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Leadership: A Narrative Process Theory of Creativity Emergence

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Abstract:

Research Question: This research examines how employee creativity emerges through integrated approaches and proposes a model of strategic organizational leadership grounded in process theory. **Motivation:** Leadership strategies, activities, and processes have been identified as critical components of strategic management models. However, theory and research in this domain are predominantly grounded in static constructs rather than dynamic process theories. To address this gap, we develop and verify a process-oriented theory of creativity emergence. This theory explains how strategic organizational leaders and employees interact to enact creativity, one of the most essential capabilities for innovation in the digital age. It also explains how these interactions contribute to the success of digital transformation and other forms of organizational transformation. **Idea:** The central idea of this study is to develop a narrative process theory of creativity by integrating key conceptualizations into a strategic organizational leadership model. **Findings:** We integrate the core concepts and dynamic mechanisms underlying creativity and use them to develop a theory of creativity emergence. The theory explains why, how, and when creativity emerges, as well as the components and mechanisms through which the elements of the model and its strategies interact. The model addresses the research question and contributes to the development of a strategic organizational leadership model that explains the emergence of employee creativity. **Contribution:** The key contribution of this research is the development and validation of a narrative process theory approach as a coherent theoretical framework for explaining the mechanisms through which employee creativity emerges from integrated approaches. The study advances a model of strategic organizational leadership that accounts for the dynamic emergence of creativity within organizations.

Keywords: strategic organizational leadership, creativity, narrative process theory

JEL Classification: B41, M12, M54

1. Introduction

According to the United Nations (2026), digital transformation involves integrating trust, coordination, inclusion, and long-term institutional capacities with technology, thereby contributing to peace and prosperity by 2030 and supporting the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. A shift from technology-driven approaches toward human-centric strategies is also emphasized in the United Nations Digitalization Strategy 2022-2025 and Annex I of the Global Digital Compact 2026 (UN, Global Digital Compact, 2026). Academic, scientific, and expert communities have contributed to the development of the Corporate Digital Responsibility Manifesto (CDR Manifesto, 2026), which outlines principles and objectives for integrating digital responsibility with corporate social responsibility, as well as strategies for bridging the digital divide within a human-centric context.

Enhancing employee motivation remains a challenge, particularly in identifying the factors and contextual conditions that facilitate and foster work engagement (Marjanovic, 2024). At the same time, a gap is emerging between efforts to enhance employee motivation and the implementation of digital transformation and digitalization as broader organizational processes. This gap may negatively affect employee well-being by increasing social distance (Fedorova, Koropets, & Gatti, 2019). The growing need to manage crises, organizational transitions, and digital transformations has contributed to the development of diverse

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approaches to work engagement (Marjanovic & Mihic, 2025). These approaches encompass technical and technological transformations, as well as sociological and psychological changes in employment relationships, cognitive performance, behaviour, and organizational culture. They also reflect complex interactions across individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels, consistent with a fundamental law of organizations (Kuljanin & Lemonn, 2024).

Furthermore, digital transformation requires an innovative environment, which, in turn, depends on employee creativity and leadership (Polakova, Horvathova Suleimanova, Madzik, Copus, Molnarova & Poledinova, 2023; Gilli, Nippa, & Knapstein, 2022). Creativity as a phenomenon has been examined from philosophical, psychological, and sociological perspectives. However, within the management and organizational sciences literature, creativity remains relatively underexplored, with leadership strategies focusing primarily on employee motivation rather than on the development of employee creativity (Cai, Khapova, Bossink, Lysova & Yuan, 2020). Moreover, creativity represents a complex and multidimensional phenomenon within behavioural and organizational science. Its study can therefore benefit from integrative approaches to theory development that consider both constructs and processes, as well as different layers of theoretical explanation and their implications for causality and intervention (Kozlowski, Grand, Braun, Kuljanin, & Chao, 2026).

This paper examines and theorizes organizational leadership strategies by integrating human resource theories (Marjanovic, 2025; Marjanovic & Mihic, 2025), project management strategies (Mihic, 2011), and leadership processes that facilitate the development of employee creativity in the digital age. These processes are examined within the broader context of digital transformations (Pesonen, 2020) and the fundamental principles of organization (Kuljanin & Lemmon, 2024). The main research question is how these integrated approaches contribute to the emergence and development of employee creativity through strategic organizational leadership. The study addresses this research question by examining the situations and conditions in which organizational actors operate and interact through different strategies, their responses to these strategies, the sequences of their interactions, and the underlying patterns and mechanisms that emerge over time. By adopting a narrative process perspective, the study identifies the behaviours, emotions, cognitions, and interactions of strategic organizational leaders and employees. It further examines how these sequences of interaction contribute to the emergence, development, and implementation of employee creativity, as well as to outcomes such as demotivation, conflict, and reduced effectiveness of strategic organizational leadership.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Strategic organizational leadership

An integrated model of strategic organizational leadership is commonly conceptualized from the perspective of complexity theory, which views organizations as complex adaptive systems (Mihic, 2011). At the same time, organizational science is recognized as an abstract scientific domain (Kozlowski et al., 2026), requiring theoretical frameworks that integrate the dimensions, components, constructs, and processes of strategic project management, strategic human resource management, leadership, and behavioural science. This perspective is supported by studies demonstrating the importance of social and behavioural dimensions in reducing uncertainty and managing risk in strategic project management (Mihic, Dodevska, Todorovic, Obradovic & Petrovic, 2018). These dimensions are particularly critical during the early phases of projects, when uncertainty is greatest and the likelihood of project failure is highest (Toljaga-Nikolic, Petrovic & Mihic, 2017).

However, recent theoretical developments suggest that complexity theory and construct-based approaches to theory development have limitations when applied to indirect research and to explaining organizational relationships involving emotions, cognition, behaviour, and the reciprocal actions and responses of organizational actors. Rather than focusing primarily on identifying static variables and relationships among constructs, researchers are increasingly encouraged to directly examine work processes and the dynamic sequences of actions and interactions through which organizational phenomena emerge, develop, and change over time (Kuljanin, Braun, Grand, Olenick, Chao & Kozlowski, 2024).

Consequently, the Integrated Model of Strategic Project Management (Mihic, 2011), which combines strategic management and project management within a unified managerial framework, requires further theoretical integration with complementary disciplines, particularly leadership and strategic human resource management. In this context, the strategic human resource management perspective represented by the Ulrich Model (Ulrich & Grochowski, 2018), together with the framework proposed by Scott-Jackson and

Mayo (2017) in *HR with Purpose: Future Models of HR*, provides important theoretical foundations for understanding how leadership capabilities and human resource practices contribute to organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, the resource-based view enables the identification and analysis of strategic human resources, their competencies, and organizational capabilities as critical assets for achieving and sustaining long-term competitive advantage (Petrovic, Mihic & Obradovic, 2014; Mihic, 2011). These organizational capabilities should be examined across multiple levels of analysis, including the individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels, in accordance with the fundamental principles of organizational science (Kuljanin & Lemonn, 2024). Accordingly, this study integrates strategic human resource management with strategic project management to establish a comprehensive theoretical foundation for strategic organizational leadership. This integration provides a basis for identifying the mechanisms, processes, and indicators through which strategic organizational leadership enhances organizational effectiveness and supports the development of employee creativity.

2.2 Employee creativity

Digital transformations, whether implemented as strategic projects or as integral components of mergers and acquisitions, require an organizational environment that supports innovation, which, in turn, depends on employee creativity (Polakova et al., 2023; Gilli et al., 2022; Cai et al., 2020). At the same time, there is a continuing need to advance organizational change management and leadership strategies (Marjanovic, 2024). However, scholars have devoted considerably more attention to strategies that influence organizational sustainability and innovativeness through competitive advantage, employee motivation, and human resource management practices, whereas direct research into the work processes through which creativity is enhanced, and into how employees respond to strategic organizational initiatives, remains relatively limited (Khan, 2012; Ozkeser, 2019; Kinnie, Hutchinson, Purcell, Rayton & Swart, 2005; Lopez-Cabralles & Valle-Cabrera, 2019; Nurlaila, 2022; Dewettinck & Remue, 2010).

For example, Lopez-Cabralles & Valle-Cabrera (2019) developed a model of sustainable strategic human resource management in which the contribution of corporate strategies is grounded in sustainable employment relationships. Within this model, the organization influences employees' expected behaviours while ensuring their alignment with sustainable human resource management strategies. This approach contributes to the achievement of organizational competitive advantage. Similarly, Rasool, Samma, Wang, Zhao & Zhang (2019) identified key human resource dimensions, including recruitment, employee development, performance management, and compensation and benefits, and demonstrated their positive effects on sustainable organizational performance. Furthermore, these strategies emphasize innovation as a key dimension of organizational growth and adaptability, particularly through modern and innovative human resource management practices (Marjanovic & Mihic, 2025). However, less attention has been devoted to understanding how these strategies enact employee creativity, how employees respond to them, and under what circumstances such strategies and actions can be effectively implemented.

From the perspective of process theorizing and complex systems theory, the direct study of work processes is more appropriate than the indirect examination of relationships among constructs, particularly when these processes involve affective, behavioural, cognitive, and social dimensions (Kuljanin et al., 2024). Therefore, this research seeks to identify, define, and explain the actions and relationships involved in strategic organizational leadership processes and to determine the sequences through which these processes unfold.

In this study, creativity is conceptualized as a motivation-based opportunity to fulfill individual needs through work activities that are both useful and necessary for business development and organizational success, while also involving the capacity to generate original ideas that can be implemented through business innovation. Accordingly, creativity, as the object of this research, is conceptualized as a psychological construct centered on individuals as the primary organizational actors. The further development of mediating psychological constructs, understood as mechanisms that shape employees' awareness and knowledge and influence the development of their talents, abilities, and opportunities, represents the process through which employee creativity emerges and develops. This process constitutes the central focus of the present study.

3. Methodology

Over the past several years, organizational science has increasingly emphasized the need to strengthen theoretical explanations of human and organizational behaviour by integrating different approaches to theorizing. Kozlowski et al. (2026) distinguish between construct theorizing, which focuses primarily on

relationships among constructs and the prediction of outcomes, and process theorizing, which focuses on the sequences of actions and events through which organizational phenomena unfold over time. Importantly, the authors argue that these approaches should not be treated as mutually exclusive. Instead, they propose a Layers of Theoretical Explanation Typology that integrates construct relationships, underlying action/event sequences, and the generative mechanisms that produce and sustain these processes. Such integration is argued to provide more comprehensive explanations of organizational phenomena, while also strengthening causal inference and informing the design of targeted interventions (Kozlowski et al., 2026).

Building on this perspective, the present study adopts a process-oriented approach to theory development that emphasizes the generative mechanisms underlying the emergence of creativity. The proposed theoretical framework integrates insights derived from prior construct-based research with process-oriented explanations of how creativity develops dynamically over time. Through successive theoretical iterations, established relationships among creativity-related constructs are connected with the underlying processes and generative mechanisms through which these relationships unfold. Accordingly, we develop and systematically evaluate a process-oriented theory of creativity emergence that integrates core constructs, temporal processes, and generative mechanisms into a coherent theoretical framework.

The theoretical research and theory development methods employed in this study are grounded in narrative process theorizing as the primary methodological approach. The theory is further developed and validated through systematic comparisons with previous iterations of the research. Across three iterations, the sequences and conceptualizations underlying the process theory are progressively refined and further validated through additional research iterations in the fields of strategic organizational leadership and employee creativity.

This approach explains the key actions, events, and sequences of interactions that occur within strategic organizational leadership processes and identifies the mechanisms represented by mediating psychological constructs and employee creativity as a psychological construct. In this way, the study contributes to the cumulative development of science-based knowledge and advances the development of the narrative process theory.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this research explain how organizational leaders develop and deploy strategies to foster employee creativity. The factors and constructs identified as significant for further development of a narrative process theory of creativity are commonly highlighted in the literature, including organizational culture, organizational climate, leader-follower relationships, and human resource management strategies (Alfes & Shantz, 2011); psychological safety (Frazier, Fainshmidt, Klinger, Pezeshkan & Vracheva, 2017); the relationship between human resource development and motivation (Ozkeser, 2019); effective compensation management (Ajmal, Shamim, Saleh & Malik, 2016); and autonomy at work and in job tasks (Hewagama, Boxall, Cheung, Hutchison, 2019). These factors influence job satisfaction (Nurlaila, 2022), employee attitudes, behaviour, and motivation. In turn, these factors affect employee performance (Adiguzel, Ozcina, & Karadal, 2020), productivity (Nurlaila, 2022), loyalty (Ajmal et al., 2016), competence development (Hewagama et al., 2019), and well-being (Hewagama et al., 2019).

Nikolajevaite & Sabaityte (2016) identified several factors that contribute to increased employee job satisfaction and may serve as key components in the emergence of a process theory of creativity. These include the physical work environment; employer policies, strategies, and practices; organizational commitment; autonomy and job significance; attention to and care for employees; compensation; and mutual respect. Similarly, satisfaction with human resource management strategies influences job satisfaction (Kinnie et al., 2005). At the same time, increasing job satisfaction is considered a strategy and one of the most effective approaches to significantly enhancing employee productivity (Nurlaila, 2022). Furthermore, Mayer, Bardes Mawritz & Piccolo (2008) identified a significant relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction, with organizational justice representing one of the important factors influencing leadership processes. Hewagama et al. (2019) argue that empowering frontline employees through effective management styles, competency development strategies, and appropriate human resource practices positively influences business and managerial performance by enhancing job satisfaction. In addition, raising awareness and improving internal communication (Marjanovic, 2025) support the fulfillment of employees' needs and contribute to job satisfaction.

When examining strategies and interventions based on leadership activities aimed at enhancing employee creativity, it is also important to consider the interaction between contextual and personal factors that positively influence employee creativity (Cai et al., 2020). Kuljanin & Lemmon (2024) emphasize the importance of understanding employees as individuals rather than simply as members of an organizational group, and therefore highlight the need to examine their lived experiences within the workplace. They further distinguish between two approaches to organizational leadership: providing general advice based on psychological constructs and offering direct, process-oriented guidance. The former approach seeks to improve employee satisfaction indirectly by focusing on factors such as agreeableness and trust, whereas the latter focuses on how leaders can actively build trusting and satisfying relationships with individual employees through their everyday interactions. In other words, understanding how individuals behave and interact within an organization, together with the way leaders approach and manage these relationships, can shape employees' attitudes toward their work. Paying attention to these interpersonal and organizational processes may, on the one hand, reduce the likelihood of anti-work attitudes emerging and, on the other, contribute to the development of more positive attitudes and greater motivation toward work (Kuljanin & Lemmon, 2024).

Some scholars have highlighted the importance of leadership in fostering employee creativity, examining creativity at the individual, team, and organizational levels (Hughes, Lee, Tian, Newman & Legood, 2018). Therefore, the factors, constructs, and relationships identified through construct theory approaches and related to hybrid models of strategic organizational leadership represent a starting point for developing and implementing strategies capable of supporting organizational success through employee well-being and job satisfaction. These conditions, in turn, enable and facilitate the development of employee creativity (Hughes et al. 2018). Process theorizing focuses on actions and explanatory mechanisms (Kuljanin et al., 2024), while multilevel theories combine top-down and bottom-up influences among model components and their interrelationships (Kuljanin et al., 2024). Processes provide explanations of these relationships across micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of organizational science (Kuljanin et al., 2024, p. 2).

As a result of the first iteration of this research, further process theorizing, focused on interactions, is operationalized with the aim of explaining and further developing strategies that positively enable and facilitate the development of employee creativity. Construct theory approaches primarily focus on explaining how constructs relate to one another, whereas narrative process theory provides opportunities to explain additional details that are significant for organizational leaders' strategies, their successful implementation, and the development of employee creativity. Therefore, an integrative approach combining construct and process theories is important for identifying, developing, and explaining the relevant dimensions of the creativity phenomenon (Kuljanin et al., 2024).

This approach explains how these constructs are related and how organizational actors particularly strategic organizational leaders and employees think, feel, behave, and interact with one another so that they enable creativity to emerge as a valuable set of competencies, capabilities, and psychological constructs within digital transformation processes. In comparison with construct-based research, which primarily explains relationships among constructs such as creativity, well-being, and job satisfaction through precise quantitative results, this approach provides more detailed and process-oriented insights. From a process perspective, these constructs are categorized and examined through different forms and causes of actions and events, including affective, behavioural, cognitive, and social dimensions (Kuljanin et al., 2024). These dimensions are influenced by cultural norms and values, as well as by individual, contextual, and personal factors (Cai et al., 2020).

Through observations, participants' statements, and iterative theory development, the results of the second iteration demonstrate that the constructs of well-being and job satisfaction, together with the relationships between them, represent preconditions for the development, manifestation, and implementation of creativity, innovative activities, processes, and solutions within organizations.

The third iteration presents the results of an integrative theory approach and provides a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of organizational components, relationships, and sequential mechanisms within strategic organizational leadership and employee creativity. The narrative process theory, as the primary research methodology, applies an iterative and generative process that contributes to data collection, the integration of construct and process theories, and the development of narrative process theory. This approach addresses the research questions through factor-to-actor thinking (Kuljanin et al., 2024). Figure 1 presents the development of a narrative process theory of creativity emergence.

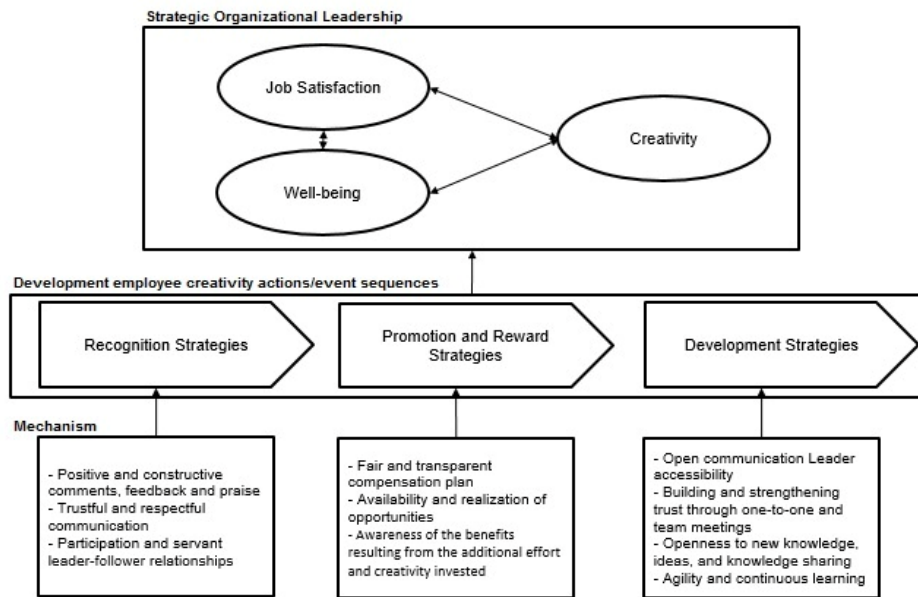


Figure 1: Integrated results of narrative process theory development, adapted according to the framework proposed by Kuljanin et al. (2024)

Opportunities and goals that are aligned across the individual, team, and organizational levels, and that are grounded in the same or similar concepts, may provide organizational leaders with stronger indications for developing and deploying strategies that foster employee creativity. We propose strategic management plans based on both human resource development and business development that, when considered together, establish the baseline conditions necessary for developing an organizational climate conducive to innovation and creativity. An organizational leadership strategy aimed at fostering creativity both depends on and influences employee well-being and job satisfaction as distinct constructs. By adopting either an advisory approach or providing concrete guidance for leaders' actions, such a strategy may indirectly enhance employees' well-being and creativity while reducing job dissatisfaction, or it may directly shape the processes through which these outcomes emerge. According to the results of this study, organizational leadership strategies that enable and enact employee creativity are based on three types of strategic actions that represent an integrated strategic human resource and project management approach: recognition, reward and promotion, and development strategies. These three types of strategic actions are grounded in the personal experiences of individual organizational actors, with distinct mechanisms underlying each approach. Emerging from the research findings, these mechanisms contribute to the theoretical advancement of strategic organizational leadership by explaining how employee creativity develops and the processes through which it emerges from actions and interactions at the individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels.

The integrated findings of this research identify improved indicators of strategic project success when leaders are directly involved in leading processes and are physically present, rather than simply delegating activities intended to foster creativity through reward and development mechanisms or other formal structures. Furthermore, more positive outcomes from fair and objective reward and promotion mechanisms are achieved when these activities are systematically planned, delegated, and implemented within the human resource management system. Such decisions should be based on employee participation and alignment with organizational change, which, in turn, contributes to reducing levels of conflict and improving strategic organizational leadership outcomes through effective promotion mechanisms. Additionally, the results of this research indicate improved indicators of strategic project success when leaders focus on the business and career development of potential and existing business partners and employees. Such an approach simultaneously contributes to the development of both the organization and individuals, rather than focusing primarily on expectations associated with organizational units, hierarchical structures, and business processes.

On the other hand, the integrated findings identify and validate well-being and job satisfaction as preconditions for employee creativity and as key mechanisms of strategic organizational leadership. The post-acquisition and digitalization phases represent periods of particularly high risk for employee turnover. This indicator is associated with lower levels of employee well-being and job satisfaction. These situations and indicator values are explained primarily by the absence of appropriate strategies and effective leadership and, to a lesser extent, by a conflict-oriented organizational climate. Positive attitudes, trust, and strong relationships represent initial mechanisms for leading strategic organizational transformations. These mechanisms involve all organizational actors, including leaders and employees, and enable the emergence of employee creativity.

We propose that promotion strategies perceived by employees as unfair represent a key source of failure and unsuccessful strategic projects. Promotion decisions are often constrained by limited budgets, while employees are frequently perceived as continuously dissatisfied or as expecting additional benefits. Furthermore, promotion plans are often based on hierarchical levels and primarily involve first-line managers rather than teams or individual employees across the organization. In this way, promotion and reward systems may create gaps between individuals, as well as between top management, first-line management, and teams, and may also create discrepancies between individual contributions and the benefits received. In contrast, we propose that successful strategic projects that emphasize employee equality should represent an important factor in achieving positive outcomes. Fair and objective reward and promotion systems are achieved when the value of employee benefits and individual contributions is consistent with and aligned with the value of project outcomes and organizational benefits. Fairness, availability, and opportunity represent the second mechanism of strategic organizational leadership, based on employee participation in strategic plan development and decision-making processes.

Furthermore, 80% of change management processes are based on a top-down approach (Marjanovic & Mihic, 2025). This approach may increase employee awareness of uncertainty regarding potential workforce reductions, as well as additional requirements for acquiring new knowledge and undertaking additional tasks. A conflict-oriented organizational climate is evident at both inter-hierarchical and inter-sectoral levels. Such an approach can also contribute to the development of anti-work sentiments (Kuljanin & Lemmon, 2024). Therefore, we argue that these processes need to be managed both vertically and horizontally across the organization. Encouraging employees to engage in professional development activities can further facilitate organizational development.

Additionally, the results identify courage as one of the important leadership characteristics, reflected in ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Courage is fostered through increased self-confidence, the development of a positive mindset, and a stronger sense of purpose. These factors, in turn, enhance positive perceptions and attitudes toward opportunities and trust at the individual, dyadic, team, and organizational levels. Servant leadership styles (Adiguzel, Ozcina & Karadal, 2020; Mayer et al., 2008), which are frequently examined in the literature, as well as coaching approaches, support employee encouragement and positively influence employees' awareness of future opportunities, thereby enabling the emergence of creativity. Openness, encouragement, and awareness of new opportunities represent the third mechanism of strategic organizational leadership that contributes to the development of employee creativity.

Conclusion

This study examines strategic human resource management and project management processes through an integrated theoretical approach and contributes to the further development of a strategic organizational leadership model within the framework of narrative process theory by addressing the research question of how employee creativity develops and emerges. The proposed model explains how organizational actors think, feel, behave, and interact with one another in the emergence of strategic organizational leadership and employee creativity. By synthesizing multiple theoretical perspectives, the study demonstrates the value of narrative process theory as a coherent theoretical framework for explaining how theoretical concepts interact and contribute to the development of a central research model.

The primary outcome of the narrative process theorizing developed in this study is the identification of strategic organizational leadership strategies based on the analysis and observation of leadership processes that enable and foster employee creativity. These strategies include recognition, reward, promotion, and employee development strategies, which operate as sequential mechanisms. The study extends the literature on strategic organizational leadership by integrating previously fragmented theoretical perspectives into a unified process framework. Furthermore, it demonstrates the contribution of the narrative process theory as a methodological approach to theory building, providing a more comprehensive explanation of organizational phenomena than construct-oriented models.

The proposed model offers organizational leaders a systematic framework for designing leadership strategies that foster employee creativity, strengthen innovation capabilities, and enhance the effectiveness of digital and organizational transformations.

This study contributes to leadership and organizational theory by developing a novel integrative process model of strategic organizational leadership and employee creativity. It further advances narrative process theory as a robust framework for integrating multiple theoretical perspectives into a coherent explanation of complex organizational processes.

Future research will build on this study through empirical examination and open coding using a larger sample of organizational actors, specifically strategic organizational leaders with professional experience in leading corporate digital transformations, mergers, and acquisitions.

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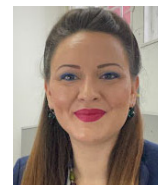
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