

## **ISMS Annual Conference 2018: Military Sciences and Future Security Challenges**

### **Abstract**

#### **Leadership challenges and employee-driven innovation in military organizations**

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#### *Summary*

This research study explores the phenomenon of employee driven innovation (EDI) in a military context. What are the enhancing and limiting factors in regard to organizational value creation of EDI. Furthermore the study aims at exploring leadership challenges arising in qualifying, facilitating and managing this specific kind of innovation in a strategic and systematic approach.

*Key Words: Military leadership, innovation theory, perceptions of innovation in a military context, employee driven innovation*

The aim of this presentation is to present empirical findings from a preliminary research study investigating employee driven innovation (EDI) in the Danish Defense and the challenges arising in supporting this specific kind of innovation from an organizational perspective and leadership position.

The presentation combines empirical studies of EDI in a specific context with theoretical perspectives. Discussing the empirical findings and theoretical perspectives leads to a more nuanced understanding of the role of leadership and organizational structures if organizations wants to be innovative from a broader range of sources. How can we develop and practice leadership as a critical factor in qualifying ideas, insights and dialogue in a strategic constructive and co-creating manner in order to support innovation?

The research project explores the concept of EDI in a military organization to unfold empirical insights of EDI in this specific contextual setting. By creating a broader understanding of the characteristics and supportive factors of EDI the possibility of a strategic approach seems within reach.

Organization of today exists in a highly complex and fast changing world. Military organizations are no different. The need for an organizational innovation capacity seems paramount in order to be in front at two arenas; At the military arena preparation for and engaging in different kind of operations, adversaries and different hostile environments calls for innovation often challenged by leadership as command. As a public organization the need for improvements, flexibility, high quality and speed requires an innovative capacity often being challenged by bureaucratic understandings. The ambition of enhancing the value of EDI is to increase agility and creativity and engage multiple sources of innovation in military organizations to respond to and enact in more complex hybrid conflicts and operational environments in which the military is engaged (Griffin 2016).

Studies of military innovation often focus on top-down innovation. To strengthen the overall innovation capacity the need for a broader conceptual and theoretical exploration and understanding of bottom-up innovations seems necessary (Grissom 2006). This study provides insights to explore and develop a broader understanding of EDI and hopefully inspire development of leadership education into creating competencies balancing and favoring both organizational exploitation and exploration.

Both empirical and theoretical studies show that a strategic intentional approach to innovation enhances the possibility of gaining organizational value from innovation (Tidd & Bessant 2009). A strategic approach implicitly challenges traditional – often tacit - understandings of innovation by opening up the ‘why and how’ of innovation at all organizational levels. EDI has shown to be a unique source of innovation creating highly sustainable and valuable innovations (Høyrup 2012, von Hippel 1988, Brown & Duguid 1991). Furthermore EDI often challenges large organizations problematic tendency to stifle around an inevitable limiting world view. This limited world view seems to have problematic consequences as the organization becomes numb to environmental changes, demands and operational and strategic possibilities (Duguid & Brown 1991). EDI enable the organization to be more enacting and innovative by combining highly skilled professional

knowledge with the tight connection to the fast changing environment operational demands and possibilities (Brown & Duguid 1991).

The empirical insight is drawn from four studies in the Danish Defense. The studies are all rooted in a social constructivist perspective. The research approach has been qualitative primarily to explore innovation as local and contextualized processes and the subjective experiences of barriers and possibilities. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in all of the studies and combined with observations in the SOF study.

The first study was conducted in an army operational unit – why and how do soldiers innovate? The second study was conducted in an army development unit – how do developers work with innovation, creative problem solving and doctrine development? The third study was conducted at top management level at all branches of the Danish Defense – exploring top management understandings of innovation and the challenges and possibilities of a strategic approach to innovation. The fourth study was conducted in the Danish special operation units exploring the culture and leadership supporting innovation. The studies have been conducted over a period of 4 years. The studies represent different organizational levels (46 interviews of 1-1.5 hours of duration).

The empirical findings reveal interesting themes regarding EDI:

- EDI are found in all of the studied units. EDI are often tacit, a way of every-day work life and closely related to creative problem solving and exploring future operational possibilities. The innovations often combine the ability to see future possibilities in the operational milieu and creative thinking to develop smarter, faster, better solutions or equipment/processes. The unique contextual knowledge and highly professional skilled and competent employees enable creative forward-looking problem solving and innovative solutions.
- EDI often remain un-qualified and unsupported by leaders, development units and subject-matter experts. The consequences of this lack of leadership attention, support and participatory involvement seems to lead to different problematic situations; the value of innovations remain in a local context – i.e. innovations are not ‘capitalized’ into organizational value. Leaders often unintentional ‘non-approval’ and lack of qualification of ideas leads to loss of meaning and de-motivation of employees. ‘Non-approval’ of ideas

seems to lead to innovation in the ‘grey-zone’ – potentially creating an elevated operational risk. Lack of leadership attention to EDI also limits the possibility of supporting the over-all strategy.

- EDI has little support – if any - in organizational structures, processes or conceptual frameworks hampering the chances of developing organizational value and a stronger operational effect.

The main intention of this presentation is to unfold the preliminary empirical findings regarding EDI as a phenomenon and the challenges and possibilities for EDI in a military context and environment. Furthermore the presentation hopefully ignites interesting dialogues that expands and qualifies current perspectives on military leadership in practice, leadership education and development to eventually strengthen the organizational capability for innovation.

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