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Awakening employee creativity: The role of leader emotional intelligence

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Abstract

Creative activities are affect-laden. Laboring at perhaps the most inspiring and difficult of human endeavors, a creator frequently experiences the excitement of discovery and the anguish of failure. Engaging in creativity in organizations inevitably creates tension, conflict, and emotionally charged debates and disagreements because complex organizations need both control and predictability and creativity and change. In this paper, we describe five routes through which the innate creativity of organizational members can be awakened: identification, information gathering, idea generation, idea evaluation and modification, and idea implementation. We propose that leaders, and in particular, the emotional intelligence of leaders, plays a critical role in enabling and supporting the awakening of creativity through these five complementary routes. After describing theory and research on emotional intelligence, we develop propositions concerning how leaders' emotional intelligence can enable and promote followers' creativity in multiple ways.

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1. Introduction

While viewing work as a creative endeavor has a long history (Ellsworth, 2002), organizational behavior research on employee creativity in contemporary organizations has emerged only recently as an important and relatively neglected area of scholarly inquiry. The past decade has witnessed a burgeoning of interest in creativity as researchers have sought to understand how creativity can be fostered or encouraged in the workplace and why it sometimes seems so rare (for a review of contemporary

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creativity research, see Zhou & Shalley, 2003). Much of this body of work has examined contextual or organizational factors that facilitate or inhibit creativity (Amabile, 1988, 1996). One key contextual factor that influences employee creativity is leadership (Shin & Zhou, *in press*; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999). While previous studies have examined the role specific leadership behaviors play in supporting or suppressing creativity (e.g., George & Zhou, 2001; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shin & Zhou, *in press*; Tierney et al., 1999; Zhou, 2003), little theory has been developed to pinpoint the roots of these behaviors.

In this paper, we suggest that at the root of creativity-supportive leadership behaviors is emotional intelligence. Creativity in organizations is affect-laden. While creative outcomes are often glorified and romanticized, and creative people hailed as geniuses, creativity is an inherently difficult endeavor and entails hard work and frustration (Staw, 1995). As both one of the most inspiring and difficult of human endeavors, creativity involves coming up with something that challenges the status quo. People often feel more comfortable sticking to the routine and familiar, rather than heading down an unfamiliar and risky path (Staw, 1995). Thus, attempting to create something new is often accompanied by anxiety and uncertainty. When a creative activity fails to bear fruit despite the creator's effort, the creator experiences anxiety and despair; when a creative activity shows promise or delivers a satisfactory outcome, the creator experiences excitement and hope (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

Compounding the inherent challenge of being creative is the fact that many organizational initiatives aim to influence or control employees to work in predetermined ways to meet specific objectives. As organizations increase in size and complexity, the need for predictability and control of employee behavior seems ever greater. Juxtaposing more traditional research in organizational behavior such as studies on goal setting (Locke & Latham, 1990) with contemporary research on creativity illustrates a fundamental paradox of complex work organizations. On the one hand, organizations are highly dependent upon control systems, standardized practices, and routines to ensure smooth and efficient operations. Yet these systems have the unintended consequence of shutting down the innate creative propensities of organizational members. Every standardized practice, routine, product, service, and technology has the potential to be improved upon or replaced and it is through the creative endeavors of organizational members that such new and better ways of doing things, products, and services come about. However, the fact that such standardized routines, practices, technologies, products, and services exist in an organization often makes it very difficult to generate and implement improvements, even when the external environment strongly signals the need for such improvements. Hence, the often-noted irony that organizations (which spend considerable resources to select and retain highly qualified and capable managers and employees) are often blind to changes in the environment until these changes are very salient to all and their ramifications transparent.

The paradox between control and creativity creates tension and conflict between existing systems and practices in organizations and employees attempting to come up with new and better ways of doing things. The tension and conflict put enormous pressure on the employees, and can induce affective states such as frustration and irritation. Numerous

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