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Effects of Integrating Peer Learning into Operational Risk Management at the Office Du Thé du Burundi (OTB)

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Abstract: This study examined the effects of integrating peer learning into operational risk management at the Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB). Using a cross-sectional survey design with a stratified sample of 60 employees drawn from the OTB workforce, the research measured perceived changes in risk identification, mitigation, collaboration, and innovation following peer-learning interventions. Results show that, 78.4% of respondents reported enhanced capacity to identify potential risks, 66.7% noted increased collaboration between teams, and 75% observed better risk-mitigation outcomes; however, only 45% associated peer learning with innovation in risk practices. Qualitative insights from open responses suggest that the benefits depend on session relevance, participant engagement, and follow-up mechanisms. The paper discusses how peer learning can strengthen operational risk management in production organizations, outlines practical recommendations for program design and implementation, and identifies limits and avenues for further longitudinal research. These findings contribute actionable evidence on peer learning as a low-cost capacity-building approach in risk-sensitive firms.

Keywords: Peer Learning, Operational Risk Management, Risk Identification, Risk Mitigation, Organizational Learning, Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB)

1.1 Background of the Study

In the contemporary business landscape, risk management and financial performance represent two of the most pressing priorities for organizations worldwide. Firms are increasingly expected not only to identify and mitigate potential risks but also to sustain high levels of operational efficiency and financial performance in order to remain competitive. These demands have become more complex with the growing uncertainty and volatility of global economic conditions, which require organizations to explore innovative approaches for building resilience and adaptability. Among the most significant of these approaches is *peer learning*, an educational method that emphasizes learning through reciprocal knowledge exchange among colleagues. Unlike traditional training methods where expertise is transmitted unidirectionally from an instructor to trainees peer learning promotes a participatory and horizontal interaction. Employees learn by sharing experiences, discussing challenges, and identifying solutions collectively. This approach encourages engagement, enhances collaboration, and nurtures problem-solving skills that are directly relevant to operational realities. In the context of organizations, peer learning has been

increasingly recognized as a cost-effective and sustainable means of capacity building, especially in resource-constrained environments.

The integration of peer learning into operational risk management (ORM) is particularly relevant for institutions operating in volatile and high-risk sectors. Operational risk, as defined by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (2001), refers to losses resulting from failures in internal processes, people, or systems, as well as from external events. These risks can significantly disrupt business continuity, weaken financial performance, and erode organizational reputation. Traditional risk management frameworks, while valuable, often struggle to ensure sustained employee involvement, cross-departmental collaboration, and rapid responsiveness to emerging challenges. This gap highlights the need for participatory and adaptive approaches such as peer learning.

The role of corporate culture further strengthens the argument for integrating peer learning into ORM. Corporate culture, defined as the set of shared values, beliefs, and practices guiding organizational behavior, profoundly influences employee engagement, decision-making, and long-term performance. Research has shown that organizations with strong collaborative cultures are more resilient and innovative (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Quinn, 1988). By embedding peer learning into ORM, organizations not only strengthen technical skills but also foster a culture of mutual accountability, openness, and continuous learning.

The Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB) offers a compelling case for this inquiry. As a state-owned enterprise specializing in the production and export of tea, OTB occupies a central place in Burundi's economy. The institution contributes substantially to the country's GDP, foreign exchange reserves, and employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas. However, like many organizations in developing economies, OTB faces substantial operational risks. These include inefficiencies in production processes, supply chain disruptions, outdated technology, human errors, and external shocks linked to fluctuating global tea markets. The COVID-19 pandemic further underscored these vulnerabilities, revealing the limits of conventional risk management strategies and the urgent need for more adaptive approaches.

Middle-level managers at OTB, who are responsible for daily operations and the implementation of risk management measures, often lack sufficient resources and structured opportunities for continuous learning. Traditional training programs, while occasionally available, are typically costly, time-bound, and not always aligned with the practical challenges faced on the ground. Peer learning presents itself as a practical alternative that leverages internal knowledge, builds on shared experiences, and fosters collective ownership of risk management outcomes. Furthermore, the broader economic environment in which OTB operates amplifies the need for innovative approaches to ORM. The global financial crisis of 2008 and, more recently, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated how external shocks can rapidly destabilize organizations, especially in developing economies. In Burundi, enterprises such as OTB must navigate an uncertain and competitive market environment, while simultaneously striving to maintain profitability and social responsibility. In such contexts, building internal resilience through employee-centered learning strategies is not only desirable but necessary for survival and growth.

This background underscores the relevance of studying peer learning as a mechanism for enhancing ORM at OTB. By exploring how this approach influences employees' capacity to identify and mitigate risks, improve collaboration, and foster innovation, the study seeks to contribute to both theory and practice. On the theoretical side, it enriches the literature on participatory learning and organizational risk management. On the practical side, it provides evidence-based recommendations for public enterprises in Burundi and similar environments on how to strengthen operational resilience and performance through low-cost, high-impact interventions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Operational risk has become one of the most critical challenges faced by organizations across the globe. Defined by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision (2001) as the risk of losses resulting from inadequate or failed internal processes, human errors, systems breakdowns, or external events, operational risk has direct implications for financial performance, organizational resilience, and long-term sustainability. In modern organizations, particularly those in emerging economies, these risks are exacerbated by resource constraints, technological gaps, and rapidly changing environments. The Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB), as the country's largest state-owned enterprise in the tea industry, epitomizes these challenges. OTB is tasked not only with generating profits and contributing to Burundi's GDP, but also with ensuring employment for thousands of workers and supporting rural development. However, the organization faces increasing exposure to operational risks, including disruptions in production processes, inefficiencies in supply chain management, limited adoption of modern technologies, and vulnerability to external market shocks. Left unaddressed, these risks can lead to financial losses, reputational damage, and reduced competitiveness in an already fragile economic environment. While OTB, like many other organizations, has adopted conventional approaches to operational risk management, these methods often fall short. Traditional frameworks are largely top-down, with limited engagement from employees at middle and lower levels. They emphasize compliance and reporting rather than continuous learning and adaptive problem-solving. As a result, risk management initiatives often struggle to secure sustained employee involvement, to promote cross-departmental collaboration, or to generate innovative solutions to emerging risks. Moreover, they may fail to address the real-world complexities that employees face in day-to-day operations, thereby reducing their practical effectiveness. It is in this context that peer learning offers a potentially transformative alternative. Peer learning emphasizes mutual knowledge sharing and collaboration among employees, enabling them to draw directly from each other's experiences and expertise. This approach can bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical realities, equipping employees with problem-solving tools that are immediately applicable. Through structured peer learning, employees not only strengthen their technical understanding of risk management but also develop soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability all of which are essential for effective ORM. Despite its potential, the role of peer learning in operational risk management remains underexplored, particularly in the African context. Existing literature highlights its benefits in enhancing knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation, but empirical evidence on its direct impact on ORM is limited. At OTB, anecdotal evidence suggests that informal knowledge exchanges already occur among employees; however, these interactions are not systematically structured, monitored, or integrated into organizational risk management strategies. This represents a missed opportunity to leverage an accessible and cost-effective learning method that could significantly enhance organizational performance.

Furthermore, the consequences of neglecting innovative approaches to ORM are severe. Inadequate risk management can result in costly disruptions, reduced efficiency, and reputational harm. For OTB, such outcomes could compromise its strategic role in Burundi's economy and weaken its contribution to national development. Given the tea industry's importance as a foreign exchange earner and a source of rural livelihoods, the stakes extend beyond the organization itself, affecting broader socio-economic stability. The problem, therefore, lies in the insufficient exploration and utilization of peer learning as a mechanism for enhancing ORM at OTB. While traditional methods have laid the foundation for risk management, they fail to engage employees fully or adapt to emerging challenges. Without integrating more participatory and innovative approaches, OTB risks remaining vulnerable to operational disruptions and losing its competitive edge in an increasingly demanding global market. This study is designed to address this gap. It investigates whether peer learning can significantly improve ORM outcomes at OTB by enhancing employees' risk-related competencies, facilitating better identification and mitigation of risks, fostering collaboration, and stimulating innovation. By focusing on the intersection of peer learning and risk management, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that will inform both organizational practices and academic discourse.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

General Objective : The main objective of this study is to analyze how the integration of peer learning into operational risk management can enhance organizational performance at the Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB).

Specific Objectives

- a) To assess the impact of peer learning on employees' competencies in managing operational risks.
- b) To examine the effects of peer learning on risk identification and mitigation strategies at OTB.
- c) To analyze how peer learning fosters collaboration and innovation in operational risk management.
- d) To identify challenges and opportunities associated with integrating peer learning into OTB's risk management practices.

1.4 Literature Review

The Concept of Operational Risk Management

Operational risk refers to the possibility of losses resulting from internal process failures, human errors, system breakdowns, or external events (Basel Committee, 2001). Unlike financial or market risks, operational risks are embedded in daily activities and thus require continuous monitoring and proactive management. Effective operational risk management (ORM) enables organizations to safeguard assets, ensure process efficiency, and maintain resilience in uncertain environments. ORM frameworks often emphasize risk identification, assessment, mitigation, and monitoring, but their effectiveness largely depends on employee involvement and organizational culture.

Peer Learning as a Pedagogical and Organizational Tool

Peer learning is an educational approach where individuals acquire knowledge and skills through interaction and mutual exchange with colleagues of similar status. According to Boud et al. (2001), peer learning fosters collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving by leveraging participants' experiences and perspectives. In organizational settings, peer learning contributes to knowledge transfer, capacity building, and innovation. Unlike traditional training, which is hierarchical and resource-intensive, peer learning is participatory, cost-effective, and adaptable to contextual needs.

Peer Learning and Risk Management

Research indicates that participatory learning methods, including peer learning, enhance organizational capabilities in risk-sensitive environments. For example, Gervais & Lemieux (2010) argue that collaborative learning approaches improve employees' capacity to identify and respond to risks. Similarly, studies in banking and manufacturing sectors have shown that knowledge-sharing practices help mitigate operational errors and reduce vulnerability to external shocks (Mikes, 2009; Power, 2016). However, most of these studies have focused on developed economies, with limited empirical evidence from African contexts.

Peer Learning in African and Developing Contexts

In many African organizations, capacity-building initiatives rely heavily on externally funded training programs. While these initiatives provide technical knowledge, they often lack sustainability and relevance to local challenges. Peer learning, by contrast, leverages internal knowledge and contextual experience, making it a more sustainable option for organizations with limited resources. For instance, studies in East African cooperatives and public enterprises have highlighted the role of peer-to-peer exchanges in strengthening teamwork, accountability, and innovation (Mutua, 2018; Nuwagaba, 2020). Yet, the integration of peer learning into formal risk management frameworks remains understudied, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and agro-processing.

Gaps in the Literature: While existing literature acknowledges the importance of peer learning in enhancing collaboration and organizational performance, few studies explicitly link peer learning to operational risk management practices. Even fewer have examined this relationship within the African context, and none, to the best of our knowledge, has investigated it within Burundi's tea sector. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing

empirical evidence on how peer learning influences risk identification, mitigation, collaboration, and innovation at the Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB).

1.5 Study Methods and Design

Research Design : This study employed a cross-sectional research design to assess the effects of integrating peer learning into operational risk management at the Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB). The design was chosen because it allows for data collection at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of employees' perceptions and experiences regarding peer learning and risk management practices.

Study Population: The target population consisted of 162 employees of OTB, covering different departments and hierarchical levels. This population was considered appropriate because it included both managers and staff directly involved in operational processes and risk management.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique : The sample size was determined using Bouchard's table for sample determination. From the population of 162 employees, a representative sample of 60 respondents was selected. Stratified random sampling was applied to ensure adequate representation of employees across different categories and departments.

Data Collection Instruments : Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed to the selected respondents. The questionnaires consisted of both closed and open-ended questions designed to capture quantitative data on peer learning and risk management, as well as qualitative insights on employee experiences and perceptions.

Data Analysis : The collected data were coded and analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarize responses. Tables and figures were used to present the findings. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to complement quantitative results and provide deeper insights.

Reliability and Validity : To ensure reliability, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a small group of employees before the actual survey. Adjustments were made based on feedback to improve clarity and consistency. Validity was ensured by aligning the questions with the study objectives and drawing from established literature on peer learning and operational risk management.

1.6 Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The survey included 60 employees of OTB, selected through stratified random sampling. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic distribution.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

<i>Variable</i>	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>	Male	33	55
	Female	27	45
<i>Education Level</i>	Secondary	10	17
	Bachelor's degree	30	50
	Master's degree	20	33
	Doctorate	0	0

Source : Field data, 2025

The educational diversity strengthens the representativeness of findings, ensuring perspectives from both academically trained and practically experienced staff.

Peer Learning and Risk Identification

The results demonstrate that peer learning significantly improved employees' awareness of risks. As shown in Table 2, 78.4% of respondents affirmed that peer learning sessions enhanced their ability to recognize risks in daily operations.

Table 2: Effect of Peer Learning on Risk Identification

<i>Response</i>	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Strongly Agree / Agree</i>	47	78.4
<i>Neutral</i>	7	11.6
<i>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</i>	6	10.0

Source : Field data, 2025

Employees explained that peer sessions allowed them to learn from past incidents shared by colleagues, which helped them anticipate similar risks. For example, one respondent noted: “*When my colleague shared how a simple negligence delayed tea processing, I realized I could also be vulnerable to such mistakes and became more attentive.*” This finding aligns with Mikes (2009), who observed that collective knowledge-sharing improves risk recognition and strengthens proactive prevention measures.

Peer Learning and Risk Mitigation Strategies

Regarding risk mitigation, 75% of respondents indicated that peer learning improved their ability to design and implement solutions. Table 3 summarizes the responses.

Table 3: Effect of Peer Learning on Risk Mitigation

<i>Response</i>	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Strongly Agree / Agree</i>	45	75.0
<i>Neutral</i>	8	13.3
<i>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</i>	7	11.7

Source : Field data, 2025

Employees explained that peer discussions often provided simple, practical strategies. For example, sharing techniques for monitoring machine performance or double-checking documentation reduced the frequency of operational errors. This supports Power (2016), who highlighted that informal mechanisms often yield pragmatic solutions more aligned with operational realities than formal, top-down methods.

Peer Learning and Collaboration

Collaboration was another area where peer learning had a strong effect. 66.7% of respondents reported improved teamwork and communication across departments. Employees said peer sessions provided a safe space for dialogue, breaking down barriers between hierarchical levels.

Table 4 : Peer Learning and Improved Collaboration

<i>Responses</i>	Number
<i>Yes</i>	66.7
<i>No</i>	33.3

Source : Field data, 2025

Findings shows that, 40 respondents (or 66.7%) answered Yes, stating that Peer Learning has fostered better collaboration among colleagues; 20 respondents (or 33.3%) answered No, believing it has not had this effect. Analyzing this data, the majority of participants, 66.7%, acknowledge a positive impact of Peer Learning on collaboration. This indicates that this method encourages employees to interact, work together, and share ideas to manage operational risks. These results show that Peer Learning creates an environment conducive to cooperation, where employees learn from one another and strengthen their professional relationships. This dynamic can enhance the overall efficiency of teams by facilitating collective problem-solving related to risks.

Peer Learning and Innovation

Innovation presented mixed results. Only 45% of respondents believed that peer learning fostered innovation in risk practices, while the majority (55%) remained neutral or skeptical. Employees explained that while peer discussions generated new ideas, these ideas often stalled due to bureaucratic rigidity, limited funding, or lack of leadership support.

Table 5: Peer Learning and Innovation in ORM

<i>Response</i>	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Strongly Agree / Agree</i>	27	45
<i>Neutral</i>	18	30
<i>Disagree / Strongly Disagree</i>	15	25

Source : Field data, 2025

This suggests that while peer learning has the potential to stimulate creativity, organizational culture and leadership commitment remain critical for translating ideas into practice. The finding supports Nuwagaba (2020), who observed that innovation is often stifled in African enterprises by rigid structures despite high levels of employee creativity. Qualitative responses reinforced the quantitative findings. Employees valued peer learning because it created a “safe space” where they could discuss mistakes without fear of blame. However, some cautioned that without proper facilitation and follow-up, peer learning risked being perceived as informal and less effective. This highlights the importance of institutionalizing peer learning and ensuring managerial support for sustainability.

Discussion of Findings

The study provides strong evidence that peer learning enhances operational risk management at OTB. Specifically, it improves risk identification (78.4%), mitigation (75%), and collaboration (66.7%), while its effect on innovation (45%) remains modest. These findings align with the literature emphasizing the value of participatory learning in organizations (Boud et al., 2001; Gervais & Lemieux, 2010). Importantly, this study adds to the limited empirical evidence from African contexts, showing that peer learning is a cost-effective and context-sensitive tool for strengthening risk management in resource-constrained environments. However, the weak link between peer learning and innovation reflects structural barriers within OTB, including bureaucratic rigidity and limited managerial support. Addressing these challenges would require not only peer learning sessions but also broader organizational reforms. In summary, the findings confirm that peer learning is not a substitute for formal risk systems but a complementary approach that enriches employee competencies, strengthens collaboration, and enhances resilience against operational risks.

1.7 Conclusion

This study examined the integration of peer learning into operational risk management (ORM) at the Office du Thé du Burundi (OTB). The findings revealed that peer learning significantly contributes to strengthening risk management practices by enhancing employees' capacity to identify risks (78.4%), develop mitigation strategies (75%), and improve collaboration across departments (66.7%). However, the influence of peer learning on innovation (45%) was relatively limited, largely due to bureaucratic structures and insufficient managerial support. These results confirm that peer learning is an effective, low-cost, and context-sensitive method for building organizational capacity in risk management. While it cannot fully substitute for formal systems and policies, it complements existing frameworks by engaging employees, fostering communication, and promoting shared responsibility. Importantly, the study fills a gap in the literature by providing empirical evidence from a developing-country context, demonstrating that peer learning can be successfully applied in public enterprises such as OTB. In conclusion, integrating peer learning into ORM has the potential to strengthen organizational resilience, improve operational efficiency, and enhance long-term sustainability. However, its success depends on structured implementation, leadership commitment, and a supportive organizational culture.

1.8 Recommendations

This study drew recommendations for action by different relevant stakeholders :-

For OTB Management

Institutionalize peer learning programs by integrating them into the official training and capacity-building framework of the organization ; Encourage leadership support for peer sessions to ensure that ideas generated are implemented and not lost due to bureaucratic rigidity ; Allocate resources (time, meeting spaces, and facilitators) to sustain peer learning practices and increase their perceived value among employees ; Promote a collaborative culture where employees feel safe to share experiences and mistakes, turning errors into opportunities for collective learning ; and Leverage peer learning for innovation by establishing mechanisms that capture, evaluate, and apply ideas emerging from discussions.

For Employees

Actively participate in peer learning sessions and share practical experiences to maximize the benefits for both individuals and the organization ; Take ownership of collective problem-solving, treating peer learning as a tool not only for knowledge transfer but also for professional growth ; and Foster cross-departmental collaboration by building networks of peers beyond immediate work units.

For Policymakers and Future Research

Extend peer learning initiatives across other public enterprises in Burundi to promote organizational learning and improve risk management practices in different sectors ; Encourage comparative studies across industries to assess the scalability and adaptability of peer learning in diverse contexts ; and Future research could employ longitudinal designs or statistical modeling (e.g., regression, correlation analysis) to measure the long-term impact of peer learning on organizational performance.

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