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Leader-member exchange, gender, and influence tactics. A test on multinational companies in Malaysia

Abstract

Building upon the “social exchange theory” notion (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962), this paper hypothesized the direct impact of leader-member exchange on supervisors’ use of downward influence tactics. Leader-member exchange (LMX) and influence tactics were conceptualized as 2- and 3-dimensional constructs, respectively. One hundred and fifty-eight Malaysian managers and executives working in large scale multinational companies voluntarily participated in this study. Two dimensions of LMX, namely loyalty and affect, have direct relationships with soft influence tactics, whereas the moderating hypotheses were not found to have any significant impact on the dependent variables. The findings suggested that leader-member exchange would have moderate impact on supervisors’ use of influence tactics on their subordinates. Implications of the findings, potential limitations of the study, and directions for future research were discussed further.

Keywords: leader-member exchange, gender, influence tactics, social exchange theory, organizational behavior.

JEL Classification: D21, D29.

Introduction

Social influence process is a vital aspect of organizational behavior. Pfeffer (1981) defined influence as the ability to exercise power in order to overcome resistance in achieving a desired objective or result. Social influence processes are generally regarded as a pervasive aspect of organizational life. As suggested by Drucker (1999), organizations are now evolving toward structures in which rank means responsibility but not authority, and where the supervisor’s job is not to command, but to persuade. Blickle (2003) contended that, in order to be effective, it is critical for managers to influence their subordinates, peers, and superiors to assist and support their proposals, plans, and to motivate them to carry out with their decisions. Previous researchers on managerial performance such as Kanter (1982) and Pavett and Lau (1983) pointed out that an important component of successful management is the ability to influence others. For the past two decades, several experts (such as Ansari, 1990; Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Bhal & Ansari, 2000; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Yukl & Tracey, 1992) have made substantial contribution to the understanding of the influence processes in the organizations where agents attempt to change the attitudes and obtain compliance from other persons (the targets) in the organizations.

On the other hand, Graen and Cashman (1975) have elucidated that, in every supervisor-subordinate dyad, the nature of the exchange is different between supervisors and subordinates. According to Howell, Dorfman, and Kerr (1986), most popular leadership paradigms include at least one moderator and quality of leader-member relations is one of them. Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory was first illustrated in the works of Dansereau, Graen,

and Haga (1975) 32 years ago and has recently been gaining momentum. Many studies have been conducted to investigate the role that the supervisor plays in his or her relationship with subordinates. Essentially, the supervisor, the subordinate, or both will evaluate the relationship according to the quality of the interaction and these perceptions have a fundamental influence on individual outcomes. As mentioned by Murry, Sivasubramaniam, and Jacques (2001), the positive exchanges are typically reciprocated with positive outcomes from the subordinates. Each member of the dyad has the other’s best interest at heart and this is reflected in more supportive behavior. Hence, this study is an attempt to examine the relationship between LMX, and as a critical predictor of supervisors’ influence tactics. Moderating effects of supervisors’ gender with supervisors’ influence tactics is also examined.

The major concern of this research is to determine whether LMX theory and influence are applicable in the manufacturing companies located in Malaysia. This research attempts to answer the following questions:

- ◆ Does Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) affect supervisors’ influence tactics?
- ◆ Does gender of the supervisors moderate the relationship between LMX and influence tactics?

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Influence tactics. Keys and Bell (1982) revealed that the appropriate use of influence is an essential leadership function that differentiates successful managers from non-successful ones (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2002). Seifert, Yukl, and McDonald (2003) also endorsed the importance of influence tactics where the effectiveness of managers depends on their capability to influence others in the same organization. Yukl (2005) goes a step

further by advocating use of proactive influence tactics. Besides, the use of influence tactics is critical for executives faced with important decision in top management teams where the influence process could either exacerbate or mitigate common decision making and implementation difficulties on executives' teams (Enns & McFarlin, 2003). Further, numerous empirical studies on organizational behavior concurred that interpersonal influence in organizations is one of the most important determinants of managerial effectiveness (Bass, 1990; Fu et al., 2001; Lester, Ready, Hostager, & Bergmann, 2003; Pfeffer, 1992; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).

Previous studies have examined the directional differences in influence behavior (Ansari, 1990; Bennebroek & Boonstra, 1998; Bhal & Ansari, 2000; Kipnis et al., 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl, Falbe, & Youn., 1993; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Their findings have shown that the use of influence tactics is connected to the hierarchical relationship between the agent and the target.

Kipnis (1984) has earlier reported that tactics could be classified into three meta-categories known as strong, weak, and rational. Later, Kipnis and Schmidt (1985) renamed the categories as hard tactics, soft tactics, and rational tactics (Barry & Shapiro, 1992; Deluga & Perry, 1991; Falbe & Yukl, 1992) where hard tactics signified the use of authority and position power, soft tactics involved the use of personal power, and rational persuasion tactics relied upon the use of logic.

Subsequently, Lamude (1994) recategorized tactics into two categories, namely, "hard" and "soft" tactics where hard influence tactics tend to be used in a manipulative and coercive manner, while soft tactics are defined as the use of personal power and power sharing. Later, Fu (2002) regrouped several tactics into three broadly defined categories, namely persuasive, assertive, and relationship-based. Recent studies have used the meta-categories of Kipnis and Schmidt (1985) to examine the strategies used by superiors on their subordinates (McFarland et al., 2002). Given the above, studies have indicated that the advantage of having three groupings is that it allows researchers to investigate combinations of tactics, especially as most managers tend to use more than one type of influence tactics; thus it helps to integrate findings from previous studies (Tepper, Eisenbach, Kirby, & Potter, 1998). Moreover, studies aimed at teasing apart the complex factors and events that constitute the influence process are difficult to conduct in any case (Enns & McFarlin, 2003). Albeit differences in the use of influence categories, a great deal of past research have similarly reported that influence is imperative to three dimensions (Falbe & Yukl, 1993).

1.2. Leader-member exchange (LMX). LMX describes the relationship between a leader and a subordinate and how they influence each other in an organization and examined their interdependencies (Yukl, 2005; Scandura, 1999). According to leader-member exchange (LMX) theory, in every supervisor-subordinate dyad, the nature of the exchange is different between supervisors and subordinates (Graen & Cashman, 1975). The LMX theory was once known as the vertical dyad linkage theory because of its focus on reciprocal influence processes within vertical dyads and it consists of one person who has direct authority over another person (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Cashman, 1975). Dienesch and Liden (1986) noted that leadership domain is the notion of the dyad relationship between the supervisors and their subordinates. These relationships are defined by the roles that the subordinates have built or negotiated with their supervisors. The differentiation in the LMX is further exacerbated by the constraints on supervisors. Therefore, only a few key subordinates are likely to have a close relationship with their supervisors.

Early works in LMX had found two types of relationships between the subordinate and supervisor, namely the in-group and the out-group. In-group refers to linkages based on expanded and negotiated role responsibilities, which are not specified in the employment contract and conversely out-group is based on the formal employment contract. Subordinates in the in-group are claimed to have more power as they receive more information, are more influential and confidence, and have personal concern from their leaders as compared to the out-group subordinates (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000). In-group members are willing to do extra things and to which their leaders will reciprocate (Graen & Scandura, 1987), but out-group members receive lesser attention and support from their leaders and thus might see their supervisors as treating them unfairly. LMX literatures had found that subordinates in high-quality exchange relationships receive more desirable assignments, more rewards, and had greater support from their supervisors. This is congruent with the social exchange theory, where individuals who are engaged in high-quality relationship will behave in such a way that their exchange partner will also get the benefits (Murphy, Wayne, Liden, & Erdogan, 2003). In searching for answers to the above questions, there is a need to develop a general framework that can depict the fundamental elements and concerns of the leadership field. Hence, the four dimensions of leader-member exchange comprising affection, loyalty, contribution, and respect would stand as predictors to examine if relationship would play a dominant role in determining or facilitating the process of downward influence.

1.3. Gender. Previous researchers have not found consistent evidence concerning the effect of gender on an individual's use of influence tactics. However, researchers such as DuBrin (1989), Gruber and White (1986), Rizzo and Mendez (1988) have identified the gender-based differences in the use of influence tactics while others (Donnell & Hall, 1980; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Thacker & Wayne, 1995) have not. Past studies investigating the effect of gender on leadership styles have found strong evidence supporting gender differences in organizational context, where women have the tendency to adopt a more democratic, participative style, whereas, men would apply a more autocratic and directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; 1996). Previous researchers have not found consistent evidence concerning the effect of gender on an individual's use of influence tactics.

However, researchers such as DuBrin (1989), Gruber and White (1986), Rizzo and Mendez (1988) have identified the gender-based differences in the use of influence tactics while others (Donnell & Hall, 1980; Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988; Thacker & Wayne, 1995) have not. As noted by Ansari (1989), male leaders exhibited a greater likelihood of using influence tactics such as negative sanction, assertiveness, reward, and exchange as compared to female leaders. Other researchers such as Carothers and Allen (1999) also concluded that males changed tactics from reward to coercion whenever challenged while females continued to use request when insulted. Past studies investigating the effect of gender on leadership styles have found strong evidence supporting gender differences in organizational context, where women have the tendency to adopt a more democratic, participative style, whereas, men would apply a more autocratic and directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; 1996). Hence, from the above backdrop the specific problem statement of this study is to examine whether the relationship of LMX together with the role of gender as a moderator in determining supervisors' influence tactics to further examine whether the variables work more significantly when practiced simultaneously in a single framework.

1.4. LMX and downward influence tactics. According to Chen, Lee-Chai, and Bargh (2001), when social exchange plays the moderating role in the power relationship, members of exchange relationships are more concerned with monitoring relationship exchanges so as they could get their "fair share" and focus primarily on promoting their own needs and interests. Their findings suggested that, exchange relationship orientation would moderate the effects of power in terms of power-goal mental associations. This also implies that, the relational aspects of the agent-target dyad are a relevant pre-

dictor of the pursuit of influence with the supervisors. Therefore, the power and social exchange relationship between the supervisors and the subordinates will determine the type of influence tactics to be applied by the supervisors.

Interestingly, Bhal and Ansari (2000) had also indicated that rational, informal, and soft tactics are all directly related to quality of interaction; however, formal and strong tactics such as assertiveness are expected to be inversely related to the quality of interaction. Raven (1993) had indicated that an agent's choice of a particular influence strategy is based on his or her evaluation of their agent-target relationship. According to Raabe and Beehr (2003), the dyadic nature of the LMX relationship can vary from one subordinate to another for the same supervisor and it is applied primarily to situations in which the direct supervisor is the leader of one or more subordinates. So far, there is no direct works on how LMX would affect supervisors' influence tactics.

The review in the preceding sections indicates there are several studies that examine the relationships of LMX, supervisors' gender, and influence tactics. The previous researches findings have helped create the foundation of this present study. However, these contributing literatures were all done separately and independently, indicating there is no study that has examined the interaction effects of LMX and influence tactics which includes also sex as a moderator. Thus, it is the main objective of this research to bridge the gap and to gain some understanding by integrating LMX, gender, and influence tactics in one single study.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research design, sample, and procedure.

This study focuses on manufacturing employees in Malaysia as a population of interest. A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed. Data were collected through survey questionnaires from subordinates comprising working executives who are currently reporting to lower and middle level managers. However, only 158 subordinates responded to the survey.

This study adopts the repertoire of influence tactics originating from Kipnis et al. (1980) such as exchange, ingratiation, assertiveness, sanctions, upward appeal, and rational persuasion which has been generally supported by other researchers (Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Erez, Rim, & Keider, 1986; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). However, by their own admission, Kipnis et al. (1980) study dealt with only very limited subset of psychometric properties which must be considered essential in measuring influence tactics, thus this study would include

another three influence tactics as suggested by Ansari and associates (Ansari, 1989; Ansari & Kapoor, 1987; Ansari, 1990; Bhal & Ansari, 2000) such as instrumental dependency, showing expertise, and personalized help.

In order to measure the quality of exchange between the subordinates and their supervisors, this study will adopt Liden and Maslyn's (1998) 12-item LMX scale with the dimensions of contribution, loyalty, affection, and respect, with 3 items being measured in each dimension. The researcher chooses to use the LMX-MDM measurement as it has undergone reasonable psychometric testing and has shown promising evidence of satisfactory reliability and validity. This scale consists of items that measure various aspects of the working relationship between the supervisor and subordinate.

3. Research findings

3.1. Profile of the respondents. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of respondents

Demographics		Frequency	Percentage
Subordinates' gender	Male	81	51.3
	Female	77	48.7
Superiors' gender	Male	89	73.6
	Female	32	26.4
Supervisors' race	Malay	41	25.9
	Chinese	65	41.1
	Indian	3	1.9
	Others	12	7.6
Subordinates' race	Malay	54	34.2
	Chinese	79	50
	Indian	9	5.7
	Others	16	10
Superiors' education background	High school	10	8.3
	Diploma	31	25.6
	Degree	66	54.5
	Postgraduate	13	10.7
	Others	1	.8
Subordinates' education background	High school	42	26.6
	Diploma	44	27.8
	Degree	61	38.6
	Postgraduate	6	3.8
	Others	3	1.9
Sector	Consumer product	52	32.9
	Industrial product	85	53.8
	Construction product	21	13.3
Type of company	Locally owned company	104	65.8
	US Based company	25	15.8
	Japan based company	19	12.0
	Europe based company	7	4.4
	Others	3	1.9

Firstly, the 12 items that assessed LMX namely, Contribution, Professional Respect, Affect, and Loyalty, were subjected to varimax rotated principal components analysis. Items with substantial cross-loadings were eliminated and the principal components analysis was re-run. The 12 items of LMX were loaded into two interpretable factors known as

Respect-contribute and Loyalty-affect. The two interpretable factors explained a total of 88 percent of the variance. Factor analysis was also conducted for 40 item measures of influence tactics to examine the appropriateness of condensing the information into a smaller set of factors. The 3 extracted factors were subsequently renamed. Factor I which comprised 12 original soft tactics items was named as "soft tactics". The 7-item Factor II was named as "hard tactics" as it constituted assertion and sanctions tactics which were harsh in nature. Lastly, Factor III consisting of 6 items of rational tactics was named "rational tactics".

The reliability coefficients, means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the study variables are contained in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the internal reliabilities of scales were between .76 and .92, which is clearly acceptable (Nunnally, 1978). Whereas standard deviations of the variables were either close to or exceeded 1.0, indicating that the study variables were discriminatory.

Table 2. Description of the main variables

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Reliability (alpha)
Respect contribute	5.18	.90	0.76
Loyalty affect	4.98	.89	0.76
Soft tactics	3.98	1.09	0.92
Hard tactics	3.33	1.20	0.87
Rational tactics	4.65	.95	0.82

Table 3 illustrates the intercorrelations among the subscales obtained using Pearson correlation to determine whether the subscales were independent measure of the same concept. Generally, intercorrelations among the two dimensions of LMX registered value of .64 ($p < .01$), whereas, the intercorrelations for the subscales of downward influence ranged from .25 to .42 at the level of $p < .01$. On the whole, the results have demonstrated acceptable levels of correlation.

Table 3. Intercorrelations of the study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
Gender	1.00					
Respect-contribute	.06	1.00				
Loyalty affect	.14	.64**	1.00			
Soft tactic	.06	.19**	.23**	1.00		
Hard tactic	-.02	-.11	-.02	.25**	1.00	
Rational tactic	.07	.12	.13	.42**	.10	1.00

Note: N = 158, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

A 3-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis was carried out to test the hypotheses that comprised the direct and moderating effects of LMX, gender and influence tactics. Tables 4, 5, & 6 present the results of the analyses.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression results using leaders' gender as a moderator in the relationship between LMX and hard influence tactics

Independent Variable	Std Beta Step 1	Std Beta Step 2	Std Beta Step 3
Model variables			
Respect contribute (RC)	-.18	-.18	-.11
Loyalty affect (LA)	.07	-.07	-.19
Moderating variable			
Gender		-.02	-.40
Interaction terms			
RC* gender			-.19
LA*gender			.65
R ²	.02	.02	.03
Adj R ²	.00	.00	-.02
R ² change	.02	.00	.00
F value	1.26	.84	.61

As noted in Tables 4 and 5, the analysis on hard and rational influence tactics revealed that the main effects on the criterion behavior were not significant. Specifically, Steps 2 and 3 were found to be insignificant, therefore, gender of the supervisors was not found to be a moderator for the relationships between LMX and hard and rational influence tactics.

Table 5. Hierarchical regression results using leaders' gender as a moderator in the relationship between LMX and rational influence tactics

Independent variable	Std Beta Step 1	Std Beta Step 2	Std Beta Step 3
Model variables			
Respect contribute (RC)	-.03	-.02	-.32
Loyalty affect (LA)	.20	.19	.17
Moderating Variable			
Gender		.04	-.61
Interaction terms			
RC* gender			.74
LA*gender			.02
R ²	.11	.11	.11
Adj R ²	.09	.08	.07
R ² change	.11	.00	.00
F value	2.05	1.43	1.10

Table 6. Hierarchical regression results using leaders' gender as a moderator in the relationship between LMX and soft influence tactics

Independent variable	Std Beta Step 1	Std Beta Step 2	Std Beta Step 3
Model variables			
Respect contribute (RC)	-.00	-.00	-.05
Loyalty affect (LA)	.33**	.33**	.28
Moderating variable			
Gender		.01	-.18
Interaction terms			
RC* gender			.13
LA*gender			.10
R ²	.11	.11	.11
Adj R ²	.09	.08	.07
R ² change	.03	.00	.01
F value	7.06**	4.68**	2.78*

In Table 6, Step 1 was found to be significant ($p < .01$). Hence, the direct effects of the predictors significantly explained 11% of the variability in soft influence tactics. Only two dimensions in LMX

namely, respect-contribute, were found to be significantly related to soft influence tactics. The incremental variance in step 3 was not significant. This indicated that the interaction effects of LMX and gender of the supervisors did not add any significant contribution in explaining the variation in soft influence tactics.

4. Discussion

No known researches on LMX have been observed to empirically examine its impact on the supervisors' usage of effective influence tactics. As stated by Kipnis et al. (1980), the choice of influence tactics is associated with the power of the target person. Hence, this study has added to the growing body of research linking LMX to downward influence tactics and expands the domain of this relationship. Considering the potential cascading effect that LMX can have on supervisors' influence tactics, previous researches may have underestimated the impact of LMX on downward influence tactics. Brower, Schoorman, and Tan (2000) stated that effective managers do not work in isolation from their subordinates, instead they would prefer to work with their subordinates, and the nature of the relationship between the manager and subordinate has been acknowledged as complex, interactive, and there exists reciprocity in the dyad. This research is perhaps the first that contributes to management in general and Malaysian leadership and management in particular.

As hypothesized, loyalty-affect has a direct relationship with soft influence tactics. This finding seems logical that an employee's attachment with the supervisor resulting from continuing reciprocal exchanges and respects over time will result in supervisors' usage of soft influence tactics. As stated by Bhal and Ansari (2007), high quality exchanges would lead to a perception of procedural justice and having said that, supervisors' need not have to exert hard tactics on them. In addition to that, enhancing work related interaction through guiding coaching or delegation could further result in higher-level employee outcome (Bauer & Green, 1996), hence, the use of hard or rational tactics is not required. Besides, this preference for soft tactics could be due to the dominance of the Malaysian culture of collectivism that had shaped the workplace culture of the manufacturing sector to be more relationship oriented than task oriented that is at times to view maintaining relationships as more important than conducting a task (Abdullah, 1994; Hofstede, 1991). Nonetheless, other dimensions of LMX such as respect-contribute were not significant with any type of influence tactics. Bhal (2006) posited that it is very important for the leaders to be seen as fair and transparent, in view of the fact that if justice is being

experienced by members, the effect of in/group or out/group memberships becomes not important. LMX suggests that interactions between supervisors and employees are frequently interest based (Wang, Hackett, Wang & Chen, 2005). The research by Vigoda-Gadot (2007) has concluded that better performances can be achieved when there is a reasonable level of expectation-fit and when the social exchange between supervisors and subordinates is fair and equal. Hence, this implied that quality of LMX does not affect supervisors' usage of downward influence tactics.

The results of the moderating effect show that gender of the supervisors does not moderate the relationships between the predictor variables and criterion variable of the present study. The finding is not surprising at all as it is aligned with previous studies where gender is often cited inconsistently by past researchers as a source of influence in the supervisor-subordinate relationship. Perhaps, the lack of a relationship between gender and influence tactics provides partial support for the contention that management guidelines are not related to gender alone (Moncrief, Babakus, Cravens, & Johnston, 2000).

Conclusion

Firstly, this study represents the theoretical or empirical research regarding LMX, gender, and influence tactics in the manufacturing industry. There have been very few empirical researches on downward influence tactics in the manufacturing industry.

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try. Thus, this study's framework has allowed for a better understanding of how LMX perceptions were formed and the mechanisms linking supervisors' gender to the choice of and effective use of specific influence tactics. Contrary to expectation, the results of this study revealed the little to moderate link between LMX and choice of influence tactics. Gender of supervisors' was not found to be an important moderator for the relationship between LMX and influence tactics. Inevitably, this study has contributed to the small but growing body of research on antecedents to downward influence tactics. It is believed that this study would have added value to the literatures on supervisors' influence tactics, especially in the Malaysian settings since there were limited literatures done on similar setting.

Limitations

One limitation of this research is that all the variables were assessed using the same questionnaire, where the results could be affected by common method variance (CMV). Besides, in view of the fact that the supervisors and subordinates were mainly from local manufacturing companies, the results of the study are very similar to the traditional cultural descriptor of collectivism (Abdullah, 1996; Hofstede, 1984). Thus, managers may anticipate lesser conflict between supervisors and subordinates in organizations when subordinates' values reflect their culture. Clearly, this is an area that calls for further investigations.

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