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Using workplace experiences for learning about affect and creative problem solving: Piloting a four-stage model for management education

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the theoretical and empirical development of a four-stage model intended for developing management cognition in the area of creative problem solving that was piloted with a doctoral student who holds a managerial position in a college. Using a single subject case study design that employs experience sampling methodology, the models flips the order of the teach-then-assess approach: Stage 1 examined the student's approach to solving problems at work through collecting two weeks of survey responses on her smartphone at work. Stage 2 scaffolded the student's approach to creative problem solving with a focused discussion of research on the role affect plays in problem solving. Stage 3 gave the student time to reflect upon this research by journaling for five days, followed by a discussion with faculty members. Finally, Stage 4 repeated examining the student's approach to problem solving through a survey on her smartphone and presented the student with an analysis of the two rounds of ESM data, and how it differed depending on solving a "new" versus "prevalent" problem (i.e., Stage 1 & Stage 4) and her journal entries. This time she derived new ways to solve organizational problems. Student data from these four stages is compared to extant literature and analyzing creative problem solving practices with real-time data collection methods is discussed.

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The growing body of scholarship on leader and management cognition suggests that how managers think and solve problems influences their actual performance (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007; Schmidt-Wilk, 2011; Yang, Wang, & Wu, 2010). The ability to solve problems effectively and creatively includes generating new approaches that depart from established policies and practices, which can be vital to organizational success (Isaksen, Dorval, & Treffinger, 2011; Isen, 2008; Puccio, Mance, & Murdock, 2011; Sawyer, 2012). Graduate-level instruction is one way to help aspiring leaders and managers make better decisions and solve problems more effectively, in order to improve their performance and organizational outcomes, and help their colleagues develop their own problem-solving expertise. Creative problem solving relies not only cognition, but also on emotion (Mumford, Mobley, Ulman, Reiter-Palmon, & Doares, 1991). Thus, management program design, curriculum and instruction should consider ways to help managers understand both the affective and cognitive components of problem solving. This focus necessitates connecting the applied workplace experience of managers

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in a more deliberate and purposeful way to instruction that departs from the traditional teach-then-assess approach in higher education programs.

This article presents the theoretical and empirical development of a four-stage instructional model designed to integrate workplace problem-solving experiences with instruction and learning, piloted with a single subject case study: a doctoral student enrolled in an educational leadership program who holds a managerial position in a college. In this four-stage model, we flipped the traditional teach-then-assess-approach: Experience sampling methodology (ESM) was used to closely examine and give feedback on workplace experiences in order to investigate how problems were solved before and after learning about research-based creative problem solving models in the classroom. Problem solving is defined as "the process of *sensing* difficulties, *problems*, gaps in information, missing elements" (Torrance, 1969 as cited in Kerr and Gagliardi, 1003, p. 16), and involves cognitive and affective dimensions (Isen, 2008). Experience sampling methodology (hereinafter referred to as ESM) can be a useful method for examining approaches to problem solving because it is based on contacting study participants to report on their real-world problem solving experiences multiple times a day, over a period of several days (Hektner, Schmidt, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2007). In this study, we focused on studying a single subject in order to better understand how a doctoral student fairly new to the role of management faced problem solving, as she was interested in learning to be more creative.

A common teaching method used in higher education is to collect retrospective information on experience through course evaluation surveys. ESM, however, is based on collecting multiple surveys, longitudinally (over at least two different times). Therefore, using ESM can allow instructors to understand students' approaches and practices, and then coach them based on what they are doing. It is thus grounded in the principle of ecological validity (Brunswick, 1956), which emphasizes the importance of the transaction between the person and the environment as a key component of the experiential learning process (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Kolb, 1984; Lewin, 1951). By incorporating ESM into an instructional model, management faculty can better position themselves to help students improve how they solve real-world problems, and derive and implement innovative ideas, thus leading to more robust management education.

This paper begins with a hypothetical workplace scenario that demonstrates a lack of creative problem solving to illustrate the importance of bridging the classroom-workplace gap, and the need to teach creative problem solving in Management Education. Next, the disconnection between classroom and workplace experiences is highlighted. The lack of understanding affective and cognitive processes in creative problem solving at work is a critical gap that necessitates the use of novel assessments like ESM. This is followed by the delineation of the theoretical framework informing our application of ESM and explanation of our instructional model. Each of the model's four stages is presented with data from a pilot study of a manager enrolled in an educational leadership doctoral program. Finally, key research and practice implications are discussed.

1. Scenario of a workplace problem

As a head manager with emerging leadership responsibilities, "Cara" learns of a new management position opening at New Tech Corp. and decides to apply. Her friend and colleague, Jim, also applies. Their CEO, Mark, however, considers neither as final candidates. Instead, he gives preference to a candidate who is his friend from his former job in a different area of the state and decides to hire him. This results in Cara feeling betrayed and she shares her feelings with Jim. Jim appears less agitated as he has experienced similar situations in the past. But, Cara finds Jim's indifference further disturbing and decides to email the CEO Mark requesting an explanation of why her candidacy was declined. In absence of a rational reason, Mark avoids responding back until one day Cara confronts him in a meeting. Their encounter soon results in an unpleasant argument that draws the attention of other employees. Mark takes Cara's aggressiveness as insulting and warns that her behavior might negatively impact her future prospects in the company. But, Mark is not the only one taken aback by Cara's behavior. Even Jim, Cara's colleague and her juniors find Cara's approach impulsive and rash.[1]

This scenario represents an example of workplace relationships that can be enhanced with creative problem-solving strategies where novel approaches are used that depart from more established, conventional policies and practices to solve persistent issues such as workplace disagreements (Isaksen et al., 2011; Isen, 2008; Puccio et al., 2011; Sawyer, 2012). First, it appears that the manager-C.E.O. relationship shifts from collegial to distant to malevolent. Cara appears angry for not being hired internally, and Mark seems to have interpreted her frustration as a deficit in that he took a punitive approach, casting her behavior as poor work performance. Neither party used creative problem solving strategies to examine each person's different perspective to build mutual understanding. In addition, neither party seemed to make sufficient effort to change their responses. Non-creative approaches to problem solving include reacting to a situation without examining diverse perspectives, and relying on habitual, ineffective responses (Isaksen et al., 2011): these behaviors occurred when Cara resorted to arguing rather than engaging in open discussion and when the C.E.O. Mark attempted to ignore Cara's email correspondence in an effort to sweep her different perspective under the rug. Most likely Mark and Cara would have improved the situation by attempting to regulate their feelings, suspend judgment and delay their reactions before engaging with each other.

[1] This workplace scenario is an excerpt from a former leadership study (Katz-Buonincontro, 2011). The details of the scenario were changed slightly and pseudonyms were used to protect the leaders' confidentiality and anonymity.

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