



Umbrella Summary

Leader-Member Exchange

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is leader-member exchange?

Leader-member exchange (LMX) refers to the quality of relationship exchange formed between a leader and their subordinate (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Note that in this context, leaders may include supervisors, not just upper-level leaders such as managers or administrators. LMX theory is based on the idea that leaders develop unique relationships with each follower, and the quality of this relationship then has the power to influence various attitudes and behaviors (Illies et al., 2007). Whereas most leadership theories focus entirely on the role that a leader plays, LMX differs in that it emphasizes the dyadic nature of the relationship between leaders and followers; that is, both leader and follower have the power to impact the nature of the relationship and influence each other (Dulebohn et al., 2012). High-quality LMX relationships usually involve a great degree of respect, trust, and obligation between the two parties, whereas low-quality LMX relationships tend to be more transactional in nature, meaning the leader and follower have a more surface-level relationship that is simply based on doing work in exchange for pay (Blau, 1964; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX is most often measured using the Leader Member Exchange 7 questionnaire (LMX-7), a seven-item scale that considers LMX to be a unidimensional construct. Example items include “I have enough confidence in my leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he/she were not present to do so,” “How well does your leader recognize your potential?” and “How would you characterize your working relationship with your leader?” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX can also be measured via the LMX-MDM, an 11-item scale which considers LMX as containing four dimensions, including affect (e.g., “I like my supervisor very much as a person”), loyalty (e.g., “My supervisor would defend me to others in the organization if I made an honest mistake”), contribution (e.g., “I do work for my supervisor that goes beyond what is specified in my job description”), and professional respect (e.g., “I respect my supervisor's knowledge of and competence on the job”; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). The LMX-7 and LMX-MDM are highly correlated with each other, indicating that they measure the same construct and that either may be used to measure LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2017).

Both the LMX-7 and LMX-MDM can also be adapted to collect ratings from the leader, rather than the follower. Although there is not an established standard for adapting the measures, there are certain conventions that most researchers seem to follow. When using the LMX-7, the perspective is commonly adapted to reflect a leader’s beliefs about how they think their subordinate feels about them. For example, “I have enough confidence in my leader that I would defend and justify his/her decision if he/she were not present to do so” becomes “Your

member has enough confidence in you that they would defend and justify your decision if you were not present to do so.” Conversely, the adaptation of the LMX-MDM usually involves changing the items to reflect a leader’s feelings about their subordinate. For example, “I like my supervisor very much as a person” would instead be “I like my subordinate very much as a person”. Thus, the measures are usually adapted in such a way that they measure LMX from two contrasting perspectives (i.e., what the leader believes the follower’s opinion is of them vs. what the leader’s opinion is of the follower), so practitioners interested in getting leader ratings may want to consider which measurement perspective would best serve their specific purposes.

LMX is most commonly measured from the perspective of the follower but can be measured from the perspective of the leader, follower, or both. However, research indicates that results may differ based on who is giving the ratings (Sin et al., 2009). There tends to be only moderate consistency between ratings given by leaders and ratings given by subordinates, which researchers believe may stem from a couple different sources. Firstly, the scale items were originally intended to reflect leader behaviors rather than follower behaviors, so changing the perspective of the items may lead to less consistency. Additionally, because the items seem to measure leader behaviors, leaders may perceive ratings as a form of self-evaluation and inflate their ratings in a socially desirable manner (Sin et al., 2009). Thus, it may be more important to collect ratings from subordinates’ perspectives than those of the supervisor.

Inherent in the definition of LMX is the idea that leaders develop differentiated relationships with followers, or relationships of varying quality. Thus, researchers have examined the effects of variability in the quality of relationships between the leader and subordinates across a team, known as LMX differentiation (Yu et al., 2018). LMX differentiation can be operationalized and measured in a number of different ways. It can be looked at using central tendency (the average or median LMX quality in a team), dispersion (the degree of variation in LMX quality across a team), or relative position (the location of a team member’s LMX quality compared to other team members’ LMX quality with the same leader). For more information about how to best measure LMX differentiation, see Martin and colleagues (2018).

Why is LMX important?

LMX is important because high LMX quality is positively associated with follower behaviors and attitudes in the workplace. When measured from followers’ perspectives, LMX is moderately associated with better follower job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors (i.e., behaviors that go beyond those specified in a formal job description, like altruism, courtesy, and job dedication; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Eisenberger et al., 2019; Gerstner & Day, 1997; Illies et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2016).

There is a moderate negative relationship between LMX and counterproductive performance, meaning that higher LMX quality is associated with fewer counterproductive behaviors such as acts of theft, deviance, aggression, and property misuse in the workplace (Martin et al., 2016). High LMX quality is also moderately associated with lower turnover intentions but is not associated with the actual rate of turnover (Gerstner & Day, 1997).

LMX differentiation is not associated with group performance but does have a negative relationship with group processes (e.g., conflict, coordination) and attitudes like organizational commitment and perceptions of justice (Yu et al., 2018). Together these findings illustrate that LMX matters in both an absolute and relative sense; having a poor-quality LMX is associated with a variety of negative individual work outcomes, and having a poor-quality LMX amongst coworkers with a high-quality LMX may have other negative effects of its own. In light of this, leaders should aim to reduce the amount of variability in their relationships with subordinates, preferably by developing high-quality relationships with all of them. When there is variability, leaders should take particular care to ensure that relationship quality does not differ based on follower diversity characteristics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, or other social identities.

What contributes to LMX?

Research still has a long way to go in learning about how LMX develops over time, but researchers tend to emphasize the importance of having open channels of communication between leader and follower in order to better foster a high-quality relationship (Banks et al., 2014; Gerstner & Day, 1997). Based on role theory, some researchers have suggested that LMX quality is determined through a series of interactions in which the follower and leader set expectations, respond to the expectations, evaluate each other's responses, and ultimately reinforce and develop a set of normative behaviors in their relationship (Graen & Scandura, 1987, as cited in Sin et al., 2009). Other researchers emphasize that liking one another may contribute to, though not guarantee, the formation of a high-quality LMX relationship (Dulebohn et al., 2017).

Meta-analytic evidence on the antecedents of LMX indicates that many variables are associated with LMX, which tend to fall under three categories: follower characteristics, leader characteristics, and interpersonal behaviors (Dulebohn et al., 2012). Follower characteristics that are moderately associated with LMX include things like competence, positive affectivity, and having an internal locus of control. There are also modest associations between LMX and follower agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and negative affectivity. Leader characteristics and behaviors appear to have the strongest relationship with LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012). High-quality LMX is more likely when leaders display contingent reward behaviors, practice transformational leadership behaviors (e.g., giving followers an inspiring vision to work toward, encouraging growth and ambitious goal setting, challenging followers to think creatively, and providing individualized help for each follower's specific needs), have high expectations of follower success, and when leaders are more highly extraverted and agreeable. High-quality LMX may also be associated with certain interpersonal behaviors and attitudes like when the leader trusts the follower, when there is high perceived similarity between the leader and follower, and when the follower self-promotes or tries to ingratiate themselves with the leader (Dulebohn et al., 2012).

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ LMX is the quality of the dyadic relationship formed between a leader and follower; high-quality LMX relationships are generally characterized by trust, respect, and obligation towards one other.
- ▶ LMX can be measured in terms of individual relationships between leaders and subordinates or in terms of the variability, or differentiation, of leader-subordinate relationships across subordinates.
- ▶ LMX is moderately and positively associated with job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and organizational citizenship behaviors.
- ▶ LMX is moderately and negatively associated with counterproductive performance and turnover intentions; it is not associated with turnover.
- ▶ LMX differentiation is negatively associated with group processes, organizational commitment, and justice perceptions, so supervisors may want to consider ways in which to have good relationships with all subordinates.
- ▶ Follower characteristics like competence, positive affectivity, negative affectivity, internal locus of control, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion are associated with LMX; leader characteristics like extraversion and agreeableness are associated with LMX.
- ▶ Leaders may be able to foster high-quality LMX through behaviors like transformational leadership, contingent rewards, and having positive expectations of followers.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers that would like to assess LMX should consider the LMX-7 (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) or LMX-MDM (Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

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