

Relational Coordination: A Framework for Building Social Capital

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Studies examining employee personal resources have shown many benefits for the individual and his or her organization. Because managers are positioned to engage employees personally, they are the organization's principal influence to develop subordinate personal resources. This paper develops a model of engaging relational coordination toward developing the personal resources of organizational members. Thus far, little depth of study has been dedicated to the relational coordination concept. Taken from sociology, organizational behavior, politics, and other related fields, the model is constructed to illustrate how managers might utilize the dynamics of relational coordination to facilitate employee resource gains. Specifically, it is suggested that manager activities to engage relational coordination will positively influence member relationships, organizational climate, subordinate attitudes, and interactive practices of organizational members.

Keywords: relational coordination, social capital, subordinate resources, manager, emotional intelligence

INTRODUCTION

The sponsor of an employee's resources in the organizational setting is the manager, who is also the employee's primary advocate. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory describes personal resources as essential assets that must be fostered and protected (Hobfoll, 1989, 1998). The personal resources discussed in this article include relationships and personal networks which provide the employee information, assistance, and emotional support within the organizational setting. COR theory also suggests that the more resources one has, the more likely one is to reinvest those resources toward further gain (Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Hobfoll 2001; Liu, Prati, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2008).

Accordingly, a manager who works toward multiplying subordinates' personal resources will benefit not only those subordinates but the manager and perhaps the whole organization. Individual benefits for subordinates may include reduced stress levels, increased job confidence, increased motivation, and many other positive outcomes. The manager may benefit from improved leader-member relationships and better unit coordination and performance. Also, the organization may benefit through a more positive organizational climate, enhanced employee commitment, increased employee motivation, and improvements in individual, group, and firm performance (Prati, McMillan-Capehart, & Karriker, 2009).

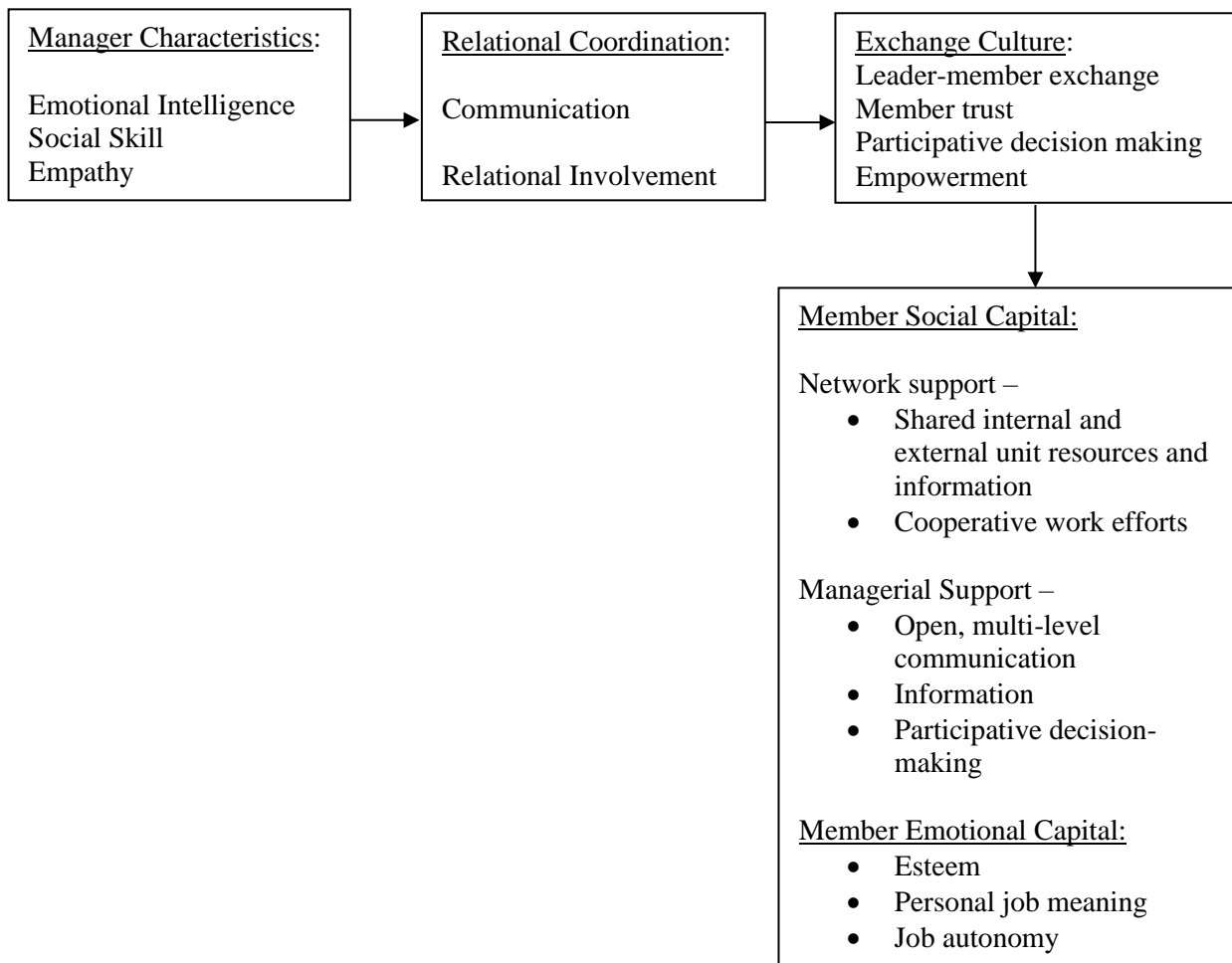
Dutton and Dukerich (1991) state that it is the general responsibility of managers to engage and support the organization's structural, relational, and affective ties. Therefore, it would seem that the ability of managers to facilitate involvement by subordinates in each facet of the organization is integral to developing subordinate resources. Through the two dimensions of relational coordination, communication and

relational involvement, managers may provide frequent and valuable information to subordinates regarding organizational activities and goals while engaging them personally.

Theorists suggest that this interactive strategic framework of Relational Coordination can produce valuable individual and organizational outcomes (Anderson, 2006; Gittell, 2001, 2002; Prati et al., 2009). Because of the dynamic, social nature of relational coordination, the manager has multiple opportunities to foster subordinates' emotional, social, and professional resources. However, the manager must first have his or her resources by which investments in subordinates are possible. Implementing such a managerial framework is no quick and easy task. Establishing an organizational model of relational coordination requires a significant investment of managerial social capital, which Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1997) delineate into structural, relational, and cognitive resources. They found that such resources benefited the firm, increasing innovation and creating value.

Showing the value of such resources, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1997) called for continued study regarding how such resources are developed and amassed within the firm. The premise of this theoretical discourse is that the manager is a pivotal link through which subordinates may gain social capital resources, specifically managerial support, organizational network support, and emotional capital. The present model begins at the point of managerial investment and describes the process through which relational coordination facilitates personal resource gains of subordinates.

FIGURE 1
BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH RELATIONAL COORDINATION



THEORETICAL DEVELOPMENT

Social exchange processes provide a conduit by which managers may put forth cognitive, relational, and structural investments in their employees (Karriker & Williams, 2009). Managerial resource investments promote the development of structural, relational, and cognitive attachments, fostering an environment where relational coordination is the norm among members. Such abilities and relational investments may play a role in how one assembles and shares meaning with others (cognitive resources), engages in interactions (structural resources), and enjoys the mutual trust and support of others within the organizational community (Prati et al., 2009).

Anderson (2006) and Prati et al. (2009), among others, have discussed the importance of managers in forming a climate of subordinate cooperation, communication, and positive interaction. This characterization of the relational coordination framework, which is meant to govern organizational interactions, must start with the manager. Scott and Lane (2000) explain that managers influence subordinates to benefit the organizational unit's performance. Accordingly, it is important to understand what resources are necessary to support such managerial influence.

Manager Characteristics

Emotional Intelligence

The manager's ability to communicate and relate to organizational members is particularly important and most relevant to this discussion. One important resource to managers facilitating such activities is emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is "the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others." (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2000, p. 396.)

Many researchers have found positive associations between emotional intelligence and both communication and relationships. Hassan, Yacco & Shah (2012) found emotional intelligence of managers led to employee communication effectiveness. Kunnanatt (2008) discussed the importance of emotional intelligence to communication, social influence, and interpersonal effectiveness. The emotional and social skill of managers has been associated with positive social relationships and social support systems (Riggio, Watring, and Throckmorton, 1993). Prati et al. (2009, p. 405) state, "One with a high degree of emotional intelligence is better able to facilitate and effectively navigate interactions with others, because of his or her ability to communicate using the symbolism of emotion toward certain objectives." Indeed, the research shows that emotional intelligence is a primary resource of managers that can engender relational coordination within the manager's sphere of influence.

Social Skill

Because relational coordination is highly interactional, social skill is a necessity for managers to navigate the framework. Social skill is the "ability to perceive interpersonal or social cues, integrate these cues with current motivations, generate responses, and enact responses that will satisfy motives and goals" (Norton & Hope, 2001, p. 60). Hochwarter, Witt, Treadway, and Ferris (2006) discuss the beneficial outcomes of social skill related to this study such as social networks, cooperativeness of others, and enhanced job performance. Riggio, Watring and Throckmorton (1993) indicate that those possessing social skill had better quality relationships and support systems. Riggio and Reichard (2008) discussed evidence that social skill is associated with leader effectiveness. Altogether, research suggests social skill as a necessary resource for managers to operate within the relational coordination framework.

Empathy

Salovey and Mayer, 1990 define empathy as "the ability to comprehend another's feelings and to re-experience them oneself" (pp. 194-195). Rogers (1951) states that empathy is necessary for form relationships. Research suggests that empathy is key to social effectiveness whereby leaders may guide subordinates toward productive behaviors and outcomes (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002; Kellett, Humphrey, and Sleeth, 2006). Riggio and Reichard (2008) proposed that leader empathy begets higher

quality leader-follower relationships. Therefore, empathy is an important resource for managers engaged in relational coordination efforts.

Proposition 1: *The manager's level of personal resources is positively related to the degree of relational coordination among subordinates.*

Relational Coordination: The Framework

Gittell (2002) defines relational coordination as “a mutually reinforcing process of interaction between communication and relationships carried out for task integration” (p. 301). Therefore, the effectiveness of this framework depends on open, positive relationships among organizational members and frequent communication between and among those members. Relational coordination generates an exchange culture that results in resources for organizational members.

The Exchange Culture

Ravasi and Schultz (2006) state, “organizational culture acts as a context for sensemaking efforts” (p. 437). The culture provides scripts and norms that dictate how employees should behave. Managers are a primary influence on creating culture in the organizational setting (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Through managerial actions, employees develop perceptions of supervisor support, trust between managers and associates, and the level of dedication managers attribute to employee well-being (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Gittell (2003) delineates three important relational features that are components of relational coordination that fuel a positive exchange culture: shared knowledge and goals, and mutual respect. Blau (1964) described *exchange culture* as a collection of personal relationships which are characterized as positive, ongoing, interactive associations. Dutton (2003) argued that relational attentiveness fosters the creation of high-quality connections between people in organizations. Liao, Liu and Loi (2017) explored the idea that positive social exchanges between managers and organizational members created benefits such as member self-efficacy and creativity.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)

Prati et al. (2009) proposed that the ability of managers to establish a personal connection with subordinates results in positive subordinate behaviors and attitudes. They indicated that relationships between manager and subordinate, characterized as courteous, sociable, and having a genial nature, may produce a positive and more personal connection between the subordinate and his or her organization.

Prati et al. (2009) proposed that the positive nature of manager-subordinate relationships can be created through a relational coordination framework (Gittell, 2000; Gittell, 2001; Gittell, 2002). Gittell (2001) defines relational coordination as “the management of task interdependencies, carried out in the context of relationships” (Gittell, 2001, p. 471). She delineates the construct into two dimensions, communication and relational involvement. The communication dimension has two measures, timeliness of information provided and frequency.

Graen and Scandura (1987) defined LMX as a quality measure in the supervisor-employee relationship. They describe it as a proactive management strategy in which the manager provides social and emotional support as an investment toward employee commitment and productivity. Graen, Novak, and Sommerkamp (1982) described the nature of the LMX relationship as an investment of resources for certain social rewards. High-quality LMX relationships have been attributed to many individual and organizational benefits, such as trust, improved communication, positive member attitudes, and performance (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). As with all organizational characteristics, the norms of member exchange are set from the top. How managers engage with employees to accomplish organizational objectives will inform all organization members regarding how to interact with other members.

Prati et al. (2009) indicate that the manager's close, pleasant relationship with subordinates will enable a culture of courtesy, benevolence, and mutual support among organizational members. A more detailed

examination of the relationship between relational coordination and culture begs for a more dynamic, interactive contribution of the organization's culture. The nature of exchange culture fits well with the relational coordination paradigm. The individual relational attention and informational resources managers provide may encourage each employee to engage in open, multi-level, inter- and intradepartmental exchanges of information and network access. Bolton, Logan and Gittell (2021) surmise that members of this type of exchange culture are better able to use resources available to them to complete work and reap personal resources that provide for their well-being at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Gittell et al., 2008; Adler & Kwon, 2002).

Trust

According to Dirks and Ferrin (2001, p. 456), trust is “a psychological state that provides a representation of how individuals understand their relationship with another party in situations that involve risk or vulnerability”. Prati, Douglas, Ferris, Ammeter, and Buckley (2003) describe trust (or lack of trust) of another as an expectancy, based on the characteristics of the referent other. These characteristics are deduced through observations of and experiences with the referent other over time. McAllister (1995) indicates that there are two types of trust. The first type is cognitive trust in which an individual observes reliable behavior, credible knowledge, and similar values by which one relates to the relevant other. The other type of trust is affective trust in which the observer is frequently, emotionally moved to trust another because of selfless, unmotivated acts performed by the referent other to benefit the observer.

Tsai and Ghoshal (1998) indicate that trust is essential to interpersonal cooperation. Others have indicated that trust is necessary to facilitate coordinated action (e.g., McAllister, 1995). Trust is portrayed in the literature as a reciprocal favor that grows with every reinforcing experience. Indeed, the responsibility of building trust does not fall to the manager only. Employee contributions of trustworthy behavior are necessary. However, for relational trust between subordinate and manager to produce valuable outcomes, research has shown that the manager must demonstrate his or her trust of subordinates. Research indicates that the manager's display of trust in the employee may result in several employee-related outcomes such as satisfaction, commitment, and citizenship behaviors (McAllister, 1995; Brower, Schoorman, & Hoon Tan, 2000; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005).

The literature shows many benefits regarding trust as a resource within the relational coordination framework. As mentioned above, trust enables cooperative efforts (Tsai & Ghoshal, 1998). Dirks and Ferrin (2001) described trust as a facilitator of cooperative behavior. Blau (1964) states that trust is one of the primary components of social exchange and it is cumulative. Prati et al. (2009) discussed how open communication of managers may facilitate trust, which engenders employee motivation toward performance. Zeffane, Tipu and Ryan (2011) argue that trust and communication is cyclical in that trust induces communication, which, in turn, engenders trust.

Empowerment

Conger and Kanungo (1988) define empowerment as “a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information”, (p. 474). Gómez & Rosen (2001) reasoned that empowerment and managerial trust would engender a positive organizational culture like Blau (1964) introduced through his social exchange theory. Spreitzer (1996) notes that high-involvement systems, such as relational coordination, inspire perceptions of empowerment and motivate individuals to perform for the organization's good. Rooney, Gottlieb and Newby-Clark (2009) found support for the relationship between managerial supportive behaviors and subordinates' perceptions of job autonomy. Gómez & Rosen (2001) stated that empowered employees feel more influence over organizational outcomes. They also offered that empowered employees perceive their work as meaningful and have higher self-efficacy and control regarding work activities. Additionally, Spreitzer (1996) found evidence to support how employee perceptions of empowerment were positively associated with sociopolitical support of networks within the organization and access to information and unit climate.

Participative Decision Making

The interactive nature of relational coordination engenders participative decision-making and provides for positive interactions between managers and employees (Wang, Wang & Li, 2018). Grasso (1994) found a direct relationship between manager behaviors in promoting decision-making participation. Managers in this type of culture are more likely to solicit opinions and encourage subordinates to participate in decision-making (Parnell, 2010). Prati et al. (2009) describe communication efforts within the relational coordination paradigm as multi-directional, whereby managers solicit opinions and information from subordinates, and subordinates communicate with managers openly, without perceived risk. In turn, the flow of information is enhanced throughout the organization.

Proposition 2: *Relational coordination is positively related to an exchange culture.*

Subordinate Social Capital

The exchange culture created through the relational coordination framework engenders a system of subordinate social capital gains. The primary forms of social capital include network support, managerial support, and psychological capital.

Network Support

Network support provides for employees' work efforts where internal and external resources and information are shared and more cooperative. Lee and Kim (2020) suggest structural empowerment provides employees with autonomous freedom, encouraging them to participate in organizational decision-making. Gittell and Douglass (2012) discuss the benefits of network support such as participant engagement, trust, and social and emotional capital. Because of these resources, participants can work closely with internal and external organizational members providing for open multi-level communication and information transfer.

Managerial Support

A great deal of research shows that managerial support is an important factor that can influence employees' attitudes and behaviors in the organization (e.g., Rooney et al., 2009; Khalid, 2020). Keller & Dansereau (1995) state that support of managers builds personal resources in the form of employee self-worth. Luthans, Norman, Avolio & Avey (2008) found that a supportive organizational climate positively predicts psychological capital. This supportive climate includes the support of peers, network participants, and supervisors. Avey (2014) found the supervisor to be a major predictor of psychological capital.

Psychological Capital

Psychological Capital is defined as:

An individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success. (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007, p. 3)

Research has shown that this construct is related to several beneficial workplace outcomes. Luthans, Avolio, Avey and Norman (2007) found a positive relationship between psychological capital and job satisfaction. Avey, Luthans and Youssef (2010) found that psychological capital negatively predicted cynicism and intentions to quit. Luthans, Norman, et al. (2008) also found that psychological capital predicted satisfaction, commitment and performance. In their meta-analysis Avey, Reichard, Luthans and

Mhatre (2011) found that psychological capital was related to many beneficial employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and psychological well-being.

Additionally, they found it was negatively related to problematic attitudes such as cynicism, turnover intentions, job stress, and anxiety. Finally, psychological capital includes psychological safety. Psychological safety enables one's expression security without fear of negative reactions or consequences (Kahn, 1990; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). Carmeli and Gittell (2009) found that relational coordination positively relates to psychological safety.

Proposition 3: *The effect of relational coordination on employee social capital is mediated by the exchange culture.*

Proposition 4: *The organization's exchange culture is positively related to subordinate's social capital.*

DISCUSSION

The presence of a manager who communicates well with subordinates and successfully maintains copacetic relationships with them makes a marked difference in the ability of subordinates to perform their jobs. The relational coordination framework enables managers to impart and develop subordinate resources toward better organizational functioning such that they develop their resources in the form of social capital. In this discourse, social capital includes features within network support, managerial support, and personal psychological capital.

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