

Effect of Managerial Coaching on Employee Creativity: The Mediating Role of Ambidextrous Learning

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Abstract—Empirical studies on managerial coaching effectiveness are only focused on limited outcome variables. Moreover, most of the studies do not fully explain why and how coaching influences the specific outcome variables. This study is to examine the direct relationships of managerial coaching to employee creativity and investigate the mediating role of employee ambidexterity relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity. This study conducted field study with 177 dyads of Chinese managers and their subordinates from Korean and Chinese companies in Mainland China. The results indicated that managerial coaching is positively related to employee creativity and employee ambidextrous learning partially mediated the relationship between managerial coaching and creativity.

Index Terms—Employee ambidextrous learning, employee creativity, managerial coaching.

I. INTRODUCTION

Empirical studies on managerial coaching effectiveness are rare, to some extent, only limited outcome variables have been examined such as employee learning [1], [2], job satisfaction [3], [4], organizational commitment [2], [4], organization citizenship behavior [5] and performance [3], [4], [6]. In addition, most studies have investigated direct relationship between managerial coaching and outcomes [7] and do not fully explain how or why managerial coaching affects certain outcomes [4]. In managerial coaching literature, scholars have highlighted the role of leader as a facilitator of employee learning. Nevertheless, there is a lack of empirical evidence for relationship between managerial coaching and employee learning. This study considers exploration and exploitation as learning activities and discusses the role of ambidextrous learning relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity.

The previous studies have tried to identify the antecedents that could affect the organization ambidexterity as well as the effect of ambidexterity on the outcomes [8]-[10]. Most of the studies regarding ambidexterity were conducted at the organizational level, and there are still limitations on research on individual ambidexterity. There has been need for studies on ambidexterity in an individual level [11]. Considering that individual employee is influenced by both the top management and direct supervisors, it is necessary to conduct further investigation on the impact of direct supervisors on individual ambidexterity. This study regards direct supervisors as coaches are important because of their roles of

creating a context that fosters contextual ambidexterity though coaching process between leader and employee.

This study contributes to the managerial coaching literature by showing how managerial coaching affects employee's creativity. Research on creativity literature has highlighted the important role of leader on individual creativity such as transformational leadership [12], [13], empowering leadership [14], leader member exchange [15]. However, there is no study to investigate link between managerial coaching and creativity. This study introduces creativity as a potential managerial coaching outcome and investigate link between managerial coaching and creativity to extend the managerial coaching literature. This research also contributes to the individual ambidexterity literature by examining the link between ambidextrous learning and its outcomes. Despite the fact that there is research on the relationship between them [16], it seems that they are to some extent limited. This study attempts to address this limitation by investigating how managerial coaching can be employed as an antecedent that enables employees to accomplish both exploratory and exploitative learning activities and, in turn, affects employee creativity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Managerial coaching has received attention as an effective alternative leadership, which facilitates employee learning and enhance employee performance [3], [6], [17], [18]. Managerial coaching is defined as a process of helping employee develop themselves not only improving performance but also maximizing employee potential [19]. Managerial coaching has been considered as an effective organization development strategy and a way of facilitating employee learning, which can eventually lead them to a positive outcome [18], [20]. Hagen [7] suggested that coaching needs to include a set of behaviors, attitude, belief, and skills. For example, coaching requires open communication and it should facilitate employees' learning and development through behavioral approach. It also needs to build teamwork and value people over task and accept ambiguity through attitudes and skills approach. For effective managerial coaching, interaction of these five managerial coaching behaviors, attitudes, and skill are required. Based on this perspective and previous research [18], [19], this study categorizes an effective coaching into the following five dimensions: open communication, team approach, valuing people, accepting ambiguity, and facilitating employees' development [19].

In a creativity study, leadership is considered as a crucial factor that affects an individual's creativity. The core of

managerial coaching is that leaders provide employees with autonomy so that they can identify and solve various problems by themselves. According to the self-determination theory, human's autonomy determines one's motivation and an individual who is internally motivated shows high level of creativity [21]. Amabile *et al.* [22] argue that individuals will more likely to show high level of creativity when they have high level of autonomy in their work and have sense of ownership and control over their work and ideas.

This study predicts that managerial coaching may increase employees' creativity. Leaders who engage in open communication are likely to encourage employees to express their thoughts and opinions freely. Based on such open communication, the leader is able to accept various opinions and perspectives to allow employees to provide different views when solving a problem. A leader who shows accepting ambiguity promotes employees to challenge themselves and utilize new ways to solve problems, which results in increase of employees' creativity. Also, as a coach, leaders openly communicate with employees and provide constructive feedback as well as guidelines relating to the task [23]. It leads employees to acknowledge that their contribution is significant in achieving the team goals. When employees pay more attention to significance of their task, they are more likely to produce new ideas or ways for achieving the team goals [24], [25].

The team approach emphasizes the notion that a leader is not a controller, but rather a partner who works together with others to achieve the team goal [2]. The team approach allows leaders not to control their team members, but rather to empower them to search for solutions and to give them autonomy of decision making. Empowered individuals are more likely to have high level of intrinsic motivation, which promotes them to put creative efforts [26].

As a coach, a leader empathizes his/her team members by valuing, caring, and supporting them. This allows team members to overcome whatever they fear and may make them focus on their task and they are likely to take risks and to freely explore and experiment with ideas and approaches [13], [27]. As a result, they will be more likely to try out or search new ideas to enact their creativity [12], [13].

Through the facilitation of the employee development, a leader provides resources and feedback with employees so that they can be creative. Creativity takes place when employees deal with undefined and unstructured problems. It requires time and effort, and by providing necessary resources and feedback, the leader helps employees to solve a problem on their own [28], [29].

Overall, a leader as a coach has the ability to give autonomy to employees so that they can make decisions on their own and control themselves. This allows employees to be motivated to experiment with new approaches of doing their jobs, and, in turn, this increases their creativity.

Hypothesis 1: Managerial coaching is positively related to employee creativity.

Scholars have argued that exploration and exploitation not only are distinct learning activities but also can combine both activities which are known as ambidexterity [30], [31]. According to Gibson and Birkinshaw [31], if an organization create specific context that promotes ambidextrous behavior

on its employees and actively utilizes it, the employees would be able to increase their behavioral capacity by appropriately arranging their resources and time in exploration and exploitation. Leaders are needed to create a context that would support the employees engaging in both exploration and exploitation activities. Previous research has emphasized the critical role of leaders in facilitating ambidexterity [9], [32], [33]. According to the ambidexterity theory of leadership, two complementary leader's behaviors promote exploration and exploitation of the employees [34]. Rosing *et al.* [34] proposed that leaders opening behaviors predicts employee's exploration behaviors and closing behaviors anticipates the employee's exploitation behaviors.

Leader's coaching behaviors that are related to opening behaviors serve as signal to increase variance in behavior, which allows employees to engage in exploratory learning. When employees engage in exploratory learning activities, they will have more diverse or broad knowledge that increase the likelihood of identifying problems, in turn, stimulate thinking in different perspectives or the more diverse number of possible combination, accompanied with generation of creative ideas. Also, leader's coaching behaviors that are related to closing behaviors serve as signal to decrease variance in behavior, which allows employees to engage in exploitative learning. When employees engage in exploitative learning, they refine existing knowledge and skills and recombine them to deepen the individual knowledge base.

When a leader shows high level of opening and closing behaviors, employees are more likely to engage in both exploration and exploitation activities, leading them to be more innovative [35]. Moreover, when individuals engage in exploration, they concurrently create new possibilities to engage in exploitation. Furthermore, when individuals engage in exploitation, they concurrently enhance their depth of knowledge that contributes to engage in exploration [36]. Therefore, when managerial coaching promotes exploratory learning activities, employees are more likely to engage in exploitative learning activities concurrently and vice versa.

When employees engage in both exploratory and exploitative learning activities, they can broaden and deepen their knowledge bases which are related to creativity [37]. Also, empirical studies have shown that individual ambidexterity has positively related to innovation [35], [38] and performance [16], [39]. Therefore, employee ambidexterity mediates the relationship between managerial coaching and creativity

Hypothesis 2: Employee ambidextrous learning mediates the relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity.

III. METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted on 240 dyads of Chinese managers and their subordinates from Korean and Chinese companies in Mainland China; the final sample comprised 177 complete pairs of questionnaires. The cover letter explained the purpose of this study and provided the assurance of anonymity. Leaders were given a questionnaire that assessed employee creativity and performance and were asked to

express their individual information. Employees were asked to rate their exploratory learning and exploitative learning activity, their leaders' coaching behaviors that they perceived and individual information.

The measurements of this study were mainly derived from western study literatures. Following the translation-back translation procedure of Brislin [40], all the measurements were translated from English to Chinese by 12 doctoral students and two professors and then back-translated into English by two bilingual students to ensure equivalency of meaning.

Independent Variable This study measures the Chinese version of managerial coaching using 25-item scale [41] from developed by Park *et al.* [19]. Respondents answered on a 6-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree).

Mediating Variables Exploratory and exploitative learning were measured with five items, and each of them developed by Kostopoulos and Bozionelos [42]. Respondents answered on a 6-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree). To test mediating role of ambidexterity, this study measured ambidexterity as computing the multiplicative interaction between two types of learning activities [30], [31].

Dependent Variables This study used the nine items creativity scale developed by Tierney *et al.* [15]. To avoid single-source bias, supervisor assessed their employees' creativity. Respondents answered on a 6-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 6=strongly agree).

IV. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

A. Correlation Analysis

Table I presents the means, standard deviations and correlations of the variables in this study.

TABLE I: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

Variables	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3
1. Managerial Coaching	4.891	0.802			
2. Ambidexterity	23.167	6.236	0.614**		
3. Creativity	4.479	0.845	0.412**	0.492**	

a. $N=177$, ** $P<0.01$; two-tailed tests

All correlation coefficients among the research variables were significant ($p<0.01$). Managerial coaching was positively related to ambidexterity ($r=0.614$, $p<0.01$) and creativity ($r=0.412$, $p<0.01$). Ambidexterity was positively related to creativity ($r=0.492$, $p<0.01$). The relationship between managerial coaching and ambidexterity was the highest ($r=0.614$) whereas the relationship between managerial coaching and creativity was comparatively weak ($r=0.412$).

B. Hypotheses Testing

This study uses regression analysis to examine Hypotheses 1 and 2. In Hypothesis 1, this study predicted that managerial coaching would be positively related to employee creativity. As shown in Model 1 of Table II, managerial coaching was

positively related to creativity ($\beta=0.437$, $p<0.01$), supporting Hypothesis 1.

TABLE II: RESULTS OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	DV, Creativity	DV, AMB	DV, Creativity	DV, Creativity
Managerial Coaching	.437**	.631**		.196*
AMB			.514**	.383**
R ²	.215**	.470**	.272**	.293**
ΔR^2	.186**	.386**	.242**	.078**

a. $N=177$, ** $P<0.01$; two-tailed tests

b. employee ambidexterity (AMB) : measured ambidexterity as computing the multiplicative interaction between exploration and exploitation.

In Hypothesis 2, this study predicted that employee ambidexterity would mediate the relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity. To test for mediation effect, this study followed Baron and Kenny's [43] four steps in establishing mediation. First, managerial coaching must predict employee ambidexterity. As shown in Model 2 of Table II, managerial coaching was positively related to ambidexterity ($\beta=0.631$, $p<0.01$). Second, there was a significant relationship between managerial coaching and creativity ($\beta=0.437$, $p<0.01$), which was also found in Hypothesis 1. Third, it requires significant effects of ambidexterity on creativity. As shown Model 3 of Table II, ambidexterity was significantly related to creativity ($\beta=0.514$, $p<0.01$). Lastly, to test for mediating effects, it requires that effects of managerial coaching on creativity become non-significant or weaker when ambidexterity is entered into equation.

As shown in Model 4 of Table II, the effect of managerial coaching on creativity became weaker ($\beta=0.196$, $p<0.05$), when ambidexterity was taken into account ($\beta=0.383$, $p<0.01$). It suggested that ambidexterity had partially mediated relationship between managerial coaching and creativity, supporting Hypothesis 2. In addition, Sobel test confirmed a positive and indirect effects of managerial coaching on creativity via employee ambidexterity ($Z=6.36$; $p<0.01$).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate effects of managerial coaching on employee creativity and the mediating role of employee ambidexterity relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity. The results indicated that managerial coaching directly impact employee creativity. The findings are aligned with expectations or results from earlier studies. It can be reasonable to expect that creativity is considered as one of the potential outcomes of managerial coaching. Research on creativity literature emphasized that when employees are empowered to make decisions and implement actions without direct supervision, they are more likely to generate creative solution [14]. Hypothesis 2 predicted that employee ambidexterity mediated the relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity. The research results

showed that employee ambidexterity mediated managerial coaching's influence on employee creativity. In addition, Sobel test confirmed the effects of managerial coaching on creativity via employee ambidexterity.

Even though results and implications of this research are meaningful to some extent, this study also has limitations.

Firstly, this research adopted the cross-sectional design, which may undermine the causal relationship between variables. In other words, it is necessary to interpret causality carefully. In future research, it is necessary to identify the causality among variables more clearly by means of longitudinal design. Secondly, this study measured exploratory learning and exploitative learning using self-reports method in this research. Despite the fact that exploratory learning and exploitative learning that were measured and developed by self-reports, it would be necessary to compare these two aspects, after measuring them by self-reports method and one that a leader or co-workers make assessments. Thirdly, this research argued that managerial coaching influenced employee ambidexterity based on the ambidexterity theory of leadership. According to this theory, a leader's temporal flexibility is one of the important elements to affect exploration and exploitation behaviors. Temporal flexibility refers to a leader's ability to switch between both opening and closing behaviors to be suitable for immediate tasks [34]. Future studies could adopt daily or weekly diary designs to investigate temporal flexibility of a leader's and employees' perceptions and behaviors.

The findings of this study have several implications for HRD researchers and professionals. First, the results of this research contribute toward managerial coaching and creativity literature by showing that managerial coaching affects employee creativity. Empirical studies on managerial coaching effectiveness are still rare, and only limited outcome variables have been investigated [4]. Also, most of studies have presented the relationship between managerial coaching and employee performance [3], [6]. This study would provide a meaningful perspective in managerial coaching literature by introducing employee creativity as a new outcome variable of managerial coaching.

Second, this study would contribute to managerial coaching literature by examining the mediating role of employee ambidexterity relationship between managerial coaching and employee creativity. Furthermore, although the role of leader as a coach facilitating the employees' learning is being emphasized, it seems that there are few studies which examine the mediating role of employee learning relationship between managerial coaching and its outcomes. This research found that employee creativity was affected by managerial coaching via ambidextrous learning.

Third, this study makes a contribution to ambidexterity theory of leadership by suggesting that leader's coaching behaviors have an influence on employee ambidexterity. Previous research focuses on transformational leadership [33], [44] and paradoxical leadership [36] as a predictor of exploration and exploitation behaviors. The results of this research could contribute toward the ambidexterity theory of leadership, proposing managerial coaching as an antecedent of employee ambidextrous learning.

This study also has practical implications. The results from this research help leaders understand the outcomes of their employee ambidextrous learning in an organizational context. This study also provides managers a further insight in relation to a role of immediate leaders in HRD practice. This implies that leaders should realize the importance of their role as a coach helping employees' learning and development. In addition, an organization has responsibility to provide training and education program available to managers to acquire coaching skills required in pursuit of implementing the role as a coach more effectively.

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