

The impact of gender difference on the leadership function of supervisors in the apparel industry—in relation to LMX Theory

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Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) is discussed as a relationship-based approach to leadership. It conceptualizes leadership as a process centred in the interaction between the leaders and followers in which the roles and the quality of leader-subordinate exchange fall into two basic categories; 1) In-Group and 2) Out-Group. This study focuses on the gender difference of the leadership function of supervisors in relation to LMX theory while also providing an insight into the job of a supervisor in the apparel industry. The objectives of the study are (a) to shed descriptive and analytical light on the nature of the contemporary supervisor-subordinate relationship in the apparel industry thereby (b) to examine how the In-Group and Out-Group prevail relating gender to the LMX construct. Randomly selected 23 boss-subordinate dyads from three garment factories were subjected to in-depth interviews, questionnaires and observation over two months to collect study data. The impact of gender on the leadership function was analyzed through the two gender combinations: female supervisor-female subordinate dyad and male supervisor-female subordinate dyad. Study yields four main findings: 1) the present strategic initiatives in the garment factories amount to a qualitative shift in the approach of the supervisory position. As a result the performance and wellbeing of both supervisors and workers have improved in factories. 2) Both the male supervisor-female subordinate and female supervisor-female subordinate dyads enjoy the In-Group characteristics consistent of mutual trust, positive support, informal interdependencies, greater job attitudes, common bonds, open communications, satisfaction, and shared loyalty. 3) However, the strongest quality of exchange occurs in the male boss-female subordinate dyad compared to other gender combination and this combination has the best perception of quality of exchange. 4) Reasons for this outcome were identified as gender stereotyping, education factor, age and the method of placement associated with male supervision position.

Key words: Supervisors, Apparel industry, Leadership, Gender difference, LMX theory

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