

Examining Malaysian Leader Characteristics in a Manager-Subordinate Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the findings of the first stage of data collection from a study on the characteristics of leaders in manager-subordinate relationship in Malaysian organizations. The findings are based on in-depth interviews conducted with focus groups involving Malaysian employees, which focused on employee perspectives on key qualities that leaders possess to uphold and maintain superior-subordinate relationship. The adoption of qualitative approach in this phase of data collection process is crucial in deriving leadership behaviors that are essential in the workplace. The identification of these behaviors could help us generate items for the final phase of our data collection process. The research takes into consideration the argument posed by Bass (2008), which has contended that methodological and substantive issues are likely to broaden through the combination of multiple research approaches such as qualitative interview and focus group discussion. The inclusion of eastern perspectives in a western model would bring a holistic description of a communication model. The interviews were conducted with the hope of identifying the themes of leader-characteristics which would help strengthen the relationships between a manager and his or her employees. This would facilitate further understanding of leader characteristics in superior-subordinate relationship. Eight themes emerged from the interviews. Consequently, this paper furthers theoretical contributions to the research on LMX, and expands the literature on superior-subordinate relationship in the workplace. The paper also highlights the limitations of the study for future research.

Keywords: *Leader characteristic, superior-subordinate relationship, leader-member agreement, leader-member differentiation, dialogue communication*

INTRODUCTION

As a method of communication, dialogue plays an essential role in enhancing organizational effectiveness, transforming organizational participations and influencing relationship development among members of the organization. A research by Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura and Gardner (2009) has demonstrated that mutual understanding of superior-subordinate relationships is crucial as it has relational consequences, which would eventually affect follower outcomes. Despite the encouraging findings, the model has not incorporated cultural elements, and this should be taken into consideration to understanding the relational alignment or “congruence”, assessing what we value, thus, maintaining cross cultural relationships (Hofstede, 2001). Demonstrating the effect of cultural conditions is a necessary next step in augmenting our understanding on leader-member agreement and its effects on relationships.

The social exchange component of leader-member relationships quality suggests that, the extent to which leaders and members agree or disagree about the quality of their relationship provides the overall representation of the relationship. It is therefore crucial to consider the leader-member agreement or the differentiation approach in our effort to further understand the dyadic nature of leader-member exchange relationship. Thus far, this approach has not been much considered in relationship investigations (Cogliser et al., 2009; Kacmar, Harris, Carlson & Zivnuska, 2009).

Findings from a number of studies have revealed that there is significant relationship between LMX quality and work outcomes within the LMX structure in the Malaysian workplace. For instance, LMX quality has been found to establish a positive direct impact on organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction (Ishak & Alam 2009; Lo, Ramayah, & Hui, 2006), commitment (Khong, 2009; Lo, Ramayah, Min & Songan, 2010) and delegation (Ansari, Hung & Aafaqi, 2007). These studies however, have not considered LMX dyadic agreement and cultural roles in the workplace. In this context, the interpretation of the meaning of leader-member agreement relationship from different cultural contexts in the workplace can be understood from the interaction or conversation as a communication mode. The approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the influences on leader and members' attitudes towards others. Furthermore, as noted by Zorn, Roper, Broadfoot and Weaver (2006), the interaction or conversation as a method of communication has allowed explorations of differentiation. However, to date, very limited studies have explored this concept as a method of communication in understanding leader-member relationships in specific organizational culture (Bakar, Halim, Mustafa & Mohamad, 2016; Magee & Galinsky, 2008).

As the interest in LMX-theory has increased (Illies, Nahrgang & Morgeson, 2007), there has been a tremendous amount of research conducted to further understand the significances of LMX-differentiation. While previous studies on superior-subordinate relationship have provided us with some insights and understanding of communication at the workplace, communication theory such as LMX, ignores certain eastern cultural aspects. Thus, our main aim is to address the gap by investigating the elements that represent relationship differentiation in leader-member exchange relationships. This will help contribute towards a distinctive theoretical insight and pragmatic application for communication in the Malaysian workplace. We hope by engaging in the focus group discussions and examining how subordinates talk about their leaders in the workplace, it would further reveal the elements and characteristics of relationship differentiation that constitute the concept of manager-subordinate relationships in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dialogue Communication

Dialogue communication is a collaborative, mutually constructive, critically reflective, participatory and emergent engagement of relationships, which involve the self, others, and world (Bokeno & Gantt, 2000). During the process, participants were actively involved in conversations to examine and reconstruct relationships. In contrast to other types of deliberative communication, dialogue is a process of learning and exploring, without the expectation of any actions to take place after the conversation. Besides, dialogue is not meant to resolve conflicts or generate solutions, but rather an effort towards achieving a number of related objectives. First, it is meant to enhance knowledge and emphasize on the emergence of shared meaning among members. Second, it hopes to promote awareness of

beliefs and assumptions that something is true without questioning it. The process of exploring and probing through dialogue is emphasized by questioning assumptions of self and others, not to criticize or prove them wrong but instead, to gain some insights. Third, dialogue is a fundamental way of enhancing learning at all levels; individuals, groups, organizations and societies (Burson, 2002) as the process of learning takes place while participants explore perspectives and assumptions, raise awareness and develop shared understandings. Fourth, as has been noted by Bendell (2003), dialogue can also motivate cooperation, and finally, it improves the decision making quality and action.

In the context of science communication studies, scholars have found that dialogue enhance participants' knowledge and understanding on policy and change (Kerr, Cunningham & Tutton, 2007), improves negotiation expertise (Philips, 2009) and increases the reliability of decision making (Walls, Rogers, Mohr & O'Riordan, 2005). Nevertheless, the outcomes of dialogue experiences in a relationship differentiation between manager and subordinate have not been thoroughly investigated by communication scholars due to the lack of socio-historical systems of thought in manager-subordinate relationships studies. As has been noted by Fairhurst (2011) the communicative perspective is not just one of the many variables of interest but rather, communication is central, defining, and constitutive of manager-subordinate relationships. Thus, it is essential that we explore how the communicative differentiation occurs in the workplace.

Superior-Subordinate Relationship

A study by Bakar and Mustaffa (2008) have suggested that superior-subordinate communication behavior affects superior-subordinate relationships quality and group commitment. The results of their study has indicated that superiors who seek suggestions from subordinates, show interest in them as people, relate to them casually and allow them to contribute ideas in decision making will be more likely to increase subordinates' commitment to their work group. This is also consistent with the findings from Liden, Bauer and Erdogan (2005), which have acknowledged that the quality of a relationship develops through exchanges or transactions between the leader and his/her subordinate since their first contact.

Meanwhile, Huang, Wright, Chiu and Wang (2008), have found that superiors and subordinates focus on different aspects of the relationship. While superiors seem to focus on the work-related aspects of the relationship, subordinates pay more attention to job and performance. In this relation, subordinates seem to prefer a friendly and understanding superior who provides opportunities for their development (Nahrgang, Morgeson & Ilies, 2009). A strong and harmonious superior-subordinate relationship will enhance organizational effectiveness and hence, lead towards the achievement of organizational goal and success (Mohamad Said & Zulhamri, 2012; Syed Abd. Rahman & Mohamed Zin, 2004).

The LMX-Theory

The fundamental of LMX theory suggests that leaders develop different types of mutual and reciprocal exchange relationships with their members (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). The mutual exchange relationship development is grounded in the social exchange theory and role theory. LMX represents the quality of exchange relationships between the leader and group members. A low quality relationship is characterized by the economic exchange of reward and performance,

whereas in a high quality relationship, it is marked by the exchange of such socio-emotional resources of trust, loyalty, commitment, and respect (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer & Feris, 2011). Over the past decades, previous studies have found that LMX was significantly correlated with a wider range of outcome variables, such as turnover intention, job performance, and job satisfaction (for reviews, see Gerstner & Day, 1997; Dulebohn et al., 2011). In the context of Malaysian workplace, numerous studies have provided empirical evidence on the relationship between LMX quality and work outcomes. For example, LMX quality poses a positive direct impact on organizational citizenship behavior, satisfaction (Lo et al., 2006; Ishak & Alam, 2009), commitment (Khong, 2009; Lo et al., 2010) and delegation (Ansari et al., 2007). Yet, neither of these studies has examined LMX dyadic differentiation nor cultural context in the workplace.

Despite the vast literature, there is still a limited understanding of LMX differentiation between superior and subordinate. For example, Zhou and Schriesheim (2009, 2010) have revealed that leaders and members perceive their quality of relationship differently. While leaders are more focused on their tasks, followers are more focused on the social-emotional dimension of the LMX relationship quality. They have argued that this lack of coexistence on task- and social-perspective dimensions has contributed towards a low to moderate LMX differentiation between leaders and members.

At the group-level, Sias and Jablin (1995) have found that differences that exist in the quality of a leader and member exchange relationship also affect each member within the workgroup. For example, group members are aware of the difference in treatment and they talk about it. Sias (1996) has also posited that group members communicate on the different treatment by their leader who serves to create and reinforce social perceptions about differential treatment within the workgroup. Accordingly, these studies have revealed that communication is the fundamental element for different qualities of relationship within the workgroup. Besides, studies have also found that the quality of communication with leaders can directly or indirectly strengthen members' perceptions of their respective work group relationships (Lee, 2005). Hence, more research is needed to enhance our understanding of relationship differences.

As LMX differentiation is primarily related to relational dynamics (Cogliser et al., 2009), we argue that such dynamics do not operate in a cultural space. Instead, its functions and outcomes have to be understood in correlation with social norms in the context of local cultural configurations. This links to our objective which is to explore the possible characteristics of social norm congruence, as an indicator in LMX differentiation in the workplace within a non-western context. Since leaders and members have "different perspectives and different criteria" when evaluating LMX quality, we propose the following research question: What are the specific characteristics of leaders that are inherent to leader member relationship in the Malaysian workplace?

METHOD

Our actual study involved three stages of data collection; the first two involved in-depth, focus group interviews with groups of Malaysian employees, representing three different organizations. The first interview involved groups of employees and second, the managers. The organizations identified for the study were comprised of public, private and government-link organizations, located in Klang Valley and Kedah. The organizations were chosen by using the purposive sampling method representing different ethnicity and race. This was crucial as we hoped to identify the similarities and differences in the context of how

these employees experience conflicts and relationships in organizations. Additionally, the participation of employees in the focus group interviews was identified by each individual organization. Since the main purpose of the study was to obtain employee perception of leader characteristics, we did not set any employee selection criteria for the interview.

A focus group was selected for this phase of data collection, as the researchers hoped to draw on the perception of subordinates towards their leader's characteristics. Besides, this approach was also adopted as it was found that Malaysians in general, prefer to affiliate themselves with groups, and prefer to share opinions and express controversial issues in group discussions as compared to a one-on-one interview (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2013). This was crucial as we were hoping to generate greater discussions from these interviews.

We facilitated the focus-group interviews with the hope of exploring the main themes. The employees were put into a group of eight to fifteen. A small group would enable participants to interact freely, ask questions or elaborate on one another's ideas. Each session took about one and a half to two hours. We prepared ten questions, with a number of sub-questions. As interviewers, our role was to facilitate the discussion, encourage participations and limit the domination of discussions. We also provided prompting questions to stimulate discussions on subtopics and obtain a diversity of perspectives on the topics discussed. We hoped the interviews would enable us to further understand leader characteristics in superior-subordinate communication in Malaysian organizations, and draw on the perception of subordinates toward their leader's characteristics and discover issues concerning conflicts and relationships between subordinates and superiors at work. We also hoped that the interviews would help us obtain more information concerning their experiences, perceptions and feelings towards their managers.

Each interview began with the ice-breaking session, where participants were asked general questions about their work routine, followed by more specific probes related to their daily interactions. We formulated specific questions and probes based on the definition of relationship differentiation of leader-member exchange (LMX) theory. Our main aim, then, was to explore what constitutes the relationships and communication differentiation at the workplace. Therefore, the following examples of questions were posed to the participants to discuss: "Would you please describe your relationship with your supervisor?", "If you had to describe your supervisor to someone who had not met him or her before, how would you describe him or her?", "How do you get feedback on your work?" and "How do you solve conflicts with your superior?" These questions enabled us to compare the responses with LMX differentiation.

Each interview was voice recorded. A note taker was also present during each session. After each interview, we listened to the recording, transcribed and read the transcriptions on multiple occasions in view of performing a content analysis on the data. The material collected was then reduced by selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was an on-going process throughout the duration of the research project. After all the recorded interviews were transcribed, read, analysed, and discussed, we began identifying the descriptions of the leader-member communication differentiation that could be extracted from the transcribed discussions. During this phase, we examined the meaning of communication differentiation with specific examples—illustrations that revealed key themes indicative of participants' communication character at the workplace that have been underdeveloped or underplayed

in current literature. Finally, after the descriptions of the LMX differentiation were identified, we re-read, discussed, and categorized these descriptions into specific categories.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

As discussed earlier, the in-depth focus group interviews involved employees of three organizations which comprised of public, private and government-link organizations. The profile of participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of Participants

	Phase I Subordinate		
	ORG1	ORG2	ORG3
Ethnicity	7 Malay (77.8%)	11 Malay (84.6%)	5 Malay (71.4%)
	1 Chinese (11.1%)	1 Chinese (7.7%)	1 Chinese (14.3%)
	1 Indian (11.1%)	1 Indian (7.7%)	1 Indian (14.3%)
Age	Ranging from 25-57	Ranging from 26 – 50	Ranging from 25- 60

From the interviews, we discovered several themes of characteristics associated with leadership in the workplace – polite behavior, relationship oriented, prominent parental images, trustworthy and credible, openness, morally worthy, resourceful, esteemed and powerful. Each theme revealed employees’ perception of leader characteristics, which articulate the specific value, meaning, and desirability of communication in the workplace.

Polite Behavior

Whereas the everyday connotation of politeness is often likened to social nicety or interactional gratuity, politeness as conceptualized here is a much more fundamental constituent of human interactions. As the data was rich and varied, we grouped caring, understanding and being friendly as polite behavior shown by the managers. Of the three aspects of polite behavior, a caring nature is an important characteristic of a leader from polite behavior described by the respondents:

...he is nice, very soft inside, because he was very caring about his staff. He won't get angry at his staff... He will settle out problem especially in term of team work... (Respondent 1, ORG1).

...Ok my boss...he is so nice ... he understand his staff, he will go to each section and ask how you work? Any problem? He'll ask everyone ... So no problems, if we have any problem, anytime we can go his room and ask him (Respondent 2, ORG1).

The caring attitude shown by leaders was also situational. This is revealed in the following comment:

I agree that he may be concerned at one time but not at other times ... depends on the situation (Respondent 3, ORG2).

Another characteristic described by the respondent is the understanding character. This is exemplified by the following comment:

My current boss is helpful and he does not talk much but when he talks like arr ... what's this. He made joke but his face looked serious. Ha ha ... man, he really could not have feeling. I never saw him angry, even though he has been working in our department for almost one year plus... (Respondent 4, ORG2).

The next feature is being friendly. This aspect of intimacy described by respondents are mutual understanding and social communication assertion, which include being happy and asking about subordinates' welfare. These are illustrated below:

Haa ... ok about my boss, we have been working together for about six month this year ... haaa he is very friendly and jovial too. He talks so fast, actually you can't understand what he is talking or sometimes he says something ... arrr... I can't understand most of the thing. I can catch up a few things then I will respond to him for clarifications... (Respondent 5, ORG1).

What I like most about my boss is when he entered office, he will say good morning. When we asked if he wanted coffee, he said ok ... so we feel happy in the morning (Respondent 1, ORG2).

Every single morning he greets us as well. Actually, he emphasizes mutual respect in the department... (Respondent 2, ORG2).

Relationship Oriented

Relationship-oriented leaders promote supportive and caring work environment, as well as provide socio-emotional security to employees. These leaders also appreciate employee contribution and keep them well informed of organizational agenda. These are illustrated in the following citations:

...based on my experience, I think he is a people-oriented ... This shape my relationship with my immediate boss (Respondent 8, ORG2).

...in terms of our relationship looks like there is a little gap with him... he lacks in term of human touch...(Respondent 5, ORG3).

We operation manager, some CEOs and many levels. Most of them do not get along ... recently there is a new boss comes in, he has raised tensions ... so sometime we work under pressure (Respondent 3, ORG2).

Although he was very strict, he was very compassionate person ... sometimes there are decisions that we do not agree ... but we can raise it up ... he will hear our views ... but he will think again (Respondent 2, ORG3).

...with my boss I can talk like friends, can discuss because we are working on the production (Respondent 1, ORG2).

As usual, if we cannot settle the problem we have to tell the boss, the most important is the explanation (Respondent 4, ORG3).

...he always asked about the progress of our work, meaning he will meet us, yet he is not very strict. If just a small matter he did not mind, can be tolerate ... (Respondent 4, ORG1).

Parental Images

Individual differences in theories of leadership exist due to childhood experience (Hunt, Boal & Sorenson, 1990). For example, this can be related to perceived parental traits (Keller, 1999). The findings suggested that parents shape leadership expectation as indicated in the following statements:

Sometimes he is like my father, too. Sometimes he is fierce, if he gives his opinion about my work I feel like a father, he was very strict (Respondent 5, ORG2).

My boss is also motherly. When she gives her views about the work, like our mother, she's also firm, how are we going to chat with her ... not an easy task... (Respondent 7, ORG2).

...so when I meet the boss, I can imagine that my boss fierce, assertive ... (Respondent 8, ORG2).

She's pretty tough, we can give our opinion, and she will hear all points of view from staff. But do not force her to accept them. That's our boss, but when I think about this fierce boss, when we get to understand her, she would be ok with us (Respondent 9, ORG2).

Scolded free ... I was scolded in front of the crowd ... in front of the reporter ... at that time there was a big event. The mistake is not very serious. The documents that I photocopy were not enough. She asked why so few ... why not enough. I feel very embarrassed because I have grown up ... not to be scolded and should be reprimanded in a better way (Respondent 10, ORG2).

Trustworthy and Credible

Most leaders value trustworthy image as the image is critical in portraying charisma (Conger, 1990); if members do not trust their leaders, it matters little how captivating their vision is or how well they communicate it to their members. These are indicated by the following respondents:

Sometimes during my work at the office, I wondered, we read even less, he knew more than us ... my previous boss always uses the analogy that affects my work ... what is important is the task I need to do and what other people say I push aside ... at the end of the day, we do what we think needs to be done (Respondent 8, ORG1).

...but in terms of knowledge i agree too ... he share his knowledge, he is not stingy with the knowledge (Respondent 5, ORG3).

In addition to trust, leaders must also be seen as credible. Whereas trust is based on a subordinate's perception that a manager's message is honest and non-exploitative, credibility depends on whether the manager's words are confirmed or disconfirmed (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985).

When we ask a question, she would elaborate at length ... about 1 hour to 2 hours, ok, we have to accept it ... (Respondent 7, ORG2).

...in term of work so far, he would trust on his staff, if he feel the staff can handle the job, he will leave it to the staff, so if we cannot do the work, we will refer to him, it means that we do not feel the pressure of work because we can work calmly (Respondent 11, ORG1).

Openness

Another important dimension identified in this study is leader openness. Yang, Kang and Johnson (2010) suggested that openness in communication is tantamount to listening, honesty, frankness, trust and supportiveness. In the organizational context, the increase in communication openness demands superiors to be more open to their subordinates and co-workers to be more open to their peers. In a leader-member relationship communication, openness includes openness in communication from senders and receivers, as this is a vital in solving organizational problems, which eventually lead to organizational performance. Without an open communication, organizations will not be able to ascertain problems, and these are indicated in the following statements:

...he is being open, we being open, but the boss is always right, he encourages us to express our self, ok what do you want, what? He will not 100% follow his views only, that's actually make us easy to work with him (Respondent 8, ORG1).

Ok my new boss is more open than the previous boss. I've been working for a year with the organization, and now this is my second boss ... he's more open compared to the previous boss, in terms of office, if the previous boss kept closing the door, the new boss is more open, when he gets into office his will have open the door ... so easy to communicate (Respondent 5, ORG3).

Morally Worthy

Some leaders portray themselves as a morally worthy people who embrace organizational success, but there are some who try to appear morally righteous, not because they are, but

because this image expands their influence (Howell, 1988) as explained in the following statements:

...he had a motto ... is to do good today because yesterday is gone. So he said you've missed things you want to do and we are not sure whether we will survive or not tomorrow. So we should do good today. So, when we work with a lot of complaint, create dissatisfaction. When we complained to him, he will share many philosophies of management ... philosophy? (Respondent 5, ORG1).

One more thing ... with him we must be honest. Don't create story and he is very fierce ... while working he is very strict (Respondent 5, ORG2).

Resourceful

Charismatic leaders usually possess strong beliefs and self-confidence in achieving their goals. This type of leaders will not hesitate to dedicate their time and energy in promoting their visions, achieving their missions and influencing organization members. The following passage illustrates the themes:

He was calm ... arr ... I can say him as a resource person because I can consult any problem with him because he will solve the problem at the same time ... at times of crisis or anything that happens he can settle the problems calmly. So this is important and I love to work with him (Respondent 8, ORG1).

..In terms of creativity and honesty, he always emphasize to the staff. If he himself or we are on leave or mc, we and he also need to give reason/clarification. If there is no reason, he cannot accept it. So this is the thing that I look at him. The thing that he highly stressed (Respondent 10, ORG1).

My boss is a lady. Her job ... ok ... so quite ... sometimes she is moody ... lady boss ... hehehe ... but when come to problem solving ... no problem. Make a fair evaluation of all staff (Respondent 9, ORG2).

....he is the one who gives emphasis on the result. Not only work alone, other things also he emphasized on the outcome (Respondent 3, ORG3).

My boss recently, he was working under the IR department. In the context of diplomacy, I think he was really okay because he is a good and not difficult. Work with him was very simple ... very simple. He was only a head. What happens in the end, though, we must follow him (Respondent 4, ORG1).

Esteemed and Powerful

This is an audience's perception that leaders are competent and capable in performing their tasks. This incomparable ability serves as a source of power and portrays identity. This ability is essential for leaders as it would reflect charismatic attributes, which could bring

benefit to influence subordinates, therefore gain their trust and secure their attachment to commitment. The theme of esteemed and powerful is revealed in the following expressions:

I just worked with my boss for two months, so I got a lot more to know about her yet, she strict, because anybody who take leave or a ... mc or come late she will make sure that ... that person will see her and explain to her the reason (Respondent 6, ORG1).

as far as you do your job so she will be okay with us, because ... arrr ... so as long as you follow the listing of the office, you do your job, no complaint from the customer, she will not bothering you (Respondent 7, ORG1).

I think it all must admit he is a very strict, he's very concern about discipline, we must be ready, we must organize, he do not like things messy, messy ... but first of all he is very particular about discipline (Respondent 3, ORG2).

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The paper discusses the outcome of in-depth focus group interviews with subordinates of three Malaysian organizations, comprised of different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. The characteristics of the leaders listed by respondents include polite behaviour, relationship oriented, parental images, trustworthy and credible, openness, morally worthy, resourceful, esteemed and powerful. These features were described by the respondents based on their perceptions on the attitudes of their leaders.

The findings revealed that subordinates expect their managers or superiors to possess certain characteristics that would help and motivate them to work towards achieving the organizational goal. Our findings also confirmed that leaders must possess certain dynamic qualities that guide leadership sense-making, which distinguish them from their employees. For example, a leader is expected to show wisdom, demonstrate compassion and honest communication with their subordinates, which are related to the concept of openness. A study by Bakar et al. (2016) has revealed that communication openness is linked to relationship differentiation between leaders and members in Malaysian workplace. For example, Malaysian employees expect the elements of trust and politeness in their communication with superiors (Bakar, Halim & Walters, 2014). The researchers have argued that by not conforming to these norms, the leader-member communication openness is tied to dyadic relational differentiations. As posited by Bakar et al. (2016), Being a multi-ethnic society, communication at the workplace in Malaysia is manifested "throughout the entire spectrum of mind, emotion, morality, goodness and practicality in judgments" during the interaction (p. 80).

Our findings clearly suggest that openness is an important feature of leaders described by the organization members. Openness denotes that staff can discuss various issues with their leaders. Openness is reflected by a leader who always leaves his office door open in order to facilitate discussions with his subordinates. This also facilitates the interaction between staffs and leaders.

Beside the elements of openness, trust and politeness, a leader must also be perceived as people-oriented or relationship oriented. Leaders who could not get along with subordinates will only create stress among employees. Therefore, it is fundamental that

leaders put efforts in building good interpersonal skills and get to know their subordinates. Simple gestures or greetings such as, “Hello,” “Good morning” or “How are you?” would make a difference in superior-subordinate relationship. Some leaders might find that these acts are not important, especially when it involves having employees in geographically distributed workplace. As suggested by leadership theory and research, relationship-oriented leaders treat their employees with kindness, respect, trust; paying attention to communication, as well as showing appreciation for contribution, and in return, employees who value interpersonal relations at work would be more likely to perceive relationship-oriented leaders positively.

In relationship, trust is seen as an expectation that the other person will perform a certain action (Colquitt, Scott & LePine, 2007), based on how the individual choose who they trust. The decision is made on the evidence of trustworthiness demonstrated by the other person. In a manager-subordinate relationship, the element of trust can be observed in subordinates’ beliefs and their inclination to act based on what the managers say, do and decide. As pointed by Pellegrini and Scandura (2008), this indicates interest, needs, values and emotional attachment. The element of trust is well-described by the respondents in our study. The trust that exists in manager-subordinate relationship is paramount in subordinate performance and leader effectiveness.

Leaders who are highly respected by their subordinates are leaders with principles and philosophies of their own. They should make their position as a role model to subordinates, and through that they could prove to employees that they have extensive knowledge. However, a firm or strict leader is characterized by subordinates as fierce, but subordinates would still value the comments or criticisms made by their leaders, with the condition that these comments or criticisms take into consideration some various aspects such as dignity and worthiness of subordinates.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes towards LMX research and literature on relationship differentiation especially on how to build and cultivate positive relationship and communication between superiors and subordinates. Our findings contribute towards the substantial body of research on superior-subordinate relationship (i.e. Bakar et al., 2016; Oetzel, McDermott, Torres & Sanchez, 2012). Our approach in examining Malaysian employees has contributed towards greater knowledge on cultural differences in the aspect of superior-subordinate relationship. Our findings indicate that Malaysia employees have different expectations towards their leader.

The results revealed the variables that represent relationship differentiation in leader-member exchange relationships, and consequently, bestow a unique theoretical perception of communication in the Malaysian workplace.

Practical Implications

Apart from the theoretical implication, the findings from our study also have important implications on organization’s management, especially on how leaders and members can build positive and meaningful relationships at the workplace. The knowledge from the study can be utilized in creating awareness among managers, especially on the significant roles of polite behaviour, relationship-oriented, parental image, trustworthy and credible, openness, morally worthy, resourceful, esteemed and powerful, -; and how these roles affect the relationships with their subordinates. These behaviors although look superficial and

effortless, can lead to stronger relationship between leader and members and fill up the gap that exists in relationships.

In addition, the knowledge obtained from the study can also help leadership trainers to shift their focus from current leadership training methods which commonly focus on skills development and communication, to a more significant method that focuses on the need on employees. When managers are aware of how these behaviors can affect employee's perceptions and needs, and embrace these behaviors in their management roles, they may succeed in fostering positive and quality relationships with their subordinates, hence, contribute towards positive organizational outcomes.

Limitations

In conclusion, we would first like to highlight a number of limitations from our study. Headmost, since our study is constrained only to specific organizations, there are limitations in the generalization of our findings to other organizational environment. Hence, future research is needed to confirm our findings. Another limitation is the single event which the participants expressed their perceptions of leader characteristics. While this limits the generalizability of the findings to a larger population, the findings nevertheless contribute towards understanding, either directly or indirectly towards LMX and leadership communication. The final limitation lies in the nature of our study, which depends greatly on the participants' ability to elicit events that take place in their communication and relationship with their leaders. This could also affect the accurate interpretation or their perception towards their leader's communication behaviour.

Although our findings support superior-subordinate communication tenets, further investigations on this area are crucial. While our study focuses on leader-member relationships through dialogue group, other forms of communication and theoretical explanations can be utilized to explain leader-member relationship. Consequently, a new model of leader-member relationships could be developed and help enrich the knowledge on workplace communication and leader-member relationship. The understanding of employee expectations towards their leaders has a major implication in managing communication in the workplace.

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