Theses

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4E's Socratic Model: A grounded theory for managing team creativity in an organisational context

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this research is to apply and refine the Socratic method to better understand how to enhance creativity in organisations. As a result of this analysis, areas for future research that would further prove the legitimacy of creativity in the management context will be identified.

This chapter outlines the background (section 1.1) and context (section 1.2) of the research, and its purposes (section 1.3). Section 1.4 describes the significance and scope of this research. Section 1.6 describes the limitations of the study and section 1.7 includes an outline of the remaining chapters of the thesis.

1.1   Background

There has been considerable research on identifying antecedents of creativity and the determinants of organisational creativity, but researchers are yet to develop an effective model for managing creativity within a traditional hierarchical management structure. Organisational creativity is defined here as "a domain-specific, subjective judgment of the novelty and value of an outcome of a particular action" (Ford, 1996, p1115).

Richard Florida, whose book *The Rise of the Creative Class* (Florida, 2002) identified three conditions under which creativity would flourish, describes an environment where an individual's thoughts and ideas are valued; where recognition is based on merit; and where a range of views and backgrounds are acceptable and there is honesty in people's relationships. This contention is supported by Amabile et al. (1996), who also emphasize the importance of challenging work. However it is not just the antecedents of creativity that are important, it is also the interplay

between the individual and the context in which they operate (Elia et al., 2017) and how a deficiency in one area can be offset by a strength in another (Caniels & Rietzschel, 2015).

Achieving this utopia requires closing the gap between risk-averse corporate governance and the flexibility required for creativity to survive. This paradigm shift is critical in today's fast-moving business environment as creativity is a key factor for success (Hon, Bloom & Crant, 2011) and without it an organisation is unlikely to remain competitive (Anderson, De Dreu & Nijstad, 2004; Sohn & Jung, 2010; Beheshtifar & Kamani-Fard, 2013).

Woodman, Sawyer and Griffin (1993) assert that creativity is an interaction between the individual and their work environment and therefore it is that interaction that produces creative outcomes in an organisational context (Jain, R., Jain, C. & Jain, P., 2015), which Sonnenberg and Goldberg (2007) say can be managed using the Socratic Method (a directed questioning technique to encourage critical thinking). Is this a potential solution to the problem? This thesis is an exploration of this contention.

1.2 Context

The importance of creativity in an organisational context was first highlighted by Schumpeter (1942) when he said that the process of "creative destruction" (new ideas/ways destroying old ones to create value) was at the heart of Capitalism (1942, p. 82). However, creativity of itself is not enough to guarantee growth. Edith Penrose (1959), in espousing her theory of growth of the firm, points out that a firm's failure to grow is "often attributed to demand conditions rather than to the limited nature of entrepreneurial resources" (Penrose, 1959, p. 37). Those demand conditions are not

only market driven but are also influenced by the culture of the organisation, which in many cases doesn't tolerate trial and error decision-making (Thompson, 1961, p. 486). The issue is thus to be able to foster creativity in an environment that is not conducive to risk taking.

While the ideal traits of the creative individual and the most conducive environmental conditions have been well documented by socio-cultural theorists such as Amabile (1983) and Csikzentmihalyi (1996), there is no clear framework identified for managers to use to foster creativity in a real-world context. There has been much research that focuses on individual characteristics and interactions within a group but little that considers a process by which these individuals and their interactions can be managed to produce creative outcomes. The current study therefore extends the knowledge by producing a model (based on real-world interactions) that results in a creative outcome irrespective of individual differences in creativity or environmental impediments.

In today's hypercompetitive business environment there is an air of constant change as companies scurry to catch up to, or retain relativity with, their respective competitors (Anderson, Potocnik & Zhou, 2014). Often, they must achieve this with fewer resources. The speed of this change means that companies "must become learning organisations; places in which everyone learns to do things better in an age of uncertainty" (Sonnenberg & Goldberg 2007, p. 54). That raises the question about the best way to achieve this. While the authors mention a number of different approaches, they highlight the Socratic Method as being one of the best options.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to test Sonnenberg and Goldberg's (2007) assertion that taking a Socratic approach to champion creativity will enable management to increase creativity in their teams. This study first examines what is meant by a "Socratic approach" and what constitutes both individual and organisational creativity through examination of the relevant literature. The identified process is then tested in the field to identify the conditions under which this statement is true and to develop, test and validate a model for its use.

1.4 Significance and Scope

The significance of this project is that the research results will advance the theoretical understanding of creativity in an organisational context and provide a framework for managers to create a positive climate of creativity in their organisations. As stated in section 1.2 above, there is no clear framework identified for managers to use to foster creativity in real-world conditions. Recent authors such as Elia et al. (2017) present some research-based factors, but these are yet to be empirically tested.

This research was undertaken using a socio-cultural framework, which Amabile (1983) proposed (based in part on the work of Bordieu (1966)), consisting of three components: the person, domain and field. This framework is appropriate because the topic is concerned with the creativity of various players (the person) within an organisational context (the domain) and will be examined with specific organisations (the field).

Within this framework I use a grounded theory methodology because it supports the development of a concept (the proposed Socratic Model) through the use of constant comparison and ongoing questioning.

The scope of this research was to:

- Explore the incidence of creativity in a selection of Australian organisations and determine whether a Socratic approach to creativity will increase its effectiveness.

- Identify a Model that incorporates the diversities of creativity into a structure that can be used by managers in the real world.

1.5 Research question

The primary research question or core variable was developed using an approach recommended by Creswell (2009) for the development of grounded theory:

What is the theory that explains the process of using a Socratic method to produce creative outcomes in organisational team interactions?

1.6 Limitations

As this was a phenomenological study, the results may not be transferable outside the organisations studied. However, the resulting theory is designed to provide a starting point for the management of creativity within an organisation that can then be adapted to account for unique circumstances.

1.7 Thesis Outline

The chapters for the remainder of this thesis are presented using the stages of a Socratic Dialogue that replicates the various stages of the Model from which the substantive grounded theory is developed. The successful conclusion of this will

provide a partial proof that the proposed Socratic approach is viable as a management tool.

The stages and chapters are listed below:

- Chapter 2: Literature review – **exploration** stage – what we currently know

- Chapter 3: Research Design – **examination** stage – method for gathering evidence

- Chapter 4: Results and Theory Development – **examination** stage – what views have been exposed

- Chapter 5: Discussion – **evaluation** stage – where this leads

- Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications – **election** stage