Creative leadership: the neglected power relations dimension

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Power has not been sufficiently emphasized in the creativity literature, and it has been virtually absent in creative leadership proposals.

The views on creative leadership often fall in two main camps: some advocate leading from the top, centering on the role and skills of the leader, whereas others suggest to ‘lead from the middle’. An example of the former can be found in Puccio et al.’s (2011) definition of creative leadership as “the ability to deliberately engage one’s imagination to define and guide a group toward a novel goal – a direction that is new for the group. As a consequence of bringing about this creative change, creative leaders have a profoundly positive influence on their context and the individuals in that situation” (p. 13, my emphasis). Such a view clearly separates leaders from followers, and places them in a hierarchy, in which creative leaders impose an agenda on others. As for the latter, the understanding is that the leader should be “not at the top or the front or on the outside looking in as an overseeing observer, but in the thick of it – in the middle” (Bilton and Cummings, 2014: 187). This view echoes several pieces of research on the links between creativity and leadership. In order to increase creativity, the first priority of leaders is, according to Amabile and Khaire (2008), to distribute the responsibility for creativity throughout the organization, thus bypassing the negative effects hierarchies can have on creativity, limiting the scope of autonomous groups and the exchange of ideas. In creative contexts, likewise, it has been found (Mauzy and Harriman, 2003) that the creative potential of an organization is constrained by traditional structures in which position equals knowledge. Hence, the suggestion of spreading the responsibility and capability of creative leadership to everyone in the organization.

These two main views on creative leadership usually ignore or bypass the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities that characterize creative work, and therefore overlook power struggles in, and between, the different groups, as well as between leaders and those engaged
in creative work. For example, Leonard-Barton (1995) suggested creative abrasions to be intrinsic to knowledge-creation work, igniting a conflict among individuals who work together but have different ideas and approaches to a particular problem or situation. In fact, practice-based studies of creative and innovative work indicate that semantic, interpretive and epistemic differences may affect knowledge creation and sharing, therefore requiring that issues of power and politics be addressed (Carlile, 2004; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Contu, 2013; Wenger, 1998). Also, negotiating is a central aspect of practicing, especially in cross-disciplinary projects, in which “people confront problems that are outside the realm of their competences but that force them to negotiate their own competence with the competence of others” (Wenger, 2000: 238). In communities of practice, shared practice thus creates boundaries which offer both possibilities and difficulties when experiences are confronted with experiences in other fields (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). On a different level, Prichard (2002) argues that creativity enables the elaboration of workplace power relations in new forms, and notes that “the practices performed by this creative, flexible and entrepreneurial subject can have certainly destructive effects on other identities including those located and performed outside of ‘work’” (p. 274).

This paper critically analyses the creative leadership literature, identifying the roots of the different perspectives in different conceptualizations of creativity and leadership, and points out the crucial importance of addressing power issues in the process of leading for creativity. In that analysis, the related literature on knowing and learning in organizational settings is explored so as to highlight how the power dimension has already been discussed there, especially in the context of practice-based studies. Drawing on Foucault’s (1977) ideas on power and knowledge, the paper then argues for rethinking creative leadership as a set of dialectical relationships of power/resistance, in which the relations and practices of leaders and followers (or ‘creative leaders’ and ‘creative individuals’) are mutually constituted and co-produced (Collinson, 2005), and control and resistance are mutually reinforced and linked, often in contradictory ways (Collinson, 1994). Finally, the paper analyses the implications of this regarding the identity of the ‘creative worker’, in which selves, rather than fix and stable, are multiple, open, shifting and potentially contradictory (Collinson, 2003).
References


