

Culturally Sensitive Managerial Innovation: Insights from Imam Ali's Letter 53 for Moroccan Public Organizations



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ABSTRACT: This article delves into the intricacies of managerial innovation within Moroccan public organizations, focusing on the challenges and enablers that shape its adoption. By drawing upon Imam Ali's Letter 53, a seminal work in governance, the study underscores the necessity of a gradual and culturally attuned approach to introducing new managerial practices.

The findings reveal that, despite its critical role in enhancing organizational performance, managerial innovation is often underutilized, hindered by resistance to change and the apprehension of disrupting established norms. Letter 53 provides timeless principles that address these challenges, advocating for the careful and respectful integration of innovations while upholding local cultural and ethical values.

The study further emphasizes that managerial innovations which are congruent with cultural traditions and benefit all stakeholders are more likely to flourish. Moreover, it highlights the pivotal role of transparent communication and employee involvement in the change process as essential factors in mitigating resistance and fostering acceptance of new practices.

KEYWORDS: Managerial innovation, Organizational performance, Public organizations, Letter 53, Imam Ali.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a constantly changing world, innovation is often perceived as an essential driver of progress, and is mainly associated with technological advances. This dominant conception of technological innovation, manifested in the development of new products, processes or technologies, has largely shaped organizations' strategies for growth and competitiveness. However, another form of innovation, more subtle but just as crucial, is emerging in management science: managerial innovation.

Introduced by Kimberly in 1981, managerial innovation refers to the introduction of new management practices, processes or structures that enable organizations to better adapt to contemporary challenges. Despite its importance, this form of innovation remains relatively underexplored in the scientific literature, as illustrated by the work of Mol and Birkinshaw (2006), which reveals a significant imbalance between studies on technological innovation and those on managerial innovation.

This is the context for our reflection, which draws on the teachings of Imam Ali, particularly his Letter 53 addressed to Mâlik al-Ashtar, to propose an approach to managerial innovation as a pillar of good governance in public organizations [La voie de l'éloquence, 1989]. Although written in the 14th century, this letter offers surprisingly modern perspectives on the management of people and organizations, emphasizing the need to innovate while respecting established traditions. Imam Ali advocates managerial approaches based on benevolence, collaboration and gradual adaptation, thus avoiding abrupt ruptures that could generate harmful resistance. [Ifiss, S., & Mssassi, S., 2020]

In this article, we will explore how these principles can be applied to the contemporary challenges of public organizations in Morocco, particularly in the context of management that seeks a balance between economic efficiency, employee well-being and respect for cultural values. We will demonstrate that managerial innovation, when guided by values of justice, integrity and respect for tradition, can not only improve the performance of organizations, but also strengthen their legitimacy and acceptance by stakeholders.

II. IMAM ALI'S APPROACH TO MANAGERIAL INNOVATION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

Innovation is frequently linked to technological advancements, often characterized by the introduction of new products or the development of innovative production processes. This type of technological innovation typically occurs within the confines of R&D laboratories and is quantified through the number of patents filed and scientific publications produced.

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Contrasting this technological paradigm is the concept of "managerial innovation," a term first introduced by Kimberly in 1981. Kimberly's objective was to expand the focus of management researchers to encompass other forms of innovation, particularly within the realm of management practices. Unfortunately, managerial innovation remains a relatively underexplored area within the management science literature. This disparity is starkly illustrated by the statistics presented by Mol and Birkinshaw in 2006, which reveal over 12,700 scientific articles dedicated to technological innovation, compared to a mere 114 that explore "other" forms of innovation, including managerial innovation.

Against this backdrop, this paragraph offers a reflection on the challenges and opportunities presented by managerial innovation as articulated by Imam Ali in his Letter 53. Despite being written in the 14th century, certain passages of this letter reveal a compelling connection between organizational performance and the principle of innovation as a cornerstone of good governance.

In this light, Imam Ali demonstrated remarkable foresight in emphasizing the importance of innovation as a crucial tool for public organizations to navigate and surmount both present and future challenges. In his renowned epistle to Mâlik al-Ashtar, particularly in passages 31 and 32, the fourth Caliph advocated for the adoption of innovative managerial approaches. These approaches, according to Imam Ali, should concentrate on refining practices and attitudes, while eschewing radical, sweeping reforms that could disrupt established traditions.

- **Process, Tool and Method**

(31) The more kindly you deal with them, the more you ensure their good intentions; conversely, the more you harden yourself to them, the more they will resist you.

Extract from letter 53

In **passage 31**, Imam Ali urges his governor in Egypt to use good procedures to guarantee the good intentions of the governed. It's worth noting that for any process to be good, it must necessarily adopt innovative mechanisms to avoid becoming obsolete over time. Indeed, traditional management mechanisms hinder the evolution and development of organizations in an uncertain and unpredictable environment.

In this respect, the Imam implores Mâlik al Ashtar to introduce innovative managerial methods focusing mainly on practices (devices, habits, methodologies...) and behaviors (attitudes, modes of reasoning, state of mind...). On the scale of public organizations, these innovative methods should focus on collaboration between managers and employees. In other words, to develop a co-responsibility-autonomy type of relationship, to support and enhance the energies, potential and different forms of intelligence of all agents.

Moreover, a careful reading of **passage 31**, in particular the part "**the more you use good procedures..., the more you secure their good attention...**", reveals the positive correlation between innovative managerial approaches and social and economic performance. At this point, the fourth Caliph warns Mâlik al Ashtar against using managerial procedures that lead the governed to be non-performing and refractory. In other words, managerial innovation must imperatively encompass collaborative behaviors and practices, enabling both entities and their civil servants to achieve the right balance between personal fulfillment and social and economic performance, whether individually or collectively.

This quote also expresses the idea that kindness and benevolence towards others are effective ways of encouraging their good intentions towards us. By using "good manners" towards others, such as kindness, compassion, patience and respect, we can establish a relationship of trust and mutual respect. This can help defuse tensions and foster greater mutual understanding. What's more, when we treat others with kindness and goodwill, they're more likely to treat us the same way in return, which can strengthen the relationship. On the other hand, when we're too strict or harsh with others, it can have the opposite effect, making them more resistant. If we use force, threats or intimidation to get what we want, this can provoke resistance and hostility from the other party.

In short, this quote suggests that using gentle, benevolent methods is more effective than using rigid, punitive and authoritarian methods to obtain good intentions from others. This can be compared to managerial innovation, which aims to use new methods and techniques to encourage employee commitment, motivation and performance. It encourages managers to adopt more collaborative and participative management approaches to encourage employee contribution and creativity. This can include the use of methods such as employee empowerment, participative leadership, agile management and open communication.

Finally, the lessons learned from this text can encourage managers to reflect on new management practices and adopt a more holistic approach to managing employees, taking into account the individual needs and motivations of each employee.

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- **Adapting innovation to tradition and culture**

(32) ... Don't introduce any innovation that could harm established traditions....

Extract from letter 53

Man is the enemy of what he does not know. This Arab proverb shows how human nature resists and fights change. Given this state of affairs, Imam Ali urged his governor Mâlik al Ashtar , in **precept 32**, to avoid any radical innovation with a global vocation. Indeed, the Imam fears that abrupt managerial changes, no matter how innovative, will damage established traditions, especially if these traditions have significant value or meaning for the population. This, in turn, will generate resistance capable of seriously threatening the durability of the relationship between the governor and the governed.

This passage suggests that, in the context of innovation, it is advisable to strike a balance between innovation and respect for tradition, ensuring that new ideas do not damage the integrity of the governed and their culture.

In connection with this debate, public sector organizations looking to implement innovative managerial practices are likely to have to take into account and overcome a great deal of resistance to change, whether from those who don't believe in it, who don't want to and/or who don't know. By nature, human beings fear change and like to remain anchored in old postures and practices. To this end, the introduction of innovative managerial approaches undoubtedly requires an interactive and collective process. This process must undoubtedly involve as many stakeholders as possible, rather than being the preserve of an elite.

This is then reaffirmed by the literature on managerial innovation, which has focused too much on radical innovations that are detrimental to established postures and practices. It suggests that for managerial innovation to have a positive impact on an organization's performance, certain conditions must be met (Reinmoeller et al., 2011; Heij et al.,2012; Le Roy et al., 2013):

- Avoid radical innovations that undermine established positions and practices ;
- Promoting collaboration and cohesion ;
- Consolidating pleasure and well-being at work;
- Develop creativity, reactivity and proactivity.

III. PRESENTATION OF FLAT AND CROSS TABULATION RESULTS FOR VARIABLES ASSOCIATED WITH INNOVATION)

A. Process, Tool and Method" flat sorting and cross-referencing with "organizational performance

Table 1: Univariate analysis of the use of innovative processes in Moroccan public organizations (DD variable: Population)

Are your managers using innovative, profitable processes?	Frequency	Percentage
Never	60	47,62%
Rarely	34	26,98%
Sometimes	11	8,73%
Often	16	12,70%
Very often	5	3,97%
Total	126	100%

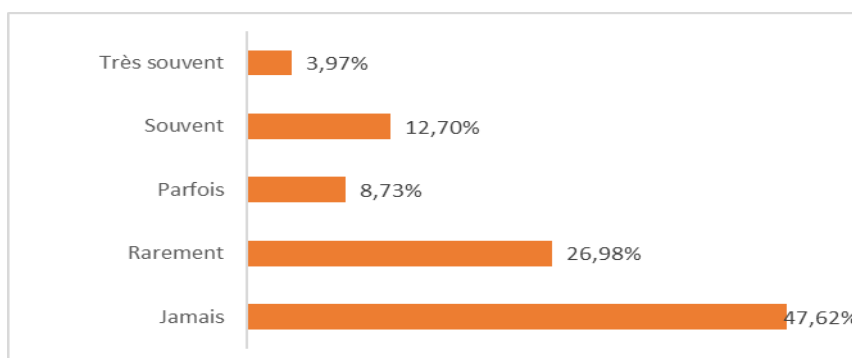


Figure 1: Univariate analysis of the use of innovative processes in Moroccan public-sector organizations

Table 1 and figure 1 reveal that the adoption of innovative processes in Moroccan public organizations is largely limited. Nearly half of all respondents (47.62%) stated that their managers never use innovative processes that are profitable for their organization. This figure is worrying, as it indicates a resistance or lack of initiative in integrating new managerial practices. Another quarter of respondents (26.98%) stated that such processes are rarely used, reinforcing the idea that innovation remains marginal in the management of public organizations. Only 12.70% and 3.97% of participants respectively indicated that innovation is often

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or very often present in their organization. This low uptake of innovative processes could be an impediment to improving performance and adapting public organizations to modern governance requirements.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of the Relationship between the Use of Innovative Processes and Organizational Performance (DD Variable: Population)

	Are your managers using innovative, profitable processes?				
	Value square	Chi- freedom	Degree of	p-value	V value by Cramer
How do you assess your organization's efficiency?	194.32	16		< .001	0.626
How do you assess the efficiency of your organization?	262.00	16		< .001	0.727
How do you assess customer satisfaction with your organization's products or services?	123.06	16		< .001	0.498

The second table examines the relationship between the use of innovative processes and various aspects of organizational performance. The results show that managerial innovation has a significant influence on effectiveness, efficiency and customer satisfaction in public organizations. Chi-square test values are high for all three aspects of performance, with p-values below 0.001, indicating a statistically significant relationship. In particular, Cramer's V value is highest for efficiency (0.727), followed by effectiveness (0.626) and customer satisfaction (0.498). These results suggest that public organizations that adopt innovative processes are more likely to improve their overall performance. Innovation therefore appears to be a crucial lever for increasing effectiveness, maximizing resource efficiency, and better satisfying customer needs.

B. Flat sorting "Adapting innovation to tradition and culture" and its intersection with "organizational performance".

Table 3: Univariate analysis of the adaptation of innovation to tradition and culture in Moroccan public organizations.

These innovative processes challenge the company's traditions and culture?	Frequency	Percentage
Never	52	41,27%
Rarely	40	31,75%
Sometimes	12	9,52%
Often	17	13,49%
Very often	5	3,97%
Total	126	100%

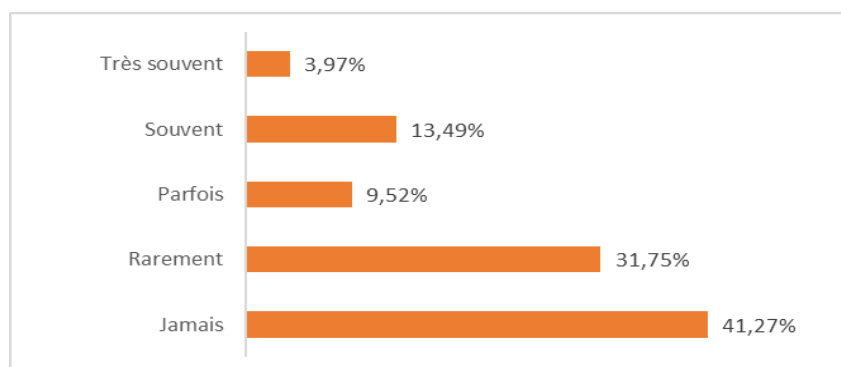


Figure 2: Univariate analysis of the adaptation of innovation to tradition and culture in Moroccan Public Organizations.

Table 3 and Figure 2 focus on how innovation is perceived in relation to tradition and culture within Moroccan public organizations. A majority of respondents (41.27%) felt that innovative processes had never challenged their organization's traditions and culture, while 31.75% thought this rarely happened. These figures suggest that innovation, when introduced, is often implemented in a way that respects existing cultural and traditional norms. However, a significant minority (13.49%) of respondents say that innovation often challenges these traditions, which could signal tensions between the introduction of new

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practices and the preservation of cultural values. This tension could be a factor in resistance to change, requiring culturally sensitive managerial strategies for successful implementation of innovations.

Table 4: Bivariate Analysis of the Impact of Adapting Innovation to Tradition and Culture on Organizational Performance

	Do these innovative processes challenge the company's traditions and culture?			
	Value Chi-square	Degree of freedom	p-value	V value by Cramer
How do you assess your organization's efficiency?	94.99	16	< .001	0.436
How do you assess the efficiency of your organization?	176.21	16	< .001	0.594
How do you assess customer satisfaction with your organization's products or services?	239.03	16	< .001	0.691

Table 4 explores the impact of aligning innovation with tradition and culture on organizational performance. The results show that aligning innovations with an organization's traditions and culture has a significant effect on its performance. Chi-square values are high for efficiency (176.21), customer satisfaction (239.03), and effectiveness (94.99), with p-values below 0.001, confirming the relevance of these relationships. Cramer's V-value, which measures the strength of the association, is highest for customer satisfaction (0.691), followed by efficiency (0.594) and effectiveness (0.436). These results indicate that innovations that respect and adapt to organizational traditions and culture are more likely to lead to superior performance. Consequently, to maximize the positive impact of innovation, it is essential to take cultural and traditional aspects into account, in order to minimize resistance and promote greater acceptance of new practices.

IV. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Managerial innovation within Moroccan public organizations is a key lever for improving organizational performance, although this area remains insufficiently explored and implemented. The results of this study, illuminated by the principles set out in Imam Ali's Letter 53, reveal elements of vital importance that merit rigorous, in-depth analysis.

Indeed, Letter 53, addressed by Imam Ali to his governor Malik al-Ashtar, is an invaluable source of wisdom on governance and management. It provides advice on the art of governing justly, while respecting fundamental human values and cultural traditions. This letter is particularly relevant when considering how the principles of equity, gradual change and respect for tradition can be integrated into the process of managerial innovation in public organizations.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the low level of adoption of innovative practices within Moroccan public organizations. Nearly half of survey participants indicated that their managers never introduce innovative practices, raising fundamental questions about the ability of these institutions to evolve and respond to contemporary challenges. (Mol et Birkinshaw, 2008)

Imam Ali warns against the hasty introduction of change, which could be perceived as a destabilizing break with the past [Ifiss, S., & Mssassi, S., 2023]. This principle of graduality is of crucial importance in the context of Moroccan public organizations, where cultural traditions occupy a predominant place. The results of the study suggest that this limited adoption of innovation may stem from a fear of destabilizing established structures.

Inspired by Letter 53, it appears that managerial innovation should be introduced gradually, taking into account traditions, while guiding organizations towards more efficient practices. This approach not only minimizes resistance to change, but also ensures a smooth transition to new methods. Organizations that have succeeded in integrating innovative practices have recorded significant improvements in their performance, suggesting that managerial innovation is an under-exploited lever for reform in the Moroccan public sector.

Letter 53 also stresses respect for local customs and values in governance. Imam Ali urges us not to impose changes that might conflict with people's traditions, but rather to adapt them so that they are in harmony with local culture.

The results show that managerial innovations that respect cultural traditions are better accepted and have a positive impact on organizational performance (Reinmoeller P., Dalen J.V., Elsenburg B. , 2011). This respect for tradition is not simply a question of reducing conflict, but also represents a strategy for anchoring innovations in a sustainable way. Innovations that are perceived as compatible with cultural values have a much better chance of being sustainably integrated into everyday organizational practices.

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This observation corroborates existing theories on change management in specific cultural contexts (Mol et Birkinshaw, 2009). Change management literature emphasizes the importance of taking cultural context into account when introducing new practices. In societies where tradition plays a central role, innovations need to be adjusted in such a way as to be compatible with these values. This not only reduces resistance to change, but also ensures that innovations are permanently integrated into organizational practices.

In the context of managerial innovation, these principles must be applied in such a way as to ensure that the new practices are fair and equitable for all members of the organization. This means that innovations must not only serve the interests of a management elite, but must also benefit the entire organization, including rank-and-file employees and the citizens they serve. The results of this research demonstrate that innovations that take into account the needs of all stakeholders are more likely to succeed. By following Imam Ali's precepts, public leaders can introduce innovations that not only improve organizational performance, but also strengthen the trust and commitment of employees and citizens.

One of the main challenges in introducing managerial innovation is resistance to change. Imam Ali advocates governance based on transparent communication and stakeholder consultation. He emphasizes the importance of explaining the reasons for change and ensuring that it is fully understood and accepted by the individuals concerned.

This study reveals that resistance to change is a major obstacle to the adoption of managerial innovation. Transparent communication, inspired by Letter 53, could help overcome this obstacle. By clearly explaining the benefits of innovations and involving employees in the implementation process, managers can allay fears and encourage acceptance of new practices.

The gradual approach advocated by Imam Ali, which recommends not introducing changes abruptly so as not to disrupt existing structures, finds a contemporary application here. In the context of Moroccan public organizations, this approach can help to alleviate fears and resistance, by introducing innovations gradually and ensuring that they are perceived as improvements rather than disruptions.

Finally, in the field of managerial innovation, new practices must be evaluated not only in terms of effectiveness, but also in terms of ethical impact [Ifiss, S., & Mssassi, S., 2024]. Innovations that respect ethical values and contribute to the well-being of the community are more likely to succeed in the long term.

The results of this study suggest that managerial innovations must be aligned with ethical values if they are to be fully accepted and integrated into public organizations. By following the ethical principles of Letter 53, managers can ensure that the innovations they introduce reinforce not only organizational performance, but also social cohesion and general well-being.

In conclusion, Imam Ali's Letter 53 offers a valuable analytical framework for understanding and guiding managerial innovation in Moroccan public organizations. By adopting a progressive, culturally sensitive and ethical approach, managers can overcome obstacles to change and improve organizational performance. The results of our study confirm that these principles, when applied, not only enable effective innovations to be implemented, but also strengthen the trust and commitment of stakeholders, thus ensuring fairer and more sustainable governance.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study illuminate both the challenges and the opportunities that accompany managerial innovation within Moroccan public organizations. Drawing upon the principles enshrined in Imam Ali's Letter 53, this research underscores the necessity of a gradual approach that respects cultural traditions and is anchored in ethical integrity to successfully integrate innovative practices.

As a perennial guide to governance, Letter 53 provides a profound framework for navigating the intricacies of organizational change. By honoring cultural values and adopting strategies that prioritize inclusion and justice, leaders not only enhance organizational performance but also fortify trust and social cohesion. Organizations that align with these principles are better positioned to overcome resistance to change, ensuring a seamless transition to more effective and sustainable practices.

In essence, this study reveals that innovation, when thoughtfully designed and implemented with wisdom, can serve as a formidable catalyst for positive transformation within the Moroccan public sector. The future of managerial innovation hinges on the ability of leaders to harmonize modernity with tradition, efficiency with ethics, in a sustained effort to advance the common good.

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