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Closing Comments on 'Leading for Innovation': We've Only Just Begun

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Abstract

The Problem: Insights and recommendations on developing leaders of creative efforts have been offered from various scholars and practitioners in this issue. However, we felt it would best serve the overall effort of this issue to provide several specific linkages between the overall themes presented. **The Solution:** In this closing piece, we briefly summarize the articles within this issue of *Advances in Developing Human Resources*. **Stakeholders:** This synthesis is intended to integrate key aspects of each article within the issue in order to stimulate further thought, and eventually action, for scholars and practitioners in Human Resource Development (HRD) and other related fields.

Keywords

leadership, creativity, innovation leader development, leader performance

The theme of the present issue, by now, should not escape even the casual reader. Organizations that wish to push towards success in the new, global economy must re-evaluate and re-align themselves with some key principles of leadership in creative and innovative domains. More specifically, they must begin to tailor these retooling efforts with a keen eye towards building creative leadership capacities at many organizational levels. As noted by Mumford and Gibson (this issue) in their preface, there is a paucity of literature, exploratory or empirical, investigating the kinds of interventions that may assist in developing effective leaders of creative

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efforts. Thus, this issue sought to provide a theoretically based, structured guide to some of the major topics to be considered by Human Resource Development professionals and practitioners as they continue in “developing and unleashing human expertise through organization development and personnel training and development for the purpose of improving performance” (Swanson & Holton, 2009, p. 4).

Accordingly, the first article in this issue, by Hunter and Cushenberry (this issue), presents a model of how leaders impact creative performance in organizations. Hunter and Cushenberry make a key proposition—that the impact of leadership on creative performance must be monitored and evaluated as an *iterative* process, one that is constantly occurring, reoccurring, and changing across multiple (i.e., individual, team, organizational) levels. This proposition, in turn, leads them to suggest four steps for leaders to take in order to begin championing both creative performance and innovative products and services, namely (a) finding employees with creative capacities or skills (cf., Mumford, Mobley, Uhlman, Reiter-Palmon, & Doares, 1991; Mumford, Peterson, & Childs, 1999), (b) engaging in a variety of developmental activities, (c) motivating to innovate, and (d) championing creative ideas and endeavors. We feel their piece presents a compelling framework for organizing and synthesizing the thoughts and issues raised by the remainder of the articles in this issue.

Finding Those With Creative Capacities

In order for HRD professionals to help organizations build creative capacities, they must begin with seeking a creative leader for such an effort. Although this particular task might not always fall under the purview of the HRD professional, McEntire and Greene-Shortridge (this issue) have outlined several steps and processes for how to recruit and select leaders for creative efforts. Such suggestions include peer referrals, professional societies, psychological assessments, and interviewing. Indeed, each of these tactics target key areas whose importance are echoed in several of the other articles within this issue. For example, peer referrals assist in finding culture (or person-organization) fit, as mentioned by Hunter and Cushenberry (this issue). Utilizing members of professional societies as a basis for recruiting may enhance the probability of finding individuals with key domain or field expertise, as suggested by Hunter and Cushenberry (this issue) and Ligon, Wallace, and Osburn (this issue). Psychological assessments, such as skill inventories or biodata, may help to gauge levels of traits, skills, or styles—for example motivation, divergent thinking, or risk-taking—that are key to leading for innovation. Such constructs are mentioned by Hunter and Cushenberry, Ligon et al., and Waples and Friedrich (this issue).

The underlying importance of McEntire and Greene-Shortridge’s article is this—organizations, engaging in creative tasks or seeking to be innovative, must select a leader carefully. Moreover, this leader must possess the requisite knowledge, skill, and experience—and this experience must be related to previous creative and/or innovative performance. Perhaps most importantly, the leader must fit the culture of the organization—because as later articles assert, the organizational culture and

climate, upon which the leader has a key influence, will be a driving force to the success or failure of creative efforts.

In addition to the points discussed above, McEntire and Greene-Shortridge noted the importance of interviews and gap analysis in order to help the organization develop potential successors from within, which was the core focus of the next three articles. These articles, by Williams and Foti, Ligon et al., and Antes and Schuelke (this issue), discuss three separate, yet related, conceptualizations of developing leaders to enhance creative performance and innovation.

Development Activities

Leadership development is one of the most popular fields of literature in HRD (cf., Ardichvili & Manderscheid, 2008; Callahan, Whitener, & Sandlin, 2007; Conner & Marquardt, 1999; Hezlett & Gibson, 2005; Holton & Naquin, 2000; Naquin & Holton, 2006; Skipton Leonard & Land, 2010; Trehan, 2007) and other disciplines (cf., Day, 2000; Day, 2011; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010). Interestingly, a simple Google search of the term “leadership development” results in more hits than the terms “job performance” or “organizational commitment”. Regardless of popularity, the rules of creative people and creative performance necessitate a separate line of thought for development vis-à-vis leadership and creative efforts (cf., Byrne, Mumford, Barrett, & Vessey, 2009; Mumford, Hunter, Eubanks, Bedell, & Murphy, 2007; Osburn & Mumford, 2006; Stenmark, Shipman, & Mumford, 2011).

Along these lines, the next three articles present frameworks for development that are specifically tailored for leaders of creative efforts. Williams and Foti (this issue) discuss problem-solving skills as outlined by Puccio, Murdock, and Mance (2007), as well as some general tenets of formal creative problem-solving outlined by Sternberg (2007). In essence, they argue that through administering formal developmental programs around these skills and processes, leaders of creative efforts will be more effective, presumably because of their enhanced creative problem-solving skills. While this may well be true, they also note the importance of a creative climate—both essential elements suggested by Hunter and Cushenberry (this issue) and McEntire and Greene-Shortridge (this issue). However, as Mumford and Gibson noted in the preface, such formal programs must be accompanied by more “informal” designs.

Although they could be considered both formal or informal, Ligon et al. (this issue) discuss the importance of mentoring emerging leaders of creative efforts. Specifically, they propose three key functions of leaders for creativity and innovation—(a) managing the work, (b) managing teams, and (c) securing resources and selling ideas. The main premise of their work is that in order for leaders to engage (successfully) in these behaviors, they must possess several key KSAOs, namely, (a) expertise, (b) evaluative creative process skills, (c) social skills, and (d) organization and field (i.e., market and competitive environment) knowledge. However, the “training” perspective adopted by Ligon et al. diverges from the more technical skill oriented and “formalized” approach offered by Williams and Foti (this issue). Here, the authors suggest an

approach touched on by McEntire and Greene-Shortridge (this issue)—experiential development. They argue that experiential development builds the capacity for more relevant and accurate sensemaking (cf., Drazin, Glynn, & Kazarjain, 1999; Weick, 1995). The crux of this approach lies in mentoring, and more specifically formalized, targeted mentoring to encourage and enhance skill and identity development and the formation of complex mental models for problem solving. The mentor, in this case, holds expertise (i.e., tacit knowledge) that is best conveyed in an applied and interactive environment. Thus, the sensemaking of the developing leader is bolstered by the mentor's ability to guide the self-reflective process—or perhaps steer the self-reflective process—in directions that are most appropriate for the situation, organization, and environment that the individuals are operating within. This frequent exposure to leadership challenges in creative, innovative projects enhanced through mentoring may prove to be one of the most fruitful methods for preparing leaders for leading innovation on both social and cognitive levels.

For the HRD scholar, these two articles provide a complementary framework. To develop leaders who are capable of leading creative efforts, they must possess the cognitive skills (i.e., creative problem-solving skills) that are essential, but they must also have domain expertise—something which a mentoring program can help them both gain and refine through experience. However, such programs are not always tenable, due to a variety of constraints both foreseen and unforeseen. Thus, organizations must consider alternative pathways to delivering such development to potential leaders.

Antes and Schuelke (this issue) suggest developmental activities that are rather “non-traditional”. Their detailed and informative layout of developmental activities incorporates simulations, e-mentoring, multi-source feedback, social media, and succession planning software. These modes, while not the typical “classroom of instruction”, are offered with an eye towards the fast-paced environment that many leaders find themselves in. Thus, these next generation developmental tools offer a wealth of applicability to organizations that find traditional programs constraining. More importantly, many of these efforts focus on building creative problem-solving skills and sensemaking capacities through experiential development (whether simulated or real) and self-reflection (see Ligon et al., this issue). Their exhaustive review of the utility, challenges, and practical value of each of these methods should provide a useful roadmap for organizations, leaders, employees, and HRD professionals who wish to incorporate such technologically advanced elements into their developmental programs.

Motivating to Innovate

As mentioned in several articles within this issue, the climate of the organization, often created by the leader, is essential to managing creative efforts. Waples and Friedrich (this issue), illuminate a few key definitions of creative performance in the workplace, with particular attention to noting that the creative performance leaders oversee may

not always result in the creation of an iPad (e.g., a groundbreaking innovation)—but that does not negate the importance of “garden variety” creativity in the workplace (Mayfield & Mayfield, 2008). Keeping this in mind, managing creative performance in the workplace, as discussed within this article, revolves around (a) defining creative performance through the vision, mission, and goals of the organization, (b) monitoring creative performance by allowing time, autonomy, and providing feedback where appropriate, (c) evaluating creative performance and the appropriate criteria with which to do so, and (d) rewarding creative performance.

These suggestions contrast quite starkly with traditional means of performance management. Thus, for the HRD professional, this caveat must be taken into account when developing leaders for creative efforts. Leaders must understand that when attempting to encourage and reward creative efforts, the current performance management system, as applied to general work, will not aid their efforts, but will hinder it. This means that an intricate understanding of the differences in motivating creative versus non-creative work must exist, and be applied.

Champions of Innovation: A Competency-based Approach

The final article, by Gilley, Shelton, and Gilley (this issue) presents a competency-based model of leadership—Developmental Leadership. While this model is not exhaustive (i.e., does not discuss expertise), it certainly provides a framework of attributes that the leader must have and utilize in order to garner creative performance from their subordinates. This model focuses on what it is that leaders must do to in order to make the subordinate successful during efforts to innovate. This final piece provides an important full-circle point. In the previous articles we have covered how we identify and develop leaders of creative efforts, and how they shape the creative work being done at all levels of the organization. Gilley et al. (this issue), paint a final picture of who that leader may be and how they use the “tools in their tool box” to foster innovation.

Conclusion—We’ve Only Just Begun . . .

The contributions within this issue have, at least, offered some theoretical “food for thought”. Of course, our hope would be that these articles will spur empirical studies on the topic of developing leaders for innovation. We must, within the field of HRD and elsewhere, turn our attention to evaluating which of these approaches indeed hold merit for developing leaders—which leaves many questions yet to answer. What level of impact on performance, across levels, do leaders truly have when leading creative efforts? Which influences—direct or indirect—are most essential? Under what conditions? Do we have valid and reliable means to appropriately select leaders for creative efforts? To what extent does mentoring enhance sensemaking? What level of creative

problem-solving skill is needed prior to such extensive mentoring? Is e-mentoring effective? Under what conditions do the offered motivational tenets succeed or fail? And which competencies are *essential* and *trainable*? It is important that we, as HRD professionals, work to implement innovation interventions that are rooted in sound theory, as we believe the assertions in the current issue to be. This is not only critical for the success of organizational innovations, but also to ultimately facilitate our understanding of the innovation process and further refine the theory. Leading for innovation is a budding, and sometimes daunting, area of work, but one in which the implications for human resource practices and the ultimate success of organizations is great.

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