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# The Role of Formal and Informal Learning in Developing an Organizational Learning Culture

*Companies can intentionally develop an organizational learning culture through a balanced integration of formal and informal learning.*

Désirée A. Laubengaier , Julia Wiggers, and Daryl J. Powell 

**OVERVIEW:** Organizational learning cultures are key determinants of innovation. Despite growing recognition of their importance, establishing organizational learning cultures remains challenging, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of how to do so. This study scrutinizes the process of developing an organizational learning culture, exploring the role of formal and informal learning. It addresses the need for research on the relationship between formal and informal learning in general, and specifically in the context of culture development. Drawing on a multiple case study, our findings reveal that formal and informal learning complement each other in the development of organizational learning culture. Engagement in learning interventions composed of both forms of learning is associated with a spectrum of learning flexibility, ranging from static to dynamic. Furthermore, throughout the journey towards an organizational learning culture, ownership of learning shifts. Learning evolves from being manager-driven to employee-led, with managers adopting a supportive role and exercising what can be described as learning leadership. This progression reflects increasing learner agency throughout the process.

## PRACTITIONER TAKEAWAYS

- *Balance formal and informal learning:* Integrate structured training programs with informal, experiential learning opportunities to support and sustain an organizational learning culture.
- *Adopt both static and dynamic learning approaches:* Employ a combination of consistent, standardized learning practices and adaptive, personalized methods to address evolving organizational and employee needs.
- *Nurture employee-led learning:* Encourage employees to take active ownership of their learning, while ensuring managerial support to foster both top-down and bottom-up engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** Organizational learning, Formal learning, Informal learning, Culture development, Learning organization

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Organizational culture forms the core of a company, exerting a pervasive influence over its members, strategies, and overall functioning (Kim, Toh, and Baik 2022). In particular, organizational learning cultures—that is, cultures that value and promote learning—are crucial determinants of innovation within organizations (Kandemir and Hult 2005; Rabetino et al. 2025; Zhang et al. 2024). These cultures play an important role in both research and practice (McCausland 2022), leading many companies to pursue their establishment. However, embedding learning into an organization’s culture is challenging, and our understanding of how to do so remains limited (Basten and Haamann 2018; Shaik et al. 2023). While existing literature identifies the characteristics (Santa 2015) and outcomes of an organizational learning culture (Biswakarma and Subedi 2025), the process of developing and embedding learning within the cultural fabric remains underexplored (Choi and Jacobs 2011; Friedman, Lipshitz, and Overmeer 2001; Kim, Toh, and Baik 2022; Schein 2017).

Prior research highlights the fundamental roles of formal and informal learning in learning organizations (Kandemir and Hult 2005). Formal learning refers to structured educational approaches, often in the form of workshops or training sessions. In contrast, informal learning is unstructured and occurs within daily work activities, such as interactions with colleagues (Froehlich, Segers, and Van den Bossche 2014). Research has shown that formal and informal learning complement each other, emphasizing the importance of their integration (Svensson, Ellström, and Åberg 2004). Some studies suggest that informal learning can enhance participation in formal learning and that formal learning can stimulate informal learning (Choi and Jacobs 2011; Kittel, Kunz, and Seufert 2021).

The scholarly debate regarding the relationship between formal and informal learning is ongoing, with diverse arguments highlighting their complex interaction. Further research into their relationship in the workplace is warranted (Choi and Jacobs 2011). Specifically, the role of formal and informal learning activities in developing an organizational learning culture requires scholarly attention. Given that developing and changing culture is a learning process that can be supported by learning activities (Schein 2017, 1990), it is essential to understand how formal and informal learning contribute to this process. To address this issue, this study poses the following research question: *How do formal and informal learning shape the development of organizational learning cultures?*

Exploring this research question is crucial because organizational learning cultures (Achdiat et al. 2023; Zhang et al. 2024), along with formal and informal learning (Cook and Yanow 2011; Marodin, Wechtler, and Lehtonen 2023), drive innovation within organizations. Our findings emphasize that the combined use of formal and informal learning is essential for developing organizational learning cultures. This study has both practical and scholarly implications, demonstrating how companies can leverage these two types of learning to build an organizational learning culture.

## Conceptual Background and Literature Review

This study builds on research in organizational culture and learning to establish its conceptual foundations.

### Organizational Learning Culture

Culture can either constrain or support learning in organizations (Sanz-Valle et al. 2011). Organizational cultures that are oriented toward and supportive of learning are referred to as organizational learning cultures (Kandemir and Hult 2005). According to Schein’s (1990, 2017) three-layered model of culture, an organizational learning culture comprises collective artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions that encourage learning and shape the behaviors of organization members accordingly (Kandemir and Hult 2005).

Artifacts represent the visible, audible, and tangible expressions of organizational culture, grounded in deeper values and assumptions (Hatch 1993). Despite their accessibility, the deeper meanings of artifacts often remain opaque (Schneider, Ehrhart, and Macey 2013). Values reflect what is deemed desirable, guide behavior, and provide meaning by delineating appropriate goals and the means to achieve them (Schein 2017). As the most influential cultural element, values are crucial for understanding both organizational dynamics and individual behavior within organizations (Kraatz, Flores, and Chandler 2020; Schein 2017). Underlying assumptions consist of unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs about reality (Marcoulides and Heck 1993; Schein 2017).

The unique characteristics of an organizational learning culture include openness to new ideas, a willingness to experiment, acceptance of failure, and active employee participation and involvement (Santa 2015). Additionally, these cultures tend to promote a willingness to recognize and learn from mistakes, foster open communication and collaboration, and encourage a people-oriented approach (Achdiat et al. 2023; Rebelo and Gomes 2011).

Numerous studies suggest that organizational learning cultures facilitate innovation (Naqshbandi and Tabche 2018) and provide supporting evidence (Achdiat et al. 2023; Naqshbandi, Meeran, and Wilkinson 2023). For organizations to continuously engage in innovation, learning must be entrenched within the organizational culture (Balzano and Marzi 2023; Migdadi 2019; Popper and Lipshitz 2000).

Given its critical role in fostering innovation, innovation literature increasingly recognize an organizational learning culture as a vital factor (Fuglsang and Hansen 2022; Rabetino et al. 2025; Zhang et al. 2024). Organizations aiming to drive innovation must prioritize the development of an organizational learning culture (Shaik et al. 2023), as this creates an environment conducive to nurturing and accelerating innovative efforts (Büschgens, Bausch, and Balkin 2013; Migdadi 2019). However, as Kim, Toh, and Baik (2022, 1506) note, research on the antecedents of organizational culture “is still nascent.” In particular, little attention has been given to the antecedents of organizational learning cultures, making further research in this area essential to better understand how such cultures can be purposefully developed.

## ***The Role of Formal and Informal Learning in Organizational Learning Cultures***

Cultural research suggests that “organizations are somehow able to create intended cultures . . . intentionally,” yet the theoretical understanding thereof is limited and empirical evidence is scarce (Kim, Toh, and Baik 2022, 1534).

On the one hand, the development and change of culture imply a learning process as a new cultural repertoire is established (Giorgi, Lockwood, and Glynn 2015). On the other hand, learning processes, such as social learning, have been identified as mechanisms underlying cultural development (Kim, Toh, and Baik 2022). More generally, the literature presents learning as a central factor in innovation and change (Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Fiol and Lyles 1985), leading to the consideration of leveraging learning to foster organizational learning cultures.

The literature differentiates between formal and informal learning, recognizing their potential significance in developing an organizational learning culture (Clarke 2004).

*Formal learning* refers to learning that occurs “off the job,” meaning it takes place outside regular work settings, typically in formal educational environments—such as through workshops or courses (Manuti et al. 2015). This type of learning happens in contexts specifically designed for education and is characterized by intentionality and planned learning activities, usually delivered through training and development programs within organizations (Manuti et al. 2015). Eraut (2000, 114) identifies five characteristics that indicate formal learning, whether individually or in combination: learning framework, organized learning events, presence of a designated teacher or trainer, award of qualifications or credits, and external specification of outcomes. While the provision of certificates can enhance workers’ employability (Van Der Heijden et al. 2009), the application of learned skills in the workplace is often limited (Clarke 2004; Van Der Heijden et al. 2009), suggesting that informal learning plays a more significant role (Froehlich, Segers, and Van den Bossche 2014).

*Informal learning* refers to learning that occurs beyond organized and intentional efforts (Manuti et al. 2015), and is increasingly acknowledged as a vital element of both learning (Froehlich, Segers, and Van den Bossche 2014) and innovation (Marodin, Wechtler, and Lehtonen 2023). It typically takes place on or close to the job, through experience and usually arises in contexts not primarily designated for learning, frequently in response to a problem that requires a solution (Manuti et al. 2015). This form of learning occurs through activities such as problem-solving, social interaction, and collaborative efforts like teamwork (Manuti et al. 2015). More specifically, informal learning involves seeking advice or feedback, reflecting on daily activities, sharing knowledge with colleagues, experimenting, learning by doing, and learning from mistakes (Bednall, Sanders, and Runhaar 2014; Edmondson and Nembhard 2009; Manuti et al. 2015).

Research suggests that learning is rarely entirely formal or informal (Manuti et al. 2015). Instead, both forms often complement, lead to, or reinforce one another (Kittel, Kunz, and Seufert 2021). Studies have shown that formal and

informal learning are associated with different types of knowledge that should be integrated to enhance overall learning (Svensson, Ellström, and Åberg 2004). While the innovation literature increasingly recognizes the important nuances of learning (Marodin, Wechtler, and Lehtonen 2023; Rabetino et al. 2025), the role of both formal and informal learning in developing organizational learning cultures remains largely unexplored, which is the central focus of this study.

### **Research Method**

In line with the exploratory nature of our research question, we adopted a qualitative research approach. Here we explain the study’s research design, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Research Design**

We conducted a multiple case study, which supports the generalizability of findings (Eisenhardt 1989). In multiple-case research, cases are selected based on their potential to illuminate the focal phenomenon (Eisenhardt 2021). We selected companies that were actively engaged in developing an organizational learning culture, and this initiative needed to be ongoing. In addition, we sought cases in which both formal and informal learning occurred. Initial contact with a key representative in each company helped us confirm their commitment to formal learning, evidenced by the presence of formal learning activities such as training, as well as their aspiration to incorporate informal learning activities, including learning from mistakes and gaining knowledge through practical experience.

We selected three similarly sized Dutch small- to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the manufacturing industry, each with an ongoing initiative to foster an organizational learning culture, to ensure comparability. The Netherlands, with its knowledge-based economy, represented an appropriate context where learning is a key asset.

### **Data Collection**

The majority of the study data originate from semistructured interviews conducted at each case company (Table 1). The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and focused on themes related to the organizational learning culture development journey, as well as formal and informal learning activities. Interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 317 pages of interview transcripts. In addition,

Research suggests that learning is rarely entirely formal or informal. . . . Instead, both forms often complement, lead to, or reinforce one another.

**TABLE 1. Case overview**

Case company	Industry	Company description	Size (number of employees)
Donut Co.	Manufacturing; food	Manufacturer of bakery products	210
Croissant Co.	Manufacturing; food	Manufacturer of bakery products	250
Wood Co.	Manufacturing; wood	Manufacturer of wood flooring	120

**TABLE 2. Types of company documents collected in each company**

Case company	Types of company documents collected
Donut Co.	Value statement (declaring core principles and beliefs) Vision and mission Vacancy texts (e.g., bakery operator, technical engineer)
Croissant Co.	Value statement (declaring core principles and beliefs) Vision and mission Vacancy texts (e.g., demand & production planner, production team lead)
Wood Co.	Value statement (declaring core principles and beliefs) Vision and mission Vacancy texts (e.g., production operator, automated woodworking technician)

### *Donut Co.: Group and Individual Formal and Informal Learning*

*Learning Intention:* At Donut Co., learning has been a significant focus for over a decade, and a corresponding organizational learning culture development initiative began many years ago. The company recognized the importance of combining formal and informal learning. For instance, the human resources (HR) manager heavily involved in the initiative stated, “The one [formal learning] cannot exist without the other [informal learning],” highlighting the company’s need for both forms of learning.

we took notes during each interview to capture important emerging insights.

To enrich the body of data and deepen our understanding of the companies’ culture and learning efforts, we collected company documents that provide insights into an organization’s culture, including value statements, vision and mission statements, and vacancy texts (recruitment texts). We present the company documents used (Table 2) and their application in our analysis (Table 3).

The key contacts also helped us identify suitable interviewees and arrange interviews. We intentionally selected interviewees based on their job roles and experience with learning activities (Table 4). In each company, we interviewed multiple employees, ranging from senior managers to operational staff.

### **Data Analysis**

The analytical process involved iterations of constant comparison and replication logic to identify patterns both within and across cases (Eisenhardt 2021). First, we developed descriptions of each case. Using open coding (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), we coded the data as part of the within-case analysis, identifying unique patterns in each case (Eisenhardt 1989).

Next, we conducted a cross-case analysis to identify patterns across cases by examining similarities and differences. Applying Gioia’s methodology (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), we grouped and connected first-order codes into second-order themes and then abstracted these into aggregate dimensions. Throughout this process, we maintained constant comparison between theory and data to ensure a close alignment between the two (Eisenhardt 2021). We present the resulting data structure (Figure 1).

### **Findings from Within-Case Analyses**

Following Pratt (2008), we integrate “power quotes” in the text to support arguments and provide supplementary “proof quotes” (Table 5).

*Formal Learning:* Formal learning increased significantly after 2018 as the amount and scope of training, workshops, and courses expanded. Donut Co. offered individual formal learning opportunities, including role-specific training modules and online courses. Additionally, the company provided group formal learning opportunities, particularly for management through leadership programs. The HR manager explained, “We have technical employees doing welding courses, forklift operation, and troubleshooting. For shift leaders, we focus heavily on soft skills at the middle management level, such as leadership development and how to motivate and engage people.”

Donut Co. gradually expanded its range of workshops—group formal learning—by introducing new topics such as health and family. According to the HR manager, additional courses and training enhanced individual formal learning opportunities, such as the “self-improvement program.”

*Informal Learning:* Donut Co. emphasized informal learning, as the HR manager explained, “We strongly believe in learning on the job.” Informal learning was considered a necessary complement to formal learning. A team leader noted, “With theory, it’s theory. And then it has to become ingrained in practice.” Donut Co. also implemented the 70–20–10 principle, which suggests that 70 percent of learning occurs through practical experience, 20 percent through interactions with coworkers (such as feedback and collaboration), and 10 percent through formal educational programs like workshops. Learning through experience was particularly important: “Learning consists of the practical experience you gain. From that experience, new questions arise that will be anticipated,” stated the HR manager.

Donut Co. aspired to further reinforce informal learning. A team leader explained, “We are currently working on

**TABLE 3. Summary of data sources**

Data source		Use in the analysis
Interviews		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and categorize (intentions toward) forms of learning within the organization.</li> <li>Understand the organizational learning culture and its development.</li> <li>Examine the role of the different forms of learning in the development of the organizational learning culture.</li> <li>Deepen our understanding by exploring emerging factors influencing the development of the organizational learning culture, including how and why they steer the process.</li> </ul>
Company documents	Value statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide deeper contextual understanding of the organizational cultural aspects such as declared values.</li> <li>Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias.</li> </ul>
	Vision and mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reveal organizational aspirations and intentions related to learning and development.</li> <li>Gain insight into the organizations' expectations of employee behavior.</li> <li>Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias.</li> </ul>
	Vacancy texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gain insights into expected employee skills and competences as well as documenting development opportunities.</li> <li>Uncover signals of developmental opportunities.</li> <li>Retrieve signals of learning embeddedness.</li> <li>Supplement interviews and mitigate potential bias.</li> </ul>

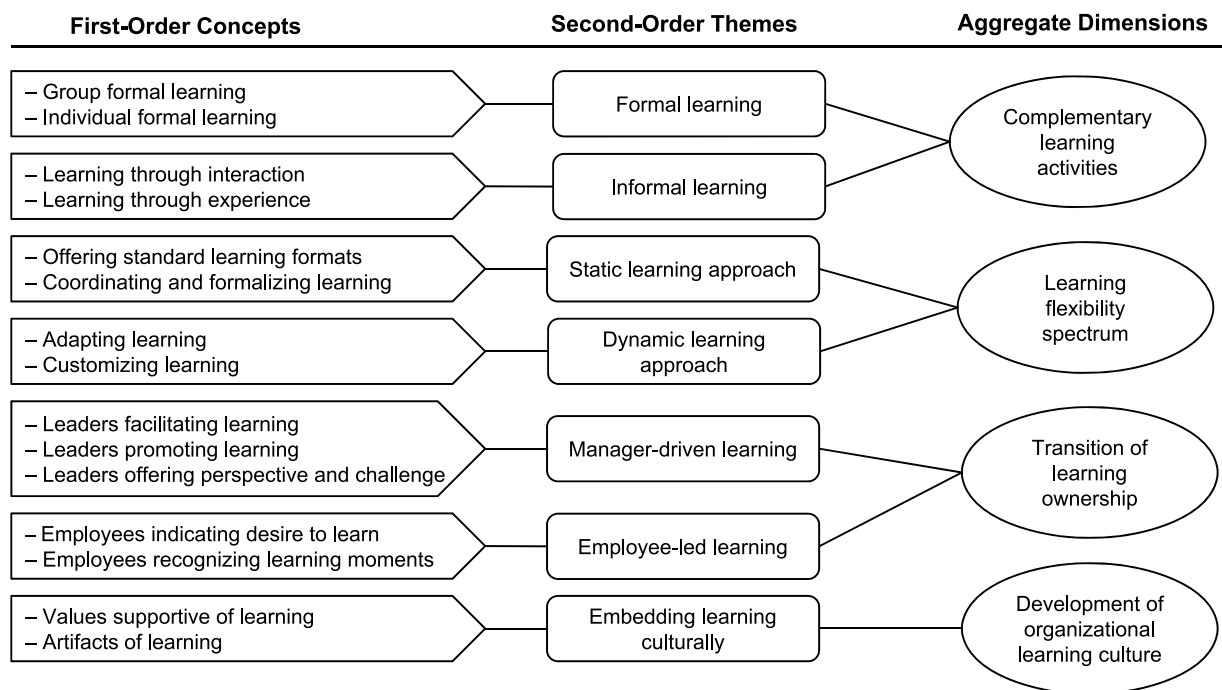
**TABLE 4. Interviewee overview**

Case company	Interviewees
Donut Co.	1 HR manager, 1 team leader, 1 production worker
Croissant Co.	1 L&D manager, 1 production engineer, 1 planning coordinator, 2 production workers
Wood Co.	1 HR business partner, 1 staff planner and L&D manager, 1 team leader, 1 production worker

Learning from mistakes and failures was an established practice at Donut Co., further indicating the value of informal learning. A team leader explained, "Mistakes let them know how it could be done differently."

*Static and Dynamic Learning Approach:* Donut Co.'s learning approach was initially static; learning was systematically tracked through tools like checklists. "We have lists with everything they need to be able to do," explained a team leader. Over the

improving it further, going even deeper into expanding opportunities, so that you really have a senior guide, your theory, practical experience, and competency assessments, followed by more hands-on experience and then another test."



**FIGURE 1. Data structure**

While managers at Donut Co. initially determined training needs, employees gradually became autonomous in deciding which learning activities to pursue.

years, Donut Co. enriched its static learning activities, such as generic training, by incorporating a more dynamic approach. In other words, Donut Co. began to adjust and customize its learning methods. The HR manager noted, “In recent years, your modules and stuff are constantly being refined and im-

proved. . . . you also have to adapt to new generations who want to learn in a different way.”

Donut Co.’s commitment to customizing learning was evident even during the hiring process, where the specific learning needs of potential employees were discussed. The HR manager remarked, “We often ask in job interviews how you learn, what method works best for you, so we can see in practice how we can incorporate that. . . . whatever works for them.”

*Ownership of Learning:* Donut Co.’s intention to foster an organizational learning culture was initially driven by managers who guided employees toward learning. Over time, responsibility for learning shifted to employees, who became owners of their learning and began to pursue a self-directed approach to it. While managers initially determined

**TABLE 5. Data table**

Second-order themes	First-order codes	Representative first-order data
Formal learning	Group formal learning	“We had a leadership training.” —Team leader, Donut Co. “I participated in leadership workshops. The team leaders did it all.” —Team leader, Wood Co.
	Individual formal learning	“Training sessions. Doing vocational training, welding courses, forklift operation, and troubleshooting.” —Team leader, Donut Co. “Training that I had to go through online.” —Production worker, Croissant Co.
Informal learning	Learning through interaction	“And you talk about it. You are together for a moment. And you have a conversation. So you also share experiences. Which in that way also means you are already learning from each other again. . . . If you happen to be doing something different in practice. You know. This acts as a wake-up call again. —Team leader, Donut Co. “That is definitely discussed and explained directly on the floor by the line managers, like, Okay, this happened, and next time we can do it this way and that way.” —Planning coordinator, Croissant Co. “I really like talking about things together and having conversations. That way, I can learn a lot because you also learn from other people.” —Production worker, Wood Co.
	Learning through experience	“If you do it, you just have more experience. You see how it works.” —Production worker, Croissant Co. “It is the same as learning to drive. You get 100 percent of the theory to learn how to drive, but in the end, you forget about 30 percent of it. And the other 30 percent, you figure out on your own.” —Team leader, Donut Co. “People here learn in practice just by doing.” —Staff planner and L&D manager, Wood Co.
Static learning approach	Standard training	“We have standard training sessions.” —Team leader, Donut Co. “Certain programs have been implemented that are simply repeated every year.” —Planning coordinator, Croissant Co. In principle, it [training] is required.” —Staff planner and L&D manager, Wood Co.
	Coordination and formalizing learning	“We created those [modules] ourselves, including photos. What we are still working on to complete the loop is ensuring that after completing the modules and logging the required hours, employees also officially take proficiency tests.” —HR manager, Donut Co. “That we have elaborated for every role, what you need to be able to do and know to perform your role, and that we have described a learning solution for each skill and competency.” —L&D manager, Croissant Co. “They can learn it from a teacher. That they get time off to absorb theory.” —Staff planner and L&D manager, Wood Co.
Dynamic learning approach	Adapting learning options and process	“You also have to adapt to new generations, who want to learn in different ways.” —HR manager, Donut Co. “A balance between what people need. Because you have to make sure they stay attentive.” —Production worker, Wood Co.
	Customizing learning offer	“It’s not about the quality of the individual but about adapting to how someone processes and absorbs knowledge.” —HR manager, Donut Co. “If you don’t know right now. We explain it to you. And even if we have to explain it three times. Whether you learn it or whatever. Then we just do that.” —Team leader, Wood Co.

(Continued)

**TABLE 5. continued**

Second-order themes	First-order codes	Representative first-order data
Manager-driven learning	Leaders facilitating learning	<p>“At the core, we try to ensure that all levels have the opportunity to develop through their roles, and we facilitate that.” —HR manager, Donut Co.</p> <p>“It’s important that you give someone enough time. The first time, he doesn’t see what he sees the second time, and the second time, he doesn’t see what he sees the third time.” —Production worker, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“There is increasingly more attention given to ensuring that people get space and time to learn things. And most people find that pleasant. I do, at least.” —Production worker, Wood Co.</p>
	Leaders promoting learning	<p>“And all shift leaders ask, ‘Hey, can we help you with anything? Do you want to grow? Do you want to learn something new?’” —Team leader, Donut Co.</p> <p>“I think it’s important to pay attention to people who want to develop. Because from my experience, if you see someone’s ambition and you support them, they go very far. So that is very important.” —Production worker, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“Further development. And you have to put your employees in that too. Get [them] on board. So you have to give them the guidance.” —Staff planner and L&amp;D manager, Wood Co.</p>
	Leaders offering perspective and challenge	<p>“When we [team leaders] think, ‘Hey, that person has been on the same line for too long,’ we always go to that person and say, ‘Hey, you’re doing well. Would you like to move to the next one?’” —Team leader, Donut Co.</p> <p>“The only thing I do in this regard is sometimes intentionally scheduling people in a different position. For example, if someone is always working on line one, I might think, ‘Well, that’s getting a bit monotonous,’ so I occasionally assign her to another line.” —Planning coordinator, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“Team leaders facilitate and encourage employees to think in a different way.” —Staff planner and L&amp;D manager, Wood Co.</p>
Employee-led learning	Employees indicating desire to learn	<p>“In our culture, it’s more common for people to ask for it [learning] themselves.” —Team leader, Donut Co.</p> <p>“Right now, the responsibility lies with the team leader. But actually, I think it should shift a bit more toward the employee. I mean, after all, it’s their life, their job.” —Planning coordinator, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“You have to take a look at yourself first anyway. . . . [and] see where your qualities [and needs] lie. And I think that a manager can play a guiding role in that and really has to have those conversations with his employee.” —Production worker, Wood Co.</p>
	Employees recognizing learning moments	<p>“I’m surrounded by experienced people. If there’s something I don’t know, or if I have questions afterward, I can always go to them and ask, ‘Hey, do you have any tips for me?’” —Team leader, Donut Co.</p> <p>“They will have to recognize those moments, as my colleague just said. Like, hey, this is a dead moment. I can now use this time for some informal learning.” —L&amp;D manager, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“People also do it [learning efforts] themselves.” —Team leader, Wood Co.</p>
Embedding learning culturally	Values supportive of learning	<p>“Tolerance of mistakes.” —Team leader, Donut Co.</p> <p>“It’s important to pay attention to people.” —Production worker, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“Awareness that everyone has to develop. Stand still is to go backwards.” —Staff planner and L&amp;D manager, Wood Co.</p>
	Artifacts of learning	<p>It’s quite an open, open location here, open people, everyone is very open.” —Donut Co., HR manager</p> <p>“We launched our own learning platform. . . . We give you all the space you need to grow at your own pace and adapt to the times. That way, we stay ready for the future, together.” —Vacancy text, Croissant Co.</p> <p>“We walked through the factory and we had to think . . . And where it is a mistake we come to slide on a sticker.” —Production worker, Wood Co.</p>

training needs, employees gradually became autonomous in deciding which learning activities to pursue. Meanwhile, managers continued to support employees’ ownership. “Interest comes from them . . . ‘I would like to learn more about this’, and then you as a team leader notice that and then you also get involved and then you offer that space,” explained a team leader.

In 2022, Donut Co. introduced a “function house” that clarified skill requirements for career progression, encouraging employees to design and direct their own learning journeys. This further expanded employees’ ownership, as they were expected to make informed decisions about their professional development. Employees welcomed this change, taking the initiative and being proactive regarding their

learning. The HR manager noted, “People from the floor do indicate, ‘Hey, I do want to develop myself there.’”

*Organizational Learning Culture Journey:* Donut Co. embraced both formal and informal learning, supporting the development of an organizational learning culture characterized by values of openness, learning from mistakes, and self-directed learning. Though learning-oriented core values were established and codified, they had not yet been fully embraced. The HR manager explained, “Our core values are team spirit, passion, and open dialogue. That’s what we strive for. We’re not there yet. . . . we can definitely still improve together.”

Efforts to continuously enhance learning further illustrate the company’s progress toward an organizational learning culture, which is reflected in its value statement: “Our company culture can be described as informal and open, with a no-nonsense mentality.”

Learning from mistakes and experimentation was reportedly deeply ingrained in the organization. A production worker stated, “We have an environment where people dare to ask questions and dare to take that step to make a mistake. And if someone makes a mistake, we are never the first ones to criticize them.” A team leader remarked, “Learning by trying, that is the culture we have.”

### ***Croissant Co.: Individual Formal and Informal Learning***

*Learning Intention:* In its pursuit of developing an organizational learning culture, Croissant Co. placed primary emphasis on formal learning. The learning and development (L&D) manager stated that the learning culture should be “as formal as possible. Because the more we can take it away from the workplace, the less stressful we are in the workplace. . . . Everything we can theorize, we theorize.” More specifically, Croissant Co. prioritized individual formal learning, followed by informal learning, which was preferred over group formal learning. The L&D manager explained, “Make a piece formal by means of an e-learning. Then informal learning is the next option for us. And if that is difficult, then it will be classroom. And that is the least pleasant variant for us.”

*Formal Learning:* Croissant Co. provided individual formal learning through training and online modules covering broad, non-role-specific topics, including health, machinery usage, and food safety. The company did not engage in group formal learning due to operational restrictions. The production engineer explained, “Classroom learning is actually impossible for us because then our production cannot run.” Hence, Croissant Co.’s formal learning was exclusively individual-based.

*Informal Learning:* Although Croissant Co. expressed interest in informal learning—specifically, learning through interaction with others—the company deemed practical application of such activities difficult to achieve. The production engineer explained, “You’d rather interact. You would prefer to do that in a group so that you can talk about examples. And that you can discuss with each other. But yes, that is almost

impossible for us. That is just not practically feasible for us.” Informal learning through gaining experience was, however, relatively established at Croissant Co. A production worker stated, “There is a bit of theory and training that I also had to do online here. And then I just went to practice. . . . It’s just practice, you’re just working on it. . . . You just want your experience when you do it.” However, informal learning through mistakes was not encouraged. A planning coordinator remarked, “Room for error? I don’t really want to say. Yes, occasionally it does [happen] that something goes wrong, and then it is indeed because it has happened to a new person. But, it is still not really appreciated.”

To nurture informal learning and encourage member engagement, Croissant Co. assigned the role of a practical trainer, whose responsibility, the L&D manager explained, “on the shop floor [was] to take over as a coach and as a companion . . . on the road [and] in the workplace.”

*Static Learning Approach:* Croissant Co. adopted a static approach to learning, evident in several aspects. The emphasis was primarily on structuring, systematizing, and centralizing learning. The existing learning management system (LMS), its internal academy (a central, in-house entity dedicated to learning and development), procedures, instructions, and learning tools such as a skills matrix to assess and track skills illustrate Croissant Co.’s static approach. The academy particularly reflects this notion, which the L&D manager emphasized, “The academy is the engine behind everything.”

Additionally, training modules were not updated, leading to repetition without new learning. The planning coordinator explained, “[We] don’t learn anything new; [we] just learn what they [people in the firm] already know.” Although Croissant Co. codified in its documents that personal learning requirements and preferences would be considered (“We want to understand what drives you and what your ambitions are so we can grow together,” as stated in a vacancy text), the company did not practically engage in customizing learning. Indeed, the company mostly offered predefined e-learning options.

*Ownership of Learning:* Croissant Co.’s ownership of learning and the guidance toward the development of an organizational learning culture rested with managers. A planning coordinator explained, “Responsibility lies with the team leader. . . . It doesn’t come from the people themselves. . . . [The] majority still feel it as an obligation.” Relatedly, a production worker emphasized the importance of managers’ support for learning and development: “Managers pay attention to people who want to develop . . . and they express appreciation when you take initiative.”

*Organizational Learning Culture Journey:* Croissant Co. recognized that it was in the early stages of developing an organizational learning culture. The L&D manager explained, “Developing the learning culture, well, we just haven’t put that one yet. . . . Hopefully it is something that will be in our DNA. But I really don’t think we are there yet.” Nevertheless, the first signs of change were evident. A production engineer

noted, “It is indeed clear that the organization values it [learning] and wants to facilitate it.” Similarly, a planning coordinator stated, “I think something has changed. That people do, there is more talk about it [learning]. It is looked at more.”

At Croissant Co., learning was codified as a core principle, as documents revealed a focus on being solution-oriented and innovative, taking initiative, and creating individualized learning paths. Furthermore, the vision and mission document highlighted, “We believe development and growth are essential . . . we can grow together.” Metaphorically comparing learning to building a house, the L&D manager emphasized the importance of ongoing efforts to integrate learning into everyday work life: “I do think we are already working a bit on the furniture. I just hope that everything will be furnished by the end of this year. And then we have to live in it.”

### **Wood Co.: Group Formal Learning and Informal Learning**

*Learning Intention:* Wood Co.’s initiative to develop an organizational learning culture had been ongoing for a year, during which the company engaged in both formal and informal learning. As part of this initiative, Wood Co. began to emphasize formal learning, as noted by the staff planner and L&D manager: “Before, we had no training or courses. There was really just learning on the floor.”

To support the development of their organizational learning culture, Wood Co. recognized the importance of combining formal and informal learning. The HR business partner explained, “We do the two side by side. Which we are doing now.” Both forms of learning were considered mutually supportive. However, Wood Co. was in the process of finding the appropriate balance between these two forms of learning. A production worker remarked, “Finding balance between formal and informal learning is difficult. It is not yet at the level it should be. . . . the right balance still needs to be found.”

*Formal Learning:* Wood Co.’s formal learning activities were primarily group-oriented (for example, workshops). The HR business partner stated, “Formal learning does provide a kick-off where they learn the why and how.” In particular, leadership programs were initiated to develop managers, as Wood Co. acknowledged their significance in fostering an organizational learning culture. “Managers are an important link within the company to realize a cultural change. So we followed a leadership program,” outlined the HR business partner. Additionally, workshops on problem-solving behaviors were offered, involving the entire production team. This combination indicates that Wood Co. engaged in group formal learning activities that supported informal learning activities.

Focusing on group formal learning in the first year of the initiative, Wood Co. planned to expand its formal learning offerings in the future by incorporating individual formal learning opportunities, such as e-learning. The HR business partner specified that the aim of this expansion was to ensure

At Croissant Co., learning was codified as a core principle, as documents revealed a focus on being solution-oriented and innovative, taking initiative, and creating individualized learning paths.

that it “really becomes a combination of formal and informal learning.”

*Informal Learning:* Wood Co. was strongly committed to informal learning, which was evident in its emphasis on experiential learning and learning from mistakes. The staff planner and L&D manager explained, “We learn in practice just by doing.” Relatedly, the HR business partner noted, “Mistakes can be made here and we just want to learn from our mistakes.”

Further informal learning activities, such as collaborative problem-solving, feedback and feedforward, and shadowing were practiced, underscoring Wood Co.’s commitment to informal learning. The HR business partner stated, “We do much more with informal learning than with formal learning. Because you then get that solution-oriented approach, together with the workshops.” Lastly, Wood Co. had appointed two learning ambassadors to encourage colleagues to explore learning opportunities. “We have learning ambassadors to really get that learning culture within our company,” noted the HR business partner.

*Static and Dynamic Learning Approach:* Wood Co.’s learning approach was both static and dynamic. The use of standardized learning tools and techniques was evidence of the company’s static approach. The HR business partner explained, “We have a whole box of work instructions.” In support of its learning, Wood Co. was in the process of implementing an LMS, which reflects a static approach by standardizing and structuring learning, providing a centralized framework for the delivery, management, and tracking of educational content. The staff planner and L&D manager stated, “We are also in the process of selecting an LMS system. . . . to make learning more accessible. To make it live even more.”

Wood Co. further exhibited a dynamic approach by adapting support for learning and recognizing that different requirements and needs had to be accommodated. A team leader emphasized, “Not everyone is the same. The one [explaining things to him] went through in a week. And the other one takes two, three weeks. Yes, that’s just part of it.”

*Ownership of Learning:* Initially, the development of Wood Co.’s organizational learning culture was driven by management. The HR business partner explained that it was “quite top-down.” From the outset of the initiative, management

informed and included everyone. The L&D manager remarked, "Because this is new, I went around the factory handing out flyers and personally informing everyone: 'Hey, this is what we're going to do. . . . If you have any questions, come to me.'" Learning was originally directed by management, but ownership quickly shifted to employees. The HR business partner explained, "Where at first the employee was really listening, like, 'Well, manager, tell me,' the role of the employee is now also becoming very important." The production worker shared, "I also made a personal development plan for myself. . . . I always try to learn something. I always try to find something I would like to learn."

At the same time, managers remained supportive. The staff planner and L&D manager stated, "And you have to put your employees in that [further development]. You have to give them the guidance." The HR business partner added, "[The] manager mainly has an exemplary role and a bit of clear expectation management. . . . employees take ownership." Wood Co. viewed the learning journey and the development of its organizational learning culture as a path requiring collaboration between managers and employees. "It really has to be a co-creation," noted the staff planner and L&D manager.

*Organizational Learning Culture Journey:* Wood Co. formally started its organizational learning culture development initiative in 2023, aiming to become a learning organization. The L&D manager emphasized, "We aim to cultivate a mindset, a sense of awareness that everyone must continue to develop, and standing still means moving backward." As part of the initiative, Wood Co. identified the core values that should define its organizational learning culture. The HR business partner explained, "We did a culture survey last year into the core values. Four core values emerged. That was solidarity, solution-oriented, professional and innovative . . . solution-oriented, because that does indeed hook up with our learning culture."

Company documents revealed that corresponding learning-supportive cultural aspects were codified: "solution orientation" (value statement); "we are always eager to learn new skills" (mission and vision); and "growth and development" (value statement and vacancy text).

On the one hand, group formal learning through workshops supported the development of the organizational learning culture. A staff planner explained, "They [workshops] signal a clear shift in direction [for employees] . . . and provide a pressure-free environment for employees to engage in conversations." On the other hand, informal learning also supported the development of the organizational learning culture. The HR business partner stated, "Correction [feedback] and providing feedforward truly leads to behavioral change."

Since the launch of the organizational learning culture development initiative, Wood Co. has strengthened its learning environment. A production worker noted, "More learning is being used. And you also get more and more space to learn. More and more attention is being paid to [it]."

We provide an overview of the key findings for each company (Table 6).

### **Findings from Cross-Case Analysis**

We present the findings from the cross-case analysis, highlighting patterns and themes across the cases.

#### ***Complementary Learning Activities: Formal and Informal Learning***

All three organizations used both formal and informal learning mechanisms, but the composition, format, and integration of these activities varied significantly.

Donut Co. adopted a comprehensive approach, combining individual and group formal learning with a strong emphasis on experiential informal learning. Wood Co. prioritized group formal learning, particularly through company-wide workshops and leadership programs, supplemented by a wide array of informal learning practices. In contrast, Croissant Co. relied exclusively on individual formal learning, primarily through online modules, and engaged only marginally in informal learning due to operational constraints.

Both Croissant Co. and Wood Co. employed individual formal learning not only to convey job-relevant knowledge but also to support informal learning activities, suggesting that formal learning served as a complementary mechanism to foster informal learning. As one Wood Co. team leader stated, "And now we are also working on another workshop. On awareness of problem-solving ability, thinking." Meanwhile, the L&D manager at Croissant Co. stated, "We are going to train them now to explain something about learning. How do you give feedback, your growth mindset."

At Croissant Co., however, informal learning through mistakes was not supported, in stark contrast to Donut Co. and Wood Co., where mistakes were framed as learning opportunities.

Despite these differences, all three firms acknowledged the complementary relationship between formal and informal learning. Even Croissant Co., whose informal learning was the least developed, expressed the interdependence of the two. "Informal and formal are always quite close to each other," explained the company's L&D manager.

#### ***Learning Flexibility Spectrum***

The cases illustrate a spectrum of learning approaches ranging from static (standardized, fixed) to dynamic (adaptive, customized).

All companies maintained static learning foundations through standardized training and documented processes: Donut Co. used checklists; Wood Co. relied on work instructions; and Croissant Co. centralized learning via its internal academy, LMS, and skills matrices, providing consistent but static offerings.

However, dynamic learning varied across cases. Donut Co. actively refined its modules, acknowledging diverse learning styles. The HR manager explained, "One is a visual thinker, the other learns from a book, the other

**TABLE 6. Case insights**

Case	Informal learning occurrences	Group formal learning occurrences	Individual formal learning occurrences	Organizational learning culture development timespan	Learning approach	Ownership of learning	Cultural embeddedness of learning
Donut Co.	Learning on the job using 70–20–10 principle; learning by gaining practical experience; interactions with coworkers; senior guide (mentoring); learning from failing and mistakes	Workshops, leader development program	Learning modules, training sessions	10+ years	Static (e.g., generic training) and dynamic (e.g., adaptive and customized learning opportunities)	Initially manager-driven; gradually employee-led, with ongoing managerial support	Deeply embedded: Learning is normalized, self-directed, and reinforced across formats and roles. Mistakes are embraced and informal learning is integrated into daily work.
Croissant Co.	Learning by gaining practical experience; early-stage coaching on the job	<i>None (due to production constraints)</i>	Learning modules, training sessions	1.5 years	Static (e.g., mandatory annual e-learning)	Mainly leader-driven; emerging employee initiative	Formally encouraged but shallow: Learning is promoted top-down, but constrained by structure and lack of peer interaction. Cultural internalization is limited.
Wood Co.	Learning on the job; learning by gaining practical experience; learning from mistakes; coaching and mentoring on the job; interactions with coworkers, problem-solving; job shadowing; learning-by-doing	Workshops, leadership development program, courses	<i>No individual formal learning yet, but planned</i>	1 year	Static (e.g., generic workshops) and dynamic (e.g., adaptive learning support)	Early transition from managers to employees, with ongoing managerial support	Emerging and accelerating: Learning is socially supported and actively encouraged. Mistakes are valued and collaborative structures foster early cultural anchoring.

only wants it demonstrated and then to imitate it . . . you have to adapt to how someone absorbs knowledge.” This dynamic approach to learning was reflected in recruitment, with learning preferences discussed during interviews to tailor future learning.

Wood Co. showed early signs of customization, recognizing that employees learn at different paces. A team leader explained, “Not everyone is the same. So the one [explaining things to him] went through in a week. And the other one takes two, three weeks.” According to the staff planner and L&D manager, Wood Co.’s anticipated LMS implementation aimed to “make learning more accessible and to make it live even more,” indicating a push toward dynamic delivery.

In contrast, Croissant Co. remained fully static, with its learning modules being repetitive, providing “mandatory

yearly repetition of similar training” without updating content. The planning coordinator noted that “[People in the firm] don’t learn anything new but just learn what they already know.”

This comparison highlights that static learning formed the essential base for all cases, but the presence and extent of dynamic, learner-centered adaptation exhibited differences.

**Wood Co. showed early signs of customization, recognizing that employees learn at different paces.**

Donut Co. and Wood Co. revealed a dual learning approach that encompassed both static and dynamic components, whereas Croissant Co. maintained a rigid, standardized system.

### ***Transition of Learning Ownership: From Manager-Driven to Employee-Led***

In all three companies, learning was initially manager-driven, evidenced by managerial efforts to guide employees toward learning and direct learning activities. Over time, a common trend emerged: Ownership of learning began to shift from managers to employees. Although the pace and extent of this shift varied, all companies demonstrated movement toward increased learner agency. Managerial support evolved into a more facilitative role rather than a directive one. Across the cases, managers provided encouragement, legitimacy, and space for employees to take charge of their learning and development.

Despite these similarities, the degree and speed of the shift toward employee-led learning differed notably. At Donut Co., the transition was deliberate and institutionalized. Employees gradually assumed greater responsibility for their learning, culminating in the introduction of the “function house” in 2022, which explicitly tasked individuals with charting their development aligned with career pathways. Managers facilitated this evolution by stepping back from directive roles and focusing on creating space and encouragement for employees.

Wood Co. followed a similar path but at a faster pace. Although the initiative began top-down, employees quickly took the lead in identifying learning needs and setting personal learning goals. The company promoted a narrative of “co-creation,” emphasizing shared responsibility regarding learning and positioning employees as the main drivers of their learning and development. Managers transitioned into facilitative roles early in the process, reflecting the rapid uptake of learning ownership by frontline workers.

In contrast, Croissant Co. exhibited a slower and more limited shift. Leadership remained actively involved in promoting learning, but employee initiative lagged behind. While there were indications that employees were encouraged to take ownership, actual learner autonomy was underdeveloped. The organization continued to rely heavily on top-down motivation, and a broad transfer of learning responsibility to employees had yet to materialize.

The development of organizational learning culture across the three firms appeared closely intertwined with the nature and balance of their formal and informal learning practices.

### ***Organizational Learning Culture Development: Embedding Learning Culturally***

While all three companies formally espoused learning-supportive values, the enactment of these values varied significantly (Table 7).

Donut Co. exemplified a relatively mature organizational learning culture, with openness, growth, and collaboration deeply embedded in everyday work. The company articulated core values such as “Team Spirit, Open Dialogue, and Passion,” framing them as essential for collective success. Its value statement outlined, “We encourage courage and teamwork among our employees . . . because together we are TOP!” Donut Co.’s commitment to learning was not mere rhetoric: Learning from mistakes was both psychologically safe and actively practiced. A team leader affirmed, “People dare to ask, dare to take that step to make a mistake.”

In contrast, Croissant Co. displayed an early-stage organizational learning culture, where values like “solution focus,” “development,” and “growth” were articulated in mission and vision statements but had not yet permeated day-to-day practices. The L&D manager acknowledged this developmental gap: “We want to move toward lifelong learning, but we’ve only just introduced the concept of learning . . . it would be great if people come up with their own ideas . . . but for me, it still feels like we’re not quite there yet.”

This gap between espoused values and practice was echoed by employees who appreciated recognition of their learning initiatives. A production worker explained, “Last week, my manager then dared to comment on my idea and just interfere a bit and give a bit of an idea about certain things for better points. I liked that he came to me and said, ‘Good, I appreciate that,’” suggesting early but fragile momentum toward embedding learning.

Wood Co. occupied an intermediate position, actively establishing its learning culture around values such as “solidarity,” “solution orientation,” and “professionalism.” These values were codified and prominently displayed, as the HR business partner noted: “Core values are projected very large in our production . . . making it visible.” However, Wood Co. also acknowledged challenges in shifting from reactive problem-solving to reflective learning, as an HR business partner pointed out, “We are very solution-oriented. But, for example, what we really need to learn is—that if a pen falls off the table—looking at why the pen fell off the table in the first place.” This self-awareness indicates a maturing organizational learning culture still grappling with deeper cognitive and behavioral shifts.

The development of organizational learning culture across the three firms appeared closely intertwined with the nature and balance of their formal and informal learning practices. Formal learning disrupted established routines and legitimized learning efforts, while informal learning contributed to instilling learning as an everyday practice. Donut Co.’s HR manager stated, “If you receive formal training, you receive handles that you can use . . . and the experience makes you internalize it.”

**TABLE 7. Cultural value themes (comparative evidence)**

Value theme	Illustrative evidence		
	Donut Co.	Croissant Co.	Wood Co.
Team spirit/solidarity	“Together we are TOP!” – Team leader, Donut Co.	“We help each other.” – Production worker, Croissant Co.	“We can’t do it every man for himself.” – Shift supervisor, Wood Co.
Openness/communication	“It’s quite an open location here, open people.” – HR manager, Donut Co.	“Open communication.” – L&D manager, Croissant Co.	“Let everyone participate.” – Production worker, Wood Co.
Growth and development	“Ambition and support.” – Production worker, Donut Co.	“Development and growth are essential.” – HR manager, Croissant Co.	“Standing still means moving backward.” – Staff planner and L&D manager, Wood Co.
Solution-focus and innovation	“Continuous improvement.” – HR manager, Donut Co.	“Being solution-focused and innovative.” – Production engineer, Croissant Co.	“We are very solution-oriented.” – HR business partner, Wood Co.

Similarly, learning flexibility served as a cultural enabler: Dynamic approaches promoted ownership, contextual relevance, and the behavioral internalization of learning—manifestations of an established organizational learning culture. In contrast, static approaches ensured consistency, thereby helping to anchor learning within the organization. Thus, learning flexibility acted not merely as a delivery choice but as a cultural mechanism shaping how learning was perceived, enacted, and embedded in the organization.

Finally, the transition of learning ownership reflected the depth to which the culture incorporated learning. Ownership indicated not only *who* drives learning but also *how* deeply learning is culturally embedded—whether it is lived, shared, and valued across the organization.

This shift from manager-driven to employee-led learning represented more than a redistribution of ownership; it signaled deeper changes in how learning was understood, prioritized, and ingrained within the organization. In all cases examined, the transition of learning ownership to employees functioned as a mechanism supporting the development of organizational learning culture, and the extent to which ownership of learning shifted to employees served an indicator of the maturity of the organizational learning culture.

At Donut Co., the gradual transition of learning ownership to employees helped consolidate a self-sustaining learning culture. At Wood Co., a faster transition acted as a cultural catalyst for participatory learning. In contrast, at Croissant Co., limited employee ownership reflected and reinforced a compliance-oriented culture, where learning remained largely manager-driven.

This evolution underscores that a maturing organizational learning culture involves a broader shift toward increasing learner agency.

## Discussion

Based on the empirical insights outlined, we summarize our main findings in a model that illustrates the journey of developing an organizational learning culture (Figure 2). This model demonstrates how both formal learning and informal

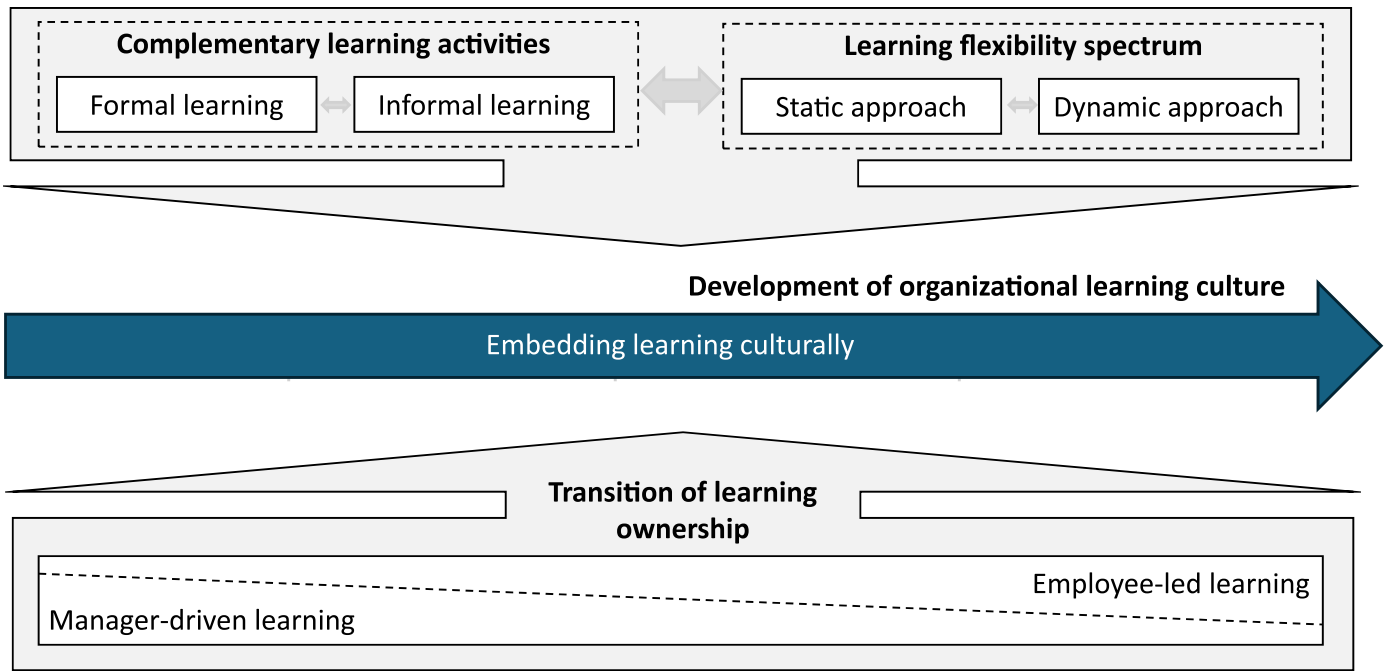
learning, along with static and dynamic learning approaches, play key roles in establishing an organizational learning culture. It also highlights the transition of learning ownership from manager-driven to employee-led learning. Formal learning provides structure, legitimacy, and conceptual grounding, while informal learning reinforces and contextualizes these insights through daily practice. These modes are not alternatives but mutually reinforcing elements of a continuous learning environment.

This study responds to calls for examining the interplay between formal and informal learning (Choi and Jacobs 2011; Kittel, Kunz, and Seufert 2021) and the importance of better understanding the development of an organizational learning culture (Friedman, Lipshitz, and Overmeer 2001; Schein 1990; Van Der Heijden et al. 2009). By providing empirical insights into the precursors of organizational culture, our findings address the limited empirical evidence in this area, as noted by Kim, Toh, and Baik (2022).

We confirm that formal and informal learning are not substitutes for one another (Svensson, Ellström, and Åberg 2004) and challenge arguments that informal learning is superior (Manuti et al. 2015). Instead, we emphasize complementary and interdependent roles both forms of learning play in developing an organizational learning culture. Our study shows that their combined use supports gradual cultural evolution, which is increasingly recognized as more attainable than radical shifts (Van de Ven 2021; Visnjic, Birkinshaw, and Linz 2022).

We contribute further to research on organizational learning cultures in SMEs. While previous studies emphasize the importance of developing an organizational learning culture to enhance innovation performance (Shaik et al. 2023), we illustrate how SMEs can systematically nurture such cultures through both formal and informal learning, in static and dynamic ways.

Although our study does not directly address innovation outcomes, it has important implications for innovation research. An organizational learning culture is recognized as foundational for innovation (Zhang et al. 2024). By empirically analyzing how formal and informal learning contribute to the development of this culture, we provide insights into



**FIGURE 2.** Model of the organizational learning culture development journey

the mechanisms through which organizations create conditions that are critical for innovation.

Informal learning has been linked to innovative behavior (Bednall, Sanders, and Runhaar 2014), and recent research identified it as a micro-level mechanism for innovation (Rabetino et al. 2025). Enriching this body of research, we argue that informal learning is a valuable practice in innovation management that merits intentional cultivation. Building on studies that emphasize leaders’ roles in fostering organizational learning cultures (Ahsan 2025; Saabye and Kristensen 2025), we suggest that learning-oriented leadership is a key enabler, creating conditions for continuous learning. Thus, we align with research on the human and behavioral dimensions of innovation (Weiss, Baer, and Hoegl 2022).

### Practical Implications

Both formal and informal learning are essential components in embedding learning within an organization’s culture. We present a set of practical recommendations derived from the findings, offering actionable guidance for organizations aiming to develop and strengthen a learning culture (Figure 3). To foster the development of an organizational learning culture, organizations should adopt a deliberate mix of formal and informal learning activities, ensuring that both types align with cultural objectives.

Learning initiatives should be explicitly culture-oriented. Informal learning formats, such as “culture labs”—collaborative spaces where employees co-create and reflect on organizational values—can support both cultural development and innovation. These should be complemented by formal learning activities, including action learning projects centered on cultural goals, culture-focused leadership development

programs, culture workshops, and recognition programs like “culture champion” initiatives to reinforce desired behaviors.

Organizations should also intentionally balance static and dynamic learning approaches. While static structures, such as checklists and standardized modules, ensure consistency, dynamic formats—adapted to individual needs and evolving contexts—are crucial for embedding learning as a lived experience. For SMEs, achieving this balance is even more critical as they often navigate complex and rapidly changing environments. Firms can leverage flexible learning platforms, encourage peer learning, and implement agile feedback loops to quickly adapt training programs to organizational changes and employee development needs.

To entrench values that support learning within the organization’s cultural fabric and to encourage corresponding learning-oriented behavior among members, leaders should adopt a “learning leadership” style. This approach ensures that employees gradually take ownership of their learning while still receiving support from management. Managers should consistently model, support, and legitimize learning behaviors. Rather than acting solely as initiators, leaders should serve as ongoing facilitators who create psychological safety, provide space for experimentation, and promote peer-based learning. The evolution from manager-driven to employee-led learning should be viewed not as a handover but as a cultural shift.

### Limitations and Future Research

A key limitation of this study is its design. Although we collected both real-time and retrospective data, we did not trace the development of organizational learning cultures

## Key Managerial Takeaways

	Focus Area	Practical Recommendation
1	<b>Blend Formal &amp; Informal Learning</b>	Combine structured training (e.g., workshops) with on-the-job, peer-based learning. Use both formats to reinforce cultural values.
2	<b>Make Learning Culture-Oriented</b>	Design learning activities (e.g., culture labs, action learning projects) that explicitly support cultural transformation.
3	<b>Balance Static &amp; Dynamic Learning</b>	Maintain standardized training for consistency but allow for personalization and adaptation to learner needs.
4	<b>Lead with a Learning Leadership Style</b>	Adopt a leadership approach that models continuous learning, provides psychological safety, and supports experimentation.
5	<b>Support Transition to Employee-Led Learning</b>	Encourage autonomy by enabling employees to identify and drive their own development while managers shift to facilitative roles.
6	<b>Recognize &amp; Reinforce Cultural Behaviors</b>	Use recognition programs (e.g., “culture champions”) to celebrate behaviors aligned with the learning culture.

**FIGURE 3.** Key managerial takeaways for developing an organizational learning culture

from their inception. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how learning interventions evolve over time and how formal and informal learning interact with broader organizational changes. This study is based on the assumption that organizational learning cultures are functional (see Kim, Toh, and Baik 2022, 1534). This study did not consider functionality or impact on effectiveness. A greater focus on outcomes is critical for future research. A promising direction for future research is to examine learning activities and organizational learning cultures beyond the intra-organizational level (Zhang et al. 2024). Future studies could build on prior work (Fuglsang and Hansen 2022) by exploring how cross-boundary learning shapes the evolution of organizational learning cultures.

### Conclusion

This study clarifies the often-abstract notion of an organizational learning culture by demonstrating how organizations can intentionally develop it through a balanced integration of formal and informal learning. It offers a practical pathway for developing cultures that are contextually relevant. Practitioners can leverage these insights to create learning environments that align with both organizational

goals and employee development. By adopting a combination of static and dynamic learning approaches, organizations can ensure consistent growth while remaining adaptable to change. Furthermore, encouraging employee-led learning, supported by management, can foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. Ultimately, this research provides a practical roadmap for companies aiming to embed learning into their culture and drive long-term success.

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