Capstone Thesis
Leader-Member Exchange in Tech Company Culture – The Impact of Relationships

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Thesis and Capstone Committee:
Jonathan Holiman, MA, Chair

Natalie Lovell
Southern Utah University
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Abstract

In this research, organizational culture is looked at within technology companies to study leader-member relationships. Leader-Member Exchange is a theory used in researching how a leader builds a mature partnership his or her followers. The three components of a mature partnership are mutual trust, respect, and obligation. While there are copious amounts of research on the model of this theory, there is little research on what those three factors look like. This research provides insight on how mutual trust, respect, and obligation are developed and illustrated with the leader and members through the communication exchanges. This paper also touches on potential impacts of these strong relationships on the company culture.
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Approval Page

We certify that we have read and viewed this project and that, in our opinion, it is satisfactory in scope and quality as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Professional Communication.

Capstone Committee

__________________________
Jonathan Holiman, MA, Chair

__________________________
Kevin Stein, PhD, Graduate Director
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Introduction

Human connection and relationships have always been important and desired among society and individuals. These relationships even go back to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs which places social needs immediately after physical and safety needs (West & Turner, 2012). These relationships are important in all contexts, such as in the home, the office, and other casual friendships. In looking at these relationships, it is important to understand how one forms a relationship that is filled with mutual trust, respect, and obligation.

A significant type of relationship that is common in many aspects of life is that of the leadership relationship. Everyone has multiple leaders in their lives, and many have multiple individuals for whom they are the leader. One of the most common of these leader relationships are those in the work environment. Every member of a company has someone that they report to directly, even the CEO or president typically report to a board of directors or something similar. On the other side of the coin, many employees have someone who reports to them directly. Therefore, it is important to understand how relationships develop from a stranger or acquaintance to that of a high-quality, mature partnership.

Leader-Member Exchange theory is an emerging theory amongst leadership theories that looks directly at the importance of this relationship. In the early stages of this theory, it was thought to only develop these mature relationships with certain members that were ready for and wanting the additional responsibility. Now, after going through modifications and revisions, the goal of the theory has evolved to create these unique relationships with all members. But the question then arises, how does one create those relationships?

The Leader-Member Exchange theory describes the three components being necessary for a mature relationship are mutual trust, respect, and obligation. This thesis seeks to bring
insight illustrating how mutual trust, respect, and obligation are created by the leader with their individual members. This qualitative study focused on interviewing members of two teams from two tech companies in Silicon Slopes. Because tech companies are known for having strong company cultures, they set a great stage to study these relationships in being a significant piece of the culture.

Tech companies tend to be described as having positive and sought-after company cultures. This can range from things such as employee perks, professional development, and team dynamics. The leadership and relationships of an organization are key pieces of the company’s culture. As this thesis looks at how to develop those relationships, it will also touch on what those potential impacts may be from them on the organizational culture. It is apparent in the findings that it is indeed the leader’s role to have a concerted effort on creating these partnerships and how it can have positive effects, such as higher performance.

**Literature Review**

**Organizational Culture**

The term “company culture” is becoming popular amongst both company board executives and fresh jobseekers, and with good reason (Bersin, 2015). In fact, in 2014, culture was the “word of the year,” being the top-searched word in Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Company culture is now something that employees look for, need, and want in a company. Leaders are seeing the crucial role it plays, as it attracts and keeps talent, fuels team innovation, and drives employee connection and motivation (O.C. Tanner Institute, 2019). Company culture is something that is at the forefront of goals and initiatives within many companies to proactively develop and foster a positive organizational culture.
While ‘company culture’ is more of the corporate term, ‘organizational culture’ is typically the term seen in academia. Schein (1984) is known to have come up with the original definition and concept of organizational culture, stating that it is,

The pattern of basic [underlying] assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning how to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (Schein, 1984, p. 3)

Simply put, a company’s culture boils down to its set of values, beliefs, and attitudes. These shape the behaviors of the organization and is something that is experienced, felt, and lived by the employees – ultimately it is about alignment (Holderness, 2017). It encompasses everything from within the organization, including the vision and goals, ways of thinking, relationships, successes, how failures are handled, leadership, and communication.

While there are many business and communication theories, organizational culture specifically is a rising focus amongst researchers and professionals. Schein (1996), known as one of the original researchers of organizational culture, stated “we have not yet sufficiently understood the impact of culture” and “how little [we] understand its profound influence in situation after situation” (p. 229). As time goes on, more researchers are studying and finding positive and negative effects of an organization’s culture. The belief is that “organizational culture is an important social characteristic that influences the organization, group, and individual behavior” (Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011, p. 677). Organizational culture is important to study and understand as it drives not only decisions, performance, success, and growth, but it also has a significant impact on employee satisfaction (Lund, 2003). The greater it can be
understood and positively applied, the more advantageous and favorable the results will be on both individuals and organizations.

While many definitions have arisen for organizational culture, Schein (2010) contends that while these different meanings may illustrate manifestations of an organization’s culture, they do not exemplify its essence. Schein explains that “culture implies that rituals, climate, values, and behaviors tie together into a coherent whole, and this pattern or integration is the essence of what we mean by ‘culture’” (p. 17). It is about all of these factors coming together, affecting one another, and working as a whole. The culture is constantly changing, for better or worse, and requires proactive attention.

Schein (2010) goes on to discuss and break down the three levels of organizational culture: artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions. The simplest level being the artifacts, deal with visible structures and processes in the physical environment. This includes things like the language, technology, style, stories, rituals, and ceremonies. The beliefs and values deal with the ideals, goals, values, ideologies, and rationalizations. Whether they are correlated with actual performance or not, they are well articulated and have become adopted by the employees. Whether in training new employees or in how to deal with certain key situations, the espoused beliefs and moral rules serve as a normative function for guiding the members.

Last, the underlying assumptions deal with “unconscious, taken-for-granted beliefs and values [that] determine behavior, perception, thought and feeling” (p. 24). An example of underlying assumptions would be if a problem arises within a company and nobody pauses to ask or debate how it should be solved. Rather, the shared processes and ways of working together have become adopted over time. These processes are unspoken and just assumed as
what is done from being debated over in past times (Christensen and Shu, 2006). How to handle
the problem is no longer a discussion, but it has been established into the culture of how to react,
what to do, and by what means to arrive at a solution.

The culture of an organization or company can have much broader reaching effects than
just the visible artifacts and decision-making processes. The culture can even be a source of
conditions that must be present in the company’s culture in order to be a source of sustained
superior financial performance. First, the culture must be valuable; adding financial value to the
organization by enabling behaviors that will lead to an increase in sales and reduction of costs.
Second, the culture must be rare in having characteristics that are not common to the cultures of
a great number of other organizations. And third, the culture must be extremely hard to imitate
by other organizations in either not being able to provide such characteristics or that those
characteristics would put them at a disadvantage.

Coyle (2018) suggests that one of the first steps in creating a strong company culture is to
build safety. This suggests that a “group succeeds not because its members are smarter but
because they are safer” (p. 6). Teams succeed because the individuals feel safe and connected,
which is built through what Coyle calls “belonging cues.” Safety and connection are developed
through trusting relationships with the leader, which will be discussed more later within Leader-
Member Exchange theory.

Not only is there a culture for the company as a whole, but there are also sub-cultures
within the organization between different departments, teams, and units. It is important to
understand the larger culture of an organization, as well as the varying sub-cultures within the
organization (N.A., 2017). The larger the company, the more sub-cultures may arise. The goal
for a company regarding these different inner cultures should be that they very closely align. Different companies and industries may be known for different cultures, but it is up to the individual company to create and live a strong, positive, and safe culture.

**Tech Companies**

“Tech companies” are becoming a large and popular industry with the stereotype of having strong company cultures (McPherson, n.d.). The term is oftentimes a bit of a blurry, grey-area label with which a variety of organizations describe themselves – which can sometimes be misleading and mislabeling. Throughout the years, companies have wanted to associate themselves with technology. In fact, a study from 2001 found that companies that changed their name to have the dotcom suffix at the end, even if they were not particularly affiliated with the internet, had a significant stock price increase (Cooper, Dimitrov, & Rau, 2001). There is a large appeal in society to be associated with technology.

Although companies that are not largely in the technology world use the term “tech company,” many other companies still fit under its definition. Simply put, one is a technology company if it is in the business of selling technology. That is to say, if “your *product* – the thing you make money by selling – consists of *applied scientific knowledge* that solves concrete problems and enables other endeavors, you are a technology company (Payne, 2012, italics in original).” This definition of what a technology company provides is a pure explanation in that they are in the business of selling technology.

While most definitions agree that a tech company should emphasize tech being the product, some companies under the definition sell technology as a service. Heath (2017) quotes David Coveney, Directory of digital agency Interconnect IT in stating,
A true tech company creates new technology. It doesn’t necessarily sell it to other people. It may use technology as part of a product, such as Uber which both uses and creates technology in order to assist people in booking minicabs. Or it may be like Google which creates new search algorithms. (Heath, 2017)

Some tech companies may sell technology and other times it is merely a large piece of what the company does. Heath (2014) references a great definition from the Tech Nation Report that stated a digital tech business is a “business that provides a digital technical service/product/platform/hardware or heavily relies on it, as its primary revenue source.” Ultimately, the most common and accepted definitions and understandings of how a tech company is defined comes back to the company selling technology as a product or creating the technology as part of the service in what they offer.

In looking at the success of a technology company, three components determine them successful: growth, engagement, and monetization (Eyal, 2016). The growth focuses on the company’s number of new users or customers, the engagement focuses on the number of retained users or customers, and the monetization focuses on profit, worth, or revenue. Throughout this paper, these three pillars will be used as the framework when the term “financially successful company” is used.

Leader-Member Exchange

A large component of both a company’s culture and its success is the leadership within the organization. This culture and success include both the leadership at the very top of the company at the executive level, as well as the various leaders within the organization that go all the way down the ranks of directors and managers as direct-report leaders. In fact, Schein (2010) discussed leadership and culture being two sides of the same coin and that “culture is ultimately
created, embedded, evolved, and ultimately manipulated by the leaders” (p. 3). Many leadership theories and models are analyzed and used in both academia and the corporate world. One theory in particular that dives into the leader-member relationships in the culture is Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory. The theory originated almost 35 years ago in 1975 and has since gone through several revisions as it continues to expand in further research.

Originally called “vertical dyad linkage theory,” LMX focused on the dyads, also called interpersonal exchanges, between the leader and the follower (Dansereau, Graen, and Haga, 1975). This was different from previously prevalent and studied leadership theories that focused on traits, skills, and situations. LMX was the first leadership theory to focus on the actual communication exchanges between the leader and member and their dyadic relationship. In its early stages, LMX suggested that leaders develop a different type of relationship with different types of exchanges per each subordinate (Liden, Wayne & Stilwell, 1993). The theory focused on the linkages and exchanges between the leader and each member being heterogeneous, rather than homogenous with each being treated the same (Graen & Schiemann, 1978). LMX became one of a handful of the rising leadership theories that focused on individuals, rather than something that would work the same for each member.

In treating each employee different, this approach essentially broke down to two groups of distinctive relationships. The key difference between these two groups comes down to negotiations within the formal employment contract. This included the in-group characterized by high-quality relationships and exchanges and the out-group distinguished by low-quality relationships and exchanges. High-quality relationships have a high latitude of negotiation, while conversely, low-quality relationships have a low quality of negotiation. Essentially, an employee in the in-group will negotiate what they are willing to do in addition to what is outlined in the
employee’s formal contract. This negotiation goes both ways in the member being willing to do more than what is outlined and also the leader in consenting upon those roles. The leader not only allows the member to do more, but proactively initiates and helps in these negotiations of additional role responsibilities (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975).

As these definitions keenly illustrate, the heart of the theory comes back to the exchanges and what is built from those exchanges. Northouse (2014) explains this negotiation well in saying that,

Subordinates who are interested in negotiating with the leader what they are willing to do for the group can become a part of the in-group. These negotiations involve exchanges in which subordinates do certain activities that go beyond their formal job descriptions, and the leader, in turn, does more for these subordinates. (p. 163)

Furthermore, Northouse continues that if subordinates are either not interested in or do not show the ability in taking on additionally new responsibilities, they then become a part of the out-group. As the exchanges and the taking on of additional duties continues, or lack thereof, the in-groups and out-groups become that much more established.

Employees can become part of the in-group based on a variety of factors, including how well they work with the leader and how well the leader works with them (Northouse, 2014). There are motivations from both the leader and the subordinate in moving into the in-group. However, the control still lies within the leader. One example of this would be that LMX is positively related to higher performance (Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997). Just the perception of a supportive, high-quality relationship between the employee and his or her leader has a correlation with positive energy and the emergence of creativity (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009). The impacts extend further than the immediate task.
Another big motivator for the leader in having in-group members includes not being able to effectively meet and deal with all of the demands in their respective leadership roles (Rosse & Kraut, 1983). This is because being in the in-group, subordinates take on additional responsibilities, which is a perfect shift into the leadership-making role as the leader. The job of the leader is still to create results, but “instead of producing the results [themselves], [their] responsibility is to learn how to influence the results of [their] team” (Stuart et. al, 2017, p. 31). One great way to influence those results is by fostering subordinates into the in-group by building a trusting relationship which then includes more responsibilities.

Over the years, LMX has developed into what it is currently known for today in having a three-stage model. With even more focus on the relationship, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1991) suggest the following three phases that show the process and cycle of leadership-making in developing these relationships: stranger, acquaintance, and mature partnership. In the stranger phase, both individuals come together in their interdependent roles, and interactions between the two are more formal and purely contractual in nature. The leader provides followers only with what they need to perform, and followers behave as required by their job. The relationships are low-quality, low-frequency, and the motives on both sides are typically of self-interest (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

The second phase of LMX moves to acquaintance where communication exchanges increase, and they begin to share greater information and resources – both personal and work-related. However, the quality of the relationship is still just at a medium level. The last phase of maturity, is the ideal phase, where a mature partnership is created. Exchanges are “in-kind” and have more emotion behind them with three key components – mutual respect, trust, and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Northouse (2014) suggests that in the third stage “they
have tested their relationship and found that they can depend on each other” (p. 167). This third stage is the optimal and ideal relationship to develop and maintain with all members.

The Boston Consulting Group conducted two surveys over the past five years supporting the importance of relationships to employees and workplace happiness. In their Decoding Global Talent Report, with 200,000 global respondents, both good relationships with colleagues and good relationships with superiors were in the top four factors contributing to workplace happiness (The Boston Consulting Group, 2014). In the same report in 2018, with 366,000 global respondents, good relationships with colleagues and good relationships with superiors were in the top three work preferences for what matters most on the job (The Boston Consulting Group, 2018). Copious amounts of research exist in both academia and corporate that show the needed focus on relationships – particularly, leader and subordinate relationships.

LMX has transitioned from fostering strong relationships with only some subordinates for the in-group to the leadership-making that suggests the importance of creating those unique relationships with all subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). Leaders should focus less on in-group and out-group member differences, but should look for ways to make the entire unit an in-group by building trust and respect with all subordinates. The leader ought to nurture high-quality exchanges with all of their members and should offer each subordinate the opportunity to take on new roles and responsibilities (Northouse, 2014). The relationships will still vary with different personalities of the individuals and different dynamics of the individual relationships, but the ideal goal is to foster each one to a mature, trusting relationship. Relationships will also develop differently based on the type of company and the company’s culture. Companies can hold and place value and importance on different things and that will affect how those
relationships may develop (N.A., 2017). This is something that indeed takes work and effort from both sides, but particularly the leader.

Brown (2018) discusses the idea of talking about trust being a difficult conversation. She suggests that leaders often avoid these conversations because of their potential to go side-ways fast, but goes on to say how “trust is the glue that holds teams and organizations together” (p. 222). Trust starts with the conversations, both directly about trust, as well as those involving and implying trust. As mentioned earlier by Coyle (2018), safety and connection are the first steps in building a strong culture. Trusting leadership and culture are intricately intertwined.

Trust is a vital component to a strong company culture. Covey and Conant (2016) quote Fortune’s research in the annual list of the 100 Best Companies to Work For showing that “trust between managers and employees is the primary defining characteristic of the very best workplaces. …It’s not nice-to-have; it’s a must-have” (p. 3). Building this trust is a large component of fostering a successful company and team culture, and as Covey and Conant continue, a successful business and company. There is a direct relationship between company culture and the LMX theory.

Developing trust is not only found in the conversations about trust, but it is also in the conversations and actions that build trust. While there is a substantial amount of research concerning the importance of developing mature relationships, or rather partnerships, in the three-stage process, there is very little research on how to get to that final stage. Of the little amount of literature that is published on strategies for getting to the third stage, it focuses on action items such as meetings, rewards, and following-up (Lunenburg, 2010). However, what needs more study and exploration is looking at the actual communication exchanges taking place between the leader and the member in building these mature partnerships.
More research is needed to fill the gap in helping to illustrate how high-quality leader-member exchanges and relationships are created (Anand et. al, 2011). A great deal of literature illustrates the importance of trusting relationships, but understanding how to foster one is crucial and missing. This research is necessary to provide in order for both academics and corporate leaders to learn and understand how to develop relationships that are founded upon mutual respect, trust, and obligation to each other, in progressing to the final stage.

In the substantial amount of literature regarding LMX, there seem to be no definitions for the framework of the final stage: mutual trust, respect, and obligation. The goal of this research is to develop theory-specific illustrations for the three components of a mature partnership as seen through the lens of two tech companies. This research will also seek to illustrate how those three components are developed, particularly through communication. The hope is that greater insight will emerge on how a leader develops those three factors with their members and the potential effects of how this relationship affects the culture.

Because there are no current definitions in the LMX literature for these three factors, the definitions from Merriam-Webster will be used for coding purposes as a base work. Merriam Webster defines trust as “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone: one in which confidence is placed: to place confidence in, rely on” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c). Respect will be defined as “to consider worthy of high or special regard: esteem” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). Obligation will be defined as “something one is bound to do: duty, responsibility: something that obligates one to a course of action” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). These definitions will be used as a base to inductively provide theory-specific illustrations from the research.
The leadership and internal relationships of a company or organization are significant components of the company’s culture – particularly in the popular and financially successful technology companies. Culture starts from the top down, and this includes the daily interactions and ways in which relationships are built. As a company learns to strengthen the leadership and relationships, the culture will be stronger, which will then lead to higher performance, greater outcomes, and financial success. It is important to gain a greater understanding as to how these relationships are nurtured and developed from a stranger or acquaintance, to a trusting, mature partnership, as described in the LMX theory. The hope of this research is that it may add to the gap of how these relationships are developed and provide illustrations of mutual trust, respect, and obligation as seen in these two tech companies.

**Research Questions**

RQ1: What does mutual trust, respect, and obligation look like at two financially successful tech companies and how are they illustrated?

RQ2: What effects do mature relationships with leaders and followers play in the organizational culture of a financially successful technology company?

**Research Method**

To gain insight into these questions regarding leader-member exchange and organizational culture, a qualitative study was conducted. As described in the literature review, ample research explores what Leader-Member Exchange theory is, the stages, and various explanations and significant impacts. A greater explanation is required to identify what a mature partnership looks like and how a leader creates those relationships through their communication exchanges. Then in doing so, what impact those mature relationships have on the culture of the
RELATIONSHIPS AND COMPANY CULTURE

Many factors go into how trust is created, but the focus of this paper is how it is built through the communication exchanges and how it is illustrated.

The three factors that define a mutual partnership in the third stage are mutual trust, respect, and obligation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This study hopes to contribute to what those three factors look like in a tech company culture and how a leader develops those three factors in getting to the third stage of a mature partnership. In the substantial amount of literature regarding LMX, no definitions exist for the framework of this final stage. The goal of this research study is to provide LMX theory-specific illustrations of the three components of a mature partnership as seen at two tech companies and what those three components look like. The hope is that greater insight will emerge on how a leader develops those three factors with their members and potential effects of how this relationship affects the culture.

Because there are no current definitions for these three factors as defined by the LMX theory, the definitions provided by Merriam-Webster in the literature review will be used for coding purposes as a groundwork. A classic illustration of interpersonal trust is “one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another based on the confidence that the other is benevolent, honest, open, reliable and competent” (Berkovich, 2018, p. 562). Respect can be seen as “an openness for others because of their human decency and the degree of excellence of their human performance” (O’Grady, 2015, p. 168). Abraham and Stein (2010) discuss obligation between a child and aging parent and their definition can correlate to leader-member relationships. They discuss obligation as, “the ‘glue’ that connects [individuals] and a set of actions or behaviors [one] feels bound to perform” (p. 125-126). These will guide in coding the interviews.

Two tech companies were chosen in Silicon Slopes (the Salt Lake Valley) to interview one team from each. The two companies were chosen based on Eyal’s (2016) three factors that
deem a technology company successful as discussed in the literature review: growth, engagement, and monetization. Company A has 700,000 new users each month and 20 million total users of their product. Company B has over 2 million users and over 10,500 brands and organizations that use their product. This information is not published or cited in order to protect the confidentiality of the companies, but the info stated was provided by the companies themselves. The monetization, or profit, of the two companies is not information they publicly release or publish. However, both of the companies have received awards and recognition for their financial success, business growth, and company culture.

A qualitative study is needed to gain the richest insight, which is why interviews have taken place. While quantitative measures can also provide insight, these qualitative measures can help to see in the minds of team members and hear their rich stories and perspectives. The two teams consisted of 3-5 members each that were interviewed, along with one direct-report manager for each team to gain an array of answers and attitudes. For the purposes of this paper in keeping with participant and company anonymity, each company and participant will have an assigned name by the researcher including: Company A and B, Leader A and B, and Member 1A, 1B, and so forth. In further complying with anonymity, all genders will also be kept anonymous using gender-neutral terms such as they and theirs.

There is abundant research on the process and model of what LMX looks like going from a stranger, to an acquaintance, to a mature relationship. However, there is very little explaining and illustrating how one fosters and develops a relationship from the stranger phase to the mature phase, specifically focusing on what the communication exchanges look like between the leader and member and how they contribute to that development of trust.
As defined by Graen, & Uhl-Bien (1995), the three factors that make up a mature partnership are mutual trust, respect, and obligation. This research anticipates building upon the Merriam-Webster definitions of these three terms to provide theory-specific illustrations. The questions asked in the interviews (see Appendix I), as well as the findings coming from the interviews, were driven from those three factors. The goal is to provide greater insight on what relationships with mutual trust, respect and obligation look like, and how a leader gets to that stage of primarily trust. The hope is to also gain some understanding of the role that a mature partnership plays in the organization’s culture.

IRB approval was received prior to the interviews happening as there is no risk of harm or linking identities to the participants. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The interviews have been recorded and transcribed so that they could be analyzed to discover patterns, trends, and themes. Each participant was asked the same set of questions (see Appendix I) with slightly varying follow-up questions, as relating to individual experience.

**Findings and Discussion**

The findings from these interviews make it very clear that a mature partnership with mutual trust, respect, and obligation is what is desired in a direct-report relationship. In answering the two research questions, the findings will first look to answer how these two tech companies illustrate mutual trust, respect, and obligation in their team relationships. As mentioned in the literature review, a large piece of LMX and building these relationships is for leadership development, so that will also be included. Finally, the potential effects of these mature relationships on the company culture will be briefly discussed.

For the purposes of this paper in keeping with the participant and company anonymity, each company and participant will have an assigned name by the research including: Company A
and B, Leader A and B, and Member 1A, 1B, 2A, and so forth. In further complying with anonymity, all genders will also be kept anonymous using gender-neutral terms such as they and theirs. Their experiences and perspectives add great qualitative insight to the literature in defining and illustrating mutual trust, respect and obligation.

Upon coding the interviews, it was particularly interesting to find how interwoven these three factors are with each other, as well as with leadership development. In fact, it was often difficult to code as the responses could easily fit into multiple categories. First, the responses related to multiple components in their definitions from Merriam-Webster. Second, oftentimes the responses would show one factor being the cause of another, leading to another, or the lack thereof inhibiting another component. And third, with leadership development being a strong component of LMX theory, the responses also show a strong relationship between trust, respect, and obligation within leadership development. While this discussion will break it down into individual components, the three components are intricately related and interwoven with direct impacts on each other.

**Mutual Trust**

In using these two companies to illustrate these three components of a mature partnership from Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), mutual trust is the first one typically listed and discussed. Trust looks at “assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone: one in which confidence is placed: to place confidence in, rely on” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c). In coding for mutual trust between the leader and member, the main themes that arose were relating to regularly open feedback, a personal connection with transparency, and direct communication of trust.
While talking about feedback, the participants all brought up the need for candid, radical feedback, particularly it being constructive feedback. There were a few key insights from the feedback piece that arose. First, in looking at what the member needs from the leader, the feedback needs to be continuous, on-going, both positive and constructive, and proactively given by the leader. This is a great thing to point out as one of the focuses of the LMX theory is on the communication exchanges that take place. They should be regular and filled with transparent feedback.

Next, the need for constructive feedback especially goes towards building trust. Member 1B stated “I don’t fully trust that [my manager] would be able to be the bearer of some harsher feedback… I don’t fully trust that [my manager] is going to share exactly what needs to be shared or what’s really on their mind.” They did not rely on the leader for this feedback and to place confidence in or rely on is a big part of trust (Merriam-Webster, 2019c). It is easy for leaders to give positive feedback, but constructive feedback requires more vulnerability and delicate conversations where emotion and identity are on the line. Having these conversations in an open manner however, as the participants mentioned, can build that trust. The members want to know that they are on the same page as the leader and that is done through candid feedback. This can be in one-on-one’s or just through side conversations, but they need to be recognized for both accomplishments as well as struggles that are brought up.

The final theme that emerged with feedback was the importance of it going both ways between the leader and member. This is important because within the framework it is specifically termed “mutual trust.” While the feedback should be given proactively from the leader, the leader must also be open to and proactively seek feedback from the member. Members from Company A all shared specific experiences of giving candid, constructive feedback to their
leader and the leader being open to it and willingly taking it. Member 3A stated about their leader, “they 100% act on it every time, always asking me for feedback on what they can do better.” Leader A talked about responding to these experiences, “I also have to take the advice and thank them for it and be excited about it or they’re never going to offer it again.” Receiving this feedback from the members was extremely important to Leader A, who views this as a high level of trust. They continued, “[Team member], my first one-on-one with them, they said, ‘hey I know something you can probably work on.’ I’m like oh my gosh we’ve made it!” Being able to organically and candidly give feedback without it being forced or feeling like it cannot be shared is when the relationship turns into a partnership.

The next factor of developing a personal connection was essential in building trust. This means to get to know and understand each other on a personal level through the communication exchanges. Member 3B specifically mentioned liking their current balance and how it maintains a sense of professionalism; “but also the ability to actually connect and have conversations and be friendly.” Members from both teams brought up trust being built through getting to know someone and knowing them on a deeper level than just a professional one. Oftentimes leaders look at the relationship of personal and work as being a balance, but Leader A stated, “I don’t think it’s a balance, I think it’s an integration.” The personal lives of employees affect their performance at work and these details “play into how we are professionally everyday” (Leader A).

One way this leader builds a personal connection is through understanding what drives the employee and what matters to them. Leader A describes what these conversations look like for them: “There are some one-on-one’s that happen first where there’s informal conversation of
what drives you, what are your passions, how we work well together… I try to figure out the little things.” The personal connection should be driven and developed by the leader.

However, the personal connection must go both ways in not only the leader getting to know the employee, but also the leader being transparent in their own personal details. Member 1B mentioned “it would be nice to just see some kind of vulnerabilities, just humanize themselves a little bit more… I think it would be easier to relate to them for sure if you could see that there was something going on and if they were open to just even say a little thing about it.”

The employees want transparency in both the relationship, as well as the communication coming from higher up leadership. Company B had a recent experience of higher-up leadership making a change and abruptly implementing it with these team members where that communication skipped the middle managers, or the team’s direct reports. Leader B reacted, “that hurt the trust of the team where it feels like, well do we even have any help with that,” or in other words anyone advocating for them. This trust is hard to rebuild they continued, “it should have come from us and we should have pre-emptively had conversations with them about it and understood where their concerns lie and basically the feedback is they want to be heard.” These discussions need to take place with transparency from the appropriate relationship of the manager and not the very top of the company. Conversations like these foster strength and the employees feel a personal interest as nothing is being hidden from them.

In looking at the core of LMX theory being the communication exchanges, it is no surprise that a key finding in building trust is directly communicating that to the employee. Multiple participants shared specific experiences in hearing their managers say it, that this confirmed and fortified their trust in them. Member 2B mentioned, “hearing that come from [my manager], it was like yeah, see they trust me, they rely on me.” Member 1A described their
manager as regularly making comments such as, “I trust that you’ve got good reasoning, go ahead, I totally trust you, you have that handled, I trust you, you’re good.” The direct communication of that trust is a necessary component in building it.

Finally, a key insight discussed relating to the idea of communicating trust to employees is that it is the leader’s job to initiate and even simply taking the risk of trusting their employees. Leader A has the following mentality,

Do I trust [my employees] and why? 100% I trust them. First, I believe you should. Just you should, as a manager. Because if you don’t then you’re not setting them up for success … I do think it’s detrimental to managers walking into a situation and they don’t trust their employees. Then they shouldn’t have hired them.

If a manager has that inherent trust in their employees, not only will they have greater confidence in their abilities, but they will also have increased confidence and trust in the leader in working to build that partnership. While mutual trust is also built through actions, the continuous and open communication is the other crucial piece.

**Mutual Respect**

Trust and respect go hand-in-hand as shown that if you do not respect someone, whether below or above you, then there is little reason to trust them. Respect is “to consider worthy of high or special regard: esteem” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). A great deal of the insights that came from the interviews regarding mutual respect relate to saving face, respecting abilities, and valuing people as individuals.

First, in order to develop a partnership of mutual trust, both parties must work on saving face of the other. One way this is done is by treating all questions and comments as valid. Member 2B stated,
No question to [my manager] is a dumb question. Because I walked into this role with no sales experience, I know that I have questions that they probably think, well I learned this forever ago. But they don’t act like they’re dumb questions at all and they’re always willing to help and find answers.

It is important to show that respect of saving face rather than trying to come off as the leader that knows it all with the need to show power. Another thing brought up regarding saving face relates to the feedback mentioned above in trust in that one must deliver the feedback with respect and positivity, both directions.

Next, in relation to saving face, there also needs to be respect going both directions for the individual’s abilities. A big part of this from the leader’s perspective is giving ownership to employees in both projects and conversations. One example of this comes from Member 2A in describing their boss letting them handle conversations and have control. In describing a situation, they explained, “[my manager] was just like skip me and just go directly to that person. Not a lot of people would do that, they might keep that relationship sacred and want that control whereas [my manager] is like you’re doing it, just work directly with them.” This builds both a mature relationship as well as individual confidence in having one’s abilities respected, not being micromanaged.

Member 3A shared a similar experience with their manager passing many things off to them and letting them run with it. “They were involved initially, but they were like look, [employee] I’m going to take a step back and I’m going to make sure the other director steps back and we’re going to let you just run with this and own this process.” This is a great example that relates back to trust as well. In respecting their abilities, the leader shows that they trust their ability to produce quality work.
Although it is important to give employees ownership, it is also important to maintain that respect in not giving them too much or making them look bad. Member 1A described their manager understanding that line in stating,

[My manager] obviously doesn’t want to put somebody over their head, they’re cognizant of that and what they can handle. If they’re not going to be prepared for something because they don’t have enough knowledge about something, they’re not going to put somebody in a compromising situation where it looks poorly on them.

There is a balance and understanding of giving employees ownership, but also being aware of what they can handle and what will push them without being too much.

The last major theme that arose from mutual respect, and possibly the most important, is valuing employees as individuals. Employees want to feel that they are cared for personally and not just seen as part of the business cranking out their responsibilities and duties. Member 3A discussed their manager being one of the main reasons they stay at the company stating, “I feel like I’m a valued member to the team and that they would rather care about how I am doing as an employee, they care about me as a person over work.” Being valued is momentous for the employees in how they feel and how they perform.

The leader can communicate caring more about the employee than the metrics in how they respond to things. Member 1A mentioned that their manager is able to “respond to the entirety of them as human, not just them as an employee” and that there is the side of “caring about them as a whole person, not just about how they physically contributed to the company.” To show and build that high esteem and regard, the leader must value them as an individual. Employees do not want to just feel as though they are there to work, earn the
company money, and go home. They want to feel that they have impact, a personal role, and valued as an individual.

**Mutual Obligation**

Obligation is the final of three components of a high-quality, mature partnership and is “something one is bound to do: duty, responsibility: something that obligates one to a course of action” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). The main themes that arose from the interviews for mutual obligation relate to being a willing first resource, keeping open communication, and most importantly, being an advocate. Many described their manager as being their first resource for when they have any questions. Member 3B explained it in this way about their manager, “they genuinely care about the success of the people on the team. They want to help and they’re definitely like a dog almost, just going after how they can help.” The leader should feel a duty to being the first resource in helping their employees.

Member 1A discusses this further in their manager prioritizing them above all else when they need something, even if they were headed to a meeting with the CEO. They stated,

If they are in a time crunch and if I said to them, no I really need to talk to you and they asked if it could wait and I said no, they would absolutely put everything else to one side to make sure that I was prioritized.

This obligation in being a resource not only entails being the one they know they can come to, but also being the one they know will not just brush them off. Members need to feel that it is genuine.

Another big part of obligation with the manager is the obligation to the team from higher-up leadership. Member 4B described this perfectly in stating that, “they are very good at keeping up with communication, instead of just leaving us out to dry.” This is a scenario that is often seen.
from the top leadership making decisions and the lower-level employees not being included in the know of what is going on. In order for the manager in the middle to offset and account for this, they need to show their obligation to their team and keep that communication open. This communication also goes both ways as some employees described keeping their manager in the loop proactively where the manager also knows what is going on. This is a great illustration of obligation being mutual.

Another key aspect of having open communication is the responsibility of the leader to do something about requests and needs. Member 3A stated that “if I were to ever go and ask [my manager] for more constructive feedback, I guarantee they would give some thought to it.” This obligation to accommodate can come through weekly one-on-one’s or organic conversations, but having that responsibility to adjust and oblige the needs of members is important.

Finally, advocacy is where the greatest amount of insight arose regarding obligation with rich examples. Member 3A described their manager being one to “definitely escalate it, get people involved that need to be to help take care of it” if they were to bring up something that was difficult. They continued with the manager’s attitude being,

Let’s come up with solutions, especially and specifically so that you don’t leave. What do we need to do? Who do we need to hire, so you can get back to doing your core job so that you are happy and doing what you enjoy?

This manager has an obligation to keep their employees happy and fulfilled as a top priority. Taking it further, the employee continued, “past managers it was how’s the work, not as much about the employee, but the metrics. But with [my current manager] it is me first and then the work.” The employees should be the focus.
Another great experience for being an advocate comes from Member 2B. Essentially the employee had been cut one short on the metrics for getting paid. The manager dug through everything with them to figure out what happened and then had the employee reach out to human resources with the manager included on the email. Initially, the employee was just shrugged off, but the manager responded very directly in defense of the employee. Member 2B stated, “I trust [my manager] to go to bat for me.” In the response email, the manager blatantly said how they trusted the employee. As illustrated, trust shows up again as being vital in each of these pieces. The manager must trust the employee in order to go to bat for them and the employee must trust that the manager will go to bat for them.

Member 1A described another example of advocacy by stating, “[my manager] will invariably have your back at any kind of conversation that you may confront …They will 100% support me in those conversations.” There has been advocacy for pay, happiness, and now even respect, face, and conversation. They continue describing this mutual obligation as the manager having the expectation that the employee will come to the manager if something was going on. Member 1A described their leader’s mentality in this way, “I expect that you would have told me if you were struggling with this, that or the other, so why are we in this situation?”

Conclusively, Leader A described advocacy best in their responses, describing having gone to bat for their employees multiple times and having gotten “whacked upside the head for it.” They described this obligation being mutual in both the leader and member having a duty to each other in the relationship, but also both sides being willing to accept and ask for that obligation. They stated, “it’s only going to work if I can help them understand that I’m here to do what you need me to do if I can help.” Similar to the idea of just having inherent trust in your employees, there is also a need for inherent obligation and responsibility to your employees.
Leader A continues in stating how it starts with the leader,

Putting your neck on the line for your people, you have to be able to and willing to do that. I think you have to be willing to do that before you even think they’re willing to do that, because somebody’s got to know that you have their back. I think managers have to be willing to do stuff like that. That’s the only way you can actually be transparent enough to get this job done.

Whether through conversation, action, or just inherent belief, it is the leader’s job to initiate that trust and obligation.

**Leadership Development**

As trust, respect, and obligation are built to develop a mature partnership, the goal is that this can also be a means of creating leadership development. Leadership development is a substantial piece of LMX theory being one of the primary goals. While trust, respect, and obligation have many other effects with performance and culture (that will be discussed later), leadership development should be an obvious outcome. In looking at how leadership development is facilitated through the communication exchanges, the main themes that arose related to discussing the career path and what drives the employee, advocating for promotions and connections, and creating opportunities to teach and lead – whether formal or informal.

Having the conversations revolving around an employee’s career path is necessary and where it all starts. Discussing the career path helps the employee to feel like there is a personal investment in them. Member 4B mentioned that their manager is “primarily worried and concerned with how I can perform and how I can contribute to the team and how I can progress in my career. Making sure that we are happy with our career progression.” It should be clear to the employees that their leadership development is a top concern and priority to the manager.
Member 1A described having these “very frank” conversations before they were interviewed, during the interviewing, upon getting hired and multiple times since then to make sure everything was still lining up. These conversations should be regular and on-going.

This relates closely to obligation with the leader having a responsibility toward the employee and their goals. Member 2A described, “[my manager] helps keep an eye on the prize with career development and kind of what are you doing now and how is that going to help you to achieve your future goals.” This should not be the sole priority of the member, but working on this development mutually as a partnership. In talking about the ongoing conversation, Leader A has frequent discussions with their employees about where they want to go in their career, what drives them, what they enjoy about particular pieces, and other similar questions relating to their passions and goals. They mentioned one employee on their team never being asked these questions until being put with this manager and this manager’s response to this was, “that’s weird.”

Tying this back to the trust, Member 4B mentioned that their manager “cared about my career development, wherever that would be, which made me trust them.” Member 5B stated that a good manager will “want to listen to you, and they care about your success and direction and career path. All of that communication goes hand-in-hand.” This all revolves around the communication exchanges and each of the components discussed in this research being intricately connected.

Next, connected to obligation, the purpose of this relationship is to ultimately help the employees progress, being an advocate and providing connections. According to Sparrowe and Liden (1997), one of the key components of the LMX theory is that in developing those high-quality, mature relationships, superiors may introduce subordinates to other key individuals in
other parts of the company or organization and facilitate mobility and other opportunities—whether upward or laterally. Member 1B specifically mentioned wanting more advocacy from their manager and not being sure if that was currently happening. Member 1B continued saying that it is “the things that matter more, the things that really drive me.” This means more than just being a resource for the current job role and questions, but being a resource for promotion and movement.

Member 1B discussed wanting to feel like there is a personal investment from their manager in that the manager is “someone that wants me to improve as an individual.” Being an advocate shows that personal investment. They stated how “it would be great to have a manager that felt like they were doing what they could to use their connections” for things such as shadowing someone, introductions to another manager on a different team and so forth. Member 1B continued, “I really wish they could help me out here. I’m working hard to try and do some good in this job so I can get here, anything that you can do to help bridge the gap would be awesome.” This would help the employee to feel as though the leader has their best interest at heart.

Finally, the last large piece that rose from the interviews with leadership development is by creating opportunities to teach and lead, whether informal or formal. This can be done through professional development, such as conferences or events, or it can also be through the opportunities a manager creates in the office. One example came from Member 2A describing a time when their manager had the employee skip them and go directly to the person involved. They stated,

Not a lot of people would do that, ...but she’s like, you’re doing it, work directly with them. You’re going to need visibility in order to continue to grow within the organization
and you’re also going to need to learn from their styles, so I’m just going to connect you two together so that you can do just that.

This requires the leader to respect the abilities of the employee in handling these situations and using them for career progression and development.

This can be done through conversation and discussion as well. Member 3A shared that “[my manager] is one of the primary reasons I stay. It’s just that open relationship and I feel like under their direction, I will grow more and learn more under them, than I would if I leave and go somewhere else.” Throughout the interview, Member 3A described being in a tough spot with their role with recent responsibilities given to them. This is a great illustration of the difference that a leader can make in developing their members through that relationship.

Lastly, the leader should have not just a single conversation, but a mentality of helping their members grow and progress. Leader A described it well by stating,

We should never look at somebody as being on our team forever. I would call that a failure. Success for me as a manager is to see you go on and do what you were always meant to do, and that’s not being on the same team for the rest of your life.

Through conversations, being an advocate through connection, and creating opportunities both formal and informal, leaders can truly help their employees grow through their relationships.

Culture

Lastly, this research looked for the effects of these mature relationships filled with trust, respect, and obligation on the company’s culture. There are many reasons and implications as to why one would develop high-quality, mature partnerships with their employees. Among those reasons are the effects that these relationships have on the culture of the organization, as well as the sub-culture of the team. Some insights that arose from the interviews relating to the culture
have to do with recognition, the effects of the individual relationships on the team dynamics, and motivation being the manager’s job.

First, recognition appeared to be something that has positive impacts on the employees - both with their performance, as well as feeling valued. Member 1B described the importance of affirmation and that “there would be a certain confidence that would come from feeling like the things I am doing are being noticed in some way.” This includes both recognition of performance, as well as constructive on what they could be going better. They continued by describing how regular feedback and recognition shows that the manager understands and they are having that journey together. They feel like they are on a team, that the manager has their back, and it is not just the member trying to accomplish things on their own. This is shown in the literature as even just the perception of a supportive, high-quality relationship between the employee and his or her leader has a correlation with positive energy and creativity to emerge (Atwater & Carmeli, 2009). This job of continued recognition and feedback can be motivating for members.

Second, there are effects on the team that come from these individual trusting, mature relationships with the leader and each member. More research needs to be done, but it appears that as there is trust, respect, and obligation built between the leader and members, those attitudes are also in return built amongst the team members as a whole. The team from Company A discussed transparency being an important piece that led to trust and obligation with one another. Member 1A mentioned how if there is a problem on the team with someone, everyone is thoughtful and chips in without it being a discussion or a thought. Everyone has each other’s backs.
Leader A described this similarly with their newer team hoping to develop to a point of just believing in each other and standing up for each other. In talking about the trust and respect that come with transparency they stated, “cause you’re not going to hold each other accountable or judge each other for something stupid.” This provides an environment where ownership of projects is encouraged and failure is acceptable in pushing new ideas.

Finally, and most profound from the interviews regarding leaders with their relationships and effects on the culture, is their duty to motivate their members. Both leaders described this duty to motivate their members. Leader B discussed the idea in talking about their role to drive and push their members. They stated,

I feel like it is very much on the manager’s shoulders to break the mold of what they believe they can do and help them believe they can do the impossible. ...In order to be able to push them, I think there has to be that relationship of trust. I think there has to be this understanding that hey, I genuinely have their best interest in mind and wanting to really see what they can accomplish.

This again shows the important role that trust plays and why one should put in the effort to build it. There are many impacts, but particularly, it can help to motivate employees in their performance and doing quality work.

Leader A discussed the manager giving credit and being able to help them see their impact – “playing that role for them is all about that engagement and motivating them.” They believe that the biggest driver of doing a good job is believing in what you do and that “your relationship with your boss can impact that belief in what you do and the impact that has.” It is the job of the manager to show them. The manager plays a more significant role than often
realized and it all starts with the development of the relationship to one of high-quality with mutual trust, respect, and obligation.

Mutual trust, respect, and obligation are three components to developing a high-quality relationship and partnership. Through these vivid descriptions and illustrations from the interviews, it is clear how intricately connected and interwoven with each of the three components are to one another. For example, in order for mutual obligation to be present, the two individuals must also have mutual trust and respect for one another. It is hard to look at each one independently as they are all so closely tied together as a constant cycle of each being built upon one another to create that mature partnership. When these components are present in a leader-member relationship, this is something that can ultimately impact the desire of employees staying at a company in feeling valued and personally invested in. It not only supports retention, but this high-quality relationship also encourages higher performance.

**Conclusion**

Leader-Member Exchange theory is essential for leaders to understand. Workplace relationships are a given and the leader must grasp the significance of those relationships as well as their role in developing them. It is through the communication exchanges between the leader and the member that mutual trust, respect, and obligation are built. While the relationship and exchanges are two-way, it is ultimately the responsibility of the leader to foster a high-quality, mature partnership.

The leader can develop this through transparent feedback, building personal connections, and going out on a limb for their employees. As the cycle of positively begins, the mutual trust, respect, and obligation will continue to spiral and increase. It is also important to see the significance that leadership development plays in these relationships. These characteristics need
to be proactively sought after and worked for by the leader. In creating these mature relationships, the team and company’s culture are also strengthened with increased performance and motivation.

However, there are some limitations to this study in its depth and breadth. While the insights discovered were insightful, it would be beneficial to gain a vast more array of insights from more than simply two teams from two tech companies. Future research is needed to illustrate how mutual trust, respect, and obligation are defined within LMX from more companies, more teams, and more industries. These interviews merely scratch the surface on what can be found, but this thesis provides a good starting place.

Future research could not only look at LMX relationships in other industries, but also other arenas. For example, what do these relationships look like between athletes and coaches, students and mentors, children and parents. This study looked at organizational culture within these relationships, but the LMX theory applies to many situations and relationships. Future studies are needed to provide greater depth and breadth on how these mature partnerships are formed and how mutual trust, respect, and obligation are defined. It would also be beneficial to conduct research linking LMX with organizational citizenship behavior and organizational commitment.

While there are many important leadership theories and models to understand, Leader-Member Exchange should be at the forefront as it focuses on the personal relationships and communication exchanges between the leader and his or her followers. Human connection is something that has always been important and as leaders foster those connections, a deep mutual trust is formed. Benefits to these relationships are beneficial for the leaders, employees, and the organization as a whole.
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Appendix I

Interview Questions for members
1. How would you describe your relationship with your boss/manager?

2. What do you appreciate most about your relationship with your boss?
   a. Follow-up on conversation, interactions, etc.
   b. In regard to your relationship with your boss, what do you wish he/she did better?

3. Do you feel your relationship with your boss is similar in quality to the relationship those on your team have with your boss (greater or worse than)? How?

4. Do you feel like your boss trusts you? Why, how does he/she show you that?
   a. Do you trust him/her? Why?

5. How does your relationships with your boss affect your motivation to work or the quality of your work?

Interview Questions for leader
1. How would you describe the relationships you have with those you oversee?

2. What do you do as leader to move those relationships from ‘stranger’ to something more mature and trusting?

3. What do you appreciate most about your relationships with your employees?
   a. Follow-up on conversation, interactions, etc.
   b. In regard to your relationships with your employees, what do you wish was better?

4. Do you feel of your relationships with those you oversee that they are all of similar quality? Why? How?

5. Do you feel like your employees can trust you? Why, how do they show you that?
   a. Do you feel like you can trust your employees? Why?

6. How do you think your relationship with your employees affects their quality of work and motivation to work?