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Rewarding Conformity, While Hoping for Creativity: Exploring the Role of Perception, Perspective, and Positionality

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> *Creativity is a key driver of competitive advantage and organizations depend upon employees feeding their creative ideas into the innovation pipeline to sustain growth and deliver upon rising customer expectations. However, creativity has been underrepresented in the literature due to its links with mysticism and spirituality and problems of definition and evaluation. Participants in this interactive session will explore creativity using the three dimensions of perception, perspective and positionality through partaking in activity-based learning.*

Keywords: Creativity, Perception, Perspective, Positionality

In 1975, Steven Kerr wrote a seminal piece entitled "On the folly of rewarding A, while hoping for B" examining the disconnect between expected organizational behaviour and rewarded organizational behaviour and identified a series of systems failures leading to individual underachievement and poor organizational outcomes. He demonstrated how many reward systems were compensating employees for substandard and poorly aligned performance leading to organizational stasis and showed how such systems were incapable of producing the discontinuous ground-breaking change so desired by their organizations. In today's fast-paced market-driven economy, creativity has been identified as a key driver of competitive advantage, enabling organizations to keep apace of changes in the external environment (Rajan & Martin, 2001). Creative ideas allow organizations to adjust to shifting market demand (C. E. Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004) and significantly add to levels of innovation, effectiveness, and productivity in organizations (Amabile & Conti, 1999; Nonaka, 1991). As McLean (2005) points out, organizations depend upon employees feeding their creative ideas into the innovation pipeline to sustain growth and deliver upon rising customer expectations. Nonaka and Tekeuchi (1995) define the "knowledge creating company" as one whose sole business is continuous improvement through developing the intellectual capital of employees and creating new knowledge, products, processes and systems. Indeed, Matheson (2006) sees the emphasis on creativity as indicative of a broader movement among western nations away from the production of goods and services to the production of ideas and knowledge. In spite of its importance, levels of creativity in many organizations remain low. As Taggar (2002) points out, companies have tried numerous strategies to foster creativity, including restructuring work, selecting people on the basis of their attributes and behavioral training, finding to their cost that these strategies are often unsuccessful.

This paper will initiate a discussion about how organizations recognize and foster creativity in the workplace. It will examine how organizational strategies and culture can be aligned to encourage creative risk-taking amongst employees. In particular, this paper will address the three dimensions of perception, perspective and positionality and examine how such dimensions affect the creative process. A series of implications for theory and practice in HRD will then be outlined.

Definitional Issues

Creativity is defined as, "coming up with fresh ideas for changing products, services, and processes so as to better achieve the organization's goals" (Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005, p. 367). Madjar (2005) maintains that definitions of creativity all include concepts of appropriateness and usefulness alongside notions of novelty and originality. Such views are echoed by Nickerson (1999) who argues that creativity must not only embrace novelty, but also a measure of utility, such as usefulness, appropriateness or social value. To this end, creativity needs to satisfy notions of commercial or cultural value and be built upon existing foundations and principles (Ward, 1995). In this regard, creativity is not a complete divergence from the past, but often takes the form of small incremental improvements that advance knowledge and understanding.

As a research topic, creativity has been underrepresented in the fields of social and organizational psychology. Sternberg and Lubart (1999) identify six historical barriers to the study of creativity including its

origins in a tradition of mysticism and spirituality; problems with the definition and criteria for creativity rendering it elusive and trivial; and the impression from commercial approaches to creativity that the field lacks a strong theoretical and psychological basis. To date, approaches to the study of creativity have been either cognitive, behavioral or personality based. Cognitive approaches have explored the superstructure of the mind and considered how cognitive processes lead to the production of innovative ideas and processes (Gardner, 1993). Behavioral approaches have examined the role of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and how reward systems affect levels of employee creativity (Baer, Oldham, & Cummings, 2003). Meanwhile, personality-based approaches have sought to identify individual traits which lead employees to be more creative in their work (Amabile, 1983; Barron & Harrington, 1981). More recent work has explored the social basis of creativity building upon the theories of social capital and recognizing the importance of communication and interaction in the creative process. (Amabile, 1996; Perry-Smith, 2006).

Perception

There exists considerable research evidence demonstrating the power of perception in affecting organizational realities (Analoui & Karami, 2002; Parker-Gore, 1996). Perception affects how an employee perceives their work environment, the relationships with their supervisor and colleagues and their own level of self-efficacy and self-competence. Perception is socially constructed and influenced by the manner in which events are interpreted. Consequently, Power (1973) argues to behave is to control perception and that we know nothing of our own behavior but the feedback effects of our own outputs. In this subsection, we examine the effects of environmental conditions, supervisory support and intrinsic motivation on employee perception and creativity.

The work environment exerts a powerful influence on the creativity of employees. Scott and Bruce (1994) maintain that employees may attempt to be creative when they perceive that creativity is valued and supported by the organization. Amabile et al. (1996) argue that the social environment can affect both the level and frequency of creative behavior. Majaro (1988) maintains that a suitable creative environment needs to emphasize flexibility and group involvement; respect for diversity; open expression of ideas; the promotion of creative thinking and the setting of clear objectives. To this list, Shalley and Gilson (2004) add the importance of individual autonomy as they propose that individuals need to feel independent in the level of time they can devote to their work and the means by which the work should be completed. Emphasizing the importance of environmental conditions, Csikszentmihalyi (1996) argues that it is easier to enhance creativity by changing the environmental conditions than by trying to get people to think more creatively. However, the reality as expressed by Amabile (1998) is that creativity is often undermined unintentionally in work environments that are established to maximize business imperatives of co-ordination, productivity and control. Likewise, McLean (2005) maintains that a culture that supports and encourages control will result in diminished creativity and innovation as control negatively affects levels of intrinsic motivation.

Leader support is a critical factor affecting an employee's self-confidence and their motivation to engage in creative behavior. Amabile *et al.* (2004) argue that individuals are likely to experience both perceptual and affective reactions to leader behaviours. An individual's perception of the instrumental and socio-emotional support of their team leaders will affect their level of creativity (Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Scott & Bruce, 1994). Tierney and Farmer (2002) found that where supervisors supported an employees self-confidence, this resulted in greater creative self-efficacy resulting in improved creative performance. Research by Andrews and Farris (1967) established that employees experienced higher levels of creativity when a more participative and engaging style was adopted by management. Similarly, a study by Zhou (2003) found that informational feedback to employees led to higher creativity than when feedback was delivered in a controlling or punitive manner. Finally, Jaussi and Dionne (2003) maintain that role modeling behaviour by supervisors is more likely to increase creative behaviour amongst followers – hence it is critical for supervisors to demonstrate creativity themselves and foster a climate which supports creativity.

While the literature on extrinsic motivation (i.e. monetary rewards and recognition) reveals a mixed picture regarding the effectiveness of such practices (Baer et al., 2003), research on intrinsic motivation shows a direct link to creativity (Amabile, 1996; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). It shows that intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to be curious, take risks, cognitively flexible and experience positive emotions such as excitement and enthusiasm (Amabile, Goldfarb, & Brackfield, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Utman, 1997; Zhou, 2003). Isen (1999)

maintains that when individuals experience positive moods, they are likely to draw greater connections between divergent stimuli materials, use broader categories and identify more interrelatedness between stimuli. Similarly Amabile et al. (2005) maintain that creativity can be an agent for change where complex cognitive processes are influenced and shaped by, and simultaneously occur with emotional experience.

In summary, a review of the literature shows that perception is critical to how employees relate to and with the work environment and peers, and as such is central in nurturing creativity in the workplace. The perception of the environment in which an employee works affects both motivation and the overall ability to generate creative and innovative ideas.

Perspective

Embracing multiple perspectives is critical to the creative process. Garavan et al. (2007) highlight the change of focus, composition and emphasis that occurs when individuals adopt a different perspective. They argue that perspectives empower innovative and creative thinking through opening the possibility of renewing and reinventing relationships between different factors and events. Similarly, Parker and Axtell (2001) argue that understanding frameworks different from your own and empathizing with others is fundamental to collaborative working. They maintain that perspective-taking may involve a high degree of cognitive complexity and results in greater levels of empathy and positive attributions. Being open to new perspectives involves adopting an interpretivist epistemological viewpoint and can provide individuals with a rich way of envisioning new realities. Consequently, it follows that individuals do not passively interpret organizational practices, but seek to understand them by applying meanings, terms and concepts, derived from our stock of knowledge, language and the ongoing interpretation of others with whom we interact.

Mostly, however, an individual operates under a limited perspective and this determines what can be seen. It is this prior knowledge that acts as a basis for establishing a particular perspective and for testing new ideas, principles and arguments. An individual's prior experiences will influence what they work on, the approach to the work, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the outcomes and products considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of those outcomes. There is agreement that creativity requires a cognitive-perceptual style involving the collection and application of diverse material, an accurate memory, the use of heuristics and an ability to concentrate over long periods of time (C.E. Shalley & Gilson, 2004); Amabile 1998). Baer et al. (2003) examine Kirton's Adaption-Innovation theory and found that individuals with an adaptive cognitive style tend to operate within particular paradigms and procedures, while those with an innovative style are more likely to take risks and develop new approaches to solving problems.

Engaging in creative behaviour requires participates to take risks. Newall et al. (1979) suggest that creativity is an unconventional act which requires individuals to reject or modify previously accepted ideas. Tesluk *et al.* (1997) argue that an individual's level of creativity depends upon their predisposition towards risk and their willingness to contemplate and accept failure if it occurs. However, research indicates that individuals are more likely to prefer certain outcomes and engage in actions designed to limit their exposure to risk (Bazerman, 1994). Farmer *et al.* (2003) coin the term "ego-investment" to delineate the level of risk an individual is prepared to commit to when being creative. They argue that the perceived risk in being creative goes beyond the loss of tangible rewards and entails a potential loss of self or a less of the sense of identity. Two factors that affect creativity in groups are social loafing and conformity. Thompson (2003) describes social loafing as the tendency of individuals not to work as hard in a group as they would alone. She argues that individuals will typically filter their contributions and only participate where they feel their comments are particularly valuable, potentially denying the group access to other useful information. In the case of conformity, she maintains that individuals will engage in bizarre behaviour to ensure their acceptance in the group and will be cautious about presenting ideas for fear of negative evaluation.

In summary, a review of the literature on perspectives emphasizes the need for drawing from multiple viewpoints based on tacit knowledge and prior experience. By recognizing the role of perspective in fostering creative processes, organizations are better able to combat conformity and indolence, and encourage calculated risk taking.

Positionality

In order to understand and partake in the creative process, we need to acknowledge our own positionality. Maher and Tetreault (2001) define the notion of positionality as one where individuals do not possess fixed identities, but are located within shifting networks of relationships, which can be analyzed and changed. For his part, Takacs (2002) considers the notion of positionality as the multiple unique experiences that situate each of us in relation to

each other. Positionality therefore encourages the identification of individual uniqueness as a reference point for differentiation from others. As Merriam et al. (2001) if the perspective of the individual is limited by positionality then it is important to recognize that in order to understand another, one must first understand oneself. Helping employees to recognize their own positionality and subjectivity, and incorporating reflexivity encourages operation on multiple levels, thus promoting creativity in organizations (Etherington, 2004).

Acknowledging the historical, cultural and socially bounded nature of positionality requires an in-depth analysis of how social factors have affected our individual identity. Sheppard (2002) argues that positionality challenges the proposition that there is objective knowledge and sensitizes individuals to the reality that their analysis is shaped by their social situatedness in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference. Similarly, McIntosh (1998) argues that in many instances, individuals need to acknowledge unearned advantage and conferred dominance in order to create better communication among groups and further higher levels of creativity. In an educational context, Fenwick (2007) maintains that the learner is not an object separable from the educator and consequently, the educator needs to acknowledge their own positionality through examining social identity markers as these will affect the creativity of learners.

An evaluation of creativity requires individuals to acknowledge their own positionality. Shalley and Gilson (2004) recognize that an evaluation of creative work requires agreement from those considered knowledgeable within the field. In this regard, Egan (2005) advocates Amabile's (1996) consensual assessment technique as an appropriate method for accurately evaluating the level of creativity associated with a product, service, process or procedure. For their part, Elsbach and Kramer (2003) suggest that judging others creativity is made easier by the existence of objective evidence. They posit that judgments about individual creativity can sometimes be rendered on the basis of tangible products, such as actual product designs, written reports or innovative programs. Alternatively, they remark that an individual's creative potential may be inferred on the basis of their role status or reputation in the organization. However, they conclude that there exists little agreement on universally accepted or empirically established standards for evaluating creativity and creative potential.

In summary, a review of the literature on positionality brings to light the individual's place in developing creativity. It recognizes that reality is socially, culturally and historically constructed and underlines the importance of recognizing one's own subjectivities and positions of power. It is only through acknowledging our own positionality that we can accurately evaluate and support creativity in the workplace.
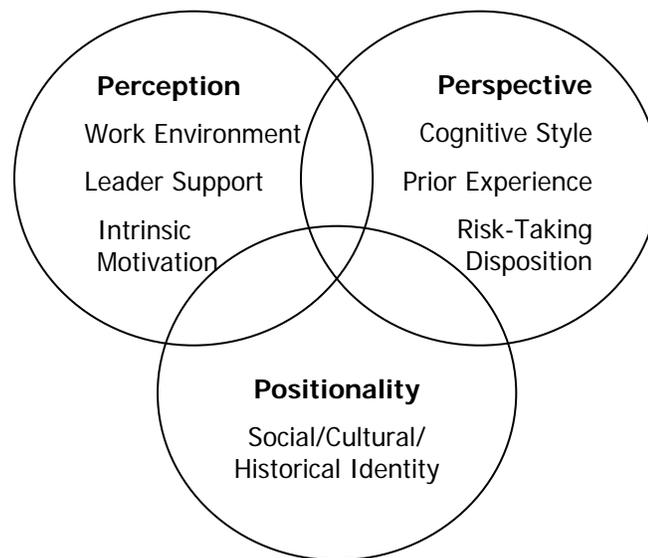

Figure 1: The intersection of perception, perspective, and positionality.

Implications for Research

Cultivating creativity is a difficult and complex process. While Perry-Smith (2006) identifies individual creativity in organizations as desirable, she recognizes that it is often difficult to stimulate and may be stifled by a range of

organizational practices, particularly during turbulent and uncertain times. Despite having some knowledge of the factors enabling creativity, limited research has been conducted to identify the organizational practices that inhibit creativity. Without a clear understanding of the practices that block creativity and the process by which this occurs, investment in initiatives designed to foster creativity may produce suboptimal results.

Research that emphasizes the role of creativity in organizations must continue to broaden and incorporate the complex and dynamic processes of how individuals and organizations manage positionality, perspective, and perceptions in order to strengthen organization effectiveness. Multi-factorial research designs are required to examine the intersectionality between perception, perspective and positionality as illustrated by figure 1. To date, Feldman (1999) recognizes that approaches to creativity have been uni-dimensional and this tendency to isolate a single dimension of creativity has had the effect of distorting the research findings. Consequently, multi-factorial research designs will encourage a more weighted holistic approach to the study of creativity, its antecedents and effects.

Future work is also needed to examine the social dimension of creativity. For too long, creativity has been viewed as a singular endeavor; an act of greatness or a spark of genius. In recent times, creativity in groups and teams is becoming increasingly important as work becomes internationalized to a greater degree and organizations place a stronger emphasis on communication, social capital and social networks.

Implications for Practice

Empowering employees to be creative in the development and analysis of new ideas demands that HRD professionals create opportunities for employees to understand how they see themselves and help them engage in creative thinking and adopt multiple perspectives in their work. Moreover, HRD interventions need to embrace experiential learning and constructivist principles in order to create a learning environment supportive of creativity. Thompson (2003) argues that this may (initially) involve organizational support for seemingly purposeless and senseless things such as striving for quantity at the expense of quality; suggesting unrealistic ideas and creating space for individual thinking.

Creating the right environment for creativity is crucial. The degree of support will affect the value placed on creativity by employees. Supervisors and managers should receive training in how to appropriate support, encourage and manage risk-taking and creativity amongst employees. Top management support for creative endeavors will send a strong message to employees that the organizational culture welcomes embraces and supports creativity. In addition, supervisors and managers should act as role models to employees in both encouraging and engaging in creative behaviors.

The concept of alignment will ensure consistency between actual behavior and rewarded behavior. A clear, transparent and accountable process for evaluating and rewarding creativity is required within organizations. Individuals need to be commended for taking appropriate risks, even where doing so occasionally leads to failure. Risk-taking is an important element in creativity and will ensure that an organization remains innovative in its approach and direction and responsive to market changes. The use of extrinsic rewards needs to be carefully managed and matched by supervisory/managerial acknowledgement of employee efforts.

Innovative Session Preview

This innovative session is designed to encourage self-exploration about the role of organizations, HRD professionals, and scholars in foster creativity in the workplace. Through a series of purposeful activities, participants will be challenged to consider the links between perception, perspective, and positionality and how each influences individual and organizational creativity. The goal of the session is to provide an opportunity for stimulating self-reflection in order to further research in creativity.

Participants will take part in three activities, designed to explore the dimensions of perception, positionality, and perspective. The first uses a short film to challenge participants to consider how perception is shaped by one's environment, and how organizations influence an individual's ability to recognize and adjust to changing conditions. The second activity brings focus to the role of positionality in enhancing creativity, by asking participants to examine illustrations that challenge their ideas of context and how their own historical, social, and cultural understandings influence how they interpret information. Finally, the participants will consider how perspective can influence the creative process through an activity that assesses their own creativity. Through this brainstorming exercise, participants are encouraged to take risks, while drawing on their prior experiences to reflect on the fluency, flexibility, and originality of their own ideas.

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