



Linking visionary leadership with employee creativity: Perceived organizational support as a mediator

Hui Li¹, Tengbiao Zhao¹, Chenyi Li¹, Xiaoran Pang¹

¹Seoul School of Integrated Sciences and Technologies, Republic of Korea

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Although researchers have shown increased interest in visionary leadership, few studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship of visionary leadership with employee creativity. Drawing on a sample of 229 supervisor–subordinate dyads employed in enterprises in China, we examined whether perceived organizational support mediated the effect of visionary leadership on employee creativity. Results of structural equation modeling revealed that visionary leadership was positively related to employees' creativity and that perceived organizational support mediated this direct relationship. This study is the first to empirically examine the mediating role of perceived organizational support between visionary leadership and employee creativity, and provides a new path to link these variables. To boost employees' creativity at work, managers should use a leadership style that will build an organizational vision and communicate this to employees, and should enhance employees' perception of organizational support.

Keywords

visionary leadership, supervisor–subordinate relationship, leadership style, perceived organizational support, employee creativity

Article Highlights

- Visionary leadership was found to be positively connected with employee creativity and perceived organizational support.
- Perceived organizational support was positively connected with employee creativity.
- Perceived organizational support mediated the relationship between visionary leadership and employee creativity.

In today's competitive business environment, innovation has become a focal point of attention for all organizations. In the context of the production or business sector, Okpara (2007) defined *innovation* as adding new ideas to an existing process or product. This implies that the basis for product innovation is employee creativity, which is widely regarded as an igniter of innovation (Chaubey et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2021). *Employee creativity* refers to the degree to which an employee demonstrates new ideas or applications for activities and solutions at work (Edwards, 1989). Thus, managers of organizations are keen to search for effective ways to facilitate employee creativity. Reiter-Palmon and Illies (2004) argued that employee creativity is largely dependent on what organizational leaders can do to help their workers be creative. Studies have also examined which leadership styles can enhance employee creativity, for example, transformational leadership (Chaubey et al., 2019) or ethical leadership (Chughtai, 2016).

In recent years, researchers have shown increased interest in visionary leadership, which refers to leaders' ability to communicate their vision for the organization to other employees, with the intention to persuade them to accept and follow this vision (Bunnoiko & Atthirawong, 2017). Some studies have addressed the impact that visionary leadership may have on employee creativity. For example, Zhou et al. (2018) examined the influence of visionary leadership on employee creativity in high-technology organizations, and found that these variables were positively related and that knowledge sharing played a mediating role in this relationship. In a study based on the hotel industry, AlKayid et al. (2022) demonstrated that visionary leadership was indirectly and positively related to employee creativity through organizational inertia. Mascareño et al. (2020) explored whether visionary leadership stimulates team creativity and innovation, and revealed that visionary leadership could enhance both creativity and innovation of teams through goal alignment.

However, there is still need for more research on the relationship between visionary leadership and employee creativity, particularly in China where the directive leadership style plays a more essential role than it does in Western cultures (Mascareño et al., 2020). It has been reported that directive leadership decreases creativity in Chinese organizations (Li et al., 2018). There is also some evidence that perceived organizational support may influence employee creativity. *Perceived organizational support* is defined as the belief of organization members regarding the extent to which the organization cares about their welfare and values their contribution. Some studies have found that in the Chinese context, perceived organizational support serves as an important mediating mechanism between an inclusive leadership style and employee creativity (Qi et al., 2019). However, in the context of Chinese organizations, where the directive leadership style prevails, the relationships among visionary leadership, employee creativity, and perceived organizational support have not been examined. It is therefore of theoretical interest to investigate whether the use of visionary leadership, which is a nondirective leadership style, enhances employee creativity in a Chinese context. To our knowledge, no researcher has yet explored the visionary leadership–employee creativity link from the perspective of how perceived organizational support functions as a mediator. The research model is shown in Figure 1.

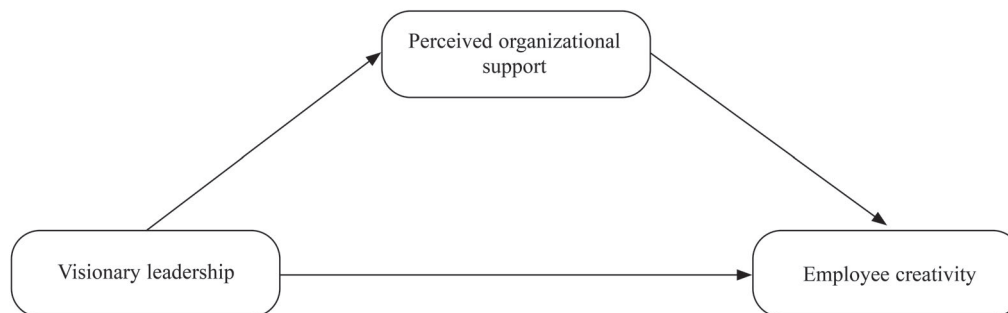


Figure 1. *Research Model*

Researchers have supported the proposal that leadership functions as an important driver of creativity (Lee et al., 2020). According to the concept of visionary leadership, leaders who use this style can create and communicate a clear vision to their followers, and thereby motivate them to apply additional discretionary effort to their work (T. Zhang et al., 2014). Behaviors such as these have also been identified as characteristics of transformational leadership (Avery, 2004), which has been reported to boost employee creativity (Chaubey et al., 2019). Taylor et al. (2014) suggested that when a leader uses a visionary leadership style, this creates a friendly environment characterized by high cohesion, trust, and commitment, which are necessary for creativity (Y. Chen et al., 2021; Hirunyawipada et al., 2015). Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Visionary leadership will have a positive relationship with employee creativity.

The relationship between leadership and perceived organizational support has been examined in prior research (Suifan et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2019), and it has been suggested that an atmosphere of supportive leadership contributes to perceived organizational support. Employees' perception of organizational support is affected by various work-related

experiences (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For example, Shanock et al. (2014) noted that when employees receive supportive treatment from leaders, this has a considerable impact on their perception of organizational support. Visionary leaders establish a supportive climate for employees to achieve their aspirations and goals by internalizing the organizational vision into their values (H. Chen & Song, 2021). When the organizational vision coincides with employees' values, they perceive that the organization cares about their needs and the importance of their contributions (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), thus leading them to develop a sense of organizational support. Thus, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Visionary leadership will have a positive relationship with perceived organizational support.

Most creative efforts are risky and unpredictable and, in the workplace, require support from work sources (Madjar et al., 2002). L. Zhang et al. (2016) found that perceived organizational support functions as a critical antecedent positively related to employee creativity. Akgunduz et al. (2018) pointed out that perceived organizational support facilitates employee creativity because of the enhancement of the meaning of their work. These authors stated that employees who feel supported by the organization view their work as meaningful and tend to display creative behavior. On the basis of the principle of reciprocity, employees make efforts to respond to favors received from organizations if they perceive organizational support (Caesens et al., 2016). Thus, organizational support, as a form of favors from the organization, creates a climate for employees to engage in the creative process (L. Zhang et al., 2016). We proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Perceived organizational support will have a positive relationship with employee creativity.

Following on from the evidence set out above, visionary leadership meets employees' needs and values, so that employees feel the organization attaches great importance to them. In a supportive environment such as this, they will show more creativity. Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Perceived organizational support will mediate the relationship between visionary leadership and employee creativity.

Method

Participants and Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Seoul School of Integrated Sciences and Technologies. Data were collected from employees of seven enterprises in South China, including organizations in the manufacturing, banking, hospitality, and retail sectors. We explained the purpose of this survey clearly to participants, who gave informed consent before data collection. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. To reduce potential common method bias we used two waves of a paper-and-pencil survey to collect data, with an interval of 3 weeks between collection times. At Time 1, subordinates rated visionary leadership and perceived organizational support. At Time 2, supervisors rated employee creativity. A supervisor rated no more than three subordinates. We sent out 364 survey forms and received 229 effective matching forms at Time 1 (valid rate of return = 62.91%).

The sample comprised 161 men (70.31%) and 68 women (29.69%) with an average age of 37.51 years ($SD = 11.86$, range = 25–43) and an average work experience of 8.85 years ($SD = 6.27$, range = 3–18). As regards education, 124 (54.15%) had a bachelor's degree, 65 (28.38%) had a level of education of college or below, and 42 (17.47%) had a master's degree or postgraduate qualification.

Measures

We used existing measures that were originally developed in English. Thus, a bilingual researcher who is a native speaker of Chinese performed back-translation. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Visionary Leadership

Bunnoiko and Atthirawong's (2017) three-item scale was used to measure visionary leadership. The items are "My leader has the ability to create an image for the future by collecting information and data for analysis from both within and outside the organization," "My leader has the ability to make stakeholders understand their vision and give them the willingness to accept and follow it," and "My leader has the ability to bring their vision to life and transforms this into policy, goals, and targets for the organization." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .85.

Perceived Organizational Support

L. Zhang et al.'s (2016) three-item scale was used to measure perceived organizational support: "The organization strongly considers my goals and values," "The organization is willing to help me when I need a special favor," and "The organization shows much concern for me." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .86.

Employee Creativity

Farmer et al.'s (2003) four-item scale was used to measure employee creativity. The items are "This employee tries new ideas or methods first," "This employee seeks new ideas and ways to solve problems," "This employee generates ground-breaking ideas related to the field," and "This employee is a good role model for creativity." Cronbach's alpha in this study was .90.

Results

Means, standard deviations, and correlations between the study variables are displayed in Table 1. Hypothesis tests were conducted by applying structural equation modeling (SEM) using Amos 24.0. First, confirmatory factor analysis was performed to evaluate the model fit. The three-factor measurement model fit the data reasonably well, comparative fit index (CFI) = .98, normed fit index (NFI) = .95, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .05, chi-square/degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2/df) = 1.58. The composite reliability values for three factors were higher than .70 and the average variance extracted values were above .50. We conducted another confirmatory factor analysis to test a single-factor model. The results showed that the fit indices offered a poor fit to the data, CFI = .65, NFI = .63, RMSEA = .20, χ^2/df = 9.73. On the basis of these results, the measurement of the study has good discriminant validity and common method variance is not a serious concern.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, Composite Reliability, and Average Variance Extracted for Study Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	CR	AVE	1	2	3
1. Visionary leadership	3.65	1.44	.81	.58	1		
2. Perceived organizational support	3.53	1.43	.79	.55	.44**	1	
3. Employee creativity	3.58	1.65	.84	.57	.44**	.51**	1

Note. *N* = 229. CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted.

** *p* < .01.

Then, we applied SEM to test the proposed hypotheses by conducting a bootstrapping analysis with 2,000 samples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). Results of SEM for the hypothesized model showed that the standardized path coefficients from visionary leadership to employee creativity, $\beta = .26, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.11, 0.51]$, and from visionary leadership to perceived organizational support, $\beta = .44, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.27, 0.62]$, were both positive and significant; therefore, Hypotheses 1 and 2 were supported. The standardized path coefficient from perceived organizational support to employee creativity, $\beta = .40, p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.27, 0.67]$, was also positive and significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The bias-corrected bootstrapping results showed that the standardized indirect effect of visionary leadership on employee creativity via perceived organizational support was .17, $p < .01, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.11, 0.33]$. Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

In this study we set out to examine the effect of visionary leadership on employee creativity, and determine whether perceived organizational support played a mediating role in this relationship. Consistent with our expectations, we found that visionary leadership was positively related to employee creativity, and perceived organizational support represented a mediating mechanism.

Theoretical Implications

Our study is one of the few to have examined the relationship between visionary leadership and employee creativity, and our results provide support for the positive visionary leadership–creativity link. This is consistent with the finding of Zhou et al. (2018). Visionary leadership plays a critical role in enhancing employee creativity because employee creative performance largely depends on leaders' behavior (Gupta & Singh, 2013). As stated by Lee et al. (2020), supportive leadership can facilitate employees' engagement in the creative task. The visionary leader builds the organizational vision by integrating employees' values, which creates a supportive climate for employees to make unremitting effort toward achieving goals.

Our findings also reinforce the argument that perceived organizational support fosters employee creativity (L. Zhang et al., 2016), implying that employees are inclined to engage in creative work tasks when perceiving organizational support. This is because perceived organizational support decreases employees' fear of risk taking by enhancing their organizational trust in the case of failure (Neves & Eisenberger, 2014). In such an organizational climate, employees are inclined to involve themselves in the creative process.

Finally, to our knowledge, this is the first study in which the mediating mechanism of perceived organizational support between visionary leadership and employee creativity has been tested. The mediating effect was verified, increasing understanding of the complex nature of the link between visionary leadership and employee creativity by providing a new path. The partial mediating role of perceived organizational support in the visionary leadership–employee creativity association demonstrates that visionary leadership has both direct and indirect influences on employee creativity through perceived organizational support.

Practical Implications

The results of this study offer a framework for leaders of Chinese organizations to facilitate employee creativity through their visionary style, which will foster the employees' perception of organizational support. On the basis of our finding of a direct effect of visionary leadership on employee creativity, to encourage employees' creative behavior managers should lead with a style that will build an organizational vision and communicate this to employees. The finding of a mediating effect suggests that to boost employees' creativity at work, companies should enhance their employees' perception of organizational support by providing adequate resources, valuing the employees' contributions, and caring for their well-being.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Three limitations in this study open avenues for future research. First, the use of a cross-sectional research design prevents us from making causal inferences. Longitudinal or experimental designs are therefore needed in future to make inferences around the causality of relationships. Second, we emphasized the mediating effect of perceived organizational support in the visionary leadership–employee creativity link. The attitudes and behaviors of employees in China are subject to the impact of the supervisor–subordinate relationship (Miao et al., 2020). Future researchers should explore how the supervisor–subordinate relationship combines with perceived organizational support in the interpretation of the visionary leadership–employee creativity relationship. A third limitation in our study is that there was no control over the environment in which the participants filled out the survey. Future studies could address this by standardizing the survey presentation environment.

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