



## Leaders' responses to creative deviance: Differential effects on subsequent creative deviance and creative performance☆

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### ABSTRACT

Leaders routinely reject employees' new ideas, and some employees violate leaders' instructions in order to keep their rejected ideas alive. These incidents of creative deviance are usually examined in terms of the personal characteristics of employees and the structural properties of the work context. We introduce a third theoretical angle that focuses on the role leaders play in creative deviance. Drawing on the extant creativity, deviance, and leadership literatures, we argue that five leader responses to employee creative deviance – forgiving, rewarding, punishing, ignoring, and manipulating – exert differential influences on its consequences. Findings from a study of 226 leader–employee dyads at two advertising firms in China show that creative deviance and supportive supervision for creativity interact to influence the forgiving, rewarding, punishing, and ignoring responses. In turn, forgiving and punishing influence subsequent creative deviance, while rewarding, punishing, and manipulating influence subsequent creative performance. The study reveals that leaders' responses to creative deviance convey the joint effect of initial creative deviance and supportive supervision for creativity to subsequent creative deviance and creative performance. Implications for theory and research on workplace creativity, deviance, and leadership are discussed.

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Leaders play a pivotal role in either fostering or hindering creativity in the workplace (Mainemelis, Kark, & Epitropaki, 2015; Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Tierney, 2008). In organizations that strive to increase creativity, leaders are responsible for maximizing, sequencing, and timing two distinct and often antithetical processes – variation and selective retention (Staw, 1990). While variation aims at novelty and is ultimately reflected in the number and diversity of new ideas generated by employees, selective retention aims at utility and results in a subset of new ideas that leaders evaluate as most promising and ultimately channel to implementation (Benner & Tushman, 2003; Ford, 1996; Frese, Teng, & Wijnen, 1999; Mumford, Connelly, & Gaddis, 2003). In theoretical terms, creativity is a function of high variation and high selective retention (Campbell, 1960; Simonton, 1999). In practical terms, this means that leaders must tackle the dual challenge of encouraging employees to generate new ideas and of routinely rejecting most of those ideas.

To date, creativity research has focused on the first aspect of this dual challenge but has largely overlooked the second one. Several studies have found that, in order to foster the generation of new ideas, leaders must encourage employees to be creative and they also must provide them with a supportive social context that nurtures creative engagement (for recent reviews see Anderson, Potočník, &

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Zhou, 2014, and Mainemelis et al., 2015). However, very few studies have examined how leaders handle the relationally intense dynamics associated with the rejection of employees' new ideas. Employees may react to rejection by abandoning the rejected new idea and even by decreasing their creative engagement with future work tasks (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Alternatively, employees may react to rejection by increasing rather than decreasing their commitment to the rejected idea (Nemeth, 1997; Staw, 1990). Following a manager's rejection of a new idea, employees may engage in creative deviance (Mainemelis, 2010); that is, they may continue pursuing the rejected new idea in direct violation of their manager's instruction to stop working on it. Such situations trigger a set of intriguing exchanges between the manager and the creative deviant that have rarely been studied, to date. How do leaders respond to an employee who has violated orders to stop pursuing a new idea? How do leaders' responses to creative deviance, in turn, influence employees' future creative performance and future engagement in creative deviance?

The present study examines these questions by integrating insights from research on creativity, deviance, and leadership. We operationalize five leader responses to creative deviance, namely forgiving, rewarding, punishing, ignoring, and manipulating (Mainemelis, 2010). These responses are not unique to creative deviance but they represent core adaptive functions of the human evolutionary makeup across culture and time. McCullough, Kurzban, and Tabak (2013) argued that humans have an evolved cognitive system that selects and implements interpersonal strategies for deterring future harm and for preserving valuable relationships despite the prior impositions of harm. When individuals encounter deviant behavior or other forms of offense, this evolved cognitive system allows them to choose among "a suite of behavioral options" (p. 12). In this paper we operationalize an analogous 'suite' of five leader responses to creative deviance in the workplace.

The nomological model of leader responses that we test is grounded in two theoretical traditions: Deterrence theories of deviance, which focus on the effects that leaders' reactions to a deviant act have on the probability of the same deviant act recurring in the future (e.g. Klepper & Nagin, 1989; McCullough et al., 2013; Ward, Stafford, & Gray, 2006); and interactionist theories of creativity, which stress leaders' influences on employee creativity (e.g. Amabile, 1988; Ford, 1996; Woodman, Sawyer, & Griffin, 1993). These two theoretical traditions are consistent with the dual deterrence-relationship preservation focus that underlies McCullough et al.'s (2013) framework and Mainemelis's (2010) theory of creative deviance. Drawing on interactionist theories of creativity, we argue that creative deviance and supportive supervision for creativity (Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Oldham & Cummings, 1996) interact to influence the five leader responses. Moreover, given that creative deviance has two behavioral components—creative and deviant (Mainemelis, 2010)—we draw on deterrence theories and interactionist theories to suggest that the five leader responses have differential (positive, negative, and neutral) effects on two key outcomes, employees' subsequent creative deviance and their subsequent creative performance.

Our study contributes one of the first conceptualizations and empirical tests of leaders' reactions to creative deviance. While the small extant literature on creative deviance focuses on organizational-level (e.g. Criscuolo, Salter, & Ter Wal, 2014; Mainemelis, 2010), national-level (e.g., Cullen & Parboteeah, 2014), or employee-level variables (eg. Criscuolo et al., 2014; Lin, Law, & Chen, 2012), we develop and test a model that is focused on the role leaders play in creative deviance. Furthermore, while past deviance research has focused on deviant workplace behaviors that are inherently positive or negative (Criscuolo et al., 2014; Warren, 2003), we contribute to deviance research a rigorous study of a deviant workplace behavior that is not inherently positive or negative, but rather, leaders' responses to it can make employees more or less creative and more or less creatively deviant in the future.

Last but not least, in two recent integrative reviews of the literature on the relationship between leadership and creativity, Dinh et al. (2014) urged researchers to pay more attention in the future to the dynamic nature of leader–follower interactions, and Mainemelis et al. (2015) stressed the need for new research that examines the influence of leader behaviors on employee creative performance far beyond the stage of idea generation. Our study responds to these calls and contributes to research on creativity and leadership a novel investigation of a set of leader–member interactions that ensue after a new idea has been both generated and rejected. In more general terms, our paper opens to creativity research a conceptual door for examining how leaders tackle the interpersonal exchanges associated with the dual challenge of encouraging employees to generate new ideas and of rejecting most of those ideas.

## Theory and hypotheses

Creativity refers to the process that results in a novel product that the social context accepts as useful or otherwise appropriate at some point in time (Stein, 1953). This long-standing definition in the field implies that creativity must be understood both as a process and a product (Amabile, 1996; Mainemelis et al., 2015). As a process, creativity unfolds in distinct stages, such as problem preparation, idea generation, idea evaluation, idea elaboration, and idea implementation (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). As a product, creativity is usually assessed in terms of the novelty and utility of its outcomes within a specific social domain (Amabile, 1988, 1996). Like previous research (e.g. Amabile et al., 1996; George & Zhou, 2001; Liu, Liao, & Loi, 2012), we operationalize *creative performance* as the product of an employee's work that his or her manager evaluates as both novel and useful.

*Creative deviance* refers to an employee's violation of a managerial order to stop pursuing a new idea (Mainemelis, 2010). This definition presupposes that the employee has already generated a new idea and has asked for a manager's permission to further develop it, but that following the manager's order to stop working on it, the employee violates that order and continues working on the new idea. Creative deviance, thus, occurs in the *idea elaboration* stage of the creative process, which follows the idea generation stage but precedes the idea implementation stage. Because the creative process is uncertain and ambiguous (Baer, 2012), creative deviance may or may not result in a creative product. However, creative deviance allows employees to further explore and pursue their rejected new idea, albeit through illegitimate means (Mainemelis, 2010).

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