

Research on the Relationship between Leader's Creative Refusal and Employee's Deviant Innovation Behavior

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Abstract: Based on social cognitive theory and stress cognitive appraisal theory, this paper explores the relationship between leadership creativity rejection and employee transgressive innovation. Leadership creativity rejection is a common phenomenon in the process of organizational innovation, but the mechanism of its influence on employees' innovative behavior has not been fully revealed. Social cognitive theory emphasizes that individual behavior is influenced by observational learning and self-efficacy, while the cognitive appraisal theory of stress states that an individual's cognitive appraisal of a stressful event determines his or her emotional and behavioral responses. This study argues that leadership creativity rejection, as a stressful event, triggers different cognitive appraisals and emotional responses from employees, which in turn affects their transgressive innovation behavior.

Keywords: Leadership creativity rejection; transgressive innovation; social cognitive theory; stress cognitive appraisal theory.

1. Introduction

In the business competition of the 21st century, innovation is the key to the sustainable development and survival of enterprises. It is not only the key for enterprises to adapt to market changes and satisfy customers' needs, but also an important means for enterprises to gain sustainable competitive advantages. Employees, as the most active innovation force in the organization, their innovative thinking and creativity are an important source to promote enterprise innovation. However, due to limited resources and the complexity of decision-making, management is often unable to support all innovative ideas, which leads to the phenomenon of leadership's rejection of employees' innovative ideas. Leadership's non-adoption or even outright rejection of innovative ideas proposed by employees is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored in organizational innovation management practice. This phenomenon has a profound impact on the innovative behavior and psychological state of employees, which may dampen their motivation or stimulate reflection and non-traditional innovation. For example, Apple's iPod project was not initially fully recognized by the top management, but the persistence and secretive development of the project team members eventually made the iPod a revolutionary product in the market. Therefore, it is necessary to study the impact of leadership rejection of innovative ideas on the innovation of organizational members.

The effect of leadership's rejection of innovative ideas on employees' innovative behavior is a complex psychological process that involves employees' cognitive appraisal, emotional responses, and behavioral choices. According to social cognitive theory and stress cognitive appraisal theory, employees facing leadership rejection make a subjective assessment of the rejection behavior based on their characteristics, emotional history and environmental conditions. This assessment not only affects their behavioral

responses, but may also determine how they respond to stress. In the process, employees may perceive leadership rejection as a challenge, which may inspire positive coping strategies and positive emotions, which in turn may have a positive impact on the performance of their innovativeness. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of how leadership rejection of innovative ideas affects employees' transgressive innovative behaviors has important theoretical and practical implications for optimizing organizational innovation management.

In order to explore the relationship between leadership idea rejection and employee transgressive innovation and its impact in more detail, this paper will start from the social cognitive theory and stress cognitive appraisal theory, respectively, to explore how they promote employee transgressive innovation. 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 leadership creativity rejection and transgressive innovation, to provide richer theoretical support for the understanding of the relationship between leadership creativity rejection and employees' innovative behaviors, and to provide valuable guidance for the practice of organizations in innovation management.

2. Theoretical Concepts

2.1. Overview of Leadership Creative Rejection

As an important issue in organizational innovation management, the conceptual connotation of leadership creativity rejection shows multi-dimensional evolution with the deepening of research. Early studies focused on the decision-making perspective, defining it as a leader's rational denial of an employee's creativity, and Zhou and George (2001)^[1] pioneered the definition of it as "a leader's opposition to or non-adoption of a new idea, method, or process proposed by an employee", emphasizing that decision-making is based

on the value of the creativity, the feasibility of the match with the organization's goals, and highlighting the leader's authority position in the evaluation of the innovation. The authoritative position of leaders in innovation assessment is emphasized. With the introduction of cognitive psychology theory, scholars began to pay attention to the subjective cognitive mechanisms behind decision-making. mueller et al. (2012)^[2] proposed the definition of cognitive perspective, arguing that the essence of leadership creativity rejection is "negative judgment based on individual cognitive frameworks", which reveals the existence of cognitive biases such as risk avoidance and path dependence in the assessment process. This groundbreaking perspective shifts the focus of research from objective assessment to subjective cognition, providing a new dimension for understanding the complexity of refusal behavior.

Recent studies have emphasized the dynamic contextual attributes of this phenomenon, and Ng et al. (2022)^[3] break away from the traditional static view and redefine it as a "context-specific negative feedback process based on creativity assessment and interpersonal interactions", which systematically reveals the moderating effects of multiple contextual factors such as organizational culture, resource constraints, and time pressure. The definition highlights three innovations: first, it views rejection as a dynamic process of continuous interaction rather than an isolated event; second, it identifies the key role of contextual variables such as resource scarcity and innovation tolerance; and finally, it reveals the multiple motivations behind decision-making such as authority assertion and competence questioning that may exist. Adopting Ng et al.'s (2022) dynamic contextual perspective, this paper defines leadership creativity rejection operationally as an explicit act of rejection of an employee's innovative proposal implemented by a manager in a specific organizational situation based on professional judgment and interactive assessment.

2.2. Social Cognitive Theory

As one of the most explanatory theories of behavioral science in the 20th century, the social cognitive theory founded by Bandura (1977)^[4] broke through the shackles of traditional behaviorism and constructed a three-dimensional dynamic model of "cognition-behavior-environment". The theory originated from the classical observational learning experiments in the 1960s, which revealed the alternative acquisition mechanism of human behavior through the Bobo doll paradigm, and subverted the mechanical learning view dominated by direct experience. Bandura continued his research, and systematically put forward the ternary interaction determinism, which elucidated the dynamic inter-constructive relationship between the subject's cognition, the environmental structure and behavioral patterns, and marked the formal formation of the theoretical system. Its revolution lies in the establishment of the core position of cognitive intermediary, and the incorporation of human symbolic ability, anticipatory thinking and self-regulation mechanism into the framework of behavioral explanation, which provides a new perspective for the understanding of innovative behaviors in the organizational field.

The theoretical core consists of three pillars: efficacy perception system, alternative acquisition mechanism and symbolic cognitive framework. Perceived efficacy serves as the driving engine to construct individual beliefs of competence through the four-dimensional paths of direct

experience, alternative reinforcement, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal, which directly affects the durability and breakthrough of innovative behavior. The alternative acquisition mechanism builds the invisible channel of organizational knowledge dissemination, and employees internalize the cognitive closed loop of "observation-retention-copying-motivation" by decoding the innovation demonstration behaviors of leaders. The symbolic cognitive framework empowers individuals with the ability of abstract modeling, enabling employees to encode the expected outcomes of innovations and regulate their behavioral strategies through self-responsive mechanisms. The synergy of this triple system shapes the cognitive resilience of organizational members in response to innovation blockages.

In the context of innovation management, the theory exhibits unique explanatory tensions. When experiencing leadership creativity rejection, high innovation efficacies trigger prospective self-regulatory behaviors through cognitive reappraisal that reframes environmental constraints into challenging goals. This motivation is reflected in a threefold adaptive mechanism: anticipating the potential benefits of transgressive innovations through a symbolic representation system, constructing an informal innovation network through alternative learning, and using self-efficacy to maintain innovation resilience. Theory also reveals that the leader's refusal behavior itself may serve as a negative template for observational learning, prompting employees to develop innovation strategies that circumvent formal scrutiny. This dialectical interaction between cognition and environment constitutes the microfoundation of an organization's implicit innovation activities.

2.3. Stress Cognitive Appraisal Theory

The Cognitive Appraisal Theory of Stress, proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984)^[5], is an appraisal-based theory of stress that seeks to explain the differential responses that individuals exhibit when confronted with the same stressors. The theory suggests that stress does not originate solely from external situations, but is the result of the interaction between the individual and the situation. Individuals make a comprehensive evaluation of the threatening nature of the situation in which they find themselves, a process that is dynamic, bidirectional, and in which the individual plays a dominant role. This evaluation depends not only on the situation itself, but is also closely related to the individual's cognitive abilities, past experiences, and psychological traits. Therefore, even in the same situation, there are significant differences in the stress appraisal of different individuals, leading to different behavioral responses and outcomes.

The cognitive appraisal theory of stress divides an individual's appraisal process into two stages: primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. Primary evaluation is the individual's initial judgment of whether the situation is threatening or not. If the individual perceives the situation as threatening, he or she will view it as harmful, challenging, or dangerous. Secondary evaluation, on the other hand, is the individual's integrated assessment of his or her internal and external resources to determine whether he or she is able to cope with the demands of the situation and what coping strategies to choose. These two phases do not occur in isolation, but rather are interactive and highly dependent on each other. Through these two stages of evaluation, individuals are able to determine the nature of the stress, whether it is challenging, threatening, or damaging. If the

individual perceives that his or her resources are sufficient to cope with or benefit from the pressure, he or she will perceive it as a challenge and evaluate it positively; if, on the other hand, he or she perceives that he or she is unable to cope with or benefit from it, he or she will perceive it as threatening or damaging and evaluate it negatively.

2.4. Overview of transgressive innovation

Transgressive innovation 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 transgressive innovation: breaking through the job boundaries in the dimension of authority and responsibility, circumventing the formal approval in the dimension of process, and realizing the unity of the organizational interests and individual initiative in the dimension of motivation. This perspective focuses on how innovation subjects construct "underground innovation networks" under institutional constraints, and realize innovation breakthroughs through resource appropriation and process modification. In contrast, there is the authority confrontation theory, proposed by Mainemelis, whose concept of "creative bias" focuses on the behavior of employees who insist on pushing forward their creativity even after being vetoed by their leaders, and emphasizes the interaction of "command-resistance" and the tension between "command and resistance". The concept of "creative bias" focuses on the behavior of employees insisting on promoting creativity after the leader's veto, emphasizes the interaction of "command-resistance", and regards transgressive innovation as the product of the game between organizational authority and individual creativity.

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

3. The Impact of Leader Creativity Rejection on Transgressive Innovation

Leadership creativity rejection as a complex social interaction phenomenon and its impact on employees' innovative behavior can be analyzed in depth through social cognitive theory and stress cognitive appraisal theory. From the perspective of social cognitive theory, employees' sense of innovation efficacy and outcome expectations are their core cognitive elements, while leadership rejection challenges these cognitions. On the one hand, authoritative rejection may weaken employees' evaluation of their own innovation efficacy; on the other hand, employees' past experiences and cognitive schemas modulate the interpretive framework of rejection events. Employees with high innovation efficacy are more likely to attribute rejection to situational factors, thereby maintaining motivation to innovate. Meanwhile, the cognitive appraisal theory of stress provides a dynamic analytical framework that emphasizes employees' primary and secondary appraisals of rejection events. In the primary evaluation stage, employees determine whether rejection poses a threat to their innovation goals; while in the secondary evaluation stage, employees assess their own coping resources, including organizational support, informal networks, and the risk-benefit ratio of transgressive innovation. This dual evaluation determines employees' subsequent behavioral choices, including intra-organizational grievances, abandoning the idea, or engaging in transgressive innovation. Taken together, leadership idea rejection shapes the mechanisms through which transgressive innovation behavior occurs by influencing employees' paths of cognitive restructuring, resource substitution, and risk gaming.

The legitimacy paradox of transgressive innovation stems from the tension between social cognition and institutional environment. From the perspective of social cognitive theory, employees rationalize transgressions by constructing a moral narrative of "organizational interest first" to maintain beliefs about innovation outcomes. This cognitive adjustment enables employees to psychologically balance the anxiety of non-compliance with the impulse to innovate, forming the dual identity of the "loyalty paradoxer": recognizing the formal non-compliance of the behavior while insisting on the substantive legitimacy of the innovation outcome. Meanwhile, the stress cognitive appraisal system plays an important role in this process, helping employees to choose adaptive strategies, such as technical concealment or resource compensation, after evaluating the risks and benefits of transgressive behaviors. This mechanism not only explains why employees choose to transgress innovation in the face of leadership rejection, but also reveals the internal logic by which transgressive innovative behaviors are sustained in the organizational environment.

4. Summary

Based on social cognitive theory and stress cognitive appraisal theory, this study delves into the relationship between leadership creativity rejection and employee transgressive innovation. It was found that leadership creativity rejection, as a complex stressful event, shapes the occurrence mechanism of transgressive innovation behavior by influencing employees' pathways of cognitive restructuring, resource compensation, and risk game.

Specifically, when employees face leadership creativity rejection, their sense of innovation efficacy and past experiences modulate their cognitive evaluation of the rejection event. Employees with a higher sense of innovation efficacy are more likely to attribute rejection to situational factors rather than to personal incompetence, thereby maintaining motivation to innovate. This cognitive restructuring encourages employees to rationalize transgressive innovation behaviors by constructing an ethical narrative of “organizational interests first”, forming a cognitive paradox of “procedural violation-value justification”, which provides psychological legitimacy for transgressive innovation. The cognitive paradox of “procedural violation-value justification” is formed, which provides psychological legitimacy for the transgressive innovation.

From the perspective of the cognitive evaluation theory of pressure, leading creative rejection activates employees' assessment of the threat to the target, which in turn triggers the mobilization of alternative resources. When employees perceive the strategic value of an idea, they systematically evaluate the support, risk exposure and potential benefit ratio of informal networks, resulting in an “underground innovation” gaming strategy. This pressure transformation process encourages employees to adopt technical means such as spatial and temporal compartmentalization and process concealment to reduce the visibility of transgressive behaviors. The study also found that organizational innovation resilience is nonlinearly related to the frequency of transgressive innovations, and that moderate institutional constraints may stimulate more groundbreaking hidden innovation practices.

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