Confident Leaders Inspire Creativity

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Confident leaders foster greater creativity among their employees, according to a new study.

"Employees are more likely to produce creative outcomes when they are aware that creativity is expected from them and is encouraged by their leaders," writes study authors Lei Huang (Auburn University), Dina Krasikova (University of Texas at San Antonio), and Dong Liu (Georgia Institute of Technology).

In some of the most influential research in the history of psychology, Albert Bandura and colleagues demonstrated that our belief in our own capabilities determines whether or not we succeed. Across many experiments, Bandura found that a person's confidence in their capabilities – or self-efficacy – predicted their success at tackling challenges.

These findings are particularly important for managers and organizations looking to inspire greater innovation and creativity in their workforce. For example, Bandura and colleagues found that managers higher in self-efficacy were also better at inspiring their teams to be more productive.

Although organizations and individuals say they support creativity, they often reject creative ideas. In an examination of this paradox, published in *Psychological Science*, researchers from the University of Pennsylvania found that many people hold an unconscious negative bias against creativity: "Our results suggest that if people have difficulty gaining acceptance for creative ideas, especially when more practical and unoriginal options are readily available, the field of creativity may need to shift its current focus from identifying how to generate more creative ideas to identifying how to help innovative institutions recognize and accept creativity."

In the new study, Huang, Krasikova, and Liu hypothesized that leaders' confidence in their creativity would be one way to inspire greater creativity within the broader organization. That is, managers

confident in their own creative capabilities engage in more behaviors that encourage creativity in the people around them.

"They get more involved in discussions about new ideas or work methods," Huang and colleagues argue. "Therefore, they are likely to be more receptive to creative ideas generated by followers, avoid severe criticisms, and strive to find value even in less promising ideas, which are behaviors that encourage creativity."

To test this, Huang and colleagues designed a study to measure the relationship between a leader's creative self-confidence and behaviors that encourage creativity in others.

They recruited 106 supervisors from a large American technology company to take an assessment of creative self-efficacy – "a self-belief that one has the ability to produce creative outcomes."

Leaders were asked to self-report on the frequency they engaged in behaviors known to encourage creativity in others. For example, listening to new ideas, showing respect towards suggestions, and allowing job flexibility for creative problem-solving are all behaviors that can help encourage creativity.

The researchers then surveyed 544 employees about whether these supervisors were encouraging of creativity (e.g., "My manager encourages and emphasizes or reinforces creativity by employees"). Participants were also assessed on their own creativity and engagement with work.

The results confirmed that confident leaders were better at encouraging creativity in their followers, particularly when teams worked closely together. Confident leaders were more likely to encourage other people's creative ideas by establishing a culture of receptive to creativity, listening to new ideas, trying new things, and offering praise.

"That is, leader CSE [creative self-efficacy] spurs leaders to encourage follower creativity, which makes followers more likely to engage in creative process and, as a result, improve their creative performance," the researchers explain.

One limitation of the study is that all of the measures for creative performance were subjective and self-reported. Despite the need for additional research, the results provide a promising direction for organizations looking to foster innovation and creativity.

References

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