



# Leader–member exchange, enriched jobs, and goal-setting: Applying fuzzy set methodology<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study takes a configurational approach to investigate multiple combinations of motivational and leadership factors that provide alternative paths for achieving positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes among employees. Using a field study of 209 leader–follower dyads from 12 different organizations, the results demonstrate that leadership and motivational constructs combine in multiple bundles to achieve high levels of employee performance, commitment, and citizenship behaviors. These results demonstrate the usefulness of configurational approaches in helping understand equifinality in the field of organizational behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

*“The task that a person performs and the person to whom the individual is responsible are probably the two most basic points of contact that employees have in the organization.”* (Ricky Griffin in *Task Design: An Integrative Approach*, 1982).

Leader–member exchange (LMX) theory is widely supported among leadership scholars. Over the past forty years, numerous articles underscore the importance of high-quality leader–member relationship for achieving positive follower outcomes (Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, & Ferris, 2012). Yet, leader–follower relationships do not occur in a vacuum and independent of other organizational factors. Many of the same outcomes associated with LMX are also associated with task characteristics and goal difficulty (Grant, 2008; Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, & Hemingway, 2005; Whittington, Goodwin, & Murray, 2004; Goodwin, Bowler, & Whittington, 2009).

In this paper, a configurational approach to evaluating the leader–follower relationship is used to investigate multiple combinations of motivational factors that provide alternative paths for achieving high levels of important employee outcomes, which include commitment, in-role performance, and citizenship behaviors. This study contributes to the field of leadership by answering the call that leadership scholars

explore the usefulness of configurational perspectives (Short, Payne, & Ketchen, 2008).

This study begins with an overview of LMX theory and then discusses how task characteristics and goal difficulty could potentially combine in alternative ways with LMX. QCA methodology is utilized to examine how various configurations of these factors could bundle together and influence employee commitment, performance, and citizenship behaviors. The paper concludes by discussing how the results of this analysis can inform future studies on substitutes for leadership and how configurational approaches may advance leadership research.

## 2. Literature review and hypothesis

### 2.1. Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

In his seminal book, Burns (1978) states that leadership is a process that takes place in the context of a relationship between the leader and the follower. No theory of leadership addresses the relational nature of leadership more directly than Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Liden, Wayne, & Stilwell, 1993). Early conceptions of LMX theory suggested that rather than using the same style with all followers, leaders develop different styles for members of in-groups and out-groups. In comparison to out-group members, in-group members are likely to receive assignments to interesting and desirable tasks, have greater responsibility and authority delegated to them, more information shared with them, participate in making some of the leader's decisions, and receive personal support and approval.

Contemporary LMX theory focuses on how the quality of the leader–follower relationship impacts a wide variety of outcomes. Research

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has linked LMX to in-role performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, satisfaction with supervision, perceptions of fairness, trust in the supervisor, and innovative behavior of followers (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Markham, Yammarino, Murry, & Palinski, 2010; Illies, Nahrgang & Morgeson, 2007; Scott & Bruce, 1998).

Scholars are increasingly recognizing that leader–follower relationships do not occur in a vacuum. For example, many of the same outcomes that scholars associate with LMX are associated with task characteristics and goal difficulty (Grant, 2008; Latham, 2012; Morgeson et al., 2005; Whittington et al., 2004). This study follows Griffin's (1982) observation that both the task and the person to whom an individual reports are key aspects of one's employment by examining these factors simultaneously.

## 2.2. Leadership and motivational bundles

The substitutes for leadership model (Howell, Dorfman, & Kerr, 1986; Kerr, 1977; Kerr & Jermier, 1978) offers a substantive lens for exploring the ways that alternative factors may combine together to achieve high levels of affective commitment, performance, and organizational citizenship behaviors among followers. This model has been used to explore hierarchical-, supportive-, and contingent reward-based leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994; Podsakoff, Niehoff, MacKenzie, & Williams, 1993).

Other organizational factors, such as task characteristics and goal design could combine with LMX in multiple ways to achieve high levels of commitment, in-role performance, and citizenship behaviors. For example, according to the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), there are five core job characteristics (task variety, task significance, task identity, autonomy, and feedback). Jobs that possess high levels of these characteristics are considered to be “enriched.” The presence of these core job dimensions produces a sense of meaningfulness and responsibility in employees, as well as knowledge of the results of their work. In turn, these critical psychological states lead to high levels of employee performance, high internal motivation, low levels of absenteeism, and low turnover rates. Research has found support for a positive relationship between task characteristics and organizational citizenship behaviors (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Bommer, 1996; Whittington et al., 2004).

The presence of challenging and specific goals is also an aspect of organizational formalization in the substitutes for leadership model. The relationship between challenging goals and employee performance has been documented on a wide variety of tasks in both laboratory and field settings (Locke & Latham, 1990). This relationship is described as the “high performance cycle” (Locke & Latham, 1990). The outcomes associated with the high performance cycle (high levels of employee performance, extra-role behaviors, and commitment to the organization) are similar to those associated with high quality leader–member relationships.

While LMX theory has received broad support in the literature, task design and goal difficulty have also been positively linked to high levels of commitment, in-role performance, and citizenship behaviors. In contrast to prior studies that have tended to evaluate their isolated influence, this study evaluates these in a holistic manner that reflects Griffin's (1982) assertion that the relationship an employee has with his or her direct supervisor together with the tasks the employee performs was the most fundamental point of contact between an employee and the organization. Indeed, the quality of leader–follower relationships (LMX), enriched jobs, and perceived goal difficulty can combine in unique ways to achieve high levels of employee performance, commitment, and citizenship behaviors. Hence, the following general hypothesis is tested:

**Hypothesis.** Multiple combinations of high-quality leader–follower relationships, enriched jobs, and challenging goals will be associated with high levels of in-role performance, citizenship behaviors, and affective commitment.

## 3. Data and method

### 3.1. Data

For the present study subjects were drawn from twelve different organizations representing a variety of industries (e.g., manufacturing, governmental agencies and departments, and health care), departments (e.g., production, accounting, and personnel), and organizational levels (ranging from first-line supervisors to company president).

Managers received a packet containing an evaluation form to assess each subordinate's performance and organizational citizenship behavior, and a demographic questionnaire. Each manager provided a list of up to ten direct report subordinates, from which three were randomly selected. The subordinates were given packets containing a social-report instrument for evaluating the quality of their relationship with their manager, their affective organizational commitment, characteristics of their job, the level of perceived goal difficulty, and a demographic questionnaire. One hundred out of 140 managers completed the required questionnaires (71% response rate). From the 420 subordinates selected, 209 participated (50% response rate). Each survey was coded to allow matching of manager and subordinate responses, resulting in 209 dyads that were used in the analyses.

### 3.2. Method

The fs/QCA 2.5 software developed by Ragin (2006) was used to analyze the data. Fs/QCA's is based in a set-theory approach that develops causal claims by means of supersets and sub-sets (Ragin, 2008). Given the research questions addressed in this article, fs/QCA is especially helpful because the methodology allows for an outcome to be produced by multiple conditions. Second, there can be multiple combinations of factors that lead to the outcome under investigation. Third, fs/QCA allows for outcomes to occur as a result of the presence of variables, (which QCA refers to as ‘conditions’) or because of their absence. Conjunctural causation, which is central to fs/QCA, is particularly important in the present study because multiple leadership combinations that bring about positive employee attitudes and behaviors are hypothesized.

The first stage of the analysis identifies the various factors that work in combination to influence employee performance, citizenship behaviors, and affective commitment. The raw data was then calibrated into crisp sets and fuzzy sets (Ragin, 2008). Crisp sets assign membership into either “fully in” or “fully out” status. The presence or absence of affective commitment would be an example of a crisp set. Fuzzy sets, however, allow researchers to account for the varying degree of membership of cases to a particular set by using the anchors of 1 to designate “fully in” a particular set, 0 for non-membership (fully out), and .5 as the point of maximum ambiguity to mean neither in, nor out, of a particular set. The crossover point (or the point of maximum ambiguity) designates when a case is more in or more out of the set. The calibrations used in this study are provided in the variable descriptions below.

*Subordinate perceptions of LMX* were measured using a six-item scale developed by Liden et al. (1993) to assess the subordinates' perceptions of their relationship with their manager. A sample item from the seven-point Likert scale is “I can count on my supervisor to ‘bail me out,’ even at his or her own expense, when I really need it.” A total score for LMX was derived by averaging across the six items ( $\alpha = .91$ ). Following Fiss (2011) a measure of membership in the set of subordinates perceiving a *high degree of leader–member exchange* with their supervisors on the 7-point LMX scale was created. Responses of (2) were designated as “fully out” of this set whereas responses of (6) were considered “fully in” the set. The crossover point corresponded to the middle of the scale (4).

*Task characteristics* were measured from the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The JDS has acceptable psychometric properties (Griffin, 1991) and measures subordinate responses to items related to task variety, autonomy, feedback, significance, and identity.

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