

G Price  
L Bezuidenhout

## Communication and leader-member exchange: a South African case study

### *ABSTRACT*

This study partially replicated similar research conducted by Yrle, Hartman & Galle (2002:262) and Yrle, Hartman & Galle (2003:95-96) in the United States (US), which examined the correlations between communication style and leader-member exchange (LMX) in the South African context. It also took into consideration the potential impact of aspects such as gender, demographics and diversity on supervisor-subordinate LMX and communication considering the uniqueness of the South African environment.

The research was conducted among supervisors and their subordinates at a South African government department. Forty-nine supervisors and subordinates, effectively representing 27 organisational dyads, were able to participate in this study. It yielded some interesting results, the most important of which is that the Pearson correlation coefficient statistical analysis supported the proposition that there is a correlation between LMX and communication in dyadic relationships.

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*Gill Price is a former master's student in Communication Management at the University of Pretoria. Louise Bezuidenhout is a lecturer in Communication Management at the University of Pretoria.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years a reasonable degree of research has been conducted into the relationship between communication and leadership, and the influence these could have on job satisfaction, competitiveness and productivity. To date, a number of research studies have paid attention to the ways in which managers communicate and interact with different employees. Some of these studies have attempted to determine whether there are differences between so-called higher- or lower-quality exchange relationships that exist between supervisors and subordinates (Kolb, 1995:233-234; Yrle, Hartman & Galle, 2003:92-93).

Communication theory has, according to Yrle, Hartman and Galle (2002:258), been able to describe so-called communication best practices with reference to supervisor-subordinate communication. The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, on the other hand, has not entirely been able to establish whether supervisors should treat subordinates in so-called higher-quality relationships differently to those in lower-quality relationships. It would nevertheless seem that supervisors do differentiate between the two quality relationships insofar as communication and interaction (LMX) are concerned (Yrle, et al., 2002:258).

This study partially replicated the initial US-based study in a unique South African environment to ascertain whether it would yield similar results. It interrogated, in addition to the elements investigated as part of the original study, the potential impact demographics, diversity and gender could have on the quality of LMX and communication quality. A number of hypotheses were examined as part of this study, some of which explored aspects relevant to the South African environment, whereas others paid attention to some of the limitations identified by Yrle et al. (2002:266-267).

The contingency theory, the equity theory, role and social exchange theories, and the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory formed the theoretical foundation of this study. Because this study partially replicated similar research conducted by Yrle et al. (2002:262) and Yrle et al. (2003:95-96) in the US, which examined the correlations between communication style and leader-member exchange, the focus of this study is on the LMX theory and within the South African context.

## 2. PROBLEMSTATEMENT

Literature from the management theory, particularly LMX, and communication sciences indicate that there are potential correlations between the two fields insofar as supervisor-subordinated interaction is concerned. However, there seems to be insufficient research - especially within the South African context - to explore these linkages and their impact on organisational and supervisor-subordinate communication and interaction environments (Yrle, et al., 2002:258 & Yrle, et al., 2003:92-93).

This study therefore examined the possible relationship between the nature and quality of LMX and communication style in supervisor-subordinate dyads in a South African context.

### 3. LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE (LMX) THEORY

According to Dansereau, Graen and Haga, as well as Graen and Cashman (in Dionne, 2000), the LMX theory describes “the role making process between a leader and an individual subordinate”. It is furthermore pointed out that the theory describes in which way leaders develop different exchange relationships with various subordinates over time.

The LMX theory suggests that an interpersonal relationship evolves between supervisors and subordinates in a formal organisational environment. This relationship is based on social exchange which “each party must offer something the other party sees as valuable and each party must see the exchange as reasonably equitable or fair” (Graen & Cashman in Wayne, Shore & Linden, 1997).

The LMX theory additionally describes a transactional framework in which supervisors treat individual subordinates differently. As a result, relatively stable dyads develop, reflecting a range of lower- to higher-quality exchanges (Ashkanasy & O’Connor, 1997:647-648; Day & Crain, 1992; Deluga, 1994:316; Dienesch & Liden, 1986:621; Liden & Maslyn, 1998:45; Wayne et al., 1997; Wayne & Stilwell in Deluga, 1994:316; Sparrowe & Liden, 1997:523).

The LMX theory, with its focus on the supervisor-subordinate dyad, thus contends that supervisors expend their resources unequally among subordinates. It is essentially based on the premise that a leader and a member develop various behavioural interdependencies based on their respective roles (Mueller & Lee, 2002:224; Yrle, et al., 2002:260).

Allinson, Armstrong and Hayes (2001) elaborate further on the descriptions given so far on LMX by citing Graen and his colleagues who, following a number of longitudinal studies, pointed out that supervisor-subordinate dyads are generally adequately differentiated to warrant a dedicated focus on each dyad. Allinson et al. (2001) also point out that Graen’s research has indicated that individual subordinates may differ significantly in their descriptions of the same supervisor and this is reflected in the varying quality of the exchange relationships in the same group. Graen (in Allinson, Armstrong & Hayes, 2001) also found that due to the differences among subordinates, and constraints on time and energy, supervisors would develop close associations with a few subordinates and more distant relations with the remaining subordinates.

Mueller and Lee (2002:224) assert, in a similar vein to the views captured by Deluga, that LMX relationships exist on a continuum, ranging from high to low quality. High-quality exchange relationships (from time to time referred to as the in-group, cadre or partnership) are generally characterised by a high degree of mutual positive affect, loyalty, contributions or obligations to the exchange, professional respect, trust and support. Low-quality exchange relationships (sometimes referred to as out-group or hired hands) are generally characterised by formal organisational authority (Deluga, 1994:316).

In addition to the aforementioned descriptions, Mueller and Lee (2002:224) refer to a number of studies that have confirmed the notion that LMX quality is important in influencing employees' work-related emotional, cognitive and behavioural experiences, roles and fate in organisations. It is pointed out that research seems to indicate that subordinates in high-quality LMX relationships receive and/or report more favourable outcomes than their peers in low-quality LMX relationships.

Liden and Maslyn (1998:45-47) refer to a number of LMX dimensions that are useful in understanding LMX multidimensionality and positioning on a continuum ranging from high to low. These include:

- Contribution, which Dienesch and Liden (in Liden & Maslyn, 1998:45) defined as "perception of the amount, direction, and quality of work-oriented activity each member puts forward toward the mutual goals (explicit or implicit) of the dyad"
- Loyalty, which is best described as the extent to which the supervisor and subordinate are loyal to each other
- Affect, which Dienesch and Liden (in Liden & Maslyn, 1998:46) defined as "the mutual affection members of the dyad have for each other based primarily on interpersonal attraction rather than work or professional values"
- Professional respect, which refers to the "perception of the degree to which each member of the dyad has built a reputation, within and/or outside the organization, of excelling at his or her line of work"

These LMX dimensions form the basis of the Liden and Maslyn measuring instrument, which was used in the Yrle et al. (2002:262) study. The Liden and Maslyn questions were also included in the questionnaire for this study.

The above discussion on the various theoretical foundations associated with LMX and supervisor-subordinate interaction provides a comprehensive background to fully understanding the multi-faceted and multidimensional nature of LMX relationships and the way in which these could impact on and shape the work environment and member behaviour. It is, however, also important to explore supervisor-subordinate communication and the linkages between the nature of LMX and communication style.

Yrle et al. (2002:258-259) and Yrle et al. (2003:92-93), as suggested previously, intimate that the communication literature shows distinct characteristics that aim to isolate so-called best practices in terms of the way in which supervisors communicate with subordinates. It has largely attempted to identify the most appropriate communication styles, tactics and behaviours. Yrle et al. (2002:259) do, however, point out that there may not necessarily be one best way for supervisors to communicate with subordinates, and that these communication practices vary as and when situations change, and require different approaches. This concurs with the fundamental elements associated with the Contingency theory, a notion that is also emphasised by Yrle et al. (2002:259).

In addition to the above, Yrle et al. (2003:93) cite Redding, who asserts that elements such as communication-mindedness, empathetic listening, persuasive communication, as opposed to telling, a sensitive demeanour and openness usually yield higher-quality

supervisors and by implication higher-quality communication between supervisors and subordinates. These elements could contribute to job satisfaction and managers' effectiveness (Pettit, Goris & Vaught in Yrle, et al., 2003:93).

Kolb (1995:233) suggests that modern-day organisations strive towards improving performance, reducing costs and remaining competitive. Tubbs and Hain (in Kolb, 1995:233), in a review of eight field studies, also concluded that there is a relationship between management communication behaviour and organisational effectiveness. Clampitt and Downs (1993:18-25) moreover found that employees were of the opinion that satisfaction with communication (including supervisor communication) impacted on productivity.

These descriptions, particularly the one relating to relationship behaviours, correspond to the view held by Puth (2002:16) that the late 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by a tendency in organisations to move away from the traditional management and task-oriented approach to a more people-oriented relationship approach typical of a dynamic manager.

Effective organisational communication can therefore be seen not only as a means through which managers, as leaders, direct the work environment, but as their work itself. It creates perceptions of work and responsibility in the minds of organisational members and makes a significant contribution to organisational performance.

As stated previously, management literature has not adequately addressed or explained whether supervisors should treat subordinates differently. Communication literature has, in contrast, identified so-called best practices for communicating with subordinates.

Yrle et al. (2002:258) suggest that research is required to examine the dynamics of supervisor-subordinate communication, especially insofar as it relates to the nature of leader-member exchange relationships. Such research will, according to them, contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the elements, which may influence the way in which managers interact and communicate with different subordinates. It should also contribute to determining whether there are subtle or significant differences in subordinates' perceptions of higher- and lower-quality exchanges.

The Communication theory has, according to Yrle et al. (2002:258), been able to identify the pre-eminent communication practices as they relate to supervisor-subordinate interaction. The LMX theory, on the other hand, has not entirely been able to state conclusively whether supervisors should treat subordinates in higher-quality relationships differently to those in lower-quality relationships.

#### 4. AIM OF THE STUDY AND FORMULATION OF HYPOTHESES

On the basis of the above review, the following aim was identified:

To determine whether there is a relationship between LMX and communication style insofar as supervisor-subordinate dyads are concerned.

In addition to the objective of this study, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

#### 4.1 Research hypothesis 1

There is a positive relationship between subordinates' evaluation of LMX and their perceptions of the quality of the communication they receive from their supervisors.

#### 4.2 Research hypothesis 2

There are significant differences in the levels of LMX that are reported by subordinates about supervisors from different population groups.

#### 4.3 Research hypothesis 3

There are significant differences in the levels of communication quality reported by subordinates in terms of supervisors from different population groups.

#### 4.4 Research hypothesis 4

Subordinates from different population groups will differ in the levels of communication quality they report.

#### 4.5 Research hypothesis 5

Supervisors' and subordinates' assessment of LMX will be similar.

#### 4.6 Research hypothesis 6

The perceptions of subordinates in diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs with regard to LMX will differ significantly from those of subordinates in non-diverse supervisor-subordinate pairs.

#### 4.7 Research hypothesis 7

The perceptions of supervisors in diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs with regard to LMX will differ significantly from those of supervisors in non-diverse supervisor-subordinate pairs.

#### 4.8 Research hypothesis 8

There are significant gender differences in the supervisor communication quality.

#### 4.9 Research hypothesis 9

There are significant gender differences in supervisor LMX.

## 5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Research design

This study examined the relationship between communication style and leader-member exchange. Correlational relationships maintain that the variables – in the case of this study, communication style and LMX – occur in a specific manner without intimating that one causes the other. Claims such as these are often made when it is believed that there are more fundamental forces that impact on the variables, or when there is a lack of substantial evidence to suggest that there is a stronger linkage.

A survey research design was followed for the purposes of this study. It took the form of a once-off study in a field environment – i.e., the South African government department responsible for coordinating official communication.

### 5.2 Sampling and data collection

Considering that this study aimed to replicate partially the Yrle et al. (2002) research in South Africa, a related procedure consisting of the same questions and demographic requirements was followed.

The research was conducted among supervisors and their subordinates at the South African government department, and purposive or judgment sampling was used to select the sample. This sampling method was used to ensure that as many dyads as possible consisting of supervisors and subordinates would form part of the sample.

The disadvantage of this sampling method is that bias arising from the expert's beliefs could influence the sample selection and may render the sample unrepresentative with the result that the projection of the data beyond that of the sample would be inappropriate (Zikmund 2003:392).

Questionnaires were distributed at the government department and collected personally from the respondents, ensuring a high response rate and correct completion. This also addressed the possibility that subordinates could feel obliged to give socially desirable responses as a result of being handed the questionnaires by their respective supervisors.

The study ultimately involved the participation of 49 supervisors and subordinates, effectively representing 27 organisational dyads. Twenty-two supervisors and 27 subordinates were represented in the 27 dyads. In some instances one supervisor featured in more than one dyad, as was the case in the Yrle et al. (2002:262) study.

### 5.3 Measuring instrument

As mentioned previously, this study partially replicated similar research conducted by Yrle et al. (2002:262) and Yrle et al. (2003:95–96) in the US. For the purposes of this study, similar survey questionnaires were used, one for supervisors and one for subordinates.

The first 14 questions consisted of the Hatfield and Huseman (1982:352) communication instrument that was validated a number of years ago albeit in a different environment and on a different sample to that of the Yrle et al. study (2002:262). Yrle et al. (2002:262-263) conducted a factor analysis on the measurement instrument to determine how well it would fit their sample and the results indicated that it did so reasonably well.

As a result of the factor analysis Yrle et al. (2002:263) identified a number of dimensions, similar to those of Hatfield and Huseman, associated with supervisor-subordinate communication. These are "Coordination (explanation of changes, giving information and the like), Participation (discussion of problems between supervisor and subordinate) and Expression (dealing with the quality of the emotional relationship between supervisor and subordinate) as the most important aspects of the relationship" (Yrle et al., 2002:263). An additional dimension to those of Hatfield and Huseman, namely "Freedom to Question" (Yrle, et al., 2002:263), was also isolated. It was described as "a one-item factor, which appeared to be a breakout of factor 2" – i.e. Participation (Yrle, et al., 2002:263).

According to Yrle et al. (2002:262), the remaining questions consisted of 12 items from the LMX scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998:56 & 68), which was also subjected to validation. This scale examined the nature of the relationship between supervisors and subordinates. Factor analysis conducted on these items isolated four factors, namely – Affect, Loyalty, Contribution and Professional Respect (Liden & Maslyn, 1998:56–57). These were described in some detail as part of the literature review on the LMX theory.

The questions relating to communication style and LMX consisted of five-point Likert scales where (1) represented "strongly agree" and (5) "strongly disagree". The wording for the questions was adapted for supervisors and subordinates alike in a way similar to that of the Yrle et al. (2002:262) instrument referred to above. The demographic information was obviously adapted to suit the South African environment.

Consistent with the suggestions by Zikmund (2003:229 & 359) and Cooper and Schindler (1998:351–352) the questionnaires were subjected to pre-testing. None of the respondents reported any anomalies or major problems in understanding and completing the questionnaires. However, some minor stylistic suggestions were incorporated into the final questionnaires.

The final questionnaire sets were accompanied by a cover letter explaining the nature of the research and questionnaire completion requirements, and assuring the respondents of anonymity.

## 6. RESULTS

The 27 dyads (N27), unless otherwise indicated, formed the basis of all the analyses that were conducted. The hypotheses were tested statistically using the non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis test (research hypotheses 2 & 3) and the parametric t-test (research hypotheses 4, 6, 7, 8 & 9), as well as the Pearson correlation coefficient (research hypotheses 1 & 5). The significance level to test all the hypotheses was fixed at  $p < 0.05$



or 95% confidence. Item analysis was conducted on test items associated with communication style and LMX (items 4.1 to 4.26) for the supervisor and subordinate questionnaires.

According to the demographic information the mean age for the subordinates is 32.3 compared to the mean age for the supervisors, namely 37.2. In both instances, this is an indication of a relatively young age group and by implication a dyadic composition. The population group distribution as it relates to subordinates reveals that the majority of the respondents were African/Black whereas the supervisors showed a more even spread. The gender representation in both groups was relatively similar.

The role of the population group with regard to perceptions of LMX as well as the role of gender in terms of LMX and communication quality were subjected to further analysis in this study. The latter analyses were included partly based on the suggestion of Yrle et al. (2002:262-263) that these elements be subjected to further research and analysis. The demographic information and ensuing analyses should nevertheless be viewed against the backdrop of the small sample size (N49) and resulting small number of dyads (N27).

Table 1 presents the results of a Pearson correlation coefficient analysis of research hypothesis 1. A positive relationship was predicted and the results of the analysis ( $r=0.67$ ,  $p=0.0001$ ) confirm that there is a positive relationship between the subordinates' evaluation of LMX and their perceptions of the quality of the communication they receive from their supervisors.

Supervisor-Subordinate Dyads (N=27)	
<i>Category</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Subordinate LMX (Total of Q1-Q14)	26.18
Subordinate Communication Quality (Total of Q25-Q26)	32.48
Pearson Correlation Coefficient=0.67	$p=0.0001$

Table 1: Relationship between subordinates' evaluation of LMX and their perceptions of the quality of the communication

The Kruskal-Wallis test results were associated with research hypothesis 2. This hypothesis predicted that there would be significant differences in the levels of LMX that are reported by subordinates about supervisors from different population groups. This alternative hypothesis was rejected ( $p=0.1358$ ) and the null hypothesis supported.

Research hypothesis 3 stated that there were significant differences in the levels of communication quality reported by subordinates in terms of supervisors from different population groups. According to the results of the Kruskal-Wallis test, the alternative hypothesis was also rejected ( $p=0.2177$ ) and the null hypothesis supported.

Table 2 shows the t-Test results for research hypothesis 4, which predicted that subordinates from different population groups would differ in the levels of communication quality they reported. For the purposes of the statistical analysis, the coloured population group was excluded due to the fact there was only one respondent in this category. In this case the hypothesis was supported by the results –  $p=0.0255$ .

Supervisor-Subordinate Dyads (N=27)		
<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>
African/Black	20	30.80
White	6	37.67
<i>t</i> -Test statistic = -2.38		$p=0.0255$

Table 2: Subordinates from different population groups and the levels of communication quality reported

A Pearson correlation coefficient analysis was conducted on research hypothesis 5. The hypothesis suggested that supervisors' and subordinates' assessments of LMX would be similar. The results of the analysis however indicated that there was a low correlation between the two ( $r=0.24$ ,  $p=0.2262$ ).

The t-Test results associated with research hypothesis 6 stated that the perceptions of subordinates in diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs with regard to LMX would differ significantly from those of non-diverse supervisor-subordinate pairs. The statistical analysis however indicates that there is no significant difference between the perceptions of the diverse and non-diverse pairs –  $p=0.5929$ .

Research hypothesis 7 stated that the perceptions of supervisors in diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs with regard to LMX would differ significantly from those of non-diverse supervisor-subordinate pairs. The statistical analysis (t-Test) however indicates that there is no significant difference between the perceptions of the different pairs –  $p=0.7900$ .

Table 3 depicts the results of the statistical analysis conducted on research hypothesis 8, which stated there were significant gender differences in the supervisor communication quality. The t-Test results indicate that there are significant differences and this alternative hypothesis is therefore supported –  $p=0.0130$ .

Supervisor-Subordinate Dyads (N=27)		
<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Female	17	37.23
Male	10	33.30
<i>t</i> -Test statistic = 2.67		$p=0.0130$

Table 3: Gender differences in supervisor communication quality

Table 4 contains the results of the statistical analysis for research hypothesis 9, which stated there are significant gender differences in supervisor LMX. The t-Test results confirm that there are significant differences and this alternative hypothesis is therefore also supported –  $p=0.0004$ .

Supervisor-Subordinate Dyads (N=27)		
<i>Category</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Female	17	29.70
Male	10	21.60
<i>t</i> -Test statistic = 4.11		$p=0.0004$

Table 4: Gender differences in supervisor LMX

In view of the fact that the sample for this study was very small, a factor analysis could not be undertaken. The subordinate (N27) and supervisor (N22) questionnaires were however subjected to item analyses separate from each other and not in the dyadic relationship. This served to determine whether the respondents exhibited consistency (reliability) in answering the questions in each of the dimensions isolated in the Yrle et al. (2002) study. The item analysis conducted for this study sought to investigate whether the measuring instrument for communication style and LMX (items 4.1. to 4.26 of this study’s questionnaires) fitted the South African environment considering that the studies referred to were conducted in the US. In the latter instance it was found to do so reasonably well.

The question associated with the “breakout of factor 2” – i.e. Freedom to Question - as isolated by Yrle et al. (2002:263) was included as part of the original dimension (Participation) for analysis in this study. When it was initially isolated, it impacted negatively on the Cronbach Alpha value associated with the second dimension – Participation.

The low Cronbach Alpha values (<0.6) indicate that the supervisors were inconsistent in responding to the questions linked to the dimensions of communication quality. In contrast, they were consistent in their responses to the questions relating to LMX with the possible exception of the Loyalty dimension.

The subordinates, on the other hand, gave consistent answers to the questions associated with communication quality with the possible exception of the Participation dimension. Their responses to the questions linked to LMX were also consistent with the exception of the Contribution dimension.

The results of the item analysis could have been affected by a number of aspects, most important of which could be the small sample size. In spite of the aspects that could have had a negative impact on the item analysis, the results nevertheless indicate that the

respondents exhibited consistency (reliability) – apart from some inconsistencies described above – in answering the questions in each of the dimensions isolated in the Yrle et al. (2002) study.

Table 5 presents the findings of the item analyses.

Supervisors ( <i>N</i> =22)		Supervisors ( <i>N</i> =27)	
<i>Communication quality dimensions</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha statistic</i>	<i>Communication quality dimensions</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha statistic</i>
Coordination	0.425	Coordination	0.868
Participation	0.266	Participation	0.623
Expression	0.381	Expression	0.718
<i>LMX dimensions</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha statistic</i>	<i>LMX dimensions</i>	<i>Cronbach Alpha statistic</i>
Affect	0.829	Affect	0.896
Loyalty	0.665	Loyalty	0.777
Contribution	0.911	Contribution	0.339
Professional respect	0.771	Professional respect	0.926

Table 5: Item analyses of questionnaire items relating to the communication quality and LMX

## 7. DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results of this study, it would be useful to reflect briefly on the results of the Yrle et al. (2002) study.

After concluding their study, which considered possible linkages between LMX quality and supervisory communication practices, Yrle et al. (2002:266) reported that subordinate responses had suggested there was indeed a relationship between increased levels of LMX and communication practices. This was found to be particularly applicable to the Participation and Coordination dimensions as isolated by the Yrle et al. (2002:263) factor analysis of the questions linked to communication quality (questions 4.1 to 4.14 of this study's questionnaires). Additional dimensions were also isolated. However, these were discussed in detail in preceding sections.

In addition, Yrle et al. (2002:266) established that supervisors' and subordinates' reports of LMX were related and based on this. It was suggested that higher quality supervisor-subordinate dyads exhibited higher quality communication. Yrle et al. (2002:266) furthermore intimated that the lower quality dyads would manifest typical lower-quality relationships and, by implication, lower-quality communication.

It is against this background that the results of this study will be discussed in more detail. The statistical analysis of research hypothesis 1 supports the notion that there is a positive relationship between subordinates' evaluation of LMX and their perception of the quality of communication they receive from their supervisors within the dyads.

In reality this could be an indication that subordinates report and perceive that there is a direct link between LMX and communication style and/or communication practices on the part of the supervisors within the dyads.

This could support the notion that LMX relationships range from high quality to low quality on a continuum and that various factors could impact on the way in which subordinates are assigned to either of the two quality relationships. Linked to this could be the communication quality associated with each of the relationships, which is also not constant by nature.

It should be borne in mind though that the small sample size precluded more in-depth analysis, for instance to identify clearly the low-quality and high-quality relationships manifested in this study's dyads (N27). The following discussion is therefore primarily based on assumed manifestations in the absence of explicit details and results.

Based on the results of research hypothesis 1, some subordinates could have perceived that they are in high-quality LMX relationships, and would in terms of the elements of the Role and LMX theories, be seen as trusted insiders or as in-group employees. This would, as has been demonstrated in earlier discussions, make them privy to different quality levels of LMX and communication that would include dimensions such as Coordination, Participation, Expression and Freedom to Question.

The opposite would apply to subordinates who could have perceived themselves to be in low-quality LMX and communication relationships. Should this be the case, it could mean that the latter group would be subjected to more directive/coaching styles but this could change if the provisions of the Contingency theory were to be taken into account. This could support the notion that LMX and communication quality could change if subordinates gained more experience and situations changed, underscoring the fluidity or continuum-based nature of these relationships.

The above results concur to some extent with the findings of the Yrle et al. (2002) study. It could therefore be assumed that subordinates who perceive themselves to be in high- or low-quality relationships could feel that they receive different levels of supervision and by implication varied levels of communication from their supervisors. This would mean that the levels of supervision and communication would then range from freedom of close supervision and accompanying negotiating latitude (high quality) to formal organisational authority and closer supervision (low quality).

An item analysis was conducted to determine whether the respondents exhibited consistency (reliability) in answering the questions in each of the dimensions isolated in the Yrle et al. (2002) study. The results indicate that the respondents indeed exhibited

consistency in answering the questions. In view of this, it could then be postulated that in cases where subordinates perceived themselves to be in high-quality LMX relationships, the communication dimensions of Participation and Coordination could be present; so could high levels of communication satisfaction and perceptual congruence in the dyadic relationships.

In the case of research hypothesis 2, the statistical analysis rejected the alternative hypothesis, thereby implying that there were no significant differences in the levels of LMX reported by subordinates in terms of supervisors from different population groups. This could indicate that subordinates received consistent high- or low-quality LMX from supervisors. This finding is particularly interesting considering the fact that Yule et al. (2002:266) expressed concern over the ways in which subordinates were assigned into lower- and higher-quality dyads. The researchers pointed out that the assignment might not always be based on objective grounds but rather on non-objective grounds such as demographic similarity and the like. The views of Epitropaki and Martin (1999:237-238) should also be noted here, namely that demographic characteristics such as gender, age, tenure and by implication population group could play a major role in the quality of the LMX and associated communication style.

Linked to the findings associated with research hypothesis 2 are those of research hypothesis 3 where it was also found that there were no significant differences in the levels of communication quality reported by subordinates in terms of supervisors from different population groups.

The findings associated with research hypothesis 4 indicate that subordinates from different population groups differ in the levels of communication quality that they report within the dyads. It should however be noted that in this instance, as was pointed out in the results section, one population group was not included as part of the statistical analysis due to the fact that there was only one respondent. Only Black/African and White respondents were therefore included.

The statistical analysis associated with research hypothesis 5 indicated that there was a low correlation between supervisors' and subordinates' assessments of LMX – i.e. they were not similar, as stated by the hypothesis. This could be an indication that there are some discrepancies in the assessment of the LMX relationships. Possible reasons for this could be social desirability of the responses and/or the fact that supervisors experience the LMX relationships within the dyad differently from the subordinates and vice versa. In other words supervisors may be of the opinion that they operate in a high- or low-quality LMX relationship within a dyad when in fact the subordinates perceive it differently.

The same could apply to subordinates' perceptions. This is particularly interesting in view of the results of the item analysis where it was found that supervisors were consistent in their responses to the questions relating to LMX with the possible exception of the Loyalty dimension. In addition to this, subordinates also responded consistently to the questions associated with LMX with the possible exception of the Participation dimension.

Research hypotheses 6 and 7 respectively stated that the perceptions of subordinates and supervisors in diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs with regard to the LMX would differ significantly from those of subordinates and supervisors in non-diverse supervisor-subordinate pairs. In both instances no significant difference was noted. Once again this could be attributed to the fact that the government department where the research was conducted was relatively homogeneous and the mean age for subordinates was 32.3 and for supervisors 37.2. This could be typical of a vibrant, young, adaptable and racially integrated organisation representing the essence of South Africa ten years after the first democratic elections.

For the purposes of this discussion, the results of research hypotheses 8 and 9 will be discussed simultaneously.

As stated in the results section, research hypothesis 8 stated that there are significant gender differences in the supervisor communication quality whereas research hypothesis 9 stated that there are significant gender differences in supervisor LMX. In both instances, the statistical analysis supported the alternative hypotheses.

These findings are especially remarkable when seen against the backdrop of the views expressed by Rosener (in Rigg & Sparrow, 1994) on the differences between men and women insofar as management style, discussed in the literature review, is concerned.

LMX and communication style are of particular importance within the context of organisational developments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century where a stronger emphasis is being placed on people-oriented leadership (supervisors) that would contribute to organisational wellness, including that of the employees, and business sustainability, profitability and productivity.

If this were positioned against the findings associated with H8 and H9, it could imply that greater organisational emphasis on promoting LMX and communication style is mostly practised by women.

## 8. MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The previous discussions have brought some management implications to the fore in the sense that they have isolated some aspects pertinent to both the LMX and communication style within organisational dyadic relationships.

A number of management implications could be identified from the descriptions, the discussions, the limitations of the study, the findings and the recommendations for further research.

The nature of organisational LMX relationships and resulting communication styles and the ways in which subordinates are assigned to low- or high-quality LMX relationships could have a significant impact on organisational functioning, structures, effectiveness, profitability and productivity.

A fuller understanding of these dynamics and the ways in which subordinates are assigned into lower or higher dyads based on non-objective motivations could provide vital warning signs in terms of LMX relationships and communication practices for supervisors in 21<sup>st</sup>-century organisations.

Communication patterns resulting from the establishment of lower- and higher-quality dyads and ways in which subordinates are assigned to dyads should be emphasised as part of supervisor development within the organisation.

As was pointed out earlier in this study that the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen a marked shift from task-oriented to people-centred organisations, which has had a knock-on effect on leader or supervisor LMX and communication styles.

Further elements that could have a bearing on management and should be borne in mind in any organisation, especially in the South African context, include the impact that diversity and culture could have on the establishment of LMX relationships and the concomitant supervisor-subordinate communication and interaction. These elements should nevertheless be subjected to further research before any decisive conclusions could be reached.

Linked to the above is the assumption that larger numbers of women are entering leadership positions in modern-day organisations. This could be seen as an essential move away from the traditional hierarchical organisations to ones that are based on teamwork and different patterns of interaction, LMX and communication styles. The implication is that organisations that have not already done so should create favourable environments for men and women to collaborate and communicate effectively.

## 9. LIMITATIONS

It is vital to highlight this study's limitations. Some of the more pertinent limitations include:

- The fact that this study was limited to one organisation, i.e. one relatively small government department, impacted negatively on the possibility that the results could be generalised to all South African government departments.
- The government department in question is relatively homogeneous in its composition, which made it problematic to establish whether diversity, specifically in terms of population group, still had an impact on LMX and communication quality. It would have been ideal if the study had been conducted in a more diverse organisation.
- The proposed sample size of 79 respondents comprising supervisor-subordinate dyads also had a limiting effect in the sense that it represented too small a sample to allow in-depth statistical analyses of the data. The fact that only 49 respondents, or 27 dyads, were eventually available compromised the sample and the meaningful statistical analysis even further. Several practicalities impacted on full participation - among these the nature and requirements of the study, which required all the



respondents to be part of a dyad. The researcher was often faced with the non-availability of dyad members due to their work commitments.

- The data analysis was based on a limited number of dyads, which excluded the possibility of subjecting the data to factor analysis. This was a serious limitation in view of the fact that Yrle et al. (2002:263), as part of their study, identified a number of dimensions similar to those of Hatfield and Huseman that could affect supervisor-subordinate communication.
- Cost and time constraints relating to the timely completion of the research project also proved limiting.

## 10. FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research is required into LMX and communication style, and the linkages between management and communication literature. These suggestions will be emphasised in this part of the discussion and some additional recommendations will be put forward, some of which resembling those of Yrle et al. (2002:267).

Suggestions for further research include that such research should be conducted in a different setting with a bigger sample. A bigger sample will not only enable the researcher to conduct a wider range of in-depth statistical analyses, but should provide more varied results relating to the hypotheses.

Considering that this study was conducted in a small and relatively homogeneous government department, additional research should be conducted in a larger and more heterogeneous organisation. South African organisational diversity would be better examined if the research were conducted in a larger organisation with a more diverse workforce.

Elements that should be subjected to additional interrogation include the role of age, gender, work experience, job type and the way in which high- versus low-quality LMX relationships develop and how, based on objective or subjective criteria, individuals are assigned. An important factor that has not been examined is the role that personality-type preference could play in the development and nature of the LMX relationship and the concomitant communication patterns and styles.

A future research suggestion that has been highlighted by Mueller and Lee (2002:237) is that supervisor-subordinate relationships are not always marked by smooth continuity. Instead, these relationships are exposed to the everyday “ups and downs” and stressful situations associated with everyday interaction in a work environment (Mueller & Lee, 2002:237). These could then have an impact on communication and interaction, which could fluctuate over time.

The suggestion is that future research, apart from being broadened in scope and undertaken in a different environment, should, in accordance with the suggestions of Mueller and Lee (2002:237), ideally be longitudinal in order to “delineate everyday routine and/or non-routine communication behaviors in differing LMXs that affect communication”.

The majority of the above suggestions for further research obviously have a bearing on subordinates and supervisors alike within organisational dyads in the South African organisational environment.

## 11. CONCLUSION

This study, which was partially based on the Yrle et al. (2002) research, has suggested that there could be potential correlations between communication and LMX. The findings have confirmed that there is a positive relationship between subordinates' evaluation of LMX and their perceptions of the quality of the communication they receive from their supervisors.

Further significant results, notably within the South African organisational landscape, have indicated that the population group does not play a significant role in LMX; however, some evidence, which seems to suggest that it does have an impact on communication style, was uncovered.

A low correlation was furthermore noted in assessments of LMX by supervisors and subordinates, with no significant differences in perceptions of LMX and communication style as far as diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs vs. non-diverse population group supervisor-subordinate pairs were concerned. It was noted that gender played a role in both LMX and communication style within the dyads.

Accompanying these findings is the primary suggestion that this study and its hypotheses be subjected to further research within a larger, more diverse organisation, by making use of a larger sample.

Additional salient suggestions, mentioned earlier, should also be taken into account when further research is conducted.

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