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Leadership and demographic diversity in organizations

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Introduction

The complexity of today's social phenomena brings new challenges for organizations, along with a whole array of questions to be studied regarding human resource management practices. One of such issues – the quality of relationships between leaders and their followers belonging to different generations within organizations – is the focus of this paper.

Leadership research has known a major dynamic evolution during the past years. Because of its importance and criticality in a complex world, leadership represents a topic of concern for every country, for every sector of activity, and for every organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002).

Numerous companies become more and more aware of the fact that appropriate diversity policies for their staff may ensure a *sine qua non* prerequisite for achieving higher levels of business performance. For most organizations, diversity means creating

an inclusive environment where one respects, gives value to, and harnesses employees' individual differences in order to effectively reach the targeted goals.

A significant number of studies suggest the growth of diversity in today's global society, as reflected in all its dimensions (*i.e.*, demographic (age, nationality, race, gender, ethnicity), cultural (values, norms, beliefs), sociopolitical (status of social, economic or political power) or socio-psychological (group identity, stereotyping, ethnocentrism)) brings with it multiple challenges that leaders and organizations must face alike. This is why it is important to appropriately manage such a diverse workforce in accordance with its complexity, so that the organizational goals are fully achieved (Anderson & Metcalf, 2003; Cox, 1993; Jackson *et al.*, 1991; Kearney & Gebert, 2009; Pendry, Driscoll, & Field, 2007; Gordon, 1995; Richard, Fubara, & Castillo, 2000; Triandis, 2003; Watson, Kumar, & Michaelsen, 1993; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

An important body of research on the topic of group diversity can be found today (e.g., Jackson *et al.*, 1991; Jackson *et al.*, 2003; Milliken & Martins, 1996). In addition, scholars have also explored some links between group diversity and leadership in organizational settings (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996; DiTomaso & Hooijberg, 1996). However, little has been done to explore the specific links between leadership styles and demographic diversity as reflected in age – on the one hand, and in the quality of relationships between leaders and their diverse-in-age followers – on the other hand. Therefore, more research is needed to fill the gap between these areas, by appropriately addressing such issues in the context of multigenerational work teams and their dealing with leadership in organizations.

It is these two parts – how a diverse-in-age work team affects leadership styles, and how age influences the quality of relationships between leaders and their subordinates within organizations – that provide the focus of this research.

Leadership and relational demography

The field of leadership shows an increasing interest to issues involving demographic diversity at the workplace, and workforce development. Leadership scholars consistently acknowledge that women (*e.g.*, gender diversity), minorities (*e.g.*, race and ethnicity), and culturally-diverse organizations are *vast sources of leadership talent that must be effectively used by society* (Lord, 2000:504).

Extensive research recognizes leadership as a social process with behavioral, cognitive, and affective components. Leadership takes place at multiple levels of analysis, and emerges through complex exchanges between leaders, followers, and situational factors. Depending on researcher's objectives, each level of analysis may require different theories, measures, and analyses (Dansereau, 1995; Klein, Dansereau, & Hall, 1994; Lord, 2000).

Our aim in this study is – therefore – to explore the exchange relationships between leaders and followers and their quality, using the lens of LMX theory, in the context of intergenerational groups.

LMX theory

Leader-member exchange is different from other leadership theories; it represents a theoretical approach to understanding leadership at work (Martin *et al.*, 2005). Initially,

leadership scholars did not really focus on how much leaders varied their behaviors with different subordinates. The dominant leadership approach was the so-called average leadership style (ALS) model, according to which leaders used the same leadership style with all their subordinates (Kerr, Schriesheim, Murphy, & Stogdill, 1974). However, the LMX model argues that leaders develop separate exchange relationships with each one of the subordinates. Its content and dimensionality have known a significant and long evolution over time (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden, Sparrowe, & Wayne, 1997; Schriesheim, Castro, & Cogliser, 1999).

Scandura, Graen, & Novak (1986:580) provide a detailed and clear definition of LMX construct. Accordingly, leader-member exchange (LMX) is:

- (a) a system of components and their relationships
- (b) involving both members of a dyad
- (c) involving interdependent patterns behavior
- (d) sharing mutual outcomes instrumentalities, *and*
- (e) producing conceptions of environments, cause maps, and value.

More clearly, LMX describes how a leader develops in time exchange relationships with each subordinate as the two parties influence each other and negotiate subordinate's role in the organization (Yukl, 2006:117).

A comprehensive analysis of the construct's dimensions has been provided by Graen and Scandura (1987); Graen & Uhl-Bien, (1991). In addition, they presented a three-phase model of LMX development (*i.e.*, role-taking, role-making, and role-routinization). At the time, the LMX dimensions have been identified as the *quality* and the *coupling*. The former refers to the attitudes taking place in the exchange relationships,

specifically the extent of loyalty, support, and trust between the members. The latter refers more to behaviors in addressing influence, delegation, latitude, and innovativeness.

Over time, the leader is expected to establish with the subordinates either high-quality exchange relationships or low-quality exchange relationships. More recent research by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) provides a three-dimensional conceptualization of LMX quality. As such, it consists of three factors – “namely respect, trust, and obligation” (p. 237).

Findings showed that high-quality exchanges – formerly called “in-group” (Dansereau, Cashman, & Graen, 1973) – were reflected in a high level of mutual trust, respect and obligation. In addition, in such relationships followers acted as “trusted assistants” to the manager and performed beyond their contractual job descriptions. In contrast, low-quality exchanges – previously called “out-group” (Dansereau, *et al.*, 1973) – were reflected in a low level of trust, respect, and obligation. In this second case, followers acted essentially as “hired hands”, strictly performing only according to their contractual obligations and job descriptions (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin *et al.*, 2005; Zalesny & Graen, 1987).

In other terms, high-quality exchanges reveal that subordinates are privileged by their leaders as they receive a number of important resources as well as more support, autonomy and more responsibility. Such LMX relationships surpass the mere employment contract. In return for greater status, influence and benefits, high-exchange subordinates have additional obligations and costs such as: working harder, showing more commitment, being loyal to their leader, sharing leader’s administrative duties.

High-quality LMX develops gradually, in time, and is based on mutual support as long as the exchange cycle is reiterated. Unless the cycle is broken, these relationships may reach a high level of mutual dependence, loyalty, and support (Yukl, 2006). In low-quality exchanges, subordinates are not-so privileged; they are even disadvantaged as they get fewer important resources. The leaders do only limited attempts to motivate or develop their followers. There is a low level of mutual influence. The LMX relationships are strictly circumscribed to the work contract duties, standards, procedures, rules, or legitimate directions from the leader (*idem*).

Leadership research abounds in studies focused on leader. However, little research to focus on followers and the leadership relationships has been conducted. Noting this gap, Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) strongly encourage more action to be taken in this line of research.

Demographic diversity

The study of leadership becomes even more challenging when we add diversity into equation. More specifically, we believe that relational demography plays an important role in explaining some significant contextual influences on LMX processes.

In general, there has been little research to address the direct effects of demographic variables thought to influence the development of leader-member exchange relationships. However, just as Yukl (2006) notes it, one exception is the study by Green, Anderson, and Shivers (1996). They explored how demographic and organizational variables influence LMX relationships. Their findings suggest that relational differences between leaders and subordinates affect LMX relationships through mechanisms such as

similarity of demographics, attitudes, and expectations. Moreover, organizational characteristics also appeared to influence LMX; this was reflected in their influence on the latitude managers had in their interactions with their subordinates. In spite of some helpful findings, Green, Anderson, and Shivers (1996) state clearly that further research is needed to explore more thoroughly the role of demographic and organizational mechanisms in LMX development.

Research shows that demographic characteristics (*i.e.*, age, gender, race, educational level, and tenure) play important roles as they may have direct influences on certain outcomes such as LMX, work attitudes, and behaviors (Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992; Tsui, & O'Reilly, 1989; Duchon *et al.*, 1986). For instance, Tsui, & O'Reilly's findings (1989) reveal that demographic similarity between managers and subordinates can positively affect some work attitudes and perceptions through mechanisms such as interpersonal liking, and the frequency of their interactions. Liden *et al.*, (1993) investigated in a longitudinal study how demographic similarity may affect the quality of LMX relationships. Their findings suggest that demographic similarity between leaders and their subordinates had no significant effects on LMX. Some of the possible explanations, however, may refer to the subject mortality and to the possibility of testing effects – generally associated to this type of studies. The study of Duchon and colleagues (1986) shows that a greater dissimilarity between leader and subordinates reflected in gender and social class induced a low-quality LMX relationship. In addition, findings of Tsui & O'Reilly (1989) suggest that subordinates from mixed-gender dyads were liked less than their counterparts belonging to same-gender dyads. Likewise, differences in educational level may affect the frequency of communication between leaders and

subordinates, may create differences in understanding job requirements, job expectations, and ultimately, they may generate emotional and cognitive distance between leaders and their followers (March & Simon, 1958; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989: 406).

In terms of age differences, these have been found to reduce the task-oriented communication between supervisors and their subordinates; similarly, research shows that age differences may increase role ambiguity and reduce clarity in performance goals and performance strategies (Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989).

This body of research suggests that different dimensions of demographic diversity may potentially affect in a negative way LMX quality. For instance, they may create misunderstandings and conflicts between supervisors and their subordinates; they may significantly reduce the frequency of communication, and may widen the social distance between individuals. In consequence, these negative outcomes may threaten the development of high-quality exchange relationships between leaders and subordinates.

Age and generational diversity

The workforce today is increasingly generationally-diverse. Therefore, the groups at the workplace are composed by individuals spanning four generations: Veterans, Baby-boomers, Generation X, Generation Y. But what does the term generation mean?

Generation: defining the concept

In historical societies the question of generations is universal and points directly to the idea of a long term temporal progression, of a sequence of ages, sometimes of a periodic cycle. The term *generation* is a polysemantic word, originating in the Greek

genos, meaning simultaneously “race” in the classic sense of the term and “generation” (e.g., a community of individuals, of historic temporality). The term can also mean: birth, origin, line of descent, family, relative, siblings, group of citizens in all the forms, especially the same profession (Attias-Donfut, 1988).

In sociological theory, the term “generation” was first defined by Karl Mannheim in 1928. He represented the concept of “generation” on a three-dimensional axis: biological, historical, and social. According to Mannheim, to gain a thorough sociological understanding of the term “generation”, it is necessary to distinguish between the three axes: the sense of generation according to the class of age (biological dimension), the set of generations in the way of common participation in a shared destiny (historical dimension) and cohesiveness of a generation (the manifestation of a social cohesion and a self conscience of generation). For Mannheim, the generation is meaningless, unless it is connected to the peers, the previous generations, the institutions and historical evolutions. Such relationships may be direct and concrete, but also global, transcending through the idea of *Zeitgeist*.

Galland (1997: 107-117) also puts forward a triple dimension of generation, having a similar reasoning as Mannheim. He differentiates between “genealogical generation”, “historical generation” and “sociological generation”.

Other sociologists define “generation” as “the passage in time of people sharing habits, problems, and a common culture, a function that provides them with a collective memory serving to integrate the generation in a circumscribed period of time” (Eyerman & Turner, 1998, p. 93). This definition underpins the shared or collective areas of emotions, attitudes, preferences and dispositions and on a set of underlying practices such

as leisure activities that determine each generation to form its traditions and its own culture (Schewe & Evans, 2000).

In the United States diverse generations have been taken under the research inquiry (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zemke, Raines, & Filipeczak, 2000). Accordingly, the generations are defined by “common tastes, attitudes and experiences (...) indicating especially the key moments of a generation” (Zemke *et al.*, 2000, p. 16). Even if these characteristics appear as stereotypes, the demographers count the traits of numerous individuals in each category of age to determine the general descriptors for each one of them (Zemke *et al.*, 2000).

Zemke *et al.* (2000) establish a taxonomy of the various generations, and characterize each one of them.

Table 1. A description of generations

Generations	Years of birth	Fundamental values	Key events
Traditionalists / Veterans - the oldest generation of the workforce today	1920-1945	Devoted attitude, honest work, respect for authorities	The Great Depression, WW II, etc.
Baby Boomers	1946-1964	Optimism, self gratification and growth	Civil rights, JFK, feminist movements
Generation X	1965-1980	Diversity, casual, IT skills, recreation	AIDS, global challenges
Generation of the « Nexters » (Generation Y)	1981-2000	Optimism, civic conscience, confidence, professional achievement	Terrorism, computers

Source: Adapted from Zemke *et al.* (2000)

Leadership and generational differences

In Table 2 we represent how differences in attitudes, perceptions, values and beliefs that are proper to each generation influence the way the latter views the leadership. According to Zemke *et al.*, (2000), this will be reflected in the used leadership style vis-à-vis of each generation.

Table 2. Preferred leadership styles according to each generation

Generation	Preferred leadership style
Traditionalists / Veterans	Aspire to a directive style that should be simple and clear. The rationale for such a leadership style lays in the fact that Veterans were men of organizations, to whom they used to offer their loyalty. Within each enterprise there was a clear hierarchy, well defined, characterized by very formal relationships, of military type.
Baby boomers	Prefer a collegial and consensual style. Passionate and concerned for their work climate and for being able to participate. They rely a great deal on communication, on responsibility sharing, and on the respect of each other's autonomy. They despise traditional hierarchy and do everything to subvert it.
Generation X	Aspire to be just, competent and straightforward. They don't respect the authority in the way previous generations did. Instead, they prefer and appreciate egalitarian relationships. They like facing the challenges and show positive reactions to change. The distinctive mark of this generation is its blunt honesty.
The Nexters / Generation Y	Prefer a polite relationship with authority. They like leaders who bring people together. They show preferences toward collective action and change.

Source: Adapted from Zemke *et al.* (2000) and Conger (2001).

This second table does clearly show that the differences in leadership style require a continuous flexibility and a permanent adaptation to the specificities inherent to each generation. Moreover, Meredith *et al.* (2002) conclude the same thing, stating that such differences force every leader to exert a large and flexible leadership style, that is a structured style toward the Veterans to emphasize delegation, a personalized style that value the individual expression toward Baby-boomers, a stimulant and enthusiastic style

toward the people of Generation X to acknowledge their role of agents of change and, finally toward Generation Y (Nexters), a style fostering the team spirit, corresponding to their goals achievements with respect to organization and society.

To give practical examples of such styles, Conger (2001) identified them during the interviews he has done with various business leaders belonging to different generations. We noted two representative examples of leaders issued from the Veterans and Baby boomers. The ‘Veteran’ explains how traditional hierarchy in his organization has influenced his leadership style. *“It was easy to lead in such a strict hierarchical setting, because the system at the time was respected and venerated both by hierarchy and subordinates. At any time one could know exactly where he/she stands, thanks to hierarchical line”* (Conger, 2001, p. 11).

The Baby boomer leader explains, on his turn, his style based on participation, aligning an equal field of action for all the employees. *“My style is to get involved with other employees. I like to know the experts’ opinion before imposing a decision. I am not afraid to impose a decision if I have to do it, but I like to get the others involved in decision making process first. Thus, one can get a better solution”* (Conger, p. 13).

Tulgan (2006) collected data revealing the active U.S. workforce. Table 3 shows the results he found:

Table 3. U.S. civil workforce by generations at the end of 2006

« Schwarzkopf » generation (born prior 1946)	6.5 %
Baby boomers (born between 1946-1964)	41.5%
Generation X (born between 1965-1977)	29.5%
Generation Y or « Nexters » (born between 1978-1990)	22.5%
TOTAL : 150 million	100%

Source: Bruce Tulgan, *RainmakerThinking, Inc.*, 2006

The question of generational differences addressing the leadership has not yet become the focus of a larger investigation (Jackson *et al.*, 2003). Generations should be recognized by leaders and organizations alike as important components of demographic diversity. Both sides need to be sensible toward differences existing among generations because doing so they can transform generational differences into invaluable assets for organizations. Raines (2002) suggests that leadership development programs should focus on education to prevent prejudice or potential conflicts between different generations. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₁: Employee generational diversity will be positively associated to a democratic leadership style.

Research question and hypotheses

In light of the previous considerations, we reiterate our research aims. Given the need of both leadership and relational demography research fields for studies to address specifically the direct influences of “age” on the “quality of LMX relationships”, in association with “leadership styles” displayed to a diverse-in-age workforce in organizations, our first aim is to contribute to the filling of this research gap. Then, through this study, we intend to provide new findings that will help to better explain the mechanisms through which age – in both its similarities and differences – of diverse-in-age work groups affects the quality of LMX relationships between leaders and subordinates as well as their displayed leadership styles in organizations.

Therefore, our research question is:

“How does age influence the quality of LMX relationships between leaders and their subordinates, in association with the leadership styles displayed to diverse-in-age work teams in the US organizations?”

Given that age differences may interfere in the development of high-quality LMX relationships and potentially reduce task-oriented communication between supervisors and their subordinates – on the one hand, and increase role ambiguity, reduce clarity in performance goals and performance strategies (Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989; Zenger & Lawrence, 1989) – on the other hand, we hypothesize that:

H2a: The bigger the difference in age between leader and his subordinates, the lower their perception of the displayed leadership style.

H2b: The smaller the difference in age between leader and subordinate, the higher their perception of the displayed leadership style.

Given the generational taxonomy (Zemke *et al.*, 2000; Arsenault, 2004) and the generational preferences for certain leadership styles (Zemke *et al.*, 2000; Conger, 2001), our third hypothesis is:

H3: A Baby-boom leader will develop higher-quality LMX relationships with his same-generation subordinates and lower-quality LMX relationships with his subordinates of different generational group.

Our fourth hypothesis derives from the considerations developed by Green, Anderson, & Shivers (1996) in regard with the differences relational demography. Accordingly, such differences may be source of misunderstanding, may hinder

communication, and may widen the social distance between leader and subordinates. These in turn will affect negatively the LMX quality of relationships. Therefore:

H4: A greater degree of demographic diversity in subordinates reflected in age, gender, education, and ethnicity will be associated to a low-quality LMX relationship.

Conceptual model of research

Drawing on LMX theory reviewed by Graen and Uhl-Bien, (1995) and discussed as a relationship-based approach to leadership, our research model is represented in Figure 1.

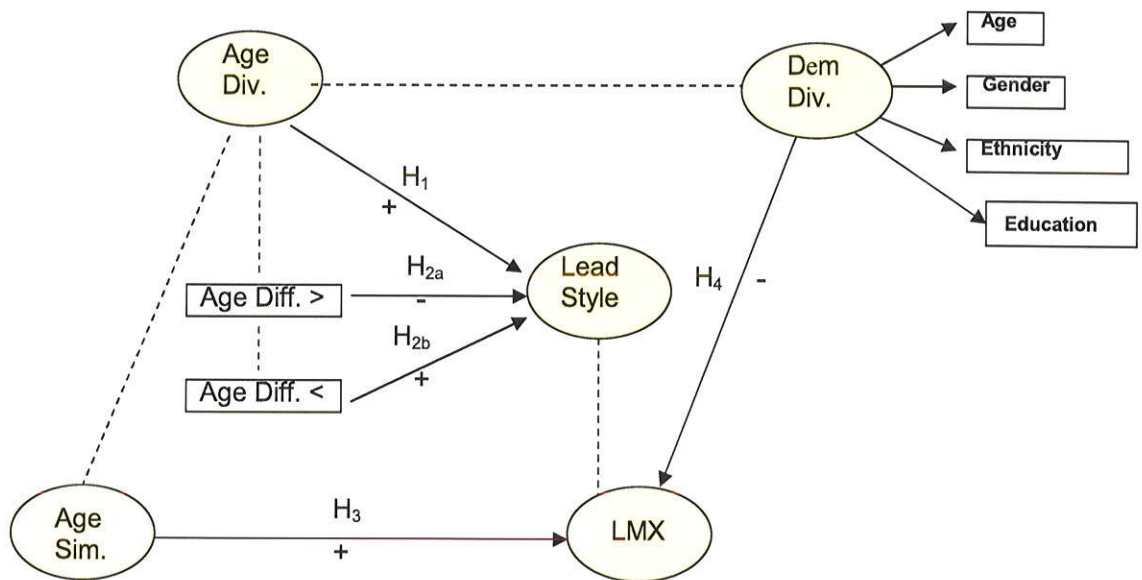


Figure 1. LMX and Age Diversity.

Methods

The method I will use is the survey. I will design the questionnaire, run a pilot survey, carry out the main investigation and finally analyze the collected data. The survey will be run through direct interviews with open-ended questions.

The questionnaire items will refer to questions relating to demographic diversity (*e.g.*, age), leadership style, and to LMX quality relationship (*e.g.*, the LMX-7 measure by Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Population and sample

The study will be conducted in demographically-diverse (*i.e.*, age, gender, educational level, ethnicity) American organizations which will be defined subsequently. The analysis will concern the dyadic and group levels. Therefore, the sample will consist of leaders and groups of subordinates of different ages, and belonging to different generations (Veterans, Baby-boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y). In addition, this investigation will also determine if/how the leaders change their styles according to employees' age, hence generational affiliation.

Procedure

The survey will be performed during the forthcoming months, through direct interviews, when possible.

First, we will conduct a pilot survey in order to pretest and refine the items (Dillman, 2000). Next, we will proceed to the data collection once the organizations and the sample are defined.

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