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Leadership, creativity, and innovation: A critical review and practical recommendations

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is a key predictor of employee, team, and organizational creativity and innovation. Research in this area holds great promise for the development of intriguing theory and impactful policy implications, but only if empirical studies are conducted rigorously. In the current paper, we report a comprehensive review of a large number of empirical studies ($N = 195$) exploring leadership and workplace creativity and innovation. Using this article cache, we conducted a number of systematic analyses and built narrative arguments documenting observed trends in five areas. First, we review and offer improved definitions of creativity and innovation. Second, we conduct a systematic review of the main effects of leadership upon creativity and innovation and the variables assumed to moderate these effects. Third, we conduct a systematic review of mediating variables. Fourth, we examine whether the study designs commonly employed are suitable to estimate the causal models central to the field. Fifth, we conduct a critical review of the creativity and innovation measures used, noting that most are sub-optimal. Within these sections, we present a number of taxonomies that organize extant research, highlight understudied areas, and serve as a guide for future variable selection. We conclude by highlighting key suggestions for future research that we hope will reorient the field and improve the rigour of future research such that we can build more reliable and useful theories and policy recommendations.

Introduction

“Creativity, as has been said, consists largely of rearranging what we know in order to find out what we do not know. Hence, to think creatively, we must be able to look afresh at what we normally take for granted.”

George Kneller

Creativity and innovation drive progress and allow organizations to maintain competitive advantage (Anderson, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). In recent years, both industry and academia have placed a premium upon creativity and innovation, and research in the field has burgeoned, generating a number of compelling findings (Anderson, Potočník, & Zhou, 2014). Unfortunately, the research has also been piecemeal in nature. As a result, the leadership, creativity and innovation literature is fragmented and primarily populated by small, ‘exploratory’ studies, which are unrelated to any unifying framework (s). In addition, the rapid growth of research in this field appears to

have reduced consideration for a number of fundamental concerns, such as the measurement of key constructs (i.e., creativity and innovation) and the use of study designs that are suitable to address the fascinating research questions posed.

Although leadership has been routinely covered within past reviews of creativity and innovation, it is usually covered briefly, in a descriptive manner, or noted as an area for future research (Anderson et al., 2004, 2014; Rank, Pace, & Frese, 2004; Zhou & Shalley, 2003). Previous reviews which have focussed explicitly on leadership and creativity or innovation have typically summarized existing research, provided overviews of dominant theoretical frameworks, identified ‘gaps’ within the literature, and noted practical implications (Klijin & Tomic, 2010; Shalley & Gilson, 2004).

In contrast, our goal is two-fold. First, we aim to summarize the main trends across the myriad of leader variables, mediators and moderators identified within the literature. In doing so, we present a number of taxonomies that synthesize extant research and can guide

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future variable selection, moving studies away from pure exploration toward a more systematic approach. Second, we consider the robustness with which the literature has proceeded so far and draw attention to two major limitations that currently undermine the veracity of the field: measurement and study design. We provide pragmatic guidance so that future research can move beyond these limitations, because left unchecked they stand to limit the scientific and practical merit of research concerning leadership, creativity, and innovation. The nature of our goals in conjunction with the vast array of variables examined in a piecemeal manner and concerns regarding the robustness of many primary studies preclude the use of meta-analytic techniques. Instead, we utilize a combination of systematic and narrative techniques to review the literature. We hope that the recommendations made will help to reorient the field such that future findings will be more robust and generate meaningful policy implications. In essence, we follow the opening quote and hope that by looking afresh at what we normally take for granted, we can help advance research in this vital area.

The remainder of this review is organized as follows. Next, we outline the systematic search strategy that we utilized to identify all papers that had examined leadership and either or both of creativity and innovation. Then we move onto our five substantive review sections. **Section 1** revisits a well-trodden path, the conceptualization and definition of creativity and innovation. We aim to make explicit how the two relate and what makes them unique, because, although previous papers have covered this issue, our review suggests that researchers remain unclear. **Section 2** provides a systematic review of the leader variables examined and their relationship with creativity and innovation, along with a review and categorization of the proposed moderators of this relationship. **Section 3** examines the mediating mechanisms by which leaders are theorized to influence workplace creativity and innovation. Within **Section 3**, we provide a theoretically-driven taxonomy of these mediating variables, which can be used to guide future research. **Section 4** examines the study designs commonly employed, with a particular focus on endogeneity-based concerns. Most often, researchers wish to examine causal process models, whereby leader behavior influences creativity and innovation through some mediating mechanism. Unfortunately, the most frequently employed study designs are not well-suited to assessing such models and making causal inferences. We provide guidance on how researchers can examine such effects in a robust manner. In **Section 5**, we examine current approaches to measuring creativity and innovation, including an expert review of popular psychometric scales, with a view to establishing what exactly they do and do not measure. Finally, we identify key areas for future research that should produce a more reliable and systematic body of evidence to serve as a platform for theory development and trustworthy policy recommendations.

Search strategy

To review the current empirical literature, we first conducted a comprehensive search for relevant studies. Accordingly, using four databases (Proquest, PsychInfo, EBSCO, and ISI Web of Science) we searched for the keywords “Leadership,” “Leader,” and “Creativity,” “Innovation,” “Creative Behavior,” “Innovative Behavior”. The search included journal articles, dissertations, book chapters, and conference proceedings. We also searched the reference lists from relevant review articles (Anderson et al., 2014; Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015; Reiter-Palmon & Illies, 2004; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011; Zhou & Shalley, 2003).

In total, we identified 185 publications and 195 independent samples (several publications reported multiple samples). Fifty-nine samples were at the team- or organizational-level of analysis, with the remainder being at the individual level. The vast majority of studies used a field sample of employees, and eight studies used a student sample. Throughout this review, we used this article cache to conduct a number of systematic analyses (i.e., documenting all mediators of the leader-creativity/innovation

pathway studied) and also as the basis for a number of narrative arguments based on trends evident with these papers. Given the nature of these papers, the majority of our discussion relates to individual employee creativity and innovation, but the overwhelming majority of the points made apply to all levels of analysis.

Section 1: defining creativity and innovation

Creativity and innovation are nuanced concepts that each incorporate a number of distinct but closely related processes that result in distinct but often closely related outcomes (Anderson et al., 2004, 2014). Given the complex and dynamic nature of both creativity and innovation (Mumford & McIntosh, 2017), it is perhaps unsurprising that they have proven difficult to define and measure (Batey, 2012). Numerous previous reviews have discussed definitional confusion and the limitations it engenders, with most making some recommendations to provide definitional clarity. Perhaps the most notable recent example is Anderson et al.'s (2014, p.1298) review, in which they put forward the following definition of workplace creativity and innovation:

Creativity and innovation at work are the process, outcomes, and products of attempts to develop and introduce new and improved ways of doing things. The creativity stage of this process refers to idea generation, and innovation to the subsequent stage of implementing ideas toward better procedures, practices, or products. Creativity and innovation [...] will invariably result in identifiable benefits.

There is much to admire in the above definition, most notably, it clearly delineates and integrates creativity and innovation. However, it also suffers from a major limitation; it defines creativity and innovation by their outcomes and products. Definitions that draw upon antecedents and outcomes are common in psychological and managerial research, but such definitions are limited for two main reasons (MacKenzie, 2003). First, they do not describe the nature of the phenomenon and thus can lead to misconceptions which, as we discuss later, foster poor measure development (Hughes, 2018; MacKenzie, 2003). Second, they make it difficult (perhaps impossible) to differentiate the phenomenon from its effects: a good joke elicits laughter from an audience, but a joke is still a joke regardless of whether people laugh. The same is true of creativity and innovation, yet the Anderson et al. definition (and many others) states that creativity and innovation are “outcomes and products” that will “invariably [i.e., on every occasion] result in identifiable benefits”. If we follow this logically, an idea cannot be creative until it leads to identifiable benefits to the organization. Even if we leave aside potential concerns regarding the precise meaning of ‘identifiable’, ‘benefits’, and ‘organization’ here, such definitions remain problematic. A creative idea or innovative process cannot exist until *after* the effects are known – would it really be the case that cars, vaccines, or computers would be considered lacking in creativity if they had not resulted in profitable endeavours? Are we to regard the processes that led to the discovery of DNA as more creative and innovative with each new identifiable benefit we find? Further, such a definition means that creativity and innovation only exist within a particular temporal space. In other words, something can change from being uncreative to creative and back to uncreative again dependent upon market forces; the high-speed aeroplane, Concorde, for example. Clearly, defining creativity and innovation at work by the nature of the effect they have is unhelpful (MacKenzie, 2003).

In a bid to provide unambiguous and succinct definitions that avoid the concerns noted above, yet remain consistent with prior research, we coded every definition provided within our article sample, to identify the core conceptual commonalities while also identifying which are suitable or not as elements of a construct definition (MacKenzie, 2003). An overview of the results of the coding procedure is displayed in **Table 1**.

In all, 79% of articles provided an explicit definition of either or both creativity and/or innovation. Of those, 47% focussed solely on

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