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Leadership and creativity: Understanding leadership from a creative problem-solving perspective

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Abstract

Employees in many jobs encounter novel, ill-defined problems, and finding creative solutions to these problems may be the critical factor that allows their organization to maintain a competitive advantage. Solving problems creatively requires extensive and effortful cognitive processing. This requirement is magnified further by the complex, ambiguous situations in which most organizational problems occur. Employees must define and construct a problem, search and retrieve problem-relevant information, and generate and evaluate a diverse set of alternative solutions. Creativity necessitates that all these activities are completed effectively. It is unlikely, therefore, that creative outcomes will be realized without a large degree of support from organizations and organizational leaders. To provide this support, leaders must understand the cognitive requirements of creative problem solving. To this end, this article reviews the cognitive processes underlying creative problem solving and suggests avenues through which organizational leaders can facilitate these processes in an effort to enhance the creative problem solving of their employees.

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In recent years, much attention has been given to understanding organizational creativity (Cummings & Oldham, 1997; Ford, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). Rapid technological change, global competition, and economic uncertainty have all contributed to organizations seeking to improve creativity and innovation. While early research in organizational creativity has focused on occupations such as scientists and R&D, current thinking is that in almost any job or occupation employees can exhibit creativity (Mumford, Whetzel, & Reiter-Palmon, 1997). Therefore, organizational scholars have sought to identify those factors that facilitate or inhibit creativity in a variety of organizational settings.

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Much of the effort of understanding creativity in the workplace focused on the creative contribution of the individual, such as personality (Feist, 1999), cognitive processes (Ward, Smith, & Finke, 1999), attitudes (Basadur, Runco, & Vega, 2000), and problem-solving style (Scott & Bruce, 1994). However, organizational factors have also been investigated, such as organizational climate (Amabile & Grysiewicz, 1989), group interactions (Scott & Bruce, 1994), and organizational structure (Arad, Hanson, & Schneider, 1997).

1. Models of creativity

Current views of creativity, particularly in organizational settings, focus on the outcome or creative product. A *creative product* is defined as one that is both novel or original and useful or appropriate (Amabile, 1996; Ford, 1996; Mumford & Gustafson, 1988; Woodman et al., 1993). Various factors contribute to the generation of creative products, both at the individual and organizational level (Mumford & Gustafson, 1988).

At the individual level, Amabile (1983) suggested that there are three key components that support creative production or the creative outcome: domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and task motivation. Domain-relevant skills refer to knowledge and expertise. Creativity-relevant processes include cognitive styles, cognitive strategies, as well as personality variables that influence the application of these creativity-relevant processes. Task motivation includes attitudes and motivation, such as intrinsic motivation. Mumford and Gustafson (1988) suggested that creativity can be conceptualized as a syndrome with a number of elements: cognitive processes underlying the individual's ability to generate creative outcomes or products, personality, and motivational variables that facilitate the application of these cognitive processes, and contextual variables, such as climate, evaluation, and culture.

Models of organizational creativity have also included individual characteristics as part of the broader framework explaining creativity in the workplace. Woodman et al. (1993), in their model of organizational creativity, included several individual factors that affect creative production in organizations. Their model includes personality variables, cognitive factors, intrinsic motivation, and knowledge. Ford (1996) included three individual variables in his model of organizational creativity: sense making, motivation, and knowledge and ability. Sense making refers to the interpretation of the environment and identification of problems through processes, such as problem finding and problem construction. Motivation includes goals, emotions, and beliefs about the individual's capability to generate a creative product and whether others would accept the product. Knowledge and ability refer to the knowledge structures the individual brings to the creative process and the cognitive processes that are used on these knowledge structures.

All these models recognize that individual creative production is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by multiple individual-level variables as well as contextual and environmental variables. The focus of this special issue is on one specific contextual variable, that of leadership and the role that leaders play in the facilitation of creative production in their subordinates. Leadership has been identified as an important contextual variable contributing to the culture and climate of the organization and perception of support for innovation (Amabile & Grysiewicz, 1989; Cummings & Oldham, 1997; Isaksen, Lauer, Ekvall, & Britz, 2001; Mumford, Whetzel, et al., 1997). Leaders can facilitate creative production through various mechanisms, such as influencing the motivation of employees. The effects of

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