

## RESEARCH BRIEFS

# DO SOCIAL COMPARISONS AFFECT INDIVIDUAL EFFECTIVENESS IN TEAMS?

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### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

It's human nature to compare ourselves with others, whether others prompt us ("Why can't you be more like your sister?") or we do it ourselves ("I am way better at golf than that guy"). We rely on comparisons to let us know where we stand in relation to others, and to guide our beliefs and actions. So, what happens when those comparisons occur within the workplace, particularly within a team and its leadership? And more specifically, what happens when a leader has high-quality relationships with almost everybody, but only a mediocre relationship with a handful of others? These questions are important because the quality of the relationship employees have with their leaders directly influences employee performance and positive job-related attitudes.

To answer these questions, Jia Hu (University of Notre Dame) and Robert C. Liden (University of Illinois at Chicago) examined the influence that a team context plays in leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships. Specifically, Hu and Liden investigated when and how social comparisons between team members with respect to LMX relationships influence their subsequent effectiveness in the workplace. In particular, they sought to determine *how* such comparisons influence their job performance, citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction levels, and *when* these comparisons will have an impact on these workplace effectiveness measures.

With regard to *how* social comparisons affect team members, Hu and Liden argued that relative LMX (RLMX)—the quality of one's LMX compared to the average LMX relationship within the team— influences an employee's self-efficacy (i.e., their perceived ability to perform a task or job successfully). That is, Hu and Liden suggested that RLMX inherently provides important social comparison information, thereby allowing individuals to judge their own capabilities in comparison to the capabilities of their team members. When individuals view their own LMX relationship as being better than others' relationships (high RLMX), they feel more confi-

dent in their abilities, leading them to exert greater effort at work, engage in extrarole behaviors, and be more optimistic about their workplace situation. On the other hand, if they view their LMX relationship as being worse than the average team member's (low RLMX), then their self-efficacy will likely suffer and lead to lower subsequent performance, citizenship, and job satisfaction levels.

In terms of *when* RLMX will impact workplace effectiveness, Hu and Liden investigated the influence that team identification (i.e., perception of an emotional bond with the team) and team supportive behaviors (e.g., assistance on tasks, cooperation, and positive recognition) have on the relationship between RLMX and workplace outcomes. They argued that when employees feel a sense of "oneness" with their team, RLMX is less likely to influence their levels of self-efficacy, and self-efficacy is less likely to influence their subsequent performance, citizenship, and job satisfaction. Hu and Liden argued that when employees feel like they are truly a part of the team *and* they have high RLMX, they will compare themselves to worse-off teammates. As such, they will experience lower feelings of competence because they view themselves as similar to their worse-off teammates. Similarly, when employees feel at one with the team *but* have low RLMX, they will compare themselves to better-off teammates. As a result, they will feel uplifted and more competent because they view themselves as similar to their better-off teammates. In essence, Hu and Liden suggested that identifying with one's team overrides the effects that RLMX has on self-efficacy.

Conversely, when employees feel detached from their team, the influence of RLMX on self-efficacy and subsequent outcomes is strengthened. When employees feel separate from the group, they do not *compare* themselves to their teammates; they *contrast* themselves. That is, when employees do not feel a sense of oneness with the team, they think about how they are different from their team members. Hu and Liden suggested that when employees do not identify with their team *but* have high

RLMX, they think about how they are better than their teammates. This leads to increased confidence in their abilities. Conversely, when employees do not feel connected with their team *and* have low RLMX, they feel worse than their teammates, which results in lower confidence in their abilities.

Regarding team support, Hu and Liden argued that when team members help each other out, the influence of RLMX on self-efficacy and subsequent outcomes is weaker. In contrast, they argued that when team support is low, the influence of RLMX on self-efficacy and subsequent outcomes is strengthened. In essence, when team support is high, the influence of RLMX is less important because team members are receiving the support and resources they need from their teammates instead of the leader. In contrast, when team support is low, the influence of RLMX is more important because the leader is providing support and resources that the team is not.

## STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

To examine when and how RLMX influences employee effectiveness in the workplace, Hu and Liden collected survey data from 35 teams with 4 to 14 members from a large beverage company in China, for a total of 275 leader–member pairs. The individual team members were asked to rate their perceptions of the overall supportive behavior of their fellow team members, the extent to which they identified with their team, their self-efficacy beliefs, their overall job satisfaction, and the quality of their own LMX relationship. The LMX ratings were compared to the average LMX rating of the team to measure an individual's RLMX. Team leaders rated the individual performance and citizenship behaviors for each of their team members. Hu and Liden also collected demographic information, such as age, gender, and tenure.

While all data were gathered at one time point, precluding any causal interpretations, obtaining information from team members and leaders on different variables reduced concerns about common method bias.

## KEY FINDINGS

Hu and Liden found that RLMX was positively associated with self-efficacy, which in turn was related to performance, citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction. Moreover, they found that self-efficacy explains *how* higher RLMX leads to better workplace outcomes. In essence, when the quality of an employee's exchange relationship with his or her leader is better than that of fellow team mem-

bers', the employee will have higher self-efficacy. The elevated self-efficacy in turn leads to better job performance, more citizenship behaviors, and higher job satisfaction.

As for *when* social comparisons impact employee effectiveness, Hu and Liden found that whether one identifies with their team influences the importance of RLMX. That is, when employees see themselves as sharing a common fate with their team, RLMX did not influence self-efficacy and subsequent positive work outcomes. Conversely, when employees did not identify with their teams, RLMX positively influenced self-efficacy, which led to increased job performance and citizenship behaviors, but not job satisfaction. Hu and Liden also found that team supportive behaviors influence when RLMX is associated with self-efficacy. However, subsequent job performance, citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction does not depend on team supportive behaviors. That is, when teams provide resources and support for their members, RLMX is less important for an employee's self-efficacy. Indeed, self-efficacy explained how RLMX leads to positive work outcomes regardless of whether teams provide support for their members.

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Hu and Liden's findings demonstrate some important issues. First, employees make social comparisons when evaluating the quality of the exchange relationship with their team leaders. Second, these social comparisons have important implications for one's confidence in their ability to perform their job, which explains how one's RLMX influences job performance, non-required behaviors that promote organizational functioning, and attitudes toward one's job. Lastly, in order to fully understand *when* RLMX influences self-efficacy and subsequent positive work outcomes, one must consider whether employees feel a sense of oneness with their team and whether they receive support and resources from their team.

So what do these findings mean for organizations that use teams to accomplish work? This study clearly demonstrated that LMX relationships do not exist in isolation. The team context plays an influential role in which team members compare their own relationship with the leader to their teammates' relationships with the leader. Because each relationship between the leader and a team member is likely to differ in quality, organizational decision makers need to consider the impact social comparisons and team characteristics have on individual self-efficacy, performance, citizenship behaviors, and job satisfaction.

Hu and Liden do not suggest that leaders should treat everyone equally. In fact, this may be impractical and unavoidable. However, they do argue that leaders can promote a positive team climate to reduce the effects of treating individual team members differently. Specifically, leaders can help to increase the team unity and sense of belonging employees feel by emphasizing the common goals within the team. Leaders can also promote a supportive team climate by encouraging and rewarding employee behaviors that help and support the team's goals.

Finally, Hu and Liden recommended that team-training programs place a strong emphasis on cooperation. This should lead to teams recognizing and understanding that they share common goals and have a common fate. Similarly, organizations should create teams that include job and task rotation for team members. Both of these interventions

should increase team identification and team supportive behaviors, which should subsequently reduce the importance of social comparisons with respect to LMX. The recommendations Hu and Liden provided do not imply low RLMX relations are bad relationships. They simply argued that the differences in leader-member relationships produce differences in self-efficacy, job performance, citizenship behaviors, and job attitudes. Their recommendations should reduce the impact of leaders having different quality relationships with team members.

#### SOURCE

Hu, J., & Liden, R. C. (2013). Relative leader-member exchange within team contexts: How and when social comparison impacts individual effectiveness. *Personnel Psychology, 66*, 127–172.