vision of the person and the organization. Specifically, co-existence, personal knowledge, personal freedom and personal love are proposed as the central elements for said growth. With this, the article proposes a coherent vision with the 'ba' term proposed by Nonaka and, at the same time, broadens its scope.

Keywords: *innovation, organization, personal growth, business growth, ba*

### Introduction

A rationalist and positivist view of science widely influenced the scientific-intellectual environment in which the main theories of the firm were developed at the beginning of the last century. This influence has resulted in a widespread tendency in the business sector toward overvaluing logical reasoning with a focus on measurable outcomes of human action. Hence, the first approaches to human organizations understand people as

mere parts of an immense mechanism. The emergence of the open systems movement (Bertalanffy 1956, 1971), especially influenced organizational and management studies (Scott 2003), initiating a shift from this mechanistic approach toward one that adopts a more biological understanding (Pérez López 1993). The latter especially seeks to unify and understand the complexity of life structures and functions.

Although the general systems theory initially involved the relationship between an organization with its external environment (in a set of increasingly larger sub-systems), it then contributed to “opening the black box” and to a process that pays greater attention to the organization’s internal— and more complex— components (sub-systems) (Perrow 1990). As a consequence, the psycho-sociological dimension of the organization garnered attention, focusing more on people’s intrinsic motivation, learning, and human development, as well as on the relationships among them (Scott 2005, Pérez López 1993). Finally, thanks to the humanistic movement, the anthropological question emerged as the key in understanding the organization and its ends (Argandoña 2008, Rosanas 2008).

One way to classify the great diversity of existing organizational theories is by starting from how they conceive of the human person, which gives rise to three paradigms, namely the mechanistic, the psycho-sociological and the anthropological models (Pérez López 1993, p.76).

*“closed systems* are only in a state of equilibrium; therefore, they are able to react to stimulus in order to regain their balance (...) *Open systems* are capable of learning and, therefore, have more than one state of equilibrium because their learning has an ascending sense (...) *Free systems* are susceptible to positive and negative learning and are the more complex of the two; they correspond, in the first place, to the human person and secondly and consecutively, to organizations or human societies” (Polo 1993, p. 135).

These three models find a parallel with our classification of the “autonomous self,” “processual self” and “inter-processual self” (Akrivou, Orón & Scalzo 2018). This way of understanding the organization is also related to the conception of human nature it contains (Barnard 1938, Pérez López 1993). Accordingly, there are different ways of understanding innovation, which correspond to these different assumptions. At present the mechanistic paradigm no longer gets much traction in the field, while the biological paradigm has garnered much attention as a system that aims to adapt to its own maintenance and evolution (Hoffman & Holzhtuter, 2012, page 3). This paradigm considers the human being as an open system and assumes an adaptive scheme that gives

rise to evolution on the basis of survival. It justifies development as an aid in “reaching a new equilibrium” in an ever-changing context.

This is how the main business theorists understand innovation, for example, Drucker (1986), Peters (1997), Kotler (2003), or Prahalad (2009) (Martínez Echevarría & Scalzo 2015). However, it amounts to a reductionist view of a concept as complex as innovation, not only because society expects much more from it, but especially because from a more comprehensive anthropological approach, this notion is associated with the idea of *growth*. Although not in opposition to adaptation, growth seems to demand something more, something akin to novelty, that is, not just passive adaptation to an ever-changing (external) reality, but rather actively changing the present reality.

A variety of philosophers and psychologists assist in the characterization of the notion of growth. For example, Polo’s understands (2007) human growth as unrestricted both in terms of extension and direction; this conception of growth allows the human being to find her calling in life, which she recognizes in what Polo calls “personal transcendentals” (including personal co-existence, personal freedom, personal knowledge and personal love). Likewise, he also points out that growth is possible in a certain dynamic of accepting and offering what has been received in the interpersonal sphere (Polo, 2007). Wang Yangming—a neo-Confucian philosopher from the fifteenth century—understood growth as increasing harmony among creation; and Whitehead—an English twentieth century mathematician and philosopher—proposed growth as maximizing fundamentally relational experience (Frisina, 2002).

Among humanistic psychologists, Rogers (2000) argues that the starting point of human acceptance is responding to one’s calling. In a similar way, Frankl (1991) highlights the call to finding the meaning of life and personal dedication; and for Erikson (1959, 1997), personal identity accompanies and makes life dynamic. Kohlberg picks up Piaget’s indication that every developmental stage is superior to the previous ones because it allows us to better resolve complexity, and further apply it to the moral realm, since moral development allows us to better resolve social and ethical conflicts and facilitate personal and social growth (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972).

Despite the particularities of these approaches, we can see how, from different disciplines and even using different terminologies, all these authors conceive of a “space for growth.” This space cannot be precisely identified since a person’s actions and life in search of

growth are always freely open, although they share the common denominator of being characterized by the intensification or improvement of interpersonal relationships and one's relationship with the world. We could represent this space as a "cone for growth" in which any decision that falls within the cone would be described as growth-related; whereas, everything outside that cone does not contribute to human growth since it divides the person, isolates her from her peers, or puts her in opposition to the world. Psychology has always understood the ability to unify one's life as a sign of health, and division as a sign of pathology. This would imply, for instance, unifying family and work life. In this sense, a business firm theory that creates distance between work and life would correspond to a proposal outside the cone of growth. A unified reading of one's life is directly related to one's identity (McAdams, 1988) and to agency (McAdams, 2013). Erikson indicates the benefits of achieving a certain unity in life to avoid falling into a vision of different domains (corporal, social, sexual, etc.)— as the latter is a symptom of pathology— and to improve personal identity (Erikson, 1959, p.43).

Indeed, personal growth is linked to the improvement and intensification of interpersonal relationships (Cf. Akrivou, Orón-Semper & Scalzo, 2018), suggesting that *innovation must be linked to personal growth*. We understand that, from an anthropological perspective, innovation is an effect of personal growth that involves an encounter with the other, that is to say, it requires the study of organizations as cooperative systems (Pérez López, 1993).

### **Anthropological assumptions for innovation**

True innovation is achievable with an anthropological paradigm based on Polo's proposal (1998), which understands the human being as co-housing personal co-existence, personal freedom, personal knowledge and personal love. Polo affirms that these four *personal transcendentals* refer to the act of being, which means, in the first place that they are not additional or expendable features. One cannot stop being who one is and this singularity is irreducible to the parts that constitute each person's self (Akrivou, Orón-Semper & Scalzo, 2018). In this sense, not being able to live according to these principles would signify degradation rather than the mere absence of enrichment. Thus, properly expressed, "we are freedom" not "we have freedom;" in addition, "we are co-existence," and so on. In what follows, we will briefly describe these principles, and, in order to apply them to business organizations, we will turn to examining diverse fields.

The fact that we are *personal freedom* implies that growth is essential to (wo)men, in other words, that it corresponds to human beings' natural form. And if we are always freedom, our personal growth is by extension unrestricted (Polo 1997, 2007). This is why the human being—unlike any other species on earth—attempts to transform the world as an opportunity for growth. Our biggest project is the one we develop with regards to ourselves and our processes of self-determination. This means that anthropology and motivation are intrinsically linked because the main motivation for action corresponds to becoming more aware of and enjoying one's growth, rather than extrinsically seeking to grow one's financial or career prospects. Moreover, as various authors have shown (Ariely, Gneezy, Loewenstein, & Mazar, 2009), when a task includes a cognitive skill, greater economic reward leads to poorer performance and less creativity. Thus, innovation is not merely determined by environmental stimuli, but rather rests on the fact that the human being—in light of freedom—is always capable of introducing novelty.

*Personal co-existence* demonstrates that the human being is not simply related to her environment, but instead that she is capable of being part of a singular type of relationship. Unlike inanimate beings—for example, a stone, which is not related to the environment, although it is affected by it—both animal and vegetable life existence would not be possible without a specific type of relationship. In the case of the human being, however, the proper term is not relationship, but rather “co-existence,” which supposes a meeting of human intimacy built on mutual trust. Psychoanalysis affirms that people do not acquire trust, but rather that it is an innate human disposition that is either upheld or rejected based on lived experience (Kohut, 2009).

This allows human beings to work in groups, to share the same intention. A renowned anthropologist (Tomasello, 2014) proposed the term “shared intentionality” to express this unique reality that animals are incapable of developing. As an example, Tomasello explains that a pack of wolves hunting is not a complex organizational system that depends on the alpha male, but rather a deeply individualist process constituted by a balance of power among its members. Instead of a shared intentionality, we could say they have “repeated intention” because everyone wants the same thing (prey) and the balance of forces does the rest. In the case of human beings, people develop—according to Tomasello (2014)—a shared intentionality that rests on mutual trust among the group members, which is prior to intentionality. Thanks to this shared purpose, people trust each other and the division of work is possible.

Nowadays, cooperative work in business organizations is a frequent topic. However, taking seriously the transcendental anthropological aspect of co-existence implies a dynamic of trust that is required for the meeting of intimacies— even in the business realm—, overcoming the egoistic dynamic that is behind the goal of merely making money. Firms need cooperative work to be versatile with the environment and creative; they must learn to “hunt” in many different ways (wolves only do so in one way) to become sustainable and resilient. Versatility and creativity require relationships of trust present in cooperation, but not in competition. Co-existence also allows for interpersonal encounters, which are true novelty. It also solves the problem of integrating the individual with the collective since, in order to generate cooperation, a business project must promote— or at least allow for—interpersonal encounters between internal members of the company, as well as with external stakeholders, including those that connect the firm to society itself.

*Personal knowledge* allows the person to access the “heart of reality” and to know things in themselves, especially other human persons: “only the person can know the person.” On a psychological level, Polo (1997 cap II) recounts a Pavlovian experiment in which a monkey is taught to put out a fire with a water pot placed at a distance from the fire, but when the conditions are changed (the animal has a new option of taking water from a source much closer to the fire) the animal continues acting in accordance with what it has been taught, taking the water that is far away. That is, the animal does not realize that extinguishing fire is a property of water; rather it has learned an external association, in other words, the monkey has no general, abstract idea of water with which it can use water irrespectively of a memorized routine. Instead, the human being—using the terminology of Zubiri, another Spanish philosophe (1984)—discovers what water is and what it gives of itself, and then can be creative with water and use it in many different contexts. Therefore, while the animal only knows reality starting from its own concrete experience, the human being is capable of knowing the characteristics proper to reality, which allows her to transcend concrete experience and— thanks to abstraction— adapt her knowledge of reality to different contexts.

In the business realm, we can think of the initiation process for a new employee. Therein, we must ask ourselves whether she is taught how things are done at the company or if she is encouraged to understand the nature of what goes on in the company. The difference between these two approaches at the pedagogical level is clear; the former approach

presents a utilitarian learning style based on expected outcomes, whereas the latter case allows the employee to approach reality in itself and where she fits in it.

As mentioned, personal transcendentals impose a way of being that aims toward growth. For humans, the absence of growth implies a process of self-destruction, especially in the case of *personal love*, which is the highest transcendental. Considered as a cooperative system, the firm's different activities— even technical work itself should contribute to facilitating interpersonal encounters and trust. Impersonal treatment in a firm annuls the dignity of man and impedes his access to moral realities, which require trust in order to externalize them, and then to internalize them again (Alvira 2001, page 189). Psychological approaches to this matter see the world as valuable insofar as it is used to intensify interpersonal relationships. This should be the main end of firms; if their activities and products do not favor interpersonal relationships, then they lose value. In order to foment meaningful human interactions and personal growth, companies must genuinely promote progressively larger amounts of trust for all involved (Rosanas & Velilla 2003).

### **Spaces for learning and innovation in business organizations**

From this humanist perspective focused on the intensification of interpersonal relationships, learning is defined as “any type of change that occurs inside the people involved in an interaction, as a result of their experiences derived from putting their interaction into practice, provided that this change is significant for the explanation of future interactions” (Pérez López 1993, p. 54). For such learning to be possible— and free—a specific environment is required.

Nishida's concept of “*ba*” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998) offers a favorable and corresponding environment for promoting innovation processes (Acosta Prado, Zárate Torres, & Luiz Fischer, 2014). This term can be translated as “space,” however, it is not reduced to physical space, but rather includes “shared space for emerging relationships” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p.40). Thus, it is highly existential because therein, the self is recognized, which provides life with meaning. Understood in this way, “*ba*” becomes the place where knowledge is created, and it is in this shared creation that innovation takes place.

If the creation of knowledge is not linked to personal existential experience, it becomes mere information to be transmitted outside of the relationship (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p 41). Certainly, the information is useful, but innovation—the creation of knowledge—

arises from the personal and existential reality that “*ba*” supposes, where knowledge as well as values are created (Scalzo & Fariñas 2018).

In addition, personal encounters happen in “*ba*” because said space requires overcoming personal limits in order to transcend in that common space; the existential dimension guarantees that all potentialities (reason, emotion, intuition, etc.) are mobilized. On the other hand, being an existential act, the creation of knowledge cannot be understood as simply improving the efficient management of one’s resources (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p 42). Knowledge creation is a self-transcendental process because it involves sharing implicit knowledge that is not yet known and that is yet to be formulated. That is, creating knowledge is not about sharing what is known, but rather about achieving knowledge thanks to a certain kind of interaction (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 42-45). Interpersonal relationships are presented as a key part of this process when Nishada himself proposes an alternative formulation to Descartes’ famous phrase, saying, “*I love therefore, I am*” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p. 46). Every phase of the process reinforces said encounter because everything that is made explicit helps people to “engage jointly in the creation of meaning and value” (Nonaka & Konno, 1998, p.47). “*Ba*” requires guaranteed creativity at all times as a free expression of the person, as well as trust and commitment resulting from an emotional bond (Nonaka, 1994). Only companies that can develop this space of trust will be able to truly innovate (Zahra, Nielsen, & Bogner, 1999).

In short, the creation of a space of trust involves different persons and groups inside a given firm and trusting relationships that link the firm with its clients (and other external groups). Figure 1.1 below illustrates how to generate a “*ba*” space in the firm that allows for innovation according to human parameters of being and growth.

----- Insert Figure 1.1 here -----

In this scheme, the product is instrumentalized, and action aims toward the improvement of interpersonal relationships. That is, growth occurs when both the organization and the client (one of the various groups who take part in the firm’s external environment) know how to use the “product” in question for the betterment of interpersonal relationships. Certainly, it could be said that interpersonal relationship space between the company and the client only emerges occasionally. However, it is not limited to those relationships alone; it expands to the relationships that the client and organization members engage in throughout their life and beyond the company, which contributes to “*ba*” in the wider

society. Our proposal therefore is consistent with the network stakeholder model (Rowley, 1997). This process puts product at the service of interpersonal relationships indicated with the bold arrow in Figure 1.1. On the other hand, if the bold arrow were to indicate the intensification of the striped arrows instead of indicating the intensification of the standard arrow, we would be before a process of “animalization,” which is an anthropological reductionism.

The differences between games in animal and human life backup this argument. Tomasello (2014, pp. 7-43) conducted an experiment using a game in two phases. In the first phase, the researcher is in front of a monkey or a child (depending on which is being studied) and there is a barrier between them. On the researcher’s side, there is an attractive object according to taste of the subject (for example, a banana or a ball respectively). The game consists in overcoming the difficulty of the barrier and obtaining the object. In the first phase, both the child and the monkey play in a similar way. However, in the second phase, another researcher removes the barrier. There, whereas the monkey quickly picks up the banana, the child’s reaction is different and varied, like for example getting angry with the researcher who has removed the barrier, in a kind of complaint that the game has been spoiled. What can we infer from this? The monkey uses the researcher to reach the banana and the child uses the ball to reach the person. In other words, the monkey instrumentalizes the researcher, while the child exploits the object, a conclusion that accords with our anthropological assumptions. The properly human way of acting consists in *instrumentalizing the object and in putting it at the service of the interpersonal encounter*.

Analogously, business activity should improve interpersonal relationships. Reductionist behavior consists in using the other person to obtain a product; for example, when a firm instrumentalizes the client to market and sell their product. In this case, the company behaves animalistically. -Figure 1.2 demonstrates this reality where the interpersonal relationship is instrumentalized for the benefit of the object, in this case, the product:

----- Insert Figure 1.2 here -----

These reflections, based on Polo’s anthropological proposal regarding the human person and growth, serve to advance the current state of organizational theory. This personalist approach can also enrich Nonaka’s concept of “*ba*” as a shared space for growth that is directly related to innovation, by generating a space for the person to live as a person (as

well as apply Polo's four transcendentals to quotidian activity in the business realm). In addition, we have offered a proposal—in Figure 1.1— for promoting and maintaining “*ba*” not only for the production of knowledge, but for the benefit of common life in organizations.

Throughout this essay, we have also shown that, for innovation to take place in all its richness and not as mere adaptation to the context, spaces where the person can manifest and develop her personal, inter-relational, and spiritual dimensions are required. As a result, the person can change reality and generate novelty starting from him or herself. Meditation can be a valuable resource for discovering each personal reality. The following questions aim to help guide self-reflection and meditation in that direction:

1. What is innovation in your life? Does it focus on adapting to the environment or on creating new environments for personal change/growth? What do you think is the best way to be more innovative?
2. What successfully motivates you to initiate innovation processes?
3. To what extent is innovation an individual or a social issue? That is, is it an individual process that affects the social? Or a social process that affects the individual? How is social openness related to your ability to think about new ideas?
4. What is the relationship between personal innovation and compassion towards the other?
5. To what extent can bad experiences in life block the ability to innovate? Can pain be a starting point for innovation?

**Figures (see ppt attached)**

*Figure 1.1: Triangle of relationships that puts production at the service of interpersonal encounter and growth*

*Figure 1.2: Triangle of relationships that puts interpersonal encounter at the service of production*

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