



A Model of Feedback-Seeking Based on the Leader–Member Exchange and Communication Antecedents

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The purpose of this study was to understand the antecedents to the leader–member exchange (LMX) model and provide communication-based predictors of seeking feedback directly from supervisors in the workplace. The results suggest (a) conversational appropriateness and effectiveness are positively related to developing high quality relationship with supervisors, (b) perceptions of communication effectiveness are positively and significantly related to direct feedback-seeking strategies but are mediated by the quality of LMX, and (c) individual assertiveness levels do not necessarily contribute to the LMX nor does assertiveness help explain why subordinates seek direct feedback. Results suggest subordinates' perceptions of supervisors' interpersonal communication competence impact the quality of the subordinate and supervisor relationship and in turn impact how subordinates seek feedback from their supervisor.

Formal feedback within an organization is provided through performance appraisals (Larson & Callahan, 1990; Pearce & Porter, 1986) and other on-the-job interactions (Hackman, 1977). However, when this form of feedback is insufficient, employees actively seek informal types of feedback through direct inquiry, indirect inquiry, and observing their environment. Ashford and colleagues have led the feedback-seeking research since their seminal study that suggested that individuals were proactive seekers of feedback in organizations (Ashford, 1986; Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Ashford & Northcraft, 1992; Ashford & Tsui, 1991; Bennett, Herold, & Ashford, 1990; Northcraft & Ashford, 1990; Walsh, Ashford, & Hill, 1985). It is possible that individuals may choose certain feedback-seeking strategies over others, depending on perceptions of their supervisor's relationship with them and their own communication traits. From a management perspective, it is critical to understand why a subordinate may choose one feedback-seeking strategy over another because it may provide insight into the subordinate's perception of the superior–subordinate relationship. This study helps to explain how subordinates determine what feedback-seeking tactic to utilize. This study suggests subordinates will first assess their assertiveness levels and communication competence with their supervisor and use

this to determine their quality of relationship with their supervisor before choosing a feedback-seeking strategy.

Review of Literature

The importance of feedback and feedback seeking in organizations is apparent through the amount of attention it has received in the literature throughout the last 4 decades. Early empirical research indicated that motivation and performance are significantly influenced by feedback (Ammons, 1956). More recent research has found that seeking feedback can improve performance because it can facilitate the establishment and achievement of performance goals (Ashford & Cummings, 1983; Renn & Fedor, 2001).

Feedback-Seeking Strategies

Many research studies have stemmed from two methods of feedback seeking, monitoring and inquiry, as identified in Ashford and Cummings's (1983) seminal study. Monitoring involves individuals attending to and taking in information from their environment by observing the situation and behaviors of others to gather informational cues. Inquiry involves individuals seeking feedback by directly asking those around them for personal feedback. Ashford and Tsui (1991) further refined this model and suggested that monitoring of direct and indirect cues could be critical in feedback-seeking strategy research. Indirect refers to relying on roundabout information by not going directly to the source.

Information seeking. Like feedback seeking, information seeking refers to the seeking out of help and information needed to do work effectively (Katz, 1985). Miller and Jablin (1991), for instance, examined the means and tactics by which organizational newcomers seek information. They defined seven information-seeking tactics: overt questions, indirect noninterrogative questions, third parties, testing limits, disguising conversations, observing target's behaviors, and surveillance.

Individual differences in feedback seeking. Employees' personality characteristics or individual differences contribute to the process of feedback seeking. Individual differences play a role in how and why people seek feedback and warrants future research (Levy, Albright, Cawley, & Williams, 1995). An individual difference that impacts the superior and subordinate communication is a subordinate's level of assertiveness. Assertive people are able to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversations with respect to their interpersonal goals (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Assertive individuals stand up for themselves and do not let others take advantage of them. Merrill and Reid (1981) suggested that assertive communicators talk faster and louder, use more gestures, make more eye contact, and lean forward more in interactions. Therefore, it makes sense that assertive individuals would seek feedback differently than nonassertive individuals. To date, no research has examined an individual's assertiveness level as an individual difference that may impact the feedback-seeking process. According to Booth-Butterfield (2002), assertive communication enhances your competence in interpersonal interactions. Therefore, this study measures subordinates' assertiveness levels and subordinates' perceptions of interpersonal communication competence with their supervisors in order to understand its relationship with the way they seek feedback in the organizational setting.

Theoretical Implications

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) suggests that superior and subordinate relationships lay on a continuum from low to high quality and are dependent on one's incremental influence. Incremental influence is the extent to which interpersonal influence is earned beyond one's formal position (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). Low quality relationships are characterized by the use of formal authority, contractual behavior exchange, role bound relations, low trust and support, and economic rewards. High quality relationships are characterized by mutual trust, internalization of common goals, extra-contractual behavior, and the exchange of social resources, support, and mutual influence (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). There has been an abundance of research devoted to understanding the outcomes of high versus low quality exchanges, and even the most current LMX literature is devoted to understanding organizational outcomes (e.g., performance in Burton, Sablinski, & Sekiguchi, 2008; innovativeness in Lee, 2008; and organizational justice in Piccolo, Bardes, Mayer, & Judge, 2008). Although antecedents to the LMX relationship have been explored (e.g., gender in Wayne, Liden, & Sparrow, 1994; performance in Wayne & Ferris, 1990; and similarity in Bauer & Green, 1996), scant research has examined the role communication has on developing this relationship (Madlock, Martin, Bogdan, & Ervin, 2007). Certainly, how subordinates communicate with their supervisor in initial interactions is related to the quality of exchanges subordinates will have with their supervisors in the future. This study will examine perceptions of conversational effectiveness and appropriateness and its relationships with LMX.

Subordinates' perceptions of their supervisors' communication is a key element in studying interpersonal relationships in the organization context. If subordinates perceive supervisors to offer differential treatment, these perceptions will influence the organizational climate and may affect the way in which an individual will seek feedback from their supervisor. The perceptions of communication competence that occurs between a supervisor and subordinate in initial interactions may determine how the quality of the relationship further develops. According to Canary and Spitzberg (1987), competent communication involves both effective and appropriate communication. In the organizational context, competent communication can be achieved when subordinates' goals for interacting with their supervisors are achieved. This process is perceived to be done so in a socially appropriate manner. Considering your conversational partner's goal is often requisite for constructing appropriate messages (Lakey & Canary, 2002). The interplay between effectiveness and appropriateness has important implications for relational development and maintenance within interpersonal relationships, specifically supervisor and subordinate relationships.

This study addresses perceptions of the quality of LMX in order to predict feedback-seeking strategies. Feedback-seeking strategies may contribute to perceptions formed by supervisors. Therefore, by exploring how leader-member relationship functions, future research can identify specific feedback-seeking strategies that are most effective within the superior-subordinate exchange. In addition, this study contributes to a growing body of research that examines communication traits as predictors of the LMX relationship (Madlock et al., 2007).

Hypothesis and Research Questions

Although some research has considered the process of providing feedback in connection with LMX (e.g., Dansereau, Alutto, & Yammarino, 1984; Mueller & Lee, 2002; Scandura,

1999), no research to date has addressed the effects of LMX on the feedback-seeking process. In addition, there has been very little research linking communication variables such as interpersonal communication competence as specific LMX predictors (see Girton & Heald, 2002; Mueller & Lee, 2002).

It makes sense that those subordinates who are able to communicate competently with their supervisors will more likely develop high quality relationships. Interpersonal communication competence is comprised of two components: appropriateness and effectiveness (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984). Conversational appropriateness is the extent to which one communicates suitably in a specific conversation, and conversational effectiveness is the extent to which individuals are able to accomplish their goal (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987).

Based on the proceeding discussion, the following hypotheses were derived:

- H₁: Members' perceived conversational effectiveness with their leaders is positively related to the quality of LMX.
- H₂: Members' perceived conversational appropriateness with their leaders is positively related to the quality of LMX.

According to Hazelton and Cupach (1986), "Communicators utilize acquired information to develop effective message strategy repertoires and to adapt to changing contexts" (p. 119). Therefore, this study suggests that subordinates' feedback-seeking strategy is dependent on subordinates' perception of their quality of relationship with their supervisor. Also, consistent with Waldron's (1991) finding that individuals with high quality exchanges report more extensive use of direct maintenance tactics, the following hypotheses were advanced:

- H₃: LMX is positively related with direct feedback-seeking strategies.
- H₄: LMX is negatively related with indirect feedback-seeking strategies.

Finally, from a communication perspective, assertive communicators speak up for one's self, make requests, and express feelings (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Therefore, it makes sense that individuals with high levels of assertiveness use more obtrusive means of seeking feedback than those with low levels. In addition, Booth-Butterfield (2002) suggested that nonassertive communicators are experts at beating around the bush, dropping hints, or attempting to get their ideas across solely nonverbally (e.g., use of the "evil eye"), resulting in less effective communication. As a result, there should be an inverse relationship with assertiveness and indirect feedback seeking. Thus, the following hypotheses were stated:

- H₅: Subordinate assertiveness is positively related to subordinates' perceptions of LMX.
- H₆: Subordinate assertiveness is positively related to direct feedback-seeking strategies.
- H₇: Subordinate assertiveness is negatively related to indirect feedback-seeking strategies.

Methodology

This study proposed subordinates' perceptions of their own assertiveness level and their perceptions of their conversational appropriateness and effectiveness with their supervisor

predict the quality of LMX which will, in turn, impact the strategies they proactively choose to seek feedback.

Procedure & Sample Demographics

A quantitative questionnaire was administered in selected MBA classes at a southeast private university. Participants were asked to recall their immediate supervisor as they filled out the questionnaire. Those participants who were not currently working were asked to think of their most recent immediate supervisor. Those participants who have or had an immediate supervisor were eligible to participate (See Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1: Demographics

Variable	n	%
Major		
Business law	21	11.4
Economics	73	39.5
Accounting	30	16.2
Finance	32	17.3
Executive MBAs	29	15.7
Sex		
Male	112	60.5
Female	72	38.9
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	78	42.2
African-American	10	5.4
Hispanic	52	28.1
Middle-Eastern	3	1.6
Other	12	6.5
Age		
21-25	90	49.2
26-64	95	51.8

Table 2: Demographics Continued

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Years of full-time work	5.75	6.32	0-35
Months at present position	32.17	43.34	1-342
Months at present organization	39.28	61.47	1-624
Number of employees	1390.05	8077.91	2-100,000

Measurement

Measures of conversational appropriateness, effectiveness, assertiveness, LMX, and feedback-seeking strategies were contained in the questionnaire. In order to define the variables, a principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was employed to confirm instrument dimensionality. A factor loading 60/40 criterion was employed; that is, the minimal principal item coefficient was set at $\pm .60$ and, to be retained, that coefficient could not load on any other factor with a loading greater than $\pm .40$. To be retained, a factor had to have at least two items meet the factor loading criteria. Cronbach's coefficient alpha was computed to determine each measure's internal consistency.

Conversational effectiveness and appropriateness. Spitzberg and Phelps' (1982) Conversational Appropriateness and Effectiveness Scale was used to measure the dimensions of conversational appropriateness and effectiveness with the original items modified to reflect a superior–subordinate relationship. Ten items comprised each scale. Response categories ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) to indicate the perceived level of appropriateness and effectiveness of their direct supervisor. Sample items for the appropriate dimension included statements such as, "Everything she/he said to me was appropriate" and "I was embarrassed at times by her/his remarks." In this study, the coefficient alpha for appropriateness was .92. Sample items for the effectiveness dimension included statements such as, "Our conversation was very beneficial" and "It was a useless conversation." The coefficient alpha for effectiveness in this study was .92. After the principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation, seven effectiveness items were retained (see Table 3), including one original appropriate item ("My supervisor is a smooth conversationalist"). This may be because the word *smooth* is unclear and could be interpreted as being more effective oriented. The appropriate factor also retained seven items (see Table 3).

Assertiveness. Assertive communicators are able to initiate, maintain, and terminate conversation according to their interpersonal goals (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996). Assertiveness was assessed using the assertiveness portion of the Socio-Communicative Orientation measure (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). The assertiveness measure consisted of 10 items including "strong personality" and "takes a stand." Participants were asked to indicate the degree that each of the items applied to themselves on five response categories ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). In this study, the assertiveness coefficient alpha was .77. After the principle components analysis, the assertiveness factor retained four items (see Table 4). Only those items that were retained in the first factor were retained in the model. Items 8-10 fell under a second factor. "Takes a stand," "Defends own beliefs," and "Independent" were not interpreted by the subordinates to mean the same as the items retained in the first factor. This may be because the mean number of years in their present organization was only a little over 3 years (39 months). Because of the order of the scale in the survey, the subordinates may have perceived their assertiveness levels in a work situation instead of their overall assertiveness levels. If they only worked in their present organization a little over 3 years, they may have not been given the opportunity to take a stand or defend their beliefs. While the items in the first factor appear to be more personality based (i.e., aggressive, dominate, strong personality, and forceful).

Table 3: Factor Loadings for the Retained Items From the Communication Appropriateness and Communication Effectiveness Scale

Items		1	2
Effectiveness			
1. Our conversations are very beneficial.		.82	.30
2. Our conversations are useless.		.80	.29
3. Usually our conversations are advantageous.		.78	.37
4. Our conversations are ineffective.		.76	.34
5. Our conversations are unprofitable.		.76	.44
6. My supervisor is a smooth conversationalist.		.70	.22
7. I get what I want out of our conversations.		.63	.34
8. I achieve everything I hope to achieve in our conversations.		.53	.40
9. Sometimes, I do not know what is going on in the conversation with my supervisor.		.48	.26
10. I am uncomfortable throughout the conversations with my supervisor.		.36	.28
Appropriateness			
1. Some of my supervisor's remarks are inappropriate.		.31	.83
2. Some of the things my supervisor says are in bad taste.		.32	.79
3. I am embarrassed sometimes by her/his remarks.		.20	.77
4. She/he says things that they should not say.		.36	.75
5. Everything my supervisor says is inappropriate.		.32	.75
6. Occasionally, his/her statements make me feel uncomfortable.		.34	.74
7. My supervisor says several things that seem out of place in the conversation.		.31	.65
8. Her/his conversations are suitable to the situation.		.52	.60

Table 4: Factor Loadings for Items From the Assertiveness Scale

Items		1	2
1. Forceful		.82	.05
2. Dominate		.80	.10
3. Aggressive		.70	.04
4. Strong personality		.62	.35
5. Assertive		.55	.46
6. Acts as a leader		.53	.42
7. Competitive		.51	.29
8. Takes a stand		.28	.78
9. Defends own beliefs		.05	.77
10. Independent		.02	.76

LMX. LMX was assessed using the seven-item version of the LMX scale (Liden & Graen, 1980; Scandura & Graen, 1984). The instrument asks participants to indicate the extent to which they agree with each item from 1 (*to a very little extent*) to 5 (*to a very great extent*). The coefficient alpha for the scale in this study was .89. One factor emerged from the principal components analysis with varimax rotation, and six items were retained (see Table 5).

Table 5: Factor Loadings for the LMX Scale

Items	1
1. To what extent would you characterize the effectiveness of your working relationship with your supervisor?	.89
2. To what extent do you have confidence in your supervisor's decisions such that you would defend and justify them even if he or she was not present to do so?	.85
3. To what extent does your immediate supervisor understand your work problems and needs?	.83
4. Again, regardless of how much formal authority your immediate supervisor has, to what extent can you count on him/her to "bail you out" at his/her expense when you really need it?	.81
5. To what extent do you feel your immediate supervisor has recognized your potential?	.81
6. Regardless of how much formal authority your immediate supervisor has built into his/her position, to what extent would he/she be inclined to use his/her power to help solve problems in your work?	.78
7. To what extent do you know how satisfied or dissatisfied your immediate supervisor is with what you do?	.48

Feedback seeking. Overt (direct) ($\alpha = .74$) and indirect ($\alpha = .87$) feedback-seeking items were measured via Miller's (1996) Information Seeking Tactic scale. Overt inquiry involves seeking feedback by directly asking those around them for personal feedback. Indirect inquiry involves individuals attending to and taking in information from their environment by observing the situation and behaviors of others to gather informational cues and/or seeking information through indirect questioning. The measure asks participants to respond to statements on a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (*to a very little extent*) to 5 (*to a very great extent*). After the principle components analysis, the direct information-seeking tactic factor yielded four items; the indirect feedback-seeking strategy factor yielded nine items (see Table 6).

Univariate, Bivariate, and Multivariate Analysis

First, univariate analyses on the main variables were performed to provide descriptive statistics on the sample data. The means ranged from the 3.81 for the direct feedback-seeking variable to 2.54 for the indirect seeking variable. In addition, intercorrelations were computed. Indirect feedback seeking was not correlated with any other variables in the model. Therefore, it was dropped from the final analysis.

Table 6: Factor Loadings for the Retained Items From the Direct and Indirect Feedback- Seeking Scale

Items	1	2
Indirect feedback-seeking strategies		
1. Through my nonverbal behavior, I would hint to my supervisor or coworker that I would like to know this information.	-.03	.76
2. I would ask questions about the subject in such a way that they would not sound like questions.	.07	.72
3. I would let my supervisor or coworker know indirectly that I would like to know the information.	.05	.66
4. I would indicate curiosity about the topic without directly asking for the information.	.03	.66
Direct feedback-seeking strategies		
1. I ask my supervisor if I am meeting all my job requirements.	.47	.34
2. I ask my supervisor how I am doing.	.40	.39
3. I would ask specific, straight to the point questions to get information I wanted.	.70	-.15
4. I would identify what I did not know and ask for the information.	.66	-.12
5. I would go directly to my supervisor or coworker and ask for information about the matter.	.62	-.05
6. I would not beat around the bush in asking for information.	.61	-.13

Multivariate Analysis

Structural equation model. The modified model incorporated (a) assertiveness, conversational effectiveness, and conversational appropriateness as the predictor variables and (b) LMX and direct feedback seeking as the outcome variables. The directional arrows in the model in Figure 1 represent regression coefficients (i.e., betas) that quantify the influence of each predictor on the dependent variable, partialing out the effect of the other predictors. The curved arrows between assertiveness, communication effectiveness, and communication appropriateness represent the correlations between the predictors but does not indicate a hypothesized causal influence in either direction. The arrows between the latent variables and the scales are regression weights that quantify the influence of the construct on each indicator (i.e., factor loadings). Each response from an independent variable will have (a) the level of the trait due to the dependent variable and (b) the residual (error), the level of independent variable that was not accounted for by the dependent variable. The circles in the model represent the residuals.

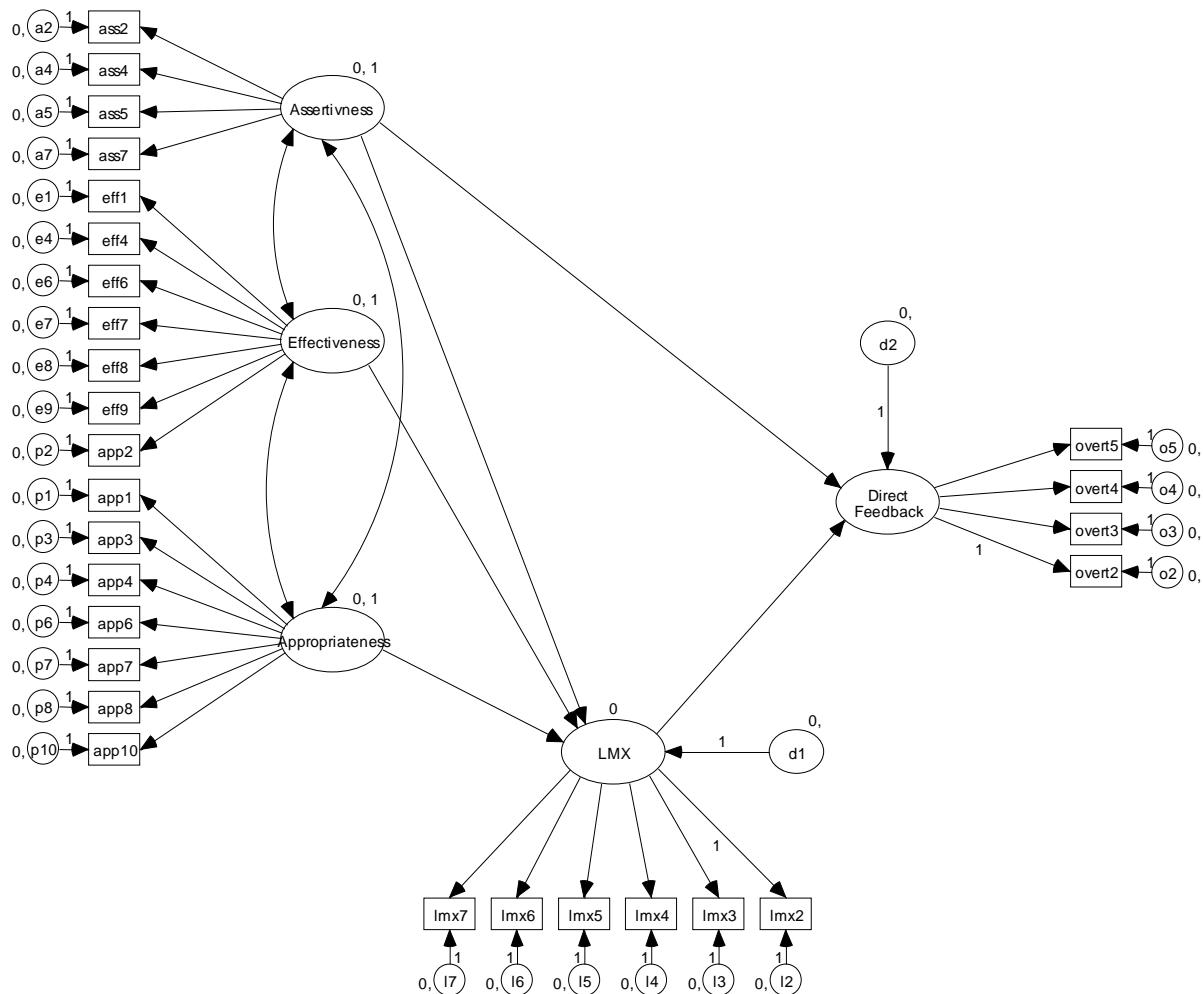


Figure 1. Full structural equation model.

Measurement vs. structural model. There are two components of the full structural equation model: measurement and structure. The measurement model defines relations between the observed and unobserved variables. The measurement component of the model shows that conversational effectiveness, conversational appropriateness, and LMX have seven indicator measures and assertiveness, direct, and indirect have four (see Figure 1).

The structural component specifies the indirect and direct relationship of the latent variables in the model. In our model, there are six unobserved variables: assertiveness, effectiveness, appropriateness, LMX, indirect feedback, and direct feedback. The structural model defines the relationship among these variables. In our model, the structural component of this model represents that indirect and direct feedback seeking is derived from subordinates' perception of their LMX which in turn is influenced by their perceptions of their levels of assertiveness and conversational effectiveness and appropriateness. It also suggests that appropriateness has a direct effect on the indirect and direct feedback-seeking strategies.

To estimate the model, exogenous variables are assigned a standardized metric (i.e., z-score) by fixing the variance of the factors to a value of 1.0. That is, because one path from each of the three independent factors (assertiveness, effectiveness, appropriateness) is fixed to 1.0, their variances can be freely estimated.

The variances of the endogenous variables (LMX, direct feedback, and indirect feedback), however, are not parameters in the model. It is not possible to fix the variance in the endogenous latent variables (i.e., outcome variables); their variances are dependent on the exogenous variables. Therefore, it is necessary to provide a metric for each of the latent variables because they do not possess an inherent measurement scale. To establish the scale, one parameter in each set of regression paths is fixed at 1.0. For example, in the LMX scale, one item's factor loading (i.e., LMX7) was set to 1.0. So, LMX is measured on the same scale as that item. The metrics for both indirect and direct feedback were also fixed in this matter.

Goodness of fit. In modeling LMX as a mediator in the relationship between communication variables and feedback seeking, the chi square goodness-of-fit statistic was significant, indicating that the model may not fit the data [$\chi^2(342, N = 185) = 541.60, p < .05$] Due to the relatively small sample size in this analysis ($N = 185$), an adjunct discrepancy-based fit index may be used as the ratio of chi square to degrees of freedom (χ^2/df). A χ^2/df ratio value less than 5 has been suggested as indicating an acceptable fit between the hypothesized model and the sample data (MacCallum, Brown, & Sugawara, 1996). With a χ^2/df ratio value of 1.58, the proposed model may have an acceptable fit. Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended the use of the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), the Standardized Root Mean Residual (SRMR), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) as fit indices for model evaluation for small samples sizes. The TLI value of .93 indicates that this model is a 93% improvement over the null model. Over .90 is considered an acceptable fit (Hoyle, 1995). In addition, our RMSEA value of .06 was acceptable (Hu & Bentler). The SRMR value of .60 was not adequate. However, a larger sample size might adjust this value.

Table 7: Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Assertiveness, LMX, Direct, Indirect, Communication Appropriateness, and Effectiveness

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Assrtiveness	-					
2. LMX	.12	-				
3. Direct	.17*	.26**	-			
4. Indirect	-.01	-.04	.03	-		
5. Appropriateness	-.02	.61**	.15	-.04	-	
6. Effectiveness	-.02	.74**	.16*	-.05	.71**	-
<i>M</i>	3.46	3.55	3.81	2.54	3.36	3.70
<i>SD</i>	.64	.87	.80	.83	1.01	.91

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Hypotheses Testing

H_1 predicted that members' perceived communication effectiveness with their leaders is positively correlated with the quality of LMX. This hypothesis was supported. The standardized regression coefficient between effectiveness and LMX indicated a significant and positive relationship ($\beta = .79, z = 8.08, p < .05$). The effectiveness variable explained 62.8% of the variance in LMX.

H_2 predicted subordinates perceived communication appropriateness with their supervisors is positive. This hypothesis was supported. The standardized regression coefficients between the predictor variable, appropriateness, and the outcome variable LMX indicated a positive relationship ($\beta = .11, z = 1.42, p < .05$). Therefore, the appropriateness variable only explained 1% of the variance in LMX.

H_3 predicated that LMX is positively correlated with direct feedback-seeking strategies. This hypothesis was supported. The standardized regression coefficient between LMX and direct feedback-seeking strategies indicated a positive and significant relationship ($\beta = .30, z = 3.19, p < .05$). Therefore, LMX explained 9.1% of the variance in seeking feedback directly.

H_4 predicated that LMX is negatively correlated with indirect feedback-seeking strategies. Indirect feedback seeking was dropped from the model because it was not correlated with any of the variables in the model. Therefore, this hypothesis was not supported.

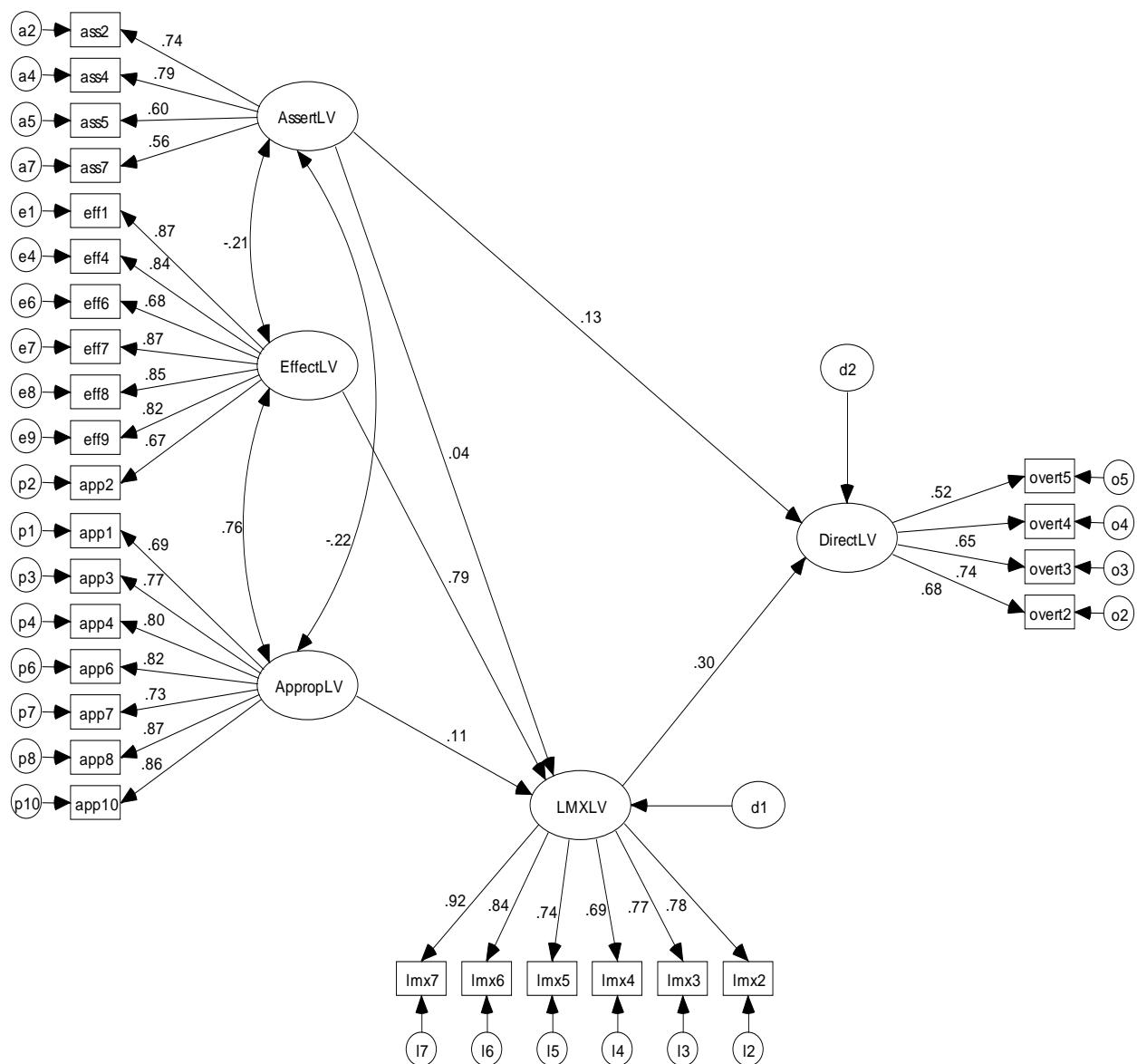


Figure 2. Full output structural equation model.

H_5 predicted that assertiveness has a positive relationship with LMX. The standardized regression coefficient between assertiveness and LMX was positive and not significant ($\beta = .04$, $z = .76$, $p > .05$). This does not explain a lot about the relationship of LMX (.16%). However, this is the contribution of assertiveness after controlling for the other predictor variables (e.g., effectiveness and appropriateness).

H_6 predicted that assertiveness has a positive relationship with direct feedback seeking. The standardized regression coefficient between assertiveness and direct feedback-seeking strategies was positive but not significant ($\beta = .13$, $z = 1.22$, $p > .05$). Therefore, the assertiveness construct explained 1.2% of the variance in direct feedback seeking.

H_7 predicted that assertiveness has a negative relationship with indirect feedback seeking. This hypothesis was not supported. Together, the predictor variables in the model explained 89.1% of the variance in LMX (i.e., $R^2 = .89$).

Discussion

This study investigated the superior and subordinate relationship and explored how they communicate in order to develop a LMX. A high quality LMX has many important benefits for a subordinate including having access to resources and having information before those who have low quality exchanges. This study also examined how subordinates' perceptions of their LMX will predict how they seek feedback. The results of the study partially supported the hypothesized relationships that (a) conversational appropriateness and effectiveness is positively correlated with LMX, (b) LMX is positively correlated with direct feedback seeking and negatively correlated with indirect feedback-seeking strategies, and (c) assertiveness is positively correlated with LMX and direct feedback seeking and negatively correlated with indirect feedback seeking.

Conversational Effectiveness and Appropriateness

Conversational effectiveness and appropriateness are two components of communication competence. This study found that there was a direct, positive, and significant relationship between conversational effectiveness and LMX. This suggests that subordinates who perceive their conversations with their supervisors are effective will have what they consider to be a high quality LMX. It makes sense that if a subordinate gets what they want out of their conversations and feels as though their conversations are beneficial, useful, and advantageous, they will more likely perceive they are engaging in a high quality exchange with their supervisor.

There was also an indirect, positive, significant relationship with conversation effectiveness and direct feedback seeking. Suggesting that subordinates first evaluate their relationships with their supervisors before engaging in direct feedback-seeking tactics. If individuals believe they have high quality LMX, they will engage in direct feedback-seeking strategies. There was no relationship, however, between indirect and conversational effectiveness or LMX.

The study observed conversational appropriateness to have a direct, positive, and nonsignificant relationship with LMX. In addition, there was an indirect, positive, and nonsignificant relationship with conversation appropriateness through LMX to direct feedback seeking. This, of course, is controlling for all other predictors in the model (i.e., assertiveness and effectiveness). Conversational appropriateness was correlated with LMX and accounted for

37% of the variance. This suggests conversational appropriateness does explain much of LMX after controlling for conversational effectiveness.

Assertiveness

From a communication scholar's perspective, assertiveness refers to the extent to which you initiate, maintain, and terminate conversation (Richmond & McCroskey, 1990). It appears from this study that how assertive people may be does not play an important role in developing high quality exchanges. This was evident here by a positive but almost nonexistent relationship between assertiveness and LMX.

In addition, the results suggest just because an individual is assertive by trait does not necessarily mean he or she will be seeking direct feedback directly from his/her superior. This is an important implication. It may be that supervisors believe that their employees will come to them if they have questions or concerns because they are assertive individuals. This study found a positive but nonsignificant relationship between assertiveness and seeking feedback directly.

LMX

LMX has a direct, positive, and significant relationship with direct feedback seeking. This finding suggests that if subordinates perceive their supervisor has put them into a high quality exchange relationship, they are more likely to seek feedback directly than those in the low quality exchange relationships. This finding is interesting because those individuals already believing they have a positive relationship with their supervisor will tend to ask direct questions, while those who do not perceive high exchanges are less likely to ask direct questions. This explanation may prove beneficial for supervisors because, if subordinates perceive they do not have a high quality exchange, they may be less likely to come to the supervisor with questions or concerns and perhaps rely on less than reliable sources.

Feedback-Seeking Strategies

This study contributed to the LMX theoretical framework by helping to explain subordinate feedback-seeking behavior. The findings suggest that subordinates' perceptions of their LMX play a role in engaging in direct feedback-seeking strategies. This finding has an important implication for supervisors. It is important for supervisors to realize that although they may believe their employees will come to them if they have questions or concerns, subordinates might first evaluate the quality of communication behaviors and the overall exchange. If subordinates do not feel their supervisors communicate effectively, they may be less likely to perceive they have a high quality LMX and less likely to engage in direct questioning than those who believe they are engaged in a high quality exchange.

Limitations to This Study and Suggestions for Future Research

One limitation to this study was its convenience sample of graduate business school students. A random sample of subordinates in a specific organization may help explain if the results would hold true in a business rather than educational setting. For example, future research

might explore differences in a hospital or a law firm or differences between organizations, especially if superior–subordinate relationships are strictly defined (e.g., doctor and nurse).

Future research might also take into account nested variables present in organizations. For example, a more complex design that looked at organizational levels, superior levels, and subordinate levels might be conducted if a large sample was obtained. A hierarchical linear model (HLM) type of multiple regression analysis might better examine if such nested relationships exist. HLM allows researchers to consider more than one unit of analysis, employing multilevel data (Byrk & Raudenbush, 1992).

Summary

This study posed a structural equation model that identified the relationship between assertiveness, conversational appropriateness and effectiveness, LMX, and direct feedback-seeking strategies. The findings contribute to the goal of understanding the antecedents to the LMX and the predictors of seeking feedback directly. First, this research suggests conversational appropriateness and effectiveness are positively related to LMX. Second, perceptions of communication effectiveness are positively and significantly related indirectly to direct feedback-seeking strategies but are mediated by the quality of LMX. Third, individual assertiveness levels do not necessarily contribute to LMX nor does assertiveness help explain why subordinates seek direct feedback. In conclusion, there remains little doubt that communication variables contribute to developing high quality LMX. Further, LMX is a critical variable that subordinates should consider when deciding whether to seek direct feedback from supervisors.

About the Author

Dr. Kristen Campbell Eichhorn earned her Ph.D. from the University of Miami in 2003 and serves as assistant professor at the State University of New York at Oswego, where she teaches research methods, communication theory, and interpersonal communication. She also has taught a wide variety of other courses, including organizational communication, nonverbal communication, persuasion, and business and professional communication. Her primary area of research is interpersonal communication in organizational, instructional, and health settings. Her research has been published in a variety of journals, including the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *College Student Journal*, *Communication Research Reports*, *International Journal of Leadership Studies*, and *Public Relations Review*. She also is the coauthor of the book, *Interpersonal Communication: Building Rewarding Relationships* (with Candice Thomas-Maddox and Melissa Bekelja Wanzer).

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