

Leadership and Creativity in Hyper-growth Small Businesses

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Abstract

Creativity is a crucial factor of development and performance of SMEs. In hyper-growth (HG) SMEs, the rhythm of development invites the company to exploit its resources in a permanent urgency. In this context, the place of the leader to guide creativity processes seems central. We privileged an organizational view of creativity in order to raise a central question: How can leadership and organizational creativity be articulated in hyper-growth SMEs? Three sub-questions emerge: what are the conditions favoring creativity in HG SMEs? Is creativity enough to generate, then to maintain rapid growth? What is the place of leadership in creativity management? Data resulting from ten case studies, adding up 48 interviews are mobilized to answer these questions. A content analysis of interviews, based on terms related to creativity and leadership is carried out, supplemented by the examination of secondary sources. Two central results concerning creativity and leadership in HG SME are proposed: (1) *The leader plays a central role to organize the conditions favoring creativity*; (2) *Creativity is necessary, but nonsufficient*. Hyper-growth requires creativity processes to be curbed by processes of stabilization/rationalization. Then, we propose that hyper-growth is generated by the paradoxical management of the couple “creativity – routine” by the leader.

Keywords

Leadership – Hyper-growth – SMEs – creativity – routine – paradox

Three debating points / questions relating the main issues discussed in the paper.

How can leadership and organizational creativity be articulated in hyper-growth SMEs?

1. What are the conditions favoring creativity in HG SMEs?
2. Is creativity enough to generate, then to maintain rapid growth?
3. What is the place of leadership in creativity management?

Questions from the CFP that this proposal hopes to tackle:

- What is the process of leadership, such as the mechanisms by which leader-entrepreneurs influence, challenge, inspire, and develop followers over time?
- What are specific challenges facing leader-entrepreneurs in small or medium-sized enterprises?

Introduction

Creativity is a central factor of development and of performance in small businesses. Creativity could be defined as “a process that aims at perceiving and combining differently what already exists, and leading to the proposition and the development of new ideas, possibly useful for the organization, its employees and customers” [adapted from Leonard and Swap (1999) and from De Brabandere (2007) by Carrier et Gélina (2011)]. Creativity is also “essential in the emergence of new ideas and business opportunities (Amabile, 1997; Long and McMullan, 1984; Hills *et al.*, 1999; De Tienne and Chandler, 2004)” (Carrier *et al.*, 2010, p. 114). However, Carrier and Gélina (2011) note that “canonical works on organizational creativity (Amabile, 1997; Woodman *et al.*, 1993; Ford, 1996; Drazin *et al.*, 1999) do not question creativity in the context of SMEs”. Small businesses have less resources at disposal than bigger firms to engage in formal creativity processes. Thus, leadership is a key factor to mitigate the lack of resources.

Leadership is a key element in the construction of SB effectiveness (Mendez *et al.*, 2013). Leadership includes vision and long-term orientation (Bryman, 1992; Yammarino, 1996; Fahed-Srein and Morin-Delerm, 2012). Recent research on leadership has investigated transformational leadership (Barling *et al.*, 2002; Pillai and Williams, 2004; Rubin *et al.*, 2005; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006; Peterson *et al.*, 2007), and charismatic leadership (Sosik *et al.*, 2002; Den Hartog *et al.*, 2004; Brown and Treviño, 2006). In SB research, the question of leadership remains understudied, and has shifted from a trait approach to a behavioral approach (Ensley *et al.*, 2006; Wang and Poutziouris, 2010).

Among the contexts of study of organizational creativity, it appears interesting to identify creativity processes in exacerbated contexts, i.e. in which individuals and organizations are subject to conditions which tighten their resources, and in which leadership can play a role. Work analyzing crisis situations or emergency situations (e.g. Weick, 1993; Rouleau *et al.*,

2013) often made it possible to reveal stable elements, extremely useful in more traditional organizational contexts. In SME literature, one of these exacerbated contexts is that of the hyper-growth small businesses. In these small businesses, which double their turnover into four years, resources are submitted to a strong tension: their scarcity invites the leader to generate rapidly and durably effective solutions.

In the context of the hyper-growth SME, we can raise the following key question: “how can leadership and organizational creativity be articulated in hyper-growth SMEs?” Three sub questions emerge: 1) what are the conditions favoring creativity in hyper-growth SMEs? 2) Is creativity enough to generate and maintain rapid growth in these companies? 3) What is the place of leadership in the emergence and the maintenance of creativity in hyper-growth SMEs?

Thus, through these three questions, the relations between leadership, creativity and hyper-growth will be examined. The article consists of four sections. The first section presents a review of literature on leadership in SME in hyper-growth and on organizational creativity, which brings to formulate in a second section two central proposals on their relations. The third section presents the empirical data and methods. In a fourth section, we present the results, and propose modellings 1) on the conditions favoring creativity in SME in hyper-growth, 2) on the articulation between creativity and routinisation, necessary to control hyper-growth. The fifth section discusses these results. The conclusion summarizes the principal contributions, and proposes managerial recommendations, limits and perspectives.

1. Literature review

1.1. Leadership at the center of SME hyper-growth

The question of growth remains central in economics and management studies. Hyper-growth SMEs are characterized by a minimum 20% annual growth rate in turnover during at least four years. This definition was given by Birch (1987), even if close terms (e.g. high growth, rapid growth, gazelles) can give a form relative to this concept. Thus, a hyper-growth SME doubles its size within four years.

The concept of hyper-growth was introduced by Markman and Gartner (2002). The phenomenon remains little studied (Markman and Gartner, 2002) and remains largely attached to the phenomenon of rapid growth. Hyper-growth SMEs are also characterized by the strong tension exerted on their resources. The literature strictly devoted to the hyper-growth is very recent. Littunen and Virtanen (2009) insisted on the need for better apprehending the processes leading to hyper-growth. Delmar *et al.* (2003) identified various types of growing companies, among which the “super absolute growers”, with a strong and regular growth in both sales and manpower. Archstone *et al.* (2012) showed that these SME develop thanks to the valorization of a slack. The leaders of SME in hyper-growth have specificities. Chanut-Guieu and Guieu (2010, 2011a, 2011b) identified their over-optimistic, volunteer and independent character. Belliato *et al.* (2010) note that being a hyper-growth leader is a specific job. For others, hyper-growth is primarily generated by unusual business opportunities and a particular access to resources (primarily knowledge resources). The entrepreneur would play a moderating rather than an explanatory role (Cassia and Minola, 2012).

Hyper-growth can be regarded as a dynamic state as defined by Levie and Lichtenstein (2010). Their work highlights recurring dynamic states, modelling by simplifying them the

traditional “stage models”. For Levie and Lichtenstein (2010), tension is central. It is the fruit of an opportunity which should be seized and for which the resources of the organization are put on line to concretize the aspirations of the entrepreneur. Hyper-growth is a dynamic state, in which the leaders show paradoxical management: on the basis of a dominant logic which guides their action, they generate ambiguous objectives to put the resources under tension (Chanut-Guieu *et al.*, 2009, 2012). In this context of strong tension on resources, the role of organizational creativity and the role of the leadership to generate it and manage it are central.

1.2. Organizational creativity is promoted and managed by the leader

1.2.1. From individual to organizational creativity

Leonard and Swap (1999, p. 6) defined organizational creativity as “a process of developing and expressing novel ideas, that are likely to be useful”. Two journals regularly publish work on organizational creativity: between 1998 and 2008, 21 empirical works in particular in *Academy of Management Journal* and in *Journal of Applied Psychology* concern organizational creativity. By analyzing them, Sullivan and Ford (2010) show that creativity has two dimensions, novelty and usefulness.

For Amabile, creativity (at the individual and at the group levels) is linked to the work environment and more largely to the organizational environment. Both environments have an impact on creativity, in particular via the place occupied by motivation (Amabile, 1997, p. 52). Woodman *et al.* (1993) propose an interactionist model of organizational creativity. Organizational creativity is “situated”, in interrelationship with individual creativity and the creativity of the groups which compose the organization.

1.2.2. Creativity and leadership

Heunks (1998) note that the leader does not have to be himself or herself creative, but must be able to create the favorable conditions for creativity. Other works present the leader as central, playing two roles to make the SME creative: he/she must at the same time “support and structure creativity” and “show creativity in his/her leadership” (Carrier and Gélinas, 2011, p. 25). The leader should be at the same time an example and a support.

Many works recognize creativity as a trait of the effective leadership. It is in particular the case of Mumford *et al.* (2000). In their model, they consider that problems that the leaders treat are unusual and that they cannot be regulated by routines. In addition, Puccio *et al.* (2011) study the links between creativity and leadership and show that in the recent evolution of the concept of leadership, creativity has become a central competence. Creativity is in particular regarded as necessary in change processes. According to Puccio *et al.* (2011, p. 27), the leader is lubricating to make other elements (people, processes, environment) effectively interact. The effective leaders are also those who found an atmosphere favorable to creativity, in particular because they are themselves creative.

Shin *et al.* (2012) note that a widespread idea is that cognitive team diversity can have a positive effect on individual creativity and that of the team. However, the relationship was not clearly established empirically. Shin *et al.* (2012) choose an interactionist view of creativity, in which the individual actor is creative only if he/she knows that creativity is developed in the team or the organization. Shin *et al.* (2012) attested that cognitive team diversity is positively connected to individual creativity only when a strong transformational leadership is present. In other words, individual creativity is not very effective without a transformational leadership, even when cognitive team diversity is high. That means that there are no strict factors of creativity, but conditions or situations favourable to creativity. Even the most

creative actors are not creative in a context that does not support creativity. The roles of the leader as an example and as a support of creativity appear clearly here.

1.3. Creativity and SME

Works about creativity in SMEs are few. Carrier's works acclimatized the concept of creativity in the particular context of SMEs. Her works more specifically deal with the identification of opportunities, and the role of the leader (Tremblay and Carrier, 2006; Carrier, 2007a; Carrier, 2007b; Carrier *et al.*, 2010; Carrier and G  linas, 2011). SME have many assets to support creativity (Carrier, 2007a): a simple and little hierarchical structure, informal and frequent relations between members, proximity between the leader and the employees, a fast-track mode of deciding. These characteristics make it possible to generate creativity, at the individual, team and organizational levels. Creative employees are more easily identified by leaders and are motivated to innovate.

In a study devoted to the management practices of organizational creativity in SMEs, Carrier (2007b) identifies the sources of new ideas privileged by leaders. They give priority to their employees, then to people met in commercial fairs. Among the principal elements favorable to creativity, she insists on the attitude of the leader towards the creativity of the employees. In fact, "leaders seem to have a rather linear and limited view on factors likely to influence the creativity of the employees" (Carrier, 2007b, p. 13).

If creativity remains scarcely studied in the context of SMEs, it is straightforwardly absent from studies devoted to growth in SMEs. In this article, the management of creativity by the leader in hyper-growth processes is studied, because we think that this topic is central to understand hyper-growth in SMEs.

2. Hyper-growth, leadership and creativity: research propositions

2.1. The role of the leader

Ford (1996) identifies creative and habitual action as competing behavioral options at the individual level (p. 1116). This competition appears to us to be able to be transposed at the organizational level, and applied in hyper-growth SME, because the leader must at the same time (1) cause the novel ideas and the continuation of business opportunities, and also (2) build an organization able to carry them and to make them bear fruit.

According to Heunks (1998) work about the links between creativity and innovation, creativity cannot be the only growth factor of a company. Creativity makes it possible to generate novel ideas or to facilitate the recognition of opportunities, but the realization of opportunities and the concretization of the ideas require other faculties on behalf of the organization and of its members, the first of which is leadership.

The hyper-growth SME leader has to set up an effective process of opportunity identification. Chandler *et al.* (2003) identified three opportunity creation/discovery processes: passive research leads to fortuitous discoveries (1), a proactive, deliberated and conscious research leads to identification of opportunities (2) and creation leads to the generation of opportunities (3).

An element characterizes hyper-growth SMEs: the leader wants ardently to make his/her company grow. This goal is central, totally integrated in the action of the leader. He/She implements creativity processes to let growth occur. Thus, the modes of opportunity identification in hyper-growth SME may concern the three modes identified by Chandler *et al.* (2003). In hyper-growth, the explanatory elements (motivation, organizational environment and network of actors) identified by Shin *et al.* (2012) are supposed to be central factors.

Taking into account the central place of the leader in SMEs, and especially in hyper-growth SMEs, and taking into account the place of the leader in organizational creativity processes, we propose:

Proposition 1: the leader is an essential link of the factors of creativity in hyper-growth SMEs, and he/she plays a central role in the installation and the animation of creativity processes within the SME.

2.2. Need and insufficiency of creativity

The hyper-growth trajectory oscillates between centrifugal forces (new opportunities, the will to diversify, etc.) and centripetal forces (current strategy, past investments, the installed structure, etc.). Hyper-growth strongly requests the resources of SME. Creativity makes the available resources more effective. A hyper-growth trajectory must be sustainable. However, only creativity does not make it possible to last. Indeed, creativity allows the passage towards a new state (in the dynamic state model proposed by Levie and Lichtenstein, 2010), whereas routines and habits stabilize the organization for the continuation of the trajectory within the new state.

Taking into account the need for maintaining a trajectory of hyper-growth durably, we pose:

Proposition 2: Creativity is necessary, but not sufficient to generate and maintain hyper-growth. The leadership is central to manage balance between creativity and routine and to maintain hyper-growth.

3. Data and methods

Fifteen SME from the South of France were studied. These companies were chosen according to some simple criteria: at least a 20% turnover growth during at least four consecutive years, geographical proximity (South-East of France, in Provence or in Rhône-Alpes), diversity of

the situations. Interviews were carried out according to a collectively designed guide, any aspect of the development of the company. For eight of these companies, the trajectories of hyper-growth are well documented. Table 1 synthesizes information about following items: industry, creation date, place of headquarters as well as manpower at the end of the studied period, stages and inflections, turnover growth rates, perimeter of activity (whether national, European and/or international), and modes of financing growth.

The firms selected are varied, in terms of industries, size and contexts of growth. Some operate in the services industry, others in manufacturing; some are in growing sectors, which allows a “natural development” (organic fruit and vegetable distribution), others operate in declining industries (Consulting and information services at the moment of the study). Some occupy less than 50 people, others exceeded during the period the higher limit of the SME category. Lastly, the field study began in a particular context, that of the beginning of the crisis in 2008. The major part of the empirical elements come from 48 semi-structured interviews carried out with 39 people of the executive teams of the 8 selected companies, adding up a hundred hours of written recordings. Initially, the principal leaders were interviewed on the general dynamics of growth of the company; then, functional, geographical or operational managers were interviewed to get precisions on elements identified in preliminary interviews, and to look further into functional questions.

For each company studied, we wrote a 10-page case study in order to share data and knowledge on the various cases, and to help our collective work within the research team (around 15 people in Aix-en-Provence and Lyon). Some complementary elements will be drawn from these studies, in which phases and stages of growth were identified.

Table . Main characteristics of studied SMEs

	South Software	Catrefining	South East Cleaning	Consult Services	Biodistri	Pollu-Tech	Voltage	Chem-Tex
Profile								
Interviews	2	5	8	5	7	4	3	5
Creation year	2003	1978	1967	1995	1987	1983	2000	1983
Activities	Consulting and information services	Catalyst regeneration for petroleum refining	Cleaning services for all types of buildings / locales	Validation of equipment and systems	Getting organic fruits and vegetables to markets	Depoluting solutions, dangerous waste management	High voltage transport solutions	Technical films for textile transfert
Manpower	80	300	1300 (equivalent to 617 full time)	225	220	110	26	49
Headquarters	Provence (France)	Rhône-Alpes (France)	Provence (France)	Rhône-Alpes (France)	Provence (France)	Rhône-Alpes (France)	Rhône-Alpes (France)	Rhône-Alpes (France)
General Dynamic								
Stages/inflexions	3	4	5	3	5	3	2	3
Hyper-growth episodes	38% per year (2004-2009)	20 % per year (2004-2008)	26% per year (2000-2004)	22% per year (2003-2009)	20% per year (2005-2009)	20% per year (2001-2008)	30% per year (2001-2008). Alterning pace: 40-60% even years, 20% odd years	24% per year (2001-2007)
Geographic scope	France, UK, Belgium Tunisia, Morocco	France, Europe, USA Saudi Arabia, Russia (projects: India, China)	France (South-East)	France, USA, Belgium, Switzerland	Spain, Guinea-Conakry, Costa-Rica, Europe	France, Rhône-Alpes	France, exports (40 %)	France (10 %), exports: 90 % (US, Asia, Europe)
Financing								
Growth financing policy	Growth by increasing capital internally	Partnerships with banks	Self financing + loans	Organic financial vision	Multi dimensional financing until purchased	Self financing	Self financing + loans	Self financing + loans + investors

We took part in the development of the research project, in the setting of the research design, in the creation of interview guides, in data gathering from three of eight analyzed SME and in the pooling of all collected qualitative material. The studied objects (organizational innovation, marketing, changes, crossing of thresholds, change of people or projects teams to explain growth) helped us studying the link between leadership and creativity in the trajectories of analyzed SMEs. The location in the interviews was carried out thanks to the Wordmapper software, which makes it possible to count the occurrences of “meaningful words” predetermined by the analyst, but also to locate, either in an inductive step, the words associated with the predetermined “meaningful words”, or in an automatic way, the co-occurrences between the words indicated and the principal associated words. Thus, Wordmapper keeps the words in their context of quotation and allows a qualitative work similar to the interpretations carried out by the interviewed people. Quotes from the interviews are presented in the Results section, in order to illustrate the various dimensions of leadership in the formation and in the management of creativity in hyper-growth SMEs.

4. Results

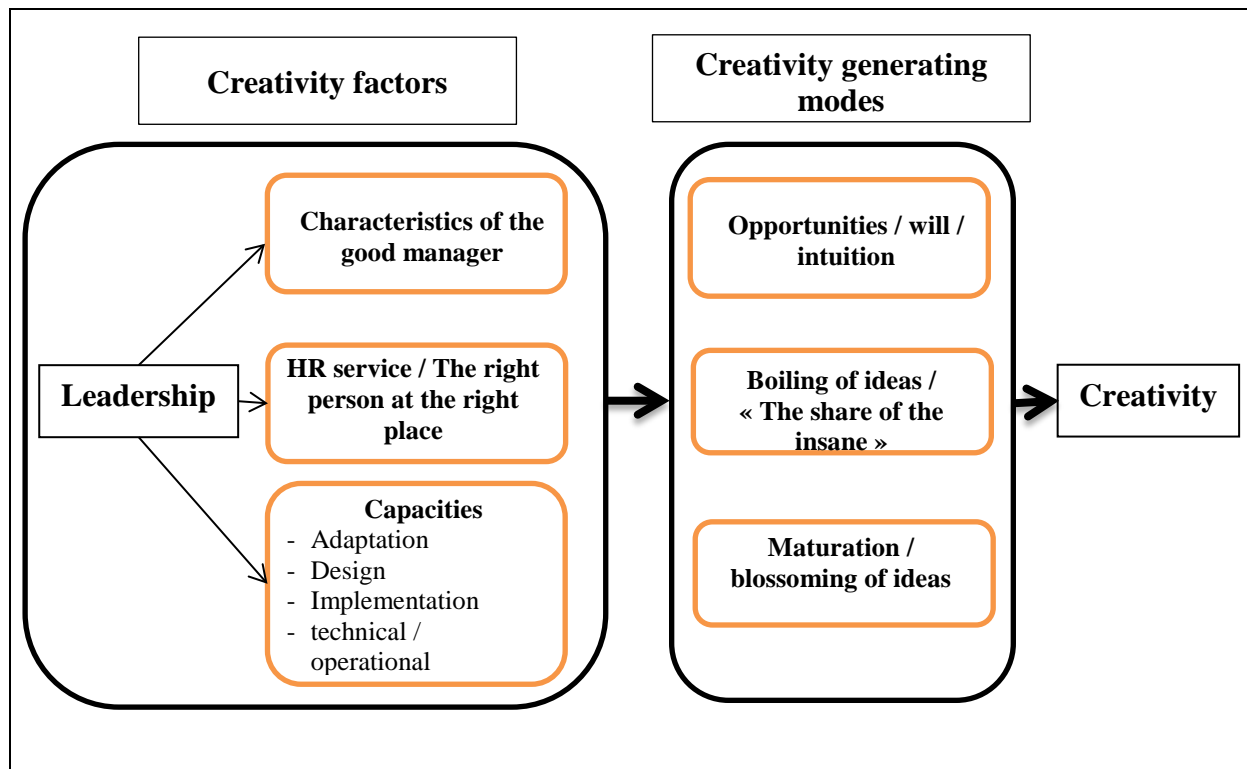
In this paper, we focus on the role of the leaders of SMEs experiencing hyper-growth. First, we identify leadership as a central factor for creativity. Then, we consider the role of leadership for balancing creativity and routine processes.

4.1. Leadership as a central factor for creativity

What are the levers allowing creativity emerge and then support hyper-growth? We showed that creativity was organized around two main axes (Chanut-Guieu, Guieu, 2014): (1) leadership is a central factor of creativity and (2) modes of generation of the creativity are

various (figure 1). We focus here on the first point concerning leadership as a central factor of creativity.

Figure 1 – Conditions favoring creativity



Source : Chanut-Guieu, Guieu, 2014, p. 50.

4.1.1. The essential presence of a “good leader”

Creativity needs the presence of a “good leader” emerge. Characteristics of the “good manager” are established and described by the people we met. The leader, to be qualified as such, must be equipped with many assets. *“It seems to me that the good leader, the one that is sufficiently good and performing to make his/her ideas considered as “the” good ideas.”* The same manager indicates that the leader can perhaps be mistaken, although it is nevertheless that its subordinates follow him/her (interview 29, South East Cleaning, chairman)¹. He must be a visionary, from the very beginning of the company. The creation of a company, *“it is*

¹ Quotes are in italics. The names of the SMEs are modified and are in line with table 1.

somehow a passion. We created this company, not in a “reasonable” way, it is because we had ideas, we felt a market and then we felt in front of us competitors that were not really well” (interview 9, Consult Services, chairman).

The leader must be undertaking and voluntary. For many leaders, being themselves entrepreneurs is obvious. *“I rather feel an entrepreneur, only creation interests me. (...) Entrepreneur with people, yes, but managing people, not, not really! ...”* (interview 35, Car).

The creative one is a “leader”, determined in his action. *“One needs a minimum of creativity and desire to go further, and it is known that the others will follow, more or less. Then, there are contrary forces, and it is necessary to try to eliminate them. There are always people who are ready, and some others who are more skeptical, who are more following...”* (interview 9, Consult Services, chairman).

For managers in hyper-growth firms, the difference between a creative actor and the others lies in the reticence to undertake, even if everything seems present to start a venture: *“I think that there are a lot of people who have ideas, but who do not dare. Then perhaps it is a question of character, if they would never go, even if they were sure that it is simple.”* (interview 14, Voltage, chairman). However, some rather see in the entrepreneur *“a lonely man”* whose “ego” is important (interview 11, Consult Services, managing director).

Opportunism, will, intuition, perseverance, are character traits quoted as being essential to an entrepreneur to show creativity and to ensure the hyper-growth in his/her company.

4.1.2. HR Management, capacities of employees and of the organization

“When in phase of creation, of creativity, it is really necessary to find the good people, that is the hardest. And you do not know what you are making” (interview 9, Consult Services, chairman). If the leaders are convinced that they need the good people at the good place to ensure creativity, they however recognize this is random, and they feel perseverance makes it

possible to solve the equation. The risk for the hyper-growth SME is to break the process of creativity by bad recruitment. The risk is also to waste time on the process of hyper-growth since some recruitment outcomes were unfortunate: *“To have the good people, it is particularly hard to support hyper-growth! I think that only we have had the good people since the beginning, perhaps we (the company) would be 3 or 4 times bigger.”* (interview 9, Consult Services, chairman). In the majority of interviews, people note that the effective human resource management is based on specific devices and on an environment that recognizes the work and the ideas of the employees.

The human factor in the creativity process refers to the often evoked concept of capacities. Thus, in the mind of the people we met, many capacities are required to feed creativity. Conceptualization and implementation capacities, technical and operational capabilities are necessary. With the following requirement: if a company asserts such or such capacity, it will have to prove it by its practices, throughout the years, in order not to reduce its growth. A more subjective capacity is adaptability, that leads to a better optimization: *“... it is mere pragmatism. That means that we seek all possible means to improve productivity in a process, therefore we do it by making people participate.”* (interview 12, Chem-Tex, CEO).

4.1.3. Conditions favoring creativity: the leader is central

In order to implement the various factors and modes of creativity, the SME manager mobilizes some typical traits of the leader: *“Today, people need a leader, I am their leader. They know that I am there and that I am somebody who makes the good decisions (...) thus they feel confident, on the one hand in my actions, on the other hand, in my decisions”* (interview 1, AST, chairman). He/She must be regarded as a good manager; he/she must also make sure that the RH department is effective, in putting the right people in the right place; finally, he/she must gather the capacities necessary to the company to be creative and grow.

Creativity factors (see fig. 1 above), managed by the leader, are associated with modes of generation of creative ideas (opportunities, the will and the intuition of the actors, the boiling, the maturation and the blossoming of the ideas – see fig. 1 above). These are the favorable conditions with the emergence and the development of creativity. The leader is a transforming leader who allows his/her SME to carry out high levels of growth: *“The most important personal competences for growth? My capacity at managing teams, it is important, and even determining to federate around you people who are confident in your decisions (...), anticipation, knowledge of the market, of the actors”* (interview 1, AST, chairman). While the SME is growing, it changes at high speed, and the two elements of the model (creativity factors and creativity generating modes) must be modified to continue to fit the new situation. Without the vision and the structuring suggested by the leader, creativity slows down and the company does not grow any more.

4.2. Managing creativity, an equilibrium to find?

Most owners announce a strong will to grow to explain high growth in their companies. *“Now, I think that in fact, there is no size. There are thresholds, there are stages, but there is no size”* (interview 26, South-East Cleaning, chairman). A phase follows another phase. Indeed, a creativity phase jeopardizes the organization by destabilizing it, and then a phase of routine re-stabilizes the organization. Thus, imbalance and equilibrium cycles follow one another. Hyper-growth continues, the dominant logic traced by the will of the leader continues, thresholds continue to be crossed, thanks to the paradoxical “controlled instability”.

4.2.1. Creativity and routine

Hyper-growth trajectory is supported by the paradoxical articulation of the process of creativity/routinisation. *“Let’s continue, add bricks, indeed bricks of activity. Let’s continue to be innovative, let’s continue... yes, that’s it! Let’s continue the technical innovation to allow*

us to be always in front. It is our creed. If there is not that, if you look around while waiting things to occur, there will be always a craftier person stronger than you.” (interview 21, Catrefining, DAF).

The alternation of behaviors (as if one unceasingly blew heat and cold to ensure growth) and the paradoxes related to growth consolidate the continuation of a dominant logic as an ultimate search: *“that remains quite related to the will of the leaders. There is on the one hand creativity, and on the other hand a ceaseless questioning of the business model. These questions are always present in the mind of the leaders; they do not hesitate to pass from one mode of organizing to another mode... ”*. (interview 13, Consult Services). The leaders do not hesitate either to break the routine and to regularly destabilize the company to ensure hyper-growth and to be as they say ‘on the top of the basket’: *“I would say that it is at the same time the will of the leaders to systematically favour growth, and their capacities to question the organization and the processes, according to the customer requirements, market requirements, and competition.”* (interview 7, Consult Services, CFO).

Routine corresponds to pauses that are considered by the leaders as essential, making it possible to breathe before setting out a new growth period. But leaders do not stand these pauses too long, because they rapidly see a danger in routinisation. Indeed, they consider that *“once it became a routine, we regret it”* (interview 6, Consult Services, DG). Routine *“deadens”* top-managers (interview 27, South-East Cleaning, Managing director). *“Routine has to be avoided at all levels”* (interview 28, South-East Cleaning, founder).

However, for others, the alternation of phases of routinisation and creation is voluntary attenuated to give place to a parallel evolution. Sometimes, routine prevails on the creative spirit; sometimes creativity prevails. Leaders see in this alternation an undeniable advantage: *“sometimes, it is necessary to make even more routine, traditional things, to make ends meet,*

and to be also able to make other things aside routine” and to later focus on creativity which requires *“heavy investments”*. (interview 48, Link, CEO).

4.2.2. Equilibria and disequilibria in creativity processes

A subtle balance is to be found between creativity and routine. The concept of balance is often proposed to explain and justify hyper-growth. Leaders are aware that they must find a good balance to continue the dominant logic of the SME. Some leaders even consider that they must permanently manage a “dynamic imbalance”: *“It becomes dynamic imbalance, because it is not obvious, it is not easy, it is an achievement.”* (interview 24, South Software, chairman). *“There are stages which are difficult”* and which endanger the company (interview 23, South Software, managing director).

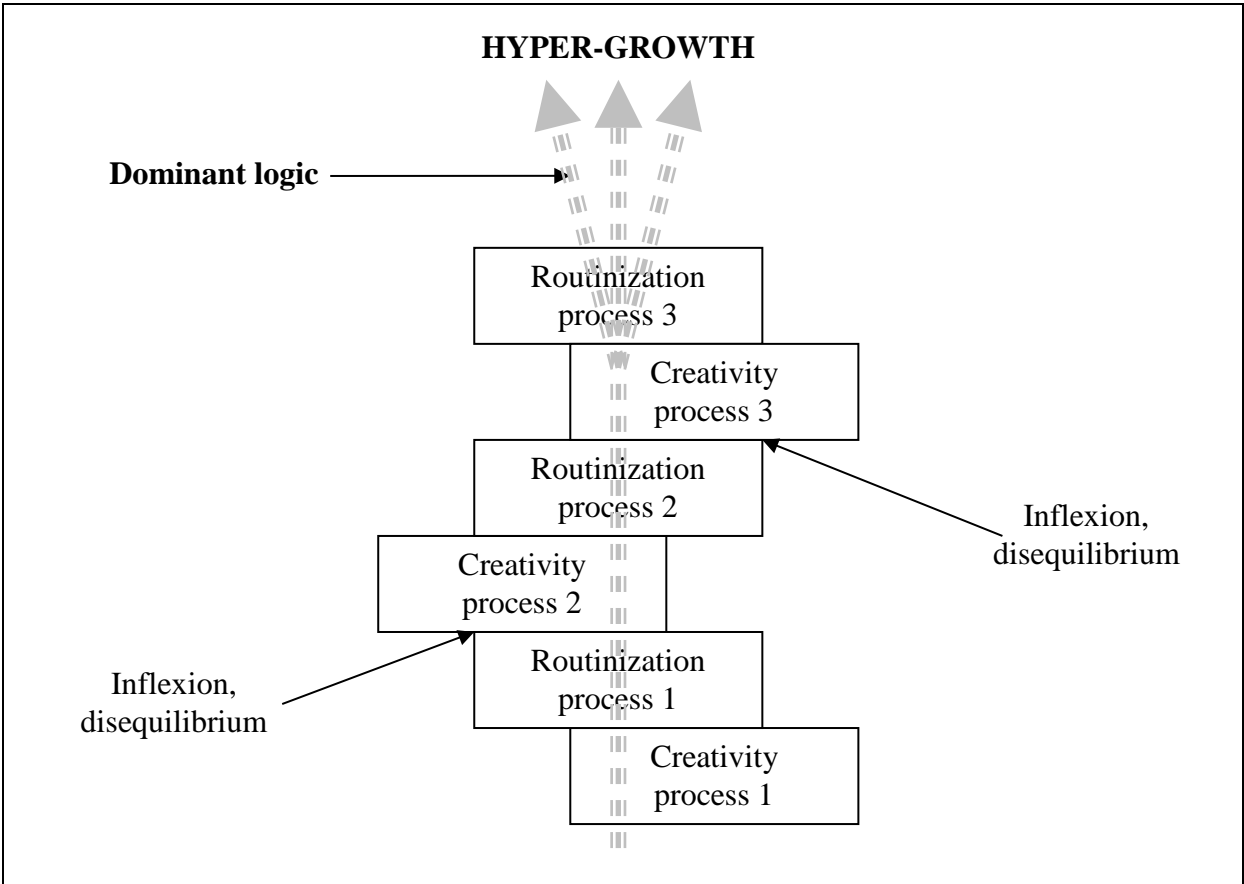
This point is a paradox. The dominant logic makes it possible to have a central axis and a long term vision. However, it is necessary that growth is regularly questioned and tested, to avoid damage and drowsiness that routine could create. In this context, creativity plays as a stimulus which contributes to ensure growth. A constant dynamic imbalance generates hyper-growth and helps the SME to ensure its trajectory. But the use of these paradoxical strategies remains perilous and the danger is constant to see the organization collapsing. It is therefore necessary to control creativity within the company, because sometimes *“the company suffers from the creativity of its leaders”* (interview 7, Consult Services, chairman). Most of them consider that it is necessary to keep *“the share of the insane”* and to function like a *“free electron”* to ensure a rapid growth. However, they are aware of the constant setting in danger, of the vulnerability of their SMEs. Hence, they seek to find a subtle balance between creativity and routine. For example, in Consult Services, the founder of the SME can be characterized as a visionary, with a strong capacity of anticipating market needs, whereas his associate is a high level technician, able to work out concrete solutions to implement the ideas of the founder (case

study Consult Services, p. 1). “I rather have insights, and he has the capacity to carry them out” (interview 7, Consult Services, chairman).

4.2.3. Equilibria and disequilibria in hyper-growth trajectories

Creativity can be the source of hyper-growth, but cannot generate a sustainable growth. The hyper-growth trajectory is in fact possible thanks to a succession of stages of creativity and routinisation (figure 2).

Figure 2 – Creativity and routine in hyper-growth processes



Each period of creativity reveals new ideas to be transformed into business opportunities, which will be then routinized. The companies we have studied have experienced inflections that enable them to renew products and operating processes, and make the hyper-growth period last. Each period of creativity destabilizes routinized processes, each period of

routinisation helps exploiting the new ideas and new opportunities. The lack of the right people in the right place led Consult Services to limit its growth, although the leader wished growth (“*One finds oneself, it is the largest difficulty, with people who find themselves systematically overtaken by the company, and who finally consider the development like a threat.*” (interview 7, Consult Services, chairman). Recruitment is a frequent means to help the company find creativity when crossing thresholds, when managers become limited or less enthusiastic.

As a sustainable hyper-growth requires an ambidextrous management (Chanut-Guieu *et al.*, 2009, 2012), hyper-growth SMEs cannot only bet on creativity. New ideas are brought by creativity, but they are not always usefull. The leader must also be able to restrict creativity. In phases of tension, creativity helps the SME to climb on the upper stage. On the contrary, phases of routinisation help (1) to form a deposit of new ideas generated by the phase of creativity, and (2) to set up the organization to manage these new ideas. The SME evolves between moments of imbalance, fruits of the creativity, and moments of balancing, fruits of the routine, which are periods during which ideas are socialized, pushed forward by their promoters (Baer, 2012).

Discussion. Creativity and routine, hyper-growth and leadership

In order to better understand the place of organizational creativity in hyper-growth SMEs, we put two propositions related to the central role played by the leader (1) in the management of creativity and (2) in the balance between creativity and routine. The first synthetic result resulting from our study specifies the place of the leader of the hyper-growth SME in the implementation of creativity. With a leader behavior, he/she succeeds in organizing the factors and the processes of creativity, in order to generate and maintain a hyper-growth trajectory. The second result indicates that the leader combines creativity with routine to

enable a sustainable hyper-growth trajectory. These analyzes are in line with former works on creativity by integrating the role of leadership. Results are discussed in this section.

4.3. Managing creativity: the enlightened leadership

The first point relates to the place of the leader in creativity. For Leonard and Swap, “Leadership makes the difference” (Leonard and Swap, 1999, p. 164). But design plays a role. Dechamp-Goy and Szostack (2012) investigate the links between design and creativity, and note: “Carrier (1997) proposes reasons for which a SME leader pains to develop creativity in his/her company. She quotes following reasons: the over-estimate of logic and reason, the reign of specialization, the obsession of “the” good answer, an excessive fear of failure, the poor value attributed to game and imagination, a restrictive conception of intelligence, or the unconditional compliance with the rule”. (Dechamp-Goy and Szostack, 2012, p. 5). Our analysis is different for the leaders in hyper-growth SMEs. Because they have a particular job (Belliato *et al.*, 2010), because they are growth-oriented and over-optimistic (Chanut-Guieu and Guieu, 2010), they are different from the leaders identified by Carrier (1997). They rather appear at ease in ambiguity; they can make new deviating proposals for their firms. The leader of hyper-growth SME “is equipped with a strong character, perseverance and agility. His/her “multi-ambidexterity” in particular enables him/her to combine know-how and innovation, opportunism and risk-control, intuition and experiment, self-organization and task-sharing” (Chanut-Guieu and Guieu, 2011b). Carrier (2007b) also notes the linear character of creativity practices in SMEs. In particular, she reveals that the leaders do not regard recruitments as an important source of creativity. On the contrary, in the SMEs that we studied, recruitments are either the occasion of filling the identified gaps in terms of competences, but unsolved by lack of time, or to prepare future developments. The effective

leaders regard recruitment as a means of generating divergent competences and management styles in the firm.

4.4. Creativity and routine : a paradoxical articulation by the leader

Ambidextrous management makes the SME oscillate between creativity and routine. We can make a parallel with Weick's work on highly resilient organizations (Weick, 2009). Thanks to his/her activism, the leader of a hyper-growth SME creates very strong expectations, related to ambitious objectives. He/She has to be fully engaged in the process to implement his/her objectives. Routine makes it possible to stabilize the experiment developed in phases of creativity. However, as in highly resilient companies, in the SMEs experiencing hyper-growth, routine is dangerous. Indeed, routine stabilizes the beliefs and the expectations, and lowers the company's capacity to identify, then to cope with, unforeseen events. The paradoxical organization that we propose is close to the "mindfull organization" conceptualized by Weick and Sutcliffe (2006, 2007), because both types of organizations create the conditions of their own destabilization to anticipate the unexpected. The will of growth plays the part of a sting, awaking energies in the firm; on the contrary, the need for structuring plays the moderating part in order to stabilize new competences and new experiments emerging from creativity processes.

Also, the creative chaos (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) which energizes the organization is close to what hyper-growth SMEs experience. Nonaka and Takeuchi indicate that creative chaos is one of the conditions allowing the creation of organizational knowledge. In the hyper-growth company, chaos is intentional, driven by the will of the leader to generate high growth. However, hyper-growth is not strictly creative chaos, since antagonist forces are necessary to make chaos really creative. For this reason, the paradoxical character of hyper-

growth has been identified as central in the dynamics of a hyper-growth SMEs (Chanut-Guieu *et al.*, 2009, 2012). Creativity is one component of the paradoxical couple, the other one is routine.

Bardin counts several elements of paradoxical logic as regards creativity (2006, p. 32-42): the need for creativity is generally born during hard times; creativity grows through phases of divergence, then of convergence; creativity is a succession of inconsistency and rationality; creativity emerges from individual characters, but in collective frameworks, and so on. Our proposal for a paradoxical logic creativity - routine is added to the list of dialogics identified by Bardin (2006).

In her study carried out with SME leaders, Carrier (2007b) identifies routine as an obstacle to creativity. Our analysis presents routine differently. If routine limits creativity in hyper-growth processes, this is rather beneficial for the SMEs. Indeed, the SMEs breathe thanks to the alternation creativity - routine and continue to grow fast.

Puccio *et al.* (2011) propose a matrix to identify the degree of novelty and of usefulness of a product. In order to understand hyper-growth processes in SMEs, we can refer to this matrix. Hyper-growth SMEs oscillate between creativity (strong innovation and strong utility) and routine (weak innovation and strong utility). The effective leaders are those who are able to build an atmosphere favorable to creativity, mainly thanks to their own creative behavior. In context of hyper-growth, this fractal character of the model of creativity proposed by Puccio *et al.* (2011) is quite present: the creative leader, by his behavior, plays a transformationnel part (Rubin *et al.*, 2005; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006) necessary to generate a creative organization.

For Mumford *et al.* (2000), problems faced by leaders cannot be regulated by routines. In opposition to Mumford *et al.* (2000), we conclude that routine belongs to the solutions necessary to continue hyper-growth. Drawing on Woodman *et al.* (1993)'s model, we can put

that creativity and hyper-growth are linked in a circular relation: hyper-growth creates the conditions for individual, interpersonal and organizational creativity. In parallel, individual, group and organizational creativity generates the conditions for hyper-growth. The leader plays a central role in proposing and managing this interaction.

Conclusion

Two main contributions are identified: (1) the elements constituting creativity have various natures, in the center of which the owner of the SME plays a leading part; (2) the leader balances creativity and routine: phases of creativity unbalance the bases of the company, and phases of routinisation restabilize the trajectory. Creativity is necessary, but nonsufficient to durably manage rapid growth in a SME. Hyper-growth requires phases of creativity matched with phases of stabilization/rationalization/routinisation. Drawing on Levie and Lichtenstein (2010) work on dynamic states, we conclude that the trajectories of hyper-growth are supported by the paradoxical articulation of processes of creativity, which endanger the organization by destabilizing it, and of processes of routinisation, that stabilize it. We propose that hyper-growth is generated by the paradoxical management of the couple creativity - routine, orchestrated by the transformational behavior of the leader.

We can draw some managerial recommendations from this research. The leader must play a double part: being creative in order to remain a model for the members of the SME, and managing creativity processes in the organization. The leader, to transform high growth in sustainable hyper-growth, must set up procedures of “unhooking”, which make it possible for the SME to leave creativity phases to enter phases of routinisation. This “unhooking” can be simultaneous, in the different services or divisions of the firm, some being in phase of creativity, others in phase of routine at the same time. Willard *et al.* (1992) noted that “in order to grow, the leader must go”. Indeed, if the leader is stuck in a stabilizing mind, he/she

will dissuade creative behaviors, and will limit the expansion of the firm. If the leader is neither transformational, nor charismatic, the leader must leave.

Two limits are inherent in this research, inviting to draw research perspectives. The first limitation is conceptual. We have privileged an organizational view of creativity. We endeavoured to show how hyper-growth trajectories could find their source in the creativity of the members of the organization, and in the devices of managing business opportunities. Hence, individual processes were not studied, a similar study privileging creativity at the individual level could be carried out to test hyper-growth contexts as valid contexts for the development of individual creativity. The second limitation is methodological. The research context is the hyper-growth SME. But, if creativity is necessary to sustainable hyper-growth, creativity can also be found in not so extreme contexts. Data gathered here result primarily from interviews carried out with the managers of studied SME. It is through the prism of their interpretation that we analyzed creativity and their own roles of leaders. Our results show the central character of the leader in the management of hyper-growth and the implementation of creativity to promote hyper-growth. The other actors were not studied as much. A useful prolongation would be to analyze the links between leadership and creativity as they are experienced by the non-leading members of the SMEs.

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