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Working with creative leaders: Exploring the relationship between supervisors' and subordinates' creativity

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ABSTRACT

We propose that supervisors' own level of creativity is a core component of effective leadership that can be associated with subordinates' self-concept and creativity. Specifically, drawing on the identity theory framework, and role identity theory in particular, we argue that subordinates' creative role identity is an important underlying mechanism in the relationship between supervisors' level of creativity and their subordinates' creativity. Using a sample of 443 employees working with 44 supervisors in an IT firm, we hypothesized and found support for a moderated mediation model. There was a positive indirect relationship between supervisors' creativity and their subordinates' creativity via the subordinates' creative role identity, and this indirect relationship was stronger when employees perceived higher levels of organizational support for creativity.

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Employee creativity, defined as developing products and processes that are both novel and useful (Amabile, 1988; Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004), is considered to be an important determinant for organizations to innovate, survive, and thrive in a competitive, global marketplace (Zhou & Shalley, 2010). Since creativity is in part the result of social processes, others in the workplace, such as supervisors, can serve to support or stimulate one's creativity (e.g., Amabile & Pillemer, 2012; Perry-Smith, 2006). Surprisingly, despite a relatively good deal of attention to the role of leaders in influencing employees' creativity, we do not know whether supervisors' own level of creativity is associated with their employees' creativity, and if so, how this occurs.

Given their status and influence within organizations, supervisors' behaviors and characteristics are likely to be modeled and imitated by their subordinates (Bandura, 1969, 1971; Weiss, 1977). Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, and Strange (2002) argued that it is critical to have supervisors with high creative problem solving skills because these types of supervisors are capable of giving better feedback, acting as role models for creativity, and are perceived as being more credible. Also, Reiter-Palmon and Illies (2004) argued that leaders' own creative skills (e.g., abilities for creative problem construction, information retrieval and coding, alternative idea generation) are critical in facilitating subordinates' creative problem solving.

Having a creative mentor has been found to positively impact individuals' creative development during their careers (Simonton, 1975; Torrance, 1988). Studies of Nobel Prize winners in various fields illustrated that many winners were students of prior Nobel Prize winners (Zuckerman, 1977), while several Nobel Laureates have acknowledged the valuable stimulation and guidance they received from their mentors. For instance, Lawrence Klein (i.e., winner of a Prize in Economic Science) mentioned that the experience of being Paul Samuelson's graduate assistant had been important to his own achievement. Dr. Klein

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stated: “I was attached to him as a graduate assistant from the outset, and I tried to maximize my contact with him, picking up insights that he scattered on every encounter” (Hirsch & Breit, 2009). The Italian anatomist and histologist Giuseppe Levi mentored three winners of the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine - Luria, Dulbecco, and Levi-Montalcini (Bentivoglio, Vercelli, & Filogamo, 2006), with all three remarking that they had experienced “profound influence” (p.365) by working with Levi.

There are several cases in which creative business leaders influence followers through their creative behaviors. For example, a Facebook employee commented on Facebook’s acquisition of WhatsApp by asking “What other CEO has the guts to purchase a chat company for \$19B” (Kux, 2014). The cofounder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg’s risk taking behavior encourages Facebook employees to take risks at work and to be bold in developing new ideas (Memon, 2014). In addition, Howard Schultz, who is the returning CEO of Starbucks, is known for his willingness to always search for a better way, even though the company had regained its share value since his return. He was quoted as saying, “We are turning over rocks and looking at the things that perhaps we didn’t get right and constantly beating ourselves up...if you walked into our Monday morning meeting, you would think this is a company that is still trying to transform itself” (Webb, 2011). Given these examples of business leaders inspiring and serving as role models for their employees, we seek to examine the relationship between creativity and leadership by focusing on the importance of supervisors’ own level of creativity for their subordinates’ creativity.

It has been argued that in order to better understand leadership effectiveness we need to examine the underlying psychological processes of followers through which leaders’ influences are enacted (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). One of the ways that effective leaders can influence follower behaviors and attitudes is by affecting their self-concept and self-identity (Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999). Taking this perspective, we draw upon the identity theory framework (Burke, 1991; McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1987), and role identity theory in particular (Burke, 1980; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Stryker & Serpe, 1982), and introduce subordinates’ creative role identity as a conducting mechanism between supervisors’ level of creativity and their employees’ creativity. Creative role identity is defined as the extent to which an employee sees the role of being a creative employee as part of his or her work related self-identity (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-Mcintyre, 2003). As such, creative role identity leads to an internalized set of role expectations that creativity is important to the self, and that one should be creative at work. In addition, since an identity has to be strong enough to be enacted through behavior (Farmer & Van Dyne, 2010; Lord & Brown, 2004), we argue that when the organizational context is supportive of creativity this should help to strengthen the effect of subordinates’ creative role identity (Farmer et al., 2003), yielding higher creativity (see Fig. 1 for our conceptual model).

This study makes a number of potential contributions. First, even though the role of leader behaviors and leader-follower relationships for employee creativity has received some attention (e.g., Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Zhang & Bartol, 2010), the role of leaders’ own level of creativity has been largely neglected by past research (Gilson, 2008; Huang, Krasikova, & Liu, 2016). According to an IBM report (2010) based on interviews with 1541 chief executives and general managers in 16 countries, CEOs stated that the most important leadership quality is creativity because creative managers can find new ideas and be creative in leading and communicating with their workforce, especially in fast-paced, dynamic environments. Our study is one of the first empirical studies that seeks to examine the important role of leaders’ creativity for subordinates’ creativity, above and beyond other leader attributes such as leaders’ demographic characteristics (i.e., supervisors’ sex and tenure), leaders’ personality (i.e., supervisors’ proactive personality), leaders’ own work motivation (i.e., supervisors’ intrinsic motivation), and leaders’ behaviors (i.e., supervisors’ intellectual stimulation). We hope that our findings point to the potential value of considering supervisors’ creativity when staffing supervisory positions if subordinates’ creativity is desirable. Second, we apply identity theory (Burke, 1991; McCall & Simmons, 1978) to establish the empirical link between supervisors’ creativity and their employees’

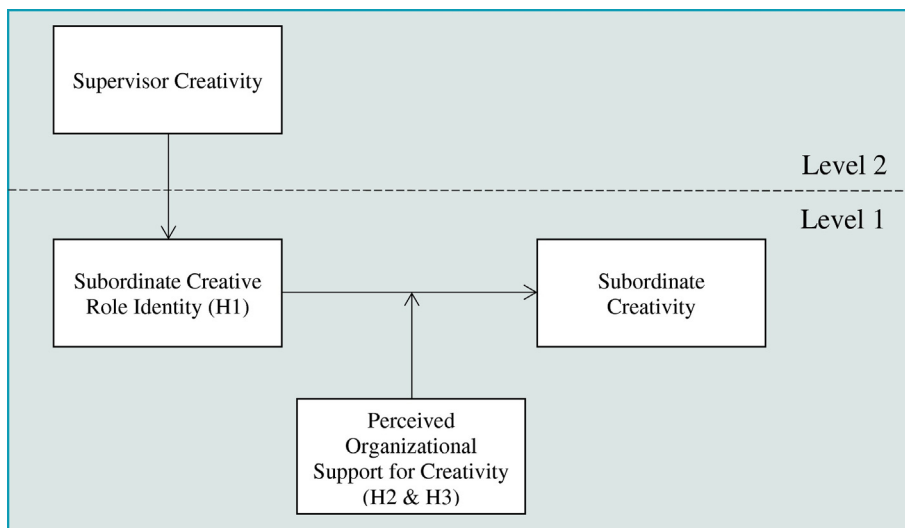


Fig. 1. The theoretical model.

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