

**The Impact of Leader-Member Exchange Theory on Education: Leveraging the Power of
'In-Group' and 'Out-Group' to Enhance School Effectiveness**

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Abstract

Over the years, considerable research has examined the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. Much of the attention has focused on the effectiveness of LMX as a dyadic relationship between leader and subordinates in organizations other than educational institutions. This paper explores the impact of leader-member exchange within the realm of K-12 education. LMX is thought to be associated, directly or indirectly, with employee performance and attitudes in the workplace. The perceptual, behavioral, and cognitive processes underlying the nature of relationships that a leader establishes with two groups of subordinates—‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’—can be channeled towards an empowerment model that can enhance school effectiveness. In other words, LMX can effectively serve as an empowerment and a professional community building tool for school leaders. By contrast, it also has the potential of sowing the seeds of division among employees that can be detrimental to an educational endeavor. Properly utilized, LMX may lead to shared school leadership, which in turn, may result in increased school effectiveness. This paper spells out a conceptual framework for LMX in K12 schools.

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Introduction

As a dyadic relationship tool, the leader-member exchange theory (LMX) has traditionally been regarded as a relevant and an important instrument for organizational management. Several researchers have posited that there is a positive relationship between LMX and many variables linked to organizational effectiveness including performance, communication, job satisfaction, and organizational climate. Conversely, LMX has also been linked to deleterious consequences including job dissatisfaction and burnout. Discussing the importance of the dynamics of leader-member exchange (LMX), Borchgrevink and Boster (1997) observed that “LMX is associated in a predictable fashion with burnout, turnover, job satisfaction, performance, organizational climate and organizational commitment” (p. 253). It should be noted at the outset that “LMX theory is grounded in the belief that there are differences in the quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates, referred to as members” (Clemens, Milsom, and Cashwell, 2009). LMX theory emphasizes relationships between leaders and subordinates.

In essence, LMX is about specific one-on-one supervisor-subordinate relationships. In a K-12 school environment, this means principal-teacher relationships, principal-assistant principal relationships, principal-counselor relationships, and principal-department chair relationships. Characterized by exchange and reciprocity (Greguras and Ford, 2006), these relationships are critically important for a school to achieve effectiveness. Nahrgang, Morgeson, and Ilies (2009) maintain that “Considerable research has shown that workplace relationships have a significant impact on employee attitudes and behaviors”. Indeed, the effectiveness of a school depends upon positive relationships and the motivation of employees.

In fact, since schools are known to be both delightful and stressful environments, fostering

positive relationships between school leaders and subordinates (teachers, counselors, and department chairs) through LMX may account for low stress levels and turnover intentions, increased employee job satisfaction, and increased performance and citizenship behaviors. Essentially, LMX can contribute to creating a culture that makes this transformation dynamics possible.

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which LMX can enhance school effectiveness. It is suggested that a school leader may influence positively followers' motivation and commitment through proper application of the LMX theory. The paper also points out the paralyzing effects that LMX can have on a school if it is not properly applied. The central question addressed in this study is: How does leader-member exchange theory fit in a K-12 education context? In other words, can LMX enhance school leadership? Is there any relationship between LMX and school effectiveness? Before reviewing relevant literature pertaining to *leader-member exchange theory* and *school effectiveness*, it is worth examining these two key notions.

Defining Key Terms

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leadership scholarship portrays the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory as dyadic relationships of high-quality and low-quality. LMX theory contends that leaders identify two groups of subordinates: those deemed trustworthy and those deemed less trustworthy. The leader establishes high quality relationships with the first group (known as the "in-group" and "high LMX," respectively) and engages in low quality relationships (known as the "out-group" and "low LMX") with the second group. While high-quality relationships are based on mutual trust and respect, low-quality relationships might consist of a reliance on the formal employment

contract and increased leader-follower distance. Walumbwa, and Weber (2009) found a correlation between quality LMX and performance outcomes. They depict LMX quality as a mediator of workplace outcomes. In broad terms, LMX Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory refers to “a dyad, that is, the relationship between a leader and each subordinate independently, rather than between the superior and the group” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 1). In discussing the two groups that the leader creates, Lunenburg (2010) argues that “In-group members are given greater responsibilities, more rewards, and more attention. The leader allows these members some latitude in their roles.

Figure 1: DeConinck’s Vertical Dyad Linkage Model



Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

They work within the leader’s inner circle of communication” (p. 1). In contrast, the “out-group” members are kept outside of the inner circle. Lunenburg (2010) notes that “out-group members are outside the leader’s inner circle, receive less attention and fewer rewards, and are managed by formal rules and policies” (p. 1). DeConinck (2009) notes that “The relationship between the

leader and outgroup is based solely on employment contracts” (p. 1082). He summarized the hypothesized ‘vertical dyad linkage’ model in figure 1. The contrasting relationships between in-group and out-group may differentially weaken the effectiveness of school leadership.

School Effectiveness

The notion of ‘school effectiveness’ is altogether elusive and enigmatic. Scheerens (2000) notes that school effectiveness is a difficult concept to define, and, once defined, is of a nature that is difficult to measure. (P. 7). Taking a quantitative approach, Georgopoulos and Tannenbaum (1957) define ‘school effectiveness’ as “the extent to which any (educational) organization as a social system, given certain resources and means, fulfills its objectives without incapacitating its means and resources and without placing undue strain upon its members.” As such, this definition means that school effectiveness can be related to subjective judgments.

Reynolds, et al. (1993) contend that an ‘ineffective school’ could be replaced by a school with ‘a low degree of effectiveness’ (p. 2). Thus, a school with a low degree of effectiveness at one time can achieve a high degree of effectiveness at another time. In fact, the cost-effectiveness of a school can be marked by differences. A school can be effective in performing some functions but ineffective in performing others. Rumberger and Palardy (2005) postulate that “Schools that are effective in promoting student learning (growth in achievement) are not necessarily effective in reducing dropout or transfer rates” (p. 3). Furthermore, these researchers observe that “characteristics of schools that contributed to performance in one area often did not contribute to performance in another” (p. 3). All these factors make the appraisal of school effectiveness a difficult task.

Clearly, appraising school effectiveness is never an easy endeavor. School effectiveness is no longer assessed through a single indicator (student achievement); it can now be assessed

through multiple indicators. Rumberger and Palardy (2005) suggest student test scores, dropout rates, and transfer rates (p. 3). As they put it, “At the high school level, school effectiveness can be measured via two related indicators: dropout rates, which indicate the percentage of students who quit school before completion, and graduation rates, which indicate the percentage of students who remain in school and earn a high school diploma” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005, p. 4). Obviously, dropout rates, student test scores, graduation rates, and transfer rates are just some of the indicators that can be used to account for school effectiveness.

Similarly, Scheerens (2000), Professor at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, who has written extensively on effective schooling and school management, advocates a multi-level approach to school effectiveness appraisal. His definition of an effective school focuses on the identification of factors that enhance learning in all schools, irrespective of the background of the children who attend them (p. 9). He suggests that each system of education identifies variables and factors associated with school effectiveness. These factors include ‘firm and purposeful leadership’, ‘unity of purpose’, ‘consistency of practice’, ‘maximization of learning time’, ‘academic emphasis’, ‘focus on achievement’, ‘efficient organization’, ‘clarity of purpose’, ‘structured lessons’, ‘clear and fair discipline’, ‘feedback’, ‘monitoring of pupil performance’, and ‘evaluating’. Ultimately, all these factors can contribute to effective student learning. According to Rumberger and Palardy (2005), factors that influence student learning include a rigorous curriculum, high teacher expectations, and a strong academic climate.

Of the many definitions found in the literature, Scheerens’s (2000) seems to capture the essence of school effectiveness. He defines ‘school effectiveness’ as “the performance of the organizational unit called ‘school’” (p. 18). His succinct definition centers on performance as the key indicator of effectiveness. With regards to the evaluation of school effectiveness, Scheerens

(2000) points out that “The performance of the school can be expressed as the output of a school, which in turn is measured in terms of the average achievement of the pupils at the end of a formal period of schooling” (p. 18). He emphasizes educational attainment as an important asset to assess school effectiveness.

Indeed, school effectiveness is achieved through effective school leadership and teacher empowerment. It is argued in the present paper that the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory can be conceptualized as a vehicle that can potentially enhance educational practices, and subsequently, enhance school effectiveness.

Overview of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

The LMX theory has traditionally been related to the social exchange theory. Ilies, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007) provide a historical background of LMX development. They note that “Originally developed as an alternative to general leadership style approaches, LMX draws from social exchange theory in order to explain the development of dyadic relationships and the linkage between leadership processes and outcomes” (p. 269). In essence, as Glynn and Dejordy (2010) from Boston College note,

“Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) emphasizes the relational bases and influence tactics that leaders use and how they vary vis-à-vis followers: when followers are similar to leaders, LMX predicts that leaders will give them more responsibility, attention, and rewards, but when followers are different, leaders will tend to give them less attention, managing by relying more on formal rules and structures” (Glynn and Dejordy, 2010, p. 125).

Central to leader-member exchange (LMX) theory is the idea that leaders develop different types of exchange relationships with their followers and that the quality of these relationships affects important leader and member attitudes and behaviors (Ilies, Nahrgang, and Morgeson, 2007).

Lunenburg (2010) refers to this type of relationship as a ‘dyad’, that is, “the relationship between a leader and each subordinate considered independently” (p. 1). Lunenburg (2010) highlights the

significance of independent leader-subordinate relationship.

Consequently, far too often, the quality of leader-member relationship has a direct influence on performance. In a study of 330 dyads about different ways relationship quality develops over time, Nahrgang and Morgeson (2009) concluded that “after leaders and members have interacted, behaviors such as performance become the key predictors of relationship quality for both leaders and members” (p. 265). In other words, the quality of LMX is directly correlated with the performance outcome. The type of leader-subordinate relationship outcome that is within the scope of this paper encompasses job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and burnout.

Dimensions of LMX

Researchers have long discounted one-dimensional measures of leader-member exchange. Greguras and Ford (2006) argue that it may be “deficient in capturing the entire scope or nature of LMX relationships” (p. 435). In recent years, LMX has been associated with four dimensions to assess the correlation of LMX relationships and outcomes. These dimensions include (1) affect, (2) loyalty, (3) contribution, and (4) professional respect.

LMX used to be linked to three dimensions. Dienesch and Liden (1986) referred to the three dimensions as ‘currencies’. They initially suggested that LMX relationships are based on three different exchange ‘currencies’: (1) perceived contribution to the exchange (contribution), (2) expressions of public support (loyalty), and (3) mutual affection (affect). Only later was a fourth dimension (professional respect) added to fully capture LMX relationships. Each of the four dimensions can often correlate with subordinate’s satisfaction with the leader. Of the four dimensions, Greguras and Ford (2006) argued that only three (affect, loyalty, and professional respect) can be significantly correlated with satisfaction with supervisor. They hypothesized that affect, loyalty, and professional respect will significantly predict satisfaction with supervisor.

It is assumed, for example, that subordinates with high LMX work harder and tend to manifest high levels of satisfaction with superiors. Loyalty is thought to be a mediator of LMX relationships. In his study of Singaporean R&D professionals, Lee (2008) found that the loyalty dimension of LMX mediated the relationship.

In a school context, the school leader is instrumental in building trust in teachers, administrators, parents, and students. In general, teachers will trust colleagues, parents, students, and principals if their word, action, written or oral statement can be relied upon. Thus, it is clear that the nature of LMX relationships between a school leader and subordinates matters. Chatman and Kennedy (2010) note that “leadership is a perpetual phenomenon, with followers observing the words and actions of their superiors and making inferences about their superiors’ motives (p. 173). The type of relationships a leader establishes with subordinates may influence organizational and group performance because ‘in-group’ members and ‘out-group’ members tend to react differently to the words and actions of a leader.

Leader-Member Exchange and Employee Empowerment

Researchers have examined the role that leaders play in influencing their employees’ creative behaviors (Atwater and Carmeli, 2009). In today’s highly competitive environment, school leaders can harness the benefits of leader-member exchange (LMX) by maximizing their managerial and instructional skills. LMX has proven to be an effective tool for school leaders to exert an influence on school employees’ role definition, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Clemens et al (2009) studied the impact of school counselor-principal relationships. He concluded that leaders can have considerable influence on subordinates’ creativity.

There is growing acceptance that LMX theory serves as a foundational framework for evaluating the outcomes of superior-subordinate relationships in a variety of professional fields

(Clemens et al, 2009). The prominence of LMX theory among other relational leadership theories stem from its central tenet that states that “leadership occurs when leaders and followers are able to develop effective relationships (partnerships) that result in incremental influence and thus gain access to the many benefits these relationships bring” (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995 cited by Uhl-Bien, 2006). By adopting quality LMX in the context of K-12 education, effective leadership relationships would develop among dyad “partners” encompassing school principals, teachers, counselors, department chairs, and other administrators.

Hence, a school leader may use LMX as an empowerment tool for shaping a professional culture of elevated performance. The success of LMX theory in an educational environment lies in the relationship quality defined as the degree to which trust, respect, and mutual obligation exist within a dyad (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). After initiating exchange with in-group members, Lunenburg (2010) argues, “Members of the in-group are invited to participate in decision making and are given added responsibility. The leader allows these members some latitude in their roles” (p. 1). Conversely, “The leader will provide support, consideration, and assistance mandated by duty but will not go beyond such limits” (Lunenburg, 2010, p. 2). Out-group members are viewed as mere “hired hands,” influenced by legitimate authority rather than true leadership. As a result, Lunenburg (2010) argues, they will do what they have to do and little beyond that.

In addition, Lunenburg (2010) points out that the leader should develop high-quality relationships with as many subordinates as possible and that the in-group must be as large as the out-group. This view conflicts with the position of this paper regarding the role of in-groups and out-groups in an educational setting. It is argued that the school leader (principal) should empower an in-group, and the in-group, in turn, should empower the out-group, and vice-versa. For this reason, it is necessary that a school leader be broad-based and open-minded.

Ultimately, LMX theory has the potential of transforming a K-12 school into a true

professional community if used appropriately. To be effective, a school leader needs to devise structures for using an 'in-group' as a relationship entity for empowering an 'out-group'. A combination of an empowered 'out-group', an 'in-group' with added leadership responsibilities, and powerful school leadership makes an effective school. In-group members should not be selected on the basis of likeability, alma mater, seniority, lifestyle, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, proximity, religion, or age. Similarly, a school leader should not select out-group members based on lack of trust. Course assignment, team assignment, or task assignment should not be amenable to easy "protégés" and "non-protégés" formulas.

This paper takes a selective and depersonalized approach to group building. Leaders are encouraged to identify discernable variables such as expertise in a given subject, ability to share strategies, ability to create strategic partnerships, communication skills, and other leadership attributes to select in-group and out-group members. Stated differently, a leader should take into consideration subordinates' differences. As Yukl and Mahsud (2010) observe, "Moreover, subordinates commonly differ with regards to their experience, skills, values, and needs, and a leader's behavior with different individuals should vary accordingly" (p. 82). Additionally, assigning leadership roles to in-group members can be done in a depersonalized fashion. Switching leadership roles between in-group members and out-group members can only strengthen an educational organization.

Ultimately, the idea here is to promote wholeness, group cohesiveness, and group effectiveness. A school leader faces many challenges. One of these challenges should not be managing divided groups of employees that he or she creates himself or herself. To encourage group cohesiveness, Elenko (2002), professor of international management at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, suggests that organizations need sensitivity training programs. He notes

that increased organization development (OD) and better organizational performance may result in improved listening skills, greater openness, increased tolerance of individual differences, and improved conflict resolution skills.

Impact of Leader-Member Exchange on School Effectiveness

It is supremely important that school leaders open up to all their subordinates equally. Subordinates' contributions can be paramount to school improvement plans and school effectiveness. Leaders should seek their suggestions, and give consideration to their inputs. If necessary, leaders should incorporate their inputs into school improvement plans, or modify proposals in light of their objections.

It is a proven fact that leader-member relationships affect low LMX and high LMX employees differently. Borchgrerink and Boster (1997) stated that "Low quality LMX employees tend to terminate employment more frequently than high quality LMX employees" (p. 242). In contrast, studies have shown that high quality LMX employees manifest higher job satisfaction levels. Javidan, Dorfman, Howell, & Hanges (2010) have argued that "leaders in organizations tend to support and leverage in-groups and cliques who they can trust to get the work done" (p. 343). Greguras and Ford (2006) inferred from their review of literature on LMX that "Subordinates in high quality LMX relationships are also expected to engage in more task-oriented discretionary behaviors than those in lower quality LMX relationships" (p. 438). They concluded that "Low LMX relationships display less loyalty, respect, and liking between the subordinate and supervisor and involve autocratic decision making. In contrast, a high LMX relationship is based on liking, mutual trust, and respect and extends beyond the employment contract" (p. 1082). The effects of low LMX can be devastating.

Differentiated leader-member relationships may produce different results. Lunenburg

(2010) reports that “There is evidence that members of the in-group (those who report a high-quality relationship with the leader) assume greater job responsibility, contribute more to the organization, and are rated higher in performance than members of the out-group (those who report a low-quality relationship with the leader)” (p. 2). He argues that the type of stress varies by the group to which a subordinate belongs. In-group members’ stress emanates from the additional responsibilities given to them by the leader, whereas out-group members’ stress emanates from being left out of the communication loop.

In education, there should be little room or no room for low LMX relationships between school principals and subordinates (teachers, counselors, and other administrators) or between teacher and students as the consequences of Low LMX can be dire for all involved.

In particular, teachers need to have high LMX relationships with their supervisors. Teachers should not be patronized, or run by condescension, or by terror. Schools need strong leadership to help students maximize their learning; but school leaders must command change through dialogue, communication, and continual learning.

Maccoby (1996) prescribes an effective model of leadership that can work in an educational organization. He contends that “To resolve the leadership paradox, leaders must become strong people who people want to follow” (p. 57). Hence, effective leadership should not be achieved by brute force but “by intellectual power and conviction, persuasion, interactive dialogue, and continual learning” (Maccoby, 1996, p. 59). More importantly, a school needs strong and ethical leadership. Walumbwa et al (2010) point out that “ethical leadership principles might increase not only employee performance, but also employee self-efficacy, leader–subordinate relationship quality, and identification with the organization” (p. 8). This may be particularly true in K12 schools.

It has been reported that leader’s trust can lead to innovative behavior. Lee (2008), who studied the effects of leadership and LMX on innovativeness for R&D professionals in

Singapore, claims that “High quality exchanges between leader and member have been found to have positive relations to innovative behaviour” (p. 671). Rather than appear to be in support of one group (in-group), it is critical that a school leader learns to balance competing values and interests so that all subordinates may foster innovativeness and creativity in the workplace.

Research has examined the contents of the LMX values. Ma and Qu, (2010), who both teach organizational management in Guanghua School of Management in China, examined the universalistic and particularistic values associated with the leader-member exchange (LMX) model. They draw attention to the negative impacts of subjective performance evaluation on workers’ satisfaction within the LMX context. They argue that “Leaders tend to develop relationships of different levels of closeness with different subordinates” (p. 734). This differentiation affects performance evaluations. They contend that performance evaluations conducted by leaders are rarely aligned with workers’ objective performance.

In fact, there have been reports about leaders rewarding in-group members with superior performance reviews and more openness while rebuking disliked out-group members with poor performance ratings and less attention. The direct consequence of this double standard is higher job satisfaction levels among in-group members and less motivation and less productivity among out-group members. It is very important that public schools have mechanisms of action in place to discourage any type of subjectivity that can breed disengagement on the part of subordinates.

It is generally accepted that low LMX can lead to burnout. School employees (teachers, counselors, and other administrators) who have low LMX with school leaders may exhibit burnout syndrome behaviors. Huarng (2001) defines burnout as “syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion involving the development of negative job attitudes and loss of concern and feeling for others” (p. 15). He conceptualizes the burnout syndrome with three components:

(1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) reduced personal accomplishment. As a result of low LMX, the burnout may have direct impacts on teachers. This may lead to absenteeism, tardiness, unpreparedness, and subsequently, to underperformance.

In sum, a leader's behavior can be linked to the levels of performance of employees. It is important that he or she adopts a flexible and equitable attitude. A leader's attitude is known to influence employees' actions and behaviors. In fact, quality LMX is believed to be a key determinant of the success of a professional community in a school. Conversely, low LMX breeds frustration and lack of commitment. In a situation where low LMX characterize the relationships between school leaders and teachers and counselors, students are often the first victims.

A Model of LMX and Shared Leadership for K-12 Schools

There is scant systematic research on the associative correlation between leader-member exchange (LMX) and school effectiveness enhancement. Clemens et al's (2009) study regarding principal-school counselor relationships provides a rare glimpse into the application of LMX theory in a school context. The findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. The relationship between principals and school counselors who work together is essential to program implementation and maintenance, and school counselors can effect change in their role by advocating for themselves.
2. The way school counselors' roles are defined has substantial implications for school counselors' job satisfaction and future employment plans.
3. It is important for school counselors and principals to foster their relationship and for counselor educators and educational leadership faculty to set the foundation for high-quality principal-school counselor relationships in training programs.

These findings provide a foundational framework for the application of LMX in a school. They emphasize the need for shared leadership wrought with high quality relationships. A key contribution of this study is an all-inclusive framework that recognizes the significance of each member and does not segregate employees on the basis of perceptual differences.

There is an abundant body of research that shows that a school principal is no longer the lone leader of a school. Several stakeholders (administrators, teachers, parents, and other community members at large) play a part in the management and administration of a school. This is why shared leadership is paramount to school effectiveness. These stakeholders are required to take on leadership responsibilities. It should behoove school leadership to engage the community in order for a school to thrive.

Researchers have defined 'shared leadership' in a variety of ways. Pearce and Conger (2003) define 'shared leadership' as "a dynamic, interactive influence process among individuals in groups for which the objective is to lead one another to the achievement of group or organizational goals or both. This influence process often involves peer, or lateral, influence and at other times involves upward or downward hierarchical influence" (p. 1). In a context of shared leadership, the quality of leader-member exchange is vitally important. Sharing leadership roles with teachers allows teachers to have an influence over, and participate in, school-wide decisions with principals. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) note that "Sharing leadership may have its greatest impact by reducing teacher isolation and increasing commitment to the common good" (p. 41). Any actions that may threaten the hard-won commitment of employees or employee performance must be dealt with accordingly. Chatman and Kennedy (2010) recommend that leaders uphold their commitment to their culture of professionalism and equity even in the most trying times.

Several techniques have been employed to build high quality leader-member exchange relationships. Schermerhorn, Hunt, & Osborn (2011 cited Lunenburg, 2010, p. 3) propose these five tips:

Stage 1. Meet separately with your employees in the initial stage to help each of you evaluate each others motives, attitudes, and potential resources to be exchanged, and establish mutual role expectations.

Stage 2. For those where the initial meeting was most promising, work toward refining the original exchange relationship and developing mutual trust, loyalty, and respect for these “in-group” members.

Stage 3. Some of these relationships will advance to a third (mature) stage where exchange based on self-interest is transformed into mutual commitment to the vision, mission, and objectives of the work unit.

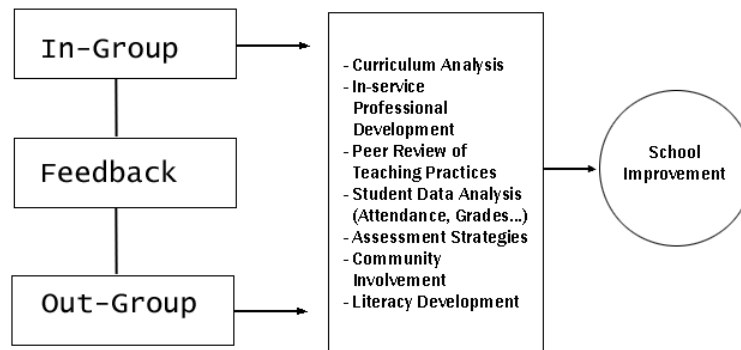
Stage 4. Reward these second and third stage “in-group members” with greater status, influence, and benefits in return for extra attention from them, and remain responsive to their needs with strong reliance on persuasion and consultation.

Stage 5. Follow up with day-to-day observations and discussions and work toward increasing the number of in-group members.

It is widely acknowledged that shared leadership can shape organizational culture and can have a direct impact on employee performance in an organization. Through LMX, educational leaders can delegate certain power to in-group and out-group and share leadership of an organization. With respect to teachers, they should be given the opportunity to perform leadership functions such as (1) organizing and leading peer review of teaching practices, (2) providing curriculum development knowledge, (3) participating in school-level decision making, (4) teaching and improving individual teaching proficiency and skill, (5) leading in-service training and staff

development activities, and (6) engaging other teachers in collaborative action planning, reflection, and research (Devaney, 1987).

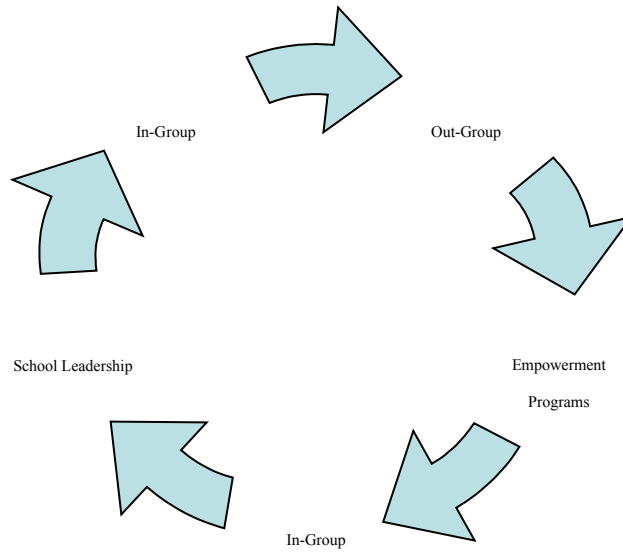
Figure 2: Ngoma’s LMX Model of Staff Empowerment



The model presented in figure 2 provides a framework for conceptualizing leader-member exchange theory as an empowerment tool. The basic premise is that a leader’s primary job is to empower all subordinates. It is crucial that a school leader identifies a group of employees (key teachers and administrators) with a strong set of skills encompassing professional expertise, procedural knowledge to facilitate professional events, content knowledge, literacy development, technological literacy, curriculum analysis and planning, high ethical standards, credibility, and communication.

The out-group should provide feedback and suggestions for program improvement. The ‘in-group’ will lead different committees (student data analysis, professional development, peer review of teaching practices, and curriculum analysis or development). In-group members are expected to take on leadership roles before leading other (out-group) members.

Figure 3: Ngoma’s Model of Employee Empowerment Cycle through LMX



More importantly, there should not be any differentiated treatment of subordinates. The quality of LMX between leader-subordinates must remain the same. Figure 3 provides the cycle of empowerment through LMX. Once empowered, out-group members will join the unofficial ‘in-group’ and lead other out-group members. The key to the success of this constant interplay is high quality LMX between school leaders and subordinates.

Conclusion

School leaders play a major part in shaping the organizational culture of educational organizations. The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory provides a leadership tool that they can use to leverage in-group and out-group members. It is too common that school leaders choose members of these two groups based on trivial or divisive variables (likability, proximity, perceived common vision, ethnicity, age, attire, gender, sense of humor, and religion). Such variables may lead to lack of cohesiveness, which in turn, may lead to ineffective or authoritarian managerial practices.

As indicated in this paper, a leader’s leadership style is closely associated with creative work involvement of subordinates. Teachers, administrators, parents, and students have special

talents that principals and other educational leaders need to exploit strategically. Failure of school leadership in K12 schools may also be attributable to the nature and levels of LMX interactions between school leaders and their subordinates.

In sum, scholarship on leader-member exchange theory maintains that high LMX can be a key determinant of the connection between leadership and employee performance. Conversely, low LMX can have deleterious consequences. This is especially true in a K-12 school. To allow all subordinates, regardless of their position or background, to participate in school improvement decisions, it is important that school leaders move away from traditional LMX relationships and toward more dynamic and professional dyadic relationships. The ultimate goal of school leadership should not be individual staff enhancement but collective staff development. Conflicts (personality clashes, intra-group and interdependence) and ambiguity can be managed effectively if a school leader has the same quality of LMX relationships with all employees. Although this is arguably hard to achieve, school leaders must strive to reach this ultimate goal.

This paper seeks to contribute to the body of research about LMX in education. It is hoped that educational researchers will examine the implications of the leader-member exchange theory within the realm of K-12 education. There is scant literature that investigates the link between LMX and school effectiveness. Yet, LMX is one of the relational theories that is widely viewed as effecting change in many organizations. Educational researchers are encouraged to further probe the effects of LMX relationships on students in K12 schools.

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