

## THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SUPERIOR-SUBORDINATE COMMUNICATION, RELATIONSHIP QUALITY AND WORK STRESS IN PRISON DEPARTMENT OF MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*An organisation's success or failure depends on the effectiveness of communication established between employees and their employers. Various studies showed that the effectiveness of supervisory communication has emerged to help members of the organisation to obtain job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and also to release their work stress. Previous research also found that effective superior-subordinate communication will be able to provide a beneficial effect on the organisation. This study uses the scale developed by Miles et al. (1996), which contains 24 items as the research instrument. The purpose of this study is to identify the relationship between superior-subordinate communication, relationship quality and work stress in the Prison Department of Malaysia. Respondents totalled 447 prison staff from eight correctional institutions in Malaysia comprising of a randomly selected sample from Superintendent Prison to Prison Warder. Statistical analysis techniques such as Pearson Correlation Test were used to test the hypotheses. The findings revealed a significant, positive, and strong relationship between superior-subordinate communication and relationship quality. The study also revealed a significant, positive but weak relationship between work stress and superior-subordinate communication. Furthermore, the study shows no relationship between work stress and relationship quality. Based on this study, implications from the findings were highlighted as an effort towards enhancing the superior-subordinate communications in the Prison Department of Malaysia.*

**Keywords:** *Prison Department of Malaysia; superior-subordinate communication; leader-member exchange (LMX); work stress*

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## Introduction

Working as a correctional officer is a unique experience that is found in no other organisation (Lambert et al, 2009). This is because working in this field can be very challenging and stressful since it deals with issues that are not typically found in other occupations (Delprino, 2002). These issues may include shift work, understaffing, threat of assault, and a correction on public image. Besides, correctional officers play an influential role in the lives of many inmates because of their direct and prolonged interaction (Farkas, 2009).

This study focuses on superior-subordinate communication in selected prisons in Malaysia. Lambert et al. (2009) stated that working in prison is a unique experience that is found in no other organisation. Studies conducted here by the Department of Community Health Medical Centre, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (HUKM) from 2007 to 2009 found that correctional officers ranked the second highest after police officers for occupational stress. The overall survey results are first by police officers (53.7%) followed by prison officers (48.8%), fire brigade officers (47.3%), teachers (45.8%), nurses (42.3%), and doctors (40.7%). In addition to correctional officers, other service occupations that have been classified as the most stressful and having the lowest level of job satisfaction are ambulance workers, customer service employees in call centres and police officers (Borritz et. al, 2006; Johnson et al, 2005).

As Finn (1988) stated that the organisation has been identified as a major source of stress for employees, this study was designed to see whether communication between employees also affected the causes of stress. This is because Mohd. Taib Dora and Hamdan Abd. Kadir (2008) stated that stress between employees occurs because of ineffective communication. Similarly, studies conducted in the Western countries also pointed out communication as a source of stress factors, where Brief et al. (1981) and Fontana (1989) stated that poor communication is a source of stress. Fulk and Mani (1986) also included a lack of communication as a source of stress. This study is also to provide more comprehensive explanation of the relationship between superior-subordinate communication and work stress faced by the organisation.

Prior to this, initial studies focusing on LMX are more from the perspective of subordinate perceptions alone. Previous researchers have also stressed the importance of measuring the quality of dyadic from both perceptions involving superiors and subordinates (Bhal & Ansari, 2000; Chooi Hwa, Jantani, & Ansari, 2009; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Scandura et al., 1986; Scriesheim et al., 1999; Varma & Stroh, 2001). Therefore, this study was conducted by taking into account the quality of LMX relationship involving the superiors and subordinates as suggested by previous researchers. In terms of the relationship between the

quality of LMX and superior-subordinate communication, there is a stream of research that explores both variables. Findings from such a line of enquiry showed that the quality of LMX affects superior-subordinate communication in areas such as discourse patterns, upward influence, communication expectations, cooperative communication, perceived organisational justice, and decision-making practices (Krone, 1992; Lee, 1997; 2001; Lee & Jablin, 1995). However, LMX research has not explored the superior-subordinate communication behaviour dimension as a meaningful independent variable (Miles, King, & Patrick, 1996). Thus, this study focuses on superior-subordinate communication as an independent variable, while work stress and LMX quality are dependent variables.

In general, correctional officers are responsible for the care, custody and control of individuals who have been arrested and are awaiting trial while on remand or who have been convicted of a crime and sentenced to serve time in a prison or jail. They are also responsible for the safety and security of the facility itself. Other than being responsible for the safety of the prisoners, correctional officers are also responsible for rehabilitating the prisoners' behaviour and attitude through rehabilitation programmes planned by the prisons.

### **Superior-Subordinate Communication**

The most important communication links in any organisation occur within superior-subordinate dyads. Jablin and Krone (1994) pointed out that superior-subordinate communication in a social system focuses on dyadic communication in maintaining the relationship between them. Superior-subordinate communication has been broadly defined as an exchange of information and influence among organisational members, at least one of which has an official authority to direct and evaluate the activities of the subordinates in the organisation (Jablin, 1979). Clampitt and Downs (1994) also defined superior-subordinate communication as a form of contact between them, where superiors are open to ideas from subordinates and how superiors listen and act on subordinates' ideas and problems.

Jablin (1979) described superior-subordinate communication patterns as a form of work interaction in a superior-subordinate relationship. He classified the superior-subordinate communication literature into nine categories, namely interaction patterns, openness in communication, upward distortion of information, the gap in understanding between superiors and subordinates, superior feedback and the communication qualities of effective versus ineffective superiors. Various studies showed that the effectiveness of supervisory communication that has emerged to help members of the organisation to obtain job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation. Previous research also found that effective communication between superiors and subordinates will be able to provide a beneficial effect on the organisation (Lee & Jablin, 1995). In this research, superior-subordinate

communication is defined as a process and interaction between superiors and subordinates in order to achieve task objectives and to maintain relationship between them according to the four dimensions; positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication (Miles et al, 1996).

### **Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Relationship Quality**

In organisational communication studies, one of the important element in superior-subordinate communication studies is the relationship formed between them (Hassan et al, 2002). Through leader-member exchange model or better known as LMX, it will provide a clear understanding of the relationship that occurs between superiors and subordinates. Since its inception, this model has become popular in the explanation of the concept and operation of the exchange process of dyadic communication between superiors and subordinates. Thus, there are many studies (Anderson & Tolson, 1991; Basu & Green, 1997; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Lee & Jablin, 1995; Mueller & Lee, 2002) in the field of organisational behaviour and organisational communication that are based on the LMX model. The LMX model has been recognised legally as an operation in the study of organisational behaviour (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden & Graen, 1980; Schriesheim et al, 1999).

In general, the LMX theory suggests that the leader does not relate to all subordinates equally where employees are divided according to the quality of exchange relationship between them (Graen & Cashman, 1975). LMX theory of evolution developed from time to time, from as either 'in-group' and 'out-group' (Graen & Cashman, 1975), a trusted aide or assistant hired (Zalesny & Graen, 1987), and high and low quality of LMX (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

### **Work Stress in Correctional Institutions**

The work of correctional officers have been identified as one of the most stressful occupation (Cooper et al, 1988). According to Senol-Durak, Durak, and Gencoz (2006), prison officers have reported greater stress due to the cultural diversity of inmates, increased civil suits, conflicts and ambiguity of roles due to the shift of expectation from being a punitive facility to a rehabilitated facility. Cornelius (1994) stated that a fundamental feature of working in prisons that causes stress is that people do not like being held against their will and being closely supervised. Broadsky (1982) noted that any organisation or social structure which consists of one group of people kept inside who do not want to be there and the other group who are there to make sure they stay in will be an organisation under stress. This is the nature of the work environment in correctional institutions that will eventually lead to working stress in their daily routine.

Nevertheless, stress among prison officers has generally become an important issue and is been widely studied (Finn, 1998). As Armstrong and Griffin (2004) pointed out, few organisations other than prisons are charged with the central task of supervising and securing of unwilling and potentially violent population. Besides, as the prison population continues to grow, the conditions within the correctional facilities will remain stressful for inmates (Hassine, 1996; Irwin, 1996; Toch, 1992) and also to the prison staff (Anson & Bloom, 1988; Finn, 1998; Harris, 1983). Consequently, much research has been done before with respect to work stress faced by prison officers where the stress is linked to several factors including lack of family support, management and society, feelings of helplessness and the perception of facing the danger at work (Cullen, Link, Wolfe, & Frank, 1985; Farkas, 2001; Grossi et al, 1996; Pogrebin, 1978; Poole & Regoli, 1980; Triplett et al, 1999). Furthermore, Finn (1998) has explained that the sources of prison officers' stress are organisational stress (understaffing, overtime, shift work role conflict, role ambiguity and supervisor demand), work-related stress (threats of inmate violence, inmate violence, inmate demands and manipulation and problems with co-workers) as well as stress from the outside system (low public recognition and poor pay).

This study aims to examine the relationship that existed between the communication of superiors and subordinates in the Prison Department of Malaysia and its connection with the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship in quality and work stress. Hepburn and Knepper (1993) stated that correctional officers are responsible for creating and maintaining a humane environment in the prison. This is why it is important to study the pattern of communication among prison officers since they are responsible for ensuring that prisoners serving a sentence are fully restored through rehabilitation programmes in the prison. This is consistent with the concept that the officers who are able to communicate and perform their jobs well will be able to implement obligations on to the prisoners under their supervision.

## **Objectives**

Based on the research issues, there are three main objectives for this research:

- i. To view the relationship between superior-subordinate communication and LMX relationship quality.
- ii. To view the relationship between superior-subordinate communication and work stress.
- iii. To view the relationship between LMX relationship quality and work stress.

## Hypotheses

Based on the objectives, there are three main hypotheses for this research:

- a) *H1: There is a positive and significant relationship between superior-subordinate communication and LMX relationship quality in the Prison Department of Malaysia.*
- b) *H2: There is a negative and significant relationship between superior-subordinate communication and work stress among the staff of the Prison Department of Malaysia.*
- c) *H3: There is a negative and significant relationship between LMX relationship quality and work stress among the staff of the Prison Department of Malaysia.*

## Research Methodology

This study was conducted at eight correctional institutions in six Malaysian states. The locations used as the sample is based on zones, namely north, east, west and south in Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak, the two states in East Malaysia. The total population in the eight institutions selected in this study is 3,470 people. Referring to Barlett et al. (2001), the number of recommended samples for this study is about 351 people. Accordingly, to facilitate the determination of the sample, the researcher has set a total of 350 people for this study. For the purpose of overcoming the low return rate of questionnaires sent to respondents, the researchers have doubled the number of samples to 700 people. This is because the use of questionnaires in the study usually faced the problem of low returns where the appropriate rate of return is 50% (Barbie, 1990).

This study uses the scale developed by Miles et al. (1996) for measuring superior-subordinate communication. The 24 items of superior-subordinate communication behaviours consisted of positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-relevant communication. These four dimensions generally represent superior-subordinate communication in the organisation and have shown to predict both the subordinates' job satisfaction and performance (Alexander et al, 1989; Hassan Abu Bakar, & Che Su Mustaffa, 2008).

For measuring superior-subordinate relationship quality, this study uses the scale suggested by Liden and Maslyn (1998). The scale contained 12 items of the four dimensions: affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect. Meanwhile, the questionnaire designed to measure the stress level of prison officers is based on

the Work Stress Scale for Correctional Officers (WSSCO) which was adopted by Senol-Durak and Durak Gencoz (2006). Senol-Durak et al. (2006) suggested that this instrument is a suitable method for measuring work stress among correctional officers. WSSCO contains 37 items of the five dimensions: work overload, role conflict and role ambiguity, inadequacies in physical conditions of prison, threat perceptions and general problems.

## Findings

From the total of 700 questionnaires that were distributed to eight correctional institutions in six Malaysian zones, a total of 546 forms (78%) were returned and analysed in this study. The remaining 154 forms (22%), either the respondents did not return or they did not fill the questionnaire completely. For respondents who have missing values in the questionnaire, the researcher has done the process of screening the data by inserting the mean values in the data. After going through the process of normality tests on the 546 respondents, there were only 447 respondents or 81.8% that are applicable in this study. The remaining 99 respondents (22%) were outliers and had to be removed to obtain a normal data.

### Correlations among Variables

All the items were measured and operated using a 5-point Likert-type, ranging from strongly agreed to strongly disagreed. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables appear in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities of Variables**

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3
Superior-Subordinate Communication	3.37	.412	-		
Leader-Member Exchange Relation Quality	3.34	.496	.585**	-	
Work Stress	3.02	.598	.160*	-.042	-

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Correlation coefficient values are referred from Davis (1971) to determine the strength of the relationship between the variables in Table 2 as follows:

**Table 2: Interpretation of the Correlation Coefficient Value**

Correlation coefficient values (r)	Interpretation
.70 or more	Very Strong Relationship
.50 to .69	Strong Relationship
.30 to .49	Moderate Relationship
.10 to .29	Low Relationship
.01 to .09	Negligible Relationship

- a) Correlation between superior-subordinate communication with LMX relationship quality  
The hypothesis involving superior-subordinate communication with LMX relationship quality is:

*H1: There is a significant and positive relationship between superior-subordinate communication with LMX relationship quality in the Prison Department of Malaysia.*

Based on the correlation test, it was found that there is a significant, strong, and positive relationship between superior-subordinate communication with the quality of LMX relationship in which the value of  $r = .585$ ,  $p = .000$  ( $p < 0.01$ ) as shown in Table 3. The finding supports the hypothesis that is formed and it shows that H1 has failed to reject it. It means that the higher the superior-subordinate communication, the higher the quality of LMX relationship between them.

**Table 3: Correlation between Superior-Subordinate Communication with LMX Relationship Quality**

Variable	LMX Relationship Quality	Correlation Value
Superior-Subordinate Communication	r	.585**
	p	.000
	n	447

\*\*  $p < 0.01$



b) Correlation between superior-subordinate communication with work stress

The hypothesis involving superior-subordinate communication with work stress is:

H2: There is a negative and significant relationship between superior-subordinate communication and work stress among the staff of the Prison Department of Malaysia.

Based on the correlation test, it appears that there is a correlation, low, and positive superior-subordinate communication and work stress in which the value of  $r = .160$ ,  $p = .001$  ( $p < 0.05$ ) as shown in Table 4. The finding does not support the hypothesis that is formed. Thus, H2 is rejected. This shows that the higher the superior-subordinate communication, work stress has also increased but the increase is low.

**Table 4: Correlation between Superior-Subordinate Communication and Work Stress**

Variable	Work Stress	Correlation Value
Superior-Subordinate Communication	r	.160*
	p	.001
	n	447

\*\*  $p < 0.05$

c) Correlation between LMX relationship quality and work stress

The hypothesis that is formed involving LMX relationship quality and work stress is:

H3: *There is a negative and significant relationship between LMX relationship quality and work stress among the staff of the Prison Department of Malaysia.*

Based on the correlation test, it was found that there is no significant relationship between LMX relationship quality with work stress in which the value of  $r = -.042$ ,  $p = .379$  ( $p > 0.01$ ) as shown in Table 5. This finding shows that it does not support the hypothesis that is formed, hence H3 is rejected. This indicated that there is no relationship established between the LMX relationship quality with work stress among the prison officers.

**Table 5: Correlation between LMX Relationship Quality and Work Stress**

Variable	Work Stress	Correlation Value
LMX Relationship Quality	r	-.042
	p	.379
	n	447

## Discussion

From the result of correlations between the superior-subordinate communication with LMX relationship quality, it was found that there is a significant, strong and positive relationship between the two variables. The findings are consistent with the study conducted by Hassan Abu Bakar and Che Su Mustaffa (2008), which suggested that superior-subordinate communication behaviour plays an important role in affecting the relationship between superior-subordinate relationship quality and group commitment. In other words, if a superior improves his or her communication behaviour (positive relationship communication, upward openness communication, negative relationship communication and job-related communication) towards a subordinate, it will also increase their relationship from low quality to high quality. Thus, the hypothesis in this study related to superior-subordinate communication and LMX relationship quality which was accepted.

With regards to the findings of the relationship between superior-subordinate communication and work stress, it was found that there is a significant, low and positive correlation between superior-subordinate communications with work stress. Although the hypothesis is rejected, this result is consistent with the findings of the study by Fauzy Hashim Yaacob (1995), which stated that stress was found to have a positive and significant correlation with all the main variables of communication, namely the role of the organisation, communication climate, communication system, the burden of communication and communication concerns. This shows that despite the increase in communication among the employees in an organisation, this cannot ensure that the level of work stress has gone down between them. This is because the main factors that caused work stress are not simply due to the communication between employees.

Similarly, the findings related to the correlation between LMX and work stress found that there is no significant relationship between them and the hypothesis is also rejected. Although the study by Lawal (2009) and Thomas and Lankau (2009) stated that LMX relationship quality is said to give effect on reducing work stress, it is not the main factor for the employees.

## Conclusion

This study shows that although organisational communication is at the highest level among the employees in an organisation with a high LMX relationship quality between them, it does not give a high impact on work stress. This is because the key factors that cause stress to the employees are solely not due to the superior-subordinate communication and the LMX relationship quality. Many other factors also affected the stress among prison officers. As mentioned by Finn (1998), the sources of stress of the prison officers are due to organisational stress (understaffing, overtime, shift work role conflict, role ambiguity and supervisor demands), work-related stress (threats of inmate violence, inmate violence, inmate demands and manipulation and problems with co-workers) and stress from the outside system (low public recognition and poor pay). However, there is no doubt that superior-subordinate communication plays a major role in enhancing the effectiveness of an organisation. This also affects the LMX relationship quality among the employees which will directly affect the effectiveness of the work as a team.

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