Leader–Member Exchange Theory: A Glimpse into the Future

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Abstract

This chapter serves as the conclusion to the edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Leader–Member Exchange* and provides a path forward for future studies in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory by highlighting important gaps and future avenues of investigation. Recommendations include extending the theoretical foundations of LMX theory beyond role making and social exchange theories, exploring antecedents of LMX by utilizing longitudinal methods and examination of trajectories, integrating the context of new dyad formation, examining outcomes from objective measures or measures that do not rely on manager or self-reports, further exploring the effects of LMX differentiation, social comparison, and social networks, and systematically investigating the degree to which LMX may have a dark side.

Key Words: leader–member exchange, LMX, relational leadership, dyadic leadership, social exchange

In this volume, thought leaders in our field of LMX have taken stock of the major developments in LMX theory over the past four decades. Each chapter in this edited volume contains a targeted summary of research relating LMX theory to a particular topic and provides directions for future research (Figure 22.1). As these chapters serve to attest, LMX theory remains one of the most active, comprehensive, and intensively researched theories of leadership. LMX quality seems to matter for employee job attitudes and behaviors, and it is the primary lens through which employees regard their work environment. Given the number and depth of past studies, it is easy to assume that leader–member relations are now a known quantity. *Is there anything left to be done? Is it time to move on to greener pastures, or are there assumptions to be challenged, questions to be answered, and gaps in the literature to be filled?*

After reading every chapter in this volume and considering the status of the literature, we anticipate just the opposite. It is our conclusion that there are a number of intriguing, theoretically, and practically important research questions that will keep LMX researchers busy over the next decade. In the following pages, we summarize some of the topics that we consider high priorities on the list of issues to be resolved and questions to be investigated. Many of these points were inspired and affirmed by the individual chapters in this volume. It is our hope that after reading the *Oxford Handbook of Leader–Member Exchange* that you are as inspired as we are.

Theoretical Background

To date, social exchange theory and role theory have been the most frequently used theories to explain how LMX quality develops and how employees respond to the quality of their LMXs. According to the role theory perspective (Dienesch & Liden, 1986), LMX quality develops as a result of a negotiated role. Mutual testing of the loyalty and competence of the exchange partner is viewed as key to the development of a high-quality exchange. According to social exchange theory (Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), employees reciprocate the level and quality of support they receive from their leaders by
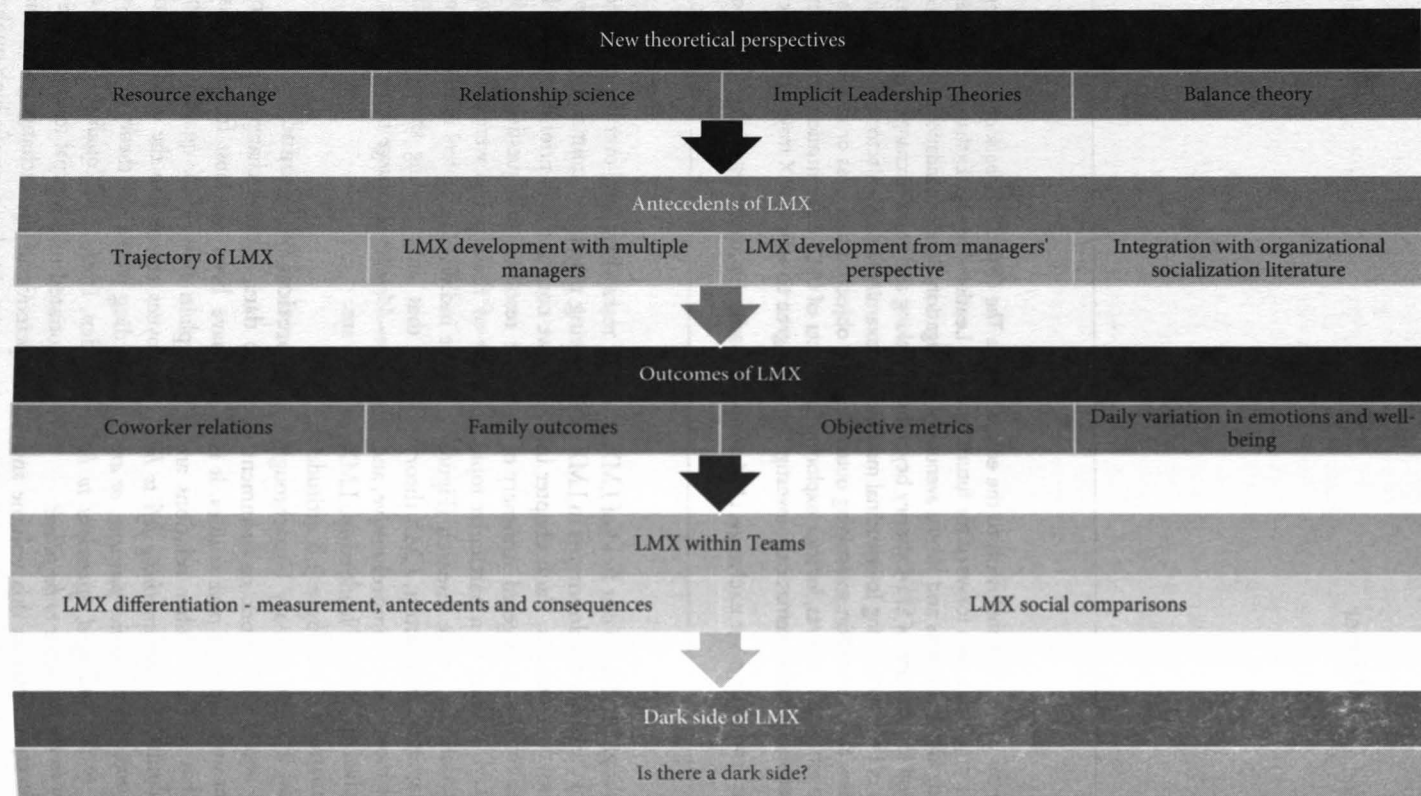
New theoretical perspectives			
Resource exchange	Relationship science	Implicit Leadership Theories	Balance theory

Antecedents of LMX			
Trajectory of LMX	LMX development with multiple managers	LMX development from managers' perspective	Integration with organizational socialization literature

Outcomes of LMX			
Coworker relations	Family outcomes	Objective metrics	Daily variation in emotions and well-being

LMX within Teams	
LMX differentiation - measurement, antecedents and consequences	LMX social comparisons

Dark side of LMX
Is there a dark side?

Fig. 22.1. A summary of new research directions in LMX theory.

behaving in ways that benefit the leader directly and indirectly. Although these theoretical bases explain a great deal about the formation of a relationship, we see room for further extension of our understanding of these exchanges. For example, what exactly is exchanged in relationships of different qualities? In this handbook Law-Penrose, Wilson, and Taylor (2015) discussed this important and oft neglected issue. More explicit focus on the resource exchange process should help researchers open up the "black box" of the exchange process. *What resources do employees receive from a high-quality exchange? What do leaders receive? Does resource exchange necessarily begin with the leader, or can employees be the initiators of the relationship by providing resources leaders value? If the leader is merely the provider of organizational resources, does this environment still contribute to the development of a high LMX quality?*

Integration of implicit leadership and followership theories into the LMX literature has been rare; nevertheless, it remains important. Individuals typically hold implicit leader theories (ILT) in their mind, listing the attributes of who they believe is an effective leader and what an effective leader does. The fit between the leader's attributes and employee ILTs will have implications for LMX quality, just as the leader's implicit followership theories, or expected attributes from effective employees, will (Engle & Lord, 1997). Scholars have theorized about the integration of ILT literature with LMX literature (e.g., Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Thomas, Martin, Epitropaki, Guillaume, & Lee, 2013; van Gils, van Quaquebeke, & van Knippenberg, 2010), and more work in this area would be beneficial. Furthermore, in addition to the leadership and followership prototypes, the prototypicality of the leader for the group as predicted by social identity theory of leadership would have implications for LMX development. Epitropaki and Martin (2015) discussed potential ways in which the social identity theory of leadership developed by Hogg and colleagues (2005) may be integrated into LMX research.

Heider's (1958) balance theory is another theoretical perspective with important implications for LMX theory. The theory predicts that when one person likes another person, that person will seek alignment between their own attitudes and values and those of the other person, which has implications for the process of LMX development. When a new employee joins an organization, his or her exchange quality with the leader will likely be affected by co-worker opinions about the employee and the quality of the exchange between the leader and existing employees. Thus, it will be unlikely for a leader to develop a high LMX relationship with a newcomer if current employees who have a high LMX relationship with the leader dislike the newcomer. Balance theory suggests that factors other than social exchange and role making operate in leader–member exchanges.

Finally, the LMX literature would benefit from explicit consideration and integration with perspectives from relationship science. Epitropaki and Martin proposed in their chapter that cross-fertilization with findings and theories of relationship science will move the LMX literature forward, and Thomas et al. (2013) discussed the connections between relationship science and LMX theory, which we believe has important implications for future research in this area. Processes such as social comparisons, attachment styles, and relationship prototypes can enrich the LMX literature and introduce further research questions.

Antecedents of LMX Quality

How do high-quality exchanges between leaders and employees develop? As Nahrgang and Seo (2015), as well as Schyns (2015), summarized in their chapters, this research topic has received much attention, yet it remains a fertile ground for future research. A key limitation of past research has been the cross-sectional designs and examining established instead of new dyads. To answer the question of how LMX develops, it is important to identify and examine new dyads early in the life of the relationship. Such studies are still extremely rare (for exceptions, see Bauer & Green, 1996; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). Furthermore, fully answering the question of how LMX develops requires researchers to utilize longitudinal approaches and model change in LMX quality over time. This approach has been underutilized to date (with the exception of Nahrgang, Morgeson, & Ilies, 2009). Examining the trajectory of LMX quality over time should help answer interesting and important questions. *What is the trajectory of LMX quality over time? Is the trajectory different for employees with different personalities such that the relationship develops faster for employees with certain personality traits (such as extraversion)? Is the trajectory more sustainable for some employees rather than others?* For example, we already know that influence tactics and impression management relate to LMX quality, as does job performance (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012), but is it possible that when LMX develops primarily through the work-related efforts

of the employee, LMX quality remains positive over time, whereas if it develops primarily as a result of impression management behaviors of employees, LMX develops quickly but is less stable?

In their chapter Day and Mischenko (2015) highlighted the importance of longitudinal research and make the astute observation that leaders change over the course of a career, and the degree to which an employee (or a manager) is able to consistently develop high-quality exchanges with a series of leaders will drive his or her career success and other long-term outcomes. Therefore, in addition to understanding the development of a specific new relationship, it is important to investigate antecedents of a person's ability to establish relationships with multiple leaders, or the degree to which one high-quality exchange can be leveraged into developing a high-quality exchange with the next manager.

We still have limited understanding regarding what helps LMX development from the manager's perspective as opposed to the employee's perspective. Though the literature has often treated LMX quality measured from employees' and managers' perspectives as interchangeable, studies have also shown that LMX reported from these perspectives has little overlap (Liden, Wu, Cao, & Wayne, 2015). If this is the case, then it would seem reasonable to expect that LMX as assessed from the manager's perspective is a fundamentally different concept than LMX measured from the employee's perspective, with a different set of predictors. We believe that examining how LMX quality develops from the manager's perspective is of critical importance.

When investigating the development of LMX quality, it is also important to adopt an organizational socialization perspective (Zhou & Wang, 2015) and integrate the two literatures more fully. A new dyad may form in one of at least three ways: the employee may be new to an existing team, the leader may be new to an existing team, or both the leader and the member may be new to an existing team. Each of the ways in which a new dyad forms will have its unique challenges, and the process may be somewhat different for each variant. Perhaps the most common scenario is the first one, when the employee joins a team with an intact social network in place. In this case, the employee is developing a relationship with the leader as well as with new co-workers. As co-workers form their opinions about the newcomer, their opinions are likely to affect their leader's opinions about the newcomer.

The newcomer will ultimately be absorbed into the existing social network, and perhaps challenge and ultimately change the social network in the aftermath. In the case of a leader being new to a team, LMX development may follow a slightly different process. Because the leader is joining an existing network of employees, he or she will be simultaneously developing relationships with both his or her own supervisor and with all new subordinates. The leader will need to invest in relationship development with several subordinates at the same time and will be under greater time pressure to establish relationships while proving his or her own effectiveness. Finally, the third scenario, although likely uncommon, may facilitate the LMX development process by introducing a point of similarity between the leader and the member, and possibly enhance camaraderie. In short, examining LMX development without regard to the context surrounding the formation of the new dyad potentially misses important distinctions between the influences underlying each scenario.

Another way of conceptualizing LMX development is to consider whether the new dyad is also undergoing a process of organizational socialization. A new dyad may form because either the employee or the manager is a new hire to the organization or because of an internal move. In the case of an internal move, the new dyad may actually be a result of an employee who has been promoted from within the team and is now taking on a supervisory position among former colleagues. Technically, both circumstances produce new dyads, but each brings about its own set of unique challenges. In the case of internal hires, the person (either the leader or the employee) has a reputation, a history, and an existing social network within the organization, which should affect the LMX development process differently from the stranger-to-stranger exchange normally inherent to LMX theories. In other words, assuming that LMX development is a process in which two strangers come together to develop a relationship through a mutual testing process misses the actual richness and nuances possible in the process of relationship development.

Much of what happens before the newcomer is hired into the organization could also have implications for LMX development. If the newcomer is replacing a specific person who has left (as opposed to being hired to fill a new position), the characteristics of the former job incumbent may affect expectations of the new person, and the similarity to the previous employee may affect

LMX development. Factors such as whether the newcomer is hired after interviewing with only the future manager or as a result of a joint decision among co-workers, and whether the newcomer is joining the team after enthusiastic support of the manager or despite the objections of the manager, will likely influence how much support the manager provides to the newcomer, again shaping the entire LMX development process. As a result, we believe that there is much more work to be done with regard to exploring and understanding the process by which leaders and employees develop a high-quality relationship.

Finally, what disrupts a high-quality relationship? In their chapter Nahrgang and Seo (2015) noted the lack of literature addressing this topic as an important research gap. Currently, we know little about what causes changes in relationship quality. *How do psychological contract breaches affect high-quality leader–member relations? If a breach occurs, how is the damage repaired?* The study of breaches within the dyad is a potentially important issue that has received scant research attention (for an exception, see Shapiro, Boss, Salas, Tangirala, & Von Glinow, 2011). Furthermore, an important question we have not yet answered is whether it is possible to deliberately increase LMX quality. Are there behaviors employees or managers may be taught to display within the context of an existing, mature relationship that will improve the relationship quality? For example, we know that leadership style relates to LMX quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012), but *is it possible for managers who are trained to display a particular leadership style to actually improve their LMX quality?* Such questions have important practical implications and highlight the importance of developing interventions that would improve LMX quality in mature and presumably less malleable relationships.

Outcomes of LMX Quality

At first glance, the outcomes of LMX quality seem well known. As discussed in this volume, LMX quality is related to job attitudes (Epitropaki & Martin, 2015), stress (Sonnentag & Pundt, 2015), job performance and citizenship behaviors (Matta & Van Dyne, 2015), emotions (Tse, Troth, & Ashkanasy, 2015), career success and mobility (Kraimer, Seibert, & Astrove, 2015), and justice perceptions (Masterson & Lensges, 2015), and creativity (Tierney, 2015), among others. Are there outcomes that have not yet received sufficient research attention?

In our view, despite all the research conducted in this area, there is still work to be done. *First, how about co-workers? What is the nature of the relationship between LMX quality and the degree to which the focal person is socially accepted and valued among co-workers?* Recent work suggests that a positive link between the two is not assured. For example, Erdogan, Bauer, and Walter (2015) showed that LMX quality was positively related to centrality in co-worker advice network only when focal employees showed high levels of discreteness and high levels of helpful behaviors toward colleagues. It is possible to imagine a scenario in which a high-quality LMX turns the employee into a "teacher's pet," suggesting that positive co-worker relations are not necessarily guaranteed, even if the LMX quality is high.

Does LMX quality have relations to stress and well-being of others who are not part of the dyad? In fact, we know little about the effects of truly low-quality exchanges and how they affect the job attitudes of co-workers. Furthermore, an employee who is in a poor-quality exchange may transmit his or her stress to those with whom he or she cohabitates, such as family members and children. A focal employee's partner may be affected by the focal employee's LMX quality through affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). For example, an employee who is supported, trusted, and valued by the manager may experience a more positive mood at home, whereas an employee who dislikes and lacks trust in the manager may display more aggression and negativity at home. A partner's LMX quality may act as a stressor for the other partner to the degree to which the member of the LMX relationship communicates worries and frustrations at home. Alternatively, in dual career couples, a partner's LMX quality may be a referent for the other partner, either helping appreciate their own relationship with their own manager, or helping the partner realize what he or she is missing. A partner's low LMX may contribute to the sense of job insecurity, affecting the well-being and life satisfaction of both the focal employee and the partner. In other words, LMX quality may have implications for the health and well-being of others who are not part of the dyad, which is an important possibility to investigate.

Does LMX quality really shape employee behaviors? One potentially problematic aspect of the majority of studies relating LMX quality to job performance, citizenship behaviors, or other types of behaviors is that the behavioral measures are typically rated by supervisors. As a result, these

assessments may more readily reflect the quality of the relationship between the manager and the employee, rather than accurately representing whether the employee truly behaves in a particular way. Therefore, extending our measurement to include objective job performance or co-worker-rated performance or utilizing raters who are not part of the focal dyad is essential before we can accept with great confidence that high-quality LMX is a driver of pro-manager and pro-organizational behaviors. At the same time, when objective measures such as sales performance or actual turnover behavior are used, relationships are, not surprisingly, much weaker because such outcomes tend to have many other antecedents and some environmental, uncontrollable elements (Gerstner & Day, 1997). One way to increase confidence in these findings is to utilize experimental methodology and focus on observable behaviors. *Given a particular LMX quality, what is the likelihood that a person will respond to a request to help a co-worker or actually help out a newcomer?* These behaviors can be observed at the microlevel using experience sampling methodology or direct observations at the day level. Sonnentag and Pundt (2015) highlight the importance of day-level analyses in examinations of the connection between LMX and stress, and Tse et al. (2015) call for additional research utilizing this method to explore the connection between LMX quality and emotion variation at the day level. We would also add that the ability of LMX quality to predict day-to-day variations in helpfulness, productivity, absenteeism, idea generation, and biological metrics of stress will validate the typically unquestioned assumption that LMX results in behavioral outcomes.

LMX at the Team Level

The focus of LMX researchers has recently shifted from understanding the effects of individual perceptions of LMX quality to understanding the effects of LMX distribution within the team, or LMX differentiation. This topic is understudied and conclusive findings are hard to come by, and therefore there is still a need for further investigation. As Anand, Vidyarthi, and Park (2015) discussed in their chapter, there are many important questions to answer in relation to LMX differentiation.

• How should LMX differentiation be measured? Should we measure LMX differentiation statistically or by using employee perceptions?

Should we use manager or employee perspectives in these calculations?

• Are differentiated relationships always harmful to group cohesion, coordination, or effectiveness? What are the boundary conditions?

• What is the role of LMX differentiation in more novel organizational contexts such as virtual teams as opposed to teams that work face to face within the same office space?

A recent development in this line of research is the investigation of LMX configuration within the work group. For example, Li and Liao (2014) showed that when LMX quality was distributed in such a way as to split the group into two subgroups, team coordination was affected, resulting in poorer team performance. LMX differentiation as well as understanding the effects of LMX distribution remain important research topics, but examining the effects of LMX differentiation while controlling for the within-group average of LMX quality is not informative in capturing the reality of how LMXs are distributed or the particular challenges that exist within the group. Supplementing these studies by adopting a configurational approach may contribute more to this conversation.

In addition to LMX differentiation, the constructs of LMX social comparisons (LMXSC; the perceived degree to which a person's LMX quality is higher than his or her colleagues, Vidyarthi, Liden, Anand, Erdogan, & Ghosh, 2010) are timely developments considering the effects of the web of relationships surrounding the focal dyad. As Liden et al. (2015) observed in their chapter, perceived relative standing may be more important than the absolute possession of resources. The authors contended that LMX quality itself may take a backseat to LMXSC. When LMX scholars utilize the underlying rationale that LMX confers a special status on the members, what they are actually referring to may not be LMX quality, but LMXSC. Therefore, familiarity with this new addition to the literature may ensure more consistent and theoretically congruent ways of operationalizing the focal variable of interest in studies of LMX. Going one step further, Sparrowe and Emery (2015) discussed the need to consider the entire social network in investigations of LMX quality, and Pellegrini (2015) noted the importance of relational context in cultural settings in which relationships take a more prominent role in organizational life. In other words, it is reasonable to anticipate that future LMX studies will investigate the dyad within the context of an existing

network of other leader–leader, member–leader, and member–member relationships.

Is There a Dark Side to High-Quality Relations?

When we spend decades embedded into a research field, it becomes easy to see the prescriptions of the theory as the solution to all ills in the world. Yet a balanced approach would necessitate explicit consideration of any potential downsides to having a high-quality exchange. *Is there a dark side to LMX quality? Are there problems high LMX members or leaders are likely to encounter, or any costs to the person, team, or organization as a result of having a high-quality exchange?*

This possibility has been recognized and discussed previously. In this volume, Matta and Van Dyne (2015) also discussed the exploration of any potentially negative outcomes as an important research direction, calling for research that examines the conditions under which LMX quality may negatively relate to job performance. Tierney (2015) examined the possibility that LMX may be a stifling force for creative behaviors under specific circumstances, given that creativity necessitates thinking beyond the status quo and questioning assumptions. However, scant research attention has been paid to this question. An obvious potential problem of high-quality LMX is the potential challenges for diversity management, as recognized by Scandura and Lankau (1996). These authors recognized that similarity–attraction may have a role in shaping the quality of exchange between managers and employees. For example, if race similarity, gender similarity, or religious similarity results in a higher-quality LMX, which is then translated into performance advantages and a better work situation for the high LMX member, high-quality LMXs may introduce concerns about discrimination or unfair advantages to the team.

High-quality LMX may also blind the employee toward controversial or unfair actions of leaders, creating an effective blind spot due to the potential halo of a high-quality relationship. There is some evidence that this can occur. In an experimental study Pelletier (2012) illustrated that high LMX members view their leader as less toxic if the victim of the leader was an outgroup member. This suggests that high-quality LMX may limit the degree to which employees question the leader, notice unethical actions of the leader, or even "blow the whistle" when the leader is engaged in questionable actions. Further research regarding the blinding effect of LMX quality is warranted.

LMX quality has also recently emerged as having both positive and negative effects on the degree of stress experienced by employees (Lawrence & Kacmar, 2012). Studies have shown that positive effects of LMX quality were mediated by increased levels of job involvement. This finding suggests that LMX quality may motivate the employee to the detriment of his or her well-being. The desire to not let the manager down, meet your perceived obligations, and support the manager may clearly be taken too far. This is an interesting possibility, suggesting that the sum total effects of LMX quality on employee health and well-being would benefit from further investigation.

Finally, Ballinger, Lehman, and Schoorman (2010) pointed out an important downside of high-quality LMX: when their leaders leave the organization, high LMX members are at greater risk of turnover. This could be because the organization may lose some of its attractiveness for high LMX members. The leader who leaves may also recruit former high LMX members into his or her new company, again motivating employees to leave. This suggests that LMX quality may create loyalty to the leader but not always to the organization. How organizations can turn a high-quality LMX into a high-quality relationship between the employee and the organization and leverage this relationship for the benefit of the organization is an important research question with theoretical and practical implications.

Bridging the Theory–Practice Gap

LMX theory is empirically valid, widely researched, and conveys a clear message to give to employees and managers alike: developing a trust, liking, and respect-based relationship with employees (or managers) matters. In fact, this is likely the key difference between successful and less successful managers. In their Project Oxygen (Bryant, 2011), Google scientists analyzed vast amounts of data to identify the characteristics of effective leaders. Their eight-point list is consistent with the prescriptions of the theory. For example, listening to employees, paying attention to their career goals, and expressing interest in team member success and well-being were all on the list. *Given its practical implications, how do we get LMX theory into the hands of practicing managers and employees?* The theory perhaps suffers from lacking a catchy, intuitive name such as "authentic leadership" or "charismatic leadership" and may seem like commonsensical advice for managers and students who are seeking the "next best

thing" in leadership. It also seems easier to prescribe simple, short-term solutions to leaders such as "act confident," "improve your posture," and "remember people's names" as opposed to suggesting that they be fair, trustworthy, and supportive of employees. In contrast, the advice from LMX theory is longer term, with few absolutes, and the information does not come in easy to communicate "sound bites."

How can we address these difficulties? It seems to us that it is essential to expose practicing managers to LMX theory. This may necessitate publishing more research translations, articulating the practical implications more succinctly and clearly, and designing training programs to be used in disseminating the theory. Given its dyadic nature and the important role it assigns to followers, we can also more easily integrate LMX theory into college classes. We can teach our students to be more proactive and thoughtful in developing, managing, and maintaining the quality of the relationships they have with their managers and co-workers. This awareness would serve them well, increase their effectiveness at work, and be instrumental in helping them achieve their career goals.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we set out to bring together top scholars in the area of LMX to create a lasting resource for current and future scholars. It has taken several years to complete this work. At last, we have a research-based handbook that serves to preserve what is known and inspire further work on LMX theory. The future of the theory remains bright, and there is much work to be done. It is our hope that researchers will take the opportunity to take LMX research full-steam ahead.

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