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Climate setting in sourcing teams: Developing a measurement scale for team creativity climate



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ABSTRACT

Creative sourcing strategies, designed to extract more value from the supply base, have become a competitive, strategic differentiator. To fuel creativity, companies install sourcing teams that can capitalize on the specialized knowledge and expertise of their employees across the company. This article introduces the concept of a team creativity climate (TCC) – *team members' shared perceptions of their joint policies, procedures, and practices with respect to developing creative sourcing strategies* – as a means to address the unique challenges associated with a collective, cross-functional approach to develop value-enhancing sourcing strategies. Using a systematic scale development process that validates the proposed concept, the authors confirm its ability to predict sourcing team performance, and suggest some research avenues extending from this concept.

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1. Introduction

Driven by competitive pressures, sourcing strategies constantly seek ways to satisfy customer demands and mitigate supply risk at lower costs (AT Kearney, 2011; Eltantawy and Giunipero, 2013). Developing such value-enhancing strategies is complex (Ellis et al., 2010; Wu and Pagell, 2011) and demands substantial creativity and innovative problem solving (Giunipero et al., 2005; O'Brien, 2012). According to a recent industry survey (State of Flux, 2013), nearly 70% of buying companies have installed sourcing teams to formulate and implement creative sourcing strategies and thereby attain superior business performance (Hardt et al., 2007). These teams pool the problem-solving capabilities and specialized knowledge of employees from different functional backgrounds (Englyst et al., 2008). For example, at Target, sourcing is a cross-functional process and a competitive differentiator in its retail environment (Forbes, 2015). By challenging product specifications or the underlying business need for a purchase, sourcing teams are able to creatively resolve problems (Giunipero et al., 2005), realize lower purchase prices (Johnson et al., 2002), and improve bottom-line results (AT Kearney, 2011).

However, it is also becoming clear that many sourcing teams fail to reach their full potential or meet general management

expectations (Driedonks et al., 2014; Moses and Åhlström, 2008). In a recent market survey (Deloitte, 2014), more than half of participating Chief Procurement Officers (57%) believed their teams were incapable of delivering unique, effective solutions to current sourcing challenges. A major reason for this failure might be the widespread use of top-down instructions (i.e., formal sourcing processes, templates, and protocols), which are inadequate for guiding sourcing teams in formulating creative, value-enhancing strategies (Kaufmann et al., 2014; Monczka et al., 2010). For example, Englyst et al. (2008) criticize extant research for not providing concrete guidance on the specific processes that govern creative problem solving and effective team functioning. Understanding how an atmosphere conducive to creativity originates from the bottom up, within sourcing teams, instead may enable such teams to focus their attention directly on the processes needed to develop creative, value-enhancing sourcing strategies.

In our attempt to do so, we seek theoretical guidance from emerging team climate research. The concept of climate implies the shared perceptions of team members toward the policies, procedures, and practices that will be rewarded and supported in a specific work setting (Zohar and Tenne-Gazit, 2008). It thus provides a means to capture the collective sensemaking process by which individual team members derive information about relevant role behaviors that are expected of them, to attain strategically-focused outcomes as a team (Schneider et al., 1992). In sourcing teams, a current challenge is to rely less on formal sourcing protocols and deploy creativity as a relevant role behavior, instead. That is, sourcing teams appear to provide impactful

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means to attain breakthrough sourcing strategies (Pagell, 2004; Trent and Monczka, 1994). However, little research conceptualizes or measures how creative processes and behaviors unfold in these teams (Driedonks et al., 2010; Englyst et al., 2008; Moses and Åhlström, 2008). Within this study, we draw on work-unit climate research to address our central research question of how creative processes and behaviors unfold in sourcing teams. The purpose is to conceptualize the creativity climate in sourcing teams, develop a measurement instrument to assess the creativity climate in sourcing teams, and test its impact on sourcing team performance. With this approach, we contribute to extant literature in two important ways.

First, we conceptualize team creativity climate (TCC) as a facet-specific work-unit climate that can reveal how individual members collaboratively develop creative solutions to sourcing challenges. With the notable exception of Driedonks et al. (2014), scholars have ignored behavioral theory perspectives on how sourcing teams perform. Climate research offers an appropriate lens to examine how team members' perceptions of or experiences in the immediate work environment influence a work group's creative endeavors (Hunter et al., 2007). From this theoretical grounding, we develop a measurement scale that can capture creative work-unit climates in sourcing teams. To the best of our knowledge, prior sourcing literature has not offered a measurement scale for creative behavior in teams. Following a systematic scale development process (Churchill, 1979; De Vellis, 1991; Netemeyer et al., 2003), we develop a one-dimensional measurement scale, using expert interviews and survey data collected from a sample of 120 sourcing professionals. In compliance with established scale development protocols, we conduct an empirical test of discriminant and convergent validity, reliability, and the unidimensionality of the target construct.

Second, we provide evidence of the predictive power of the newly developed scale for sourcing team performance; extant literature lacks evidence about the precise impact of creative team work on sourcing performance. We draw on previous research that demonstrates an inextricable link between team-level climates and strategically-focused output (Schneider et al., 1992). Because TCC can be related to relevant output, such as the extent to which sourcing strategies are truly creative, it offers the potential of contributing to bottom-line results. Specifically, we correlate team members' ratings of the creativity climate with their team leaders' ratings of the teams' creative performance. Team leaders are experts in the domain of interest and can thus use their subjective judgment to assess the appropriateness of the solution for fulfilling business unit or corporate objectives (Amabile, 1996; Amabile and Pillemer, 2012).

In the next section, we offer a conceptualization of TCC and explain how it relates theoretically to the creative performance of sourcing strategies. Following a two-stage scale development process, we subsequently derive a measurement scale for the TCC construct. After formulating, purifying, and pretesting the scale items, we validate our construct as well as its impact on sourcing performance with data from a sample of 52 sourcing teams. We conclude with a discussion of the theoretical and managerial implications.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Theoretical perspectives on creativity

The complex and competitive sourcing environment requires sourcing teams to look for solutions off the beaten paths (Giunipero et al., 2005). Given the multi-dimensionality of sourcing effectiveness, decision-makers have to seek a delicate balance

between cost, value and risk (Driedonks et al., 2010). This new sourcing reality has led to a call for more creativity and innovative problem-solving in the procurement profession in general and within sourcing teams in particular (Deloitte, 2013). For several years, companies have relied on a multitude of creative methods, trainings and processes advocated by consultants or experts of applied creativity (e.g. Syntectics: Gordon, 1961; Lateral Thinking: De Bono, 1985; Intuition: Mintzberg, 1998; TRIZ: Terninko et al., 1998). Intended to facilitate the development of novel and meaningful solutions to problems, their validity has been contested by creativity scholars (see e.g. Sternberg and Lubart (1999)). According to Puccio et al. (2006), this abundance of creative methods might have contributed to the view that the field of creativity is imbalanced towards application and lacks scientific rigor. In an attempt to build a stronger theoretical foundation for empirical research on the applied nature of creativity, we thus set out to shed light on more fundamental aspects of creative problem-solving in work groups, such as sourcing teams.

Contemporary research increasingly distinguishes between creativity as an output (i.e., how novel and useful the idea is) and creativity as a process (i.e., how the idea is achieved). While scholars agree that more attention is needed to elucidate the creative process by which individual members produce creative outcomes at the team level (Anderson et al., 2014; Mumford, 2000), the approaches taken to explicate this process are varied. Drazin et al., (1999) stipulate a process-oriented *sensemaking perspective* to describe employees' participation in creative behavior. This perspective is focused on "how individuals attempt to orient themselves to, and take creative action in, situations or events that are complex, ambiguous, and ill defined" (p. 287). In contrast, Zhang and Bartol (2010) adopt a behavior-oriented approach and use an *engagement perspective* to argue that the extent to which employees engage in creativity-relevant methods or processes – such as problem identification, information search and idea generation – is decisive for attaining creative outcomes. Haslam et al. (2013) adopt a *social identity perspective* to explain the eminent role of teams in stimulating and shaping creative acts and determining the reception or judgment of individual team members' ideas. A shared social identity motivates people to rise to creative challenges and provides a basis for recognizing certain forms of creativity among team members.

On a similar note, studies on *work-unit climates* examine how people's perceptions of or experiences in the immediate work environment influence a team's creative endeavors (Hunter et al., 2007). The theoretical foundation for climate formation recognizes that team climates originate from the bottom up within teams and thereby shape team members' behavior. Hackman's (1987) model of group effectiveness similarly posits that the process by which team-level climates arise is dynamic in nature, such that the construction of shared meaning occurs through team member interactions. As a proxy for the creative sensemaking process among sourcing team members, climate constructs qualify as team-level process variables that can explain how collective, creative behavior translates into creative solutions (Anderson et al., 2014). Therefore, the *climate perspective* offers an appropriate lens for conceptualizing the collective sensemaking process that occurs during creative sourcing teamwork. Adopting this team process focus, and in line with previous conceptualizations of facet-specific climates, we define TCC as *team members' shared perceptions of their joint policies, procedures, and practices with respect to developing creative sourcing strategies*

2.2. A conceptualization of team creativity climate

When people must perform work activities as a team, the notion of climate might provide a missing link between

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