

Leader-Member Exchange in Scripture: Insights from Jesus, Noah, and Abraham

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Abstract

Although much has been written about leadership from a Christian perspective, Christian principles have greater potential to be integrated into the academic research literature than has yet been realized. Leadership theory and practice is one area in which Scripture can contribute significantly, leader-member exchange theory (LMX) being one example. LMX states that leaders have limited personal, social, and organizational resources (e.g., time, energy, personal power); thus, rather than interacting similarly with each follower, leaders have different relationships with different followers. Some followers receive a higher degree of social exchange including increased levels of information sharing, interaction time, mutual support, and informal influence. In contrast, other followers receive a lower level of social exchange and are treated in a more formal, “by-the-book” manner. This paper applies Biblical principles to LMX with the goal of making recommendations regarding the desirability and possible limitations of building differential relationships with followers as a leadership practice. Jesus’ relationship to the twelve disciples in comparison to other followers, as well as God’s relationship to Noah and Abraham, are used to derive principles for effective LMX practices. Distinctive qualities of these high LMX relationships are shown through instruction, unique experiences, empowerment, and higher expectations that these followers received. Unique relationships between a leader and followers are appropriate, but that they must be established based on appropriate criteria, e.g., values rather than demographic variables. Additionally, followers can, in turn, develop LMX relationships with others, thus allowing the leader to influence a greater number of individuals, though indirectly. Finally, a leader has a minimum responsibility and expectation for all followers, not just those with high LMX. These principles have implications for activities such as increasing workforce diversity, span of control, succession planning, and strategic leadership.

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Both secular and Christian academic circles have viewed leadership as an important topic; however, there has been little integration of Scriptural teachings and research findings. Since all truth is God's truth, a complete examination of the topic using both types of sources would be informative and beneficial. This paper examines one particular theory of leadership, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, through the lens of Christian faith.

Leadership theory and research can be divided into three streams (Boal & Hooijberg, 2000). The first, strategic leadership theory, involves how organizational leaders develop ideas, make decisions, and implement these strategies to facilitate organizational success. The second stream focuses on charismatic, transformational, and visionary theories of leadership. The final stream is labeled the emergent theories of leadership and includes theories that involve social exchange, behavioral and cognitive complexity, and social intelligence. Writing in the area of Christian leadership has focused almost exclusively on the second stream, offering Jesus as the model of a transformational and servant leader

The third stream, the emergent theories of leadership, merits greater focus by Christians than it has received to date. In particular, LMX theory is appropriate in light of its emphasis on the interpersonal relationship between a leader and individual followers. This is not to detract from discussions of visionary or strategic leadership; it is simply recognition that a Christian worldview and a theory of leadership focusing relationships can do much to inform each other. This paper applies Biblical principles to LMX theory. Following a review of the present state of knowledge with regard to LMX theory and research, the paper describes examples of LMX from Scripture, specifically regarding Jesus' relationship with his disciples and God's relationship

with Abraham and the nation of Israel. From these examples, principles are derived that can be used to make recommendations regarding the practice of LMX as an approach to leadership.

LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE THEORY

LMX theory states that leaders have limited personal, social, and organizational resources (e.g., time, energy, personal power), a situation that discourages them from displaying an “average leadership style” in which they interact with all followers in the same manner (e.g., Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Mueller & Lee, 2002). Instead, each leader-follower relationship is unique, falling on a continuum such that some followers receive a higher degree of social exchange than others. This higher level of social exchange may include increased levels of information exchange, mutual support, informal influence, trust, and greater input in decisions (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Although high LMX followers receive more resources, leaders also expect more from them in terms of effort and going beyond the established job description. In contrast, followers receiving a lower level of social exchange are treated in a fair, but more formal and contractual, “by-the-book” manner.

Graen and Scandura (1987) have depicted the relationship between leaders and followers as a process of role development. Initial interaction between the leader and the member leads to delegation of a trial assignment: the role-taking phase. The leader then assesses the follower’s performance, makes causal attributions, and decides on future action. In the role-making phase, the relationship between the leader and member develops through working together on tasks. Role-making, if successful, generates a high LMX relationship (Uhl-Bien, Graen, & Scandura, 2000). As the relationship stabilizes, roles become routinized.

In addition to investigating this role development processes (Graen & Scandura, 1987), researchers have studied characteristics of LMX relationships, including interactive communication patterns (Fairhurst, 1993), and leader-member value agreement (Ashkanasy & O'Connor, 1994). Consequences of receiving high LMX include higher performance (Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982), job satisfaction (Graen et al., 1982), organizational commitment (Nystrom, 1990), organizational citizenship behavior (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Hui, 1993), increased delegation (Schreisheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998), empowerment (Gomez & Rosen, 2001), and lower turnover (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982).

Antecedents

The variables that predict differential relationships between leaders and subordinates have been of particular interest to researchers. Models of the leader-member exchange development process depict two alternate paths that can determine the quality of LMX (Bauer & Green, 1996; Dienesch & Liden, 1986). The longer path is consistent with Graen and Scandura's (1987) role-emergence process and assumes that the primary predictor of leader-member exchange is the member's performance. This is the more desirable path because the LMX relationship is predicated on organizationally relevant, relatively objective criteria. Investigations of predictors of LMX such as the follower's actual performance (e.g., Kim & Organ, 1982) or the leader's perception of the subordinate's competence (Dansereau et al., 1975) have achieved mixed results (Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997), however.

Instead, similarity between the leader and follower, particularly when salient (Diensech & Liden, 1986) or during initial interactions (Bauer & Green, 1996) can directly predict LMX, without using performance as a basis. Research findings have shown strong support for this

path. Liden, Wayne, and Stillwell (1993) found that overall similarity based on an index of demographic variables (gender, race, education, and age) was not related to LMX; however, research addressing specific attributes has shown that similarity in sex typically has demonstrated a positive relationship to LMX (Duchon, Green, & Taber, 1986; Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996; Larwood & Blackmore, 1978; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Similarity in education (Basu & Green, 1995, Green, Anderson, & Shivers, 1996) has received mixed results. In addition to demographic variables, attitude (Phillips & Bedeian, 1994) and values similarity (Ashkenasy & O'Connor, 1994; Dose, 1999; Steiner, 1988) also predicted LMX. Perceived similarity is a more powerful predictor of LMX than actual similarity (Liden et al., 1993; Phillips, 1992). Other perceptions such as liking (Engle & Lord, 1997) and trust (Gomez & Rosen, 2001) also show a positive relationship with LMX.

A Prescriptive Direction and Unanswered Questions

The research literature is primarily descriptive and has only relatively recently begun to deal with the issue of the extent to which the LMX leadership style is recommended (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, 2003), and questions yet remain. Yes, followers with a high degree of exchange with their leader may have higher performance, lower turnover, higher job satisfaction, etc., but what about the rest of the followers or the organization as a whole? Is it "fair" for a leader to treat certain followers differently, or is it favoritism? Do leaders select high performers for high LMX? In attempting to resolve the justice issue and enhance organizational performance, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) have suggested that leaders begin with a contractual relationship with all followers, but at some offer high-quality LMX to each subordinate rather than differentiate between them. In some cases the relationship will advance more strongly than

in others. Hiller and Day (2003) echo this recommendation, particularly for diverse groups. Mueller and Lee (2002) provide further direction by suggesting that followers can take a proactive role in determining the quality of the exchange relationship by demonstrating high performance in task assignments, engaging in effective communication behaviors, and utilizing impression management strategies. Scandura and Graen (1984) have offered evidence that leaders can be trained such skills, improving both satisfaction and overall performance of subordinate; however, it is unclear whether this practice can be maintained over time.

Although the prescriptive view of LMX recommending against differentiation does attempt to provide leaders some guidance in building relationships with multiple subordinates, this logic contains some flaws. One difficulty is that it discounts the issue of the leader's resource constraints and the reality that high LMX relationships require substantial investments of a leader's time. Furthermore, it contradicts scholarship that emphasizes the importance of differentiating among followers (e.g., Krackhardt & Brass, 1994; Liden et al., 1997) and conserving time for strategically valuable relationships (Bass, 1995), thus suggesting instead that leaders should give priority to intentionally developing followers who have the greatest potential. Although to some extent the non-differentiation view provides a means for limiting the number of subordinates to which the leader has a high exchange relationship by leaving it in the hands of the followers (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), this approach does not guarantee that the most deserving followers will accept the "offer" rather than those with the greatest motivation for impression management. Neither does it allow leaders to discern the followers with the greatest performance potential in the first place and to invest the greatest level of time and resources with them.

LMX THEORY IN PRACTICE: JESUS AND HIS DISCIPLES

Jesus as an Example

Examining some models of leadership in Scripture may shed light on the question of whether it is desirable for leaders to form differential relationships with followers and how to do so in the most effective manner. Jesus is the most obvious example. Scripture describes that although he had many followers, he selected twelve with whom he spent significantly more time and to whom he devoted more teaching. Even among these twelve, he had a more focused relationship with Peter, James, and John. Thornton has written, “On the whole it is evident that His aim is not present success or number of adherents, but the preparation of a solid nucleus . . . absolutely committed to the service of the kingdom. This withdrawal onto the few . . . is but the forging of an instrument to save the whole” (1956, pp. 37-38). Differential relationships were part of how God’s ultimate plan was put into effect.

One might ask whether Jesus truly had limited resources as is true of human managers and other leaders. At least part of that answer is that he had self-imposed limited resources; for example, the time constraints of his three-year ministry. However, surely he had greater personal resources than the typical leader; thus, it is significant that he chose not to foster the same level of exchange relationship with each of his followers. Leadership theorists have noted that the study of leadership has not adequately considered the situational context (House & Aditya, 1997). It may be that Jesus chose twelve disciples because that was an appropriate group size; if larger, they could not effectively gather, each ask questions, travel together, etc.

Antecedents. It is difficult to answer entirely the question of “*Why these particular individuals?*” since this was neither a typical employment situation, as is much of LMX

research, nor are we privy to God's ultimate plan; however, some things are apparent. The reasons for the selection of these individuals were not the same as those valued by society. Matthew, one of the twelve disciples, was a tax collector (Mt. 9:9);¹ and several were uneducated fishermen (Lk. 5:9-10). Jesus was scolded by the Pharisees for associating with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5:30). Nor do they necessarily demonstrate the characteristics found in LMX research: Jesus did not have greater demographic similarity with his disciples than with other followers. The disciples had not previously demonstrated superior performance in ministry. On the other hand, Jesus did appear to have a purpose for choosing these individuals, and they did go on to play an important role in the development of the early church. He perceived that the disciples were teachable and had potential to grow in the characteristics and values such as those he described in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5). Jesus had the disciples practice these desired attributes by sending them out two-by-two (Mt. 10:1), telling them not to take anything with them (Mt. 10:9-10), and thus enacting the principle from Mt. 6:25: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

Distinctives of Jesus' Relationship with his Disciples

Scripture depicts many examples of Jesus' relationship with his disciples, beginning with calling brothers Peter and Andrew, James and John as the first disciples (Mt. 4:18, Mk. 1:16, Lk. 5:8-11). He appointed twelve from among all his followers and designated them as apostles (Mk. 3:13-14, Lk. 6:12). His purpose was for them "to be with him, and to be sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons" (Mk. 3:14-15). Consistent with LMX theory, Jesus' interaction with the twelve disciples, and in some cases Peter, James and

John, was different from that with his other followers in several ways, including the amount of teaching they received, specific experiences, and expectations for them.

Teaching. Scripture gives several examples of instances where Jesus gave further instruction to the disciples, either to the twelve versus the other followers (e.g., Mt. 11:1) or to his disciples versus the crowd: “He did not speak to them [the crowd] except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples” (Mk. 4:34). At another point, he told the disciples, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Mt. 13:11). Jesus gave further commentary on events, such as the rich man’s questions and how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God (Mk. 10:23). At times, he instructed them not to share all they had seen (Mt. 16:20, Mt. 17:19, Lk. 9:21), at least not at that time. He gave the disciples greater explanation of his purpose and what would happen in the future, even though they did not understand. The primary example of this was that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer, die, and be raised (Mt. 16:21, Mk. 8:31). Manson (cited in Thornton, 1956) has calculated that seventy percent of the Lord’s teaching was given privately to the Twelve.

Conversation was not only in one direction. As part of this instruction, the disciples also felt free to question Jesus, such as by asking for further explanation of the meaning of a parable (Mt. 13:36, Mk. 4:10, Lk. 8:9), a reaction of the Pharisees (Mt. 15:12), or what will happen at the end of the age when he returns (Mt. 24:3). The disciples also asked Jesus to teach them to pray (Lk. 11:1). Peter, James, John and Andrew asked Jesus questions privately as well (Mk. 13:3). Once a leader has this high-quality exchange relationship with a subset of followers, there is a great deal of potential to influence them and to model appropriate behavior. Jesus’ relationship

with the disciples allowed them to get to know him quite well, to witness his values and how his behavior was consistent with them. This was particularly important in that his Kingdom was different from their previous understanding.

Experiences. The high LMX relationship Jesus had with certain of his followers is also exemplified by the miracles and other events they alone experienced. At times, Jesus simply withdrew with his disciples away from the crowd (Mk. 3:7). Often these experiences were related to things Jesus wanted them to learn. The disciples witnessed Jesus calm the storm (Mk. 4:37-39, Lk. 8:22-25) which strengthened their faith. Jesus' relationships with Peter, James, and John qualify strongly as high LMX. Only Peter, James and John accompanied Jesus into the house of Jairus (Luke 8:51). Peter was able to walk on water (Mt. 14:22). Peter, James, and John witnessed the transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-2, Mk. 9:2-3, Lk. 9:28-29) and accompanied Jesus to Gethsemane to keep watch with him (Mt. 26:37, Mk. 14:32-34). This unique relationship gave James and John the confidence (although rash) to ask to sit at Jesus' right and left hand (Mk. 10:35) and also to volunteer to call down fire upon a Samaritan village (Lk. 9:54).

Expectations. As LMX theory predicts, greater time and resources given to followers is matched by greater expectations of them. In Luke 12:48, Jesus stated, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (See also Mt.13:12). When Peter declared Jesus to be "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt. 16:16), Jesus affirmed that Peter would be the rock upon which Jesus would build the church (Mt. 16:18), not an easy task. While on the cross, Jesus gave the care of his mother Mary to John (John 19:27). Peter and John were chosen to select and prepare the Passover lamb (Luke 22:7). Later, Peter and John's letters refer repeatedly

to Christ as the Lamb, demonstrating their understanding of the concept of the Paschal Lamb like no other New Testament writer (Moore, 2003, p. 53). Peter, James, and John were referred to as pillars by Paul (Galatians 2:9). High LMX leads to development of autonomy (House & Aditya, 1997), something the disciples later would need in larger measure when Jesus was no longer physically present.

Empowerment. Many of the disciples' experiences served to prepare and empower them for ministry in which Jesus was their role model. Jesus involved the disciples and encouraged them to learn by doing or apply what they had learned, such as when he asked them to give the five thousand something to eat (Mk. 6:37). A culminating experience was when Jesus sent the twelve (Mt. 10:1, Mk. 6:7, Lk. 9:1) and also the seventy-two (Lk. 10:1) off two by two to preach and heal, applying what they had learned from Jesus. At the end of his earthly ministry he told them, "For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (Jn. 13:15) and commissioned them, saying, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:18-20). Jesus transferred some of his authority to the apostles. He repeated a theme they did yet quite understand about going to all nations. Finally, he assured them that his relationship with them would continue.

Equal Treatment

It is also important to note when Jesus does *not* treat people differentially. This distinction helps indicate under what circumstances LMX is appropriate and when it is not.

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5) explicitly includes individuals (e.g., meek, poor in spirit) who could otherwise be perceived as having less value (Willard, 1998). Jesus offers the opportunity to be a follower to everyone: "Come to me, *all* you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). He also stated, "For *whoever* does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (Mt. 12:50), not just the disciples or his earthly mother and brothers. Jesus had compassion on the crowd as a whole because they are like sheep without a shepherd (Mt. 9:36). The parable of the workers in the vineyard (Mt. 20) depicts workers receiving the same pay no matter when they started working. I Cor. 12 likens workers in the Church to a body with many parts each necessary to the whole.

Although the twelve disciples were given higher expectations, all followers of Jesus must meet certain expectations. Several Scripture passages require any disciple to take up his or her cross and follow him (Mt. 16:24, Mk. 8:34, Lk. 14:27, Lk. 9:23). Jesus illustrates the sacrifice of following him: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt. 8:20). Thus, even in the context of LMX, there is a minimum acceptable level of relationship and mutual expectation between a leader and his or her followers. This parallels the work setting where all must meet the contractual expectations of their job.

At the same time, Jesus also made a clear distinction between those who are his followers and those who are not. One example of this is the passage about separating the sheep (followers) from the goats (Mt. 25:31ff). Mt. 12:30, which states, "Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters," also expresses the clear distinction of who are Jesus' followers.

GOD AND THE NATION OF ISRAEL

On a larger scale, and in anticipation of Jesus as the Messiah, LMX theory is exemplified in God's election of Israel as his chosen people and his special relationship with certain individuals, e.g., Noah, Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Moses, through whom he worked to build the Hebrew nation. Election is "the act of choice whereby God picks an individual or group out of a larger company for a purpose or destiny of his own appointment" (Packer, 1982, p. 314). God illustrated this choice and destiny when he stated, "You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine" (Lev. 20:26). However, His ultimate plan was to work through the Jews: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you'" (Gal. 3:8). The following section describes God's relationships with Noah and Abraham as examples of effective LMX being used to further God's ultimate purpose.

Relationship and Results

God chose to develop high LMX relationships with Noah and Abraham because of their **righteousness**. "The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. . . . But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD" (Gen. 6:5, 8). Abraham, a descendent of Noah, and his son Shem, also "believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

Noah and Abraham's relationship with God is described in an **intimate** way, indicative of high LMX. "Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9). In Isaiah 41:8, God referred to Abraham as his friend. Abraham spoke with God and was able to ask Him direct questions (Gen. 15:8). God

included Abraham in the decision-making process for Sodom and Gomorrah, saying, “. . . Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Gen. 18:17). Abraham spoke on behalf of what righteous people may yet have been in Sodom, “Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing—to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare with the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?” (Gen. 18:24-25). Eventually, as it became clear that Sodom and Gomorrah must be destroyed, “God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had settled” (Gen. 19:29). This is not the contractual exchange that a low LMX relationship would evidence. Additionally, Abraham’s reasoning parallels the passages in Matthew discussed earlier in which Jesus made a clear distinction between those who are his followers (the righteous) and those who are not. God did not relinquish his standards of justice as a favor to Abraham; Abraham knew those standards and spoke within those parameters.

A significant aspect to many of God’s high LMX relationships was that he gave these individuals a **new name** indicative of his purpose for them. The meaning of Shem, Noah’s son, in fact means “name;” God set apart a people devoted to his name. Abram became Abraham, “father of many,” a symbol of God’s promise to him and his role in God’s purpose. Jacob became Israel, the name of a new nation. (Later, Levi became Matthew, “gift of the LORD,” and Simon became Peter, “the rock.”)

God’s **covenant** is an indication of a high LMX relationship as a means to accomplish God’s purpose. The parties to the covenant have higher mutual expectations of each other. In relation to the ark (Gen. 6:18) and to Noah’s sacrificial offering, God pledges, “I will never again

curse the ground because of humankind” (Gen. 8:21). This covenant is a precursor to the one made with Abraham and includes Noah’s sons and their descendants (Gen. 9:8-9), as God tells Noah to be fruitful and multiply (Gen. 9:1). God’s covenant with Abraham clearly is looks ahead to choosing and building a nation through this individual. Consistent with LMX theory, God makes a special request: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen. 12:1). In exchange, as a result of following God’s call, God promised to make Abraham and his descendants into a great nation, blessed, and a blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:2-3). God reiterated this covenant many times, also including Abraham’s offspring, e.g., “All the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever” (Gen. 13:15; see also Gen. 15:18; Gen. 17-2), as well as emphasizing the multitude of these offspring, “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Gen. 13:16).

Choosing a Nation

In addition to leading certain individuals such as Noah and Abraham, God chooses and leads The Nation of Israel. The Tower of Babel resulted in multiple nations; therefore, it became necessary for God to choose one nation through which to bring forth the Messiah (Icenogle, 1994; Moore, 1995). God did not intend to turn his face from other peoples, instead blessing them through Abraham and his descendants (e.g., Gen. 12:1-2). Jesus, the Messiah, was a descendant of Abraham. ““Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst,” says the LORD. ‘Many nations shall join themselves to the LORD on that day, and shall be my people; and I will dwell in your midst. And you shall know that the LORD of hosts has sent me to you’” (Zech. 2:10-12). Jews of Jesus’ day knew that Israel had a destiny meant to

affect other people (Kean, 1956), but they did not understand just what that destiny was. At the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus charged the disciples to “make disciples of *all* nations” (Mt. 28:19). As Paul said of Abraham, “For he is the father of all of us” (Rom. 4:16).

Israel and Other Nations in the Old Testament

Just as the relationships described by LMX theory are not simply an ingroup and an outgroup, but rather a continuum, so the LORD’s choice of Israel does not mean Israel had *carte blanche* nor that other nations had no status. Israel as a nation was not especially meritorious. Moses told them, “Know, then, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people” (Dt. 9:6). Nor did Israel’s special relationship with God mean that the people were not subject to discipline for disobedience. In fact, Israel’s punishment for their sin was a *result* of their chosenness: “Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:1-2).

Other nations also were to be given respect. For example, Israel was forbidden to abhor the Edomites (Dt. 23:7-8), descendants of Esau, and were commanded to treat kindly the Ammonites (Dt. 2:19), descendants of Lot (Gen. 19:36). Ruth, a Moabite woman, gained prominence as an ancestor of David (Ru. 4:28; Mt. 1:5-16). Moabites were also descendants of the children of Lot (Gen. 19:36). Moses married a woman from Midian, and his father-in-law Jethro, gave Moses important advice about delegating responsibility for the governance of Israel (Exodus 18). The episode of Jonah the prophet journeying to the foreign city of Ninevah is

another example of God's mercy and compassion on people other than Israel (Jon. 4:10-11).

Ninevites were descended from Ham, the youngest son of Noah (Gen. 10:6-12).

The New Testament: Working through the Jews to the Whole World

Earlier it was noted that Jesus interacted with just a few followers so that later they could interact with still others to spread his message. Although Jesus interacted primarily with the Jews during his public ministry, he modeled the relationship his followers should have with those from other nations. One example is Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4). Jews did not typically associate with Samaritans, yet he conversed with her and explained that he is the Messiah, and that ". . . salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him" (Jn. 4:22-23). A further example is Jesus' exchange with the Canaanite woman who sought healing for her daughter (Mt. 15:24-27). Although he first told her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt. 15:24), she persisted. Jesus replied, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mt. 15:26). She answered him by saying, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table" (Mt. 15:27), and Jesus healed the woman's daughter because of her faith. Both examples demonstrate (as was true since the time of Moses) that it is faith in God, not nationality that is of primary importance (Kean, 1956).

The book of Acts opens with Jesus renewing his commission to the apostles as he was taken up to heaven: ". . . and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Peter's interaction with the Roman Centurion shows him learning this same lesson about faith (Acts 10). God prepared Peter for the incident through

a vision in which he declared, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). Peter took this message to heart, stating, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). He later addressed the Jerusalem council along these lines, stating with regard to the Gentiles, “And in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us” (Acts 15:9), from which James understood that, “God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name” (Acts 15:14). Philip’s conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) is another example.

Paul became an apostle later than the others; but had a special choosing as well (Acts 9). Perhaps one attribute that led to his choosing was his ability to take a cause into the center of his whole being (Acts 9:1 refers to his “breathing” of murderous threats). Paul became the primary messenger to other nations, bringing the gospel through his travels and his letters (which continue to influence us today). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul stated, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). He also tied saving faith back to Abraham, “For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed . . . And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:9, 29).

PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATIONS

The preceding examples show how carefully-considered, selective, high LMX relationships can be effective in bringing about fruit. Followers benefit from the relationship and can, in turn, develop relationships with followers of their own. In this fashion, leaders and members work together to fulfill the organizational goals. In the following section, principles are derived from the scriptural examples; in many cases these principles contradict prescriptive

LMX theory as it is currently stated. Applications of these principles are also described. These applications are consistent with the problems that LMX research has been trying to solve, but do so through different mechanisms, ones which are consistent with Scripture but not necessarily with prescriptive LMX research in its current form.

Limiting High LMX Is Valid

The relationships between Jesus and his disciples and between God and Abraham provide support for the view that it is appropriate for a leader to establish unique relationships with followers, some receiving a higher level of exchange than others. As exemplified in Scripture, such relationships can be characterized by intimacy, involving teaching, shared information and experiences, greater influence and involvement, and higher mutual expectations. This model runs counter to the current thinking in LMX theory which advocates that leaders should foster high LMX relationships with all followers.

Succession planning can be positively impacted by the practice of choosing a limited number of followers with whom to foster high LMX. Today's fast-changing business environment means that succession planning is more important than ever before, yet about one-third of companies are concerned about being able to find suitable replacements (Bohlander & Snell, 2004). Often CEOs are so concerned about holding on to power that they fail to make a significant interpersonal investment in their subordinates (Sherman, 2004), thus highlighting the importance of high LMX for human resource management.

Limiting span of control, the number of subordinates a manager has, is the converse of limiting the number of followers who receive high LMX. Research has found that the number of employees a manager supervises is negatively correlated with LMX (Schriesheim, Castro, &

Yammarino, 2000). As work-unit size increases, relationships between supervisors and subordinates typically became less positive (Green et al., 1966). This implies that organizational design should consider LMX issues in determining the optimal span of control, taking into consideration that a smaller span of control will allow the leader to have more time to develop high exchange relationships with subordinates as well as to give subordinates an opportunity to develop their job-related skills.

Basis for High LMX

It is important for LMX to be established based on appropriate criteria. Scripture shows that similarity in values and enacting those values is important both for initiation and continuation of a high LMX relationship, whereas simply demographic variables or similarity are not. Abraham and Noah were known for their righteousness. The disciples, especially Peter, James, and John were able to understand Jesus' ministry more fully than others. Peter, especially, showed that he was teachable with regard to interacting with Gentiles. Basing high LMX on similarity in values is consistent with prescriptive LMX research but not with typical practice.

When left to their natural tendencies, research has shown that leaders are significantly influenced by perceived and demographic similarity (e.g., the similar-to-me bias; Rand & Wexley, 1975). Leaders need to be conscious of the basis upon which they choose followers for high LMX relationships. An affective rather than cognitive choice can limit the diversity of those who have access to a greater share of the leader's time and other resources, and can be discouraging to minority employees (Douglas, Ferris, Buckley, & Gundlach, 2003). This is problematic in light of organizations' need for diverse members who can make a contribution to

organizational goals. Fostering LMX relationships that cross gender and racial boundaries in fact may be the key component in a successful diversity initiative (Douglas et al., 2003). High LMX relationships should be based on ability or performance potential and congruence with the values of the organization. Using these criteria reduces the potential for favoritism (something warned against in James 2:9) by the leader and the danger of prejudice against low LMX individuals (e.g., Jews' attitude toward Samaritans).

Working Through High LMX Members To Lead Others

One way to deal with the reality of limited resources is for leaders to work through their high LMX followers to develop others, much as Jesus did with his disciples. The things that the disciples learned and experienced with Jesus enabled them to continue the mission of spreading the gospel. Noah and Abraham had important roles in furthering God's plan for the Nation of Israel and ultimately reaching the whole world. The idea of a system of relationships is consistent with the Biblical plan stretching over thousands of years and many sets of relationships. Aside from Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) preliminary ideas about LMX as a network of interdependent dyadic relationships, this principle has not been addressed by LMX theory.

The series or system of dyadic relationships throughout the organizational hierarchy proposed here implies that it is also worthwhile to look at LMX at the macro or organizational level. Followers initially benefitting from high exchange relationships could be trained and motivated to develop high exchange relationships with their own followers, thus effectively connecting them to the organization as a whole. This would not necessarily be in the context of formal reporting relationships, but could be in the form of more experienced members of a team

mentoring and developing newer members. The initial high LMX followers would be seen by others as being trustworthy and having legitimacy and credibility through their relationship with the leader (Liden et al., 1997). This allows the primary leader to influence a greater number of individuals (though indirectly), ultimately furthering the organizational purpose.

A benefit of using high LMX followers to develop other employees is that it is a way of providing more organizational members with the opportunity to develop a high-level exchange relationship. It would also mitigate against the potential negative effects on coworker relationships of some subordinates having high LMX with the supervisor and some not. Additionally, Maurer, Pierce, and Shore (2002) have proposed that when LMX is high, employees will be motivated to engage in developmental activities (going beyond the usual job responsibilities) that benefit the organization as well as their own supervisor.

Although there has been little LMX research in non-business organizations, other types of organizations, such as churches, are clearly settings in which LMX will occur and can provide an illustration of this concept. Church renewal author Martin Thornton (1956) proposed that pastors should focus on giving spiritual direction to a small subset of committed church members. He did not, however, take the logical next step of proposing that this small group of high LMX followers each develop similar relationships to other church members, in turn strengthening the commitment of these individuals. Recent church growth and renewal experts (e.g., Warren, 1995) also recognize that different levels of relationship and commitment exist within the church body; however, they imply that pastoral focus should begin with individuals at the lowest level of commitment rather than on individuals with the highest level and working through them to reach less committed individuals.

High LMX and Organizational Goals

High LMX relationships play a role in accomplishing God's plan throughout scripture. Jesus' relationships with his disciples played a role in fulfilling the great commission. God's relationship with Noah, Abraham, and the nation of Israel as a whole provided a foundation for the ministry of Jesus on earth. Research shows that high LMX leads to higher performance on an individual level, but there has been little investigation of LMX and organizational performance.

The LMX relationships described in Scripture provide excellent examples of how effective use of LMX combined with working through high LMX followers to others can be instrumental in implementing strategy; however, LMX research has typically focused on supervisory leadership (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). The processes by which strategic leaders affect the organization has received little research attention (House & Aditya, 1997), and investigating the efficacy of LMX in this regard would be beneficial.

LMX research has not extensively addressed the importance of a leader's vision. Although Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) do make a connection between high-quality exchange and transformational leadership (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978), the value of a social exchange relationship for transmitting the leader's vision to a relatively small group of followers who have the ability to carry on that vision has not been completely recognized in the LMX literature. It has been recognized to a somewhat greater extent in the Christian leadership literature, however. Maxwell (1993) commented that leaders spend eighty percent of their time with twenty percent of their followers, enabling these followers to carry on the vision.

Equitable Treatment For All

Again, it is important to emphasize that having high LMX relationships with only some does not mean that other followers are discounted or treated unfairly. God's choice of Israel did not show favoritism; Israel's disobedience merited judgment while other nations also experienced God's mercy. Jesus offered a relationship with him to all who would accept it. In an organizational context, there is a minimum appropriate level of relationship with followers; even though some have a higher level of exchange than others, the leader has a certain responsibility to and expectation for all followers. LMX theory has not addressed how other followers should be treated apart from the injunction to give high LMX to all followers.

Although giving certain followers high LMX is justifiable, leaders must be concerned about low LMX followers as well, particularly minority employees. Dee Hock, founder of Visa International, has noted, "Any leader worthy of the name makes sure that *all* people for whom they have responsibility have open and equitable opportunity to develop their abilities to the maximum" (Bennis, Murphy, Hock, & Muldron, 2003, p. 64). This is indeed a challenge, yet an important one. Nystrom (1990) found that low LMX led to low organizational commitment which in turn led to turnover. Although minority employees sometimes may feel stigmatized, resulting in lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Milliken & Martins, 1996), individuals with a strong organizational identity perceived that they were treated fairly, regardless of racial identity (Dovidio, Gaertner, Niemann, & Snider, 2001). This organizational identity may be strengthened by values congruence.

Furthermore, leaders should realize that LMX level is not set in stone. High LMX members who do not meet their (perceived) potential or subsequently reduce their output may

receive lower LMX (Nystrom, 1990; Steiner, 1997) or be sanctioned (consistent with God's treatment of Israel, e.g., Amos 3:2) while retaining high LMX. Scarce resources should be used in the most effective way, while maintaining respect for individuals.

CONCLUSION

Although there is merit in developing as many high LMX followers as possible, given the positive outcomes associated with these relationships, resource constraints limit the number of high exchange relationships leaders can realistically cultivate. As a result, leaders would do well to conform to the principles modeled in Scripture. Current LMX theory advocates fostering high LMX relationships with all followers; however, highly effective leaders such as Jesus appropriately fostered differential relationships with followers. These relationships involved greater intimacy, teaching, shared information and experiences, influence, and expectations. High LMX relationships were based on characteristics of the followers such as righteousness and greater understanding, not just similarity of demographic characteristics. High LMX relationships became part of a larger organizational plan in which these followers, in turn, developed relationships with others to further the organizational goals. Finally, all followers are treated in a fair and respectful manner.

It is important to recognize that there are limitations in the extent to which we can apply these Scriptural examples to organizational life in general. Human leaders are not omnipotent; they can not entirely recognize their followers' potential and therefore cannot always select the most appropriate individuals for high LMX. Limited time and other resources prohibit giving high LMX to all those who might be considered to be deserving. Although working through high LMX followers to lead other subordinates is a viable option, human leaders do not have the

luxury of working over thousands of years to bring a plan to fruition. Limited time may also interfere with working through high LMX followers to lead other subordinates to bring a plan to fruition. Additionally, some valid recommendations for applying for LMX cannot be derived from Scriptural examples (e.g., training leaders in order to increase LMX; Scandura & Graen, 1984). Nevertheless, application of Scriptural principles can give leaders assurance that it is both reasonable and productive to have unique relationships with subordinates, provided that this practice is implemented fairly and with concern for effective human resource development and organizational performance.

Notes

¹ All scripture references taken from: *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (1989). New York: American Bible Society.

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