

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Strategies for strengthening leader-follower relationships for improving organizational performance**

**Onyinyechi Odiaka<sup>1</sup>, Thomas Schaefer<sup>1\*</sup> and Juan Roman<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Management and Technology, Walden University, USA.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Business Administration, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Daytona Beach, Florida, USA.

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The paper uses a qualitative single case study approach. Participants included 14 leaders who successfully developed and implemented high-quality leader-follower relationship strategies. Data collection techniques were semi-structured face-to-face interviews, a review of company documents, and the organizations' websites. The paper explores strategies that leaders in oil-servicing organizations use to strengthen high-quality leader-follower relationships and improve organizational performance. Through thematic analysis five themes emerged: Leadership styles, motivation, mentoring and coaching, communication methods, and follower engagement. The results suggest that understanding the strength, weaknesses, and behavioral patterns of followers will help organizational leaders adopt strategies that can influence followers and improve organizational performance. This investigation contributes to that literature by showing practical and successful applications of high-quality leader-follower relationships resulting in improved organizational performance.

**Key words:** Leader-Follower, Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory, Leadership, Oil and Gas.

## **INTRODUCTION**

One of the factors that influence organizational performance is the leader-follower relationship (Men and Stacks, 2013; Shaikh et al., 2019). A high-quality leader-follower relationship may produce follower behaviors that enhance organizational performance, but low-quality leader-follower relationships may lower organizational performance (Breevaart et al., 2015). Organizational leaders need to develop the appropriate skills to state-planned strategies on how to inspire followers to enhance organizational performance (Christensen et al., 2017). The skills and competency of the leaders enable the followers to be more productive (Men and Stacks, 2013).

Leaders that are understanding; dependable, honest, open, just, and concerned about the welfare of the followers tend to have a high-quality leader-follower relationship (Engelbrecht et al., 2017).

Poor-quality leader-follower relationships reduce organizational performance (Quade et al., 2020:1159). About 79% of U.S. leaders report that discontent followers can weaken productivity while 86% agreed that followers with meaningful relationships increase performance (HBR Analytical Services, 2020:1). The general business problem was that a poor-quality leader-follower relationship has a negative influence on

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [drtjschaefer@gmail.com](mailto:drtjschaefer@gmail.com).

organizational performance. The specific business problem was that some leaders in oil-servicing organizations lack strategies to strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship to improve organizational performance.

The leader-follower relationship is a cornerstone of organizational performance and positive workforce outcomes (Rothmann et al., 2002; Morrison and Cooper-Thomas, 2015). The literature suggests that organizations with high-quality leader-follower relationships tend to implement strategies and attain organizational goals and objectives more effectively than competitors whilst poor-quality leader-follower relationships have the opposite effect (Quade et al., 2020; Parry, 1998; Burns, 1978). About 79% of U.S. leaders report that discontent followers can weaken productivity while 86% agreed that followers with meaningful relationships increase performance (HBR Analytical Services, 2020).

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory was the conceptual framework for this study. The theory was developed by Dansereau et al. (1975) for understanding and improving the relationships between leaders and followers in this context of organizational efficiency (Patnaik and Dubey, 2019; Saleh et al., 2015). The LMX theory has three underpinnings: (1) leadership characteristics; (2) follower characteristics; and (3) interpersonal relationships, which influence the follower's competence and thereby organizational performance (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Gerstner and Day, 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Research on LMX shows that organizational performance in service industries tend to be more susceptible to the leader-follower dynamic (Northouse, 2021; Uhl-Bien, 2006). The oil and gas field servicing industry applies traditional service activities in the uniquely volatile market of oil and gas. Thereby, highlighting the importance of effective organizational processes (that is, to include the leader-follower dynamic) on organizational performance. However, some leaders in oil-servicing organizations lack strategies to strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship to improve organizational performance. In this investigation, the LMX theory is used as the foundation of the leader-follower dynamic on attaining organizational goals.

This investigation used a qualitative method. Case study was applied as the research design to explore the strategies, views, and experiences that leaders in oil-servicing organizations used to achieve high-quality leader-follower relationships and improve organizational performance. The targeted population was comprised of 14 organizational leaders from an oil servicing company located in Port Harcourt, Nigeria.

## Research question

The following research question was developed to guide

the inquiry

1) What strategies do leaders in oil servicing organizations use to develop and strengthen the leader-follower relationship for improving organizational performance?

## Assumptions, limitations, and delimitations

This investigation assumed interviews is the most effective, comprehensive, and accurate data collection method for the research problem. The first assumption for this study was that using interviewing as an approach for data collection is the most appropriate means to get significant data to answer the research question. The second assumption was that the research participants will respond to the interview questions honestly and provide information reflecting their experiences about strategies organizational managers use to strengthen leader-follower relationship that influences organizational performance.

Thirdly, participants were assumed to understand the interview questions and convey their experiences effectively. Finally, the 14 participants in this qualitative single case study were experienced and knowledgeable about the topic and highlighted the value and implication of strengthening leader-follower relationships for increased organizational performance. This study was limited to a single group and the small sample size confined to managers of an oil servicing company in the southern part of Nigeria. The scope of the study was also limited to the views, opinions, and thoughts of the managers in the noted Nigerian oil servicing company, which may restrict the findings of the study.

## Significance of the study

The prevailing leadership literature recommends the constant implementation of strategies that will enable the followers to be engaged towards improved performance as means of achieving company goals (Keeyes and Huemann, 2017).

This investigation contributes to literature by showing practical and successful applications of high-quality leader-follower relationships resulting in improved organizational performance. In addition, current and future leaders from various work environments (that is, private, public, non-profit, and government entities) may benefit from the study findings.

This study may also assist managers in understanding that to strengthen the leader-follower relationship and achieve improved business performance, employees need to be fully invested in organizational goals by giving them room to contribute and recognize their efforts. The results of this study may allow leaders and followers to be aware and conscious of their social responsibilities and

understand that trust, motivation, and appreciation help build a high-quality leader-follower relationship towards improved organizational performance. This investigation may also provide business leaders with innovative methods towards higher job satisfaction, access to relevant resources, and organizational efficiencies resulting in improved performance and increased customer satisfaction.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This literature review examines the works on the leader-follower relationship along with studies on how the leader-follower relationship impacts organizational performance. The conceptual framework was the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory developed from the works of Dansereau et al. (1975).

### Leader-member exchange theory

The Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory has been used by various researchers as a framework to understand the quality of leader-follower relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Saleh et al., 2015). The LMX theory is a dyadic relationship that is based on the leader and the follower (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Wang et al., 2016). Dansereau et al. (1975) developed this theory, which reflects the variation in the quality of the relationship between leaders and their followers. The LMX theory is used by leaders to show that leaders develop different relationships depending on their followers, some being stronger, more passionate, and more considerate (Bauer and Erdogan, 2016; Wang et al., 2016) and represents a guide for leaders who want to establish and maintain a relationship with the dedicated and trustworthy followers (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995).

LMX had evolved through four stages: Vertical dyad linkage, leader-member exchange, leadership making, and team making (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). The leadership pattern develops from the involvement of relationships and the reciprocated needs built as the followers accomplish their designated roles and tasks (Qi et al., 2019). According to Dulebohn et al. (2012), the three foundations that the LMX is established on are leader characteristics, follower characteristics, and interpersonal relationships. Dulebohn et al. (2012) explained that the leader takes the leading role in establishing an LMX relationship and the relationship might be affected by supposed likeness, integration, self-promotion, assertiveness, and leader trust. While the leaders assess the follower's using factors like agreeableness, competence, conscientiousness, locus of control, neuroticism, extraversion, openness, and positive, and negative affectivity (Clarke, 2016; Dulebohn et al.,

2012; Inanc, 2018) the leaders are evaluated based on contingent reward behavior, transformational leadership, supervisor's expectation of followers, agreeableness, and extraversion (Bedi et al., 2016; Dulebohn et al., 2012).

LMX theory when adopted in high-quality relationships among leaders and followers most likely leads to a positive impact on the goals and objectives of an organization when compared to low-quality relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995) and establishes an encouraging atmosphere to access and share ideas (Weijden et al., 2015). Martin et al. (2018) maintained that the key concept of the LMX theory is that leaders differentiate between quality relationships with their followers. Researchers discovered that high-quality LMX is established when leaders value and support followers in the workplace (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Ross et al., 2017). Similarly, Audenaert et al. (2017) maintained that leaders that exhibit high-quality LMX positively influence follower performance.

Kim and Koo (2017) and Nguyen (2020) revealed that high-quality LMX strengthens followers and improves organizational performance in reaction to the leader's commitments. LMX is a means to encourage the follower to accomplish exceptional performance (Hooi, 2016) and overcome complexity (Nguyen, 2020). LMX increases employee job satisfaction and performance results (Siddique et al., 2020) which are determining factors of increased follower performance (Widodoa and Wiardib, 2019). LMX allows the followers to mold their attitude and perception to work and is intermediated by job satisfaction while influencing follower performance (Nguyen, 2020; Supriyanto et al., 2021).

LMX positively influences employees' job satisfaction, commitment, role performance, and employee behavior (Liang et al., 2018; Supriyanto et al., 2020; Widodoa and Wiardib, 2019) and reinforces employee engagement (He et al., 2021). When leaders promote high-quality LMX, they tend to view issues from multiple perspectives before reconciling contradictions (Han and Bai, 2020). High-quality LMX is linked with employee performance (Reb et al., 2019). Min-Seong and Dong-Woo (2017) established how the quality of LMX aids organizations to attain organizational goals through employee innovative behavior and job performance. Min-Seong and Dong-Woo discovered that LMX influences employee job engagement and innovative behavior but not on job performance.

In contrast, Ruzgar (2018) discovered that leaders and followers who are involved in LMX advance in innovation and put more effort to be more productive and improve organizational performance. Hussain and Shahzad (2018) concentrated on the LMX and social identity theories to evaluate the role of the supervisor's organizational embodiment and organizational identification on LMX and job performance relationship. In their research, Hussain and Shahzad confirmed that the combined effect of LMX

theories on job performance through organizational identification leads to improved organizational performance. Kakkar (2019) proposed that trust, reciprocity, and clarity are responsible for employee resilience which positively relates to LMX. Teams with lower LMX interactive exchanges outcomes promote higher team performance and social cohesion which in turn fosters an interconnective and productive working environment (Manata, 2020).

### Leader-follower relationship

The leader-follower relationship is important for any organization to be successful (Salas-Vallina, 2020). Medler-Liraz and Kark (2011) explored the emotional role the consequences of employees' hostility on customers' emotions and on employees' leaders play in reducing antagonism of employees and ability to perform their role as service providers pleasingly. Medler-Liraz and Kark (2011) used the leader-member exchange theory (LMX) as the framework for the study. The researchers found that the quality of LMX is related to employee hostility, employee hostility influences employee performance, and customer hostility at the end of phone interactions, a high-quality LMX relationship that can decrease employee hostility and impact customer satisfaction and result in significant gains in organizational profit, and that employee performance partly mediated the relationship between employee hostility and customer hostility. Medler-Liraz and Kark concluded that if leaders reorganize the work environment in such a way that the leaders and employees interact in order that the employees' emotions are influenced to reduce employee hostility towards customers and that the leaders are responsible for the performances and emotions of the employees as well as the customers.

In a similar study carried out by Muhammad and Muhammad (2017), using the construct of the leader-member exchange and extra-role behaviors as the framework that guided the study, the researchers investigated the leader-member relationship and its positive influence on employees' motivation towards organizational citizenship behavior.

Muhammad and Muhammad deduced that under guidelines and directions, the employees' extra-role behaviors are positively balanced with their relationships with the leader are inspired to imitate the leaders' behavior enabling the employees to understand the right way to behave at work and that leader's communication style and individual concern towards subordinates' personal, social and work life plays a very significant role in shaping the employee behaviors.

Walthall and Dent (2016) completed a quantitative study on the influence of leader-follower dyadic relationship quality (DRQ) on follower task and contextual

performance to assess the role of determining if other variables influenced this relationship. The researchers reviewed quantitative studies that used the Vertical Dyad Linkage and the Leader-Member theories and discovered that the leader-follower relationship relates to task performance which is strengthened by work structure, team dynamics, and frequent communication by leaders, while the relationship within the contextual performance relationship was reinforced by organizational and cultural attributes. In another study, Norman et al. (2019) used the qualitative method to examine the trust relationship between leaders and followers. The researchers explored the study inductively using the open-ended survey approach to analyze the views of followers in working together with their leaders. Norman et al. established that followers' perceptions of their leaders' theoretical and practical skills, leader-follower personal characteristics, depth of relationship, and time are the outstanding factors that influence the follower's trust in their leaders. Norman et al. maintained that leaders communicating positively to follower development will enhance trust from the follower.

Regts et al. (2019) examined the influence of leader-member exchange on follower job performance reflecting the larger social networks in which followers are embedded using the social exchange theory and the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as the framework for the investigation. The researchers proved that the level and existence of the positive effect of establishing a high-quality LMX relationship on follower job performance depends on the social relationship between the followers at work, the type of social relationships, and the characteristic of these relationships.

Regts et al. (2019) suggested that leaders of the organization must be mindful and appreciate that the performance behavior of followers is not only affected by the quality of the leader-follower relationship but is also influenced by the general social perspective surrounding it. Therefore, leaders must consider the situation and conditions of their followers when developing high-quality leader-member exchange relationships and for the followers to build a good relationship with their leader while considering the value of their relationship with team members (Regts et al., 2019).

In a related study, Kuvaas and Buch (2019) investigated how leader self-efficacy and leader role ambiguity are related to follower leader-member exchange (LMX) and if the relationship between follower LMX and turnover intention will be mediated by need satisfaction. Using the LMX theory as the theoretical framework of the study, Kuvaas and Buch discovered that leader role ambiguity was positively related to an economic LMX relationship and negatively related to a social LMX relationship. The links between social and economic LMX relationships and turnover intention were moderated by the satisfaction of the needs for autonomy and relatedness. The researchers argued that if organizations provide role

clarification ideas to leaders and take steps to reduce leader role ambiguity through providing personal recognition, persuasion, job autonomy, intrinsic job satisfaction, and other factors found to be negatively affecting the leader role, this will reduce leader engagement in inappropriate work behaviors.

Drawing on the self-determination theory, Xie et al. (2019) investigated the inconsistency of the LMX relationship on employee creative performance as related to attitude and emotional processes. The researchers revealed that high LMX increased the positive moods of subordinates, improved creative performance, and stimulated intrinsic motivation for improvement. Xie et al. predicted that organizations that want to boost creativity could begin by training managers to demonstrate high LMX by strengthening their relationships with employees. Loignon et al. (2019) investigated the effects of shared perceptions of relationship satisfaction and investment in the LMX relationship, from both the leader and follower's perspectives in predicting dyadic LMX disagreement. Loignon et al. (2019) found that dyadic LMX disagreement is linked to the differences in how leaders and followers perceived the importance of satisfaction and investments in their relationship. For the employees, there is a need for satisfaction and investment in LMX to get a high-quality LMX and when both the employer and employee have low dyadic LMX disagreement; both parties are particularly dissatisfied and not devoted to the relationship.

Mackey et al. (2020) in a quantitative study extended the purpose of ego depletion and LMX theories to investigate why abusive supervision is indirectly associated with the supervisor-directed destructive voice to provide novel insight that significantly informs professionals' attempts to promote principled workplace environments. The researchers discovered that higher LMX discrimination circumstances toughen the relationship between abusive supervision and subordinates' relational ego depletion, but that relational ego depletion levels remained relatively consistent across levels of abusive supervision for lower LMX discrimination circumstances. Mackey et al. (2020) opined that leaders that are aware that instances of critical inner voice may be suggestive that poor LMX relationships may reduce the effect of the inner voice by treating all followers equally.

### **The influence of leader-follower relationship on organization performance**

Some actions influence the established norms and expectations in the leader-follower relationship when building a strong and quality relationship between leaders and followers. These actions tend to encourage the trust established by individuals causing performance improvement (Jawahar and Schreurs, 2018). Jawahar and

Schreurs (2018) in their quantitative study used the theoretical approach to explain the relationship between LMX quality and counterproductive performance, and the conditions under which this relationship is pronounced. The researchers argued that high-quality LMX relationships will strengthen professional self-efficacy lowering the probability of counterproductive performance, whereas low-quality LMX relationships will undermine professional self-efficacy and the resulting feelings of dissatisfaction will support counterproductive performance. Collecting data from a sample of high-tech professionals to test the hypotheses Jawahar and Schreurs found out that work-related self-efficacy carried the effect of LMX quality on counterproductive performance, but only for workers who have longer supervisor-subordinate relationship tenure.

Lapointe et al. (2020) in qualitative research evaluated the impact of a self-related attribute in LMX relationships and how they are related to work outcomes. The research was based on the social exchange theory. The researchers suggested that LMX is based on a social exchange mechanism and expects improved work performance through increased organizational commitment. The researchers found out that the quality of the relationship between employees and supervisors strengthens the relationship between LMXSC (LMX social comparison) and commitment and is a driving force for work outcomes. Again, the relational self-concept contributes to shaping individuals' attitudes toward the organization in response to LMXSC, showing that employee performance may be more influenced by contextual factors than job attitudes.

Siddique et al. (2020) used the mixed-method statistical approach to test the hypothesis for linking authoritarian leadership to employee organizational embeddedness, LMX, and performance in a high-power distance culture: a mediation-moderated analysis. Siddique et al. (2020) discovered that authoritarian leadership exercises a negative impact on subordinates' job satisfaction and performance through poor quality LMX and weak employee the quality of being firmly and deeply ingrained in the organization. The researchers concluded that a good work environment cultivates high-quality LMX relationships and employee firmness to the organization which prevents the impact of the negative effect of authoritarian leadership on subordinates' job satisfaction and performance.

Based on the social exchange theory, Shen (2019) investigated cognitive leader-member exchange differences between supervisors and subordinates. Shen used the quantitative method to explore the influence of organizational identification on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) directed toward organizations and OCB directed toward individuals, the moderating effects of turnover intention, and the differences in the moderating effects of supervisors' ratings of leader-member exchange quality and subordinates' ratings of LMX quality in the

process. In the study, the researcher revealed that the leader relationship with the subordinates had no significant effect on organizational identification and organizational citizenship behavior relationship, but the subordinate LMX strengthens the LMX relationship positively. Shen concluded that organizations that improve the way subordinates identify with the organizational strategies motivate them to perform more action behaviors toward the organization and fellow employees while subordinates' behavior and actions can be influenced by the quality of the LMX leading to being more productivity.

In another quantitative investigation, Anand et al. (2018) represented characteristic i-deals as distinguishing resources that form leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships in workgroups. Using the data from the sample of software engineers and their managers from India, the researchers explored LMX as the connections in ideals-outcome relationships within the context of a workgroup. Thus, they extend LMX theory to the context of a new employment relationship where employees increasingly demand person-specific work arrangements. The researchers used the cross-level moderated mediation analyses on multi-source data obtained from the respondents. The finding of the research is that LMX acts as an intermediary between employees' i-deals and their effects on job performance and citizenship behaviors.

Rashid et al. (2018) applied the quantitative methodology to establish the impact of leader and member exchange (LMX) on organizational commitment at the individual level. Social exchange theory and leader-member exchange were used as the conceptual framework for the study. The researchers collected the data used for the research from the faculty members working in higher educational institutes in two cities in Pakistan. Rashid et al. used the four-factor model of the study (LMX, affective commitment, normative commitment, and employee voice behavior) in the researchers found that high-quality LMX leads to the improved affective and normative commitment of employees, have a positive influence on the affective and normative commitment of employees and that LMX predicts an individual's affective and normative commitment. The researchers concluded that for an effective running of an organization and improved performance, the authorities should encourage positive supervisor-subordinate relationships and managers should pay more attention to the quality of the LMX.

Manata (2020) explored the extent to which task and social cohesion mediate the effects of LMX differentiation on team performance using a quantitative method. The result of the study revealed that teams with lower LMX differentiation promote higher team performance and social cohesion. Further, supervisors who develop more reasonable and impartial relationships across subordinates are better able to promote task coordination

and unity, which in turn fosters a cohesive and productive working environment. Manata (2020) in this study indicated that a leader, who engages in different types of exchange patterns with the employee, forms different quality exchange relationships to stimulate higher team performance.

The LMX concept which is a two-way process is based on the right to equality and mutual respect between the leader and follower, the leader-member, superior-subordinate, and leader-follower are used reciprocally without making any difference (Uhl-Bien et al., 2020). However, some leaders in oil-servicing organizations lack strategies to strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship to improve organizational performance. To explore the strategies for strengthening leader-follower relationships for improving organizational performance, a qualitative case study asking what strategies do leaders in oil servicing organizations use to develop and sustain high-quality leader-follower relationships for improving organizational performance? This study is the first attempt to explore effective leadership strategies that influence leader-member relationships in a Nigerian oil servicing company resulting in improved organizational performance.

## METHOD

The qualitative single-case study design was used in this investigation since the research problem consisted of exploring a phenomenon that was surrounded by real-life issues and examining the relationship between the involvement and outcome of an organization within the context of a theory (that is, the LMX theory). The researchers interviewed 14 organizational leaders from an oil servicing company who have successfully implemented strategies that have strengthened high-quality leader-follower relationships that improved performance within their organization.

The criteria used for selection of the participants were (a) the leaders must have had at least five years of management experience, (b) the leader's current position must have had the potential to yield insight into strategies that strengthened leader-follower relationships (c) the leader had to be at least thirty years of age, and (d) the leader had to be a strategic decision-maker by virtue of their position. The purposive sampling technique was used in this investigation since participants were targeted based on their features related to the scope of the study and not randomly selected. Participants were selected based on their company's operation in the oil-servicing industry in Port Harcourt city Nigeria via letters of invitation to participate in the study. Data saturation was reached by watching out for the appearance and lessening of new themes and codes from the selected participants. Thematic saturation, member checking, and semi-structured interviews were used to address the research question. This research was conducted under Walden University IRB no. 11-24-21-0305831.

## FINDINGS

Poor leader-follower relationships reduce organizational performance. Using a qualitative single case study approach, the researchers examined strategies leaders in

oil servicing organizations use to develop and strengthen the leader-follower relationship. The following codes were used to identify each participant (001, 002, 003, ..... 014) and the documents (D1 – website, D2 – leadership training records, D3 – leadership policy records, D4 – financial yearbook, and D5 - historical and operational documents). Five themes emerged through thematic analysis of the data: (a) leadership styles (b) motivation, (c), mentoring and coaching (d) communication method, and (e) follower engagement (Table 2).

These themes are identified as the strategies to strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship to improve organizational performance.

Table 1 represents the demographic characteristics of the participant. 85.71% of the participants were males and 35.71 % were between the ages of 35 and 44 while 14.29% fall between the ages of 55 and 64. 50% of the participants have been in the managerial role for 10 years and above and 7.14% have been in the role for 0 to 5 years.

A list of keywords and phrases was generated from the participants' responses, notes, and company documents. Table 3 represents the percentages of the keywords and phrases that made up a theme and Table 2 shows the frequency of each keyword or phrase as used by all the participants. The phrases leadership by example, team building, management by objective, review performances, training, clear and honest communication, open-door policy, and redundancy occurred most frequently and was used by all 14 participants. While mentor-mentee and coaching, building trust, identifying strengths and weaknesses, don't blanket all issues, difficult human nature, and social-cultural differences were used more frequently by 12 participants, motivation, feedback, conducive work environment, protect follower interest, support and encouragement, and constructive criticism were used more frequently by nine participants and used less frequently by the other participants.

Other keywords and phrases included decision making, self-control, face-to-face, verbal warning, and close door talk; admit mistakes, empathy, follow-up, work pressure, team purpose, and giving room for corrections. Each keyword and phrase stress leaders, followers, communication, or work environment.

### Theme 1: Leadership styles

Leadership style was the first theme that emerged from the data analysis. The theme was made up of 29% of the keywords and phrases used by the participants. Although all participants commented on the importance of leadership style, participants 002, 009, 011, and 013 made captivating points on the importance of developing and strengthening high-quality leader-follower relationships. Participant 002 shared:

“One thing is to first try not to be harsh, we make our

team environment a fish environment where we can have fun while working, and sometimes people have their problems so I put it into considerations and allow a conducive environment that can help us work well. It is not always the stick way but sometimes we apply the carrot that motivations be used. We do not forget to manage by the organizational objective bringing together the goals and priorities of the organization through which leaders influence the followers to increase outputs”. Participant 009 stated, “the aim of everything that we do in our organization is to try to always improve on performance and ensure that while we are improving on performance, we ensure that the personnel is satisfied through leader directions and control”.

For participant 011, “to be an effective leader with a good leader-follower relationship, managers need to earn and keep their direct reports' trust through encouragement and building confidence in them. I try to make them understand that in every challenge there is an opportunity. I let them know that there is going to be pressure and that they will learn on the job. I try my best to give incentives, you might not achieve it all but there will be a show of being the best in speed, safety, and other things. I give out jobs within the capability and competency of the individual, and above all, I encourage you to succeed”. Similarly, participant 012 remarked “I walk the talk. I try to lead by example. Communicating and engaging with the team is essential to improving follower attitude knowing fully well that leadership is a process in which an individual influences the behavior and attitudes of other people. Leading by example helps other people see what lies ahead and act swiftly to counter any challenges along the way. If a group is led by a person with poor leadership skills, the group will experience frequent conflicts as each person wants to do things their way thereby lowering the behavioral attitude of the followers. Again, let them know that no one is perfect by admitting to mistakes when it occurs”.

Participant 013 drew attention to the supposed leadership style used to improve the leader-follower relationship,

“We tend to use the set objectives to delegate duties strategically, we allow the employees to feel free to contribute to the decision-making process not letting anyone's contribution look rejected, listen deeply to their contribution and corrections and giving them clear and specific objectives”.

Participant 014 shared a different view stating

“My approach is basically to strengthen the strengths so that we can get more benefits from our strengths. An example is given when somebody is very good at facilitating things and is not good at equipment use but maybe they need the same person for matching maintenance. So, you can either send the person on

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants.

Demographic	Participants (n = 14)	Survey sample (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	12	18.71
Female	2	14.29
Prefer not to answer	0	0
<b>Age</b>		
35 – 44	5	35.71
45 – 54	4	28.57
55 – 64	2	14.29
65 and above	0	0
Prefer not to answer	3	21.43
<b>Experience</b>		
0-5 years	1	7.14
6-10 years	6	42.86
10 years and above	7	50.00

Source Authors

training to strengthen the strength or develop the weak part. That's where I get that way. That's the part that's changed some parts of my approach to it. So, I strengthen the strengths and maximize the benefits. We won't ignore the weaknesses, but we spend more time strengthening the strength of this individual". While participant 005 says that "with the organization, we find ourselves and the system that we operate I try to be easy on myself using all involved system in this all involved system is when we have an objective, we let everybody know the objectives and it turns to be a personal object. When every objective is meant to be understood, there is every opportunity for everybody to be committed to his or her job. the first thing is all involved, we discuss it, is it achievable, is it something, if there is going to be a hindrance, we speak it out this gives us answers on the best way to achieve it".

A review of D3 shows that management by objective and leading by example are accepted leadership styles in the organization. D1 highlights the dangers of imitating leadership styles. D5 stated that leaders have an outstanding influence on organizational performance through the special skills accorded through training. These skills help leaders influence followers towards attaining the organizational vision, objectives, and desired performance.

## Theme 2: Motivation

Motivation is the second emerging theme comprising 22% of the keywords and phrases. All the participants

recognized the benefit of leading by example, team building, and an open-door policy as motivational factors that develop and strengthen high-quality leader-follower relationships. Participants 001, 004, 007, 010, 011, and 013 viewed motivation as a critical factor that can influence the follower to be productive whilst simultaneously exhibiting work satisfaction.

Motivation allows followers to better understand their responsibilities and tasks. Participant 001 remarked "Do you see; the idea of always pointing out and giving clues and words of encouragement, the small words with good incentives and good judgment on the part of a leader goes a long way to motivate the follower. Demonstrate interest in every individual, this shows them care inspiring them into action. Another thing I do to motivate them is to allow everyone to openly communicate their vision and objectives and this allows everyone to work towards helping each other achieve the objectives. If a follower sets an objective that is not smart, we put heads together to get achievable objectives. We work together to push ourselves. If they succeed, I succeed too". Participant 004 stated "to improve productivity is managing by objective and managing your time well. Make good use of human resources and focus on on-the-job training and personal growth. Improve workplace conditions, offer support and set realistic goals, include and practice positive reinforcement and ensure employees feel happy by positive motivation".

Participant 007 commented

"Sometimes you send the followers on training,

**Table 2.** Keyword Frequency: Top 31 Keywords and Phrases.

<b>Keyword/Phrase</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Leadership by example	267
Team building	252
Management by objective	243
Review performances	220
Training	198
Clear and honest communication	180
Open door policy	174
Redundancy	174
Mentor-mentee and coaching	123
Building trust	120
Identifying strengths and weaknesses	116
Don't blanket all issues	109
Difficult human nature	103
Social-cultural differences	92
Motivation	89
Feedback	87
Conducive work environment	87
Protect follower interest	81
Support and encouragement	80
Constructive criticism	78
Decision making	65
Self-control	64
Face-to-face	52
Verbal warning	52
Close door talk	52
Admit mistakes	47
Empathy	46
Follow-up	41
Work pressure	38
Team purpose	37
Give room for corrections	32

Source Authors

**Table 3.** Summary of Themes for Strategies for Strengthening Leader-Follower Relationships for Improving Organizational Performance.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>%</b>
Leadership style	29
Motivation	22
Mentoring and coaching	19
Communication method	16
Follower engagement	13

Source Authors

sometimes just allowing them to showcase their strengths so that everybody appreciates it. It's more like what you

call positive reinforcement. Everybody likes what you are doing. They appreciate it, so just to develop means to positively reinforce the strengths, one needs is also leader recognition, recognition by management, and recognition by team members. So, the strategy is using all motivational factors to reinforce positive attitudes for positive trends”.

Participant 011 noted

“I have clarity on what is expected of them constantly engaging with them to build trust between myself and them getting to know their families, getting to know how they are doing, giving them constant updates about how they are developing the company. If any gaps need to be closed, I try to see how I can help them in getting those

gaps covered. It might be through training. It might be true mentorship. It might even be true ensuring that they go for the right jobs to give them what they need to build their competence, gain experience and that seems to have them be motivated to want to do better. So that's how I do it. I bet other managers do it in different ways”.

Participant 013 remarked

“Recognizing exceptional individuals builds trust between you and the followers and helps improve their ability to work and give their all because it stands as an act of motivation. Creating development opportunities for the followers, booking them for different types of training and establishing clear objectives and goals of the days' plan and measure success at the end of each task is a motivation strategy I use”.

### Theme 3: Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching are two other emerging themes having 19% of the keywords and phrases. Participant 002 reported

“Coaching and mentoring programs are used to improve staff to learn new skills or boost the skills they already have. Performance coaching allows the follower to do the task by themselves with little guidance from the leader not taking the work and doing it, my policy is to allow them to do the task and bring feedback to me. I get to know the follower is coached when they can do the task so well and complete it without help, I don't at some point collect the task to complete or allocate to another but I follow up and guide you to completion. So, you do your work, while I can help you to show you how to do it, and where to get information. This helps to build the follower's confidence and competency and encourages peer-to-peer learning”.

In support of participants 002, 003, and 006, participant 014 confirmed that effective mentoring and coaching builds confidence allowing followers to build problem-solving skills.

Participant 005 remarked

“The organization has set up mentor-mentee and coaching programs so the followers can give progress feedback to their mentors while the mentor inspires and supports the follower to provide significant results. When coaches and mentors give positive feedback, the followers feel they are valued by the organization and tend to impact positively to improve productivity”.

Participants 007, 010, and 012 concluded that the mentoring and coaching programs allow followers to build upon strengths and mitigate weaknesses. Participants 002 and 012 agreed that leaders have different coaching and mentoring styles resulting in differences on follower

success. They also agreed that effective mentoring and coaching helps establish strong leader-follower relationships and identify potential problems.

D2, D3, and D5 covered the organizational mentor-mentee program, which enables obtaining an external team mentor and an internal team coach. This program aligns with the organizational culture of building trust, relationships, innovation, career growth, teamwork, guidance, and skillsets via mentoring and coaching. It is a self-development pattern for the mentor and boosts the organizational skill development program.

### Theme 4: Communication method

Communication method emerged as the fourth theme and made up 16% of the keywords and phrases used by the participants. All participants agreed that the method of communication is important, with the atmosphere needing to be conducive, so information is understood. D2 and D3 reveal that organizational communication methods consist of verbal, non-verbal, and written. Email is the most common communication system with phone calls and physical meetings also being regularly used. Participants 007 and 009 noted that effective leaders are good listeners and empathetic to follower's viewpoints. Participant 011 noted

“First is we try not to be antagonistic, delivering bad news is tough. It's even harder when you do not agree with the message or decision you are communicating. The different categories is whether the news is bad or good you will have to be real, do not say it when the person is under pressure, many people have the impulse to try to spin bad news into a positive, get to the point, be clear, and allow your follower forward-looking assurances. With me, clarity is just what communication needs.”

Participant 005 responded that

“Every case is unique whatever is needed to be communicated must be communicated in honesty”.

Participants 001, 012, 013, and 014 mentioned using appropriate words and tone to communicate removes misunderstanding. They opined leaders should communicate goals, objectives, and expectations clearly and allow for feedback to develop a productive follower. Participant 001 said “Only followers that effectively complete their tasks can be productive and individual productivity creates room for collective improvement for the organization only clear communication will lead to effective task completion”.

Participant 007 added,

“Constructive feedback and criticism is a strong

communication method, arguing that praise can be done publicly while criticism should be done privately behind a closed door”.

### Theme 5: Follower engagement

The last emerging theme was follower engagement, which made up 13% of the keywords and phrases. All participants reported that engaging followers have helped the organization build trust, culture, communication, and leadership, enabling improved organizational performance. Participant 008 commented

“My company values followers that show determination and self-confidence and this gives me insight on how to get my team to work accordingly by motivating them to be determined to deliver every task successfully and on time. I allow my followers to balance their work-life and family life this makes them concentrate at work”. In his opinion. Participant 005 added "treating followers justly and fair positively affect their confidence at work. I try building follower trust through team-building activities, and it helps my team succeed. I motivate my followers individually and collectively and it has been a good engagement strategy for me.”

Participant 001 noted

“Paying attention to your followers and their request goes a long way to keep them focused, I practice the open-door policy which allows everyone to come and lay their complaint or concern which I look into or escalate to my boss. This strategy increases follower trust and makes them know they are valued.”

Participant 009 had this to say,

"I work to understand my followers' strengths and weaknesses this helps me allocate a task to the right person, it increases their trust knowing fully well I have their interest at heart. I also do recognition which encourages them to be loyal and satisfied with their job. Motivation makes them engaged.”

Participant 011 reported

“I make sure my followers are booked for training on time, I believe they will be more engaged when they are motivated through development. The organization makes a plan for several pieces of training a follower should take to develop their skills and competency because competency counts and motivates the individual to put their best”.

To support this Participant 014 noted that

“One way my organization motivates and engages

followers is through approved training and courses. I also allow the followers to air their views, I will rather say my followers have a voice and we constructively exchange information in the team.”

D2 and D3 detail mechanisms for leadership recognition, rewards, feedback, teamwork, quarterly performance appraisal, and training, with the aim of improving follower skillsets. D3 notes these mechanisms create value, build trust, and motivates followers. Participants agreed that every leader has a unique style that works for them. A finding that aligns with existing literature on effective business leadership

### Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that a leader who has confidence in their ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors, such as leadership by example, team building, management by objective, review performances, training, clear and honest communication, open-door policy, and motivating others, may likely be successful in strengthening high-quality leader-follower relationships resulting in improved organizational performance. This study's findings align with current literature and the leader-member exchange theory (Ali and Anwar, 2021; Garvey et al., 2021; Viera, 2021; Hirschi and Valero, 2017; Woo, 2017; Walthall and Dent, 2016; Osabiya, 2015). The findings revealed that organizational leaders employ the identified themes as strategies to strengthen leader-follower relationships with all participants agreeing that every leader has a unique leadership style and employ dynamic strategies.

Organizational leaders who can include these strategies in varying leadership situations can strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship that can improve organizational performance. Likewise, organizational leaders who can adapt these strategies will remain relevant in their practice. Businesses evolve and expand in the demand to strengthen leader-follower relationships for improving organizational productivity (Sturm et al., 2016).

There is a link between the conceptual framework, the literature review, and the findings of this study. The findings of the study show that understanding the leader-follower relationship allows organizational leaders the opportunity to exploit the strength of their followers to improve organizational performance. The link within the conceptual framework is that the leader-follower relationship focuses on the relationship between the leaders and followers of an organization and is connected to improving organizational performance. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) opined that the LMX theory is associated with measuring the leader-follower relationship across the organization to determine the influence of the relationships in promoting organizational performance.

Also, the review of the literature recommends that leaders must be determined to accomplish the organizational goals through constant implementation of strategies that will enable the followers to be engaged towards improved performance (Keeys and Huemann, 2017). A high-quality leader-follower relationship is characterized by a true alliance between the leaders and the followers by the collaboration that helps organizational leaders to achieve organizational objectives by linking job performance to increase the value of the followers to improve organizational performance. To keep dedicated and loyal followers, organizational leaders must reconsider the strategies they use to successfully engage and motivate trusted followers (Lapointe et al., 2020). Leaders with good communication skills boost follower confidence because they feel they are appreciated (Siddique et al., 2020). Leader strategy includes the skills and steps the leader uses to influence the followers collectively and individually to improve desired performance.

The result of this study suggests a leader who has confidence in or her ability to carry out necessary leadership behaviors, such as leadership by example, team building, management by objective, review performances, training, clear and honest communication, open-door policy, and motivating others may likely be successful in strengthening high-quality the leader-follower relationship for improved organizational performance. The investigation's results recommend that leaders need to improve the strategies that strengthen leader-follower relationships by modifying strategies to suit everyone, encouraging organizational performance, and expanding individual career opportunities. Leaders must also understand the strength, weaknesses, and behavioral patterns of followers to increase influence on behavioral patterns, facilitating organizational change through mutual alliance resulting in improved organizational performance. These findings are in support of the studies conducted by Lapointe et al. (2020) and Siddique et al. (2020).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that organizational leaders should develop a high-quality leader-follower relationship with their followers. Leaders must also adapt and recognize the unique leadership style that works for them. Further organizational leaders need to create a conducive work environment that will promote workplace safety, growth, and goal achievement encouraging followers to participate actively in work activities. The themes revealed in this study suggest that organizational leaders endeavor to understand the strength, weaknesses, and behavioral patterns of the followers aiding them in adopting the best leadership style to influence followers. Applying these recommendations should contribute to leader experience,

leadership skills, and leadership style that will improve leadership knowledge.

All participants agreed that every leader has an exceptional leadership style and strategies that strengthen leader-follower relationships and that leadership strategy are dynamic. The leaders need to improve the strategies that strengthen leader-follower relationships by simply modifying strategies to suit everyone, encouraging organizational performance, and expanding individual career opportunities. The call for action is for organizational leaders to understand the strength, weaknesses, and behavioral patterns of the followers to adopt the best behavioral patterns that the leader can use to influence the followers to improve organizational performance. This allows the organizational leaders to positively influence social change within the social sector through the mutual alliance to enhance the organization and communities. Finally, with strengthened leader-follower relationships, the organizational performance will improve and sustain the economy of the communities.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview questions

The below nine interview questions were developed to obtain detailed answers to the research problem,

1. What strategies do you use to develop and strengthen high-quality leader-follower relationships to improve organizational performance?
2. What were the major challenges you encountered while implementing the strategies to strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship within your organization?
3. How did you address the key challenges to implementing the strategies to develop and strengthen high-quality leader-follower relationships in your organization?
4. What strategies do you as a leader use to assist your followers to develop and improve follower attitudes to work that will strengthen or lower the quality leader-follower relationships?
5. What strategies do you use to communicate good or bad news to your followers?
6. What strategies do you use to encourage and enable followers to increase productivity for improved organizational performance?
7. What strategies do you use to identify a follower with a personal problem that reduces individual productivity?
8. What strategies do you use to improve your direct reports' performance?
9. What additional information would you want to share concerning the strategies that you use to develop and strengthen a high-quality leader-follower relationship for improving organizational performance?