I can do it, so can you: The role of leader creative self-efficacy in facilitating follower creativity

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ABSTRACT

Creativity scholars have long called for more research on the effects of leader characteristics on employee creativity. Answering this call, this study draws on social cognitive theory to examine the effect of leader creative self-efficacy (CSE) on follower creativity. Using a sample of 544 employees nested under 106 supervisors at a large information technology company in the U.S., we obtained support for the indirect effect of leader CSE on follower creativity via leader encouragement of creativity and follower creative process engagement. In addition, follower leader–member exchange (LMX) strengthened the relationship between leader encouragement of creativity and follower creative process engagement. Thus, in the presence of higher LMX, leader CSE is likely to have a stronger positive impact on employee creativity through leader encouragement of creativity and, subsequently, follower creative process engagement. Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the role of leader attributes in employee creativity.

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1. Introduction

Creativity, the production of novel and applicable ideas about products, practices, services, or procedures, has become increasingly important in today's organizations (Tierney & Farmer, 2011). Creativity scholars have argued that creativity is a "potent competitive weapon" for organizations (Amabile, 1998, p. 87) and have emphasized that cultivating employee creativity is a major objective for leaders in the 21st century (Dess & Picken, 2001). Previous research has long acknowledged the critical role of leaders in fostering employee creativity (Shalley & Gilson, 2004; Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999), highlighting three facets of leader influence on follower creativity: leader personal characteristics, leader behaviors, and leaders' relationships with followers (Tierney, 2008). However, the majority of studies have focused on the last two facets (e.g., Jaussi & Dionne, 2003; Liao, Liu, & Loi, 2010; Madjar, Oldham, & Pratt, 2002; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Shin & Zhou, 2003) while largely ignoring the first facet – the role of leader attributes in follower creativity (for exceptions, see Gibson, Fiedler, & Barrett, 1993; Tierney, 2008; Tierney et al.,

1999; Zhou & George, 2003). Therefore, Tierney (2008) suggested that a valuable extension of the creativity literature would be to investigate the "ways in which work-group supervisors' attributes influence employee creativity" (p. 114).

Utilizing a social cognitive theoretical perspective (Bandura, 1989), our study addresses this research void by examining the effect of leaders' *creative self-efficacy* (CSE), which is a creativity-focused motivational attribute defined as "a self-belief that one has the ability to produce creative outcomes" (Tierney & Farmer, 2002, p. 1138), on follower creativity. Given that motivation is a critical determinant of creative performance (Amabile, 1983) and a key aspect of leaders' influence on follower creativity (Amabile, 1998), leaders' motivational attributes are likely to be a source of leaders' potential to impact others' creativity (Tierney, 2008; Tierney et al., 1999). Among motivational attributes, CSE stands out in terms of its unique ability to affect leading for creativity. First, as a domain-specific form of efficacy, CSE is shown to predict creativity (Tierney & Farmer, 2002, 2004, 2011). Second, studies on leader efficacy reveal that when leaders are confident in their abilities in a given domain, they are likely to successfully lead followers to accomplish domain-specific goals (Wood & Bandura, 1989a). Hence, we propose that leader CSE as a form of self-efficacy specific to the creativity domain will increase leaders' display of behaviors that promote follower creativity.

To gain an in-depth understanding of the effect of leader CSE on follower creativity, we also unveil the multistep mechanism

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through which this effect transpires and identify a boundary condition under which it is more pronounced. Following prior work on the effects of leader attributes on follower outcomes (Oreg & Berson, 2011), we propose that leader CSE (a leader attribute) will promote leader encouragement of creativity (a leader behavior), which will in turn motivate employees to engage in creative processes (a follower behavior), and, ultimately, improve their creativity (a follower outcome). We also examine to what extent the indirect effect of leader CSE on follower creativity is contingent on the leader–follower relationship quality (leader–member exchange, LMX, Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) which may create a favorable context in which the effects of creativity-enhancing factors are magnified (Tierney et al., 1999).

Three primary contributions of this research to the creativity literature unfold. First, our study reveals that leader CSE is a source of a leader's positive influence on follower creativity, and thereby answers the call for more research on how leader attributes influence employee creativity (Tierney, 2008). While the creativity literature has emphasized the importance of leader creativity-promoting behaviors in follower creativity (Amabile, 1998), little is currently known about what attributes make leaders more prone to engaging in such behaviors. Thus, studying the role of leader CSE in employee creativity is important both theoretically and practically. In line with research on the dispositional bases of leadership showing that leader behaviors are influenced by their personal characteristics (Bono & Judge, 2004; Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002), creativity scholars have acknowledged that leaders need to possess certain attributes to effectively lead for creativity (Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002; Tierney, 2008). Hence, investigating the effects of leader CSE contributes to a clearer understanding of what makes leaders successful at leading for creativity. Also, from a practical perspective, it can provide insights regarding how to more effectively prepare individuals to fill managerial positions that involve leading for creativity (e.g., designing interventions to boost leaders' CSE; cf. Mumford, Hunter, Eubanks, Bedell, & Murphy, 2007).

Second, most, if not all, prior studies on CSE have adopted an intra-individual approach and looked at how employees' CSE affects their own creativity (e.g., Richter, Hirst, Van Knippenberg, & Baer, 2012). Our study unveils yet another unique effect of CSE by demonstrating that CSE of group leaders may exert inter-individual effects on follower creativity above and beyond the effects of followers' own CSE. Thus, our study coupled with the work by Tierney (2008) and Tierney et al. (1999) suggests a valuable inter-individual approach to studying the impact of leader characteristics (e.g., motivational attributes, personality traits) on follower creativity. This inter-individual approach allows researchers to unveil novel inter-individual antecedents to employee creativity and mechanisms underlying their effects.

Finally, this study further uncovers the multi-faceted nature of leader influence on creativity by simultaneously considering the effects of leaders' attributes, behaviors, and relationships with followers on follower creativity. Thus, our study provides a more complete and integrative view of how leaders may shape follower creativity (by boosting their CSE, engaging in creativity-promoting behaviors, and improving relationships with followers).

2. Theory and hypotheses

The broader literature on organizational leadership suggests that a key goal of leader influence (assuming it is constructive influence that precludes the use of pressure and threats) is motivating followers to engage in activities leading to the achievement of group and/or organizational goals set by the leader (Ilies, Judge, & Wagner, 2006; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; Yukl, 1989). Similarly, creativity scholars have acknowledged that motivating

followers to engage in creative processes and produce creative outcomes is the core component of leading for creativity (Amabile, 1998; Mumford et al., 2002; Tierney, 2008). However, not all leaders are equally inclined or able to motivate their followers to be creative. Creativity scholars have suggested that leaders' personal *motivational* states and attributes could be a source of leaders' willingness and ability to lead others for creativity (Tierney, 2008; Tierney et al., 1999). In this paper, we draw from social cognitive theory and the creativity literature to propose that leader CSE, as a key self-regulatory motivational attribute, prompts leaders to lead for creativity by encouraging followers to engage in creative processes, which ultimately improves follower creative performance. The central components of this multistep mechanism transmitting the effect of leader CSE are leader encouragement of creativity (the extent to which leaders emphasize creativity and support employees to achieve creative outcomes, Zhang & Bartol, 2010) and follower creative process engagement (followers' engagement in the processes of problem identification, information search and encoding, and idea generation, Zhang & Bartol, 2010). The hypothesized relationships are depicted in Fig. 1.

Social cognitive theory is rooted in the agentic perspective on human motivation and underscores the premise that human action is a product of "the ongoing exercise of self-influence" and self-regulation (Bandura, 1991, p. 248). The key component of human agency is self-efficacy, which captures one's confidence in "their capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives" (Wood & Bandura, 1989a, p. 364). Self-efficacy allows individuals to be proactive and purposive regulators of their own and even others' actions (Bandura, 2001). Organizational leaders especially need to regulate not only their own behaviors but also the actions of their followers because directing follower actions toward the achievement of group or organizational goals is the essence of organizational leadership (House & Shamir, 1993; Yukl, 2013). As such, leader's self-efficacy beliefs are critical for the exercise of leader influence on followers (Kane, Zaccaro, Tremble, & Masuda, 2002).

Prior empirical research has theorized about and found support for this positive effect of leader efficacy on their ability to successfully influence their followers (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008). For example, Wood and Bandura (1989b) found that a manager's efficacious belief could get his or her group to achieve a certain level of productivity and was positively related to group performance. Also, leadership efficacy was found to predict cadets' performance on tasks that required leadership (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000), the frequency with which managers enacted acts of influence over their subordinates (Paglis & Green, 2002), and subordinates' ratings of leader effectiveness in planning, setting direction, assigning tasks, and leading by example (Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008).

When it comes to leading for *creativity*, a specific form of leaders' efficacy beliefs – CSE – becomes more important than general self-efficacy beliefs (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Social cognitive theory has long stressed the notion that efficacious beliefs are targeted toward specific outcomes of interest (Bandura, 1997, 2001) and that self-efficacy studies should be "tailored to the domain being studied" (Gist, 1987, p. 472). To this end, Tierney and Farmer (2002) introduced the construct of CSE. Prior research has provided rich empirical evidence showing that one's CSE is positively associated with one's own creativity in organizations (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007; Gong, Huang, & Farh, 2009; Jaussi, Randel, & Dionne, 2007; Shin & Zhou, 2007; Tierney & Farmer, 2002, 2004, 2011). However, when we turn to the analysis of *leader* CSE, additional insights into the effects of CSE may emerge. As explained immediately below, leader CSE is likely to serve as a motivational predictor of leading for creativity. Given that leading is an act of