

Building Resiliency in Employees Using LMX Concept: A Qualitative Study

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The events in 2020 have steadfastly established resilience as an important attribute for employees. Leaders and their leadership styles played a significant role in supporting and guiding employees through these events. Through this study, we present a mechanism by which team leaders and team members can enhance the quality of their relationships and therefore build resiliency in team members. A longitudinal qualitative study was conducted with six team leaders and twenty-two of their direct reports to identify behavioral attributes that support building resiliency. The resultant grounded theory identified five behaviors or actions for both team leaders and team members that can help build resiliency in team members.

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Introduction

In March 2020, COVID-19 was declared as a pandemic by WHO. (Listings of WHO's Response to COVID-19, 2020). The stress of ensuring personal and family safety against the pandemic, uncertainty about the future, and ambiguity in the current state presented employees with monumental adverse conditions (Bakia, 2019; King, 2016). The ability of employees to deal with, bounce back from, and perform in these adverse situations became critical for organizations. In short resiliency became one of the most sought after attribute in employees. Since March 2020, there has been a spate of publications in leading management journals and publications prescribing ways to build resiliency (Glynn, 2020; Hillmann & Guenther, 2020). According to researchers, Leader and Leader Development play a key role in the development or enhancement of resilience in individuals (Humphrey et al., 2008; Luthans, 2002; Richard, 2020). However current studies stop short of identifying these behaviors and the role of leadership in promoting team member resilience has received limited attention (Richard, 2020). Current lit-

erature also establishes the relationship between various leadership styles (like transformational leadership, servant leadership, and authentic leadership) and resiliency (Gaddy et al., 2017; Kool & van Dierendonck, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2016). These linkages suggest that there are common leadership traits or behaviors across leadership styles that support building resiliency among team members.

The aforementioned leadership theories are based on the common premise that leaders apply the same style to all team members. However, research on leadership styles has moved from the average leadership style into the realm of dyadic relationships (Dansereau et al., 1975) commonly referred to as Leader Member Exchange theory or LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In LMX leaders build differentiated relationships with each team member. With some, they cultivate high-quality relationships (called in-group). In contrast, with others they create low-quality relationships that are limited to the team member's job description (called out-group) (Liden & Graen, 1980). By considering leadership as a consistent or average style, we erroneously assume that the capacity to be resilient is same across all team members.

This study makes significant contributions to the field of leadership and resilience. First, it is the only study that we are aware of that specifically identifies both team leader and team member behaviors that lead to a stronger relationship and therefore assists in building resiliency among team members. Researchers have long called for gaining a deeper

understanding of factors that lead to stronger supervisor-employee relationship (Klaic et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Second, we look at the process of building capacity for resiliency from a LMX lens. Because of the high-quality relationship, closeness, and support that in-group members get from their team leaders, they have the necessary resources and higher ability to deal with setbacks and bounce back from adversity (Kakkar, 2019; Khan & Malik, 2017). Finally, research on this relationship is limited in the consulting services in India. Consulting for clients across all major industries produces its own set of challenges like constant technology evolution, new regulatory requirements, competition from new entrants, skill shortages, etc. All these drivers have the potential to create adverse conditions for employees (Eliot, 2020; Williams et al., 2017). The present study tries to fill this gap by studying the team leader-team member relationship in one of the largest consulting organization in India. We conducted a six month long qualitative study covering six team leaders and all their direct team members (twenty two) to identify specific behaviors and actions that team leaders and team members can take to enhance the quality of their relationship and therefore build resiliency among team members.

Literature Review: Resiliency

The study of resilience associates different categories of variables that collectively encapsulate the phenomenon of positively adapting to adversity (Fisher et al., 2019). From this vantage point, the

role of a team leader becomes pivotal in building resilience in team members. One of the defining characteristics of resilience is sense making or the ability to find meaning in a crisis. Meaning-making helps 'people build bridges from present day hardships to a fuller, better constructed future' (Coutu, 2002: 50). Given the centrality of meaning-making to resilience, researchers have explored several avenues for professionals to find or build meaning. For example, Glynn (2020) offers three ways in which professionals can find meaning and therefore build resilience. These are organizational values, interpersonal networks, and role modeling.

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Most successful organizations have strong value systems that they reinforce in their people and processes. Strong values create an environment of purpose and positive meaning. They offer ways to interpret and manage events or crisis to people. Strong value systems also lead to trust in organizations as sources of timely and accurate information and resources to deal with crisis. Interpersonal networks, whether face to face or virtually, create a sense of solidarity and camaraderie among teams. This sense of togetherness helps them come together and collectively face the crisis. Role modeling can help us identify individuals who are a beacon of light in the biggest of crisis for their way of handling and

managing the crisis (Glynn, 2020). They become role models for emulation and inspiration who embody institutional values and thus signal resilience. In all three pathways, the team leader plays a central role in realizing these for team members.

Early on resilience was treated like an attribute (Block, 1961). However, some of the later research defined it as a capability that could be developed in individuals (Dello Russo & Stoykova, 2015; Tonkin et al., 2018). This brought into picture the role of the individual, their team leader, and the organization in creating opportunities and practices for professionals to develop resiliency (Richard, 2020). One such practice is resiliency building training programs. While most programs are focused on self-development to build resiliency (Luthans, 2012; Vanhove et al., 2016), some include the role of team leaders, specifically in helping team members manage their emotions in adverse situations (Vanhove et al., 2016). Consistent with this approach, researchers have increasingly focused on the role of leaders in supporting team members manage their emotions (Humphrey et al., 2008; Kaplan et al., 2014; Madrid et al., 2019; Sy et al., 2018; Thiel et al., 2015; Toegel et al., 2013). Thiel et al. (2015) referred to leaders' management of follower emotion as leader-facilitated emotion management. Thiel et al. (2015) also found links between leader-facilitated emotion management and building resilience. Clearly the role of team leaders and their support and behaviors plays a significant role in building resiliency in team members.

Overall, it is clear that stronger team leader and team member relationships can have a positive impact on subordinate resilience (Harland et al., 2005; Nguyen et al., 2016).

Literature Review: Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

According to LMX theory, Leaders build high-quality relationship with team members based on competency, trust, and motivation (Liden & Graen, 1980). Members of the in-group receive significant attention (Dienesch & Liden, 1986) and support from team leaders in the form of mentoring (Scandura & Schriesheim, 1994), sponsorship (Sparrowe & Liden, 2005), empowerment (Liden et al., 2000), and increased delegation (Leana, 1986).

The outcome of high-quality relationships is that team members show greater task performance (Dienesch & Liden 1986; Duarte et al., 1993, 1994; Liden & Graen, 1980; Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Scandura & Schrieshiem, 1994; Settoon et al., 1996), commitment (Liden & Maslyn, 1998), positive behaviors and job attitudes (Kang & Stewart, 2007), and creativity (Tierney, 2015). Members in the in-group have higher quality and frequency of communication with their team leaders (Mueller & Lee, 2002). They interact more with their team leaders both formally and informally (Kramer, 1995), have greater access to resources to do their jobs (Graen & Scandura, 1987) and as a result, have more clarity about what is expected out of them (Bauer et al., 1998). When they have an occasional episode of poor performance, they feel more com-

fortable seeking feedback from their leader (Lam et al., 2007). Therefore, because of the high-quality relationship, closeness, and support that in-group members get from their team leaders, they have the necessary resources and higher ability to deal with setbacks and bounce back from adversity (Kakkar, 2019; Khan & Malik, 2017). Given the strong influence LMX has on several organizational parameters like resiliency there have been calls for in-depth studies to understand the basis or source of LMX differentiation (Chen, 2018; Sparrowe, 2018).

Methodology

Research Setting: The setting for this research was the Indian offices of a large multinational company in the services industry. This global organization has presence in over 130 countries with more than 310,000 employees and revenue of over 48 Billion US Dollars (as of May 31st, 2020). The company provides financial consulting services in all major industries and geographies. There are five career levels in the organization – Staff, Senior Staff, Manager, Senior Manager, and Managing Director. All research participants were Indian nationals.

Data Collection and Analysis: Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants for this study. Teams whose team leader and all direct reports, could participate in all three rounds were identified and on-boarded. Six team leaders and all their direct reports totaling twenty-two team members made up the participant group. Table 1 provides the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1 Demographic Information of Research Participants

	Career Level	Gender	Age	Org. Tenure	Role Tenure	Education
6 Team Leaders	Manger to Managing Director	Male: 4 Female: 2	37 to 42	36 months to 144 months	6 months to 96 months	Bachelor degree to post graduate degree
22 Team Members	Analyst to Senior Manager	Male: 13 Female: 9	27 to 41	1 month to 144 months	1 month to 60 months	Bachelor degree to PhD

Data was collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed to a word document. Participants were interviewed three times, one month apart, for 45 to 60 minutes each time, to gain their perspective of the relationship building process. In total eighty-four interviews amounting to over 80 hours were conducted over six months. The data collection period spanned some key talent management processes like annual reviews and compensation revision, allowing us to study the relationship under special and potentially demanding conditions.

We adopted grounded theory for this research since it enables the study of a process in its context, helps build theory ground-up from the data, and ensures rigor that is necessary in a good scientific research (Kempster & Parry, 2011). As guided by Charmaz’s (2014) model, the analysis included line-by-line coding which allowed concepts to emerge from participants’ experiences, actions, thoughts, and statements. This was followed by focused coding to group common and higher order codes. The final step included integrating the categories

into an emergent, grounded theory about the central research phenomenon.

Findings

The following paragraphs describe the evolution of a theory grounded in data obtained through 84 rounds of interviews conducted with the participants. The coding process helped us identify clusters of behaviors for both team leaders and team members that help in building high quality relationship and therefore capacity for resiliency.

Team Leader

From a team leader’s perspective, they should create a friendly and comfortable environment. For example, one of the team members said, “It’s also true about my wellbeing and that’s why I said he is more of a friend right now because friends are the one who care about you”. Another team member added, “Be available and be open; comfortable or uncomfortable - right or wrong we can still talk

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to him. He does this by being open, honest, willing to hear without bias, healthy discussion”.

Team leaders should listen, understand and flex their working style as per the team member’s preferences. Team members shared insights like, “There is a certain leadership quality that people have, well you know, they listen to, they are great listeners themselves and they have that ability to understand team members” or “I am trying to be conscious of the fact that I should be more in an listening mode and hopefully that gives them a comfort as well to you know continue to ask for help rather than me saying much... Even if thoughts don’t match you flex yourself and work with them.”

Team leaders should set clear, unambiguous expectations and provide accurate and timely feedback. In support we heard, “How do you avoid biases? Through clearly defined roles and expectations. Inconsistency in this can lead to biases. Communication and setting expectation and then following up on that are critical to avoid biases”. Or “I like clear goals and when I get them I’d like to accomplish them”. Another team member mentioned: “Be very, very, very articulate about what you would like to achieve and what you need your manager to really partner with you to be able to achieve and if that statement is discussed at the beginning itself it kind of gives him so much more ability to be able to achieve it. And that is my fundamental way of building trust and building a lot stronger relationship with my manager at least here.”

Finally, team leaders should connect frequently, have open honest conversations, and be approachable. For example, a team member mentioned, “I think more time investment is needed to enhance quality of our relationship”. Another mentioned, “Number one is to have meaningful conversations with an intent. So, the first thing if we need to improve our relations, we should have meaningful conversations and tangible takeaways and she should mean those investments”. A team member not co-located with her manager said: “We try to connect like I think two to three times a day sometimes as often as that on a daily basis. Usually just pick up the phone and call. If either of us cannot answer it you know we call back.”

Team Member

Team members should get to know their team leader’s working style and work preferences. Connecting regularly, finding common ground, flexing your style, and alignment in thinking, values, and beliefs were also called out as some factors that influence the quality of relationships under this theme. For example, one of the team leaders said this about his relationship with a new team member, “He would go extra miles to make sure that his team is taken care-off and by nature I am very socialist it was a very immediate connection and our respect for each other kind of grew.”

Team members should strive to build their credibility. Elements like reliability, problem solving, getting things done, ownership, accountability were also called

out as some factors that influence the quality of relationships. For example, one of the team leaders said this about a team member with whom they acknowledged strong relationships, “I know, if it is assigned to her it will get done”.

Team members should be open and honest in their engagements with their team leaders.

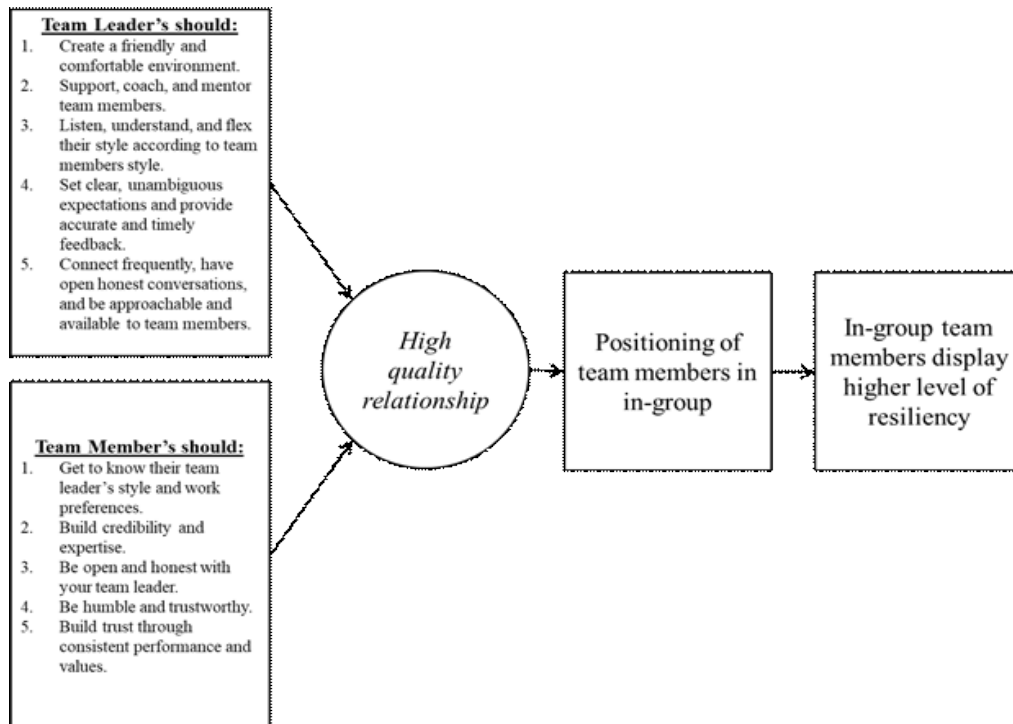
Team members should be open and honest in their engagements with their team leaders. Frequent, candid and transparent conversations were also called out as some factors that influence the quality of relationships within this theme. In support we heard, “My approach is one,

be very honest about what you want to achieve. Don’t keep any hidden facts around it or selfish motives”.

In order to build high quality relationships with team leaders, team members should be humble and trustworthy. Some other attributes called out by participants in the same category were walking the talk, genuine, authentic, and respectful. A team member contributed, “Mutual respect and that honesty between leader and team member which will build on that persona of approachability is critical”.

Finally, team members can improve the quality of their relationship by building expertise, delivering results, and adding value. For example, we heard the following state-

Fig. 1 Grounded Theory Model for Enhancing Resilience



ment from a team leader about his in-group members: “Team member A is an expert and advises me about possibilities. Team member B has moved a little bit higher where she talks about results and value addition. I think it’s a migration of how each of them developed and evolved.”

Based on these findings, fig. 1 shows the proposed grounded theory model.

Discussion

Organizations are interested in development of resiliency due to its positive impact on several workplace parameters (Luthans et al, 2010). Resilience has been related to increased organizational commitment (Youssef & Luthans, 2007), higher scores on engagement (Mache et al., 2014), positively related to performance (Avey et al., 2010), lower turnover intention (Dhiman & Arora, 2018), and employee psychological well-being (PWB) (Avey et al., 2010). Even with these advances and understanding, research on how resilience is developed and how it affects workplace outcomes, work teams and general organizational behavior theory building is still in its infancy (King, 2016). Researchers have determined that resilience can be developed and enhanced in individuals (Masten, 2001). The concept of resilience and its ability to be enhanced or developed hold value to both human resources development and leader development functions (Luthans, 2002).

Our model presents an integrated view of building resiliency by bringing leadership behaviors/actions and team

member behaviors/actions together in a prescriptive and trainable approach. Our findings identify the set of leader and member behavior that enhances the quality of their relationship and therefore provides team members with the support they need to bounce back or manage adversity at the work place. Organizations can use these findings to develop resilience-building training modules thereby proactively preparing employees to deal with crisis or adversity.

Limitations & Future Direction

This research work was carried out in a specific organizational setting. At a macro level, some of the defining characteristics of the organization included large multinational organizations, services industry, knowledge workers, and hiring from top tier colleges in India. As we know, organizational context, setting, and culture play a significant role in influencing how relationships are built. Therefore, there are limitations to the transferability of these results to a broader segment of organizations and to the generalizability of the results.

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The data that was collected had limitations from three perspectives. One, the data was collected from a single mechanism which is interviews. Typically, qualitative data benefits from multiple sources of data like field observations, document

reviews, and group discussions. However, given the sensitive nature of this topic – studying team leader and team member relationships – especially in an organization where the researchers knew the participants, field observations and access to documents were not feasible. Given that we had 84 interview samples, we did not add the burden of further data collection and analysis by doing focus group discussions. Also, the nature of this research – which was to study dyadic relationships – did not lend itself to collecting data from group discussions. The second limitation from a data lens was the team size. Four of the six teams were a three-member team which limited our understanding of team dynamics, co-worker influence, in-group sizes, movement between groups, etc. Finally, while this study checks the definition of a longitudinal study, given that we had three data collection points (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010), the data was collected within a short span of time (6 months). During this time, the relationship may not have had a chance to change, develop further, mature, and therefore accurately reflect the relationship building process.

Most research, including this one, on moderators of LMX, has been limited to identifying the behaviors of team leaders and team members that influence the quality of relationship. Minimal research has focused on the influence of the ability or the skill of dyad partners to display these behaviors on the quality of the relationship (O'Donnell et al., 2012). Most behavioral research has focused on the identification of the behaviors impacting

relationship and not on how skillfully those behaviors are being practiced either by the team leader or the team member. For example, a leader who connects well will be more successful in building strong relationships than a leader who connects frequently (Yukl, 2010). Future research should measure the skill in deploying behaviors using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods such as surveys and job shadowing and help LMX become more prescriptive in building resiliency.

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