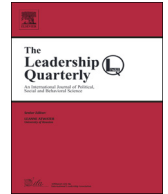




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I get by with a little help from my supervisor: Creative-idea generation, idea implementation, and perceived supervisor support

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ABSTRACT

In two studies using both field (165 employees and their 24 direct supervisors from a manufacturing firm in Study 1) and experimental (123 second-year undergraduate student participants in lab Study 2) data, we explore how perceived supervisor support acts as a crucial contingency that enables higher levels of idea implementation from creative-idea generation. First, we suggest that excessive creative-idea generation (in terms of *both* frequency and creativity of ideas) can lead to diminished returns with regard to idea implementation. Drawing on a resource allocation framework, we hypothesize and find a curvilinear inverse U-shaped relationship between employee creative-idea generation and implementation. Second, we find that higher levels of perceived supervisor support dampen the curvilinear relationship between creative-idea generation and idea implementation. Accordingly, perceived supervisor support seems to provide employees with access to resources and support needed for idea implementation, making highly creative ideas more implementable.

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Introduction

Innovation processes include several stages. First, and perhaps foremost, creativity, formally defined as the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1996; Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Paulus & Yang, 2000) is the obvious point of departure for innovation to take place. Another important phase, however, is selecting and implementing the chosen alternatives (Amabile, 1988; Hammond, Neff, Farr, Schwall, & Zhao, 2011; Scott & Bruce, 1994). In reality, the innovation process is complex, and idea generation and implementation do not necessarily proceed in a linear fashion, but can take place interchangeably (Anderson, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2004). However, creative-idea generation is widely accepted as the necessary antecedent of innovation implementation at the individual level (Amabile, 1988; Baer, 2012). For research purposes, such a distinction enables a deeper and more nuanced insight into the innovation process, which could help the managers provide knowledge of how to stimulate idea implementation from idea generation, as it is this final step that provides a tangible value for the firm. If organizations fail to implement highly creative ideas, this would mean sunk costs because they fall short of contributing to the

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business case (Levitt, 2002). In the present study we seek to increase our knowledge of why organizations fail to implement creative ideas. We first focus on the relationship between different, yet related innovation processes: creative-idea generation and implementation.

Despite the importance of transforming highly creative ideas into implemented solutions, knowledge of the specifics of this process and of the role of leaders remain limited. Even though some creativity researchers (e.g. West, 2002) have theorized about the presence of nonlinear relationships between idea generation and implementation, reviews by Dionne (2008) and Rosing, Frese, and Bausch (2011) found that the majority of creativity and innovation research continues to hypothesize and test linear associations. Such a focus “has obscured the prevalence and importance of nonmonotonic inverted U-shaped effects, whereby positive phenomena reach inflection points at which their effects turn negative” (Grant & Schwartz, 2012) and hence fails to account for the so-called “too-much-of-a-good-thing” effect in management (Pierce & Aguinis, 2013). This may be so *both* when the level of creativity and the frequency of generated ideas are in question (i.e. how creative are the generated ideas and how frequently they are generated), which is the focus of our paper. Based on a resource allocation framework (Becker, 1965; Hockey, 1997) that highlights the fact that resources are finite and, at times, organizations must make trade-off decisions regarding resource allocation, we intend to make two key contributions to the innovation and leadership literatures.

First, by proposing that the relationship between idea generation and idea implementation is curvilinear, we address the assumptions made by West (2002) and Dionne (2008). We empirically test an inverse u-shaped relationship between creativity (idea generation) and innovation in the form of idea implementation, where moderate levels of creativity (both in terms of the quantity and level of creativity of ideas) should be most beneficial for idea implementation. This argument is based on the fact that individuals at work face trade-offs between idea generation and idea implementation. Accordingly the time, energy, and attention they devote to generating novel and potentially useful ideas may prevent them from implementing their ideas. Highly novel ideas are more difficult to implement than moderately novel ideas due to their out-of-the-box, risky nature (Baer, 2012). One needs more resources (time, energy, support, etc.) to implement them, as is also the case with frequently generating creative ideas, which in turn may lead to a detrimental effect for such ideas. This, in our view, is supportive of a more nuanced and complex investigation into the relationship between idea generation and idea implementation than what is available in the current literature. It enables us to contribute to the exploration of “the black box” of micro-individual-level innovation processes through the relationship of its beginning and end phases.

Our second contribution is related to examining potential managerial and specifically leadership remedies to the untapped potential of highly creative ideas. We do so by investigating the moderating role of perceived supervisor support (PSS), i.e., the degree to which supervisors value employees' contributions and care about their well-being (Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades, 2002; Kottke & Sharafinski, 1988). By recognizing usefulness and accepting novel ideas generated by highly creative individuals, immediate supervisors act as resources at the interpersonal level (cf. Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) and can provide other resources necessary for implementing these ideas.

In the existing literature, there is already evidence of moderating influences on the idea generation–idea implementation relationship. In specific, Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2013) examined this process at the group level and found that a team's innovation climate moderates the relationship between team creativity and innovation. Baer (2012) focused on the role of individual characteristics in the linear relationship between idea generation and implementation at the individual level. His results showed that although idea generation positively contributes to implementation, the effect is contingent upon individual boundary conditions (specifically, individuals' motivation to put ideas into practice and their ability to network). Whereas this research has contributed to increasing our knowledge of boundary conditions in the form of team innovation climate and individual motivation, we seek to extend this line of work by proposing that immediate leaders/line managers also influence the idea generation–idea implementation relationship. Hence, the second central tenet of our research is that high levels of PSS can contribute to organizational success by exploiting highly and frequently generated creative ideas. In practice, our research should help organizations understand and facilitate the use of the untapped potential of such ideas.

The trade-off between idea generation and implementation

Literature on individual creativity and innovation has generally paid little attention to understanding when, why, and how excessive idea generation might have a detrimental effect on idea implementation. Even though some creativity researchers (e.g., West, 2002) have theorized about the presence of nonlinear relationships between creativity and innovation, reviews by Dionne (2008) and Rosing et al. (2011) found that the majority of creativity and innovation research continues to hypothesize and test linear associations. To explain the nature of the relationship between creative-idea generation and idea implementation, we draw on a resource allocation framework (Becker, 1965; Hockey, 1997). According to this framework, the amounts of time, energy, and resources are limited, not only within a particular work setting, but also in life in general. Because creative-idea generation and implementation are distinct activities (Baer, 2012; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013) related to different behaviors, high focus on one of those activities may prevent one from carrying out the other successfully.

For example, idea implementation is inherently embedded within social contexts (cf. Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013); employees should exchange, integrate, and disseminate their ideas in order to implement them. For those processes to be successful, additional knowledge and skills, not only creative behaviors, are needed (Mainemelis, 2010). The process of idea implementation, even at the individual level, is open to the social–political maneuvers among employees (Baer, 2012). It requires collaboration and “selling” ideas within the organization to other employees or groups (Axtell et al., 2000) in order to collect support and resources. To navigate these political processes, individuals require “salesmanship” skills. These skills can also be

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