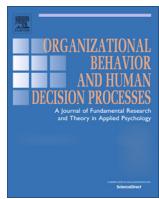


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Empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, trust, and employee creativity: Interaction effects and a mediating mechanism



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ABSTRACT

Taking an interactional approach, we hypothesized that (a) there is an interaction between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust that affects creativity, such that empowering leadership has the strongest positive relationship with creativity when the employees have high levels of uncertainty avoidance and trust their supervisors; and (b) creative self-efficacy mediates the effect that this three-way interaction between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance and trust has on creativity. In Study 1, we used a time-lagged research design, collecting multi-source data from 322 employees and their supervisors. The results of Study 1 supported our hypotheses. In Study 2, we used a more temporally rigorous research design in which data were collected in three stages, with a two-month time interval separating Stages 1 and 2, and Stages 2 and 3. On the basis of the time-lagged and multi-source data from 199 employees and their supervisors, Study 2 produced the same results as Study 1. We discuss the implications of these results for future research and practice.

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Introduction

Employee creativity—defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas concerning products, services, and work methods—is essential for the continued improvement and success of organizations (Amabile, 1988; Oldham, 2003; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley, 1991). Research on employee creativity has taken an interactional approach, positing that creativity is the outcome of interactions between contextual factors and employee characteristics (Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). One contextual factor emphasized prominently in current organizations is empowering leadership (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Fineman, 2006). This emphasis has led to a burgeoning interest in understanding how empowering leadership fosters creativity. For organizations operating in an increasingly complex and uncertain world, empowering leadership holds the potential to increase creativity, allowing organizations to fully realize their employees' abilities to address both opportunities and challenges (Zhang & Bartol, 2010). However, the outcome of empowering leadership may not be as positive as intended for all employees (Ahearne et al., 2005). To effectively foster creativity, research evidence is needed to inform managers on how

individual differences affect employee reactions to empowering leadership (Forrester, 2000). Differences in levels of uncertainty avoidance stand out in this regard, because they are fundamentally related to both creativity and empowering leadership. In this study, we tackle the complex interaction between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust. Our results reveal an interesting phenomenon—empowering leadership may be especially effective at promoting creativity for those who have high levels of both uncertainty avoidance and trust in their supervisors.

Empowering leadership is defined as the extent to which supervisors express confidence in their employees' abilities, emphasize the significance of their employees' work, involve their employees in decision making, and reduce or remove bureaucratic constraints on their employees (Ahearne et al., 2005; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Uncertainty avoidance, in turn, is defined as the extent to which employees feel unease about uncertain or ambiguous situations, and try to avoid such situations by seeking rules and guidance (e.g., Dorfman & Howell, 1988). The interactional perspective of creativity suggests that trust in their supervisors is a critical condition for empowering leadership to promote creativity for employees who score high on uncertainty avoidance (Fineman, 2006; Forrester, 2000). Supervisors constitute an essential factor in influencing employee creativity (George & Zhou, 2007; Tierney, 2008). Having trust in their supervisors facilitates employees' abilities to manage risk and uncertainty (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; Rousseau,

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Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Taking this trust as one of our central interests, we focus on affect-based trust, defined as trust that reflects genuine concern, care, and emotional bonds between employees and their supervisors (Lewis & Weigert, 1985; McAllister, 1995), based on the employees' attributions of supervisor motives. When employees have affect-based trust in their supervisors, they are more likely to feel genuinely empowered by their supervisors. With this assurance, uncertainty is decreased and employees may experience increased confidence in their creative ability which, in turn, leads to greater creativity. Conversely, when employees do not trust their supervisors, those who have high levels of uncertainty avoidance are unlikely to respond to empowering leadership with increased creativity.

Taken together, our goal in this research was to investigate how the complex interplay between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust in supervisors influences employee creativity. Following the interactional perspective of creativity (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004; Woodman et al., 1993), we hypothesized that empowering leadership would have the strongest positive relationship with creativity when employees had high levels of uncertainty avoidance and trust in their supervisors. To reveal a psychological mechanism underlying the hypothesized interaction effects, we also hypothesized that creative self-efficacy, which refers to the degree to which employees believe they are capable of being creative (Tierney & Farmer, 2002), would mediate this relationship. Fig. 1 depicts the hypothesized relationships between the variables in our study.

We conducted two studies to test our hypotheses. In Study 1, we drew a sample of research and development employees, and used a time-lagged design in which we collected data for our outcome variable—creativity two months after we had collected data for the predictors (i.e., empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust in supervisors) and the mediator (i.e., creative self-efficacy). In Study 2, we used a more temporally rigorous design (collecting data in three stages) and a sample of employees from the manufacturing industry, to make our research more generalizable.

By focusing on the interactions between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust and the effect of these interactions on creativity, we aim to make three significant contributions to the literature. First, we address the critical research question: when does empowering leadership foster creativity in employees with high uncertainty avoidance? While it is often assumed that empowering leadership is particularly effective at increasing creativity in employees with low uncertainty avoidance, our findings advance our understanding of the effects of empowering leadership on creativity by showing that this leadership style can also be beneficial for employees with high uncertainty avoidance, under the condition that the employees trust their supervisors. The present study extends previous research (such

as Ahearne et al., 2005) by examining creativity as the criterion variable, and by highlighting trust as a key factor in facilitating empowering leadership to nurture creativity for employees with high uncertainty avoidance. Second, we suggest that the negative connotation attached to uncertainty avoidance in the context of creativity in the workplace may be premature and oversimplified. We show that when trust is high, uncertainty avoidance can play a positive role, strengthening the relationship between empowering leadership and creativity. By revealing the intricate synergy between empowering leadership, uncertainty avoidance, and trust for facilitating creative idea production, we extend the interactional perspective of creativity beyond a simple person-by-context interaction. We suggest that how a focal employee views the originator of a contextual influence (e.g., trust) may amplify the effect of that contextual factor (e.g., empowering leadership) on the employee's creativity, depending on individual attributes such as levels of uncertainty avoidance. Third, the interactional perspective of creativity currently lacks the investigation of a psychological mechanism that might explain why a particular person-context interaction occurs (e.g., Shalley et al., 2004). Our investigation of creative self-efficacy as a mediating mechanism for creativity contributes to the development of the interactional perspective of creativity.

Relation between empowering leadership and creativity: joint moderating role of uncertainty avoidance and trust

Scholarly debate has emerged on when empowering leadership is particularly effective in promoting employee outcomes. Whereas one study showed a positive relation between empowering leadership and creativity (Zhang & Bartol, 2010), other theoretical and empirical work suggests that the influence of empowering leadership on employee outcomes is likely to be more complex than previously thought, contingent upon a host of factors (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005; Fineman, 2006; Hersey & Blanchard, 1982). First, empowerment may be particularly effective for employees whose characteristics indicate relatively low levels of "readiness" or propensity for pursuing a focal activity (e.g., Ahearne et al., 2005). Extrapolating this insight to creative activities, we propose that empowering leadership may be especially beneficial for enhancing creativity in employees who are not predisposed to be creative. Second, whether employees have a trust with their supervisors may be a necessary condition for empowering leadership to promote creativity in employees not predisposed to be creative (Fineman, 2006). Hence, we aim to help resolving this debate by investigating how an employee characteristic and trust jointly moderate the contribution of empowering leadership to employee creativity.

In the following theory and hypothesis development section, we first touch on the nature of the two constructs that influence

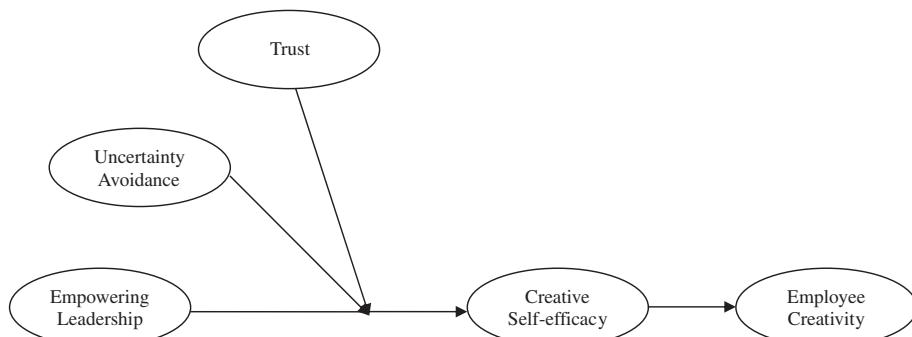


Fig. 1. The hypothesized model.

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