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Title: Help me to be creative! Let me flourish

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Help me to be creative! Let me flourish

Summary

A number of studies argue that organisational performance can be enhanced due to employee's creativity (Buhl et al., 2016; Mihail and Kloutsiniotis, 2016; Chowhan et al., 2017). Although the problem of individual creativity at work has received significant attention (Doran and Ryan, 2017; Fortwengel et al., 2017; Preenen et al., 2017), fundamental issues remain under-researched. For instance, it is still unclear how to separate higher and lower levels of creativity and what criteria distinguish more creative people, products, or processes from less creative ones (Martin and Wilson, 2017). The scant research highlights that certain developmental interventions can lead to organisational and personal growth by unleashing untapped human expertise (Gilley et al., 2011). This paper aims to shed more light on the problem of human creativity at work and focuses on the concept of human flourishing as the unit of influence on individual creative performances [144].

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Introduction

Creativity has broadly been recognised as an essential ingredient of long-term organisational success (Fay *et al.*, 2015; Aleksić *et al.*, 2016; Buhl *et al.*, 2016; Mihail and Kloutsiniotis, 2016; Chowhan *et al.*, 2017). Traditionally, it has been researched within the context of extraordinary people, creative occupations, or creative industries. In such studies, researchers aimed to explain characteristics of creative personality and develop mechanisms aimed at helping to increase creative skills (Mackinnon, 1965; Martindale, 1989; Basadur, 1995; Batey *et al.*, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2013; Aubke, 2014). The recent shifts towards employee-driven innovations have promoted more inclusive attitudes to employees, who are now expected to contribute to organisational competitive advantage from the bottom up via their creative-thinking (Kesting and Parm Ulhøi, 2010; Høyrup *et al.*, 2012; De Spiegelaere *et al.*, 2013; Amundsen *et al.*, 2014; Smith, 2017). However, scholars still apply a homogeneous approach to their creative skills, believing that all employees can easily give rise to something new (Aasen *et al.*, 2012). The contrasting observations by Hon and Lui (2016) suggest there are several habitual or psychological determinants that can hinder workers from being creative.

Considering the aforementioned, Hon and Lui (2016) and Martin and Wilson (2017) call for a more sustainable approach to the issue of human creativity at work. More specifically they call for an examination of how creativity enhancing strategies can reduce the negative effect of less creative behaviours on individual performances and overall organisational effectiveness. By responding to the call, this paper will consider a more inclusive approach to the problem of human creativity at work and draw specific attention to employees who exhibit lower levels of creative potential. By proposing to engage them in creative activity over a period of time, this research aims to develop insight into the processes of developing the untapped creative potential among those deemed to be less creative.

Literature review

Creativity

A wide range of existing theoretical approaches has attempted to define the nature of creativity. Furnham and Bachtiar (2008) state there are more than 60 definitions of creativity while Martin and Wilson (2017) add that the theory still does not provide a clear understanding of the concept. Such uncertain views on creativity can be explained by the controversial and unclear nature of the phenomenon itself, which is hard to comprehend because of its “unseen, unconscious, and nonverbal” character (Torrance, 1988: 43; cited in Acar *et al.*, 2017).

The question of *what is creativity* has brought scholars to the emergence of at least four theoretical approaches, namely creativity as *production* (Mumford *et al.*, 2012; Gupta, 2014; Weisberg, 2015; Corazza, 2016), *a process* (Runco, 2004; Neyer *et al.*, 2009; Mumford *et al.*, 2012), *a decision* (Sternberg, 2006; Aleksić *et al.*, 2016), and *a discovery* (Boodin, 1921; Martin and Wilson, 2017). The most widespread and cited definition postulates creativity as “the *production* of novel and useful ideas by an individual or small groups of individuals working together” (Amabile and Pratt, 2016, p. 158). This perspective has largely been criticised in the literature for a lack of inclusion of all relationships and stakeholders in the process (Glăveanu, 2014; Corazza, 2016), limited and unclear parameters of creativity (Kharkhurin, 2014; Corazza, 2016), and a lack of reference to time and culture to recognise and subjectively judge the novelty of creation (Weisberg, 2015).

Another widespread definition of creativity, referred to as the “little-c” approach, describes creativity as “creative actions in which the non-expert may participate each day” (Richards et al., 1988; cited in Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009). Such a view of creativity is of more relevance to this paper, as it illustrates a wide distribution of creative potential in organisations. However, it does not provide a clear and fundamental categorisation of parameters relating to creativity and creative types of behaviour (Martin and Wilson, 2017), hence, the first research question can be formulated as:

RQ1: What is a full and encompassing definition of creativity?

Individual Creativity

Guilford (1950) defines individual creativity as patterns of traits that are inherent to the portrait of a creative person. Traits should be understood as “consistent patterns in the way individuals behave, feel, and think” (Pervin and Cervone, 2010: 228; cited in Mumford et al., 2012). A degree to which individuals incorporate creativity-related traits in everyday life signals their creative personality (Guilford, 1950). This view is supported by Runco (2010), who states that every person possesses the potential to be creative, which “is a part of the basic human tendency to construct personal interpretations and assimilate information as we experience it” (p. 321).

Such understanding of individual creativity is consistent with the “mini-c” approach, according to which personal creativity is “the novel and personally meaningful interpretation of experiences, actions and events” (Beghetto and Kaufman, 2007; in Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009, p. 3). This approach is deeper than the aforementioned “little-c” construct and deals with the development or learning conceptions of creativity (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009). It is driven by the assumption that creativity is a malleable phenomenon (Kirton, 1976; Meinel *et al.*, 2018), and training in creative thinking can lead to positive shifts in cognitive style and attitudes towards its utilisation (Woodman et al., 1993; Min et al., 2016). It claims that all humans “can give rise to something new” (Vygotsky, 1991, p. 7), when their creative act is based on interpretative and transformative processes of working with incoming information and the ability to deliver it in the form of recognisable solutions (Kaufman and Beghetto, 2009). Even if the work of the mental construction has not (yet) been expressed tangibly, it can still be regarded as (highly) creative. Therefore, individual creativity is not just a matter of personal quality, rather it is an individual behaviour resulting from a personal quality (Oldham and Cummings, 1996; cited in Min et al., 2016).

Deeper research into the nature of individual creativity has brought scholars to the understanding that unique patterns of traits may not necessarily result in actual creativity, as it can be influenced by unforeseen forces (Shalley et al., 2004). For example, personality traits in conjunction with employees perceiving themselves as lacking the ability to be creative may be associated with reduced creative job behaviours (Tierney and Farmer, 2011; Hon and Lui, 2016). In addition, a lack of training and development could result in decreased interest in identifying opportunities, looking for solutions, using their knowledge and reconfiguring resources (Somsing and Belbaly, 2017). However, research on the nature and characteristics of less creative employees remains scarce and fragmented, so the second research question is:

RQ2. What does a portrait of a less creative employee look like?

Human flourishing and individual creative behaviour

Human flourishing should be understood as a concept, which “focuses on maximising individuals’ achievement of their potential for growth and development” (Heron and Reason, 1997; cited in Titchen *et al.*, 2011: 2). It suggests that employees are likely to grow and blossom, when they are influenced by contemporary facilitation strategies, which in turn contribute to individual transformation and practice development (Titchen *et al.*, 2011).

To make this possible and encourage novel ideas, individuals need to be able to initiate their cognitive processes and integrate new information into existing cognitive structures, and this process requires substantial work (Baer, 2010). In order to assist the process, their capacity or capability for creative problem solving can be developed and improved, so that they would be able to produce novel ideas (Sternberg, 2017). Specifically, from the perspective of less creative individuals, the need for overcoming cognitive blocks is high in order to release the under-utilised potential and promote cognitive thought processes (Carmeli *et al.*, 2013; Loewenberger, 2013). Previous research showed that employees who participated in the processes of exploitation of new ideas were more successful in overcoming cognitive barriers and could produce more ideas than those who were not involved in such initiatives (Mumford *et al.*, 2012; Gupta and Banerjee, 2016). In addition, they could produce more creative solutions to problems and develop their creative problem-solving capacity (Gupta and Banerjee, 2016).

However, existing studies are largely focused on the role of leadership and Human Resource Management (HRM) systems on individual creativity (Gibb and Waight, 2005; Zhang and Bartol, 2010; Heffernan *et al.*, 2016; van Esch *et al.*, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2017). Loewenberger (2013) suggests it is still unclear how to engage employees in the development activities, such as Human Resource Development (HRD) intervention. The author aims to examine the gap in the context of dynamic association between context and personal characteristics, specifically among less creative individuals. The final research question is:

RQ3. Which mechanisms can help less creative employees to unleash creativity?

Method

In this research, an interpretivist perspective will be adopted, allowing for the construction of knowledge by encouraging multiple subjective perspectives (Greener, 2008). The data collection methods will be qualitative in nature in order to better understand the theory as well as relate the data to theory or inform it (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, a case study strategy will be adopted, which is “a strategy for doing research involving an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence” (Robson, 2002, p. 178; cited in Saunders *et al.*, 2016).

The data will be gathered in Northern Ireland and is expected to involve 6-8 companies from a variety of types serving to enhance research validity and increase the generalisability of results. Private-sector organisations will be cases of the study, because they are more strategic in promoting human creativity, which is viewed as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Cooke and Saini, 2010; Min *et al.*, 2016; Li *et al.*, 2017). In addition, they are better equipped as innovation/creativity cultures and tend to focus on competence development in their strategic HRM (Cooke and Saini, 2010; Uslu, 2015). To access the

research environment, initial contact with Heads of the HR department will be established, and cooperation with them will be maintained throughout the course of the study.

The following methods of data collection will be used: semi-structured interview, self-assessment tool, development process, diary study and follow-up interview. Semi-structured interviews will be held with line managers to explore the role of human creativity within their organisation as well as existing creativity training methods and interventions. At the end of the interview, line managers will be asked to help select participants for self-assessment and development intervention.

Pre-selected employees will be encouraged to undertake a creativity-related self-assessment. For this purpose, a complex tool will be developed, underpinned by other published sources. It will be comprised of a combination of several existing tools, which have been used in previous studies and proved successful in explaining the association between the creative personality and individual creative behaviour (for example, Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa and McCrae, 1992), Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) (Torrance, 1974)).

The subsequent development process will take the form of a planned intervention (Saunders et al., 2016) called “Talent Awakening”. Namely, it will be a half-day workshop and include 15-20 participants. Altogether, 6-8 workshop sessions will be delivered, subject to the number of involved organisations.

The workshops will involve five interconnected stages: introduction, understanding the challenge, generating ideas, preparing for action, and approach planning (Treffinger et al., 2008). It will consist of several involvement activities and provocation techniques to initiate, support and sustain creative thinking among less creative employees (So and Joo, 2017; LeBoutillier and Barry, 2018). At the end of the workshop, participants will get a predefined or organisational problem to solve creatively, with 6 months to work on the problem.

Diaries will be distributed among participants who will be encouraged to evidence their daily or weekly experiences at work i.e. how they spend their working day, what creative technique(s) they have used to solve the predefined problem and what result they have received. Review of the data contained within these diary entries will allow for evaluation and examination of individual progress in creative thinking.

Finally, follow-up interviews will be conducted with employees, to gain richer perspectives of shifts in creative personality and individual creative behaviour.

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