

Research on the Relationship between Shared Leadership and Employee's Deviant Innovation Behavior

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Abstract: Based on social cognitive theory and conservation of resources theory, this paper explores the relationship between shared leadership and employee's deviant innovation behavior. In the context of organizations seeking breakthrough innovation, shared leadership, as an empowerment-oriented leadership model, requires an in-depth investigation into its influence mechanism on employees' unconventional and informal innovation behaviors. Social cognitive theory emphasizes that individual behavior is shaped by environmental observation and self-efficacy, while conservation of resources theory points out that individuals actively acquire, maintain, and invest valuable resources to achieve their goals. This study argues that shared leadership, as a key environmental resource and empowering context, affects employees' willingness and likelihood to engage in deviant innovation behavior by enhancing their innovative self-efficacy and providing rich structural and social resources.

Keywords: Shared Leadership; Deviant Innovation Behavior; Social Cognitive Theory; Conservation of Resources Theory.

1. Introduction

In the fierce business competition of the 21st century, breakthrough innovation has become the core driver for enterprises to maintain vitality, meet challenges, and win the future. Employees, as an important source of organizational innovation, often play a key role in fostering disruptive outcomes through unconventional and risk-taking exploratory behaviors. However, traditional hierarchical management structures and rigid approval processes sometimes struggle to accommodate highly forward-looking yet risky ideas. Against this backdrop, shared leadership—a leadership model emphasizing dynamic power sharing, collective decision-making, and mutual empowerment among members—is increasingly becoming a vital pathway to stimulate deep innovation vitality within organizations. Concurrently, deviant innovation behavior, referring to employees secretly advancing ideas that have not received formal authorization or have been explicitly rejected, is gaining widespread attention as a special path to break organizational constraints and achieve innovation breakthroughs. Therefore, deeply investigating how this empowering environment of shared leadership influences employees' choice and implementation of deviant innovation behavior holds urgent theoretical and practical significance for fully unleashing organizational innovation potential.

Shared leadership profoundly shapes the cognitive foundation and resource conditions for employees' breakthrough explorations by creating a unique organizational climate. This leadership model breaks the shackles of singular authority, granting team members greater autonomy and space for participation in decision-making, while also promoting open knowledge exchange and mutual support. In such an environment, employees are more likely to perceive innovative ideas that are temporarily unrecognized by the mainstream or constrained by processes as challenges worth pursuing, rather than insurmountable

obstacles. The high autonomy provided by shared leadership reduces employees' reliance on formal approval. Rich informal collaboration networks offer potential social resources and support for secretly advancing ideas. Moreover, the relatively tolerant atmosphere for trial and error within the team mitigates the perceived potential risks after exposure of deviant behaviors. These factors collectively make employees more inclined and capable of choosing the "detour" path of deviant innovation when encountering obstacles in formal channels.

This paper aims to deeply dissect the intrinsic link between shared leadership and employee's deviant innovation behavior. The research will explore how the core characteristics of shared leadership create conditions conducive to deviant innovation and how this leadership model influences employees' decision-making process in assessing risks, acquiring resources, and ultimately deciding to implement deviant innovation. To explore the relationship between shared leadership and employee's deviant innovation behavior and its impact in more detail, this paper will start from social cognitive theory and conservation of resources theory, respectively, to explore how they promote employee's deviant innovation behavior. The research in this paper aims to provide in-depth understanding and insights for business managers, policy makers and academics, etc., in order to promote the in-depth development of shared leadership and deviant innovation, to provide richer theoretical support for the understanding of the relationship between shared leadership and employees' deviant innovation behaviors, and to provide valuable guidance for the practice of organizations in innovation management.

2. Theoretical Concepts

2.1. Overview of Shared Leadership

As a frontier field in modern organizational management and team effectiveness research, the conceptual connotation

of shared leadership continues to enrich and deepen with theoretical and practical exploration. Early research primarily adopted a power structure perspective, defining it as the systematic distribution of leadership responsibilities among team members. Conger and Pearce (2003)[1] proposed in their foundational research that shared leadership is "a collective process in which team members mutually influence each other and share responsibility to achieve common goals." Its core lies in breaking the singular authority model of traditional vertical leadership and emphasizing the dynamic distribution of leadership functions within the group. This definition focuses on the fundamental shift in power structure, establishing the core characteristics of shared team responsibility and mutual leadership. With the development of social cognitive theory and complexity science, scholars began to pay attention to its internal psychological and interaction mechanisms. Liu Boyi (2009)[2], based on the Chinese organizational context, proposed a cognitive perspective definition, suggesting that the essence of shared leadership is "a dynamic process of role cognition and identification among team members based on task requirements and expertise matching." This perspective revealed the psychological foundation through which members achieve leadership sharing via observational learning, efficacy transmission, and role expectation adjustment. Shifting the research focus from static power distribution to the dynamic interaction of members' cognitive schemas (e.g., self-efficacy, team efficacy), it emphasized the critical role of cognitive consensus in the formation of shared leadership, providing a new pivot for understanding its complexity.

The latest research emphasizes its attributes of dynamic emergence and contextual adaptation. Carson (2007)[3] broke through the structural functionalist paradigm and reconstructed it as "an adaptive leadership model that emerges bottom-up within specific task contexts and team interactions," systematically revealing the moderating effects of boundary conditions such as team maturity, task interdependence, and external environmental turbulence. This definition achieved three breakthroughs: First, viewing shared leadership as an emergent state evolving continuously in team interaction rather than a preset structure; second, identifying the driving role of task complexity, time pressure, and resource mobility on the dynamic adaptation of leadership models; finally, clarifying its core mechanism for enhancing team resilience through knowledge integration, conflict coordination, and adaptive learning. Adopting Carson et al.'s (2007)[3] dynamic emergence perspective, this paper operationally defines shared leadership as: a dynamic configuration model of collective leadership that emerges spontaneously through informal interactions among team members based on expertise complementarity and consensus building, under specific task and environmental constraints.

2.2. Social Cognitive Theory

As one of the most explanatory behavioral science theories of the 20th century, Bandura's (1977)[4] social cognitive theory broke through the constraints of traditional behaviorism, constructing a three-dimensional dynamic model of "cognition-behavior-environment." The theory originated from classic observational learning experiments in the 1960s, which revealed the alternative acquisition mechanism of human behavior through the Bobo doll paradigm, overturning the mechanical learning view

dominated by direct experience. Bandura continued his research and systematically proposed the triadic reciprocal determinism, elucidating the dynamic inter-constructive relationship between subject cognition, environmental structure, and behavioral patterns, marking the formal formation of the theoretical system. Its revolutionary nature lies in establishing the core position of cognitive mediation, incorporating human symbolic capacity, anticipatory thinking, and self-regulatory mechanisms into the framework of behavioral explanation, providing a new perspective for understanding innovative behaviors in the organizational field.

The theoretical core comprises three pillar systems: the efficacy perception system, the alternative acquisition mechanism, and the symbolic cognitive framework. Efficacy perception serves as the driving engine, constructing an individual's system of competence beliefs through four pathways: direct experience, vicarious reinforcement, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, directly impacting the persistence and breakthrough nature of innovative behavior. The alternative acquisition mechanism builds an invisible channel for organizational knowledge dissemination, where employees internalize a cognitive closed loop of "observation-retention-reproduction-motivation" by decoding leaders' innovative demonstration behaviors. The symbolic cognitive framework endows individuals with abstract modeling ability, enabling employees to encode expected outcomes of innovation and regulate behavioral strategies through self-reactive mechanisms. The synergistic action of these three systems shapes the cognitive resilience of organizational members in responding to innovation blockages.

When employees are in a shared leadership environment, those with high innovative efficacy reconstruct organizational process barriers into innovation challenge goals through the symbolic representation system, triggering autonomous self-regulatory behavior. This agency is manifested as a triple synergistic mechanism: internalizing the distributed demonstration of autonomous decision-making by team members through observational learning, forming an implicit path template to circumvent formal approval; buffering the risk perception of deviant innovation behavior through the efficacy belief system to maintain the behavioral resilience of informal exploration; driving adaptive strategies like resource substitution by modeling the expected strategic value of breakthrough outcomes. The theory simultaneously reveals that the dynamic sharing of leadership dissolves traditional authority deterrence, shifting the focus of observational learning from avoiding scrutiny to collaborative breakthroughs, constituting the empowering foundation for the organization's implicit innovation activities.

2.3. Conservation of Resources Theory

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory is a foundational theory exploring the interaction between resources and the individual within the social environment. The theory contains two fundamental assumptions: First, individuals tend to adopt proactive strategies to protect and recreate the resources they value; second, individuals constantly face the potential threat and actual risk of resource loss. Resources are defined as "entities that are either centrally valued in their own right (e.g., self-esteem, close attachments, health, inner peace) or serve as a means to obtain centrally valued ends (e.g., money, social support, credit)," primarily encompassing material resources, conditional resources, personality traits, and energy resources.

The core proposition of COR theory emphasizes that individuals are motivated to accumulate and create more valuable resources. Employees possessing abundant resources not only face fewer risks of resource loss but also possess a greater capacity to continuously acquire and create valuable resources. This theory reveals the dual effects of a gain spiral and a loss spiral. Monnier (2002)[5] indicates that the gain spiral refers to employees with sufficient resources being able to achieve resource accumulation through maintenance and recreation, thereby stimulating higher levels of resource acquisition; conversely, the loss spiral points out that employees lacking resources are more prone to resource depletion under stress, and excessive defense of resources may lead to further resource loss, ultimately trapping them in a state of resource insufficiency.

2.4. Overview of Deviant Innovation Behavior

Deviant innovation behavior is a frontier area in organizational innovation research, and its concept can be traced back to Knight's theory of "Bootlegging," i.e., unauthorized innovation practices carried out by members of an organization through informal channels. Around this phenomenon, two major schools of thought have been formed: institutional breakthrough theory and authority confrontation theory. Augsdorfer (2005)[6], a representative scholar of the institutional breakthrough theory, emphasizes the triple transcendence of deviant innovation: breaking through job boundaries in the dimension of authority and responsibility, circumventing formal approval in the dimension of process, and realizing the unity of organizational interests and individual agency in the dimension of motivation. This perspective focuses on how innovation subjects construct "underground innovation networks" under institutional constraints and achieve innovation breakthroughs through resource appropriation and process modification. In contrast, authority confrontation theory, proposed by Mainemelis, focuses on the concept of "creative deviance," which concentrates on employees' persistence in promoting creativity after leader vetoes, emphasizing the interactive tension of "command-resistance" and regarding deviant innovation behavior as the product of the game between organizational authority and individual creativity.

In recent years, research on deviant innovation behavior has shown a trend of cross-paradigm integration. Scholars break through the limitations of a single perspective and attempt to construct a more inclusive theoretical framework. Jiang Yi (2018)[7] proposed the theory of institutional elasticity, redefining deviant innovation as the innovative practice of organizational members breaking through the rigid constraints of the system and emphasizing the dynamic adaptation between formal institutions and innovative agency. The theory introduces the concept of "institutional friction coefficient," systematically explaining the probability and path of deviant innovation behavior in different organizational environments. Wang Hongyu et al. (2019)[8] further proposed a process nested model, deconstructing deviant innovation behavior as a dynamic system in stages such as opportunity identification, resource reorganization, and outcome transformation, revealing its morphological evolution patterns at different innovation stages. These theoretical advances not only bridge early conceptual differences but also shift the research focus from behavioral characterization to mechanism explanation, providing a new paradigm for understanding the legitimacy paradox and value

creation logic of deviant innovation behavior.

3. The Impact of Shared Leadership on Deviant Innovation Behavior

In modern organizations, shared leadership, as an emerging leadership model, emphasizes the interaction and shared decision-making process between leaders and employees. Shared leadership can promote knowledge sharing and teamwork, thereby stimulating employees' innovation potential. Against the backdrop of rapid development in information technology, the external environment faced by organizations is becoming increasingly complex and uncertain, making employee innovative behavior crucial for organizational development. Shared leadership provides employees with more innovation opportunities and support by encouraging participation in decision-making and sharing resources and knowledge.

First, shared leadership can enhance employees' work autonomy, thereby stimulating deviant innovation behavior. Research shows that employees with higher work autonomy face fewer constraints at work, which is conducive to the proposal and implementation of innovative ideas. Second, shared leadership emphasizes teamwork and resource sharing, providing a more open and collaborative work environment that fosters the emergence of employee deviant innovation behavior. By establishing open communication channels and encouraging knowledge sharing, shared leadership promotes information exchange and creative collision among employees, thereby stimulating deviant innovation behavior. Furthermore, the supportive and inclusive traits of shared leadership make leaders more inclined to view employees' deviant innovation behaviors with a tolerant attitude. This leadership style encourages employees to try new methods and solutions, even if these attempts may violate traditional organizational norms. Therefore, shared leadership may stimulate more deviant innovation behaviors among employees, especially when employees believe these behaviors can bring potential benefits to the organization.

4. Summary

Based on social cognitive theory and conservation of resources theory, this study deeply explores the intrinsic connection between shared leadership and employee's deviant innovation behavior. The findings suggest that shared leadership, as an empowering environmental resource, significantly shapes the generative pathways of deviant innovation behavior by triggering employees' cognitive activation and resource synergy mechanisms. Specifically, employees in a shared leadership environment exhibit heightened sensitivity to distributed innovation opportunities due to their innovative self-efficacy and team identity. Employees with higher innovative self-efficacy are more likely to perceive organizational process constraints as innovation challenges that can be overcome, thereby maintaining proactive exploration motivation. This cognitive activation prompts employees to rationalize the strategic legitimacy of deviant behavior by constructing an innovation narrative prioritizing breakthrough value, forming an action logic of "procedural delay, breakthrough priority," which provides cognitive legitimacy for deviant innovation.

From the perspective of conservation of resources theory, shared leadership constructs rich structural and social resource networks. When employees identify innovation

opportunity windows, they systematically assess the accessibility of team redundant resources, the responsiveness of collaborative networks, and the safety margin for innovation failure, subsequently forming a resource synergy strategy for distributed co-creation. This resource gain spiral drives employees to adopt adaptive strategies such as dynamic role switching and cross-boundary collaboration to maximize the synergistic effectiveness of implicit innovation. The study simultaneously reveals that team psychological safety has a positive reinforcing relationship with the intensity of deviant innovation behavior, and moderate structural looseness catalyzes the emergence efficiency of breakthrough innovations.

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