

LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE AMONG MALAYSIAN ARMED FORCES: A DYADIC RELATIONSHIP

Khuan Wai Bing¹, Azeman Yusoff²

¹Faculty of Management & Economics, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris
Tanjung Malim, Perak, Malaysia

²Pusat Sumber Maritim dan Sejarah (PUSMAS), TLDM

Abstract

Not all leader-member relationships are created equal. The same leader may have very different relationships with each of the individuals with whom he interacts. Those closest to the leader and whom the leader trusted the most are known as the in-group. On the other hand, those whom the leader trusted the least are known as the out-group. The purpose of this preliminary study was to determine the perception of leader-member exchange leadership among Armed Forces personnel in the military. A questionnaire with LMX 7 was distributed to about 200 Armed Forces personnel. The data collected was analyzed descriptively by using mean and percentage. Overall, the quality of relationship between leader and member is positive but only average. The findings also indicated that LMX theory of in-group and out-group appeared not to be applicable in the military setting. However, this finding is not conclusive. Continued LMX studies are needed as this leadership approach addresses a process centered in the interactions between leaders and followers.

Keywords *Leader-member exchange, leadership, in-group, out-group, military*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is very important for the success of military missions. History has shown that better led forces have repeatedly been victorious over poorly led forces (Bass, 1990). Good soldiers are led by effective military leaders. Military leadership is defined as a process by which a soldier influences others to accomplish a mission. Military leaders are trained to provide direction, implement plans, and motivate subordinates to achieve their objectives.

In other words, effective leadership is a major managerial issue (Smith & Rupp, 2004). Historically, military forces have been known for their strong and authoritative style of leadership (Bass, 1990). The old “tear-‘em-down-and-build-‘em-back-up” leadership style has been replaced with boosting recruits “self-esteem,” and instead of obstacle courses, they run “confidence courses” (Bockhorn, 2000). As the military work force transformed, so did the need to review what was required of leaders to discipline and mold mixed groups into a single military unit.

Military leaders are expected to inspire their soldiers to fight and carry out missions which are at times beyond their capabilities. Moreover, military leaders are also expected to be concerned about their soldiers’ morale since morale has a tremendous impact on motivation and can make a difference in the battlefield. In short, the basic goal of military training is to develop loyalty, self-discipline, physical fitness, self-confidence, pride in service, and military values (Carbone, 2001). The interactions between military leaders and their soldiers make the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers. Leader member exchange (LMX) focuses the lens on the quality of the relationship between the leader and the follower.

LMX has become a popular leadership theory in the past 30 years due to its hypothesized relationships between leader processes and leader outcomes (Gerstner & Day, 1997). At the time of its inception in the early 1970s by Graen and colleagues (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Graen, 1976; Graen & Cashman, 1975), LMX represented a break from the more traditional leadership research that focused on the characteristics of the leader or on the constraints of the situation. Instead, LMX was one of the first leadership theories to focus on the relationship element of leadership and the fact that all leadership relationships are not created equal. The same leader may have very different relationships with each of the individuals with whom he interacts. Those closest to the leader and whom the leader trusted the most are known as the in-group. On the other hand, those whom the leader trusted the least are known as the out-group. LMX also takes into account that trust in the relationship, is strengthened over time with mutually beneficial exchanges. Naturally, the in-group members received more praises, rewards and benefits from the leader. Over time, the leader follower relationship is reinforced by the behavior of the leader and the members (Yukl, O’Donnell & Taber, 2009) and developed into a more mature or permanent relationship.

Despite the apparent stability and generalizability of LMX, Northouse (2006) concluded that further exploration of the LMX is needed. The most obvious criticism of LMX theory is that it challenges the basic human value of fairness. This is because LMX theory divides the work unit into two groups and one group receives more attention, it gives the appearance of discrimination against the out-group (Northouse, 2006). Secondly, the basic ideas of the theory are not fully developed. Thirdly, leadership is vital to a soldier’s success. Although there are many studies on leadership generally, but few were on military leadership. However, a better understanding of how leader-member exchange leadership translates across different demographic groups in Malaysia is still necessary. This study is intended to contribute to the development and understanding of leader-member exchange in the military setting. The findings of this study would provide needed feedback and contribute to a better understanding of how leadership influences subordinates’ trust while the military is in the midst of a fundamental expansion of its capabilities.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this research was to determine the perception of leader-member exchange leadership among navy and army personnel in the military.

Specifically, this research was conducted to achieve the following objectives:

Analyze the level of leader-member exchange leadership in the Malaysian military;

Determine if there is an in-group and out-group relationships among navy and army personnel in the Malaysian military;

LITERATURE REVIEW

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory describes the dyadic process of relational roles between a leader and each individual follower. Leaders form unique relationships with each follower through differentiated exchanges that can be characterized as being of either high or low quality (Hoirul & Winter, 2009). The theory emphasizes that a leader's relationship often varies from one follower to another (O'Donnell, Yukl & Taber, 2012). The exchange relationship gradually develops over time as the leader interacts with each follower and the role is negotiated (Mahsud, Yukl & Prussia, 2010). LMX theory was formerly called the vertical dyad linkage theory because of its focus on reciprocal influence. The processes involve vertical dyads composed of one person who has direct authority over another person.

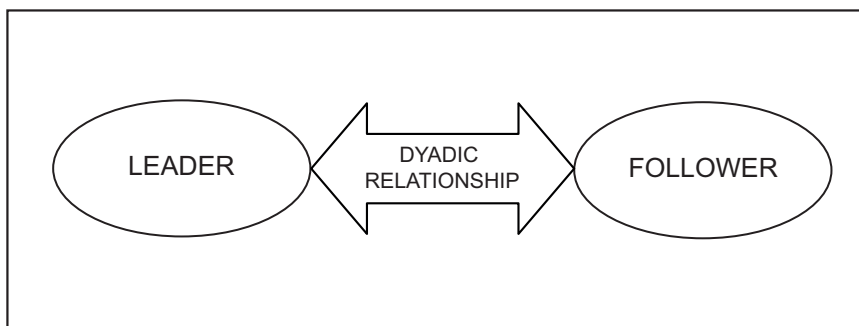


Figure 1 Dyadic Relationship of Leader-Member

LMX theory focuses on the amount of interaction between a leader and individual. It contends that outcome of a leadership is dependent upon how much of interaction exists between the leader and the members. Some of the relationships developed are of high quality whereas others are of low quality. In general, these dyadic exchanges are thought to range on a continuum from high to low. Since a leader has limited time, discretion and positional power, they tend to focus their attention on members who would maximize their leadership outcome. Hence, only a few high quality LMX relationships can exist in work groups.

High Quality LMX Relationships

In high quality LMX relationships, the exchanges between leader and follower are accentuated by mutual trust, respect and obligation such that there is reciprocal interaction between leader and follower. This reciprocity contributes to role negotiation over time where followers actively participate in decision-making processes that elevate their social status as “in-group” members within the work group (Hoirul & Winter, 2009; Anusuiya, Rozhan & Murali, 2010).

In exchange, the subordinate is expected to be committed to the work and loyal to the leader (Mahsud, Yukl & Prussia, 2010). The members go beyond their expected roles and have a constructive approach to the tasks. They would seek out their leaders and look for high interaction with them (Schyns, Kroon & Moors, 2008). They seemed to gravitate towards leaders who demonstrated traits that they valued (Ehrhart & Klein, 2001). If the follower values ‘commitment’ and they perceive the leader as committed, they will follow the leader effectively. “Value congruence” made followers and leaders comfortable with one another and facilitated establishment of common ground (Bugstad, 2006). At the same time, they also receive special attention from the leaders as *leaders identify them as subordinates that are proactively seeking to help the leadership role*. The In-Group is identified as high-quality of LMX with positive outcomes.

Some of the characteristics and benefits of In-Group members are:

1. Members initiate and negotiate their role expansion beyond their job description.
2. The relationship with leader comprises of mutual trust, respect and liking (Mahsud, Yukl & Prussia, 2010).
3. Members receive reciprocal attention, more information and concerns from their leader.
4. Members receive more positive performance evaluation, higher frequency of promotions, their desired work assignments, additional responsibilities, and much more support.
5. Leader provides more psychological support, recognizes subordinate contributions, develops subordinate skills, and consult with subordinates to learn about their ideas and concerns (Mahsud et al., 2010).
6. Members

Low Quality LMX Relationships

In low quality LMX relationships, the social exchanges between leader and follower are contractual in nature where tasks are performed according to formal regulations defined by a unilateral information flow from leader to follower. Followers often receive little support and encouragement from their leader and are delegated minimal responsibility with simple tasks. Compared to the in-group, the members of out-group do not receive any additional attention or benefits, their interaction with leader is formal and task oriented. Extra benefits

are not provided by the leader (Mahsud, Yukl & Prussia, 2010). Typically, low quality LMX relationships are characterized by a wider social distance between leader and follower such that followers take on an “out-group” social status (Hoirul & Winter, 2009). The out-group is a low degree LMX and as expected only provides mediocre result.

Some of the characteristic of Out-Group members are:

1. The communication or interaction between the leader and member is formal, more like scripted gestures between two strangers.
2. Leader tries to influence the subordinate but there is little reciprocity.
3. Subordinate is primarily concerned with fulfillment of self-interest.

Strengths of LMX

Among the strengths of LMX include:

1. Practicality: It is very easy to identify the In-Group and Out-Group in any organization; it provides good reason of why not all individuals perform equally. It also provides a good model to integrate out-group with in-group.
2. Importance of communication: It provides a strong base to give due importance to aspects of communication and exchanges between leader and members.

Criticism of LMX

Among the criticism of LMX include:

1. Conflicts Ethics: While the law governs the corporate to be fair and prohibit any discrimination, the identification of Out-Group and In-Group itself is a form of segregation. It is often hard to be convinced that such segregation is indeed intended to promote organizational citizenship of the out-group and would not be used for any other purpose. Nevertheless, it is recognized that leader’s behavior can sometimes be dysfunctional (Scandura, 1999) where the quality of social exchange affects the leader’s reward and resource allocation decision, preferring mainly in-group members (Othman, Foo & Ng, 2010).
2. Measurement Method: Although there are several LMX questionnaires, each focus on some dimensions. There is no comprehensive measurement method that has been created and studied (Northouse, 2006).

Dansereau (1995) argues that leaders provide support for followers’ self-worth, whereas followers return with satisfying performance, meaning that whereas leader and follower share a positive relationship, the basis for this relationship is different for leader and follower.

The development of LMX may also be affected by contextual variables (Liden et al., 1997). It may be more difficult for the leader to develop favorable exchange relationships when the work unit or team has many members, when the members are only temporarily assigned to the team, when the members are widely dispersed and seldom interact with the leader, when the leader is overloaded with responsibilities and has little time for interaction with individual members, or when the leader has little power to provide rewards and benefits desired by members. The extent to which leaders develop different LMX relationships with their subordinates is probably affected by other aspects of the situation as well, such as the organizational culture, human resource practices, and the type of team or work unit (Henderson et al., 2009).

Another antecedent of LMX is leader behavior, but the theory does not clearly explain how this behavior is related to the quality of the exchange relationship with a subordinate. Causality in both directions is possible, because leader behavior can influence how the exchange relationship develops, but leader perception of a subordinate's competence and loyalty influences the choice of behavior (Graen and Scandura, 1987; Keller and Dansereau, 1995).

LMX can be applied to many types of organizations and can be used by managers at all levels within an organization as indicated in Table 1. The quality of a leader's exchange relationships with subordinates has important implications for leadership effectiveness. A leader who is able to develop high quality relationships with most or all subordinates is likely to be more effective than a leader who is unable to develop high quality relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Empirical studies have found a positive correlation between LMX quality and several indicators of leadership effectiveness (e.g. Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Harris et al., 2009; Schriesheim et al., 1999). Gerstner and Day (1997) had found that LMX correlate positively with several desirable outcomes, including: subordinate performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Liao et al. (2010) also recently found a statistically significant relationship between LMX and employee creativity, and Wilson et al. (2010) speculated that there are likely additional benefits of achieving high LMX relationships such as employee willingness to share important information with the leader.

Several empirical tests of the LMX model have also confirmed that leaders (i.e. supervisors/managers) allot membership in the in-group and out-group based on personal characteristics that are often unrelated to performance (Dansereau, Graen & Haga, 1975; Liden & Graen, 1980; Graen, Liden & Hoel, 1982; Scandura, Graen & Novak, 1986; Dienesch & Liden, 1986). A favorable exchange relationship is more likely when the subordinate is perceived to be competent and dependable, and the subordinate's values, attitudes, and demographic attributes are similar to those of the leader. Some personality traits for the leader and subordinate (e.g. agreeableness, extroversion, positive affectivity) may also be related to LMX. However, the number of studies on traits is too small to reach any firm conclusions, and the studies did not include mediating variables such as leader behavior to explain the relationship (Mahsud et al., 2010).

Table 1 Main Focus of LMX Studies

Main Focus of Study	Researchers of article	Variables	Description
Demographic variables on LMX	Hoirul & Winter (2009)	Demographic variables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age, gender, organizational tenure (most common) • Life experiences & social ethnic (Based on life experiences similarities of leader and member) • Unit/platoon, rank, type of service & length of service (in military) (Hoirul & Winter, 2009)
Antecedent of LMX	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mahsud et al. (2010); • Schyns, Kroon & Moors (2008); • Arup et al. (2005) 	Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personality traits of the leader • Leader behavior (Mahsud et al. (2010) looked at leader empathy, ethical leadership & relations-oriented behaviors)
		Leader – Subordinate’s perception of each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favourable relationship with leader when subordinate is perceived to be competent and dependable, and the subordinate’s values, attitudes, and demographic attributes are similar to those of the leader • agreeableness, extroversion, positive affectivity (similar to leader’s personality) (Schyns, Kroon & Moors, 2008)
		Contextual variables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work conditions: Difficult when the work unit or team has many members, when the members are temporary workers, when the members are widely dispersed and seldom interact with the leader, when the leader is overloaded with responsibilities and has little time for interaction with individual members, or when the leader has little power to provide rewards and benefits desired by members. • Organization conditions: organizational culture (Arup et al., 2005), human resource practices, and the type of team or work unit
Outcome of LMX	Schyns & Wolfram (2008)	Variety of outcomes	Attitudes: job satisfaction, commitment (Schyns & Wolfram, 2008)
			Well-being: occupational self efficacy (Schyns & Wolfram, 2008)
			Performance: Goal fulfillment (Schyns & Wolfram, 2008)
Measure of LMX	O’Donnell, Yukl & Taber (2012)	Variables in LMX-MDM 12 item instrument	Replicate instrument in a different sample

Instruments Used to Measure LMX

Many different questionnaires have been used by researchers to study LMX theory. All of them have been designed to measure the quality of the working relationship between leaders and followers. Among them are LMX-7 and LMX-MDM as indicated in Table 2.

LMX-7. LMX-7 instrument was developed by Scandura and Graen (1984). Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) provided additional support for the validity of this questionnaire (O'Donnell, Yukl & Taber (2012). LMX-7 measures three dimensions of leader-member relationships: respect, trust and obligation. Each item had a seven-point Likert response format with anchors for each response choice (1 “Disagree Strongly” to 7 “Agree Strongly”). Sample items include:

- how well does your boss understand and appreciate your talents and potential;
- how much confidence does your boss have in your ability to do the work;
- how willing are you to do extra work to help your boss deal with a difficult problem; and
- how would you describe the relationship between you and your boss?

LMX-MDM. Liden and Maslyn's (1998) developed the multi-dimensional model of leader-member exchange (LMX-MDM) scale, comprising 12 items, and used it to measure the quality of relationship between respondents and their superiors. The LMX-MDM scale incorporates the dimensions of affect, loyalty, contribution and professional respect, with each dimension consisting of three items. LMX quality is the summation of all the LMX dimensions. Affect refers to the subordinate's liking of the supervisor of a dyad. A sample item is “I like my supervisor very much as a person” (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Loyalty refers to the extent to which the subordinate feels the leader will publicly support the subordinate's actions and character. A sample item is “My supervisor would come to my defense if I were ‘attacked’ by others” (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Professional respect refers to the subordinate's perception of the degree to which his or her supervisor excels at work. A sample item is “I respect my supervisor's knowledge of and competence on the job” (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Contribution refers to the degree to which the subordinate is willing to work hard and apply extra effort to meet his or her supervisor's work goals. A sample item is “I do work for my supervisor that goes beyond what is specified in my job description” (Liden and Maslyn, 1998). Each item had a seven-point Likert response format with anchors for each response choice (1 “Disagree Strongly” to 7 “Agree Strongly”).

Table 2 Sample Group and Instrument Applied

Researchers of article	Sample Used	Instrument Used	Developed by
Schyns & Wolfram (2008)	216 employees and supervisors in banks and insurances	LMX-MDM 12 items instrument ➤ 4 dimensions: • Affect • Loyalty • Professional respect • contribution	Liden and Maslyn (1998)
O'Donnell, Yukl & Taber (2012)	239 respondents from a diverse set of industries, organizations, and occupations. Subordinates of 73 middle-level or lower level managers	LMX-MDM 12 item instrument ➤ 4 dimensions: • Affect • Loyalty • Professional respect • contribution	Liden and Maslyn (1998)
Mahsud et al. (2010)	218 business students at a university who had regular day jobs rated their immediate boss from a variety of industries (airlines, trucking, software, telecommunications, internet companies, banking, retail stores)	LMX-7 item instrument ➤ 3 dimensions: • respect, • trust • obligation	Scandura and Graen (1984)
Hoirul & Winter (2009)	109 non-commissioned officers and 421 recruits from 27 platoons in Singapore Armed Forces	LMX-7 item instrument ➤ 3 dimensions: • respect, • trust • obligation	Developed by Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995)
Arup et al. (2005)	Electronic firms in USA and Iron & steel factory in India	LMX-7 item instrument ➤ 3 dimensions: • respect, • trust • obligation	Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995)

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this preliminary research was to determine the perception of leader-member exchange leadership among Armed Forces personnel in the military. A questionnaire with LMX 7 was distributed to about 200 Armed Forces personnel. The questionnaire was categorized into two parts as follows:

1. Respondent demographic profile;
2. Leader-member exchange from Scandura and Graen (1984) with three dimensions namely respect, trust and obligation.

The measurement of leader-member relationships is based on a seven-point likert response scale where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree. The researcher distributed the survey questionnaire with an informed consent from each respondent at the camps. The researchers explained the objectives and the basic instructions of the questionnaires to each respondent. About 68% completed questionnaires were returned and analyzed. The data collected was analyzed descriptively by using mean and percentage. Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS 19.0 was utilized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As shown in the Table 3, majority of the respondents are between 23-40 years old of age and they represent 90% of the respondents of the study. There are only about 10% of the respondents above the age of 40 years old. Out of the 90%, about 35% of the respondents are between 29 to 35 years old. In the Malaysian Armed Forces, this range of age represents the biggest percentage of its strength. In this survey, the Navy is the highest group of respondents with 56% followed by the Army (32%), and the Air Force (12%).

In terms of number of years of service, majority of the staff have served 13 to 18 years (33%) followed by 7 to 12 years (29%). For those who have served below 6 years, there are only about 13%. Out of the total number of respondents, majority are male (82%) whereas there are only 18% female. In terms of rank structure, Corporal and below contributed 41%, Sergeant 38%, Officers 12% and Warrant Officer 9%. This is in line with the organization structure of Malaysian Armed Forces.

Table 3 Demographic Profile

Item	N = 136	Percentage
1. Age		
<28 years	34	25
29-35 years	48	35
36-40 years	40	30
>41 years	14	10

cont... **Table 3**

2. Service		
Army	43	32%
Navy	77	56%
Air Force	16	12%
3. Year of Service		
< 6 years	18	13
7-12 years	39	29
13-18 years	45	33
> 18 years	34	25
4. Gender		
Male	111	82
Female	25	18
5. Rank		
Corporal & below	56	41
Sergeant	52	38
Warrant Officer	12	9
Officer	16	12

Table 4 indicated the mean scores for the Leader-Member Exchange characteristics of the respondents in the survey. According to the interpretation of the scores: a high score (6 and greater) suggested that the follower has a high quality leader-member exchange relationship with his or her leader. A low score (2 or less) suggested that the follower has a low quality leader-member exchange relationship with his or her leader.

Overall, the members have an average relationship with their leaders as the mean scores ranged from 4.72 to 5.62. It is neither a low nor high quality relationship with their superiors. It is just a normal and standard relationship between the follower and the leader. The findings implied that followers did not perceive that they are either in the 'in-group' or the 'out-group'. This also implied that they did not perceive receiving more or lesser benefits and attention from the leader than others. In other words, followers did not think that the leader practiced the 'in-group' or preferred certain people as their most trusted follower.

As indicated in Table 4, item with the highest mean score of 5.62 is 'I usually know where I stand with my leader'. The personnel in Armed Forces usually go by rank and they know what they can do or cannot do and how they should relate to their superior within their stipulated rank. Even though they may be a friend or a relative to the leader, they have to adhere strictly to the Armed Forces' rules and regulations.

The item with the second highest mean score of 5.37 is ‘My working relationship with my leader is effective’ and the third highest mean score of 5.28 is ‘Regardless of how much power my leader has built into his/her position, my leader would be personally inclined to use his/her power to help me solve problems in my work’. This indicated that although there seemed to be no ‘in-group’ and ‘out-group’, the members found the working relationship with the leader as an effective one. They indicated that although their leader might have a lot of power in his or her high rank, he or she would not hesitate to use their authority to help the members solve their problems. This is due to the strong team spirit of the Armed Forces that if one member get defeated, the whole troop will get defeated. They practiced either they sink or float together as a group.

Table 4 Leader-Member Exchange Characteristics

No.	Items	Mean
1.	I usually know where I stand with my leader.	5.62
2.	My leader has enough confidence in me that he/she would defend and justify my decisions if I were not present to do so.	4.72
3.	My working relationship with my leader is effective.	5.37
4.	My leader understands my problems and needs.	5.18
5.	I can count on my leader to “bail me out,” even at his or her own expense, when I really need it.	5.09
6.	My leader recognizes my potential.	5.18
7.	Regardless of how much power my leader has built into his/her position, my leader would be personally inclined to use his/her power to help me solve problems in my work.	5.28

LMX postulated that all leadership relationships are not created equal (Gerstner & Day, 1997). The same leader may have different relationships with different members with whom he interacts. Those closest to the leader and whom the leader trusted the most are known as the in-group. On the other hand, those whom the leader trusted the least are known as the out-group. However, in this study, the findings indicated otherwise. The findings showed that there was no inequality and the leader did not practice favouritism (in-group) or out-group among his followers. All the Armed Forces personnel perceived that they have the same quality leader-member relationship as other personnels.

The item with the lowest mean score of 4.72 is ‘My leader has enough confidence in me that he or she would defend and justify my decisions if I were not present to do so’. This

indicated that members perceived that although the leader might have enough confidence in them, the leader might defend them only selectively according to situations if they were not present to do so. They would still be called in-person to give their explanation or justification for their decisions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The purpose of this research was to determine the perception of leader-member exchange leadership among Armed Forces personnel in the military. A questionnaire with LMX 7 was distributed to about 200 Armed Forces personnel. The data collected was analyzed descriptively by using mean and percentage. Overall, the quality of relationship between leader and member is positive but only average. It is suggested that intervention including LMX training for leaders that might lead to higher LMX. The findings also indicated that LMX theory of in-group and out-group appeared not to be applicable in the military setting. However, this finding is not conclusive. It cannot be denied that a leader having quality relationship with his members will bring to better trust and performance. Furthermore, LMX 7 is limited in scope and not a comprehensive measurement of the leader-member exchange relations. Therefore, more studies are needed to explore the quality relationship between leader-member. Future studies can be extended by using a different LMX questionnaire such as LMX-MDM by Liden and Maslyn (1998). Continued LMX studies are much needed as this leadership approach addresses a process centered in the interactions between leaders and followers. LMX theory tells managers to be aware of how they relate to their subordinates. They have to practice sensitivity to whether some subordinates receive special attention and some do not. Managers have to be fair to all employees and allow them to become involved in the work of the unit as they want to be. Employees should be respected as unique individuals.

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