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Peer Relationships in the Workplace: A Call to Arms

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Abstract

Scholars have long recognized that maintaining peer relationships is an integral part of a manager's job, yet this is an area with minimal theoretical development; most work focusing on superior-subordinate relationships. Managers need knowledge on how to develop and maintain peer relationships, however, workplace relationships can be of great diversity. They vary in emotional and productive content, with varying levels of influence, commonality, knowledge of the partner and uncertainty about the strength and nature of the relationship. This paper examines the existing state of workplace peer relationship theory, and argues that theoretical development could be enhanced by drawing on theories of intimate relationships. A number of relevant theories are identified including Winch's (1958) theory of complementary needs and Deutsch's (1949) theory of cooperation and competition, among others. Adapting such theories requires recognition of the differences between work place and intimate relationships. This includes their non-voluntary nature, lower emotional component and, in some cases, managerial colleagues may not even like each other. The purpose of this paper is to open up areas for academic researchers, however it also holds implications for managers. In particular, the complexity in the characteristics of relationships and the factors affecting them that makes it difficult for managers to adhere to broad-brush strategies. Nevertheless, some strategies are identified. This paper recognizes that relational learning is an important managerial process in the development and maintenance of peer relationships.

Keywords: *peer relationships, workplace, management, interdependence, symbolic exchange, relational learning*

INTRODUCTION

It is nearly fifty years since Mintzberg (1973) stressed the interactive role of managers and the need to maintain contacts with colleagues outside the formal chain of command. Managers must develop and maintain relationships with colleagues inside and outside their organization. Earlier still, Rosemary Stewart (1967) found that British managers spend 47% of their time with peers. Despite the early recognition of the importance of this topic, collegial relationships remain under-studied. Most research on workplace relationships focuses on the vertical relationships between employer and employee. As flatter organizational structures have become more common, we would expect to see more research on horizontal relationships, but little has been done to date.

Relationships are mechanisms through which colleagues and staff are mobilized, support is

garnered and work is performed (Clydesdale, 2009 and 2013). They provide managers with resources, information, activities, and support which can be used to enhance productivity. Relationships are arguably the best assets a manager can possess, and the quality of relationships impacts on the efficiency of the organization in which those relationships exist. However, in some cases the value of a relationship may not be productive but intrinsic to the relationship i.e. for the social and personal benefits it brings.

Given these benefits, a body of research has developed stressing the need for managers to develop high quality relationships. However, this is not always possible. Colleagues may not even like each other, yet the relationship must be managed in order to achieve work goals. This requires a deeper understanding of relationship development and management than is currently available in the managerial literature.

Academic attention has focused on a number of associated areas, gender (e.g. Montgomery and Norton, 1981), trust (e.g. Pratt and Dirks, 2007), and bullying and harassment (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1994). Valuable contributions have come from communication specialists and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). However, relationships are much more than communication channels. They are carriers of obligation, weighted by the history of activity, tainted by future expectations and varying levels of attraction. What is missing is in depth knowledge of the under-lying mechanisms of collegial relationships with their implication for managing such relations.

The development and maintenance of workplace relationships is of importance to managers and employees in profit and non-profit organizations. To enable them to do this, more knowledge is needed on how workplace relationships develop, strategies for managing relationships and understanding of the diverse range of relationships that exist in a workplace. This requires greater understanding of the diverse forces that shape relationships, including power differences, task description and situational factors such as goals and levels of interdependence.

This paper is a conceptual/analytical paper which analyses existing literature and identifies paths for future research. The next section identifies the benefits of positive relationships in the workplace and identifies characteristics of peer relationships in the workplace. This is followed by a description of Social Exchange theory which dominates existing academic literature. The following section then explains other theoretical areas that can contribute to our understanding. This is followed by a discussion on how relationships develop over time and relationship management strategies. The paper identifies future research pathways that include the use of social penetration theory, relational uncertainty, relational learning and Levi Straus's symbolic exchange. In summary, peer relationships in the workplace present a number of research areas that can provide valuable knowledge for managers wanting to build and maintain healthy functional relationships.

PEER RELATIONSHIPS: THEIR DIFFERENCES AND BENEFITS

Strong social ties can provide significant workplace benefits (Sias and Cahill, 1998; Rawlins, 1994). They increase staff morale, job satisfaction and reduce turnover. Friends are more likely to share information, help and mentor each other. They provide emotional and instrumental support, which can help buffer times when the job gets stressful and dissatisfying. While there is potential for social indulgence, negative gossip and formation of in/out groups, Berman, West and Richter (2002) surveyed managers and found they believed the benefits of friendships between their staff more than out-weighed the risks.

The value of workplace relationships is embodied in the term 'social capital.' However, social capital has been criticized for being too broad a catch-phrase (Adler and Kwon, 2002). It has been described as a public good, with corresponding studies performed at the social, group and organizational levels. The term 'relationship capital' applies more specifically to individual relationships, and corresponds to the private good aspect of social capital. Clydesdale (2013: 48) defined relationship capital as "the asset that is gained when managers develop and maintain relationships that help achieve their work goals." Good relationships are

an investment that help obtain work goals. By contrast, bad relationships are a liability that can divert time, emotions, and mental energy from work.

Morrison (2009) identified a number of benefits of workplace friendships, but noted that workplace friendships do not reliably predict positive outcomes. The impact of relationships is far more complex. She notes that

> There is a crucial distinction between having friends at work and working in a friendly environment. Whereas the former situation is undoubtedly important and 'natural' at certain times and for certain individuals the latter does not require a deep emotional involvement between individuals and may perhaps prove more beneficial overall in terms of organisational performance (Morrison 2009:135).

Organizational policies on appropriate behavior, harassment, bullying and conflict resolution can help to maintain a friendly environment, but for an individual manager wanting to build and sustain positive ties, the literature provides little guidance. Most research on workplace relations are on superior/subordinate relationships which differ from peer relationships in a number of ways. Superior/subordinate relationships are more formalized. For example, job descriptions will normally describe who a staff member reports to, while organizational charts show the relationships along the vertical chain of command. By contrast, peer relationships are horizontal and normally have less formal definition which can increase relational uncertainty. This concept, which will be discussed in more depth later in this paper, refers to the uncertainty that a person may hold about their position in a relationship.

A job may implicitly require interaction with some colleagues but not others. Role definition and differing levels of task interdependence can strongly shape the quantity of interaction. However, it does not necessarily determine the quality of that interaction, and the relationships that develop may not be determined solely by this connection.

Another difference between hierarchal and vertical relationships is the differing levels of power embodied in the relationships. Superior/subordinate relationships embody power consistent with their governing responsibilities. That can include legitimate power, coercive power, reward power, expert and referent power. Due to a lack of authority, peer relationships could be expected to have less of the first three forms of power and may contain no power. However, relationships are not devoid of power, and the existence and management of power in peer relationships is another area that is unexplored by academics.

Superior/subordinate relationships do share some commonalities with peer relationships. Both relationships can be involuntary in that a worker applies for a job not necessarily aware who all his/her colleagues will be. This stands in contrast to intimate relationships and friendships whereby the relationships are voluntary and can have a high emotional component. Yet workplace relationships are not necessarily devoid of emotion and can obtain great intimacy. Workplace relationships can be both productive and social. This lack of definition and dual function can open up uncertainty over the nature of the relationship, another subject that has been research in intimate relationships but not in the workplace. Any workplace will contain a range of relationships with different levels of intimacy, relational knowledge, social and productive content. Maneuvering through this diversity is one of the tasks of today's employees and managers, and there is need for more knowledge to help with this task.

SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY IN THE WORKPLACE

The dominant theory in workplace relations is social exchange theory and can be seen in psychological contracts (Rousseau, 1989) and leader member exchange (LMX) (Graen & Uhl-Bien,1991). However much of the work is based on hierarchal relationships between employer and employee, not peer relationships. The theory's origins can be traced to Levi-Strauss (1949), who saw exchange as culturally defined and embedded with symbolism. For Levi-Strauss, it did not matter what was exchanged—it was the exchange that was important. Such exchange facilitated social structure

through interconnected patterns of relationships.

The type of exchange identified by Levi-Strauss was a generalised exchange which was not necessarily reciprocated to the original giver—the exchange may be repaid to another in the group. It reflected Levi-Strauss's collective view. Homans (1958) shifted the focus from the collective to the individual, and considered utilitarian purposes of exchange. People exchange for self-interested gain. With a strong reflection of economic thought, he noted that reciprocated exchange between two individuals could be mutually beneficial to both parties. It was not just symbolic and could be used to gain both material and non-material goods such as approval and prestige.

Blau (1964) differentiated between social and economic exchange, although in his case, it wasn't just a difference in what was exchanged (content), as the processes were also different. Economic exchanges were negotiated, contractual and specified exchanges, whereas social exchanges were unspecified and reciprocated.

Integral to social exchange is the concept of reciprocity. This demands that people should help those who have helped them, and people should not injure those who have helped them (Gouldner 1960). The existence of reciprocity helps to stabilise relationships. However, Gouldner noted that reciprocity norms vary in relationships. He suggested that in close relationships expectations are tacitly known, whereas in new ones, the expectations behind the exchange are made explicit.

Social exchange theory indicates that a relationship exists for the mutual benefit of both parties who are aware of what they give and receive. If an individual feels the costs exceed the benefits, they are likely to end the relationship. On the other hand, if the benefits out-weigh the costs, they will feel justified investing effort to maintain the relationship (Blau 1964, Thibault and Kelley 1952). Similarly, if an individual feels they are getting too indebted, they will experience discomfort and attempt to reduce that discomfort by reciprocating or cognitively restructuring the situation (Greenberg, 1980).

Psychological contracts are an extension of social exchange, but once again, most of the research in this area refers to employee-employer relationships. When originally introduced psychological contracts referred to mutual expectations in employment relations (Argyris 1960, Levinson, Price, Munden, Mandl and Solley, 1962). In 1989, Rousseau changed the focus from mutual expectations to individual-level cognition. Rousseau defined a psychological contract as "an individual's perception of what he or she owes another party in an exchange relationship, and of what that other party owes in return…" (Wolf-Morrison and Robinson 2004, 162).

This lead to a significant body of research exploring the perceptions of what each party is expected to give and receive. However the psychological contract is inherently subjective and dependent on the individual's perception (Rousseau, 1989). This can create high levels of incongruence in expectations of obligation between parties. The incongruence can be caused by different cognitive schemata and assumptions of each party's obligations (Wolfe-Morrison and Robinson, 2004). Incongruence can also result from ambiguities in exchange, poor communication and perceptual biases and distortions such as self-serving bias.

The literature thus far has identified three types of exchange relationships; negotiated, general and reciprocated (Flynn, 2005). As its name suggests, negotiated exchange occurs when two parties negotiate their respective obligations and expectations. In reciprocated exchange, the obligations may not be explicitly stated, but it is expected that a favour will be reciprocated in the future. With generalized exchange, the giving and receiving is indirect. i.e. "Paul may receive a benefit from Heather but may reciprocate by giving to Eric, rather than to Heather" (Flynn, 2005).

Social exchange theory can be used to explain relationship development. Workers who do not provide opportunities for productive complementary exchanges, or who fail to reciprocate get little attention (Berman, West and Richter, 2002). Similarly, a worker who demands too much may be perceived as high maintenance. Workers learn what is appropriate to exchange through experience and relational learning. This involves trial and error, which by definition suggests a well-intentioned colleague can make mistakes and damage relationships. In an aptly titled article 'How much should I

give and how often?,' Flynn (2003) found that a colleague who frequently performs favors, but receives fewer in return, may gain status compared to less generous colleagues. However, this situation is not necessary to their advantage. Flynn argues that generous 'creditor' employees tend to be less productive. An employee with highly unbalanced patterns of exchange tended to be less productive and may see their resources drained which could hinder their productivity. In which case, it is important to minimise the imbalance.

Exchange theories also lie behind strategies on relationship management. In an examination of givers and takers, Grant (2013) summarised strategies that would maintain an element of giving but reduce the chance that productivity suffers. These include limiting the time available for others, setting boundaries and being selective about who one helps.

Flynn (2005) attempted to explain why employees prefer different forms of social exchange. He proposed their preferences reflect their identity orientations (with implications for managing in a collective or individualistic culture). He proposed that a worker with a personal identity orientation will favour negotiated exchange in which the terms of the exchange are openly discussed for a direct transaction. However, someone with a collective orientation will be comfortable with generalized exchange. Such workers are more open to actions that benefit the group as a whole. Finally, someone with a relational orientation will have a more selective reciprocated exchange based on their relationship.

Other Theories and Their Potential

Social exchange theory provides a good basis for understanding much workplace interaction however, it does not describe all relationships. One alternative to exchange-based relationships are communal relationships (Clark and Mills 1979). In communal relations there is no expectation of reciprocity. People give in response to other people out of concern for their welfare. The benefits given are not part of an exchange and do not create an obligation to return a comparable benefit (Mills and Clark, 1994).

Social network theory and analysis recognizes that a manager's relationships have a major impact on performance (Burt, 1997). A social network can be mapped showing which actors act as nodes tying others together into relationships. It considers an actor's density of ties with others and their position in the structure. A centrally located individual gains access to information resources and power (Brass, 1985; Brass & Burkhardt, 1993). Granovetter (1973) proposed that the strength of any tie is determined by the emotional intensity, intimacy, time involved and degree of reciprocation. Social network analysis recognizes the importance of relationships, however there is a need for more academic literature on the management of those relationships and maximizing the value of any given tie.

Another welcome body of knowledge is 'positive relationships at work' (Ragins and Dutton, 2007). Positive relations at work are defined as high-quality connections characterized by higher emotional carrying capacity, greater levels of tensility which refers to a relationships ability to withstand strain in the face of adversity, and a greater capacity for connectivity including an openness to new ideas (Ibid). Positive relations foster communication and coordination of highly interdependent work (Golden-Biddle et al. 2007). Studies on positive relationships at work recognize the importance of relationships, but their focus is on higher quality relationships which may not represent most workplace interactions. A notable characteristic is their higher emotional component.

There is a tendency to assume that low quality exchange is not desirable, but this may not be the case. Such relationships may require less time and energy that distract from productive activities. Granovetter (1985) suggested that a trade-off exists between the quantity of relationships and the quality of those relationships. People do not have sufficient resources to adequately develop and maintain a high number of high-quality relationships. Of course, some people have a desire to be liked, in which case they will commit significant energy into developing relationships. For some, relationships are the thing that they most enjoy about work. For others there is a need to ration their socio-psychological resources. Time and energy constraints imply the need for selectivity in relationship development.

Despite these advances, our understanding and theoretical base of peer relationships remains narrow, undermined by the nature of workplace relationships which increases complexity. Peer relationships in the workplace are non-voluntary and not formally defined beyond general policies on staff behavior. They vary in emotional content and levels of social and productive interaction. This diversity complicates our minimal understanding of power in peer relationships, relationship uncertainty and situational factors. The large number of potential relationships in a workplace can increase uncertainty as there is little opportunity to learn about our colleagues and the potential for a relationship.

To expand knowledge on workplace relationships, academics could begin by examining literature on non-work-place relationships. Social psychologists have conducted significant theoretical development and research on intimate and marital relationships, how relations affect child development, and a lesser amount on friendships. This body of work can provide a number of directions to explore workplace relationships. However, not all aspects of these theories are transferable to the workplace. With an intimate relationship or friendship, the relationship in itself is the goal for the parties involved. In the workplace, a relationship may merely be a means to an end. The goal may simply be to get along with the workmates while earning a living, in which case we could expect such relationships to embody lower levels of commitment and emotion. Workers cannot always choose their workmates so lower levels of self-disclosure and intimacy can be expected. Nevertheless, if we bear these differences in mind, the work of relationship researchers may open up a number of paths to follow.

The most influential general theory of relationship interaction is interdependence theory developed by John Thibaut and Harold Kelley (1962). Thibaut and Kelley argued that individuals must not just consider their own options, but also those of their partners. They must consider how the partner's reactions and actions will affect them, and the influence that parties may exert on each other in any given situation. It is presumed that partners with high levels of mutual dependence will be able to exert greater influence on each other. If the state of dependence is unequal, "the less involved member is assumed to have a greater ability to influence it than the more involved one" (Levinger, 1994: 23–24).

Interdependence theory can help to explain power in peer relationships. It also recognizes situational factors as each situation presents its own possibilities and levels of influence. If applied to management, common situations could be explored for different strategic options. The emphasis in interdependence theory is on the relationship. If we recognize that the management role is one of a series of interactive episodes, interdependence theory could become a useful tool for analysis.

One theory which gained little traction in intimate relationships, but could find greater use in workplace relations is Winch's (1958) theory of complementary needs. This theory argued that people who possess different but complimentary traits may be attracted to each other and interact harmoniously. Complementary needs exist:

> When two persons, A and B, are interacting, we consider the resulting gratifications of both to be 'complementary' if one of the following conditions is satisfied: (1) the need or needs in A which are being gratified are different in kind from the need or needs being gratified in B; or (2) the need or needs in A which are being gratified are very different in intensity from the same needs in B, which are also being gratified (Winch, Ktsanes and Ktsanes 1955, 243).

In other words, a relationship is more likely to exist where parties have different needs, or they have the same needs, but there is difference in the intensity of that need. It is the differences, not the similarities between people that are important. However, subsequent research on intimate relationships failed to back the theory. In intimate relationships, similarity (homogamy) plays an important role in attraction. Bowerman and Day (1956:605) noted that "there is no reason to believe that all needs should be either homogamous or complementary." It depends on the relationship and the circumstances. A relationship may be

complimentary in some instances and homogamous in others.

Winch's theory initially referred to psychological needs of romantic partners however, it could be extended to refer to productive needs of colleagues. At work, job roles may create situations with complimentary but, in contrast to personal relationships, the needs will commonly be instrumental needs, such as the need for advice, resources and information.

Winch's theory has been used to assess compatibility of personalities between leaders and followers with mixed results (Saltz 2004, Glomb and Welsh, 2005). However, the theory does not appear to have been applied to broader aspects of work relationships' including resources and information needs.

These theories open possibilities to examine relationships through the assessment of needs and dependencies. Some people's jobs may require them to be more dependent on others. This might not a problem if the other person's job-role is one where they must cooperate. However, where extra-contractual behaviors are required, the first worker may end up in a situation of dependence, or alternatively, the second worker may find they are giving with little gained in return. Of course, a worker can reciprocate by moving beyond the workplace (e.g. buying a colleague lunch).

Those with complementary needs may end in a relationship of mutual dependence or mutual assistance. In contrast, those with similar needs may end up in situations of competition or alternatively, they may act as allies if the resources can be shared. This raises another important contribution from the psychological literature; Deutsch's (1949, 1980) theory of cooperation and competition which focused, not on needs, but on goals. If partners have interdependent goals their relationship will reflect the nature of that independence. Partners who have positive interdependent or congruent goals are more likely to cooperate. In contrast, those with negatively interdependent goals will have a competitive relationship. Once again, this is dependent on resource distribution and organisation decision making processes.

Role and job descriptions can determine whether a relationship is defined by high need dependence and high interaction. This leads to a situation whereby relational strategies will vary depending on the level of dependence and need. Relationships can be characterized by high need and/or high interaction. This has implications for social network theory with maps of ties having to consider complimentary need, goals and levels of dependency.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS OVER TIME

Workplaces are characterised by large numbers of relationships, each at different levels of development. Social psychologists have conducted a significant number of studies on relationship development, however most of these focus on intimate/romantic relationships.

A key aspect of both friendships and intimate relationships is self-disclosure. Self-disclosure is a common feature of almost all relationship development theories (Berscheid and Regan 2005). Standing out is Altman and Taylor's (1973) Social Penetration Theory. This theory proposes that the reciprocal exchange of self-information increases as people get to know each other, leading to greater closeness and commitment. When people first meet, they disclose little about themselves, and any disclosures are relatively shallow. If the partner does not respond or reciprocate to these early exchanges, the relationship is unlikely to develop further. However, if the response to these initial exchanges is positive, the reciprocal exchange of information increases. The interaction becomes deeper, with parties revealing more detailed personal information about themselves and their emotions

Reis and Shaver's (1988) intimacy model links disclosure to relationship development. In their model, relationship development begins when one party discloses information about themselves to the other party. Commonly, this self-disclosure involves statements of thoughts and feelings. The partner's response to this disclosure determines if the relationship develops further. If the partner is unresponsive, the relationship will not deepen. However, if the response is supportive and encouraging, they appear caring and the disclosing party feels

understood, valued and worthy. This in turn influences their response, and intimacy is increased. This is a recursive process in which the feelings, thoughts and behaviours of partners are modified over time, shaped by the previous interaction.

The intimacy model illustrates the recursive nature of relationship development and the process of learning that occurs in relationship development. Partners learn whether to make more disclosures (and further investment) into a relationship based on what they learned from the previous response. Responsivity lies at the heart of all relationships (Berscheid and Regan, 2005, p. 146–7). Partners need to be responsive to each other if the relationship is to develop.

The social psychology literature on friendships provides another view of relationship development. Friendships go through a formation stage in which an individual is identified as a potential friend. Mutual attraction exists and leads to increased interaction and exchange of information, including self-disclosure. As with intimate relationships, partners are believed to examine the value of a relationship under the influence of factors associated with attraction. If a friendship is formed, the relationship enters a maintenance stage in which the level of interdependence varies over time. It may lead to a deterioration and dissolution phase in which the relationship ends.

The existence or amount of self-disclosure may be one aspect in which work relationships vary from previous relationship studies. The non-voluntary nature of productive relationships suggests lower levels of disclosure, or alternatively, the disclosure may contain different content, including less emotional content.

Sias and Cahill (1998) studied peer friendships in the work-place and revealed a three stage process in which colleagues first become friends and, in the next stage, become close friends and finally moved from close friend to almost best friend. Consistent with social penetration theory, this process is marked by increased intimacy of conversation and less caution. Worker friendship development is influenced by contextual factors and personal attributes. Contextual factors include whether they work in close proximity to each other, whether they share common tasks, or engage in extra-organizational socializing. Life experiences, including work problems can also facilitate workers to get closer.

Ferris et al. (2009) proposed a four stage model of work relationship development, with growth in the level of trust, respect, affect and support as the relationship ages. The first stage is initial interaction. The second and third stages sees development and expansion in the relationship with growing commitment to each other. Finally, in the last stage, the relationship is characterized by increased interpersonal commitment, loyalty and accountability. The authors recognise that relationships vary in quality. If expectations are not met the relationship will be of low quality but, if exceeded, can be of high-quality. One of the features they recognize as impacting on relationship development is relational interaction style (Ferris et al., 2009). The style of interaction used by an individual is a reflection of personal characteristics, background and experiences, and has an impact on compatibility.

The principles of attraction reflect personal characteristics that workers bring to the workplace such as familiarity, similarity, reciprocity of attraction (we like people who like us) and physical attractiveness. Similarity can make it easier for people to understand and work with each other. This can include similarity of goals, values, interests, and ethnic and demographic similarity (Cole and Teboul, 2004). People with similar views are more likely to understand each other and find it easier to work with each other. Dutton, Roberts and Bednar (2010) link social resources to an individual's identity at work. If an individual's identity is characterized by virtuous qualities, regard for others and him/herself, and the identity fits the standards of the workplace, an individual is more likely to form quality relationships. A complex and compatible identity facilitates the creation of diverse relationships.

Equally important is the fact that workers don't always want their work place relationships to grow closer (Sias and Gallagher, 2009). Many work relationships do not follow a path to friendship or close trusting relationship. As Sias and Gallagher (2009) note friendships are voluntary and personal. By contrast, we do not choose who we work with and the nature of interaction is primarily task oriented.

However, managing low quality relationships is a topic with little academic exploration.

The models of relational development described above have an implicit element of relational learning, in which partners learn about each other's characteristics as the relationship developments. Exchange based models focus on gaining greater knowledge on the potential for exchange. Parties also learn what is possible to exchange. Blau (1964) differentiated between social and productive exchange (Blau's characterisation also differentiated both in terms of content and process). A productive exchange can involve resources, time, labour and advice (expertise and information) that enhance productivity. By contrast, social exchange involves items like status and social support.

Trust is a factor that is learned as a relationship develops and is a key factor as it gives workers confidence to know that contribution will be repaid. Trust may not initially exist but can develop over time through a process that begins with small exchanges and increases over time (Pratt and Dirks, 2007). However, much more is learned through the process of exchanges than how much our partner can be trusted. Parties also learn whether their expectations are realistic, and as experience is gained, parties may change their expectations, as well as their perception of previous promises and exchanges (Schalk, 2004).

Relational learning is the process by which a party learns if a potential partner is compatible and the characteristics of that particular interaction. Through relational learning, knowledge is also gained about a person's disposition and how they will behave in a wide range of situations, not just exchange, and with that knowledge we develop expectancies about their probable behaviour. More is learned about their traits, values and beliefs, and through this learning people can then decide the best way to interact with their colleagues. Learning the differences between individuals allows people to build effective management strategies. For example, successful relationship management requires learning the appropriate level of intimacy interaction and trust with each relationship. Drawing on this literature of relational development, we can identify the following features that are learned as the relationship develops:

1. What resources colleagues have for exchange (social and productive)
2. If they are responsive to exchange
3. If they can be trusted for exchange.
4. What is appropriate to exchange and the rules of exchange. A new employee could ask for too much and has to learn when they are going too far.
5. If we like them, a position which is influenced by a number of features of attraction including similarity, familiarity, etc.
6. Whether they like us
7. Whether they wish to disclose information and how much they wish to disclose
8. If they are responsive to our disclosure in a manner that makes us feel cared for and valued
9. Schemata, disposition, expectations, exchange views, desired intimacy
10. If they have compatible interactive styles and behavioural rules.

This process of relational learning plays an important part in the nature of the subsequent relationship. Current theories describe a movement from shallow exchange to closer intimate exchange, but a positive relationship or friendship might not develop because a process of relational learning had occurred and revealed a lack of compatibility (or worse, they dislike each other). A relationship may have low quality exchange simply because parties have not had the opportunity to engage in relational learning, or alternatively, because they have nothing to exchange.

RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES —MANAGING EXISTING RELATIONSHIPS

While a body of work on this subject exists on intimate relationships (Dindia & Baxter, 1987; Baxter & Dindia, 1990), limited work has been done on maintenance strategies between peers in the workplace, and it is an issue in which Interdependence theory and the theory of complimentary needs may contribute. For example, it is possible that one sided exchanges may occur because one person has resources that one party needs but has little needed by the other. This may occur because of the role in

their job description. In situations where time and resources are scarce, it may only be worthwhile to enhance a relationship if there are complimentary goals and needs, or if colleagues have resources that enhance performance.

Hatfield, Utne and Traupmann (1979) stressed the importance of equity in relationships. They argued that partners judge the status of a relationship by considering what they contribute to a relationship compared with what their partners put in (relational comparison). They then compare this to the contributions that others make in similar relationships (referential comparisons). On the basis of such comparisons, they determine if they are in an equitable relationship. If not, a number of options exist to restore perceived equity including:

- changing individual contributions to the relationship;
- convincing partner to change his or her contribution;
- the individual convinces him or herself the inequity does not exist;
- ending the relationship.

However, Hatfield et al. did not look at work relationships. It can be difficult to sever work relationships because of the requirements of the job. In which case, changing contributions to the relationships is more likely or, alternatively, replacing 'ending the relationship' with 'reducing the level of interaction,' although this action in itself may give offence.

One can see the potential to marry such research with Game Theory in which agents must consider the responses of their partners. However, strategy development also requires consideration of those factors that a manager has little control over, particularly if the job is one of high productive need and dependency. This includes the likely future length of the relationship as a negative action may incur negative reciprocity, and ignite a spiral which destroys relationship capital, hindering productive functioning and the enjoyment of the job. In which case, the problem could become bigger in the future. In relations based on reciprocity, one action lays the foundations for future interactions. Other factors to be considered include the level of productive need and dependence, the frequency of interaction and the social content of interaction.

Managing relationship uncertainty is another concept of relevance from intimate relationships, but once again, more research is required to adapt it to workplace relations. Knobloch and Solomon (1999: 264) describe relational uncertainty as "the degree of confidence people has in their perceptions of involvement within close relationships." Four types of uncertainty have been identified including uncertainty over the reciprocity of feelings, uncertainty about behavior norms, uncertainty about the current status of the relationship, and uncertainty about the relationship's future.

Given the large number of relationships at work and the impossibility of knowing all workers (unless the job as been held for some time), many relationships will operate in a vacuum of uncertainty, a situation made worse by the perceptual biases and communication problems that can lead to incongruity. Many workers may feel unappreciated with implications for their sense of belonging. Such feelings can fester and lead to disruptive behavior.

Uncertainty reduction strategies can be married with Levi-Strauss's (1949) view of relationships in which exchange can occur to strengthen social networks. Symbolic exchange may be a useful mechanism in workplaces and an area deserving of further study. However, uncertainty management need not be so explicit. Low energy strategies may simply involve monitoring vocal tone, positive greetings or simple statements of assurance (Clydesdale, 2013). It might be expected that production-based relationships require fewer discussions about feelings than expected in intimate relationships. It is also worth noting that in some cases, uncertainty may be preferable to the truth—the colleagues may not like you. However, if the goal is to 'get the job done,' it may be irrelevant whether they like you or not.

Once again, the literature on intimate relationships can offer a guide for theoretical development for managing workplace relations. While examining romantic relationships, Stafford and Canary (1991) identified strategies of:

1. Assurance, where a partner reassures the other about his/her importance in the relationship.

2. Openness, where partners openly discuss their feelings about the relationship.
3. Positivity, in which the partners make effort to keep the interaction positive.

Stafford, Dainton and Haas, (2000) later added two more strategies

4. Advice, in which expressions of opinions and support are given.
5. Conflict management, including strategies of cooperation and apologizing.

While this work offers a good starting point to explore strategies, the different nature of work relationships means we cannot always transfer strategies and theories from intimate relationships without adaptation. The difference between the two types of relationships must be taken in to account. Workplace relations involve less self-disclosure and intimacy, less emotional content, less commitment, and the goals of the relationships are different. Workplace relations often means to an end, whereas in intimate relationships, the goal is the relationship.

These differences would suggest that workers may not appreciate openly discussing feelings, and it is significant that Lee and Jablin (1995) found workers sometimes use strategies to distance themselves. In fact, Kaplan (1976, 1978) noted that organizational members may maintain their relationships by not just expressing their feelings and views, but also suppressing them. This suggests it is important to know the subtleties of how much to reveal, a knowledge that can be gained through relational learning.

Effective strategies for managing relationships take in to account individual differences of the colleagues. With knowledge of their disposition and accurate expectations of how colleagues behave under certain circumstances, one can devise more accurate strategies. However, to possess this knowledge, one must have undergone a process of relational learning and this is not always possible.

CONCLUSION

Peer relationships have long been recognized as an important part of workplace functioning, hence, there is need for knowledge on how workplace relationships develop and strategies for managing such relationships. This paper suggests that research and theoretical development could be progressed by drawing on the broader academic literature on relationships, particularly intimate relationships.

Managers must maintain a high number of relationships with diverse characteristics and at different levels of development. The extant literature on relational development among workplace peers does not sufficiently account for the diverse range of relationships. This limits their practical application. Current theories describe a process of movement from low to high quality interaction, but not all relationships follow this path. A number of reasons explain why a relationship may not become a high-quality relationship. It may be that colleagues have nothing to exchange or no need to exchange in order to enhance productivity. Alternatively, a process of relational learning may have revealed a lack of compatibility. Finally, relationships take time and energy to develop and some selectivity of relationship development will occur. The result is a broad range of relationship patterns.

Some of the factors influencing relationships can be beyond the control of managers such as similarity, attraction and desire of the workmates to have a relationship. These are shown in figure. 1. This complexity in the factors affecting relationships makes it difficult for managers to adhere to blanket strategies. Strategies will vary depending on the characteristics of each individual and the influencing factors, in which case relational learning is necessary for relationship management. Seen in this light relational learning is not just a process of relational development but a vital management process.

Where low quality relationships exist, managers may have to rely on codes of conduct and workplace policies to ensure workplace relationships remain functional. Other useful strategies include the need to be aware of how relational uncertainty can lead to disharmony and the use of low-energy symbolic exchanges to facilitate useful connections. Finally, it is important to remember that colleagues are not chosen but are in place for the position a manager holds. The manager's position is not

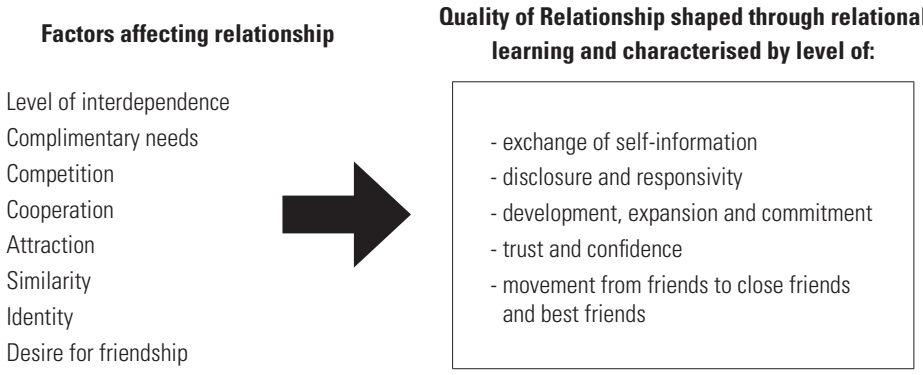

Figure 1: Characteristics and Factors Affecting Peer Relationship Quality in the Workplace

necessarily to be friends but to achieve organisational goals through relationships.

This paper has raised the need for more research on peer relationships and that recognise the diversity of relationships that exist in the workplace. Future research options include social penetration theory, relational uncertainty and relational learning in the workplace. This knowledge can provide insight on differences in relationships and how they can be managed. Relational uncertainty can be matched with Game theory to explore relational management strategies for different situations and consideration of the partner's position. Similarly, studies of symbolic exchange may prove useful to facilitate relationship maintenance.

However, in transferring theories, the different nature of workplace relations must be considered including the lower voluntary and emotional component, and the importance of work goals and needs. Nevertheless, this subject presents an Aladdin's cave of research possibilities of high value to managers and management educators.

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