

ABSTRACT

Should I Stay or Should I Go?
Examining Leader-Member Exchange Theory in Millennial Job Retention

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Previous research has shown that a Millennial holds value and high volume in the workplace, but their consistent movement to other companies has become a necessary area of study for job longevity's sake. This paper shows how Millennials have previously been studied and what researchers have historically seen as a desirable workplace. The other weathering factors of job meaning and satisfaction have forced others to reconsider their organizational commitment. Through qualitative in-person interviews, results show that the leader-member exchange theory involves a wide variety of interpretation that will affect the Millennial's commitment to staying at their current workplace. This research dives into the three deepest areas of this theory: trust, professional respect, and loyalty. The results emphasize the important of building a relationship between a leader and employee and fostering an open communication in the workplace to help reduce turnover, increase work tenure, and influence job satisfaction.

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Examining Leader-Member Exchange Theory in Millennial Job Retention

by

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DEDICATION

To future leaders of the world,
Your impact will be beyond measurable.
May you guide the next generation with passion, empathy, and love.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Is it something I said?”

A boss could be asking his or herself that when a Millennial employee puts in his or her two-week notice on the desk, citing that he or she is leaving the workplace. This is concerning when a leader did not see it coming, but it’s even worse when their job positions have turned into a perpetual revolving door every time they hire a Millennial. What’s going on here? Let’s face it: job retention isn’t what it used to be.

In 2022, Millennials are changing the job landscape with their departures from their companies. A study by Jive Communications, Inc., a U.S. company founded in 2006, reported that the average Millennial has already had three jobs, and 24 percent will start looking for a new one within six months to a year at their current workplace (Neely, 2018). With the rise in remote and hybrid opportunities since the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional 30 percent are already looking for a new job between a year and 18 months after starting a position (Neely, 2018).

One study, examining 2,000 Millennials, found that one of the top reasons that Millennials find another workplace pertains to leadership and their relationship with their supervisors (Hoffman, 2018). Although we understand leadership is an important factor in Millennials’ job choices and job retention, there is a lack of rich research on how supervisors facilitate communication to Millennial employees in their work. This trend is being seen across multiple industries, most recently in healthcare, nursing, information

technologies and secondary education (Hollman & Luthans, 2020; Juliana et al., 2021; Keith et al., 2021).

On a societal level, this study discusses how Millennials analyze their communication channels and work relationships with their employers by providing examples and awareness of effective and ineffective practices in the workplace. It also gives helpful, practical tips for supervisors to effectively lead their Millennial employees to drive higher job satisfaction in hopes of keeping them around longer. However, this does not come without unselfish reasons. Companies are spending an average of \$4,000 and 24 days every time they have to hire a new position in their company, citing resources from recruitment, human resources, onboarding, interviews, site visits, moving expenses, and training (“How To Calculate Cost-Per-Hire,” 2019; Vasconcellos, 2022). It’s not cheap to keep re-hiring in an organization, especially if it’s recurring every six months to a year, which is an average lifespan of a Millennial’s time at a job (Hoffman, 2018; Neely, 2018). This insight directly impacts an employer and should always be noted when turnover occurs at their workplace.

In addition, a vacancy in the workplace can shift that job’s responsibilities onto the remaining employees until the position is filled. With open positions, companies have to immediately address the assumption that larger workloads for the current staff are sustainable. In fact, previous interviews have stated that there are “understaffed teams working extra hours to compensate for missing hires as the norm, rather than a stopgap. For them, it’s a win, because payroll declines, the work still gets done and profits rise” (Christian, 2021, p 8). A serious domino effect can unfold when this revolving door continues to shuffle in and out new employees (Christian, 2021; Neely, 2018).

This study combines areas of focus from leader-member exchange (LMX) theory in how it relates to a leader's ability to communicate to a specific audience: a Millennial. This theory is examined in the literature review to lay a foundation for the research carried out in this study.

But why conduct a study that solely focuses on Millennials? The World Economic Forum reported in 2021 that Millennials account for 23% of the world population for a total of 1.8 billion people, including 76 million in North America (Neufeld, 2021). With this number of stakeholders, it's vital to understand their intrinsic feelings as well as encoding and decoding of communication information before they become the senior-level leaders in their organizations.

All in all, finding a way to encourage Millennials and young employees to consider long-term commitment to a company or organization can make a difference in a higher retention of a company's frontline constituents. The true impact will lie in understanding the feelings and thoughts behind their work and value in that space.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Understanding The Target Population

As defined by Laurie et al. (2019) and Dimmock (2022), Millennials are “the world’s first generational cohort to come of age with the internet” and were born between 1980 and 1996 (p. 769). Millennials have been labeled as digital natives because of their extensive background with technology, and they amass to the largest generational cohort, with approximately 75-80 million in the U.S. (Laurie et al., 2019).

Millennials are a key group to identify attitudes and implications due to their large saturation in the job market. McGrady (2016) found that this group comprised 38 percent of the job market in 2016, and that number will grow to about 75 percent by 2025. Previous studies have studied retention tactics and strategies in order to keep their workplace attractive (Koppel et al., 2017; Sujansky & Ferrish-Reed, 2009). The main tactic has been working with their human resources department to come up with a more dynamic work environment. Is that the extent of what employers can do: benefits, company parties, complimentary gifts every now and then?

Understanding this cohort will be vital for retention committees that look at keeping them employed at their institutions on a more long-term basis, and further studies will allow businesses to figure out and coordinate plans for employees that will have long-term benefits, allowing them to feel meaning in their workspace and hopefully make them feel successful and engaged in their environment (Hoffman, 2018).

Understanding Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory was originally introduced as a vertical dyad linkage theory where its primary focus was on the communication exchange between a leader and his/her team members (Dansereau et al., 1975; Emerald Works, 2021). There is rich data in how the origin of this theory can assist communication studies since it puts emphasis on the leadership of an organization and their responsibility to guide their employees in a meaningful way to accomplish multiple goals with a few being job productivity and job retention. It has since been morphed into understanding how to establish an effective relationship in the workplace (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015).

The theory's expansion into workplace relationships assesses the role that trust, professional respect, and loyalty play in member consequences, which can also be referred to as the outcomes of that workplace relationship (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015).

Trust is defined as the degree to which someone displays their "best interest of the other member of the dyad as reflected in supportive behavior and honesty" (Liden & Maslyn, 1998, p. 49). Another branch of leader-member relationships is respect, which can be described as the reputation someone has built up in the work space based on their work quality and experience (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). The final branch used for this study is loyalty, which can be defined as a faithfulness to an individual or an entity based on established relationships and experiences with someone (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). These three areas help guide the outcomes of a relationship, which include job attitudes, behaviors, and career success (Bauer & Erdogan, 2015).

Examining LMX from the Millennial's perspective helps expand the understanding of the LMX theory concept of in-group and out-group (Emerald Works, 2021). An in-group is described as an employee that gets maximum attention from his/her leader and gets the most resources to do the job at a high level. Previous studies have shown how engaged and valued an in-group employee feels and showed positive trends of job retention, and this study will further evaluate this plethora of information using the Millennial demographic (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In-group members often report having more access to information, a higher influence on decision making with their boss, additional resources, and frequent communication with their supervisors (Anderson et al., 2017).

Meanwhile, an employee in the out-group doesn't usually get the support that he/she needs, sparking dissatisfaction and often lackadaisical effort in the workplace (Emerald Works, 2021; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Dansereau et al. (1975) described being a part of the out-group as low quality LMX exchange, meaning that their communication and involvement is much lower than an in-group member and experience less interaction, engagement, and influence with their supervisors. Understanding both of these outlooks on LMX exchanges allow the researcher to evaluate the quality of relationships that are explored through this study.

Further, the understandings behind the LMX theory hyper-focuses on the relationship between the leader and the employee like never before. As this theory breaks down the management of this relationship, further understanding applying LMX theory towards a segmented audience (Millennials) has benefits that will ultimately save businesses money and help create a larger satisfaction rate amongst Millennials as they

continue to move up in the leadership ranks. A Millennial is likely led by an older Millennial, a Generation X or a Boomer generation member. Therefore, the information will be transferrable in hopes of building up the next generations of leaders in the workplace (Dimock, 2022).

Job Engagement and Organizational Commitment

A determining factor in previous studies for a Millennial's commitment to an organization was job engagement (Walden et al., 2017). Other studies have started to explore what has motivated Millennials to seek a job, maintain a position in the company, or stay in their current workplace. However, the waist-deep analysis opens the door for future studies that explore meaning making and communication analysis between the Millennial and the leader. These other studies have found that a baseline communication model is vital in shaping employee-organization relationships and can ultimately enhance work productivity (Men, 2014; Walden et al., 2017).

This finding will be expanded on with this study as it dives deep into how different communication is encoded and decoded in a conversation, and the message is interpreted in a positive or negative light to affect job satisfaction and retention. All in all, strategic employee communication can be explored to see how it can lead to job meaning and help Millennials develop a loyalty to their workplace (Walden et al., 2017). These studies are just the tip of the iceberg for what rich data is available in this area of study.

Furthermore, Walden et al. (2017) defined job engagement as “a state of immersion in work such that employees demonstrate enthusiasm for completing individual tasks while maintaining a deeply felt connection to their job role” (p. 76). This description provided researchers with specific words (e.g., connection, tasks, enthusiasm)

that can be assessed using quantitative or qualitative research. These terms were used in the creation of the interview instrument to discuss with Millennials. In summary, job engagement is an important factor in this type of study since the employee's work and engagement rate can be tied to how they create meaning in their careers.

Another important term to understand is organizational commitment. Organization commitment is "an emotional attachment to the organization that involves considerations about the cost of leaving the organization and a sense of obligation to the organization" (Walden et al., 2017, p. 75).

Meyer and Allen (1991) found that organizational commitment can be a mindset or psychological state. Employees may or may not create an emotional attachment to their workplace, and in turn it will either help them stay in their current position or start looking for another place to work. Meyer and Allen (1991) suggested that an employee's organizational commitment can be measured using attitudinal and behavioral perspective.

An employee's commitment can be sorted into three categories: affective, continuance and normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Based on Meyer and Allen's (1991) findings, each member can be tested/examined on their *desire, need, and obligation* to remain using the organization commitment model. This study addresses these feelings in the interview process through the first set of questions that examine previous experiences and the emotions that have been attached to those memories.

Studies also have found that Millennials viewed their relationship with their employer by evaluating the workplace communication, both internal and interpersonal (Gallicano, 2013; Walden et al., 2017). The different amounts of information distributed to the employee concerning the organization's past accomplishments, their future goals,

and the assessment or evaluation process are important to their job stability (Walden et al., 2017).

Past studies have confirmed that ongoing communication and constant engagement between organizations and employees are ultimately desired by employees, and it is a day-to-day process and commitment for employers to keep each day. Prior research suggests that this process needs to be sustainable in order to build trust, loyalty, and organizational commitment with Millennials who want to feel valued and trusted in their current role. When these two things co-exist in an organization, employees focus on their tasks and also are committed to a healthy relationship with their employer (Walden et al., 2017). This is where the “in-group” and “out-group” concept in LMX theory is tied into current communication research. Dialogue with supervisors is important to Millennials, especially when dealing with constructive criticism (Gallicano, 2013; Walden et al., 2017). Therefore, a Millennial that would consider his or herself in the “in-group” have developed feelings of a strong leader-member exchange and have a higher

Transformational Leadership Approach

A major influence in finding meaning in a job lies in the leadership of a work environment. Men (2014) understood the different leadership styles of organization heads. Men (2014) emphasizes that transformational leaders “convey a strong sense of purpose and collective mission and motivate employees by communicating inspirational vision and high-performance expectations” while also “creating *an emotional attachment* between leaders and followers” (p. 259). Walden et al. (2017) and Men’s (2014) research suggests that transformational leaders have a high amount of organizational commitment since their leadership helps convey goals and proper messages to their employees.

Transformational leaders emphasize “relationships, individual consideration, meaning, and empowerment and thus has particular implications for communication and relationship managers” (Men, 2014, p. 260). This is a big point of emphasis for this study and will be considered when drafting interview questions.

Also, leaders have the ability to accomplish goals based on symmetrical and asymmetrical communication (Men, 2014). Symmetrical communication allows leaders and employees to have conversations and listen to one another to understand and foster meaning (Men, 2014, p. 260). This type of communication “fosters a participative organizational culture and organic structure” (Men, 2014, p. 260). Men and Shanks (2016) found that symmetrical communication resulted in multiple positive factors in the workplace, including mutual understanding, collaboration, and reciprocity that encourages transparent communication practice (p. 316).

On the other hand, asymmetrical communication is a “one-way, top-down approach” that allows employers to control or persuade employee behavior (Men, 2014, p. 260). This is often what is seen as the *old-school way* of running an organization. Men (2014) suggests that this type of communication offers little room for feedback and organizational decision making. Because of its top-down approach, the opportunity for someone in a lower position to speak up and offer feedback or criticism seems daunting and almost pointless if there will be no level of impact based on their observations or experiences. Therefore, this observation would suggest that an employee has little meaning in his/her job position.

Research found that transformational leadership, symmetrical communication, employee–organization relationships, and employee advocacy are all linked and provide

positive outcomes to each other (Men, 2014, p. 265). Two-way communication that allows employees to provide constructive feedback to their employers can help create that advocacy that helps members feel *needed* and *valued*. These types of systems can be implemented for best employee-organization relationship growth, and while not every leadership style has to be transformational, Men's (2014) research provides a blueprint of how it can all work together in an effective way. This opens the door to combine this research with LMX theory since the collaboration is a key element in understanding relationships in the workplace.

Workplace Culture and Influence of Communication Practice

One important factor in a Millennial's decision to stay or leave can lie in the workplace culture. Men and Jiang (2016) studied how culture impacts internal communication in the work environment and LMX outcomes. Culture can "be created and manipulated" for a desired outcome and can also be completely unique to that specific organization (Men & Jiang, 2016, p. 468). Culture is a large area of study within job longevity because it influences and changes the way that organizations and companies are shaped (Men & Jiang, 2016).

Because culture heavily influences communication practice, scholars can separate various culture aspects into seven factors: competitiveness, performance orientation, stability, supportiveness, innovation, social responsibility, and emphasis on rewards (Sarros et al., 2005). Each factor plays a role into creating a work culture, and depending on the priorities set by the employer, it will impact the internal communication and how their employees create meaning surrounding their work.

Sarros et al. (2005) separated these seven factors into three different subgroups depending on how they related to work culture. Competitiveness, performance orientation, and innovation are all grouped together as outcome orientations that focus on an employee's production and contribution to the workplace (Sarros et al., 2005). Stability and social responsibility were both environment orientations that involved an employee's perception and philosophies they bring to the work culture (Sarros et al., 2005). Supportiveness and emphasis on rewards are people orientations that emphasize fairness, teamwork skills, collaboration, and social skills in a workplace (Sarros et al., 2005). These seven factors will be considered during interpretation of the interviews and the coding process.

Men and Jiang (2016) found that stability, emphasis on rewards, and supportiveness were "positively related to symmetrical internal communication" (p. 474). Combining teamwork skills, fair pay and promotion opportunities, and a sense of job security provided employees with a balanced work culture that was healthy and provided an adequate amount of communication (Men & Jiang, 2016). These scholars encouraged more research into the other factors of an organizational culture (social responsibility, innovation, competitiveness, and performance orientation) that can contribute to effective internal communication and other factors that mean a lot to an employee (Men & Jiang, 2016).

Employee Organization Relationships and Turnover Rates

Kang and Sung (2019) evaluated how employee-organization relationships affect the turnover rate or intention in an organization. Research shows that having a positive relationship with a supervisor influenced job engagement in a positive way and

influenced turnover intention in a negative way (Kang & Sung, 2019, p. 167). This is why LMX perception is important in studying why employees stay at their jobs (Kang & Sung, 2019). If positive employee-organization relationships can occur at a business, then the turnover rate could be affected. Kang and Sung (2019) encourage further studies into “the role of employee engagement...as part of the turnover equation” and how further engagement in an organization can keep employees longer (p. 167). This sets up the following research to fill in the gaps in literature. Ultimately, this literature review brings up multiple issues related to Millennial employee-organization relationships and communication gaps that merit more attention and research. Questions that will be addressed in this research include:

RQ1: How do Millennial participants determine job longevity at their work sites?

RQ2: To what extent do participants feel that trust, professional respect, and loyalty from their leader affecting job longevity?

RQ3: How do participants view their leader-member exchange?

RQ4: To what extent do Millennial participants feel that their leader-member exchange affects their job attitudes, behaviors, and career success?

CHAPTER THREE

Research Method

The study was conducted with face-to-face interviews through qualitative methods to hear directory from Millennial employees. A qualitative interview method was chosen since it “elucidates subjectively lived experiences and viewpoints from the respondents’ perspective (verstehen)” (Tracy, 2013, p. 156). The interviews were cross-sectional for answers during one time period. They were conducted during the summer of 2022 with 13 total interviews.

Face-to-face interviews (or one-on-one interviews on Zoom and Microsoft Teams) was the best method for this type of study due to allowing a space for greater explanation for questions and concepts (Schröder, 2016). Since a key component to the research question relied on a personal, intimate social construction of meaning with the interviewee, a one-on-one setting was the most appropriate (Tracy, 2013). Virtual interviews were also conducted when the participant was not local to the researcher’s area. This new virtual method was a viable second option and allowed more geographic diversity.

Regarding structure, this was a semi-structured interview that allowed room for probing as meaning was constructed with the participant (Tracy, 2013). It allowed for more emergent meanings and opened the door for more organic conversations, which helped elicit deep, insightful answers. The questions were asked in the same order for each interview (complete interview guide is in the Appendix).

The interviews were responsive since the content the research was searching for involves personal experiences and thoughts behind the Millennial's habits and actions in the workplace. On the other hand, part of the questions were discursive when the interview questions discuss leadership in the work organization. This research was open to the possibility of both of these types of questions and received good feedback using both of these methods. A semi-structured interview worked well with a responsive or collaborative stance throughout the study.

Sampling

With purposive sampling used for this study, the target population sample was Millennials. The targeted interviewees needed to be born between 1980 and 1996 to be considered an eligible participant in this study (Laurie et al., 2019; Dimmock, 2022). The strategy was to secure a mix of participants with a diverse range of number of years in their respective work fields. The study solicited for participants on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram platforms in July 2022, and eligible interviews were set up within two days of the first promotion. While using close contacts in the field to access initial participants for the study, this process also relied on snowball sampling for other participants.

Eight women (61.5%) and five men (38.5%) participated in the study. Millennial participants' work industries ranged from the military to healthcare to communication to engineering to higher education. With the youngest participant at 27 years old and the oldest participant at 42 years old, the average age of the Millennial participant was 33 years old.

Since the study asked participants to use critical thinking when discussing their feelings about their supervisor and job experiences, whether that was a current or former

employer, a confidentiality form was signed before the start of the interview.

Furthermore, the findings of this study removed identifiable information and built trust with the participants prior to asking questions by explaining the purpose of the study and the confidentiality form.

To open the interview, questions were asked to get background information and context in order to set up a successful interview. It opened with demographic questions and a screener question about their age to ensure that their data qualified for the study. The first set of questions asked about their job history, background in searching for jobs, and their job retention experience. On average, a Millennial held 5 different jobs prior to his/her interview. Identifying the number of jobs for each participant helped validate previous research about how many jobs Millennials have held in their lifetime. Jobs only qualified if the participant was 18 years or older during employment.

Furthermore, this study was conducted and evaluated through the lens of a Millennial as the primary researcher. This distinction allowed for self-awareness and opened the door for self-reflexivity along the way (Tracy, 2013). Oftentimes, the researcher Millennial and the interviewee Millennial established common ground and created meaning together as a result of being a part of the same age demographic for this study. The researcher acknowledged the need to stay clear of personal biases with this study.

Pretesting

This research was previously tested with a pilot study prior to the full study with two interviews in order to continue developing the interview questions, sequencing, and

areas for probing. The pre-test helped develop a codebook for the full study and saw areas of improvement by talking to the two Millennials.

Data Analysis

Coding was validated and received a 93% validity rate using the designated codes in the codebook. The interviews are coded with descriptive items as well as emergent items. Emergent items look for interviewees' sensemaking and distinction between good and bad aspects of leadership. The descriptive items were coded to see how well the interviewees understand the study's concepts and how they interpret the status quo of leader-member exchange in their workplace.

Each interview was coded immediately after the research process had been concluded using transcription software. The transcripts were read through and coded twice by two coders as the process for interpreting meaning-making information can be difficult to code at first.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Job Longevity

The study addressed all four research questions during the length of the interview. *Talk* – the way the leader communicates – and *care* – displaying to employees – were two of the most commonly used words during the interviews, showing this is something that Millennials pay attention to and value from their leaders. This research first analyzed how Millennial participants determine job longevity at their work sites.

There were several recurring themes when interviewees described their intent to stay at their jobs. The most frequent answer given was two years as a common timeline for commitment to a workplace. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic was pegged as a deterrent for individuals leaving and finding other work. Millennials are looking to stay if there's a path for growth and are inclined to look for another job if they can't see that path.

One Millennial was adamant that if there was no growth seen, then he's applying elsewhere:

If I feel that I'm stuck at a point where I'm not growing anymore and I'm just stuck and not being challenged, that for me is a sign that I need to either...speak with my manager on my goals and where I want to be headed with my career or start searching for a different job.

Expanding on this theme is the desire to be a manager or supervisor of others in their organizations. With the amount of experience working with supervisors and taking the “good things and the bad things,” Millennials can choose to stay at jobs that help

them utilize all the skills and experiences that they've had to impact the next level of employees.

However, the lack of progression to obtain some sort of leadership position can wear on a Millennial. After working for her organization for nearly seven years, one Millennial found herself feeling unsuccessful because she was not in a leadership role yet:

I think I've always really looked for more responsibility and to be able to manage someone because I have had a mixed bag of managers and I've kind of taken things from along my career and really thought about how would I be as a manager. But I haven't really gotten that next step yet. So that's kind of something that I'm looking for. You know, given my age and how long I've been working, I feel like that to me is kind of a sign of success for our generation: it's that you become a manager for people. So, that's kind of always been my goal.

While the pathic approach was taken by many Millennials during this study, the tangible benefits were not left out of the conversation though. Participants noted that health benefits, paid time off, reduced or free education, company equity, and pay scale were items that were in consideration as well.

When deciding what work sites are appealing during job searches, the participants' top answers referred to a positive culture and a place where the organization cared for its people, prompting job retention among current employees:

If people are there for a while, you know why they're there. Like there's something working. I just look for a place where people are happy to be there. And obviously, if people are staying, there's a reason.

Other emerging themes were the amount of knowledge that someone had of the organization before inquiring of others or working there.

When I was interviewing, nobody would really come out and say that like, "Why would you want to work for this guy?" but they would be like, "Why do you want to come?" I'm like, "Why wouldn't I want to come?" I think that's what they were saying, but nobody actually said it.

This type of insight can really help Millennials gain that insight into finding the right fit for them since lack of input from colleagues can be a factor in locating a wrong job site.

Impact of Trust, Respect, and Loyalty

Participants were asked to answer to what extent they feel trust, professional respect, and loyalty from their leader affects job longevity. The researcher had extensive content to choose from to answer this question with a majority of the study participants addressing these three areas of LMX theory. Relationship building is a major factor in building trust with a supervisor. Millennials who agreed that they trusted their supervisor had personal interactions with them where it was exemplified with an action:

I think because of the way my supervisor communicates, I know that I can go to him for anything. And sometimes it's nice to be able to trust that he's going to have my back, especially when it comes to solving a problem that's complex or tricky.

Another characteristic of a trusting relationship is constant face-to-face interaction in the office, according to participants. This allowed them to get to know their leader both professionally and personally, and whenever a crisis came up, they knew their boss's intent and were secure to know that their boss was going to "have their back." A Millennial saw his basketball coach pour his heart into the program he ran, and through two-way communication, he earned trust right away:

It was easy to trust him. It was easy to trust him with basketball too because I saw the time he was at the office. I saw him asking others for input. So while he wasn't the easiest to work for because of the job pressure aspect, he communicated what he wanted, and so it was easy to trust him with that.... I trust him to this day. Like if I need something, I call him because I believe in him that much.

While trust was there for the Millennials, evidence of distrust also loomed with their supervisors. Signs that supervisors displayed a lack of trust include micromanaging, verbal abuse and “talking down” to their employees, failing to explain lack of intent with projects and goals, uncertainty in direction of their department or organization, bad and inconsistent communication, and miscommunication. All of these actions were causing negative feelings towards trust for Millennials. One Millennial angrily spoke that his supervisor’s words almost mean nothing to him and his colleagues:

It's just been because of miscommunication. Information is just not being disseminated at the lowest levels. They can't get their stuff right (at the top). So, by the time it reaches me, it's just hearsay. Not trusting (my leadership) leads to so much anxiety and (makes me) unsure of the future... A lot of last year really made me reconsider if I wanted to stay in the (military) because of this bad leadership.

Another Millennial is worried about bringing up issues or tough conversations to his/her supervisor due to a fear of retaliation. It could as small as finding errors in an email or as large as applying for other jobs. Either way, one participant felt like he couldn’t trust his boss with any information since “he doesn’t have his best interests at heart”:

I have looked for different jobs, but I don't want to tell him because if it doesn't work out and I don't get any of those opportunities... and I end up back (here), I feel like he is the person that if you're not with him, you're against him.

Micromanaging was brought up by Millennials and was quickly met with anger by each of them. This term could also be labeled as ‘my boss doesn’t trust me to do my own work, so they’re going to check up on me every step of the day.’ Constant check-ins may seem like a good thing to a supervisor due to multiple periods of interaction throughout the day, but this Millennial did not appreciate feeling like her boss was always looking over her shoulder:

That goes back to feeling like I'm not trusted to do my job because my current supervisor has to go through every single bullet (of my to-do list). I don't feel like that happens with anybody else in our team. And so that to me is a little frustrating and is very much feels like there's not trust there.

Moving into evaluation, the professional respect that LMX created, Millennials had a near consensus that respect is present for the supervisors, and the “great” managers have more when they’ve put in the time to build a relationship in and out of the office. In the office, Millennials observed that more face-to-face interaction allowed them to feel like their boss valued them and their opinion when they sought direct communication and got to see their supervisor in-person. One participant valued that time spent together and allowed it to strengthen her respect for her superior:

I do think when you're face to face with someone, you get more of their attention. You know (their attention is) not divided. I think a lot of times that translates to more respectful communication.

However, more interactions didn’t always equal to respect for certain Millennials. Whether it was “pulling rank” or using phrases such as “You’re my employee,” one Millennial was not afraid to voice her concerns about how her exchanges went when she was looking to sign a new contract for a promotion but didn’t agree with the new terms:

They were just really trying to shortchange me and change some of the terms, and I just felt disrespected, which for me is like the number one thing: I need to feel respected by my employer, and I just felt like they were not respecting me.

No other themes were consistent as far as negative respect in terms of communication from these participants. Concerning loyalty, there are several consistencies in responses. First, the vulnerability that one Millennial’s supervisor had with her and financial willingness to provide professional development workshops and resources went a long way in terms of loyalty:

I think her willing to work on our communication and willing to invest in us has definitely made me want to stay and be loyal to her. And it's definitely given me a positive experience.

However, there was also an overwhelming response that Millennials showed a lack of loyalty to their specific supervisor in the office but rather to the personal relationship that they had built. For example, Millennials wanted to be loyal to their bosses, but they struggled to build relationships with them where they were openly communicating and having a positive experience in the workplace. Therefore, they started looking for other jobs because there was nothing keeping them at the organization. The lack of loyalty to a supervisor can yield consequences for organizations as a whole if employees are not incentivized to stay. While there is a genuine desire to be loyal, loyalty can also be debilitating to employees, making them miserable and slowly “sucking the life out of them.” One Millennial provided valuable insight when he pointed out how difficult it is to align loyalty in a workspace:

Ultimately, companies are comprised of ideas and people, and I think it's easier to be loyal to one of those two things, but both of them becomes a little bit more challenging when ideas start to deviate from the people. I'll say it's more rare, I guess, to find people and ideas aligned at the same place.

Total honesty can be incredibly fruitful for building an open communication line and personal relationship between leaders and Millennials. However, supervisors can quickly turn the tables on their employees and accuse them of disloyalty when they start seeing “if the grass is greener on the other side.” Loyalty to an organization or one specific supervisor for the sake of being loyal isn’t good enough for these Millennials, especially if they don’t feel comfortable communicating their issues to their leadership:

I feel like now there's really no reward for your loyalty. You can go elsewhere and they're going to pay you. I think that the generation before us and the Boomer generation, they stayed in jobs for 30-40 years. And we don't want that. I want

more out of my profession and my career because ultimately, I'm setting a really good example for my children to work hard (while being) a working mother. I think that I want to be somewhere where I feel appreciated and I feel that ultimately there's some kind of reward for the hard work and loyalty. And if there's not, then I'm not going to stay in that role.

Characteristics of A Leader-Member Relationship

Then, the researcher asked questions on how participants view their leader-member exchange. This group of participants were not hesitant to reveal positive and negative communication characteristics about their superiors. Certain mannerisms were common among positive supervisor descriptions, including intentionality in building both a personal and professional relationship with their employees:

She was very understanding. She would sit everybody down, like even the littlest soldier in our unit or the newly-hired civilian in our organization. She would sit them down and get to know their family and stuff... she was genuinely interested in the lives of her people, and I think that created a lot of trust in the organization.

While weekly check-ins and drop-ins at the office were seen as a sign of a positive characteristic, Millennials don't expect their bosses to go easy on them. In fact, they embrace feedback and open communication as expectations are clarified and explained:

It's definitely a work culture where we can say, "Hey, I didn't understand. Can you explain to me what you mean by that?" And that's met with a ton of just grace and patience of "Yeah, let me explain that a different way." So communication is very open. It's also very honest. (My boss is) somebody who is in senior-level leadership. He's not airing the (organization's) dirty laundry to the team, but he does a great job of explaining like any time there's a tough decision or a challenge that our team is meeting, he helps coach us through that in a way that honors senior leadership but also helps us as his followers, if you will, to understand what's needed.

Positive characteristics also included the tone and delivery of communication. While not every interaction can be life-changing or nice, Millennials respond well to bosses who "pour into" their employees by devoting time to them, administering an open-

door policy as part of the workday culture, a willingness to help solve problems with their employees, and upholding the organization standards regardless of their position in the office. One Millennial spoke about the admiration she gained for her boss based on the communication and accountability she had for herself:

She was someone who had been there and done that...someone who'd been (at her organization) for 16 years and does not have to answer to us on the bottom of the totem pole, and yet she would text us when she was running late, and she held herself accountable. That was something that I really admired.

A positive, meaningful relationship allowed Millennials to see an effectiveness in their supervisor beyond their ability to do their job. In fact, it encouraged them to provide their best work to the organization and allowed them to “share their lives” with their supervisors. One Millennial made sure to tell the researcher about her supervisor’s efforts to building a relationship:

He is someone who understands that whole people come to work, not just work people. So he is understanding in all the situations and seasons that we find ourselves in as his employees. He's incredibly relational. He is someone who leads from a place of building a relationship. And I think that relational (aspect) makes his communication even more seamless.

Not all descriptions can be positive though. All Millennial participants also gave at least one negative supervisor description during their interview. One clear observation made by several Millennials is the recognition of workload their bosses are taking on. This level of business has come with consequences for these employees. While being “overworked and overbooked,” Millennials have noticed their boss’s ability and willingness to listen is highly affected. This lack of availability has caused several employees to struggle with communication and expectations. One participant’s boss was sporadic in communicating with them and would get upset when they didn’t immediately get a response when she had a remote position from across the country:

So what I learned in the beginning of my career with her, whenever she wouldn't respond to my email, she wouldn't answer my phone, I would then send her another email, and that would really annoy her. And then whenever she would respond to me, it would be like 8 p.m. on a Sunday night or whatever time she would decide she had time for me. She would just be irate if I was not able to immediately take her call, and it was just like crazy to me, you know? Just many, many calls on nights and weekends, and during the regular business hours she had no ability and would mostly not respond to emails or anything like that. So it was just very strange, and it was like that dreaded Saturday afternoon call or email. And it (would) ruin your weekend, you know?

These types of communication issues have frustrated Millennials about their employers. Whether it's a micromanager or a lackadaisical, hands-off leader, Millennials don't find comfort with either characteristic of their manager. Participants also found that supervisors were failing to define a work culture or would set unrealistic goals and expectations without speaking to their subordinates first. How could a supervisor do any of this without speaking to their employees? That's what one Millennial dealt with at a previous position:

It was very much a culture of very little communication. There wasn't a lot of formal and informal communication. So in terms of instructions and direction for job tasks as well as bigger company goals and things like that, there just wasn't very much communicated across the board. But then also on the informal side, people just didn't really talk to each other. It was kind of this culture of 'you go in your office, you shut your door, you put your head down, you do your work, you leave.' There just wasn't that informal relational communication either. So, it was really weak on both the formal organizational side and the informal side.

Furthermore, Millennials didn't take kindly to supervisors who would evade responsibility when things went wrong or missed their chance to step up for them when it came time to "fight" for resources or promotions. This is where the "hands-off characteristics" were perceived negatively by one Millennial when she was asking to get more resources for her job:

He wasn't always a great advocate for his employees. I think at some point he was like, "Oh, my hands are tied. There's nothing I can do." And at some point, you

get tired of that because you're like, "Well, this other team is getting all of these things and nobody's giving them any cr** about it, but we're asking for X, Y and Z and we can't get it." So, I felt some frustration built up there.

Finally, Millennials addressed the delivery and tone of their leaders. An elevated tone was not the issue – it was the unnecessary abrasiveness that was an unpleasant memory for employees:

I had a supervisor who the way in which they talked to me made me feel like I was not as intelligent as I know I am. It didn't have that "I'm giving you feedback, but I still support you" feel to it. It was like, "Here's what you did wrong. You need to go fix it, and I can't believe you didn't know that."

There were also numerous answers to **RQ₃** that are not considered positive or negative according to the coders. Daily routines and mannerisms discussed included arrival time at work, acknowledgement of a busy schedule as a manager. One Millennial mentioned that he worked "more independent" from his managers and developed a neutral feeling towards them.

Outcomes of Leader-Member Relationships

Finally, the researcher and participants created meaning with asking to what extent Millennial participants felt that their leader-member exchange affected their job attitudes, behaviors, and career success.

Millennials made one statement very clear: bosses and organizational leadership do not affect work ethic. The perception of their work ethic is coveted and can't be questioned whether their leader-member exchange is great or not. One Millennial stressed that despite all her frustrations with her administration and all the issues and obstacles she's run into since accepting her job, it won't change how she does her job. Her professionalism kicks in for the benefit of her subordinates:

I'm very professional, and when I'm in the business of kids, no matter what is going on the outside, I just always do my best because it's not their fault (for) what's going on. Obviously, when (communication is) better, it just makes it that much better because you're working hand in hand. Outside of that, it hasn't really affected how I do my work.

Further, Millennials have trouble keeping work at the office, which includes positive and negative emotions that come with it. This greatly altered their perception of a future in their organization. With primarily negative interactions through the delivery of feedback, one Millennial said those “overwhelming feelings” are hard to come home with:

It's been just an awful experience in the past nine months. I've come home just very depressed from having a work environment that doesn't care about you... and doesn't use talent management properly. Just not a good experience.

Those feelings can “make or break a job” for some, and for others it's a chance to figure how they do and do not want to be a manager in the future. Millennials explained that they take the good and bad from their experiences with their bosses, including one participant who is currently in charge of a student staff:

I have learned how to be a really good communicator. I clearly set expectations. I'll have honest communication with people and honest feedback as soon as possible. I always have a little debriefing or something after a project or after a show, especially like if things go really well or if things don't go well. Until that person has worked for me at least a year or two years, I will give them feedback every single time we work together. I've learned to do all of these things because none of them were ever done with me.

For some Millennials, a negative leader-member exchange can pour into feeling like they don't care about them and allowing them to behave like they don't want to be at work every time they're around their boss. It has emotionally exhausted one Millennial who expressed that she had a major mental health crisis due to the lack of communication and miscommunication in her relationship with her boss:

I just feel like I'm always treading water, and that gets exhausting after a while, especially emotionally. I think that we as a society don't do a great job of checking on people's mental health. I think we talk about it, but we don't put any action behind it because I had expressed my struggles with mental health and I was not offered any assistance and I was like, "Gosh." That just kind of makes you not feel great about where you are.

That feeling of not feeling cared for caused her to look for another job elsewhere. She put in her two weeks shortly after getting a job that was in the same organization but in a different department with another supervisor.

Ultimately, a boss can change attitudes, behaviors, and thoughts on future career success for Millennials, but not the work ethic or career goals that the employee has established for themselves. One Millennial made this clear in her interview, "I'm going to work - I'm going to do my best regardless of my supervisor's communication."

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Conducting this study brought themes to light and helped us better understand LMX theory in the context of Millennial employees following the COVID-19 pandemic. This research contributed new insights to leader-member communication and how relationships affect job retention through in-depth interviews first established by Dansereau et al. (1975) and then expanded on by Bauer and Erdogan (2015). The study contributed multiple results to advance previous literature: Millennials want a place to work that has room for growth and leadership opportunities in the future. They also want to utilize all of their skills and experience. Investment into their professional development also can determine whether a Millennial stays or leaves an organization.

Like Liden and Maslyn (1998) state in their research, trust is built with a relationship and face-to-face exchange. That “reputation” that a leader builds with their Millennial employee becomes crucial when building the next two pillars, respect and loyalty. This also aligns with previous literature that found baseline communication was crucial in building a mutually beneficial exchange with a boss (Men, 2014; Walden et al., 2017). Micromanaging and constantly undermining the Millennial does not build trust. Respect is inherently established for employees, but it can certainly grow if a leader puts the time and effort into the relationship and intent behind their communication, aligning with Men’s (2014) previous research on relationship building’s impact on

communication. Like trust, loyalty is built with communication and the personal connection between the supervisor and Millennial.

There's a concern that seeking or even looking at other opportunities will negatively impact the supervisor's perception of that employee. This insight validated previous research of organizational commitment by exploring how emotional attachments entangle thoughts and feelings when determining the cost of staying or leaving a job. This evaluation deeply involves a personal relationship evaluation and often is scored with the culture that the Millennial is walking into each morning. Lemon and Boman (2022) reported that "a caring approach stems from not only actions, but the ongoing caring intent behind those actions...which leads to it being infused into organizational culture" (p. 4). This is a short glimpse into ethics of care research that has allowed researchers to understand more about effective employer-employee relationship management.

Furthermore, these comprehensions contribute to Walden et al.'s study (2017) and expand how communication is interpreted in a positive or negative way according to Millennials. This research found that clear and vetted expectations, tone and delivery of information, and intentional communication are positive signs of a leader-member relationship. On the other hand, lack of availability and visibility, lack of communication for priorities and goals, and the portrayal of not caring about their Millennial employee were viewed as negative aspects of a relationship. Men (2014) and Walden et al. (2017)'s studies have been validated through this research with clear examples of different ways communication is positively or negatively interpreted by this demographic. Their studies

are further expanded upon with baseline communications serving as a sign of positive communication with Millennials.

While a relationship may not greatly impact work ethic, ineffective communication can cause Millennials to feel transactional in their interactions and less enthusiastic to be at the organization. Men's (2014) studies were expanded upon as symmetrical (two-way) communication was evaluated by the Millennial demographic as a measuring tool of job retention. Their communication with their boss gives them experience to learn from and ultimately build their own toolkit of leadership and the type of communication they have in the present or in the future with other employees. Like Men (2014) states in her previous study, symmetrical communication is key for a positive trend of job retention.

Also, this study further validates LMX theory since all Millennials in the study established that they wanted both a professional and personal relationship with their supervisor. Without it, there is a lack of connection and meaning to the job since a supervisor holds proverbial keys to their success in their hands. These keys include valuable information for projects or upcoming opportunities, leadership development, and workplace morale. This study also followed the common tendency of how it used LMX theory since it captured this research from an employee perspective (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). However, this approach feels valuable because there are more employees that can usually voice their experiences, especially if they work for a big company. Lower-level employees are also the people executing the organization's product production or services, leaving them room to be molded and taught by their direct supervisors.

LMX theory was also extended by this study as previous studies used employees from the same organization to conduct research and pull work environment implications based on their responses (Dansereau et al., 1975). This new approach allowed multiple perspectives to be heard across the Millennial demographic, purposively ranging with different ages to grasp a wide spectrum of experiences. Also, this study did not stick to just one work environment but 13 different ones across the United States. This provided lots of helpful insights into different industries that have different techniques for building and maintaining relationships and ways of communicating goals, objectives, and information.

One other thing that this study also challenges about the theory is the influence of work ethic based on LMX relationship quality. This research showed that Millennials still put their best foot forward whether they have a high-quality LMX relationship and communication channels or not. This generation seems to cherish and garner that high-quality work mentality and won't let leadership affect how well they do their jobs. According to the interviews for this study, the researcher has confidence that Millennials are smart and know that future jobs will select them not for their relationship with their supervisor but their job portfolio and work quality. Therefore, they will not let their good or bad influences on communication and leadership drop the quality of their output. However, previous literature from Men and Jiang (2016) suggested job security with a balance work culture and adequate communication created a perfect scenario for an employee to stay.

Overall, this information provides valuable insight and information into how supervisors can effectively work with Millennials and what values in a relationship they

are seeking. With Millennials taking up a large portion of the work population right now, they need to be the focus of two-way communication to ultimately create a connection that fosters a desire to stay. The generations that have come after them are entering the workforce and possibly need even more connection and communication than ever before, so it's vital that Millennials gain the skills needed to be create meaning and a desire to continue working at an organization when evaluating the theory's areas of trust, professional respect, and loyalty in addition to two-way communication. Understanding this information along with Christian's (2021) findings about finding a manageable workload for the employees that stay behind if someone chooses to leave, it will not only help foster a great communication channel for the organization but also save money in hiring costs.

Further, it was interesting to see qualitative interviews and hearing from Millennials themselves bringing to light issues and observations in the workplace. These results are increasing the theoretical application by expanding understanding of LMX theory in the Millennial demographic. As more information unfolds with further research, this study hopes to be a wake-up call for leaders that are not proactively trying to create a work environment that is fostering meaningful jobs for their Millennial employees and contributing to job retention in their organization despite previous research from the likes of Kang and Sung (2019), Men (2014), Men and Jiang (2016), and other scholars who found the importance of two-way communication and professional and personal relationships when building a quality leader-member exchange.

In the end, a greater understanding of how a leader and employee can foster a positive working relationship will open the door for job retention and satisfaction for future generations.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provided new insights into the experiences of Millennials in the workplace, one limitation is the lack of generalizability with this being a qualitative study conducted with 13 participants. While participants were asked to rank their supervisor's communication skills on a scale from 1-5 (with five being the highest), the other questions of the interview were open-ended and responsive. Therefore, there could be greater reach and generalizability if this was conducted as a quantitative study. Further, this study could get more specific if all participants were working in the same industry or were a specific gender. There could be rich data that could come with that modification.

Finally, the participants sought affirmation during their interviews, using phrases such as "you know?" and "right?" with the researcher. This showed that participants were slightly uncomfortable with the topic and needed affirmation to continue answering the questions in an open and honest way. The researcher caught himself affirming out loud whether it was verbally or with body language (nodding and smiling); however, no participants changed or modified their answers externally based on the researcher's response.

Future opportunities for research could further examine the experiences of the supervisors and the leader-member exchange from their points of view. There lies valuable information to help this workplace relationship from the other side of the fence. Studies could also dive deeper into the shift in digital communication for supervisors and

Millennials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants in this study referenced the changes in communication during this time period, and it would be insightful to read more studies focused on this topic.

Conclusion

For this study, there were a lot of questions of whether or not a Millennial could stay at an organization or if this was the generation that didn't have a loyal bone in their body. The research shows that there are multiple factors that a Millennial will weigh and consider prior to looking for a new job, such as: levels of trust, benefits, and ultimately a personal and professional relationship with their superiors.

However, the communication between bosses plays a giant part in that decision, and Millennials won't stay at an organization that doesn't have supervisors that value them enough to build a personal relationship with them. You want to know how to keep them? Care for them. Otherwise, Millennials will find someone else who will show them that interpersonal fulfillment in the workplace. A work environment that fosters relationships and an open, two-way communication between bosses and employees will see its work tenure rise and its turnover drop with time.

Unlike the previous generations that will "tough it out" in a job for 30 years just because that's the way things have been and they have to work through their boss's ineffective leadership and communication, Millennials won't stay with that anymore. It's their turn to change the workplace dynamic, and their loyalty won't be compromised based on previous industry hardships.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

1. What is your date of birth?
2. What is your occupation?

Topic Introduction:

1. Why did you pursue your particular field of work?
2. What are some of your professional goals and aspirations?
3. What do you look for in a good job site?
4. How did you get your current job?
 - a. How long did you plan on staying there when you got the job?
5. What other jobs have you had in your adult work career?
 - a. What are some of the reasons you left those jobs?
6. In your own opinion, describe an effective communicator.
7. Describe your current supervisor in the work place.

Trust Questions:

1. How do you interact with your supervisor on a day-to-day basis?
2. Do you feel whether you can or cannot trust your supervisor on a professional basis?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What experience(s) has led you to answer that way?

Professional Respect Questions:

1. What is your most common mode of communication with your supervisor?
2. Do you feel whether your supervisor exhibits respect to you in a professional capacity?
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What experience(s) has led you to answer that way?

Loyalty Questions:

1. Based on your levels of trust and professional respect you have with and for your supervisor, have you developed a sense of loyalty to them?
 - a. Has that sense of loyalty affected your feelings towards your organization?
 - b. Why or why not?
 - c. What experience(s) has led you to answer that way?

Job Attitudes, Behaviors, and Career Success Questions:

1. On a scale of 1-5, how would you rate your supervisor's leadership skills?
2. In your own opinion, does your supervisor aid or hinder your experience in the workplace?
3. How has your supervisor affected your work performance, output and daily interactions with your other co-workers?
4. Have you developed any behaviors or attitudes towards your supervisor or others based off your interactions with your supervisor?
5. On a scale of 1-5, how much of an influence is your supervisor in whether you stay at your current job or leave for another job?
6. What advice would you give supervisors on how to lead employees with the same goals and aspirations as yourself?

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