

Build Your Creative Performance

Brainstorm business buzz words and “creativity” and “innovation” are sure to make the list. We hear these words all the time: “*Our creativity is our competitive advantage.*” “*We must innovate to stay ahead of the competition.*”

Intuitively we know what people mean when they say things like this, but do we know how to select talent and foster the creative performance that will drive innovation in our organizations?

Summary

As the world becomes more connected, our competition expands, diversifies and becomes fiercer. At the same time, our customers’ needs, preferences and expectations become more sophisticated. Creativity and innovation are critical to supporting our organizations to set themselves apart from the competition.

The research paper “*Relationship Between Psychological Capital & Creative Performance*” by Sweetman, F. Luthans, Avey, and B. Luthans looks at the psychological capital and characteristics that help explain and predict creative performance. Some of the practical implications of these findings for your organization are discussed.

Background

Much research has been devoted to the study of creativity and, in particular, the creative process. That research tends to focus on answering the question, “What do we need to do/experience, or what steps do we need to take to get creative?” The practical implications are clear, but the success of processes uncovered is hit-or-miss at best.

We’ve all sat at the planning table or in a brainstorming session where the results have been wildly creative. And we’ve all sat at tables where the results have been marginally useful at best. Structuring or guiding a process is not enough.

Key Definitions

Key definitions as they appear in the research paper:

Creativity - the process of coming up with fresh ideas for changing products, services, and process so as to better achieve the organization's goals (Ambile, Barsage, Mueller & Straw, 2005).

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) - an individual's positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007).

Think back to past brainstorming sessions. Are there people who consistently contribute while some dig their heels in regardless of how brilliant the ideas are? Have you ever noticed that the creativity of team members, maybe even your own, depends on what else is going on in life (e.g., stress at work, happiness at home, etc.)? There's something more than a creative process that determines creativity.

Evidence suggests that positive psychological resources (such as optimism and resilience) and overall workplace attitudes and performance are positively related, but studies have yet to test the relationship between these resources and creative performance in the workplace. That's where the research by Sweetman and his colleagues comes in. Sweetman, Luthans, Avey and Luthans examine the relationship between psychological capital (PsyCap), its four core components (efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience) and creative performance in general, with idea generation in particular.

Hypotheses and Results

The researchers tested a number of hypotheses to better understand the relationship between psychological resources and creative performance. They proposed that each of the four components of PsyCap (efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience) would impact creative performance; and that an individual's overall PsyCap would have the greatest impact of all.

899 employees participated in the study from a wide cross-section of industries, organizations, levels, jobs, tenures, and ages. Approximately half of the participants were male and half female. Respondents agreed to participate in a US Midwestern university sponsored research project and provided input through a web-based survey and an online exercise focused on creative idea generation.

PsyCap & Creative Performance

The research found that positive psychological resources, including efficacy, optimism, hope and resilience, have a positive impact on creative performance and that the impact is even greater **when all of these are present**. This gives a person the psychological capital or PsyCap to approach situations with a belief that they have the ability to be creative, the energy and perseverance to try new approaches and ways of doing things, the resourcefulness to overcome setbacks, and a positive

More Key Definitions

Efficacy - one's conviction (or confidence) about his or her abilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action need to successfully execute a specific task within a given context. (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998).

Hope - a positive emotional state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful, goal-directed energy and planning to meet goals (Snyder, Irving & Anderson, 1991).

Optimism - optimists are people who expect good things to happen to them (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Optimism is depicted as an explanatory style whereby positive events are attributed to personal and permanent characteristics by the individual (Seligman, 1998).

Resilience - positive psychological capacity to rebound, to 'bounce back' from adversity, uncertainty, conflict, failure or even positive change, progress and increased responsibility (Luthans, 2002).

attitude and expectation for success. In particular, PsyCap and its components play an important role in the idea generation portion the creative process.

Efficacy Motivates Creative Performance

Essentially, efficacy is related to what a person believes he or she can do with his or her skills. The research found that efficacy is positively related to creative performance. This may be attributed to the perception that creativity can be a “high risk” activity. New, novel ideas and approaches to organizational challenges are often looked upon with skepticism and many fail. Efficacy helps people to believe that they can use their skills to create new opportunities or overcome challenges. In fact, people with high efficacy enjoy the opportunity to master a challenge. In other words, efficacy positively impacts motivation toward creative actions.

Hope Provides Paths to Creative Performance

While efficacy answers the question “can I do this?”, hope answers the question “how many ways can I do this and do I have the energy and willpower to do it?” (Sweetan, Luthans, Avey & Luthans, 2011, p. 6). The research found that hope is positively related to creative performance. Hope involves creating and applying energy and effort to exploring a variety of alternatives which, in turn, increases the potential for creative performance. Also, hopeful people tend to be independent thinkers who are highly autonomous. The freedom to apply resourcefulness and non-traditional thinking may further lead to creative performance.

Of the four characteristics that make up PsyCap, hope was the most significant singular and important predictor of creative performance.

Optimism Sets a Mindset for Creative Performance

Optimism differs from hope in that optimism relates to an expectation of positive outcomes whereas hope relates to the application of energy toward a variety of ways to reach outcomes. Optimists take a positive approach to situations. They believe that positive results are due to personal and permanent characteristics, and that negative results are due to external temporary factors of the situation. Thus, those who take a positive approach tend to believe that they are in control of the results they achieve and expect success. They form self-fulfilling prophecies for themselves and, if faced with failure, simply try again using a different approach until they succeed.

Optimism, Creative Performance and Self-fulfilling Prophecies

According to businessdictionary.com, a self-fulfilling prophecy is:

"Any positive or negative expectation about circumstances, events, or people that may affect a person's behavior toward them in a manner that causes those expectations to be fulfilled.

An employer who, for example, expects the employees to be disloyal and shirkers, will likely treat them in a way that will elicit the very response he or she expects."

In the case of optimism and creative performance, an individual who expects to be successful at generating a creative solution to a challenge will likely approach the challenge using non-traditional thinking and apply novel solutions that will result in a creative outcome.

Resilience Overcomes Challenges for Creative Performance

Resilience is what differentiates a person who survives significant change or adversity, and one who thrives under similar conditions. Resilience supports people outside of their comfort zone to challenge their assumptions and use this knowledge to adapt to new circumstances. The more times they successfully do this, the more resilient they become. Resilience is positively related to creative performance. Creative work is often the reaction or response to a changing environment and inherently involves challenges and set-backs. People who are resilient tend to persevere when faced with change, and challenge their ways of thinking so they can make adjustments that produce more creative outcomes.

Implications for HR

Simply put, creative performance is the backbone of innovation. Whether it's a new product, a new way to relate to customers or to train employees, staying ahead of the competition helps organizations make their mark in the marketplace. To support creative performance to emerge, HR can establish practices that build the PsyCap of the organization.

Hire for Creative Performance

If creative performance and innovation are important to your organization, then it makes sense to select and recruit people for that purpose. For example:

- When posting for positions, highlight the values of creativity/innovation in the company description and include specific requirements for managing change, evolving or innovating processes, etc. in the job description.
- Use assessments to help identify candidates that possess or have strong potential to develop the components of PsyCap. If assessments are already used as part of the hiring process, ask your assessment provider to identify which assessment items are key indicators of PsyCap.
- Weave PsyCap skills questions into your interview guide. For example: Tell us about a time when you came up with a creative solution to a challenge at work. What was the challenge, what was your solution, how did you come up with it, and why do you consider it creative?

Flex Creative Muscles with Training & Practice

Research suggests that training interventions can be used to develop PsyCap skills in as little as one to three hours depending on delivery method, tools introduced, follow-up, etc.

Whether training is in place or not, tools and opportunities to flex the proverbial creative muscle can be introduced in the workplace.

HR Trends for 2013

According to the BC HRMA 2013 HR Trends Survey, managing change and increasing leadership capabilities will be key areas of HR focus in the next 12 months. The 2013 learning needs assessment digs a step further, identifying resilience as a key learning need for HR practitioners and organizations.

Want to learn more? Find the results of the 2013 HR Trends Survey on the BC HRMA website at: www.bchrma.org/resources/knowledge-centre/

Make Change an Opportunity

The pre-cursor to creative innovations is often organizational change. For change to be an opportunity to be creative in an organization, leaders, managers, and key influencers should receive training, coaching and/or mentoring so that they can better demonstrate how to creatively manage, communicate, and adapt to change. When leaders take the opportunity to seek out creative ways to adapt to organizational changes and challenges, others will see this as the way to approach change.

Set a Vision for Creativity & Innovation

Another way to reinforce creative performance is to build PsyCap into your organizational values and/or vision. Values and vision help keep performance on track and can reinforce the organization's direction, goals and how to achieve them.

Final Thoughts

While research and organizations have traditionally focused on having teams follow the 'creative process' to yield creative performance, the research of Sweetman and his colleagues demonstrates that this isn't enough.

Creative performance is a risky activity. It requires people to challenge preconceptions, move out of their comfort zones, and take chances that sometimes don't pay off. Staying motivated to go out on a limb takes practice and perseverance even when it is discouraging.

Organizations must be prepared to value, build and recognize the efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience (and overall PsyCap) of its employees. This will pave the way for the emergence of creative performance needed to overcome challenges, adapt to new organizational realities, and drive innovations that create competitive advantage.

This research briefing is a service from BC HRMA's research group. Our aim is to make it easier and quicker for HR professionals to find and apply the latest and best people management insight to their challenges and projects.

This article is based on the following research paper:

Sweetman, D., Luthans, F., Avey, J. B. and Luthans, B. C. (2011), Relationship between positive psychological capital and creative performance. CAN J ADM SCI, 28: 4–13. doi: 10.1002/cjas.175

We'd like to hear from you!

Tell us how the insights from this study could affect change in your organization. What practices in your organization are most in need of attention?

Contact us at research@bchrma.org.