

Servant Leadership, Creativity, and Innovation: A Relationship?

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As economic globalization continues to accelerate, organizations must continually create and/or innovate new products and services to satisfy customer requirements, improve quality, and lower costs in order to remain viable (Hill, 2011). McLean (2009) echoes this sentiment when she writes, “[I]n the 21st century, creativity is a crucial factor in organizations gaining and sustaining competitive advantage.” Banks and Winston (2008, para. 3) opine that creativity and innovation are critical to organizations “because much of today’s competitive marketplace demands ever-increasing value to customers, which translates to lowest total cost, highest total quality, fastest total cycle time, and highest total overall customer satisfaction;” they go on to note that creativity and innovation are critical drivers to achieve these ends. Khorshidi, Abdoli, and Khorshidi (2013) agree, reinforcing the point that only creative and innovative organizations will survive in the present marketplace.

Creativity, Innovation, and Leadership

Presented below is an abbreviated discussion on creativity and innovation, and the leadership necessary to foster and sustain organizational creativity and innovation. Linking to any of the citations will provide a more detailed and informative read. The focus of the present paper is on intra-organizational creativity and innovation. Inter-organizational creativity (e.g., knowledge or technology transfer) is beyond the scope of the present effort.

Creativity

Teresa Amabile (1996a), one of the world’s foremost writers on creativity and innovation, has defined creativity as “the production of novel and useful ideas in any domain” (p. 1). All human beings have creative potential to some level, which is affected by his or her environment. McLean agrees that creativity arises not only from organizational processes but “the individual’s innate creative traits” (2009, p. 30). Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, & Herron, (1996, p. 1154) extend creativity to include teams.

Amabile (1996a) goes onto note that creativity resides at the nexus of expertise, creativity skills, and task motivation (p. 6). The creative individual or team must have a high degree of domain (subject matter) expertise, which is the foundation of all creative endeavors. According to Amabile creative thinking skills are transferable from application domain to application domain.

Creative skills included the desire to encounter new problems or novel circumstances; a willingness to “think outside the box;” and persistence, even in the face daunting challenges. Task motivation is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic task motivation determines whether or not the individual or team with creative potential (i.e., expertise and creative skills) actually becomes creative. Intrinsic motivation arises from within an individual who is curious, enjoys challenges, and the work itself. Extrinsic motivation drives one to achieve a goal in order to receive a reward, recognition, and/or meet a criterion unrelated to the work itself. Task motivation determines what an individual will do as opposed to what he or she can do. Influencing task motivation is the feedback- relationship between manager and employee; de Stobbeleir, Ashford, and Buyens (2011) report that employee cognitive style and perceptions of organizational support influenced the inclination to seek manager feedback and to search for indirect feedback in his or her work environment in order to self-regulate his or her creative performance.

Andriopoulos (2001) identified five determinants of organizational creativity: climate, culture, leadership, resource and skill allocations, and organizational systems and structure. Amabile (1996a) argues that it is easiest for an organization to influence intrinsic and extrinsic motivation by the (1) allocation of rewards, (2) creation and maintenance of a work environment (e.g., organizational structure, processes, culture and climate) which fosters creativity, and (3) supportive leadership (e.g., leadership behavior/expectations, resource allocations, and worker skills distribution).

Khorshidi, Abdoli, and Khorshidi (2013) as well as Shin and Park (2013) insist that organizations, too, are creative (e.g., departmental faculties, R&D units, Apple Computer, etc.). The creative relationship between the individual/team and the organization is symbiotic, i.e., each nourishes/injures the other. It appears that the most significant route to influence individual (and by extension team) creativity is the social environment within an organization which is defined by its culture, climate, and leadership norms (Amabile, 1997, p. 40). Amabile (1996b) summarized work environment enablers and obstacles (Table 1) to individual creativity.

Table 1: Work Environment Enablers and Obstacles to Creativity

Enabler	Obstacle
Work Freedom	Organizational Bureaucracy
Good Leadership	Organizational Constraints
Enough Resources	Organizational Disinterest
Leadership Encouragement	Poor Leadership
Supportive Organizational Processes	Inappropriate Evaluation and Feedback
Recognition	Inequitable Evaluation and Feedback
Adequate Time for Creativity	Not Enough Resources
Being Challenged	Time Pressures
Sense of Urgency	Enforcement of the Status Quo
Desire to Accomplish Something Important	Destructive Competition

Note. These are listed in order of importance to study subjects who worked in a research and development environment. See Amabile (1996b) for more detail.

The enablers and obstacles can be extended to work teams with recognition that team dynamics will influence, positively or negatively, both individual and team creativity. An organization’s management, culture, and climate “scoring high” on enablers and low on obstacles can be expected to be more creative than one with opposite characteristics.

There are multiple benefits to the organization which nurtures creativity, aside from mere survival. Walesh (2012, para. 3) identified additional benefits of creativity which included “increased personal and organizational productivity”...“reinvigorated staff, new services”...“enhanced reputation”...“growth”...“improved recruitment and retention”...“greater profitability.” The chief benefit for nurturing creativity is that without it, the likelihood of an organization being innovative is close to zero.

Innovation

Amabile (1996a, p. 1) defines innovation as, “the successful implementation of creative ideas within an organization;” Bourguignon (2006. p. 3) explains the relationship between creativity and innovation, “Innovation is considered the crucial cornerstone of strategies [to remain viable], and there cannot be innovation without creativity first.” Gurteen (cited in McLean, 2009, p. 30) asserts that creativity results in new ideas and innovation converts those new ideas into “reality” (i.e., goods and services). Amabile (1996a) agrees in that creative individuals and teams are the stimulus for organizational innovation; however, she acknowledges that creativity, in of itself, is an insufficient driver for innovation. She believes that the organization’s innovation orientation starts with senior management (p. 8), an observation echoed by Banks and Winston (2010) as well as Shin and Park (2013).

According to Amabile (1996a, pp. 9-10) innovation is created at the nexus of an organization’s (1) management practices, (2) resource allocations, and (3) organizational motivation to innovate. Illustrative organizational innovation determinants, according to Amabile, are presented in Table 2. Additional management practices include the ability to organize effective work teams which include diverse skill sets and perspectives, characterized by mutual trust, authentic communication shared commitment to goal accomplishment and mutual support. The work environment directly impacts the factors which drive individual and team creativity and visa-a-versa.

Table 2: Selected Organizational Innovation Determinants

Management Practices	Organizational Innovation Orientation	Resource Allocation
Degree of Autonomy Permitted	Demonstratively Values Creativity, Innovation	Money
Leadership Quality	Fosters Responsible Risk-Taking	Time
Clear Goal Setting	Forward Thinking	Technology & Tools
Job Design and Employee Matching to Ensure a Good Fit	Believes in the Skills and Abilities of Its Members to Accomplish Goals	Facilities
Quality of Performance Evaluation and Feedback		Human Capital
Depth of Mutual Trust		
Frequency		
Authenticity of Communication		

Note. Table was drawn from Amabile, (1996a) and is not an exhaustive listing.

Several other authors echo Amabile’s observations. Baumgartner (n.d.) identified characteristics of innovative organizations which include organizational strategies which are dependent on innovation, leaders who foster and implement innovation, and organizational cultures which tolerate failure, nurture autonomy, and ensure a trusting environment. Walesh (2012) adds that a creative and innovative organizational culture requires “varied expertise,”...“motivation,”... and “creative and innovative methods” (p. 338). Ramamoorthy, Flood, Slattery, & Sardessai (2005) reported that the organizational expectation to innovate, degree of job autonomy, and high perceptions of organizational justice stimulated innovative work behaviors. Pratoom and Savatsomboon (2012) observed that group innovation arose from individual creativity, self-leadership, group culture, and knowledge management practices.

Glaser and Lawrence-Ross (2010) recommend the that leaders, wishing to build an innovative culture, (1) provide “space for idea generation” by removing fear to permit experimentation and providing resources, permitting time, and ascribing importance to idea generation; (2) introduce “quality conversation” to foster openness, trust, recognition, and authenticity; and (3) seek and act on influence opportunities to create a risk-taking mindset and free exchange of ideas (p.18).

Leadership, Creativity and Innovation

Bennis (1999, p. 4) asserts that intellectual capital “is the key currency in the world right now” and “leadership is the main instrument for leveraging intellectual capital.” Bennis (pp. 4-5) identified five essential leadership competencies to leverage intellectual capital: (1) “passion and purpose,”...“generate and sustain trust,”... offer “hope and optimism,”...“manifest a bias for action,”...and “keep learning and growing” (pp. 4-5). Leadership does affect organizational, individual, and team creativity and innovation (Amabile, et al., 1996; Khorshidi, Abdoli, & Khorshidi, 2013; McLean, 2009; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Parjanen, 2012; Shin & Park, 2013).

Bourguignon (2006, p. 3) asserts that leaders, themselves, should be creative. Shin and Park (2013) found that in small to medium enterprises, the CEO’s development orientation did positively influence the organization’s creativity; however, when the organization’s learning systems were strong, the CEO’s influence weakened. It is possible that a learning orientation, once institutionalized into the organization’s culture independently promotes creativity, given that expertise in a pre-condition to creativity. Oldham and Cummings (1996) found that supportive leadership behavior correlated positively with subordinate creativity. de Jong and Kemp (2003) specifically identify leadership style as a factor in promoting worker autonomy, which is a recognized creativity and innovation enabler. Politis and Politis (2009) reported that leadership styles which center on people are positively correlated to innovation, risk taking, and being proactive. Scott and Bruce (1994, p. 600) found that leadership and leadership expectations, organizational support for innovation, subordinate career stage, and problem-solving style were contributors to driving individual innovation.

Parjanen (2012, p. 119) reported that the two most significant determinants of employee creativity was leadership and organizational culture, which leadership has a primary role in determining. Parjanen goes on to comment, “leadership must be clear about the need for creativity and the types of creativity that best suits the organizational goals. There is also a need to communicate the need for creativity to the employees” (p. 124, para. 1). Amabile, et al., (1996) concluded that managers should carefully hire those who display a creative bent and construct a work environment that nurtures creativity and innovation. Deliberate effort must be made to design and staff an organization for creativity and innovation. Collins (2001) and Kotter (1996) provide further guidance.

Regarding teams, Hülsheger, Anderson, and Salgado (2009), in reporting on the practical managerial implications of their meta-analysis covering 30 years of published research, advised that managers should provide work team members with high performance standards, while creating an open environment which tolerates failure. Team members, team leaders and senior management must mutually support each other, while holding each other accountable for performance. Managers should provide clear goals, which not only meet organizational needs, but to the extent possible, meet team member needs. To encourage goal attainment, managers should provide constructive feedback, incentives, and structure the work environment so that team members are mutually interdependent. Communication within the team and between the team and its managers should be open and authentic.

Servant Leadership Can Foster Creativity and Innovation

Robert Greenleaf (2002) is credited with framing the modern conception of servant leadership in 1977; he (p. 21) argues that “the great leader is seen as servant first” or put another way, “the servant leader *is* servant first” (p. 27). Greenleaf goes on to note, “It [leadership] begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, *to serve first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (p. 27). Greenleaf (2002) drew his concept of the “servant leader” from nearly 40 years of corporate experience at AT&T (between the 1920’s and 1960’s) and Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East* (p. 248). A central theme in servant leadership theory (SLT) is the leader’s motivation and behavior, as well as the culture, climate, and work environment he or she nurtures for followers, within the organization and those affected (e.g., customers, vendors, investors, regulators, community, etc.) by the organization’s products, services, processes and tasks is “to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served...Do those served grow as persons?” (p. 27); this is the true test of a servant leader’s effectiveness.

Concerning business (large and small) Greenleaf was hopeful that a “new business ethic” (2002, p. 147) which he labeled as “a striving for excellence” which would, if adopted, lead businesses to “become greater social assets.” He argued that “performance in any field or calling should be judged in reference to the obligations assumed for society which differ from field to field” (p. 151).

His conclusion, after surveying, the world in the 1970's was that "[n]one does very well," despite the presence of sufficient resources, due to mediocrity and poor leadership. In 2019, one could draw much the same conclusion. In explaining, his "new business ethic," Greenleaf wrote, "The work exists for the person as much as the person exists for the work" (p. 154); the worker is as important as the organization's products or services, probably more so. Work must provide "meaning and significance" (p. 156), "the excitement of a dynamic purpose," and "create a variety of environments in which different styles of able young people will flourish and be themselves" (p. 157). Larger companies will need to "decentralize" to create a work environment which permits workers ("able young people" in Greenleaf's words) to feel supported and part of a larger effort without comprising their individuality so that all give to the "total strength of the enterprise" (p. 158). Businesses adopting the "new ethic" would embrace "both work and learning" (p. 159). Greenleaf concluded that, "great things happen when able leaders create these conditions" (p. 159).

Recognizing that business must produce goods and services to earn profits and satisfy existing performance expectations, Greenleaf saw the transition to the "new business ethic" as slow and steady. He argued that by adopting the "new ethic," businesses would benefit because workers would ensure that customers are provided high quality products and excellent customer service which guarantee business profitability. He saw a time when consumers, as well as competent workers, would expect businesses to adopt this new ethic. Today, we see significant corporate emphasis and investment in "going green" and being sustainable.

Greenleaf (2002, pp. 152-153) acknowledged that the transition would require business "building geniuses" such as Alfred Sloan of General Motors, Julius Rosenwald of SearsRoebuck, and Theodore Vail of AT&T, who built some of the most successful companies of the 20th Century. Today, we'd identify Google, Apple Computer, Oracle, or Facebook.

Competent leadership is required to build or transform organizations to accomplish what Greenleaf advocated. One will logically ask, "What are the leadership competencies or characteristics required to accomplish Greenleaf's vision?" Much research (Peterson, Galvin, & Lange, 2012; Russell & Stone, 2002; Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002; Sipe, & Frick, 1993; Spears, 1998, 2003; van Dierendonck, 2011) has been conducted to answer this question. The authors have summarized servant leadership trait theory research streams into Table 3.

Servant Leadership & Fostering Creativity & Innovation: A Process Model

Dirk van Dierendonck and Laurens Rook (2010, pp. 155-165) argue that SLT is quite suited to fostering creativity and innovation. They argue that particular servant leadership characteristics (e.g., empowerment, accountability, humility, authenticity, forgiveness, courage, and stewardship) directly affect two mediating variable clusters: (1) affect, loyalty, and contribution and (2) role expectations and constructive feedback, which stimulates self-concordance and subsequently creativity (p. 156), which then can fuel innovation, provided necessary organizational supports are in place. The authors summarized the servant leadership research stream into Table 3, which reveals substantial overlap between the leadership conditions which foster creativity and innovation (Table1 and Table 2).

SanFacon and Speaks (2010) write that practicing servant leadership encompasses three spheres: motives, means, and ends. "Motive" may be found in the authentic attributes and servant leader behaviors, presented in Table 3; "means" are found in the organization's leadership ethos and practices, culture, climate and work environment; and "ends," within the context of this paper, are creativity and innovation.

Accordingly, the authors have posited the relationship web presented in Figure 1. It is hypothesized that authentic servant leadership attributes drive SL behaviors which influence or determine the organization's (or subunit's) leadership ethos and practices, culture, climate and work environment. These in turn affect follower actions which may result in creativity and later innovation, within the context of the organization's mission, vision, values and strategies. The "double-pointed arrows" between the web elements signifies that each element is influenced, and in turn, influences each other element. It is recognized that an organization's market, regulatory, and competitive milieus will exert material influence, whose effects are exerted through the firm's mission, vision, values and strategies.

Table 3: Authentic Core Servant Leadership Attributes and Behaviors

Authentic Core Attribute	Servant Leadership Behaviors
Servant Leadership Orientation	
Commitment to Serve	Decision to Serve, Service Tenure
Concern for Others	Altruism, Puts People First (i.e., Meets Others Priority Needs), Empathetic, Volunteers
Humane	Humility, Gratitude, Forgives, Patience, Compassion, Justice, Trusts Self and Others
Moral Seeker	Honesty, Integrity, Fairness, Ethical Behavior Accepts Feedback (i.e., Listens to Learn), Renews Him or Herself, Reflective, Internal Locus of Control
Spiritual Faith or Life Philosophy	Shows a belief in a higher power and/or cause or philosophy greater than oneself
Respects Diversity	Respects those who are dissimilar
Emotional Intelligence	
Self-Awareness	Aware of feelings, attitudes, and emotions
Self-Management	Expresses feelings, attitudes, and emotions constructively
Social Awareness	Aware of and honors the feelings, attitudes, and emotions of those about him or her
Relationship Management	Constructively manages his or her relationships
Leadership Competence	
Cultural Competence	Competently Negotiates Cultures & Spheres
Empowering	Models Enabling Behavior and Attitudes, Teaches, Mentors
Foresight	Vision, Risk-Taking or Pioneering, Aware and Realistic, Generates Ideas, Initiates Action
Responsible Stewardship	Wise Use of Human, Animal, Ecological, and Capital Resources; Practices Sustainability; Ensures Mutual Accountability
Knowledgeable (Cognitive)	Leadership, Management, Subject Area, and Technology Competence; Cognitive Complexity Comfort
Builder	Builds Community (i.e., Promotes the Common Good), Mediates Conflicts, Provides Structure and Processes, Shares Power, Communicates
Responsible Stewardship	Wisely deploys entrusted resources in a sustainable manner

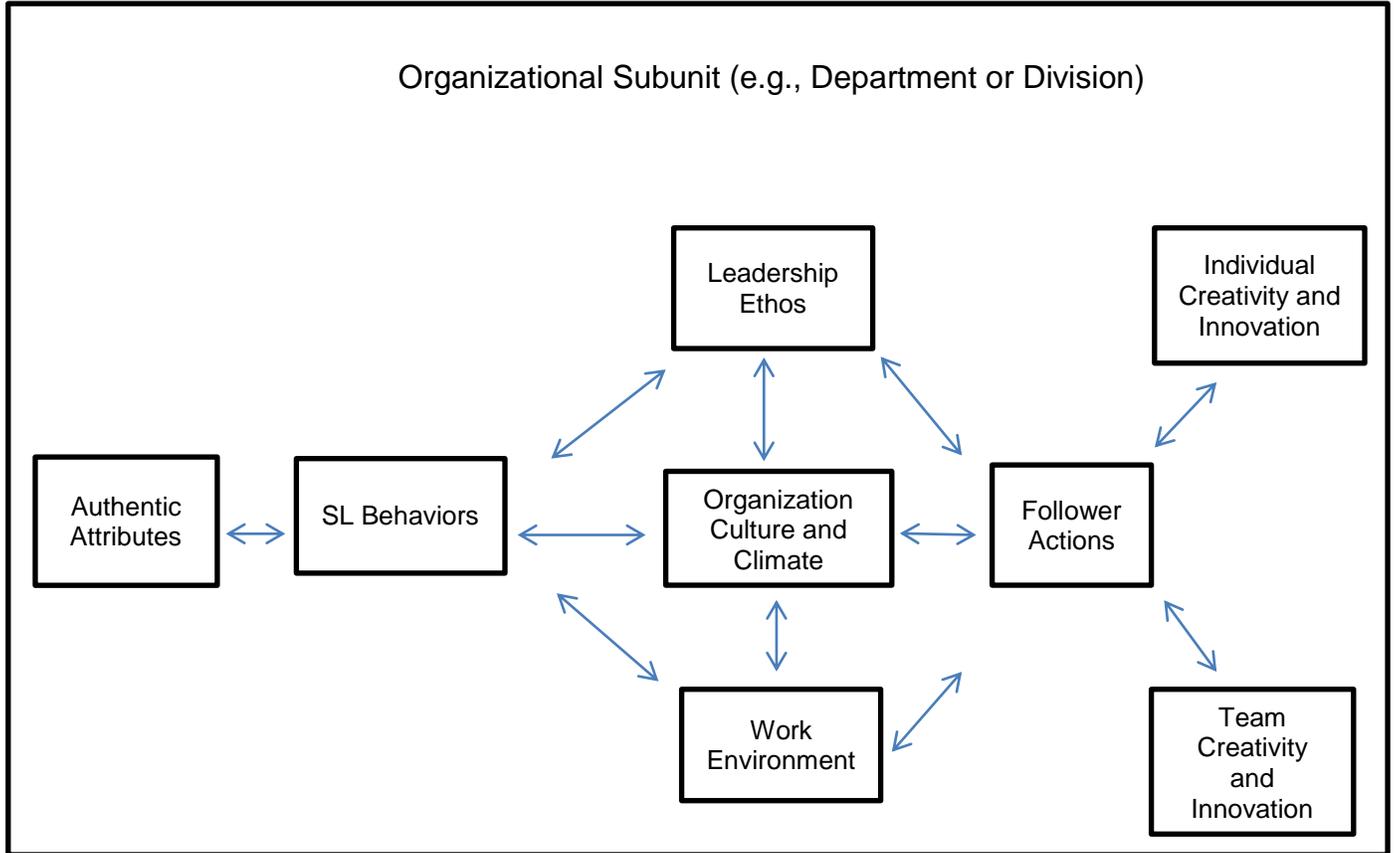
Note. Table 3 is drawn from Hale, C. D., Gold, A., & Walker, C. W. (In review). Servant leadership: A Conceptualization.

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Organizational Mission, Vision, Values, and Strategies



Organizational Mission, Vision, Values, and Strategies

Figure 1 A Posited Servant Leadership, Creativity and Innovation Relationship Web