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## Leader–member exchange, feelings of energy, and involvement in creative work

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined how leaders create the impetus for creativity at work. One hundred ninety-three employees occupying a variety of jobs in Israeli organizations completed surveys at two points in time to assess their perceptions of the quality of their relationship with their leader (LMX), their level of energy, and their creative work involvement. SEM and regression analyses showed that LMX was positively related to employees' feelings of energy, which in turn were related to a high level of involvement in creative work. Factors that leaders should take into consideration in promoting followers' creative behaviors are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

In a knowledge-based economy, organizations face rising needs to increase not only productivity among their workers, but also their creativity. The speed of technological change as well as globalization and increasing competition, both domestically and internationally, has put enormous pressure on companies to be first-to-market, quick to solve problems, and ready to develop new ideas for products and procedures. Therefore, enhancing creativity, “the production of novel and useful ideas by an individual or small group of individuals working together” (Amabile, 1988, p. 126), has rapidly become a key goal of many organizations (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002).<sup>3</sup> This poses a major leadership challenge as managers seek ways to augment and maintain creativity at work. Thus, a key research question is how leaders motivate individuals to engage in creative tasks (Mumford et al., 2002).

The processes by which managers encourage employees to become involved in creative work have yet to be fully understood. Despite research suggesting that leadership is important to creativity and innovativeness (Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Scott & Bruce, 1994) and accumulating evidence that supports this notion (e.g., Redmond, Mumford, & Teach, 1993; Shin & Zhou, 2003; Sosik, Kahai, & Avolio, 1998; Tierney & Farmer, 2004), the potential influence of leadership on creativity has been understudied (Mumford et al., 2002). Amabile, Schatzel, Moneta & Kramer noted, “the literature linking specific leader behaviors to group performance is scant (Kim & Yukl, 1995, p. 352), and the literature linking specific leader behaviors to individual creative performance is even smaller” (2004, p. 9).

Although researchers have long been interested in the antecedents and consequences of job involvement (Carmeli, 2005; Dubin, 1956; Kanungo, 1982; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977), relatively little is known about involvement in creative work, i.e., “the extent to which an employee engages his or her time and effort resources in creative processes associated with work” (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007, p. 36). Creative work involvement is of importance for creative achievements and innovation (Carmeli &

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that we distinguish between creative work involvement and innovation. Innovation is the intentional application of new ideas, products or procedures (West & Farr, 1990). Creativity, when associated with the innovation process, occurs through the generation of a potentially valuable idea at the start of the innovation process or even earlier (West & Atlink, 1996).

Schaubroeck, 2007; Keller, 1997; Mumford et al., 2002). However, how and why individuals are motivated to become involved in creative work remains unclear and needs further research. As Carmeli & Schaubroeck noted: “although outcomes of the creative process are often studied, one of the key questions in creativity research relates to the motivation of individuals to become and remain creatively engaged at work” (2007, p. 36).

This theoretical call to better understand why some employees are more involved in creative tasks than others is crucial because creative work requires high levels of mental energy, focus and persistence and it differs from more repetitive work in terms of the demands it places on workers and leaders. Workers in jobs that require a high level of creativity are often individuals whose creative ideas do not fit into a typical 9–5 workday. They need to feel highly energized and enthusiastic about their work. The creative work environment has been described as highly dynamic “full speed”, “go”, and “breakneck” as compared to slow, job-trot environments with few surprises (Ekvall, 1996). Thus, leaders need to find ways to induce a level of energy that will result in high involvement in creative work.

Energy, the feeling that a person is capable of and eager to engage in a particular behavior or undertake a task (Dutton, 2003; Quinn & Dutton, 2005), clearly contributes to one's involvement in creative work, but as Polewsky & Will (1996) point out, “it is not all that easy to free up creative energy; new ideas and innovative vigour don't just materialize of their own free will – they require a special background and specific conditions...” (p. 43).<sup>4</sup>

How do leaders energize their employees to be involved in creative work? Researchers have directed some attention to studying how leaders provide the impetus for creativity in the workplace (e.g., Redmond et al., 1993; Shin & Zhou, 2003; Tierney & Farmer, 2004; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). Amabile's (1983) Componential Theory of Creativity serves as the theoretical basis for the claim that supervisor's support “exerts an influence on subordinates' creativity through direct help with the project, the development of subordinate expertise, and the enhancement of subordinate intrinsic motivation” (Amabile et al., 2004, p. 6). These behaviors include serving as a role model, showing openness to new ideas, planning and setting goals appropriately, supporting the work group within the organization, shaping quality communication and interaction with work unit members, valuing individuals' contributions to the work task, showing confidence in them, and providing constructive feedback (Amabile et al., 2004). These specific, supportive leadership behaviors constitute both task-oriented and relationship-oriented actions (Amabile et al., 2004) that enhance one's willingness to become involved in creative work.

Theory and research have noted that an influential way to energize the workplace and augment involvement in the job is through high-quality interpersonal relationships (Dutton, 2003). However, studies that have focused on the relationship between leader–member exchange (LMX) and creativity have reported mixed results (Elkins & Keller, 2003; Tierney et al., 1999).

In an attempt to address this call and further contributing to this line of thinking and research, we investigate the intervening role of employee feelings of energy in the relationship between employee perceptions of LMX and creative work involvement. The present study draws on three emerging theories. First, consistent with the Componential Theory of Creativity in the workplace (Amabile, 1983), we argue that relational leadership shapes positive social exchanges between the leader and the follower. This positive exchange not only helps develop expertise and enhance cognitive thinking and flexibility but also enhances the motivation of the follower to be involved in creative work (Amabile, 1997). In this study, we focus on the employee's motivation to engage in creative work. Second, we follow a relatively new stream of research that has begun to document the effect of *affect* on creativity at work (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Fredrickson, 1998, 2001). Third, we build on emerging research on high-quality interpersonal relationships at work (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007) which enriches the Componential Theory of Creativity (Amabile, 1983). Dutton (2003) argues that high-quality relationships lead to positive emotions such as joy and interest, which help increase individuals' capacity to think and act in the moment.

## 2. Theoretical background

### 2.1. Leadership and creativity

Until the early 1980s, conventional wisdom prompted creativity researchers to focus on the background, personality traits and work style of creative people and how they differ from ‘normal’ (not outstandingly creative) people. However, this approach was “both limited and limiting” (Amabile, 1997, p. 42) because it did not take into account the work environment and its role in influencing employee creative behaviors. Amabile's (1983) watershed work about the Componential Theory of Creativity showed that leaders can influence both the level and frequency of creative behaviors among followers (see also Amabile, 1997; Amabile et al., 2004). This opened up a new line of research and thinking as researchers have directed increased attention to studying how

<sup>4</sup> We believe energy is a distinct construct that can be distinguished from positive emotions, self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, involvement and extra effort. Positive emotions facilitate approach behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1990), increase readiness to act (Forgas, 2003) and they broaden an individual's momentary attention and thinking (Fredrickson, 2003). In this case, positive mood should make it easier to energize an individual to act, but energy involves the feelings of energy, vitality, passion, and a desire to act. Intrinsic motivation, as defined by Deci & Ryan, (1985) has to do with the joy one gets from doing a task or engaging in an activity. While people might be more energized to engage in tasks they find to be intrinsically motivating, again the concepts are distinct. Employee engagement has some similarity to energy as well, but the items that measure involvement include such phrases as “I know what is expected of me at work”, “I have received recognition for doing good work”, “I have the materials and equipment to do my job right” and “my opinion seems to count” (cf. Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Again, while this level of involvement in work may help promote energy, it is distinct from energy as we conceptualize it. Extra effort as conceptualized by Bass & Avolio (1994) is an outcome variable, and one that is often substituted for a performance measure. While we expect extra creative effort to be related to energy, we are concerned with the energy one has to put into the job rather than the actual level of effort put forth. Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that impact events that affect their lives. Again, while this may affect the degree to which an individual has the confidence to explore creative endeavors, it is not the same as energy as we have defined it.

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