LMX Theory and Superior-Subordinate relationships

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Most people have heard the phrase; “there are too many chiefs and not enough Indians,” which means there are too many leaders trying to take control of a situation and not enough followers to go along with the plan of action. Well what if you don’t have a strong communication system built between your chiefs and Indians? As a current employee for Pepsi Mid-America, I have come across this problem many times, whether it’s knowing what displays they want up, to simply knowing my schedule for the week. I have wondered if it was something I was doing wrong or if my superiors weren’t conveying the message to me correctly, and how I could resolve the issue in a correct manner, in order to perform my job tasks to the best of my ability. Until now I could never find the correct solution, but after doing research, I stumbled upon the Leader Member Exchange theory and Superior-Subordinate Relationships, and right away I knew I had found something that would begin to answer the problems I had been trying to deal with. Throughout my paper I will discuss the different studies that have been conducted within Leader Member Exchange theory and Superior-Subordinate Relationships, as well as discuss an interview I conducted with one of Pepsi’s Area Sales Manager, Tony Rushing. Finally, my main goal for this writing assignment is to find out how does the Leader Member Exchange theory explains superior-subordinate relationships within the organization of Pepsi Mid-America?

*LMX Theory*

In order to answer my research question, you must first understand the theory and the concept as a whole. Having said that I begin first with leader-member exchange theory. In defining Leader-member exchange theory (LMX) Beebe, Beebe, and Redmond say it is a “theory that supervisors develop different types of relationships with different subordinates and that seeks to explain those differences” (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2011, p. 369). In brief, it is a theory that explains the different relationships in a workplace between supervisors and employees and how certain relationships differ from others. In order to find out how LMX theory affects the organization of Pepsi, the research articles helped analyze the theory in a general approach. Leadership, was summarized by Erdogan and Enders (2007) as the ability to motivate others. In their article, they looked to find how supervisors, or leaders of an organization, are seen and how they use the LMX theory to increase their influence. They believed that a supervisor’s perceived organizational support (POS) would balance out the relationships among LMX, job satisfaction, and job performance. After having 210 subordinates and 38 supervisors fill out a confidential survey, they found that when a supervisor possesses a high POS, the relationship between LMX and job satisfaction was stronger within the organization. This shows us that by having a supervisor that is willing to establish relationships with his or her employees, will ultimately gain that supervisor’s POS and positively affect the supervisor’s job performance.

The next study that helps show how LMX theory affects the organization of Pepsi was conducted by Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, and Ervin (2007). In their study they wanted to find how communication apprehension (the fear/anxiety you receive when talking with others) and cognitive flexibility (how people receive information and understand the information given to them) affected the LMX quality between superiors and subordinates. They found that when a subordinate has communication apprehension, it repressed a quality LMX relationship from developing with the superiors, but when the subordinate showed qualities of cognitive flexibility, he or she had a better LMX relationship with their superiors. Basically, when a boss and employee have a discussion, better relationships will form when the employee is not scared or afraid of his or her boss, which will then develop into a successful business because the employee feels comfortable in the job task he or she is given to perform.

In the last study that helps show how LMX theory affects the organization of Pepsi, Mueller and Lee (2002) defined communication satisfaction as “the affective response to the fulfillment of expectation-type standards” in message exchange processes and “symbolizes an enjoyable, fulfilling experience” (Hecht, 1978, p. 350). Mueller and Lee believed that “the quality of LMX will affect the perceived amount of communication satisfaction in interpersonal contexts” (Mueller & Lee, 2002, p. 226). After careful planning of their questionnaire, they distributed out about 400 questionnaires to four different organizations and found that the quality of LMX had a positive effect on subordinates’ perceived communication satisfaction in interpersonal, group, and organizational contexts. Mueller and Lee (2002) go on to state that:

The quality of LMX appears to be strongly and positively related to communication satisfaction in larger group and organizational contexts. That is, the LMX quality not only affects subordinates’ satisfaction with communication with their superiors, but also their satisfaction with communication practices within group and organizational contexts. Thus, it would appear that the quality of LMX has a “spillover” or “ripple” effect on perceptions of communication satisfaction in other forms of communication interaction. (p. 235)

After looking over all the information from the different articles, I have found that so far it all comes back to one thing, effective use of communication. By having a supervisor who possesses a high POS, cognitive flexibility, and a positive quality of LMX can show how to be successful in any type of organization. When in a business setting, if you have a group of people who won’t work together to find a common ground, that business is never going to find success unless they find a way to work as team and talk with each other.

*Superior-Subordinate Relationships*

The next part of answering my research question, comes in discussing superior-subordinate relationships. Superior-subordinate relationships are defined as “interactions between employees and their supervisors; interactions can occur inside and outside the workplace” (Golden & Vegia, 2008). When analyzing this concept in relevance with the organization of Pepsi, Madlock and Kennedy-Lightsey (2010) conducted a study believing “that subordinates’ job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and communication satisfaction would be negatively associated with subordinates’ reports of supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness yet positively associated with subordinates’ reports of supervisors’ mentoring” (Madlock & Lightsey, 2010, p. 55). After distributing 400 questionnaires to full-time employees in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United states, it was found that mentoring, [“individuals with advanced experience and knowledge provide support and facilitate the upward mobility of junior organizational members” (Ragins & Scandura, 1994, p. 967)], and communication satisfaction [“socioemotional feeling derived from positive relational interactions” (Hecht, 1978, p. 255)] had a direct association. However, when it came to mentoring and job satisfaction, [“a pleasurable or positive emotional state from the appraisal of one’s job or experiences” (Locke, 1976, p. 1297)], they had no significant association with each other, which shows that communication satisfaction is the suppressor variable (independent variable is related to others, but not to dependent variables) for job satisfaction. Furthermore, they found that mentoring had a direct association with both communication satisfaction and organizational commitment, which is “the level of attachment an employee feels toward the organization” (Madlock & Lightsey, 2010). In addition it was found that Supervisor mentoring and supervisor verbal aggression, “communication that attacks another person’s self-concept and is considered to be an expression of hostility because it hurts the person(s) involved,” (Madlock & Lightsey, 2010) had a significant association between the two, but they also found that a supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness was a greater predictor than a supervisors’ mentoring in subordinates’ organizational commitment. Madlock & Lightsey (2010) found that forty-eight percent of supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggression had a variation in subordinates’ job satisfaction, but a supervisors’ verbal aggressiveness was a greater predictor than mentoring in subordinates’ job satisfaction. In the final regression they found that forty-seven percent of supervisors’ mentoring and verbal aggression made a variation in subordinates’ communication satisfaction, but supervisors’ verbal aggression was a greater predictor than mentoring in a subordinates’ communication satisfaction.

Another article that helps explain superior subordinate relationships in accordance with Pepsi was written by Shanock and Esienberger (2010). In their, study they examined full-time retail employees and their supervisors to investigate supervisors’ perceived organizational support (POS) with subordinates’ perceptions of support from their supervisors (PSS), and in-role and extra-role performance. After surveying two hundred and forty-eight full time employees at a large electronic store, Shanock and Esienberger found that the supervisors’ POS had a positive correlation to the subordinates’ perceptions of supervisor support, as well as the subordinates PSS having a positive association with their POS, in-role and extra-role performance. In simplifying this result it shows that if the supervisor has support from the organization, then he/she will show more supportiveness towards their subordinates. By showing support from the supervisor and subordinate for the supervisor, it helps the retailers to take more prideful acts not only in the organization, but in their work as well.

In order to answer my research question, I interviewed Pepsi Mid-America Sales Manager Tony Rushing. After defining LMX theory, I asked for his explanation of the theory and how he relates that with the Pepsi organization. He replied with:

Well you must first gain my trust by doing a good job, once I begin to feel comfortable with that employee then I begin to give him or her a little more breathing room knowing they can successful get the job done… I believe LMX theory is best described as a positive way of finding a common ground and finding out the best way to relate with others in our organization. (Rushing, personal communication, February 15, 2011)

Then, I asked the same question with superior-subordinate relationships. He replied with:

When understanding superior-subordinate relationships I define it as the most positive way to convey a message to my employees… If they understand me through text message then I text message them, if they understand me through lingo then I use a certain lingo that me and that employee can understand. The hardest thing for me is really knowing how each person within the organization finds it easiest to communicate about the job task at hand so that it is not only easier on that employee but on me as well. (Rushing, personal communication, February 15, 2011)

Finally, I asked him the big question, how does the LMX theory explain superior-subordinate relationships within Pepsi? His response to the question was:

Pepsi’s main goal is obviously to distribute as much Pepsi product as possible and find ways to improve our sales techniques to the consumer, but in order to do that I as a sales manager must make sure my employees have a positive aspect when it comes to providing the products to the consumers, so by having positive relationships with my employees, whether it’s at work or outside of work, helps this company to meet its main goal, and not only that but it makes it more enjoyable for the employees themselves to want to work for this company and give Pepsi that positive image everyone likes to see. (Rushing, personal communication, February 15, 2011)

When you add in all the factors of LMX theory (high POS, cognitive flexibility, and positive quality of LMX) and superior-subordinate relationships (mentoring, communication satisfaction, verbal aggressiveness, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction) it helps to understand the two on a general level in any type of organization. So, when understanding how LMX theory explains superior-subordinate relationships within Pepsi Mid-America it uses all the sub categories in the theory and concept to develop positive relationships with a supervisor and an employee and finding ways for the two to meet a common ground on communicating a message and meeting the organizations main goal.

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