

Does Improvisation moderate the Impact of Transformational Leadership on Employee Creativity: A Conceptual Proposal

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Accepted: 15 December 2021 | Published: 31 December 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55057/ajrbm.2021.3.4.6>

Abstract: *Prior research on creativity has grasped the attention of researchers to devote more focus on the interaction that arises between the individual and the surrounding milieu. Thus, this study aimed to propose the moderating role of improvisation on the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity. The propositions posted in this study was developed based on the relationships established within previous empirical studies among these variables. Such proposition of improvisation as a moderator on the relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity might heavily contribute to the theory by addressing the issue of mixed and inconclusive results in the transformational leadership-creativity literature, and will provide a comprehensive understanding of how improvisation might help in unleashing the creative potentials of employees.*

Keywords: transformational leadership, employee creativity, improvisation

1. Introduction

Over decades, employee creativity has enticed scholars' attention to investigate its antecedents (Zhou & Hoever, 2014) in their endeavor to develop theoretical models and empirical-based guidance for promoting it (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman & Legood 2018). Thus, research investigating creativity has become considerably salient in internationally recognized academic journals (Koh, Lee & Joshi, 2019), this is stemmed from the emergence of employee creativity as a challenging issue put in face of organizations, as creativity reinforce their constant innovation, which is prerequisite for their growth and survival in a dynamically changing business landscape (Zhou & Hoever 2014).

In this vein, leadership was for long established as a prominent antecedent simply as leaders portray the working environment, allocate resources, elaborate to their subordinates their job duties (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), and leveraging their followers' existing behavior like motivation or evolving new ones such as learning (Fischer, Dietz & Antonakis, 2017). Thus, a plethora of studies has examined the relationship between leadership and their followers' creativity, despite that, the number of variables studied in this literature in association with leadership has generated complex evidence that restrains comprehending and

developing finding-based recommendations (Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). In another word, although the incessant endeavours undertaken by scholars to identify the factors that prosper employee creativity (Henker, Sonnentag & Unger, 2015; Jaiswal & Dhar, 2016; Ma & Jiang, 2018; Tse, To & Chiu, 2018), the surge of literature investigating transformational leadership and employee creativity and the stream of empirical findings suffer from the inconclusiveness of results in terms of significance and non-significance and sometimes negative relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity (Koh et al., 2019; Shafi, Lei, Song & Sarker, 2020).

Therefore, this current study is expected to address this deficiency by looking into the boundary condition of this relationship. This will be through introducing a moderator that might fill this paucity. By doing so, the study will respond to a recent call in the leadership and creativity literature “there is a need for additional empirical studies that examine factors that influence employees’ creativity” (Alblooshi, 2018, p. 16). Consequently, this evokes future research to further investigate the boundary conditions that might impact the relationship that exists between transformational leadership, and creativity (Koh et al., 2019). In this vein, introducing a moderator might strengthen the interaction between these variables.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the componential theory of creativity (Amabile, 1996) have been analysed by Fisher and Amabile (2009) and it was evidenced that this theory lacks improvisation. Drawing on that, those scholars have suggested that to explain the creativity phenomenon, there is a need to have a boundary condition as “improvisation” which might enhance the explanation of the creativity process. This is due to that improvisation is considered a tactic that caters to creativity in firms, for its instantaneous potential and its capacity to generate bottom-up actions. The concept of improvisation hail from the observation that some individuals possess a unique aptitude to create things out of extant few resources—to improvise (Hmieleski, & Corbett, 2006). That capacity enables them to perform things in a way that is distinct from the others—and sometimes that distinction leading to engender an initiative in a resourceful way. Moreover, improvisation entails more repetitive and pivoting action (Gojny-Zbierowska & Zbierowski, 2021).

This evokes to examine the impact of improvisation in strengthening this interaction as many research elucidated that improvisation can be considered as a prominent tool to provoke the spirit of creativity and to make individuals perceive their inner potentials to be more creative, despite that scarce literature has studied the impact of improvisation on creativity (Hassan, 2019). Additionally, despite that a myriad number of factors affecting individual creativity have been examined in prior studies (Amabile & Mueller, 2009; Tierney & Farmer, 2002; Amabile, 1998), scarce quantitative research has focused on improvisation (Nisula, 2015).

2. Literature Review

Amabile Componential Theory of Creativity

Creativity denotes original and beneficial ideas by individuals or a small team functioning together (Amabile, 1988); these ideas can be related to “new products, services, processes, or practices”. Drawing on the componential theory of creativity, “all humans with normal capacities can produce at least moderately creative work in some domain, some of the time — and that the social environment (the work environment) can influence both the level and the frequency of creative behavior” (Amabile, 1997, p. 42). Thus, creativity is the thorough paradigm of social and psychological components that are imperative to generate a creative “response”. This model encompasses four components; three constituents relevant to the

domain where the individual works: “domain-relevant skills, creativity-relevant processes, and intrinsic task motivation”. The fourth component is the “social environment” surrounding the individual. Based on this premise, creativity surges when individuals develop their knowledge, technical competencies, and expertise in a specific realm theorized as “domain-relevant skills”. The second component, “creativity-relevant processes”, encompasses attributes associated with the personality, risk-taking capacity, possessing a cognitive style, and owning divergent thinking that enables nurturing creative thinking (Amabile, 2012). The third component is “intrinsic task motivation”, which was perceived by a considerable number of researchers as the key driver to triggering creative behavior (Amabile, 1997). This is due to that intrinsic task motivation as theorized by Amabile (1997) is the “central tenet” of creativity; as individuals turn more creative when they perceive that the carried activity is thrilling, involving, and challenging (Amabile, 2012). The fourth component is “the social environment” which constitutes the work setting that comprises all extrinsic motivators that might boost or impede intrinsic motivation as well as creativity (Amabile, 2012). A surge of previous studies has shown various external factors like leadership, innovation climate, and management support that nurture individuals’ creativity (Li, Bhutto, Xuhui, Maitlo, Zafar & Bhutto, 2020; Tung, 2016; Wang, Rode, Shi, Luo & Chen, 2013).

The componential theory of creativity that was grounded initially by Amabile (1988), postulated that individual creativity comprises one “external component” which is the social environment, and three “intra-individual components”; intrinsic task motivation, domain-relevant skills, and creativity relevant skills.

- The social environment includes all external forces that represent either obstacles or inducements to both intrinsic motivation and creativity (Amabile, 1988).
- Intrinsic task motivation implies the passion to cope with the problem stemmed from being interesting and challenging (Amabile, 1988).
- The domain-relevant skills revolves around the knowledge, expertise and job related skills acquired by the individual in the domain the individual works. These skills comprise the inputs that the individual will rely on to produce potential responses and the expertise against which he/she will judge how feasible are the responses (Amabile, 1988).
- Creativity-relevant processes involve cognitive flexibility exhibited in combining and analyzing information and exposure to fresh experience, instigating new perspectives in tackling problems (Amabile, 1988).

The componential theory explicates that creativity occur in sequence -like path as follow (Amabile, 1988):

- **The first stage: problem identification-** is the phase where the individual begin to acknowledge that there is a need to find a solution for a specific problem. At this phase, task motivation will play a robust effect, as it determines whether the individual will be willing to engage with this problem and the level of such engagement.
- **In the second stage: preparation,** domain-relevant skills lead this phase as the individual will be in a quest to collect information (and likely earn new knowledge and skills) to perform the task.
- **The third stage: response generation,** Creativity-relevant skills, and task motivation heavily determine the output of the potential response produced by the individual.

- **In the fourth stage: response validation**, the individual relies mostly on domain-relevant skills to assess the novelty and the feasibility of the responses.
- **In the fifth stage: the outcome**, the final response is disseminated to others in the organization and the result of the entire process is judged. In case the result is a complete success (a novel and feasible solution is recognized by others) or complete failure (no enhancement in the pursuit of a solution), the process ends. If there is minor development toward achieving the ultimate goal, the individual possibly returns to the first phase and commences the process.

Transformational Leadership and Employee Creativity

In the leadership-creativity literature, transformational leadership is the style that is foremost attached to employees' creative outcomes. This link is gleaned from nurturing their subordinates' self-confidence, triggering their intrinsic motivation, creating desirable relationships with all subordinates, and inspiring them. As a result, those followers cultivate a creative-oriented endeavor (Al Harbi, Alarifi & Mosbah, 2019).

It is argued that transformational leaders' intellectual stimulation provokes their followers to question old assumptions, reconsidering problems, tackling them from new perspectives. In such a pursuit, followers are more likely to become active thinkers.

The argument is that through idealized influence, the transformational leader acts as a role model, and thereof, followers in a reciprocal way will be having a strong sense of purpose that will arouse them to perform in a way that surpasses their leaders' expectations (Bass, 1985). They will be more triggered to afford the risk and to develop paths towards creativity (Gong, Huang & Farh, 2009).

It is argued that through inspirational motivation, leaders are capable to stimulate their subordinates by articulating an optimistic and aspiring vision, nourishing a belief of psychological safety where subordinates are induced and energized to carry on risks. Thus, they will be pursuing their path without being anxious about negative potential outcomes (Kahn, 1990), and their developed confidence will fuel their ambition towards attempting new approaches that might lead to creative solutions (Shamir, House & Arthur, 1993).

Proposition-1: Transformational leadership is positively related to employee creativity.

Improvisation and Employee Creativity

Improvisation is the conjunction of composition and execution of an activity in time which is contrary to accomplishing pre-set routines, thus, it is not unplanned (Moorman & Miner 1998). It constitutes the extemporaneous and real-time devising and execution of a novel response to an unexpected situation (Magni, Palmi & Salvemini, 2018). In another word, improvisation is the act of coping with the unanticipated without being prepared. Thus, improvisation implies an act of going beyond the set routines to generate a novel solution for the faced problem (Hadida, Tarvainen & Rose, 2015). It is noteworthy, that many characteristics depict improvisation like novelty, the extent of improvisation, and time burden. In the plethora of literature, the extent of improvisation is confined as "a continuum that starts by interpretation, embellishment, variation and at the upper limit improvisation" (Hamzeh, Faek & AlHussein, 2018, p. 63).

Improvisation entails a postulation that change is incessant, and is not deemed as a threat or something perilous. When change arises, new opportunities are created. That idea that an

individual has been contemplating is suddenly possible. Improvisers who are apt to make decisions with no prior preparation are those who act, who don't wait or ask for permission. In general, fears tight individuals, thus, improvisers attempt instead to overcome these fear by unleashing such momentum initiative. They expose themselves to menaces in their pursuit to take decisions independently. Thus, improvisation should be simple and raw to be more likely to work. Therefore, the fewer opportunities grasped, the more creativity will prosper (Falkheimer & Sandberg, 2018).

Employee improvisation is an individual intentional extemporaneous composition and implementation of novel action to cater to unexpected and critical contextual scenarios (Fisher & Barrett, 2019; Moorman & Miner, 1998). Therefore, improvisation has evolved as a prevailing topic for both researchers and practitioners provided its impact in engendering novel responses to enact with the unforeseen events (Magni, Proserpio, Hoegl, & Provera, 2009).

Opposing to a routine script, which implies little patterns of change, improvisation is a vital behavior in a vibrant setting, where current procedures and practices might likely be non-feasible (Miner, Bassoff & Moorman, 2001; Pavlou & El Sawy, 2010). Improvisation is not an accidental behavior but it relies on micro patterns that reunify and order in novel means. Thus, improvisation is an essential behavior that leads to individual creativity (Chen, Liu, Tang & Hogan, 2020).

Particularly, improvisation can support creativity in two approaches. First, improvisation assists individuals to seek and gather fresh information that is pivotal for generating creative ideas (Anderson, Potočnik & Zhou, 2014; Crossan, 1998). Thus, the creativity literature has robustly highlighted the inevitability of original information to trigger employee creativity (Shalley, Zhou & Oldham, 2004), due to that creativity emanates from shaping and restructuring original information (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Improvisation provokes employees to establish a distinguished repertoire of original knowledge that can cater to contextual emerging challenges in such a creative approach (Magni et al., 2009). Nevertheless, employees who do not improvise will be unlikely to determine and collect original information, thus will not be prepared to generate creative thoughts (Freedman & Edwards, 1988). Second, employees who resort to improvisation are more prone to challenge their firms' contracts with alternate solutions (Magni et al., 2009; Vera & Crossan, 2005). In another meaning, improvisation stimulates employees to continuously challenging current routines and suggesting new tactics to tackle problems (Cunha & Clegg, 2019) and to be more apt to be creative (Chen et al., 2020). This is because creativity implies departing from set procedures and rules (Baer & Oldham, 2006), enabling individuals to be more capable to diverge from accustomed practices and accomplish their tasks in distinctive ways (Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, 1996).

Moderating role of Improvisation

Over decades, transformational leadership has been portrayed as a general panacea for all organizational deficiencies (Caniëls, Semeijn & Renders, 2018). This can be attributed to that transformational leaders inspire followers in their sphere of impact to surpass self-interest in pursuing the organization's needs (Bass, 1999; Mendelson, Alam, Cunningham, Totton & Smith, 2019). Despite that, other scholars argued that it is time to forego the transformational leadership construct as a whole (Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) and to look at the conditions where transformational leadership may not properly work (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2015; Blom & Alvesson, 2015; Caniëls et al., 2018).

In the creativity literature, it was established that improvisation may impact the extent of divergent thinking (Webster, 1977), which by its turn enables coming up with an array of possible solutions for a specific problem to be a path for problem-solving (Lewis, 2012). This pursuit of developing different alternate solutions for the problem will associate with the intellectual stimulation fuelled by transformational leadership to their followers. This is stemmed from transformational leaders are eliciting followers to think in new ways, revisit old problems, challenge existing assumptions in their endeavor to solve these problems (Chen, Chang, Yeh & Lin, 2014; Ostafin & Kassman, 2012; Walsh, 2017).

Improvised employees possess the capability to generate work that is original and proper (Runco & Jaeger, 2012). This conduct, being descriptive in nature and context-relevant (Nemkova, Souchon & Hughes, 2012), is anticipated to surge employees' aptitude for creating pertinent solutions to customers' incidental needs (Wang & Netemeyer, 2004). Since improvisation drives act when it concerns a lot (Weick, 1998), it may offer spontaneous responses which contribute to employees' benefit. Improvising employees are more apt to generate fresh and beneficial solutions on the spur of the moment, and they are more capable to continuously adjust (Crossan, Cunha, Vera & Cunha, 2005). This may enable them to have rapid responses while facing a complex situation (Cunha, Clegg & Kamoche, 2006; Magni et al., 2018). Furthermore, improvisation is an effective tool that permits individuals to avert being recurrently surprised by unanticipated events (Dovigo, 2016). These responses might represent solutions that may convert unexpected incidents into real benefits (Hamzeh et al., 2018). Thus, it would be apparent that creativity can be triggered through improvisation (Richard, Halliwell & Tenenbaum, 2017). Based on this premise, practicing improvisation deliberately may unleash individuals' potential creativity (Kleinmintz, Goldstein, Maysel, Abecasis & Shamay-Tsoory, 2014).

Proposition-2: The positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity will be stronger when improvisation is high.

Proposed research framework

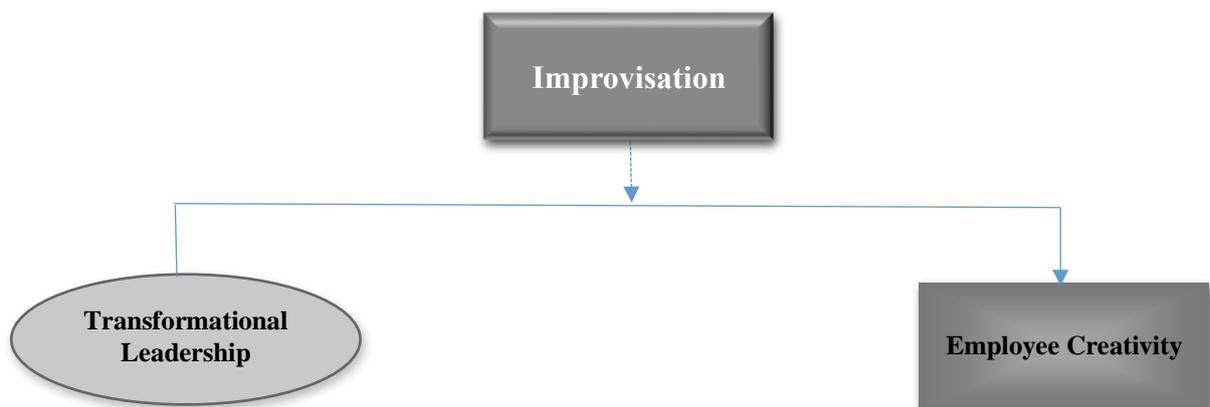


Figure 1: Proposed research framework

3. Conclusion

In this research, the proposition for the impact of transformational leadership on employee creativity was posited to be positive and significant, and the results revealed by the surge of empirical studies support this postulation and confirmed the positive relationship between transformational leadership and employee creativity (for example Cummings & Oldham, 1997; Miao & Cao, 2019; Qu, Janssen & Shi, 2015; Scott & Bruce, 1994; Tierney, Farmer & Graen, 1999). Such association was attributed by scholars to the conceptualization of transformational leadership in terms of its four dimensions (Çekmecelioğlu & Özbağ, 2016), whilst others referred it to intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and individualized consideration (García-Morales, Jiménez-Barrionuevo & Gutiérrez-Gutiérrez, 2012; Si & Wei, 2012). Particularly, intellectual stimulation as implying subordinates' capacity to tackle old problems from new perspectives and to challenge existing assumptions (Bass & Riggio 2006), to get cognitively engaged in their thoughts (Watts, Mulhearn, Todd & Mumford, 2017), given that transformational leaders share their thoughts with their subordinates regarding potential risks (Pandey, Davies, Pandey & Peng, 2016).

Whilst the idealized influence implies admiration by subordinates, stemmed from viewing them as exceptional (Kark, Shamir & Chen, 2003; Yukl, 1998), a role model that fuels them to outperform (Bass, 1985), triggering them to emulate those leaders (Ghadi, Fernando & Caputi, 2013), acquiring new behaviors, affording risk in their pursuit towards creativity (Abbas, Othman & Rahman, 2012; Gong et al., 2009).

In terms of inspirational motivation, scholars attributed it to transcending self-interests towards more collective vision (Bass, 1985), instilling confidence that enables generating new initiatives (Suifan, Abdallah & Al Janini, 2018), dissipate any feeling of anxiety (Kahn, 1990), which by its turn will fuel their creative potential (Shamir et al., 1993).

Fourthly, individualized consideration implies acknowledging subordinates' needs for growth and development (Shin & Zhou, 2003) which by its turn will cultivate the subordinates' self-efficacy (Bass, 1990).

In conclusion, the insights of this study offer theoretical support for the propositions that transformational leadership and employee improvisation might strengthen the later creativity. Drawing on the above, proposing improvisation as a moderator between transformational leadership and employee creativity might theoretically contribute in coping with the issue of mixed and inconclusive results highlighted within the surge of empirical findings. Additionally, proposing improvisation as a moderator might promote the extant understanding of the notion of creativity.

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