

Leadership and Creativity

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Abstract: This paper provides a review of old and new research examining contextual factors that can foster or hinder creativity at the individual and organizational level. In particular, we examine the role of leadership and the use of different human resource practices for developing a work context that is supportive of creativity. In the end, we discuss practical implications for managers and highlight some directions and areas for future research.

Keywords: creativity, intrinsic motivation, risk taking, organizational climate

JEL Classification: O31, O39, M12

1. Introduction

Much of the empirical research has defined creativity as an outcome, focusing on the production of new and useful ideas concerning products, services, processes

and procedures (Amabile, 1996; Ford, 1996; Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1991; Zhou, 1998). Using this definition, research has examined creative solutions to business problems, creative business strategies and creative changes in job processes

(Ford and Gioia, 2000; West and Anderson, 1996). Creative outcomes can range from minor adaptations in workflow or products to major breakthroughs and the development of new products and processes (Mumford and Gustafson, 1988). Prior researchers have suggested that some level of creativity is required in almost any job (Shalley, Gilson and Blum, 2000; Unsworth, 2001). Therefore, understanding that there is a spectrum of what would be considered a creative outcome is crucial for those in a position to lead and evaluate creativity. Sometimes, organizations may desire more incremental creative solutions while at other times may be desirable to have employees achieve more monumental breakthroughs. Inherently, the level of creativity required may be dependent on the job in question. For example, when examining the tasks performed by R&D professionals, major breakthroughs may be desirable and necessary. In contrast, for the jobs of assembly line workers, an incremental change in how the work is done may be a desirable creative outcome.

It is also important to clearly differentiate creativity from innovation. While the constructs of creativity and innovation are closely related, they are different. Specifically, creativity involves producing novel and useful products, processes or services (Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin, 1993; Shalley, 1995). Creativity differs from innovation in that innovation refers to the implementation of ideas at the individual, group or organizational level (Amabile, 1996; Mumford and Gustafson, 1998). Creativity is important in and of itself and can be conceptualized as a necessary first step or precondition required for innovation (Scott, 1995). And yet, it would not be correct to neglect

intuition as a stimulating factor of innovation (Niță, Simirad, 2009). In this article, we are concerned solely with creativity and the relationship among leadership, context and creativity.

Because creativity is considered by many to be historically, culturally and socially bound (Amabile, 1996), it is important to have agreement from those who are considered knowledgeable in the field concerning the level of creativity. For example, an industrial designer who may produce creative outputs in his own field is not necessarily in a position to judge the creativity incorporated in a new agricultural product. Therefore, with regards to creative outcomes, managers may play a key role in that they are often the individuals best suited to make the determination of whether an employee's outcome should be regarded as creative.

At any given time, a single manager may be overseeing employees who are working toward creative outcomes. As such, a key component necessary for creativity is the context within which creativity takes place because creative outcomes cannot and do not occur in a vacuum. Mumford et al (2002) discussed creative work as being contextualized (p. 709) in that the success of creativity depends on the capabilities, pressures, resources and socio-technical system in which employees find themselves (Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). In order for creativity to occur, leadership needs to play an active role in fostering, encouraging and supporting creativity. Hence, the role of leaders is to ensure that the structure of the work environment, the climate, the culture and the human resource practices (such as rewards, resources, goals and expected evaluations) are such that creative outcomes can and do occur (Shalley et al,

2000; Mumford, 2000; Mumford et al, 2002, Oldham and Cummings, 1996). In the following section we will review the social and contextual components of the work environment that have been found to influence the occurrence of creativity. Next, we discuss how managers can use this research to lead their employees to be more creative.

2. Social and contextual factors

The theoretical works of Amabile (1988, 1996) and Woodman et al (1993) serve as general frameworks that describe a variety of relevant factors that can either enhance or stifle employee creativity. Although these models do not specifically define any particular contextual factor, they present a foundation for suggesting why the context in which employees work is important for their creativity. Based, in part, on these models, several researchers have included context in their work on creativity (Mumford, 2000; Mumford et al, 2002; Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Shalley et al, 2000). However, a clear picture regarding what is important and when is still emerging. In general, these two models have categorized the major components of the work context into individual, job, group or team and organizational level factors. In the following sections of this article, we will use the same categorization to discuss how leadership can play a role at individual and organizational levels. Essentially, we argue that if managers are aware of the important social and contextual factors at all levels, they should be better able to positively affect the occurrence of creativity.

3. Individual factors

Individual creativity is said to be a function of personality factors, cognitive style

and ability, relevant task domain expertise, motivation and social and contextual influences (Woodman et al, 1993). For instance, researchers have identified a set of core personality traits that are reasonably stable across fields and result in some individuals being more creative than others (Barron and Harrington, 1981). These traits include broad interests, independence of judgment, autonomy and a firm sense of self as creative.

In addition to personality traits, creative performance requires a set of skills specific to creativity (Amabile, 1988). Creativity relevant skills can be defined as the ability to think creatively, generate alternatives, engage in divergent thinking or suspend judgment. These skills are necessary because creativity requires a cognitive-perceptual style that involves the collection and application of diverse information, an accurate memory, use of effective heuristics and the ability and inclination to engage in deep concentration for long periods of time (Amabile, 1988). When individuals access a variety of alternatives, they are more likely to make connections that lead them to be creative (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby and Herron, 1996). In addition, skills such as problem finding, problem construction, combination and idea evaluation are important for creativity (Reiter-Palmon, Mumford, Boes and Runco, 1997; Vincent, Decker and Mumford, 2002).

At the individual level, having depth and breadth of knowledge also has been linked to creativity. In contrast to personality traits and creativity relevant skills, domain-specific knowledge reflects an individual's level of education, training, experience and knowledge within a particular context (Gardner, 1993). Education provides exposure to a variety of experiences, viewpoints

and knowledge bases, reinforces the use of experimentation and divergent problem solving skills and develops individuals cognitively so that they are more likely to use multiple and diverse perspectives and more complicated schemas (Perkins, 1986). Training also can provide employees with guidance on how to generate novel ideas as a part of what they do rather than the exception. For instance, training strategies have been found to enhance individual creative thinking skills and problem solving ability (Feldhusen and Goh, 1995). In addition, by developing a more extensive skill set, employees should be more comfortable in trying new things and more aware of different alternatives and opportunities.

Experience in a field can be a necessary component for creative success because an individual needs some level of familiarity to perform creative work (Weisberg, 1999). That is, it would be difficult to be creative in an area without having some experience and knowledge about what has historically been constituted as routine or the status quo. Although, in some cases, task familiarity could lead to more "habitual" performance (Ford, 1996) it also can provide the needed opportunity to prepare for creativity through deliberate practice of task domain skills and activities.

Creativity also requires some level of internal, sustaining force that pushes individuals to persevere in the face of challenges inherent to creative work. Much of the research on individual creativity has focused on the importance of intrinsic motivation (i.e., their feelings of competence and self-determination on a given task) for creativity (Amabile, 1987; Shalley and Oldham, 1997). Essentially, research based on the intrinsic

motivation perspective has argued that specific contextual factors influence individuals' intrinsic motivation that, in turn, influences individuals' creativity. For example, R&D professionals have reported that intrinsic motivation is critical for creativity (Amabile and Gryskiewicz, 1987).

Finally, creativity inherently involves risks (Farr and Klein, 1997). That is, to develop new and useful products, individuals have to be willing to try and to possibly fail. For many, this is not an easy thing to do and can, in part, depend on the individual's predisposition toward risk as well as the organizations culture. Research has indicated that people tend to avoid risk and prefer more certain outcomes (Bazerman, 1994). However, because creativity does not just happen but rather evolves through a trial-and-error process that involves risk taking, failure will often occur along with success. If employees are risk averse, it is much easier for them to continue performing in more routine ways rather than take a chance with a new and potentially better approach. Therefore, a key in the motivation of employees toward creativity is to ensure that they feel encouraged to take risks and break out of routine of doing things.

This discussion highlights the point that while there are individual differences with regards to creativity, social and contextual factors can enable the expression of creative activity and motivate its applications. Therefore, if creativity is desired, managers can try to hire individuals that are more predisposed to be creative. Additionally, they can use an individual's predisposition for creativity as a factor in placing them in jobs where creativity may be more desirable and critical. However, if managers do not want to

screen for high innate levels of creativity ability or intrinsic motivation, they need to focus on affecting the social and contextual influences in the work environment that would be more likely to lead to creativity. This would be particularly useful for managers who already have a pool of employees that they want to be more creative. To this end, managers need to ensure that their employees are well trained so that they have the skills necessary to perform not only their work but also a depth and breadth of knowledge that should encourage them to be curious about other solutions, options or ways of doing their work. For instance, while job rotation has become popular, managers need to ensure that employees have enough experience in an area of work if they want them to be creative. Therefore, while individuals from different areas may bring a new perspective to the work, they also need to have sufficient experience and familiarity with the target area so that creativity can occur.

4. Organizational factors

Organizational climate

In trying to determine what makes a climate that is supportive of creativity, Amabile et al (1996) and Woodman et al (1993) have suggested a number of different characteristics. At the organizational level, there are several key contextual components that leaders should be aware of when managing their human resources to encourage creativity.

In general, organizations tend to have a basic climate that has often been described in accordance with Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions. A key for creativity can be the level of uncertainty avoidance – in other words, is the organization one where every

situation encountered is highly structured and where employees feel threatened by uncertainty or is it an organization where there is latitude regarding how work is to be performed and where there are opportunities to try new things? Similarly, Isaksen, Lauer, Erkvall and Britz (2001) proposed that the values, beliefs, history and traditions of the organization should affect employees' propensity to be creative. If leaders value and want employees to be creative, a critical contextual factor they need to attend to is fostering an environment where risk taking is encouraged and uncertainty is not avoided. This has been referred to as providing a culture where employees feel psychologically safe such that blame or punishment will not be assigned for new ideas or breaking with the status quo (Blake and Mouton, 1985; Edmonson, 1999). In support of these arguments, Nystrom (1990) found that organizational divisions were more innovative when their cultures reflected challenge and risk taking and Abbey and Dickson (1983) found that climate was the most important component for R&D innovativeness. Essentially, if creativity is a valued outcome and employees believe this to be true, they should be more willing to experiment with new ideas, more open to communicating and seeking input from others about new ideas and overall behave in ways that will lead to creative outcomes.

In addition, an organization's structure can play a critical role in enhancing or hindering creativity. When considering the link between structure and creativity, there are many things that leaders can do to ensure that the climate of their organization, division or general work area is one that supports creativity. For instance, research has found that

structures that promote open, ongoing contact with external others or information seeking from different or multiple sources were related to creativity (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992).

Another important component of organizational structure is how levels of responsibility and formal reporting relationships are organized. For instance, a highly bureaucratic organization may not encourage employees to try new ways of doing their work, whereas a flatter structure with wider spans of control may be more conducive to employee creativity. For instance, Hage and Aiken (1969) found that more authoritarian organizations tended to be less innovative. Similarly, Amabile (1988) asserted that individual creativity efforts are strengthened by the presence of organizational systems, procedures and processes that enable creativity. For example, Cummings and Oldham (1997) found that individuals with creative personalities produced more creative outputs than those with less creative personalities only when they were surrounded by an organizational context that facilitated creativity.

With regards to climate, leaders also may want to attend to the issue of conflict – how is conflict perceived in their department or organization? Work on the importance of constructive conflict for performance has found that task conflict can be beneficial for creativity (Jehn, 1995; Pelled, 1996). This is because when individuals experience conflict over how work is to be done, the process or act of disagreeing can result in the generation of new ideas and novel solutions. Research on group composition and conflict has found that diverse groups report having higher levels of task conflict and such conflict was positively related to creative performance (Jehn,

1995; Pelled, 1996).

A final component of organizational climate that needs to be considered by leaders is the justice or fairness climate. When justice is conceptualized as a contextual phenomenon (James, 1993) it has been argued that a fair context is one where individuals can focus on their work because they do not need to worry about how decisions will be made or individuals treated. With regards to creativity, it should be important that employees perceive their work context as one where decisions are made and applied in a just manner. Interestingly, fairness has not been considered in many studies of creativity. However, many of the components of procedural justice have been incorporated into creativity research. For instance, being able to participate in decision making was found to be a key process in enhancing innovation (West and Anderson, 1996) and is an integral component of procedural justice (Lind and Tyler, 1988). Likewise, participative safety, being able to give input without being judged or ridiculed has been positively linked to creativity (De Dreu and West, 2001). Finally, Amabile and Gryskiewicz (1987) describe being free from extraneous concerns as important for creativity and the justice literature stresses accuracy of information, correction of errors and ethics as crucial components of how decisions are made, how resources are allocated and how individuals are treated (Leventhal, 1976).

While overall climate is often regarded as a hard thing to change, there are several components of climate that are reasonably manageable and should have an effect on creativity. For example, fostering a climate where risk taking and constructive task conflict are encouraged can be role modeled

and actively encouraged and supported by management. Likewise, a review of a department's or organization's management hierarchy and reporting structure may highlight that employees are not encouraged to make decisions on their own and thus may be less likely to try new ways of doing their work. Finally, if the bureaucracy associated with changing anything is such that it takes a great deal of time and effort to get new ideas considered, employees may be less likely to try new approaches to work.

Organizational human resource practices

In terms of individual differences in ability to be creative, there are a variety of things that leaders can do through their human resource practices to ensure a creative environment is achieved and sustained (Mumford, 2000). According to Nită (2011), an individual's creative capacity is also based on "the knowledge triangle" and on "the block diagram of a receiver analyzer or transmitter analyzed". For example, selection devices can be used to try and select employees who are more likely to be creative or who have higher innate creative ability. Organizations can focus on screening prior to selection to try to hire employees based on their task expertise, intrinsic motivation and cognitive skills needed for creativity. Placement is also important so that individuals fit both the task demands and their immediate work context. In addition, given that creativity can be a requirement of the job, it may be helpful to match more creative types to jobs that require higher levels of creativity.

Training can be used to increase the incidence of creative thought processes and provide educational opportunities that can enhance task domain expertise. For example,

Basadur, Graen and Graen (1982) empirically demonstrated that training in creative thought processes resulted in positive improvements to attitudes associated with divergent thinking. In addition, research on training for creative problem solving has indicated that training can help enhance employees' level of creativity (Basadur, Wakabayashi and Graen, 1990). By offering training opportunities that can increase individuals' knowledge base or their creativity relevant skills, this should help employees to try to be more creative in their work. Leaders also can encourage employees to seek training outside of work and even to pursue higher educational degrees with the expectation that their work will benefit from this increased knowledge base.

While selection, placement and training are all important, leaders may also want to put systems in place to track creativity so as to be able to appraise and ultimately reward it appropriately. If organizations actually evaluate and reward creative ideas, then more should follow. In addition, some reward programs may facilitate creativity over others. For example, programs that may help to increase employees' long-term commitment to the organization such as profit sharing make them more willing to be creative. Moreover, although no job can be guaranteed, if employees feel that their jobs are relatively secure, they may be more willing to exert the cognitive effort required for creativity and more willing to take risks that could lead to creative outcomes. Therefore, leaders may want to consider the nature of employment practices and whether they are having the desired effects on employees' creativity.

While some areas that are related to

human resource practices have been touched in this article, a key point for leaders to focus on when thinking about human resources is consistency. The human resource practices used to select, train, appraise and reward employees, all need to be systematically linked together so employees know what is expected of them and when and how. This also ties back to the importance of procedural justice in that if employees understand how, when and for what they will be rewarded, promoted or even fired, then they should have a stronger sense of fairness and subsequent organizational commitment, loyalty and increased levels of organizational citizenship behavior. In addition, it is specifically these types of attitudes that need to be fostered for creativity to occur. For example, employees who are not loyal or committed to their organizations will not be willing to give more than is required by their job and therefore will be more likely to stick to the tried and true ways of performing their tasks rather than searching for alternative solutions.

5. Conclusions and future directions for research

In this paper we have tried to organize the existing research concerning individual and organizational factors that should be of interest to leaders within a framework of how leaders can manage their human resource to encourage creativity. Because leadership plays a key role in providing a context where creative performance can be nourished, it behooves leaders to understand the context within which their employees currently work and to ascertain whether there is a match for the level of the creativity desired.

Some implications for the management

of creative people should be highlighted. First, across the empirical studies reviewed, one common theme is that individuals need to feel they are working in a supportive work context. This applies to how leaders interact with employees and whether the climate is perceived to be supportive. Thus, managers should attempt to increase the supportiveness of the work context.

Second, if leaders truly desire creativity, they need to communicate this to employees in some way. This can be accomplished by setting goals or role requirements for producing creative outcomes and by modeling the types of behaviors that would be more likely to lead to creativity. Also, when leaders reward employees that are creative, this can send a powerful message that creativity is desirable.

Finally, there are some important things that leaders can do to help facilitate individual employee's ability to be more creative. These can include using selection criteria favoring those that have a higher predisposition to be creative. Moreover, leaders need to redirect employees' intelligence towards creativity as employees are not always aware of their abilities and potential for future growth based on the magnitude of their own intelligence (Nita, 2012). When placing employees in different jobs leaders can consciously factor in whether they fit well with the job and the level of creativity that may be required in that job. Further, managers can make sure that if employees are not necessarily predisposed to be more creative at work, they are given training in creative problem solving skills and any other content-based skills they need to be more creative in their jobs.

Currently, although we know about several social and contextual factors that

influence creativity, there is still a great deal we do not know. As such, future work should take a closer look at understanding the underlying processes that operate in conjunction with contextual conditions to influence individual's ability or motivation to be creative. For example, what is the relationship between domain or creativity relevant skills and specific contextual factors? To date, the primary intervening process examined has been motivation and this particular focus has some potential problems. For instance, although the theoretical models discuss the importance of intrinsic motivation, very little research has empirically tested this reasoning. In fact, recently, the importance of intrinsic motivation rather than motivation in general or some other underlying mechanism such as focus of attention has been questioned (Shalley and Perry-Smith, 2001).

Next, given the changing nature of work, today's employees are more likely to change jobs and professions, share jobs, move from one organization to another or work virtually. As such, one issue that leaders might need to consider is how the work production of creative outcomes might affect an individual's career progress, tenure in an organization and their continuance in

a particular field. In addition, because having sufficient knowledge and experience in an area benefits creativity, how can we retain knowledge when individuals change jobs? One way this could be overcome is by having a context and human resource practices that stress training and having employees work together in teams such that knowledge resides in the team. If this type of approach is accepted, the movement of individuals in and out of the team at different times will allow for an influx of some new ideas and new external communication channels but should not detract from the teams having the skill set necessary for creativity to occur. This suggests that leaders may want to consider a context within which teams are empowered and team members are not only cross trained but also trained as a team (Kirkman and Rosen, 1999). Moreover, because employees are increasingly working in locations separated by time and geography, this confronts leaders with a new level of complexity when trying to foster creativity. In virtual work, the social and climate components of the organizational context are stripped away; therefore, the effects of leadership in providing a context that supports creativity for this type of work remain to be explored.

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