The Role of Supportive Leadership and Job Design for Proactive Behavior and Self-Organization in Work Groups

Annika Lantz, Department of Psychology, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden, & Fritz Change AB Sweden, Stocksund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Research on group work has shown that supportive leadership helps improve the group’s cooperation and social exchange in groups, which in turn influences the effects of the group work. This study develops a previous model on the relationship between job design, group processes, group initiative and self-organizational activities by including supportive leadership. The hypothesized model was tested using LISREL 8.30 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) in five different organizational contexts (two types of industry, elderly care, school and nuclear power plant) and in 104 work groups. The results are based on work task analysis (two studies) and questionnaires. The meaningfulness of the model was tested both in contexts where proactive behavior and self-organizational activities are desirable and in a context where proactive behavior can be damaging. Dimensions of job design, supportive leadership, group processes are interrelated and connected to self-organizational activities. Reflectivity and group initiative show the largest effects on self-organizational activities. Job design captured by work task analysis gives a better model fit and has a larger impact on self-organizational activities than self-assessed autonomy. Supportive leadership has an effect on group processes that in turn impact group initiative and self-organizational activities and a direct effect on group initiative as well.

Keywords: Group Processes, Innovation, Job Design, Leadership, Proactive Behavior, Self-Organization, Teams, Work Groups

INTRODUCTION

An innovation is the result of a knowledge exchange within the collective learning processes and creative, interdisciplinary cooperation along the entire chain from idea to product and maintenance (Kim, 2009; North & Güldenberg, 2008; Sawyer, 2007). Innovation research points to the importance of the management both creating the right conditions for employees on all levels within the organization to participate in innovation processes and of supporting and encouraging proactive behavior (Lorenz, 2004; Parker, Williams & Turner, 2006; Strauss, Griffin & Rafferty, 2009; West, Hirst, Richter & Shipton, 2004). Crant defines proactivity as “taking
initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones; it involves challenging the status quo rather than passively adapting to present conditions” (Crant, 2000, p. 436). Strauss et al. (2009) ascertain that “proactive behavior is crucial in the process of innovation, influencing the transition from idea to idea implementation” (Strauss et al., 2009, p. 279).

Production work groups seldom come up with the idea for a totally new innovation themselves but they fulfill an important task in that they contribute input to how new products or services can be improved, or produced more efficiently. They also need to prepare themselves proactively so that they can eventually produce new products and services. 70% of the costs of an innovation process are incurred in production (Ehre, Kiewert & Lindemann, 1999). There is substantial evidence that work groups can be an effective organizational solution for innovative work (Brav, Andersson & Lantz, 2009; Kozlowski & Bell, 2003; West et al., 2004). Substantial research also points to the crucial importance of the context within which work groups operate and the amount of organizational support they receive in the form of group work leadership to the results they achieve (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003).

Strauss et al. (2009) distinguish between two different forms of proactive behavior: team member proactivity aiming at changing the team situation and the way the team works; and organization member proactivity that aims at changing the way the organization as a whole works. The interest in this survey lies in examining the contextual characteristics that might influence team member proactivity which is expressed in the form of self-organizational activities. Self-organizational activities are defined as a) proactively creating conditions and organizing work so that the group can handle new possibilities, problems or tasks and b) handling and mastering unexpected situations, problems or tasks (Brav et al., 2009).

In previous research (Brav et al., 2009; Lantz & Brav, 2007), we proposed a model of determinants of self-organizational activities in work groups where dimensions of job design, group processes (cooperation, social support and reflectivity) and proactive behavior, defined as group initiative, are interrelated and connected to self-organizational activities. We refer to group initiative in accordance with Frese, Garst and Fay’s (2007) concept of personal initiative as a syndrome “that results in an individual taking an active and self-starting approach to work goals and tasks and in persisting in overcoming barriers and setbacks” (Fay & Frese, 2001, p. 97). The theoretical path model was tested on work groups on the shop floor in industry and received substantial but not complete support for the causal relationships (Lantz & Brav, 2007; Brav et al., 2009).

The aim of the present study is to extend the previous model by including supportive leadership and provide empirical support for the extended model by testing it in five different organizational contexts. The extended model is presented in Figure 1. The rationale behind the model is explained in the following text.

In Figure 1 each arrow represents a hypothesis. An arrow indicates a direct effect and a double arrow represents a correlation between two variables.

The Model

In the model, group processes mediate the relationship between dimensions of job design and group initiative as the latter presupposes reflectivity and a collective redefinition process of work. It follows the general model input - process - output model proposed by McGrath (1984), which a great deal of group research uses as a starting-point to describe and analyze group work (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). This model describes how inputs impacts different forms of group processes, which in turn create various outputs. West et al., (2004) draw the conclusion from a literature review that there is substantial support for the assertion that “team processes provide the core driving-force for team innovation and that these processes may mediate the relationship between team inputs and innovation” (p. 91).
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