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Leading for creativity: The role of unconventional leader behavior

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between a leader's unconventional behavior and followers' creative performance at both the individual and group level in an experimental setting. Our results indicate that after transformational leadership and individual intrinsic motivation for creativity are controlled for, unconventional leader behavior (e.g., standing on furniture, hanging ideas on clotheslines) significantly interacts with follower perceptions of the leader as a role model for creativity to explain follower creativity. Results also suggest that unconventional behavior explains variance in group cohesion above and beyond transformational leadership, and that group cohesion interacts with group intrinsic motivation to explain group creative performance. Academic and practitioner implications are discussed, as are avenues for future research in this area.

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1. Introduction

Currently, creativity is a “hot” topic and an important agenda item in the business world, indicated by the rise of creativity consulting firms, creativity departments in organizations, and a surge of creativity in business “how-to” books in bookstores. Consistent with the business world trend, Mumford, Scott, Gladdis, and Strange (2002) highlight nearly two dozen research papers (published since 1990), which include creativity and innovation as central themes. In a knowledge-driven, global, business environment, the concept of creativity seems primed to enjoy the same attention as Total Quality Management did in

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the 1980s. The question remains, though, are leaders in organizations prepared to take responsibility for ensuring creative follower output?

For the last several years, much attention has been devoted to understanding the creative processes of individuals (cf. Amabile, 1988; Redmond, Mumford, & Teach, 1993; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). Although efforts to understand the creative processes of individuals in organizations implicitly involve their leaders, little attention has been devoted to leadership as it applies to follower creativity (Jung, 2000–2001; Mumford et al., 2002). Research on creativity, combined with leadership theory, can help us understand how to lead both individuals and groups for creative results.

The few leadership and creativity studies that have been conducted yielded promising results. Redmond et al. (1993) found that when leaders contributed to problem construction and feelings of self-efficacy, followers were higher on creativity performance. Tierney et al. (1999) noted that effective exchange relationships between leaders and followers were correlated with creativity ratings and invention disclosures. Cummings and Oldham (1997) found that supervisory support for new ideas was related to creativity indices, especially for those employees predisposed to creativity.

At the group level, the relationship between leadership and follower creativity has been examined through the lens of transformational leadership. Although this literature is fairly new, preliminary results from these studies are encouraging. For example, Jung (2000–2001) found that transformational leadership produced more divergent thinking in groups. Sosik, Avolio, and Kahai (1998) reported that group fluency and flexibility were higher under transformational leadership conditions (but moderated by anonymity), and Sosik, Kahai, and Avolio (1999) found that flow mediated the effects of transformational leadership on creativity.

While the studies discussed above provide a strong base from which to begin to build knowledge with respect to leadership and follower creativity, the research is too sparse to definitively indicate which leader behaviors are appropriate for promoting creativity in individual followers and groups. Although the power of leader behavior serving as a role model for follower behavior has been discussed previously in transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1990b), the leadership literature has yet to make an explicit link between leader role modeling and follower creativity. Therefore, one primary goal of this research is to establish the importance of leaders role modeling behaviors that promote follower creativity. Specifically, we suggest that unconventional leader behavior may positively influence the effects of leader role modeling creativity and that those effects include elevated levels of follower creative performance.

To accomplish our primary goal, we theoretically develop why we expect the effects of role modeling to be enhanced by unconventional leader behavior. Also, we strive to delineate unconventional behavior from transformational leadership, theorizing how and why these two constructs will interact with leaders role modeling creativity to enhance creativity in individual followers. Finally, we examine the impact of unconventional leader behavior on group process and creative performance since organizations are increasingly relying on groups and teams for sustainability and competitive advantage (Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995).

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