



LEADER-MEMBER EXCHANGE THEORY: A DRIVER FOR OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) QUALITY PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT AT THE ZIMBABWE OPEN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The current study is a qualitative case study which explores the degree to which the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme Management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. It conveniently sample 24 out of 27 members of the Department of Education comprising six Programme Leaders, one Chairperson and 17 Regional Programme Co-ordinators in the year 2010. Research participants responded to an in-depth questionnaire. The study found out the LMX theory is based on effective leader-member exchanges that conceived quality ODL programme management. LMX theory was found to be all about collaboration and communication between leaders and subordinates for the sake of achieving quality ODL programme management. LMX theory promotes shared vision and ownership of programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. The study recommended the need for LMX to be implemented at all levels of the Zimbabwe Open University for the sake of making it a driver for quality ODL programme management. It also recommended that LMX theory be effectuated for the purposes of promoting unity of purpose between Zimbabwe Open University's National Centre and Regional Centre's personnel with the sole intent to make LMX theory a driver for quality ODL programme management.

Keywords: Leader, Member theory, ODL, Leader-member-exchange theory programme management.

INTRODUCTION

LMX theory has been hailed as one of the hallmarks of organisational efficiency and effectiveness (Northouse, 2010). Also, organisations that employ LMX theory into practice largely attain their goals (Harris *et al.*, 2009). The present study is an attempt to demonstrate how Leader-Member

Exchange (LMX) theory could be effective in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU). It focuses on the Department of Education of the Faculty Arts and Education at the ZOU during the year 2010.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

World over ODL institutions are made up of leaders and members who are in constant interaction in order to ensure that delivery of ODL programmes takes place. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is one such theory of such leadership that is related to empowerment of both leaders and members as much as far as the goal achievement of organisations is concerned (Harris *et al.*, 2009). LMX theory is hailed for its ability to direct leaders and members' attention to the importance of communication in leadership (Northouse, 2010). LMX theory is also related to positive organisational outcomes (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Also LMX theory conceptualises leadership as a process that is centred on the interactions between leadership and followers (Northouse, 2010). LMX theory makes the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers the focal point of the leadership process (Northouse, 2010). The quality of leader-member exchanges is usually related to positive outcomes for leaders, followers and the organization in general (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Researchers also found that high-quality leader-member exchanges produced less employee turnover, higher frequency of promotions, greater organisational commitment, more desirable work assignments, better job attitudes, more attention and support from the leader, greater participation, and faster career progress after 25 years (Liden *et al.*, 1993; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Generally speaking, the preceding observations tended to focus on the quality of LMX theory in the manner it relates positive outcomes for leaders, members and teams and organisations in general. They were not related to ODL settings with regards to programme management. It was against the background of such findings that the present study investigated the degree to which the LMX theory could be a driver for quality programme management with particular focus on the Department of Education in the Faculty of Arts and Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Statement of the Problem

Leader-member relations are cordial at the Zimbabwe Open University. The extent to which they promote programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University is yet to be empirically documented. The intriguing question that this study sought to interrogate is:

To what extent is the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory is a driver for quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Research Questions

The study sought to provide answers to the following sub-questions.

- How is LMX theory viewed by members of the Department of Education in connection with the programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- How does LMX theory work in regard to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- Which are some of the challenges to the implementation of LMX theory with regards to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- How best could LMX theory be applied to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Significance of the Study

The study was important in a number of ways. First, it was bound to generate new knowledge regarding the effectiveness of LMX theory in the facilitation of quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University since it is a qualitative case study of at the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. Second, it also sought to demonstrate how LMX theory empowers both leaders and members in quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. Third, the conduct of this study informed ODL leaders and their subordinates on the advantages and disadvantages of LMX theory in promoting quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University, with the intent to suggest solutions to overcome the disadvantages of LMX theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Reflections of LMX theory

Using a sample of employees in a variety of jobs in Israeli organisations [Atwater and Came L \(2009\)](#) in [Northouse \(2010\)](#) examined, “the connection between employees”, perceptions of leader-member exchange and their energy and creativity at work”. They found out that perceived high-quality LMX was positively related to the feelings of energy in employees, which in turn, was related to greater involvement in creative work. According to [Northouse \(2010\)](#) , “LMX theory was not directly associated with creativity, but it served as a mechanism to nurture people’s feelings, which in turn enhanced their creativity”. Researchers have also studied how LMX theory is related to empowerment ([Northouse, 2010](#)). [Harris et al. \(2009\)](#) explored how empowerment moderates the impact of leader-member exchange on job outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover, job performance, and organisational citizenship behaviours. Based on two samples of college alumni, they found that empowerment and LMX quality had a slight synergistic effect on job outcomes. The quality of LMX mattered most for employees, high-quality LMX appeared to compensate for the drawbacks of not being empowered ([Northouse, 2010](#)). While these findings seem to indicate that organisations stand to gain much from having leaders who can create good working relationships, they did not relate them to ODL settings with particular reference to the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. They also appear to illustrate that when leaders and subordinates have good exchanges, they feel better and accomplish more, and the organisation

prosper – but they were not tailored to ODL quality programme management. It was therefore motivation enough on our part to explore how well such findings could measure up against quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University's Department of Education.

How LMX Theory Works

According to [Northouse \(2010\)](#), LMX theory works in two ways. First, it describes leadership. Second, it prescribes leadership. In both instances, the central concept is dyadic relationship that a leader forms with each of the leader's subordinates ([Northouse, 2010](#)). Descriptively, LMX theory suggests that it is important to recognise the existence of in-groups and out-groups within a group or organisation ([Northouse, 2010](#)). Prescriptively, leaders should offer each subordinate the opportunity to take on new roles and responsibilities ([Northouse, 2010](#)). It was in the interests of this study to ascertain the extent to which such findings could be compatible with quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Advantages of LMX theory

According to ([Northouse, 2010](#)), LMX theory makes some positive contributions to our understanding of the leadership process. First, it is a strong descriptive theory. Second, LMX theory is unique because it is the only leadership approach that makes the concept of dyadic relationship the centrepiece of leadership process. Third, LMX theory is noteworthy because it directs our attention to the important alert for leaders. Finally, a large body of research substantiates how the practice of LMX, the present study sought to establish the degree to which they could be consistent with ODL quality programme management in the Department Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Disadvantages of LMX Theory

In spite of the afore-mentioned advantages of LMX theory, it has some disadvantages. The most obvious criticism that can be made of LMX theory is that on the surface, it runs counter to the basic human value of fairness ([Northouse, 2010](#)). LMX theory appears unfair and discriminatory ([McClane, 1991](#)). LMX theory does not address other fairness issues, such as subordinates perceptions of the fairness of pay increases and promotion opportunities (distributive justice), decision-making rules (procedural justice), or communication of issues with the organisation (interactional justice)([Scandura, 1999](#)) . In view of these disadvantages, the present study behaved to find out the extent to which they could undermine quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

METHODOLOGY

The study was a qualitative case study. Qualitative research is multi -method in focus, involving an interpretive, natural approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative research studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, interpret, phenomena in terms of the

meanings people bring to the (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research, according to Stivers (2000) in (McNabb, 2004), is interpretation which:

entails sense-making; taking a more or less inchoate bundle of events and processes-what might be thought of as a situation or groups of situations – and putting a frame around them based on more or less conscious assumptions about what is likely to be important, significant or meaningful.

Case studies are ‘step to action’. They begin in a world of action and contribute to it. Their insights may be directly interpreted and put to use (Bassey, 2000). Also, the case study was useful in carrying out this study because of its ability to present research or evaluation data in a more publicly accessible form than other kinds of research reports, although this virtue is to some extent bought at the expense of their length (McNabb, 2004) .

Sampling

The study employed a convenience sample to select 24 out of 27 members of the Department of Education. These research participants constituted six Programme Leaders, Chairperson of the Department of Education and seventeen Regional Programme Co-ordinators stationed in the Zimbabwe Open University’s ten Regional Centres scattered in the ten country’s Regional Centres. Convenience sample is useful to gather data from research participants who are present on the day of the conduct of the study (McNabb, 2004). Similarly, a convenience sample enables researchers to access research participants at any time they reach site (Seale, 2006) .

Research Instruments

We gathered data using in-depth questionnaires with unstructured questions. In-depth questionnaires enabled the research participants to go to town phenomenon under study (Punch, 2008) . The research participants responded to four broad questions drawn from research questions.

- How is LMX theory viewed by members of the Department of Education in connection with the programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- How does LMX theory work in regard to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- Which are some of the challenges to the implementation of LMX theory with regards to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?
- How best could LMX theory be applied to programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University?

Data Analysis

The study employed content analysis so as to analyse data. Content analysis of thematic data helps very well to generate new knowledge (Seale, 2006). These could be measured against research questions.

Discussion of Research Findings

The discussion of the research data occurs two parts namely, demographic characteristics of the research participants and the actual research data.

Table-1: Demographic characteristics of the Research Participants by Gender (N=24)

Gender	Frequency	% Frequency
Male	17	71
Female	7	29
Total	24	100

In terms of gender composition of the research participants the distribution in Table 1 shows that 71% (percent) of the research participants were males, while 29% (percent) of them were female. The gender composition is somehow biased in favour of female research participants. However, the findings would reflect reasonable perceptions of how LMX theory could be a driver for ODL quality the programme management in the Department at the Zimbabwe Open University along gender lines.

Table-2. Distribution of research participants by age. (N=24)

Age in years	Frequency	% Frequency
40-49	6	25
50-59	15	62
60+	3	13
Total	24	100

The scenario in Table 2 shows the majority (62%) of the research participants being aged between 50 and 59, followed by (25%) of them being aged between 40 and 49, while only (13%) of the research participants were aged at least 60years of age. The results show that the research participants were generally mature and assumed to be conversant enough with how well LMX theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Table-3. Distribution of research participants by professional qualification (N=24)

Professional qualifications	Frequency	% Frequency
Doctor of Education	1	4
Master of Education	22	92
Any other Masters Degree	1	4
Total	24	100

The results in Table 3 indicate that most (92%) of the research participants were holders of a Master of Education Degree, while (4%) of them were holders of a Doctor of Education Degree and the rest were holders of a Masters Degree that is not education-related, but Master of Science in Psychology. These results tend to reflect that research participants were qualified enough to be able to conceptualise how LMX theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Table-4. Distribution of research participants by experience (N=24)

Experience in years	Frequency	% Frequency
0-5	8	33
6-10	12	50
4+	4	17
Total	24	100

The distribution in Table 4 shows (50%) of the research participants having an experience of 6 to 10 years, while (33%) having an experience of 0-5years and (17%) of them having an experience of at least 11 years. The results seem to point out that the research participants had gained reasonable experience to assist them to visualise how LMX theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

Discussion of the Actual Research Data

How LMX theory is viewed by the Research Participants

Research participants in their free responses to the question that required them to pen down their views about LMX theory put forward a number of opinions. Chief among them included the following:

- LMX theory is concerned with collaboration between leaders and subordinates in ODL programme management,
- LMX theory involves interaction between leaders and subordinates in the pursuit of quality programme management,
- LMX theory all about working together by leaders and members who are interested in quality programme management,
- LMX theory is about team work between leaders and followers in their quality programme management,
- LMX theory is about effecting strategies that water down differences that might exist between leaders and followers for the sake of pursuing, quality programme management, and
- LMX theory is viewed as collective efforts by leaders and followers to attain prescribed organisational goals

The results appear to dovetail with (Northouse, 2010) observation that; “LMX theory conceptualises leadership as a process that is centred on the interactions between leaders and followers”. They also concur with Graen and Uhl Bien. (1991) who pointed out that research of LMX theory has begun to focus on how exchanges between leaders and subordinates can be used for leadership making. In the light of quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University, the preceding observations obtain situationally. They depended on the availability of time and financial resources. They however appeared to be largely consistent with view that LMX theory could act as an active driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

How LMX Theory Works in Quality ODL Programme Management

Most of the research participants also responded to a free response question in the in-depth questionnaire regarding how they feel LMX theory works in enhancing quality ODL Programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. Critical among their views were:

- Foremost, LMX theory directs Deans, Chairpersons and Programme Leaders to assess their leadership from a relationship point of view. This is echoed by (Northouse, 2010) who summarises that LMX theory suggests ways in which managers, can improve their work unit by building strong leader – member exchange with all their subordinates.
- LMX theory advocates for an all inclusive approach in regard to the effectuation of quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. This view is in tandem with Northouse (2010) point of view which indicated that the ideas set forth in LMX theory can be used by managers at all levels within the organisation.
- LMX theory is about flattening the leadership style in order to promote quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. Again, this view is constant with earlier observation by Graen and Scandura (1987) who found out that the ideas of LMX theory can be used to explain how individuals create leadership networks throughout an organisation to help them accomplish work more effectively.
- LMX is about team building as far as the pursuit of quality ODL programme management is concerned. This view transcends with Northouse (2010) opinion which indicates that theory tell us to be aware of how we relate to our subordinates.

When put together, the forgone research participants' view regarding how LMX theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University, three things come to our mind. Foremost, LMX theory, informs Deans, Programme Leaders and Chairpersons to be sensitive of the needs of the Regional Programme Co-ordinators so that none receives special attention at the expense of the others. In addition, it informs the leaders at the National Centre to be fair to all Regional Programme Co-ordinators and allow each one of them to become as involved in the work of the unit as they want to be. Above all, LMX theory tell us leaders to be respectful and build trusting relationships with all their Regional Programme Leaders, recognising that each subordinate is unique and wants attention and relate to all Departmental members in a special way. This is consistent with (Hassain, 2012) finding that LMX in Banks improves efficiency and effectiveness in goal attainment.

Perceived Advantages of the LMX Theory

LMX theory was perceived to be characterised with some advantages associated with quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. Research participants gave a host of advantages of LMX theory as indicated below.

LMX theory:-

- Indicates how members in the organisation work together. According to Northouse (2010) LMX theory validates our experience of how people within organisations relate to each other and the leader. Some contribute more and receive more; others contribute less and

receive less. In regard to quality ODL programme management, LMX theory shows how Regional Programme Co-ordinators, Programme Leaders and Departmental Chairpersons gel for the purposes of achieving stipulated goals.

- LMX theory is reflective of the opinion that effective leader-member-exchanges conceive quality ODL programme management for the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. This view is supported by (Northouse, 2010) who gives the following two views:
 1. Other leadership approaches emphasise the characteristics of leaders, followers, context, or a combination of these, but none of them addresses the specific relationships between the leader and the subordinate.
 2. LMX theory underscores that effective leadership is contingent on effective leader-member exchanges.

We feel that effective leader-member exchanges tend to provide worthwhile opportunities for quality ODL Programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. They drive quality programme management as the members of the Department and their leaders would be bound to play a mutually supportive role in their work performance.

- LMX theory values the interactions that go on between leaders at the National Centre and the Regional Programme Co-ordinators. Espoused by (Northouse, 2010) are three sentiments that support the preceding research participants' view.
 1. The high-quality exchanges advocated in LMX theory are inextricably bound to effective communication.
 2. Communication is the vehicle through which leaders and subordinates create, nurture, and sustain useful exchanges.
 3. Effective leadership occurs when the communication of leaders and subordinates is characterised by mutual trust, respect and commitment.

As co-researchers, we are content with the view that communication is so central to quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. It oils the LMX theory in its deliberate effort to make it a driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University.

- LMX theory is a pathway for fair leadership in quality ODL programme management. According to (Northouse, 2010), the principles outlined in LMX theory serve as a good reminder for leaders to be fair and equally sensible in terms of how they approach each of their subordinates.

To confirm this documented view, one research participant had this to say:

Leaders at the National Centre should exercise maximum fairness all the time when they distribute examination scripts for marking, assign tasks to module writers and content reviewers. We need money and academic growth in as much they like the two rewards, as well.

We feel that LMX theory could be a driver for quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University if leaders realise that exercise of

fairness in the award of rewards to Regional Programme Co-ordinators who look forward to get promoted.

- LMX theory promotes shared visions, collective planning, collaborative commitment, shared implementation and shared evaluation in the programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University. To underline this view, three research participants concurred that:
 1. leaders manage by participation in the quality programme management, and
 2. leaders and Regional Programme Co-ordinators share programme ownership

We feel that LMX is a gateway to communal ownership of programmes by all members of the Department of Education. It could be the driver for quality ODL management in the Department of Education if every member of the Department plays a part in the programme management.

Another advantage that comes as a result of employing LMX theory in quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University is that it promotes a unity of purpose among Programme Leaders and Regional Programme Co-ordinators. They all work towards achievement of one goal. In that regard, LMX theory could be argued to be a driver for quality ODL programme management at Zimbabwe Open University.

Perceived Disadvantages of LMX Theory

Research participants put forward some undocumented disadvantages of LMX theory in regard to quality ODL programme management in the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University. Here is a list of some of them:-

- LMX theory could be time consuming as leaders could spend more time to build relationships with subordinates,
- LMX theory could be unpractical in ODL settings where members of the Department initially meet during the year,
- LMX theory could result in the formation of groups based on feelings of how their leaders treat them, and
- LMX theory stresses determination of effective leader-member exchanges ahead of prompt quality work performance

We are content that lack of careful treatment of the preceding perceived disadvantages of LMX theory could undermine the view that LMX theory could be the driver quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University if preventive steps are not taken in time. Leaders need to balance their subordinates' personal needs and organisational needs.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the light of the above findings the following summary and conclusions suffice.

- First, LMX theory is based on effective leader-member exchanges that beget quality ODL programme management,

- LMX theory is about collaboration and communication between leaders and subordinates for the sake of achieving at the Zimbabwe Open University,
- LMX theory involves flattening of the leadership style by the leaders at the National Centre if ever it is to be a driver for quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University,
- LMX theory if properly implemented could undoubtedly be a driver for quality ODL programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University,
- LMX theory promotes shared vision and ownership of the programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University,
- LMX theory could be labour and time taxing if it is put into practice without careful planning,
- LMX theory if properly oriented, it will be able to situationally take quality programme management out of the woods,
- LMX theory exposes leaders to corporate governance so that they do not think about themselves and at the expense of the university and the subordinates, and
- LMX theory could be a divisive approach to leadership if leaders at the National Centre cease to exercise fairness in all issues regarding quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the summary and conclusions, we recommend that LMX theory be:

- implemented at all levels of the Zimbabwe Open University for the sake of making it a driver for quality ODL programme management,
- employed when the members of the Department of Education based at the National Centre regularly meet with Regional Programme Co-ordinators for the purposes of advancing strategies to further improve quality of ODL programme management,
- administered so that Programme Leaders and Regional Programme Co-ordinators feel confident with each other, as well as trusting one another in pursuing quality programme management,
- put into practice for the purposes of encouraging corporate governance in the programme management by the Department of Education at the Zimbabwe Open University,
- effectuated for the purposes of promoting unity of purposes of promoting unity of purpose between the National Centre personnel and Regional Programme Co-ordinators with the sole intent to make LMX theory a driver for quality programme management at the Zimbabwe Open University, and
- be researched university wide so as to generate knowledge that could influence policy decisions.

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