Leaders' narrative sensemaking during LMX role negotiations: Explaining how leaders make sense of who to trust and when ☆

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ABSTRACT

This investigation supplements Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory by explaining how leaders make sense of whether and when to trust members throughout role negotiations. This conceptualization of leaders' trust of members describes how leaders emplot members in storylines characterized as predictably good, unpredictable, or predictably bad, and catalogs the formal communication practices indicative of those predictions. Forty working adults, who have reputations for being effective leaders, were interviewed. Constant comparative analysis revealed leaders attempted to produce stories with characterological coherence about members' character development throughout role negotiations. The Leader-to-Member Narrative Sensemaking of Trust (LMNST) concept describes how participants reported trusting *and* doubting (often simultaneously) their members by evoking combinations of seven narrative elements (i.e., selection, probation, escalation, confederation, jeopardy, redemption, and termination). The LMNST contributes to the leadership communication literature a way of viewing leaders' discourse about members through the lens of narrative logics.

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1. Introduction

Leadership is important and inseparable from the trust that enables its relational and task-oriented operation. While trust is defined in countless ways, it is generally conceived to be reliance upon another (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Rotter, 1967). Scholars (Ellis & Shockley-Zalabak, 2001; Shamir & Lapidot, 2003; Thomas, Zolin, & Hartman, 2009) and workers (Bartolomé, 1993; Galford & Drapeau, 2003; Shockely-Zalabak, Morreale, & Hackman, 2010) espouse effective leaders garner members' trust; yet, far less scholarly attention has been given to understanding how leaders process which (and when) members should be deemed trustworthy—an important contribution of this research. Leadership and trust are popular concepts studied in communication, management, and psychology (Bunker, Alban, & Lewicki, 2004; Hatzakis, 2009; Hubbell & Chory-Assad, 2005; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007; Shockely-Zalabak et al., 2010). Typically, these kinds of studies position leaders as engaging in programs of social exchange in which they give tangible and intangible resources to gain follower trust and compliance. In the following pages, however, a complementary explanation is presented: Leaders make sense of who and when to trust by placing (i.e., emplotting) their members' character into a limited range of storylines in order to manage the inherent indeterminacy of predicting members' future role performances throughout role negotiations.

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2. Rational and narrative logics

2.1. Social exchange theory and LMX

Fairhurst (2007) explained that the well-known leadership theory, Leader–Member Exchange (LMX), is a social exchange theory. In traditional LMX theorizing, leaders and members co-negotiate roles and expectations through mutual influence. This influence unfolds as the giving and receiving of resources, and thus is a process built on social exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Within the LMX framework leaders are typically conceived to be individuals who influence and manage; whereas, members are typically operationalized as individuals who receive directives from specific leaders and comply, resist, or modify those directives in their implementation (cf. Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Scandura & Graen, 1984; Wayne & Green, 1993). Of course, as Yukl (2006) lamented, definitions of leadership remain hotly debated and are notoriously difficult to operationalize.

LMX theorists posit leaders and members engage in role negotiations in stages of: (a) role-taking, (b) role-making, and (c) role-routinization (e.g., Graen, 1976; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). In role-taking, leaders communicate to members role expectations, with little influence from members. In role-making, communication exchanges between leaders and members define and redefine how roles and expectations are fulfilled. Lastly, in role-routinization, communication exchanges regarding the expectations of members' roles become routine in terms of how members accomplish their work. Extensive reviews of the LMX literature are available elsewhere (see Dirks & Ferrin, 2002; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). However, what remains constant across social exchange theories is the assumption that leader–member relational development follows a rational, reciprocal logic according to "certain rules of exchange.... In this way, rules and norms of exchange are the guidelines of exchange processes" (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005, p. 875). This logic of leader–member relational development is, "Among the most influential conceptual paradigms for understanding workplace behavior" (p. 874).

Social exchange theories presume leaders engage in rational-information processing as they exchange resources with members throughout the role negotiation process. Fairhurst and Hamlett (2003) and Fairhurst (2007) add to a rational-information processing view by suggesting a complementary idea: narrative sensemaking. In this view, leaders make sense of who to trust and when by narrating their experience with members for themselves. Presumably, leaders' ongoing sensemaking about the trustworthiness of members influences leaders' plans to engage in resource exchanges with them. Thus, the idea of narrative sensemaking complements a social exchange view of leader-to-member trust throughout role negotiations by affirming the importance of resource exchange in relational development while also supplying an explanation for *how* leaders make resource exchange decisions in the first place (i.e., via sensemaking; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012).

Fairhurst and Hamlett (2003) make the important methodological point that much LMX research employs psychometric measurements, which "force-fits" assessments of relational quality (p. 117; Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012). Such methodological approaches tend to present leader–member relationships as linear and stable, while also obscuring the ways that "sensemaking and meaning gets worked out in communication" (p. 123). In other words, LMX researchers presume relational development occurs according to the logic of social exchange. Yet, LMX researchers may unwittingly impose their assumptions onto leaders' decision-making about trusting members throughout the role negotiation process. To be clear, a social exchange account of this decision-making is a plausible explanation, but in the words of Van Maanen (1979), "the map is not the terrain" (p. 520). In other words, we argue that in the process of figuring out who to trust and when, leaders may apply logic akin to narrative in addition to contingent reward.

2.2. Sensemaking and narrative logics

Weick (1995) explained how individuals interpret the meaning of events with the heuristic question, "How can I know what I think, until I see what I say?" His question directs our attention to the ways we influence our own and others' thinking discursively by working communicatively to assign meaning to equivocal events and extracted cues (Bute & Jensen, 2011). Weick argued stories are powerful sensemaking devices that help us assign meaning to ambiguous circumstances (see also Boje, 1991):

> Stories posit a history for an outcome. They gather strands of experience into a plot that produces that outcome.... Stories allow the clarity achieved in one small area to be extended to and imposed on an adjacent area that is less orderly.... they integrate that which is known about an event with that which is conjectural.

> [Weick, 1995, pp. 128–129]

Collective action requires trust. Yet, determining who to trust is difficult, in part because it requires making sense of a future that is always indeterminate. In order to manage collective action effectively, leaders must grapple with the ambiguous task of trying to predict members' future role performances throughout role negotiations. Stories are helpful devices for forcing coherence onto the ambiguous task of predicting an indeterminate future.

Weick and Browning (1986) make the point that organizational members often glorify rational argumentation as the preferable mode of discourse in work settings; however, this preference by no means should suggest rational argumentation is the *only* mode of discourse present in these contexts (e.g., Gabriel, 1995; Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). Weick and Browning draw from Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm to suggest an alternative. Fisher argues individuals understand the world around them through the narrative logics of narrative coherence (i.e., the story "hangs together," p. 47) and narrative fidelity (i.e., "truthfulness