

The influence of leader regulatory focus on employee creativity [☆]

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Abstract

Brockner and Higgins (Brockner, J., Higgins, E. T. 2001. Regulatory focus theory: Implications for the study of emotions at work. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 86(1), 35–66.) suggest that a leader's behavior may be perceived as an organizational endorsement of promotion-focused or prevention-focused concerns and that this perception will influence employee behavior by eliciting a congruent state of regulatory focus. We tested this hypothesis using matched pairs of leaders and employees from a Chinese firm and found that employee creativity is positively associated with the promotion focus of the supervisor's behavior. Consequently, through their actions, promotion-focused leaders may increase the likelihood of entrepreneurial action in their firms by eliciting a promotion-focused state of eagerness from their employees.

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1. Executive summary

Entrepreneurial action is essential to the emergence, performance, and survival of firms in competitive markets (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). Through the creation of new goods and services the entrepreneurial action process acts as the mechanism by which firms reinvent themselves (Brown and Eisenhardt, 1995). Therefore, generating a pool of novel and useful ideas is an organizational imperative (Amabile, 1996). For without these ideas, the number and quality of potential entrepreneurial actions is diminished, impairing a firm's ability to adapt to changing market preferences. Consequently, firms have incentives to seek to ensure a continuous flow of potentially valuable ideas by tapping what often remains a latent resource: the creativity of employees.

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In this article, we study the influence that leaders have on employee creativity through the socio-cognitive principle of regulatory focus. An increasing number of scholars (e.g., Baron, 2004; Brockner et al., 2004; McMullen and Shepherd, 2002, 2003; McMullen et al., 2007) have suggested that promotion focus may play a significant role in the entrepreneurial action process by encouraging creativity and the generation of ideas (Lam and Chiu, 2002). Research, however, has yet to study whether and how a leader's regulatory focus affects an employee's creativity in a field setting.

This study introduces a socio-cognitive explanation of how leadership influences employee creativity, develops a measure of an employee's perception of regulatory focus of a leader, and examines whether the promotion focus or prevention focus of this leader is associated with employee creativity. Using 70 matched pairs of leaders and employees, we find a significant positive relationship between the promotion focus of a leader's behavior and employee creativity. Consistent with theory and lab experiments that suggest that situations can prime states of regulatory focus within individuals and that people are likely to act more creatively when these states are promotion-focused, our findings suggest that a leader's behavior may be a key priming mechanism for encouraging employee creativity. Thus, we provide some initial support for the notion that leaders can prime a promotion-focused state of eagerness in their employees, which encourages these employees to engage in creative behavior.

2. Introduction

Novelty and usefulness are the “lifblood of entrepreneurship” and the hallmarks of creative ideas (Ward, 2004). Creativity is essential for organizational performance (Amabile, 1996), especially in highly innovative industries in which firms must compete by continually introducing new goods and services (Eisenhardt and Tabrizi, 1995; Lumpkin and Dess, 1996; Lumpkin and Lichtenstein, 2005). Because new goods and services are the result of entrepreneurial actions that are initiated by individuals (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006), stimulating and engaging employee creativity is a necessity in today's competitive and changing business environment (Corbett, 2005, 2007; Dess and Pickens, 2000; Lumpkin et al., 2004; Mumford et al., 2002). Depending on industries, job requirements, and product markets, the level of creativity required may vary; however, continuous improvement requires that virtually all jobs exhibit enough creativity to produce incremental adjustments if not radical breakthroughs (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). Because employee creativity serves as the foundation for organizational creativity (Amabile, 1988), there is much to be gained from an enhanced understanding of the factors that encourage or inhibit employee creativity (e.g., Shalley et al., 2004) and the entrepreneurial actions that it is likely to yield.

Given the critical role of leadership in organizations, it is surprising that leadership in general has not been seen as a crucial influence on creativity (Amabile et al., 2004). Studies that have examined the influence of leadership on employee creativity have focused primarily on supervisory support (Oldham and Cummings, 1996; Cummings and Oldham, 1997; Shalley and Gilson, 2004; Shalley et al., 2004; Madjar et al., 2002). Specifically, research has shown that employees demonstrate higher levels of creativity when leaders give informational and developmental evaluation and feedback (Zhou, 1998; Zhou and Oldham, 2001), provide encouragement (Frese et al., 1999), avoid close monitoring (George and Zhou, 2001; Zhou, 2003), develop quality leader-member exchange relationships (LMX) (Scott and Bruce, 1994; Tierney et al., 1999), demonstrate transformational leadership behaviors (Shin and Zhou, 2003), and enhance employee creative self-efficacy (Tierney and Farmer, 2002, 2004). These studies have investigated the specific behaviors used by leaders as they seek to support or reward creativity in employees through direct interactions.

Despite the fact that creativity does not “spring from a vacuum” (Bandura, 1986:105) and that “modeling probably contributes most to creative development” (Bandura, 1986:105), little attention has been devoted to the indirect channels, such as the socio-cognitive influence of role modeling, by which leaders influence the creative behavior of employees (Shalley and Gilson, 2004). Social cognitive theory suggests that individuals learn by observing role models and regulating cognitive resources to replicate the observed behavior (Bandura, 1986). When the observed models are high in status or power, their behavior is more likely to be attended to and replicated because it conveys expectations and approved norms (Bandura, 1986). Particularly, Brockner and Higgins (2001) proposed that leadership's behavior may be perceived as an endorsement of promotion-focused assumptions which then encourages creative behavior by eliciting promotion focus from employees.

Introduced by Higgins (1997), Regulatory Focus Theory (RFT) delineates two orthogonal self-regulatory systems (or mindsets), known as promotion focus and prevention focus, that influence individuals' behavioral preferences.

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