



WORKERS: DARE TO BE INNOVATORS

A study at the School of Management and Business this year is searching for the keys to understanding what can give employees the courage to be innovators.



← The modern leader should recognize that innovation is a springboard for the progress of the organization. The organization's ability to innovate reflects its capacity to observe what goes on around it and imagine how it can be adapted within the organization.

Professor Françoise Contreras arrives on time for our café conversation. She looks around the place, and, just from reading their faces, seems to know how the staff feel and even what the boss must be like. But her time is not spent in prophesying or entertaining hunches.

Contreras is a researcher on how organizations should be led in order to encourage their employees to adopt innovative behavior.

She has been interested in such topics for eight years. Working at the Universidad del Rosario's School of Management and Business, she heads up the line of research on

leadership and organizational behavior of the Business and Management Research Group, classified since 2006 in the highly-respected A1 category by COLCIENCIAS in recognition of the high academic level of its lines of research. The group has run a Ph.D. program for around six years.

This professor and researcher has not only been ideally placed to witness the School's evolution first hand, but together with other researchers she has played a fundamental role in its determination to focus on innovation and entrepreneurship.

This orientation has led Contreras to devote much of her energy to new research that seeks to better understand the nature of employee behavior in innovation, the impulse that takes workers beyond passive compliance with a timetable and towards the kind of procedures through which they might follow instructions to reach a state of self-examination on, for example, how processes can be fine-tuned or how the packaging for the product they manufacture daily could be improved for the children who buy it and play with it. And who knows what other improvements in efficiency and effectiveness could be suggested within a business?

WHAT ARE INNOVATIVE EMPLOYEES ACTUALLY LIKE?

Professor Contreras believes this behavior can be analyzed by studying how people change industrial processes, which leads to the question: how does an employee manage to innovate. Of course, based on her years of research, Professor Contreras knows that some businesses adapt more quickly than others, and that this is largely because "businesses are the people" who work for them and who either move them forward or paralyze them with inertia.

Based on the idea that businesses are their human resources, one of the fundamental variables is leadership. "Leadership is one of the most studied variables in organizational behavior. Leaders want their enterprises to adapt to the environment," says Professor Contreras, underlining that the role of leader today has much to do with stimulating the curiosity of team members so that this motivates them to constantly innovate. They are not asked to be "inventors" in the trivial way that word is usually understood, but to dare to propose ideas. To this end, it is up to their leaders to establish the environments that bring about such zeal.

**THEY ARE NOT
ASKED TO BE
"INVENTORS" IN
THE TRIVIAL WAY
THAT WORD IS
USUALLY
UNDERSTOOD, BUT
TO DARE TO
PROPOSE IDEAS.
TO THIS END, IT
IS UP TO THEIR
LEADERS TO
ESTABLISH THE
ENVIRONMENTS
THAT BRING
ABOUT SUCH
ZEAL**

INNOVATION IS NECESSARY FOR SURVIVAL

Today, those companies unable to quickly find new markets or a rich seam in the existing marketplace are destined to disappear, or at least to be less competitive in the face of such mercurial conditions. Innovative behavior is necessary for survival in environments

where competition may come from any direction. This may include traditional businesses in the sector, but it may also include others that are trying to colonize new spaces, perhaps after others have cannibalized their traditional options.

Today, says the professor, “a new leadership model has been proposed to promote innovative behavior that facilitates innovation and survival.” This model, which should be self-generated as much as possible in countries such as Colombia, must take into account the essence of Colombian workers, their expectations, their ambitions and, of course, their fears. Team members often have innovative ideas but don’t speak up, fearing that their own jobs could be eliminated if they suggest ways things might be improved.

Organizations should think about what kind of leaders they have, because businesses have two kinds of leaders (though not necessarily mutually exclusive) transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Transactional leadership includes managers who primarily focus on the supervision of tasks, assigning functions, overseeing performance, and in general seeing that missions are carried out, but not in changing the future, just keeping things ticking along as well as possible.

AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP

Transformational leadership, on the other hand, focuses on people, on empowering work teams, transforming them through boosting motivation, morale, and performance. When asked, Contreras says that although one cannot generalize, Colombian leaders often display a certain authoritarian bent. Some think that leaders should be extremely serious to win the respect of their teams, but obviously there are those who are more open and dynamic, and who use charisma as a means of persuasion, especially among younger generations.

The professor and researcher also indicates that leadership is related to an organization’s capacity to integrate new ideas, a fundamental element for implementing innovation. The modern leader should recognize that innovation is a springboard for the progress of the organization. This ability to take in

→
Businesses
are the people
who work
for them.



A NEW LEADERSHIP MODEL HAS BEEN PROPOSED TO PROMOTE INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOR THAT FACILITATES INNOVATION AND SURVIVAL

new ideas is related to the ability to observe what goes on outside it and imagine how it can be adapted within the organization.

This is a variable that Professor Contreras has brought from the University of Leipzig, in Germany, where she participates in a virtual platform to carry out this international research. A total of twelve researchers work on the platform, three of them from the Universidad del Rosario, and others from Mexico, Argentina, Peru, Brazil, and Ecuador.

In January 2017, Contreras made a presentation at the University of Leipzig, where she got excellent feedback from the researchers and doctoral students who attended the event. Among the variables that the professor

and other researchers on the platform will analyze going forward is the organizational climate for innovation as a space



"Leadership is one of the most studied variables in organizational behavior. Leaders want their enterprises to adapt to the environment," says François Contreras.



for encouraging workers to suggest and implement new ideas. This also implies team members' engagement, their emotional involvement in their work, a factor workers with high innovative potential admit to experiencing.

In a first phase, the proposed model will be tested by producing and distributing questionnaires to 1,200 MBA students (200 in each of the countries mentioned above) who have worked for at least one year in business within the participating countries.

In a second phase, the group will consider other countries in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Finally, they will design and validate an instrument to assess organizational practices and use this information to steer leaders toward practices that promote innovation among their workers.

When the results are available, the international team will make recommendations on what stimulates innovation within organizations, giving these countries some guidelines for training new leaders to project innovation as a fundamental

necessity for contributing to their businesses, and thus their economies.

Contreras says that we have a variety of challenges in Colombia, but they can be summarized with one underlying imperative: "The leaders of this century must meet the challenge of shepherding diversity." The cultural diversity of employees adds an additional challenge to the transmission of ideas, since employees from different regions have very different expectations and ways of understanding life. At the same time, the plurality of outlook inherent in such diversity increases the possibilities for finding unconventional solutions to practical problems.

There is also diversity in generational differences, where the experience of older team members may complement the energy and impetus of younger ones. In the end, it is the job of leaders to stimulate everyone to be comfortable in the organization, and to dare to innovate. "People do well at what they enjoy doing," notes Contreras.

We have finished our coffee, and the professor again glances at the staff who served us and those behind the counter. That reminds me of one of her very telling phrases about leadership and organizational culture: "To understand the leader, you must look at the operative." ■