



# Leadership behaviors and group creativity in Chinese organizations: The role of group processes<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In seeking to understand the factors contributing to work group creativity in Chinese organizations, we explored the roles of two different leadership styles (transformational and authoritarian) that Chinese leaders play in group creativity through influencing internal group processes, i.e., collective efficacy and knowledge sharing among group members. We tested our hypotheses with a sample of 163 work groups involving 973 employees in twelve Chinese companies. We found transformational leadership to relate positively but authoritarian leadership to relate negatively to group creativity, mediated by both collective efficacy and knowledge sharing among members within the group. We discuss the implications of these findings for research on group leadership, group creativity and cross-cultural management.

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## 1. Introduction

To maintain or enhance effectiveness within rapidly changing and extremely competitive environments, organizations have to be creative at the individual, group, and organizational levels (Drazin, Glynn, & Kazanjian, 1999; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). The challenge for organizational researchers is to identify the factors that contribute to creativity at these different levels within the firm. The majority of the research on creativity has focused on individual traits, abilities and cognitive styles (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldman, 2004). At the group level, the tendency for individual members to conform and align with the views of the majority of the members in the group (De Dreu & West, 2001) may discourage the creative thinking that is necessary for innovation. In this context, group leaders play a critical role in counteracting this tendency toward conformity and in releasing group members' creative potential. Empirical research has reported that leaders can enhance subordinate creativity by showing technical and creative problem-solving skills (Mumford et al., 2002); providing support (Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Oldham & Cummings, 1996), building intrinsic motivation (Shin & Zhou, 2003), or creating a positive mood (Madjar et al., 2002). This stream of research has focused primarily on leaders' influence on individual team members. However, the role of leadership in stimulating the entire group's creativity remains underexplored (Zhou & Shalley, 2008). The current study extends our understanding of how leaders influence group creativity through creativity-enabling group processes. The specific research question that the current study seeks to answer is: What behaviors of the leader are conducive to group creativity and what are the group processes that serve to bridge leader behaviors and group creativity?

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To address the above questions, we conducted a field study involving 163 work groups and 973 group members in 12 Chinese companies. We propose that collective efficacy and within-group knowledge sharing among members are two important group processes that account for the influence of leadership behaviors on group creativity. The changing nature of management practices in China due to economic reforms and globalization provides an interesting setting to test our hypotheses on the comparative role of modern leadership theory (transformational) with traditional Chinese leadership (authoritarian). Our study can contribute not only to knowledge about team leadership and group creativity, but also to management practices within a cross-cultural context, such as leading multi-cultural teams. The results should be both locally relevant and globally meaningful.

## 2. Conceptual background and hypotheses

Creativity refers to the production of novel and useful ideas by an individual or a small group of individuals working together and it is different from innovation that refers to the successful implementation of creative ideas (Amabile, 1988). Creative ideas are the basic ingredients of innovation in products and services and have potential to produce value for the organization (George, 2007).

Despite a rich body of research focusing on the creativity of individuals (Drazin et al., 1999; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shalley et al., 2004), groups (De Dreu & West, 2001), organizations (Amabile, 1996) and even multilevels in organizations (Taggar, 2002; Zhou & Shalley, 2008), “most earlier research has focused on antecedents of individual employee creativity” (Shalley et al., 2004, p. 951). Although some insight can be gained from the research on group brainstorming, team innovation, and creative performance (e.g., Jaussi & Dionne, 2003), little empirical work has been conducted on conditions that contribute to group creativity (Shalley et al., 2004).

At the group level, creativity is a function of group processes in addition to group composition and group characteristics (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). These group processes include the development of shared objects, participation in decision making, managing conflict effectively, and developing members' integration skills (West, 2002). The input-process-output model (Cohen & Bailey, 1997; Shalley et al., 2004) suggests that a group's creative output is a result of the group's processes, and a small body of research has empirically examined the role of group processes in creativity. For instance, Leenders, Van Engelen, and Kratzer (2003) found that a moderate amount of communication was best for fostering creativity in new product development teams. West and Wallace (1991) reported that a low level of cohesiveness was necessary for new idea generation while a high level was required for idea implementation. Taggar (2002) investigated the interaction between group members' individual dispositions (e.g., cognitive ability, openness to experience, and conscientiousness) and group processes (e.g., involving others, providing feedback, and effective communication) in the creation of products by groups of college students. West et al. (2003) found that group processes (e.g., group participation, commitment to team objectives) consistently predicted group creativity. While these studies have focused on group processes as the major antecedents to group creativity, they beg the question of what produces these creativity-generation processes.

The group leader has been suggested as one of the organizational contexts in input-process-output model to induce group processes for creative performance (Woodman et al., 1993). Mumford, Connelly, and Gaddis (2003) proposed a conceptual process model of leaders' creative thought from the perspective that the leader actively contributed to the production of creative ideas in shaping creative ventures. Mumford and his colleagues (Mumford et al., 2002) also proposed a systematic model on tactics and skills that a group leader uses to manage creative people, including leader expertise, creative problem solving, planning skills, and social skills. West et al. (2003) found leadership clarity predicted group creativity partially through group processes in health care teams.

Focusing on the role of group leadership, O'Hara (2001) found that participative leadership improved group creativity through promoting group members' engagement and reducing conflict. Jung (2001) confirmed that divergent thinking (as a proxy of group creativity) would be higher under transformational than under transactional leadership. However, more research is needed to understand the intervening process that group leaders induce. In line with the input-process-output framework, this study examines the role of two types of leadership behaviors in group creativity through two specific group processes.

Group leadership influences group dynamics through influencing both individuals within the group and the group as a whole (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). Given that leadership substantially influences employee individual motivation and behavior (e.g., individualized consideration), group leadership could shape an individual member's behavioral tendency toward other group members and toward the whole group. Group leaders also direct the group as a whole to influence group outcomes. For example, leaders can address the whole group when they deliver speeches about attractive visions to the group. By focusing on both individual members and the group as a whole, group leadership encourages knowledge sharing and increases collective motivation of a group, which in turn contributes to group creativity. The following section reviews the two leadership styles that may impact group processes and group creativity.

### 2.1. Two types of leadership behaviors

The general idea of leadership is that it is a universal phenomenon, since no society exists without some kind of leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Bass (1997) proposed that the transformational leadership paradigm is sufficiently broad to provide a basis for understanding leadership in all situations and settings. Indeed, transformational leadership has been found to be meaningful and effective in Hong Kong (Yu, Leithwood, & Jantzi, 2002), Taiwan (Spreitzer, Perttula, & Xin, 2005), and mainland China (Wang, Law, Wang, & Chen, 2005), similar to that in the United States (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Transformational leaders (1) raise followers' consciousness about the importance and value of designated outcomes; (2) encourage followers to transcend their self-interests for the good of the group, organization or society; and (3) expand

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