

# Trust in Leader, Organisational Culture, and Employee Creativity: Understanding the Interplay

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## Abstract

Organisations in today's neck-breaking competitive environment are continuously marching towards attaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Creativity is one such component that can increase the probability of the organisation in staying ahead. The importance of creativity is significantly evident by the available literature on creativity. This paper aims to explore the relationship between employees' trust in the leader and employee creativity, and the influence of organisational culture on this relationship, based on the review of the literature. This study explores the moderating effect of different dimensions of organisational culture on the relationship between trust in the leader and employee creativity. By integrating literature on trust, organisational culture, and creativity, this paper aims at advancing our understanding of creativity, considering the employees' trust in the leader and culture within the organisation. Based on the review of literature, propositions have been stated in this study, which can be empirically tested in further studies.

**Keywords:** Trust in Leader, Organisational Culture, Employee Creativity

## Introduction

In today's dynamic environment, where burgeoning competition and technological change are attaining the limelight, organisations face immense pressure to enhance creativity. Employee creativity has been consistently shown as the salient component of every successful organisation. Creativity not only contributes to

the organisation's capabilities, it also provides employees with satisfaction and the opportunity to stand out with their ideas and suggestions. With the accelerating interest of researchers in this area, there have been numerous attempts to study how different factors affect employee creativity. There has been a considerable shift in focus from analysing personality characteristics as the only influencing factors of creativity to analysing contextual factors as well. The significance of trust in enhancing employee creativity has long been advocated by researchers (Chen et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2018; Mainemelis et al., 2015). Various studies have also suggested that employees tend to take risky alternatives when a trust-based relationship exists in their organisation (Schoorman et al., 2007), which, in turn, contributes to creative ideas. Succinctly, it can be stated that trust in the leader acts as a catalyst for employees to undertake a risky venture; thus, employees who trust their leaders are highly likely to exhibit creative behaviour. Employees engage in creativity where open discussion and debate is favoured by the culture of an organisation (Yu et al., 2018), since organisational culture can facilitate, as well as impede, employee creativity (Amabile et al., 1997, 1996). Despite an increase in the consideration of the organisational context in studying creativity (Krishnakumar, 2017; Martins & Terblanche, 2003), there is a dearth of research examining individual creativity through contextual factors (Agars et al., 2012). Despite significant literature on the effect of trust on creativity, where the trustworthiness has achieved considerable attention, there is a paucity of research on trust, considering behaviours exhibiting trust, which entails actual risk-taking. The purpose of this study is to explore and provide a more nuanced understanding

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of the relationship and interactions between trust in leader, organisational culture, and employee creativity, where trust equates to employee's willingness to be vulnerable and their acting on that willingness, rather than relying on perceiving other's trustworthiness. Further, this study focuses on exploring the roles of different cultures in nurturing trust within the organisation, which is of significant importance in promoting creativity within the workplace.

## **Employee Creativity: A Brief Theoretical Background**

Creativity entails the generation of ideas that are unique and should serve some problem or target the opportunity, since an idea can be original, but not necessarily perceived as creative every single time, if not serving the desired goal or a problem at hand. Zhou et al. (2019) highlighted that creativity perception heavily relies on the practicality, usefulness, and effort involved in the implementation of an idea or a product over originality. Creativity is often defined as the production of novel, appropriate, and useful ideas (George, 2007; Amabile, 1988, 1997). Scholars and practitioners have laid greater emphasis on creativity due to its substantial role in maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage. Without disregarding the contributions of previous research, where empirical studies focused on distinguishing creative and non-creative individuals, undertaking the trait approach, various researchers shifted towards considering the cognitive abilities and social environment, to have an eloquent understanding of how individual creativity can be promoted within organisations (e.g., Jain & Jain, 2017; Furnham, 2016). Various researchers have considered creativity in terms of the creative process, creative person, and creative product. Since the identification of an individual as creative is in some or other way dependent upon the evaluation of the individual's piece of output or product, this study adopts defining creativity as a product or an idea that is both original and useful at the same time. If we consider a painter, it is not the painter who is being observed and evaluated; it is the painting on which the criticism or appreciation is drawn. Similarly, Madjar and Ortiz (2008), in their empirical study, measured a hairstylist's creativity based on their work delivered, for example, changing the appearance of the client and responding precisely to the needs of different clients.

Since prior studies have constructed creativity as the product that emerges from the interplay between different social and contextual factors, an individual's traits, and behavioural characteristics (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1990), the investigation of the interaction between these factors is essential to have an in-depth understanding of workplace creativity. For example, an employee having a breakthrough idea would not dare to share it with the leader if the employee barely trusts the leader. Although trust in the leader allows an employee to be creative, the presence of a deviation-repellent culture would obstruct the employee from taking risky endeavours. Literature review suggests that both the trust in the leader and supportive culture are of significant importance for inducing creativity within the organisation. Supporting the preceding statement, Khazanchi and Masterson (2011), in their empirical study, highlighted supervisors and organisation environment as important influences on creativity conducive behaviours. Following the interactionist perspective (Woodman & Schoenfeldt, 1990), it can be argued that employee creativity is significantly influenced by the interaction between organisational culture, which forms a salient part of the contextual factors, and the employee's trust in the leader, which represents the behavioural characteristic of an individual. Further, Amabile and Pratt (2016) revised their componential model of creativity and innovation in organisations (1988) after 28 years by introducing four new factors to the already existing model, highlighting the role of leaders and organisational culture in their dynamic componential model (2016). Yet, the role of different dimensions of organisational culture in the enhancement of workplace creativity remains untouched. Past studies have focused on different antecedents of creativity, of which trust in the leader, a key precondition of encouraging employee creativity (Lee et al., 2019) did not receive enough consideration, and contextual antecedent factors are also less common. This interaction is explored in more detail in the sections that follow.

## **Trust in Leader: A Catalyst for Employee Creativity**

Hon et al. (2016) assert that organisations dedicated to identifying different ways of enhancing creativity illuminate the importance of grooming creativity among employees. Many scholars and practitioners seek to better

understand how to facilitate and motivate individuals in organisations, to quickly generate creative breakthroughs to the problems at hand. Employees working in an organisation where creativity is of significant importance need to have trust in their leader, as it leverages employees to take the liberty to expose and share their ideas with the belief that they will not be penalised or criticised for it. Lack of such behaviour deteriorates employee contribution to the organisational performance, as one attempts to cover up oneself, thus refraining from sharing information. Different researchers have employed different definitions of trust. Mayer et al. (1995) define trust as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party” (p. 712). Contrarily, Schoorman et al. (2015) mention that like the Mayer et al. definition, McAllister (1995) also defines “trust as a willingness to act rather than the action itself” (p. 14). Many other researchers continued to confound trustworthiness and trust; various researchers have advocated that trustworthiness is an important determinant of trust but does not equate to trust (Schoorman et al., 2015; Gillespie, 2012; Mayer & Gavin, 2005). For example, in a student-teacher relationship, perceiving a teacher’s trustworthiness does not involve vulnerability or assumption of risk, but relying on the expertise of the teacher or sharing of personal information or views with the teacher entails risk. However, this example is not directly related to the organisational context, but fairly explains the point. In addition, Gillespie (2012, 2003) advocates that a person exhibits the willingness to take risks through engaging in trusting behaviour and gives a nearly closer measure of trust behaviour than the perceived trustworthiness of a target person, and therefore, works as a better measure of trust. Thus, trust, as a term, will be used here to refer to the employees’ willingness to be vulnerable by engaging in trusting behaviour, evincing active as well as passive vulnerability, for an employee is in a vulnerable state only when the employee acts upon their trusting attitude or willingness.

Zand (1972) suggests three elements of behaviour, i.e., information, the influence which relates to trust behaviour, and control which indicates distrust behaviour. Since trust and distrust are 2 distinct concepts (Oomsels et al., 2016;

Van de Walle & Six, 2014), the control element is not considered in this study, as it focuses on trusting behaviour. These 2 elements of trusting behaviour, information and influence, are similar to what Gillespie (2003) mentioned in her study as disclosure and reliance. This study focuses on exploring trust based on 2 dimensions, i.e., disclosure-based trust and reliance-based trust, as suggested by Gillespie (2003). Disclosure-based trust can be defined as the willingness to reveal personal intentions or work-related sensitive aspects and information to another, and reliance-based trust is the willingness to accept influence and rely on another’s skills, knowledge, judgments, or actions, including delegating and giving autonomy (Le & Lei, 2018; Nienaber et al., 2015; Gillespie, 2003). Different types of trust have been explored in past researches – interpersonal trust, inter-organisational trust, trust between superiors and subordinates (trust in the leaders), political trust, societal trust, peer trust in the workplace, and organisational trust (Joseph & Winston, 2005). Now the question arises: why, out of the different types of trusts mentioned in the preceding statement, this study emphasises on trust in the leader? The current study focuses on the aspects of trust in the leaders due to the immense role it plays in enhancing employee creativity in the workplace through motivating a sense of belongingness, courage, and reliability, and by promoting the creation of a knowledge repository. Contrarily, in organisations that suffer from a lack of trust, employees face the fear of judgment that precipitates employees to thwart the generation of creativity by withholding relevant information and hindering themselves from engaging in developing and exchanging ideas.

Supervisors and leaders have been recognised as having a critical role in providing an environment that encourages or impedes creativity among employees. To be successful, creative ideas are needed to be shared with the influential members of the organisation, as they are of differential importance for the generation of creative products. Creativity not only is the outcome of one or more individual’s ideas, but requires a supportive contribution from the leader. Studies have highlighted that the employee’s creative contributions are influenced not only by their cognitive abilities and motivation, but also by the leader’s support (e.g., Mainemelis et al., 2015). Thus, before undertaking the risk of bringing forth ideas out of the box, the employee closely analyses the

leader, and the one with a high level of trust in the leader exhibits more mettle, in deviating from the religiously followed way of carrying out a task. Supporting the preceding statement, Chen et al. (2020) indicate in their study that subordinates' trust in leaders motivates them to diversify their choices and are more likely to produce divergent thinking and creative ideas. Various researches have suggested a relationship between trust in the leader and employee creativity (Lee et al., 2019; Javed et al., 2018). Le and Lei (2018) observed that disclosure-based trust and reliance-based trust in a leader have positive influences on knowledge sharing behaviours. Employees can generate breakthrough ideas only when there is a fluent flow of knowledge and sharing of ideas in the organisation. In addition, Zand (1972) opined that employees exhibit their trust in one another by engaging in behaviour related to influence and information. Concerning information, people engage in disclosure-based trust when they disclose accurate, timely, and comprehensive information, and share their ideas, which contributes to generating creative and mindboggling ideas. Sharing ideas creates a rich intellectual capital and pool of information, which assists as a great source of developing exemplary ideas. Moreover, Woodman et al. (1993) suggest that the free exchange of information is crucial for creativity in social settings. Employees, by engaging in more exchange of ideas and information, build stronger trust relationships with their leaders (Jain & Jain, 2017), and these trust relationships, in turn, increase employee creativity. Nienaber et al. (2015) mention that people exhibit reliance-based trust when they seek feedback and allow the leader to have a significant influence over their working lives; this is often manifested in sharing power with the followers.

*Proposition 1: Disclosure-based trust is positively related to employee creativity.*

*Proposition 2: Reliance-based trust is positively related to employee creativity.*

### **The Interplay of Trust in the Leader and Organisational Culture**

Organisational culture is a broad concept that comprises a spectrum of core, complex, interrelated factors; it often goes undetected. It intertwines the different aspects

of an organisation and explicitly influences employee behaviour in the organisation. Deal and Kennedy (2000) state that a strong culture is a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time. Organisational culture is often mentioned as "just the way things are around here" (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). In other words, it can be simply stated that organisational culture represents the array of behaviours and attitudes acceptable of people within the organisation, and thus, should be taken into consideration as the contextual factor for answering how trust in a leader can be promoted in the organisation, which, in turn could induce employee creativity. Exploring the organisational culture allows comprehending what arrangements are required to motivate employees for taking diverse initiatives and enhancing creativity in the workplace. Since creativity requires individuals to diverge from the pre-existing schemas for coming up with new ideas, there is always a probability of rejection of one's proposed ideas. Thus, it is of extreme importance for the organisations to cultivate a culture where an employee has an assurance that one's endeavour will be fairly assessed, acknowledged, and implemented. Encouraging the importance of organisation culture, Amabile (1988) states that what happens in the organisation is significantly influenced by individual creators, but individual creators are significantly influenced by what happens in the organisation. Creativity requires a green signal from the organisation for risk-taking, idea generation, and experimentation, which an organisation can exhibit through propagating a culture of positive attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions encouraging employees' active participation. Supporting the influence of organisational culture on creativity, McLean (2005) proposes organisational culture as a determiner of whether a particular behaviour will be accepted or discouraged. Organisations encouraging values and assumptions of risk-taking induce employees to effortlessly share and exchange their ideas with their leaders, which results in nurturing employee creativity. Such a work culture increases trust in their leaders, for they provide employees with the opportunity to audaciously share their ideas without fear of being judged for doing so.

An employee engages in creative actions and manifests creativity through the exchange of information, encouragement of employees in the decision-making process (Li & Zhang, 2016), support, assistance from

their leaders, and a close leader-follower relationship characterised by a high degree of trust (Lee et al., 2019). Conversely, the organisational culture which does not exhibit enough support weakens employee capabilities of generating breakthrough ideas. The gravity of supportive organisational culture for employee creative competencies has been debated by various researchers (Ogbeibu et al., 2018; Lukic et al., 2014; Amabile, 1998).

Competing Values Framework (CVF) is a theoretical foundation based on empirical evidence that can narrow and focus the search for key cultural dimensions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). It categorises organisational culture into 4 quadrants – hierarchy, market, clan, and adhocracy, based on 2 dimensions. One dimension reflects a continuum that ranges from flexibility on one end to control on the other; the other dimension indicates a continuum that ranges from internal orientation on one end to external orientation on the other. This study employs the competing values framework (CVF) for assessing an organisational culture, as considering all the factors for diagnosing the culture of an organisation would be a tedious task and implicitly impossible to encompass every single factor.

#### *The Moderating Effect of Hierarchy Culture*

Hierarchy organisational culture is more concerned about stability, predictability, and efficiency, and is characterised by a formal and structured workplace, where ceremonial procedures and rigid rulebooks administrate people's actions (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). An organisation with an emphasis on hierarchy culture focuses on adherence to order and standardised rules and regulation; the leaders tend to be more conservative, cautious, and pay close attention (Denison & Speitzer, 1991). Where control mechanisms are too strong in the organisation, employees are less likely to take initiatives in diverting from the usual rigid processes and procedures. McLean (2005) infers that a culture that supports and encourages control will result in diminished creativity. Supporting this inference, Gupta (2011) concludes that an organisation where the culture is characterised by high preference to role adherence and where, sometimes, employees may even have to sacrifice to do so, seldom allows the employees to deviate from the usual and unveil their creative self. Evidence from literature suggests that an employee actively participates in activities that lead to breakthrough ideas where culture motivates risk-taking and autonomy; thus, the culture that

provides this support enhances employee creativity (Hon et al., 2016; Baer, 2012). Ogbeibu et al. (2018) mention the case of Hewlett-Packard (HP) Corporation; when the new CEO joined, in 1999, he propagated the culture of fear and reflected core values of hierarchy culture, which led the corporation to face mass layoffs and loss of trust, and a decline in employee perceptions of their leaders' trustworthiness. This caused them huge loss in revenues. In other words, the organisational culture which is characterised by strict control and bureaucracy obstructs trust in the leaders, and thus, lowers employee creativity.

*Proposition 3: Hierarchy culture dampens the relationship of trust in leader and employee creativity.*

#### *The Moderating Effect of Market Culture*

Market organisational culture lays greater emphasis on external positioning. The market culture organisations are oriented towards customers, profitability, productivity, and results, where leaders are demanding and strictly focused on winning (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Gallagher et al. (2008), based on their study of Le Touessrok Hotel, a five-star hotel owned by the Sun Hotels Group in the Republic of Mauritius, and other successful firms like Toyota, state that a strong market culture emphasises on sharing the intelligence gathered on customer insight and competitor awareness activities with the employees, thus empowering employees to act, and recognising and rewarding them for delivering memorable experiences for customers. Such culture expresses clear goals and focuses on driving people towards productivity and devising incentive plans to motivate them to perform effectively, thus giving birth to the motivation among employees to be more productive. A culture where leaders are transparent regarding goals, policies, workplace procedures, a fair recognition system, and information gathered regarding customers and competitors enhances employees' trusting behaviour towards their leader. In addition, Gillespie and Mann (2004) concluded that rewarding based on achievement of goals and sharing of common values builds followers' trust in the leader, thus inducing creative behaviour among employees. Extrinsic motivational factors that provide information and present rewards, recognition, and feedback that confirm competence have more additive effects with the intrinsic motivation (includes interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself), thus enhancing creativity (Amabile

& Pratt, 2016). Hartnell et al. (2011) state that market cultures exhibit the strongest association with innovation. Organisation culture aspiring for innovation assures high creativity in the organisation, as individual creativity sows seeds for innovation (Amabile, 1993). A creative environment for potential individuals can be created by providing them with clarified goals, required resources, and considerable autonomy. Such employees provide creative ideas and solutions to the prevailing problems (Amabile & Pratt, 2016).

*Proposition 4: Market culture facilitates the relationship of trust in leader and employee creativity.*

#### *The Moderating Effect of Clan Culture*

Clan culture emphasises trust, respect, teamwork, employee empowerment, employee participation, and high organisational commitment to employees (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Organisations featuring clan culture are internally oriented, which shows strong concern for employees by emphasising long-term benefits and motivating employees to voice their ideas and suggestions. An organisation that desires employees to take risks, and express and share ideas is required to create a culture where emotions can be freely discussed and people are not frowned upon for developing relations at the workplace (Rouse, 2020). As there are employees in the organisations capable of contributing creatively, but may not necessarily intend to bring forth their ideas (Gupta, 2011), there is requirement of supportive leaders, which can be found in clan culture, where employees observe their leaders as mentors and from whom they receive the required support (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). Evidence from literature suggests that employee creativity will flourish if the manager garners greater trust (Chen et al., 2020; Mayer & Gavin, 2005) and provides an opportunity to the employees to openly participate and share their ideas and knowledge; the culture that practices such norms, therefore, facilitates employee creativity (Li & Zhang, 2016).

*Proposition 5: Clan culture facilitates the relationship of trust in leader and employee creativity.*

#### *The Moderating Effect of Adhocracy Culture*

The adhocracy culture focuses on the external environment and flexibility. It is a dynamic, entrepreneurial, and creative workplace, where the focus is on new knowledge,

products, individual initiative, freedom, risk-taking, future anticipation, and information sharing (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). In such a culture, leaders tend to be more idealistic and willing to take the risk, concentrating more on acquiring additional information and developing a vision for the future (Denison & Speitzer, 1991). Leaders who promote and manifest transparency through exhibiting behaviours such as communicating adequate information may contribute to boosting trust and diminishing the information discrepancy within an organisation (Javed et al., 2018). Further, Puccio and Cabra (2010) mentioned the importance of organisational culture in creativity, highlighted by Andrew et al. (2007) in their Boston Consulting Group's survey of senior managers, wherein 38% of the 2,468 senior managers identified a risk-averse corporate culture as the prime barrier to innovation in their organisations. Jain & Jain (2017) point out that if the prevailing organisational culture is risk-averse and withholding resources, individual creativity tends to decline; on the other hand, in a culture where open appreciation of creative ideas prevails, employee creativity increases. Evidence suggests that the display of such characteristics of a culture instigate employees' level of trust in their leaders (Javed et al., 2018), and thus appear most effective in contributing to creativity (Lee et al., 2019; Agars et al., 2012).

*Proposition 6: Adhocracy culture facilitates the relationship of trust in leader and employee creativity.*

## Discussion

This study contributes to the literature on creativity. It focuses on the significant role that trust in the leader displays in cultivating creativity within the organisation; trust has been reflected as the willingness of an individual to be vulnerable, through enacting on that willingness that gives a closer measure of trust. In addition, this study assists in deepening our understanding of how trust can be enhanced in the organisation through fostering an appropriate culture. This study further emphasises the influence of organisational culture on employee's trust in leaders, highlighting the need for managers to continuously monitor the culture that prevails, if they aspire to be a creative organisation. Therefore, managers must ensure that they provide the culture that nurtures trust in the workplace, as it encourages employees to be

courageous enough to take up divergent perspectives and challenges, and bring forth their breakthrough ideas, thus acting as a catalyst for creativity.

Most of the existing researches that have attempted to study trust with creativity have assessed other's trustworthiness rather than trust, which lacks the element of vulnerability. However, Schoorman et al. (2015) mention trustworthiness as a significant antecedent of trust. Many researchers have considered it as a proxy of trust. Since trustworthiness could be an important determinant of trust although it cannot replace trust, this study focused on understanding the interplay between trust and culture, accentuating the role of trust in the form of trusting behaviour of individuals towards their leader, which reflects one's actual vulnerability. Since employee creativity is not only affected by the presence of trust, but is also influenced by the contextual factors, undertaking the interactionist perspective, this study focused on studying employee creativity as the product of the interplay between behavioural characteristics and contextual factor, i.e., between trust in the leader and organisational culture. Many researchers have studied organisational culture in context with trust and creativity (Lukic et al., 2014; Masood et al., 2011; Martins & Terblanche, 2003), yet failed to examine the influence of different dimensions of organisational culture. Since organisational culture is too general to operationalise, it must be responded to by subcategorising or labelling different types of culture (Song et al., 2019). This study explored the possible influence of different dimensions of organisational culture on the relationship of trust in the leader and employee creativity, and emphasises how different cultures contribute to promoting trust.

Furthermore, this study states a few propositions that suggest that disclosure-based trust and reliance-based trust are positively related to employee creativity; clan, adhocracy, and market culture facilitate trust in the leader, which, as a result, enhances the employee creativity in the organisation; hierarchy culture, on the other hand, impedes trust in the leader and thus, hinders employee creativity as well. The creative theorists have advocated the importance of individual creativity as a necessary precondition for innovation (Amabile & Pratt, 2016; Woodman, 1993), thus focusing on the fact that creativity increases the probability

of extended innovation in the organisation, which leads it to attain a sustainable competitive advantage.

## Future Research

Although several studies state the positive influence of organisational culture (and its dimensions) on employee creativity (Ogbeibu et al., 2018; Gupta, 2011), several researches suggest that there is no significant or negative relationship between organisational culture (and its dimensions) and employee creativity (Masood et al., 2011). This expresses the conflicting arguments in the field of organisational culture and employee creativity, and thus proclaims that the paradigms of organisational culture and employee creativity are yet growing and still require considerable work.

In the hierarchy culture, leaders behave as per strict rules, and regulations may give an impression of professionalism, which in turn may influence their followers. Considering the example given by George (2007), employees may be influenced by their supervisors due to the belief that they are more professional and knowledgeable, which leads to high cognitive trust. Such belief may prompt them to generate ideas for improvements. Gillespie (2012) mentions that reliance-based trust is influenced by the abilities of the target person, therefore including cognitive assessment of the trust target. This reasoning raises the possibility of reliance-based trust in the hierarchy culture, which may facilitate employee creativity in such culture. This possibility can be investigated in future studies.

Researchers have conflicting opinions regarding the relationship of market culture with creativity and innovation. Hartnell et al. (2011) conclude that market culture has positive effects on innovation. However, some researches support that market culture negatively affects employee creativity (e.g., Ogbeibu et al., 2018). Future researches can contribute to shedding more light on this equivocal relationship. Employee creativity is influenced by different institutional contexts (Amabile & Pratt, 2016), and thus, future studies could explore more factors that impede or facilitate employee creativity in the organisation. Researchers could explore the influence of other moderators and different effects of possible

mediators on the relationship of trust in the leader and employee creativity.

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