



# Leader–member exchange (LMX), job autonomy, and creative work involvement<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have claimed that high quality of supervisor–employee relationships (i.e., leader–member exchange; LMX) fosters creativity at work. Moreover, researchers have acknowledged that this relationship is not clear-cut but rather complex. The present study focused on the moderating role of job autonomy in the LMX-creative work involvement relationship. Longitudinal field survey data ( $N = 144$ ) collected in a high-technology firm revealed a positive association between LMX and creative work involvement and confirmed our assumptions on the moderating role of job autonomy. The positive relationship between LMX and creative work involvement was stronger when employees experienced greater job autonomy. Our findings point to the importance of considering the interplay of both, the leader–member relationship and job design issues for increasing employees' creative work involvement.

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## 1. Introduction

As today's global companies are rapidly changing, they need employees who search for new opportunities and who continuously improve their work environment (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Rank, Pace, & Frese, 2004; Unsworth, 2001). Creativity, defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1983, 1996), has been considered to be a key driver for organizational effectiveness and survival (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Unsworth, 2001; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). Leaders are thought to be one of the most influential predictors of creativity at work (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Rosing, Frese, & Bausch, 2011). Therefore, leaders need to know how to provide a context for employees' creativity in order to stay competitive in today's turbulent and fast-changing work environments (Tierney, 2008).

Researchers have begun investigating the impact of leaders on creativity, including studies that have considered leader and follower traits (Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999; Zhou & George, 2003), transformational leadership (e.g., Jaussi & Dionne, 2003; Jung, Chow, & Wu, 2003; Sosik, Kahai, & Avolio, 1998), benevolent leadership (Wang & Cheng, 2010), and empowering leadership (Zhang & Bartol, 2010a). Researchers have also started examining the association between a relational concept of leadership, namely leader–member exchange (LMX) and creativity (e.g., Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Tierney et al., 1999). LMX theory differs from other leadership approaches by its explicit focus on unique, dyadic relationships and the notion that leaders and followers negotiate their relationship over time (Dansereau, Cashman, & Graen, 1973; Graen & Schiemann, 1978). There are major reasons (detailed below) to expect LMX to have a positive impact on creativity. However, research on the LMX-creativity association revealed heterogeneous findings (cf. Eder & Sawyer, 2007; Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011 for meta-analytical findings), pointing to inconsistencies in this relationship and suggesting an influence of third

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variables. Therefore, a major purpose of the present study was to extend existing research that connects LMX with creativity by focusing on job autonomy as a moderator.

It is important to note that in the present article, we follow earlier research (e.g., Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Kark & Carmeli, 2009) and focus on employees' *creative work involvement* as one important component of creativity (Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006). We will briefly define and differentiate our conceptualization from creative performance, which has been considered as another important component of creativity (e.g., Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Vinarski-Peretz, Binyamin, & Carmeli, 2010; Zhang & Bartol, 2010b). According to Atwater and Carmeli (2009), creative work involvement is defined as "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). A related construct, *creative performance*, refers to supervisors' evaluation of employees' creative problem solving at work (e.g., Tierney & Farmer, 2010), or objectively (through the use of external judges) assesses numbers and quality of suggestions or ideas (e.g., Zhang & Bartol, 2010a, 2010b; Zhou, 1998). In contrast, creative work involvement focuses on individuals' subjective assessment of their involvement in creative tasks at work. Researchers have argued that it is not only important to consider outcomes of creativity (i.e., creative performance), such as the actual idea or solution, but that it is of special importance to gain knowledge about employees' evaluation of creative involvement at work (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007; Kark & Carmeli, 2009). Creative work involvement is regarded as an important precursor of creative outcomes because it is strongly related to creative performance and innovation (Ohly et al., 2006).

Although creative work involvement is a complex phenomenon that requires an interactional approach (Amabile, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993; Zhou & Shalley, 2003), research on how job characteristics can foster creative work involvement is still missing. Building on the Job Characteristics Model (JCM; Hackman & Oldham, 1976) from job design literature, we therefore examine the moderating role of job autonomy in the relationship between LMX and creative work involvement. We focus on job autonomy as a moderator because job autonomy as one component of the JCM has received a lot of research attention in the job design literature (Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Langfred & Moye, 2004). More importantly we focus on job autonomy because it has been considered to be of special importance among job characteristics for numerous outcomes (e.g., performance, turnover intentions, satisfaction, role conflict, anxiety; cf. for example Humphrey et al., 2007), since job autonomy enables self-determination and meaning (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Niemiec, Ryan, & Deci, 2010). We assume that opportunities provided within high-quality LMX relationships are best used in conjunction with job design features, such as job autonomy, which allows employees to determine the pace, sequence, and methods when accomplishing tasks. Job autonomy is important for creative work involvement as it provides employees – beyond the trust and support provided by a high-quality LMX relationship – with a sense of responsibility for their jobs (Langfred & Moye, 2004).

The present study contributes to the literature on leadership and creative work involvement in at least three important ways: First, researchers have ascertained that the inquiry of leadership for creativity is an unusually complex one (Mumford & Licuanan, 2004) and that it "is still in its nascent stage" (Tierney, 2008, p. 95). Our study contributes to the important role of leaders in fostering employees creative work involvement as an important antecedent of creative outcomes, which has yet to be adequately examined (for exceptions see Atwater & Carmeli, 2009; Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007). Second, although creativity research has emphasized the role of job autonomy for fostering creativity (Amabile, 1983; Hennessey & Amabile, 2010; Unsworth & Clegg, 2010), and for its connection with leadership (Krause, 2004; Wang & Cheng, 2010), we are not aware of a single study that has tested the interplay between a relational concept of leadership (i.e., LMX) and job autonomy for creative work involvement. This is surprising because such an analysis would broaden our theoretical knowledge about social exchange processes within LMX-theory, and about amplifying mechanisms, which lead to creative work involvement. More concretely, identifying job autonomy as one potential moderator suggests that job design features influence the type or content of the social exchange process between supervisor and subordinate. Imagine, for example, an employee with a great deal of autonomy. This employee feels responsible for the work to be done and can determine the methods and means for completing the work. This employee can actually translate the privileges associated within a high-LMX relationship like respect, trust, and recognition (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009) into creative work involvement since this employee has the opportunity to select and use knowledge independently and to actually take risks. Third, our study extends earlier research by theoretically integrating the important job design variable of job autonomy into LMX theory. Therefore, two important research streams of I/O-psychology are combined and can nurture each other in order to better understand the complex LMX-creative work involvement relationship. Furthermore, results provide important information for practitioners because identifying job conditions that amplify leadership effects are relevant for designing intervention tools in leadership training programs (Graen, Scandura, & Graen, 1986).

We approach our research question with a longitudinal study that takes place in the manufacturing branch of a large, internationally operating high-technology firm. In the following, we will outline our theoretical reasoning for our hypotheses. We will begin with the direct relationship between LMX and creative work involvement, followed by the moderator hypothesis.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Leader–member-exchange (LMX) and creative work involvement

LMX theory builds on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960) and assumes that a supervisor has a unique relationship to each employee (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), which is negotiated over time as a result of role expectations and fulfillments between leaders and members. A high-quality relationship, as characterized by favorable reciprocal exchanges between

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