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Understanding The Relationship Between Span of Control And Subordinate Consensus in  
Leader-Member Exchange

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**Abstract**

Leader-member exchange (LMX) refers to the relationship quality a leader shares with members of his or her workgroup, typically described as differentiation in quality within the group. Numerous empirical studies demonstrate that the quality of this relationship is positively related to followers' attitudes and organisational outcomes. It has been proposed that the quality of possible relationships between the leader and the led will be affected by the number of employees directly reporting to the leader, with empirical findings showing a slight negative relationship between span of control and LMX. Little is known, however, about how span of control influences variability in the quality of leader-member-exchange within the context of work groups. Therefore, following a recognized assumption to strive for as many as possible leadership relations on a high LMX level, we examine how individual and group level (consensus in) LMX can be based on different dimensions of the LMX relationship. We suggest how LMX consensus and a high LMX level can be established even in large spans of control.

## Understanding The Relationship Between Span of Control And Subordinate Consensus in Leader-Member Exchange

### **Introduction**

Leader-member exchange (LMX) refers to the relationship quality a leader shares with individual members of his or her work group. From the outset of research in this area it has been shown that leaders differentiate their relationships and their behaviour toward subordinates within their work groups (Graen and Cashman, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980). That is, in the course of their interactions, leaders develop qualitatively different relationships with followers suggesting little consensus among those subordinates regarding LMX quality. Such differentiation among followers by leaders is central to LMX theory (Liden, Sparrowe & Wayne, 1997). The issue of differentiation is particularly relevant because many individual studies and indeed meta-analyses (e.g., Gerstner & Day, 1997; Ilies, Nahrgang & Morgeson, 2007) confirm that leader-member exchange quality is positively related to followers' positive attitudes and organisational outcomes, implying that only high level exchanges would be preferable.

Initially proposed as a dyadic-level theory to capture the leader-member relationship, LMX has been discussed and examined from multiple levels of analysis. Most frequently, an individual level of analysis, where the quality of the exchange has been assessed from one dyad member's perspective, has been used (Schriesheim, Castro, Zhou & Yammarino, 2001). At the dyad level, researchers have focused on and examined the essence of exchanges or reciprocity between dyad members, including discussions of multiple dimensions of LMX (e.g., Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Uhl-Bien & Maslyn, 2003) as well as agreement between leader and follower (Gerstner & Day, 1997). Further, LMX has been viewed as a relative phenomenon (individuals-within-groups level), where variability in the relationship quality within groups serves as the relevant approach to understanding the impact of different quality

relationships (e.g., Cogliser & Schriesheim, 2000). Finally, more recent examinations (e.g., Boies & Howell, 2006; Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Liden, Erdogan, Wayne & Sparrowe, 2006) have considered the importance of the group level, using differentiation itself as a key variable.

Despite the extant literature showing the great extent of differentiation by leaders, it is often suggested that leaders should strive for high quality exchange relationships across their entire work group (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2005). Consequently, a high absolute average of LMX ratings on the follower side (high level of LMX quality), accompanied by a low variability of ratings of followers reporting to the same leader (high consensus) and a high level of shared perceptions (leaders and members rating their relationship the same) about the LMX quality between leader and follower regarding the same dyadic relationship (high agreement) should be a manager's goal, a combination called LMX excellence by Schyns and Day (in press). Ultimately, however, it has also been suggested in the LMX literature (e.g., Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975; Liden et al., 1997) that while managers should attempt such broad high quality relationship development, it is extremely difficult to accomplish, especially in large work groups.

For example, Dansereau et al. (1975) argue that leaders possess limited resources of time and energy, which automatically limits the number of possible high-quality relationships they can develop and maintain. Similarly, there is support in the LMX literature for the proposition that increased span of control fosters greater differentiation (Green, Anderson & Shivers 1996; Schriesheim, Castro & Yammarino, 2000; Schyns, Paul, Mohr & Blank, 2005). Other studies, however, have failed to support and even disagree with this assertion (Cogliser & Schriesheim, 2000; Kinicki & Vecchio, 1994), leaving the question more equivocal than certain. As high LMX quality is shown to be a positive asset for organisations and because current organization structuring tends to increase the span of control through downsizing,

decentralization, and empowerment, it is worthwhile to look deeper into this contradicting research.

The organisational terminology “span of control” describes the number of employees who are formally and directly subordinated to a superior and are reporting to her/him. Though thinking about the optimal span of control and the impact of span of control has been a foundational issue in organization theory since the classical study of Graicunas appeared (1937), LMX research has not considered span of leadership beyond the core tenets of the exchange of limited resources to key individuals in the workgroup. In this paper, we define span of control in a practical rather than theoretical fashion: a large span of control is defined as the number of followers led by a leader that make “close” (high quality) relationships difficult to pursue across all members. The actual number of followers that render a work group large may vary depending on, for example, the structure of a work group (e.g., team versus individual direct reports; task interdependence).

The aim of this paper is examine the impact of the manager’s span of control on individual and group level LMX (consensus) as a means of understanding the circumstances that could affect LMX within work groups. Rather than centre on LMX as a composite of multiple dimensions or currencies of exchange, we offer propositions that focus on the influence of span of control on different dimensions of LMX (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). One of our key assumptions is that increased leader distance (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Shamir, 1995) created by a large span of control influences LMX dimensions differently. We concentrate here on the individual level effect (quality of LMX relationship as seen by one follower) and the group level effect (consensus regarding LMX quality in a group of followers reporting to the same leader). With this baseline, we discuss a number of implications regarding consensus among group members in high quality LMX relationships.

### **Dimensions of LMX**

Different types of currencies of exchange, discussed in depth in the multidimensional approach to LMX (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden & Maslyn, 1998), are central to our understanding of the LMX-span relationship. In early conceptualizations of LMX theory, the exchanges made between members were considered to be essentially work-related and consistent with the traditional roles of manager and subordinate (Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). For example, followers might contribute a high level of effort toward the job while leaders might reciprocate by providing favourable task assignments. As research in LMX theory progressed, however, various researchers (e.g., Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden et al., 1997) argued that LMX was not based solely on the job-related elements emphasized in earlier work but may also include socially-related currencies. Specifically, Dienesch and Liden (1986) and Liden and Maslyn (1998) proposed multiple dimensions of LMX that included both material and non-material currencies of exchange. These dimensions were labelled Contribution (e.g., performing work beyond what is specified in the job description), Affect (e.g., friendship and liking), Loyalty (e.g., loyalty and mutual obligation), and Professional Respect (e.g., respect for professional capabilities). Other LMX research has produced measures of these constructs and demonstrated validity of these dimensions (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Schriesheim, Neider, Scandura & Tepper, 1992).

The multidimensional approach to LMX has received growing attention in the literature and scholars have started utilizing the LMX-MDM (LMX multidimensional measure, Liden & Maslyn, 1998) to assess LMX in their research. Maslyn and Uhl-Bien (2001) provided an early glimpse into the value of a multidimensional approach in finding unique effects among the dimensions in an examination of effort toward relationship development. Use of the component dimensions of the LMX-MDM (contribution, affect,

loyalty, and professional respect) as either independent antecedents or outcomes, however, is still limited with the vast majority of research using the LMX-MDM combining the dimensions to form a broader measure of LMX (see Ansari, Hung & Aafaqi, 2007; Schyns & Paul, 2005, for recent exceptions).

Investigating LMX in large spans of control opens up the question as to whether or not these different currencies of exchange are manifested in different ways in larger work groups. As prior research has concentrated on the relationship between span of control and a composite measure of LMX (Green et al., 1996; Schriesheim et al., 2000, Schyns et al., 2005), we no virtually know nothing about the role of dimensions with regard to span of control. However, because the different dimensions require different reinforcement, helping leaders to understand the role of dimensions in LMX relationships seems a fruitful way to support LMX relationships also in large spans of control.

In the following, we will first set out our general theoretical background relating to the role of dimensions of LMX in large spans of control and then derive how individual level LMX is shaped by those dimensions in large spans of control. Subsequently, we will transfer these considerations to the group level.

### **Individual Level: The influence of span of control on different LMX currencies of exchange**

We propose that not all currencies of exchange are equal in the amount of effort needed by leaders to develop or maintain a high quality relationship. LMX relationships develop through testing processes and the exchange of valued currencies of exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden et al., 1997). Given a large span of control, managers have resource constraints that can lead to a differential exchange among their followers. A primary resource examined in the literature is time available from managers to interact with and provide other resources to subordinates. Dansereau et al. (1975) noted that the size of the workgroup directly impacted the



time managers can spend with their subordinates. Judge and Ferris (1993) similarly suggested that the larger the span of control the less actual manager-follower contact occurs. Still other researchers (e.g., Cogliser & Schriesheim, 2000; Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970; Green et al., 1996) proposed or found support for this contention. Time effects, however, have not been any more consistent regarding LMX than have studies of span of control. In a study by Kinicki and Vecchio (1994) time constraints were actually positively related to LMX quality while Cogliser and Schriesheim (2000) found no relationship leaving open the question of possible differences in bases of relationship quality associated with a manager's time. An examination of the differential process for the development and maintenance of exchanges based on different currencies of exchange offers an alternative view to a rigid resource constraint approach. Rather than the actual time spend with followers, we argue that the different results found for the impact of span of control on LMX are due to the different effects of span of control on the different LMX dimensions. We thus explore the question whether leader distance is responsible for the effect of span of control on LMX relationships.

According to Napier and Ferris (1993), organizational distance is comprised of physical distance, structural distance, and functional distance (Napier & Ferris, 1993). The leadership distance literature (e.g., Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Napier & Ferris, 1993; Shamir, 1995; Weibler 2004) defines leader distance as consisting of status and power distance, physical distance, and infrequent contact with followers. The latter two are especially characteristic for large spans of control. Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) review and extension of the leader distance literature holds that leaders and followers may operate at different distances from one another. While high quality LMX relationships have been conceptualized as falling in the category of "close" relationships, with quality diminishing as distance increases, Antonakis and Atwater's (2002) position challenges the universality of this notion by suggesting that followers can identify with leaders whether social distance is large or small. This identification implies that

followers can ascribe or, as noted by Shamir (1995), attribute, characteristics to leaders even when distant, while in closer relationships they base their judgment on actual leader behaviour rather than attribution.

Therefore, the question arises as to whether and which LMX dimensions are more or less likely to occur in the case of small or large leader distance. Research and theory concerning psychological distance and level of construal (Liberman, Trope & Stephan 2007) facilitates the answer to this question.

“According to CLT [construal level theory], individuals use concrete, low-level construals to represent near events and abstract, high-level construal to represent distant events. Low-level construals are relatively unstructured, contextualized representations that include subordinate and incidental features of events. High-level construals, in contrast, are schematic, decontextualized representations that extract the gist from available information.” (Trope, Liberman & Wakslak, 2007, p. 83).

Psychological distance is characterised by temporal, spatial and social distance as well as hypotheticality (referring to decisions under uncertain outcomes; Trope et al., 2007). Leader distance can be set into relation to this construct in so far as both comprise spatial and social distance. We therefore assume that some of the predictions Trope et al. (2007) make with regard to psychological distance are valid for leader distance as well. According to Trope et al. (2007), psychological distance leads to a higher level of abstraction in representations of events. Transferring this assumption to leader distance, we argue that in cases of higher leader distance or large spans of control, more abstract representations of the leader-member relationship will be more relevant. To apply this thought to the different dimensions of LMX we need to look closer

at the dimensions of LMX suggested by Dienesch and Liden (1986) and Liden and Maslyn (1998) in order to determine their level of abstraction.

The dimension “affect” comprises items referring to liking and direct work experience, thus is not abstract. Liden & Maslyn (1998) specifically note that a characteristic of this dimension involves frequent interaction because the members enjoy each others’ company. “Contribution” is characterised by the “perception of the amount, direction and quality of work-oriented” (Dienesch & Liden, 1986: 624) contributions of the follower, again something that is related to direct experience and does not imply leader distance. That means that the currencies being exchanged when relationships are based on contribution and affect need to be replenished frequently. As with closer forms of manager-follower relationships, we consider that contribution and affect are based less on attribution and more on direct interaction between managers and followers. The reason for this assumption is that the dimensions of contribution and affect are more specific in their scope and impact on followers, characterized by an interdependence that Uhl-Bien, Graen and Scandura (2000) note is typical of high quality, “close” LMX relationships. Specifically, contribution’s definition as a “perception of the current level of work-oriented activity each member puts forth toward the mutual goals (explicit or implicit) of the dyad” (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 50) implies more frequent short-term exchanges. Similarly, the affect dimension of LMX includes “personally rewarding components and outcomes (e.g., a friendship)” (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 50) suggestive of frequent exchanges and investments on the part of dyad members.

We suggest that the LMX dimensions of loyalty and professional respect can and do exist from a “distance.” That is, followers can obtain these currencies based on their beliefs and expectations of the leader without experiencing them directly, but instead through vicarious means such as the reputation of their manager. “Professional Respect”, for example, refers to the follower’s appreciation of the leader’s professional abilities. It is a rather abstract construct as it

is not comprised of specificities of what this respect is exactly built on or what it refers to. For professional respect, work on the importance of expectations of competence (e.g., Liden, Wayne & Stilwell, 1993) and the importance of expert power (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002) support this contention. Having an admirable reputation as an expert provides potential present and future value to followers, even if it is accessed only occasionally. Further, the maintenance of this expertise requires little extra work on the part of managers beyond normal day-to-day interactions with followers in general or with others in the organization because reputation is by definition a social phenomenon. As such, once developed, professional respect is likely to continue as a valid currency without placing either continued demands on the manager, or increased demands across multiple followers.

In the same way loyalty to each other, or the expression of public support or the expectation that the manager will remain faithful in that support from situation to situation (Liden & Maslyn, 1998), does not require constant reinforcement by managers but only the absence of disloyalty. The items of the LMX-MDM bear out that the value of loyalty is found in a future expectation -- two of the three items of the loyalty subscale include statements such as "My supervisor would come to my defence if..." and "My supervisor would defend me to others in this organization if..." Because of this expectation loyalty can exist at a distance or be considered valuable by subordinates without a manager ever demonstrating loyalty directly or frequently. Further, in terms of construal theory, loyalty is a hypothetical dimension ("My supervisor would come to my defense if I were "attacked" by others") implying a higher construal level.

Consequently, we propose that contribution and affect are more characteristic in close leader-member relationships with high quality of LMX relationships, thus, in large spans of control resulting in fewer subordinates with high quality relationships. Loyalty and professional respect on the other hand are currencies that do not demand frequent exchange but instead are

characteristics that can be achieved even in the case of psychological or leader distance. On the basis of these arguments, we propose the following:

**Proposition 1a: In large spans of control, there will be a negative relationship between span of control and contribution and affect.**

**Proposition 1b: In large spans of control, a greater number of quality LMX relationships will be based on the dimensions of loyalty and professional respect than on contribution and affect.**

**Group Level: The influence of span of control on consensus regarding different LMX currencies of exchange**

Much of the research on LMX has focused on the outcomes of a good relationship quality between leader and his or her subordinates, often differentiating between an in-group of trusted members and an out-group of members with whom a purely contractual relationship is upheld (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In the context of the larger workgroup, differentiation research has shown that consensus among followers of the same leader is an important predictor of organisational outcomes. Research indicates that perceived differences in LMX quality within groups affects the judgments of co-workers' use of ingratiation (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2005), negatively influences job satisfaction and well-being (Hooper & Martin, 2008); that similarity in LMX is positively related to co-worker exchange (Wikaningrum, 2007) and that the variability of one dimension of LMX (contribution, cf. Liden & Maslyn, 1998) is negatively related to satisfaction and commitment (Schyns, 2006). These studies underscore that it is beneficial for leaders to uphold positive relationships with *all* members of their workgroups. Henderson et al. (2008) extended this line of inquiry to examine differentiation from both the individual-within-group and group levels and found that LMX at both levels significantly predicted judgments of psychological contract fulfilment. They noted that variability in LMX quality at the group level was dysfunctional but interestingly also noted that differentiation could be functional under certain

circumstances, for example, when differentiation is based on individual contribution and, thus, accepted by other followers (see also van Breukelen & Weselius, 2007).

Besides empirical work showing negative effects of lack of consensus in LMX quality, simple differential treatment of followers by their leaders has been proposed to have implications for justice or perceived fairness. Empirical research is inconclusive at this stage: Van Breukelen, Konst and van der Vlist (2002) as well as Sias and Jablin (1995) look into the effect of differential leader treatment on LMX relations. While Van Breukelen et al. (2002) found no direct effect of differential treatment, they found an interaction effect of differential treatment and LMX quality on commitment. Sias and Jablin (1995), on the other hand, found a direct effect of differential treatment on communication between co-workers. In a theoretical contribution, Scandura (1999) suggests that justice and LMX are closely related and that justice is associated with the differentiation between in- and out-group. In an empirical study Pillai, Scandura and Williams (1999) showed that distributive justice mediated the relationship between LMX and job satisfaction in US, Australian, Columbian and Middle Eastern samples. Ansari et al. (2007) extended this research, using commitment and turnover intention as outcomes. They found that procedural justice mediated the relationship between the respect dimension of LMX and commitment in a Malaysian sample. Consequently, not only should the expected good results associated with high quality LMX relationships motivate leaders to uphold as many positive relationships as possible but a justice or fairness perspective make treating followers similarly appear vital ethically. Consequently, both research on LMX differentiation and its results as well as LMX differentiation and justice have led some LMX scholars to recommend to leaders to avoid differentiation (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al., 2000).

In essence, two broad levels of consensus can be differentiated: Followers of the same leader can agree in their rating regarding the relationship with their leader on a high or a low

level of LMX quality. Extreme variability or a lack of consensus, on the other hand, would lead to a mid-level LMX average. In accordance with the positive outcomes of high quality LMX relationships, on the one hand, and consensus, on the other hand, in this paper, we are most interested in the consensus among followers of the same leader with regard to their individual (dyadic relationship between one leader and one follower) relationship quality *on a high level of LMX quality*. That is, high consensus with an average high LMX quality at the same time. However, as we have argued above, depending on the number of followers reporting to one leader, establishing a good relationship quality with all followers and, thus, achieving high consensus on high quality LMX might be next to impossible in large spans of control. Again, examining the different dimensions of LMX can be useful to differentiate which type of consensus is achievable and which is not achievable because consensus in LMX must be built from the bottom up (Graen, 2009).

We argued above that different dimensions of LMX can be related to different levels of closeness / distance, namely, that high LMX between leaders and followers with a large leader distance will be characterised by loyalty and respect rather than affect and contribution. In large spans of control, not all followers can be close to the supervisor, meaning that consensus regarding LMX quality is unlikely to be built on dimensions that need closeness, such as affect and contribution. However, loyalty and respect can flourish in the case of leader distance as well, making it more likely that if consensus develops at all in large spans of control, it will be shaped by loyalty and respect.

**Proposition 2: In large spans of control, followers are more likely to have a high consensus concerning the LMX dimensions of loyalty and professional respect and a low consensus concerning the LXM dimensions of affect and contribution.**

## Summary and Discussion

As Johns (2006) argues, the influence of context on organisational behaviour “is often unrecognized or underappreciated” (p. 389). With this paper, we bring organization structure and practice in the form of span of control to a discussion of leadership as it is a potential key factor for organisational context in which leader-member relationships are placed (see also Porter & McLaughlin, 2006).

Though there is some consideration within LMX theory regarding contextual factors, our analysis takes the discussion into a rather new direction. Instead of only demonstrating that certain effects (e.g., satisfaction) go along with different sizes of span of control (e.g., narrow), or that larger spans of control are necessarily associated with lower average LMX quality, as prior research has done, our contribution has argued that analysing the different dimensions of LMX quality more closely, leads to an insight into the working of LMX in large groups. As such, we look at dimensions of LMX as a means to collectively examine both bottom-up influences on consensus (Graen, 2009) with top-down or contextual realities in organizations. On the one hand, the idea that relationships can be built on different dimensions can explain the contradictory results of prior studies that were based on composite LMX measures. On the other hand, it can support leaders in coping with large spans of control more effectively. That is, we identify means by which managers may build greater high quality LMX consensus within their workgroups even under conditions of larger spans of control. Our focus was on individual level as well group level LMX (consensus) as a function of different dimensions of LMX, an approach consistent with researchers who suggested or found that LMX operates at multiple levels of analysis simultaneously (Henderson et al., 2008).

We postulated that different currencies of exchange between managers and their subordinates will have different effects on LMX quality consensus, depending on how necessary personal interaction or psychological closeness might be for the different



currencies involved in the exchange process. We suggested that the “affect” and “contribution” currencies needed to be exchanged more frequently and more directly, thus making low leader distance necessary. Loyalty and professional respect, on the other hand, rely more on attribution processes and can, therefore, be developed and sustained in large groups. Integrating leader distance into LMX, is a new way of looking at the different dimensions of LMX. While so far, the question leading to the development of dimensions was mainly how leader-member relationships can be described (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Berneth et al., 2007), we explained how the different dimensions contribute to positive leader-member relationships in specific context (small versus large span of control).

### **Practical Implications and Future Research**

Based on our discussion, some practical implications can be articulated. Regarding the broader or more narrowly based impact of different currencies of exchange, leaders can be trained to show and communicate more consciously the professional respect and loyalty dimensions in their exchanges with subordinates instead of relying as heavily on the contribution and affect dimensions. Again, a high level of professional respect and loyalty can be accomplished from a “distance” by communicating critical incidents where examples of professional capabilities and loyalty were present. This approach can create the expectation that these are characteristic of the leader more generally. Before such an approach is recommended and applied, however, more research is necessary as to the different outcomes that are likely to accompany each unique dimension. For example, Liden and Maslyn (1998) found that contribution is highly related to organizational commitment, while loyalty is highly related to leader-rated performance. Future research needs to investigate in how far these relationships are stable in different spans of control.

In terms of large spans of control and the creation of LMX beyond professional respect and loyalty, an on-going discussion has emerged as to how leaders can more

effectively differentiate among followers (Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2005). This more instrumental approach to relationship development suggests that in cases where factors such as span of control present constraints on managers' time spent with individual subordinates (large leader distance), manager's efforts should be invested in fewer targeted subordinates as opposed to most or all subordinates (Liden et al., 2006). For example, Liden et al. (1997) proposed that under such circumstances managers would be advised to establish higher quality relationships with those followers that possess greater network centrality. Harmon and Van Dyne (2008) also suggest prescriptive role-making with a recommendation that managers target top performers within work groups for the development of high quality relationships. Consequently by targeting such employees, leaders could strive to substitute for their own lack of possibility to establish LMX relationships on the basis of affect and contribution. However, this discussion implies that the decision to target certain employees is made on an explicit level. Looking into research that shows that, for example, value similarity is positively related to the development of a high quality exchange relationship (e.g., Ashkanasy & O'Connor, 1997) may imply that the differentiation in LMX relationships is made unconsciously. That would mean, that before using the approach of targeting followers instrumentally, leaders need to be made aware of their choices and the implications of these choices.

The development of high quality LMX relationships with targeted followers are then likely to be the key contributors in creating co-worker exchange (CWX, Sherony & Green, 2002). CWX is conceptualized as a dyadic process between respective team members along similar dimensions as used by LMX. Drawing from balance theory (Heider, 1958), Sherony and Green (2002) showed that there was a tendency within individuals to balance exchange qualities between triads (leader-member and member-member relationships). This indicates that a good CWX quality would lead to a good LMX quality even considering "close" LMX

dimensions such as affect and contribution. Sherony and Green (2002) suggested that a few positive LMX relationships with certain co-workers could have a contagion effect on the whole team. Thus, leaders who are able to establish and maintain high-quality LMX relationships with significant co-workers will provoke direct positive effects on exchange relationships between co-workers.

The possibility of influencing targeted co-workers, however, depends on the group structure. Leadership research has just begun exploring this topic (e.g., Balkundi & Kilduff 2006; Graen & Graen 2006; Mayo, Meindl & Pastor, 2003; Uhl-Bien, 2006). For example, Balkundi and Kilduff (2006) outline a network approach to leadership, emphasizing the need to include different relationships into the leadership process. When introducing the notion of target co-workers, one has to take into account that relying on others enhances the dependency on them and leads – in this case and at least indirectly – to a shared leadership approach (see, for instance, Pearce & Conger, 2003) where efficiency of a work group is dependent on the productive co-acting of different formal and informal leaders. Therefore, organisational support for LMX relationship should concentrate either on the optimal match between a leader and the situation or on shaping selected substitutes or context factors which support superiors to lead larger groups effectively.

If we broaden our view regarding in terms of networks of leadership and look into organisational “chains of command”, we recognize that leaders are mostly followers themselves. This means that as with their own followers, they are members of their respective leaders’ in- or out-group (Graen, Cashman, Ginsburg & Schiemann, 1977). Weibler (1994; 2004), for instance, empirically demonstrated that the next higher leader influences the ease with which a leader-member relationship are managed. Thus, we can assume that the possibilities as well the effectiveness of more positive LMX relationships based on different dimensions will be influenced by a powerful and resourceful next higher leader. If leaders do

not share a good relationship quality with their own leader, they may have fewer resources available to establish many high quality LMX relationships with followers. For example, if followers perceive that the next higher leader does not respect their leader professionally, this may lead to lower follower respect as well.

Researchers should also consider factors potentially affecting leader distance and LMX quality, such as the use of a team structure and variance in relationship tenure. Leaders who interact and communicate with followers regularly on a one-to-one basis (direct reports, e.g., sales and distribution), those that have only one team versus several teams, or those whose subordinates are located in different regions (e.g., research and development), are likely to have different experiences regarding LMX and span of control. For example, contagion effects may be limited in non-located workgroups. Within different teams, different levels of leader distance can emerge, influencing the dimension of LMX quality relevant to that group.

Possibly, this notion is also dependent on follower characteristics that might be conducive to high levels of consensus regarding LMX. One example comprises followers' implicit leadership theories as prior research has shown that implicit leadership theories are related to the perception of leadership (e.g., Schyns, Felfe & Blank, 2007). Assuming that the same is true for LMX, it could be argued that when followers agree in their implicit leadership theories, they will also agree more in terms of their perception of LMX quality and the related dimensions. However, in a large span of control, achieving consensus among followers may be difficult simply due to the fact that there will be many different views. For example, in a large group, some followers may be more or less likely to accept professional respect as part of a good LMX relationship.

Other follower-oriented research might consider the role of followers' needs in their perception of LMX quality. For example, Schyns, Kroon and Moors (2008) found that

follower needs are related to their perception of LMX quality. They argue that follower needs are relevant for leaders as they can only establish good relationships with their followers if they are aware of their followers' needs. Again, in a large span of control, aligning followers' needs can be more difficult than in a small span of control. This is in line with diversity research which suggests that in order to cooperate and agree on issues, similarity in terms of values and needs (deep level diversity as opposed to surface level diversity which is based on demographic dissimilarity) among members of the same group is crucial. Transferring this prior research into consensus and span of control, we would expect that with a larger span of control, the advantage of leading teams – in contrast to isolated followers – is only and undoubtedly conducive to high level, high consensus LMX when followers are similar in their implicit leadership theories and in their needs, and thus show deep level similarity.

In this paper, we have concentrated on the effects a large span of control has on individual and group level LMX (consensus) and how the suggested negative effects can be overcome by emphasizing different dimensions of the LMX relationship. However, we did not consider the effects of a large span of control on the agreement between leader and follower on their mutual relationship. Prior research has shown that, although we would expect a high agreement between leader and member when rating their mutual relationship, this is not the case (Gerstner & Day, 1997). According to Liberman et al. (2007), power can imply social distance, meaning that leaders see themselves as separate from their followers. They argue that power leads to more abstract perceptions. With respect to LMX relationships, we could thus assume that especially in large spans of control that have been associated with larger structurally induced distance and larger power distance (Napier & Ferris, 1993), supervisors will tend to view relationship in a more abstract way than followers. Consequently, leaders may perceive more respect and loyalty rather than affect and contribution while this may be different for followers. Given that Gibson, Cooper and Conger

(2009) argue and find that perceptual distance between a leader and his/her team negatively affects team performance, this is an important area for future research.

Our focus in this paper was on span of control as an indicator of leader distance. Looking into the literature around leader distance, span of control is only one indicator of leader distance. An interesting route to pursue in future research would be to look into the personality of the leader and how it can convey psychological distance leading to similar constraints regarding the dimensions of LMX that define good relationship qualities as indicated here for span of control. The example of attachment styles may illustrate this point:

Attachment styles are differentiated into avoidant, anxious, and secure (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, 1978; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Essentially, individuals with an avoidant attachment style do not look for relationships but rather try to avoid establishing relationships, preferring to work alone (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). In the workplace, managers with this style are likely to be inattentive, manipulative, and provide little interpersonal support to subordinates (Keller & Cacioppe, 2001), characteristics that could be used to describe distance. Therefore, managers with this attachment style would not be expected to be willing or able to develop many high quality relationships. In contrast, individuals that show an anxious attachment style are concerned about relationships to fulfil their need for attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Keller and Cacioppe (2001) suggest that leaders with this attachment style may be attentive to followers as a means of creating dependence by followers on the leader, though still not trusting in their competence. This one-sided relationship runs counter to a high quality LMX relationship where there is mutual dependence and a high level of trust between members of the dyad (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Finally, leaders with a secure attachment style feel comfortable about interdependence with others and have been shown to recognize and balance the needs of the parties to the

relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Leadership research has linked a secure attachment style to relational competence (Manning, 2003), and to transformational leadership behaviour such as individualized consideration and intellectual stimulation (Popper & Mayselless, 2003; Popper Mayselless, & Castelnovo 2000). Keller and Cacioppe (2001) note that secure-type leaders “may positively approach their leadership role and express more certainty of their ability to perform well in that role” (p. 72). These characteristics are consistent with high quality LMX relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Thus, with respect to leader distance, we can assume that only a secure attachment style allows the closeness that the LMX dimensions affect and contribution need to be developed and maintained even when other factors might suggest a greater distance between leader and follower.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this overview identified how focusing on different dimensions of LMX can explain the effects of span of control on individual and group level LMX, and also provides guidance for organisations that wish to expand the number of high quality relationships within their expanding workgroups. Although some recent research has identified certain conditions under which differentiation may be beneficial (e.g., Liden et al., 2006, van Breukelen & Weselius, 2007), overall we believe that an understanding of how to maximize LMX quality within groups is important for researchers and managers alike.

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