



E-ISSN: 3108-4176

APSSHS

Academic Publications of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies

2023, Volume 4, Page No: 45-53

Available online at: <https://apsshs.com/>

Annals of Organizational Culture, Leadership and External Engagement Journal

The Interplay of Political Skill, Ethical Leadership, and Leader-Member Exchange in Shaping Work Outcomes

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the interconnections between political skills, leader-member exchange (LMX), and ethical leadership while assessing how LMX influences key work outcomes. The study investigates how LMX influences factors such as creativity, career success, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being in employees. Data was collected through surveys from 211 employees of a private firm in Istanbul, between September and November 2018. The study used structural equation modeling to analyze the data. The findings indicate that ethical leadership serves as a complete mediator in the relationship between political skills and LMX. Furthermore, employees' perceptions of LMX have a positive impact on their creativity, career success, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being. The research suggests that cultivating an ethical leadership culture in an organization can potentially eliminate the need for leaders to rely on political skills, thus highlighting the importance of ethical values in leadership.

Keywords: Leader-member exchange, Political skills, Ethical leadership, Work outcomes

How to cite this article: Lee S, Kim J, Byun G. The Interplay of Political Skill, Ethical Leadership, and Leader-Member Exchange in Shaping Work Outcomes. Ann Organ Cult Leadersh Extern Engagem J. 2023;4:45-53. <https://doi.org/10.51847/vAKE892Paf>

Received: 16 August 2023; **Revised:** 26 October 2023; **Accepted:** 27 October 2023

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Introduction

The rapid changes in global conditions have transformed organizations, making people and knowledge central to their functioning. This transformation calls for new strategies on how to best utilize human resources. In this evolving landscape, traditional leader-employee relationships must adapt, encouraging a unique and more dynamic form of communication between leaders and their teams. Given that leaders' resources are limited, they cannot distribute them equally among all employees. Consequently, leaders evaluate their employees through various metrics, leading to the creation of an inner circle of employees who have more responsibilities and influence compared to those on the outside. These inner-circle employees often display behaviors that align with the organization's objectives and contribute more effectively to its success.

Political skill, often viewed negatively due to its association with manipulative behavior, has been redefined by Ferris *et al.* [1] as a positive trait that enhances one's ability to influence, lead, and manage others. Political skill can be cultivated, and its development is vital in today's competitive environments, particularly for those advancing in their careers. Furthermore, the importance of ethical leadership cannot be overstated. Ethical leaders inspire trust and model behavior that influences their employees positively. Trust between leaders and employees fosters high-quality exchanges, resulting in numerous positive work outcomes, including enhanced life satisfaction, psychological well-being, career success, and creativity.

This study investigates whether a leader's political skill influences leader-member exchange (LMX) through ethical leadership and how LMX subsequently affects various work outcomes. To the best of our knowledge, no previous research has examined



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all of these relationships simultaneously. Therefore, this study fills an important gap in the literature by exploring the connections among political skills, LMX, ethical leadership, and key work outcomes.

Literature review

Political skill

The concept of political skill has evolved through the contributions of scholars like Pfeffer [2] and Mintzberg [3], later being refined by Ferris *et al.* [1, 4]. It is generally defined as the ability to perceive, understand, and influence others within organizational settings to achieve both personal and organizational objectives [1, 4]. Political skill enables individuals to gauge social dynamics effectively, apply strategic influence, and build trust. Leaders possessing political skills are seen as adept at navigating complex situations and making decisions that foster organizational success. According to Pfeffer [2], political skills are indispensable for achieving success within organizations, as they help leaders shape decisions and outcomes in their favor.

Studies indicate that leaders who possess political skills establish stronger relationships with their followers. Douglas and Ammeter [5] argue that political skills directly contribute to leadership effectiveness, facilitating stronger bonds between leaders and their teams. Furthermore, research by Ammeter *et al.* [6] suggests that political behaviors not only enhance leaders' careers but also improve the performance and satisfaction of their subordinates. Additionally, studies by Epitropaki *et al.* [7], Brouer *et al.* [8], and Frieder and Basik [9] affirm that political skills positively impact leader-member exchange (LMX), indicating that such leaders can cultivate high-quality exchanges with employees. Given this, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Leaders' political skill positively impacts the quality of their exchange with employees.

Ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is a style of leadership where leaders base their decisions on a strong ethical framework, particularly in environments that are filled with ambiguity. Ethical leaders strive to establish and promote clear ethical standards that guide the behavior of their followers, ensuring that organizational processes align with these standards [10-12]. These leaders play a pivotal role in shaping what is perceived as right or wrong within an organization, ensuring ethical conduct at every level. There is limited research directly examining the relationship between political skill and ethical leadership, but some studies have suggested important connections. For instance, Rice and Shields-Dutton [13] and Harvey *et al.* [14] explored how a leader's political skill influences employee perceptions of ethical leadership. Additionally, Gill *et al.* [15] identified that political skill mediates the relationship between ethical leadership and organizational citizenship behaviors. According to Beu and Buckley [16], politically skilled leaders tend to be seen as role models for ethical conduct, demonstrating behaviors that promote trust and loyalty. As such, employees view these leaders as honest and just, further reinforcing ethical standards within the organization. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H2: Leaders' political skills positively influence employees' perceptions of their ethical leadership.

Leader-member exchange

The leader-member exchange (LMX) Theory, introduced by Dansereau *et al.* [17], suggests that leaders do not treat all members uniformly. Instead, they interact differently with each employee, creating varying levels of relationships. Some employees, due to closer rapport, are treated more warmly, while others, due to formal requirements, remain more distant. This results in an "in-group" and "out-group" dynamic among employees. High-quality relationships indicate greater trust, support, and more frequent interactions, which translate into rewards that can be both formal and informal [18, 19]. On the other hand, low-quality interactions are marked by minimal trust, support, and engagement.

Dhar [20], Hansen *et al.* [21], Hu *et al.* [22], and Bedi *et al.* [23] confirmed that ethical leadership positively affects the quality of leader-member relationships. Employees view ethical leaders as honest, trustworthy, and principled, which encourages closer relationships with the leader. This ultimately enhances the quality of the leader-member exchange. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: The ethical conduct of a leader positively influences the quality of their exchange with employees.

Satisfaction with life

Life satisfaction is defined as an individual's overall evaluation of their life based on their criteria, as proposed by Diener *et al.* [24]. It is expected that leaders who engage in high-quality interactions with their employees and establish strong, positive connections will foster an environment where employees feel supported. Research by Wayne *et al.* [25], Pauli *et al.* [26], and Tu and Lu [27] suggest that employees with better leader relationships tend to experience higher life satisfaction. Essentially,

when employees feel their time and effort in the exchange are reciprocated, they exhibit more positive work outcomes. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is formed:

H4: As the quality of leader-member exchange improves, employees' life satisfaction increases.

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being, introduced by Diener *et al.* [24] and later explored as subjective well-being, refers to the ability to balance life's stresses and personal-social interests [28]. It also involves an individual's ability to recognize and express emotions. Previous research has shown that high-quality exchanges with leaders improve psychological well-being by reducing stress and fostering a more positive emotional state in employees [29-31]. In line with these findings, the following hypothesis has been developed:

H5: As the quality of leader-member exchange improves, employees' psychological well-being also increases.

Career success

Career success, as defined by Arthur *et al.* [32], refers to achieving desired outcomes in one's professional life. It can also be described as the sense of fulfillment or goal achievement related to work experiences. Studies by Sagas and Cunningham [33], Breland *et al.* [34], and Byrne *et al.* [35] show that quality interactions with supervisors enhance employees' career advancement. Wei *et al.* [36] also found that political skills positively influence employees' relationships with their managers, contributing significantly to career success. Based on this, the following hypothesis was formed:

H6: As the quality of leader-member exchange improves, employees' career success also improves.

Individual creativity

Creativity, as defined by Drazin *et al.* [37], is more of a process than an inherent personality trait. It involves the ability to create new perspectives or ideas by combining new and existing concepts [38]. Research by Olsson *et al.* [39] and Gu *et al.* [40] established a direct relationship between leader-member exchange and individual creativity. Employees with strong leader relationships tend to approach challenges more creatively, feeling more engaged and motivated in their work. Consequently, the following hypothesis was developed:

H7: As the quality of leader-member exchange increases, employees' creativity levels also increase.

The influence of political skill

The political skill of a leader has been shown to positively influence the quality of their relationship with employees. High-quality interactions foster positive feelings toward the leader and increase the employees' commitment to the organization. This emotional investment results in employees exhibiting more positive behaviors at work. A study by Kim *et al.* [41] found that leader-member exchange mediates the relationship between a leader's political skill and employee loyalty and job satisfaction. Similarly, Frieder [42] confirmed that a leader's political skill improves the quality of interactions with their employees, which in turn contributes to the employee's success. While no direct study has been found that examines the relationship between political skill, leader-member exchange, and ethical leadership, the following hypothesis has been developed based on current research:

H8: Ethical leadership serves as a mediator between a leader's political skill and the quality of leader-member exchange.

Materials and Methods

The study's sample includes employees from a consulting firm based in Istanbul, Turkey. The data collection was carried out through hand-delivered questionnaires between September and November of 2018. The company employs 306 individuals, and all employees were invited to participate in the survey. After excluding incomplete responses, 211 usable surveys were analyzed. The questionnaire comprises 64 items, all measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

Political skill of the leader

The political skill of the leader was assessed using an 18-item scale created by Ferris *et al.* [4] This scale consists of four subscales: social astuteness (5 items), interpersonal influence (4 items), networking ability (6 items), and apparent sincerity (3 items). The scale initially exhibited a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.950$, as shown in **Table 1**. The initial model's goodness-of-fit values were not satisfactory. Therefore, three items were excluded based on their factor loadings and item correction indices, and adjustments were made to improve the model. After confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), the scale was treated as a unidimensional construct. The final goodness-of-fit statistics were: CMIN/DF: 4.623; GFI: 0.848; CFI: 0.872; AGFI: 0.783; SRMR: 0.037; RMSEA: 0.079.

Ethical leadership

The ethical behavior of leaders, as perceived by employees, was measured using a 10-item scale developed by Brown *et al.* [43]. The initial Cronbach's alpha for this scale was $\alpha = 0.939$. After reviewing item factor loadings and correction indices, five items were removed, and subsequent adjustments were made. The final goodness-of-fit indices were as follows: CMIN/DF: 8.14; GFI: 0.995; CFI: 1.00; AGFI: 0.977; SRMR: 0.006; RMSEA: 0.000.

Leader-member exchange

The quality of leader-member exchange was evaluated using a 7-item scale developed by Scandura and Graen [44], which has a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.931$. The confirmatory factor analysis revealed that all items were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The goodness-of-fit indices indicated that the scale had a unidimensional structure, with values as follows: CMIN/DF: 1.814; GFI: 0.972; CFI: 0.991; AGFI: 0.935; SRMR: 0.022; RMSEA: 0.062.

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using a 5-item scale from Diener *et al.* [24]. The scale demonstrated a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.817$. The goodness-of-fit indices for this scale were acceptable, with values as follows: CMIN/DF: 1.444; GFI: 0.986; CFI: 0.993; AGFI: 0.957; SRMR: 0.024; RMSEA: 0.046.

Psychological well-being

Psychological well-being was assessed with an 8-item scale developed by Diener *et al.* [45]. The scale had a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.880$. After removing two items based on their factor loadings and item correction indices, the scale was found to maintain a unidimensional structure. The goodness-of-fit values for this scale were: CMIN/DF: 2.34; GFI: 0.975; CFI: 0.985; AGFI: 0.924; SRMR: 0.032; RMSEA: 0.080.

Career success

To assess career success, a 5-item unidimensional scale created by Greenhouse *et al.* [46] was utilized, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.869$. After analyzing the item factor loadings and correction indices, one item was removed. The resulting "CARSUCC" scale showed a single-factor structure, with the following acceptable goodness-of-fit indices: CMIN/DF: 2.35; GFI: 0.999; CFI: 1.000; AGFI: 0.994; SRMR: 0.003; RMSEA: 0.000.

Individual creativity

Individual creativity was measured using an 11-item scale by Muñoz-Doyague *et al.* [47], with a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha = 0.909$. Five items were excluded from the analysis based on the factor loadings and correction index. After revisions, the "CREATE" scale displayed a unidimensional structure, with the following acceptable goodness-of-fit values: CMIN/DF: 2.008; GFI: 0.977; CFI: 0.992; AGFI: 0.931; SRMR: 0.024; RMSEA: 0.069.

Procedures and analysis

The data were analyzed using the SPSS-21 and AMOS 21 software. The AMOS program was initially used to evaluate the skewness and kurtosis of the items, confirming that the data were normally distributed. Mediation analysis was conducted according to Baron and Kenny's (1986) method. Given that the data satisfied the assumption of normal distribution, the maximum likelihood method was applied in the structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis.

Results and Discussion

The validity of the dependent and independent variables of the study is tested by identifying the correlation between the variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, correlation and reliability, and discriminant validity values

No	Scale	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	PS	3.929	0.7211	(0.849)						
2	EL	3.887	1.0305	0.792**	(0.883)					
3	LMX	3.815	0.9622	0.713**	0.867**	(0.821)				
4	LIFESAT	3.194	0.9272	0.256**	0.311**	0.359**	(0.713)			
5	WELLBE	4.128	0.6882	0.263**	0.296**	0.361**	0.406**	(0.735)		
6	CARSUCC	3.488	0.9157	0.238**	0.271**	0.319**	0.534**	0.357**	(0.777)	
7	CREATE	3.848	0.7325	0.369**	0.352**	0.469**	0.294**	0.460**	0.333**	(0.794)

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Reliability coefficient Cronbach alfa	0.950	0.939	0.931	0.817	0.880	0.869	0.909
Combined reliability (CR)	0.922	0.947	0.935	0.836	0.875	0.857	0.910
Explained average variance value (AVE)	0.722	0.780	0.675	0.509	0.541	0.605	0.632

*P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; the values shown in parentheses are the square root values of AVE calculated for the scale.

As presented in **Table 1**, employees have a somewhat favorable view of their managers' political skills ($\bar{X} = 3.929$). The quality of their interaction with leaders is also reported as moderate ($\bar{X} = 3.815$). Employees generally perceive their managers' ethical behavior as average ($\bar{X} = 3.887$). Their levels of individual creativity ($\bar{X} = 3.848$), career success ($\bar{X} = 3.488$), and life satisfaction ($\bar{X} = 3.194$) are also moderate. However, psychological well-being among employees is reported as high ($\bar{X} = 4.128$).

From the data in **Table 1**, it is evident that the connection between political skill and ethical leadership is stronger than the connection between political skill and leader-member exchange (LMX). Additionally, political skill shows a more significant relationship with individual creativity ($r = 0.369$) than with other work-related outcomes. Ethical leadership also has a stronger link with individual creativity than with other workplace factors. Moreover, the leader-member exchange has the strongest connection to individual creativity among all the work outcomes considered.

In the analysis with paths that were found to be non-significant removed, the goodness-of-fit indices were generally acceptable, although some values were close but slightly outside the preferred ranges (X2/sd: 1.882; GFI: 0.735; CFI: 0.874; NFI: 0.767; TLI: 0.862; RMSEA: 0.078; SRMR: 0.069). While X2/sd, RMSEA, and SRMR fit indices were within acceptable limits, the values for CFI, GFI, and NFI did not fully meet the criteria. This deviation is expected, given that the model includes parameters that are not significant ($P > 0.05$). Previous research suggests that when sample sizes are smaller ($N < 250$), RMSEA and SRMR values tend to be higher, and it is less common to rely on RMSEA in these cases. For studies with fewer than 250 samples, it is considered acceptable for the X2/sd, RMSEA, and SRMR to be within the acceptable range [48]. The effect sizes in the model are displayed in **Figure 1**.

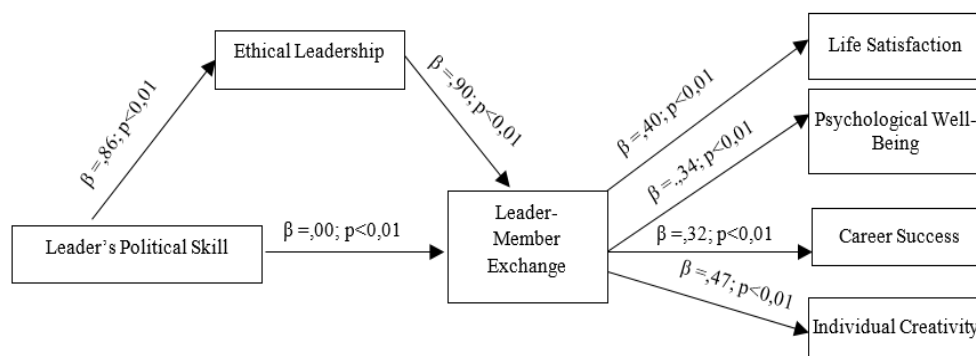


Figure 1. Structural model of the research

The direct, indirect, and total effects of the structural model are presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Direct, indirect, and total effects of variables related to the model

	Effects	EL	LMX	CREATE	CARSUCC	WELLBE	LIFESAT
PS	Direct	0.863	-0.003	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	0.000	0.775	0.366	0.249	0.262	0.308
	Total	0.863	0.772	0.366	0.249	0.262	0.308
EL	Direct	-	0.898	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	-	0.000	0.427	0.290	0.305	0.359
	Total	-	0.898	0.427	0.290	0.305	0.359
LMX	Direct	0.000	-	0.475	0.323	0.339	0.399
	Indirect	0.000	-	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Total	0.000	-	0.475	0.323	0.339	0.399
CREATE	Direct	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Total	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

CARSUCC	Direct	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Total	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
WELLBE	Indirect	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Total	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
LIFESAT	Direct	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Indirect	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
	Total	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

According to the data shown in **Table 2**, the independent variable of political skill does not directly affect the leader-member exchange (-0.003 ; $P > 0.05$) but only indirectly (0.775 ; $P < 0.001$).

The H1 hypothesis was supported, indicating that the political skill of the leader has a direct impact on the perception of ethical leadership ($\beta = 0.863$; $P < 0.001$). Consequently, the H2 hypothesis was also supported. Furthermore, the perception of ethical leadership was found to directly influence the leader-member exchange ($\beta = 0.898$; $P < 0.001$), thus supporting H3. As shown in **Table 2**, the leader-member exchange positively and significantly affects life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.399$; $P < 0.001$), supporting H4. Additionally, leader-member exchange was found to positively influence employees' psychological well-being ($\beta = 0.339$; $P < 0.001$), confirming H5. **Table 2** also indicates that leader-member exchange positively impacts career success ($\beta = 0.323$; $P < 0.001$), supporting H6. Moreover, the leader-member exchange significantly and positively affects individual creativity ($\beta = 0.475$; $P < 0.001$), thereby supporting H7.

The data also reveals that the political skill of the leader has a significant effect on leader-member exchange ($\beta = 0.771$; $P < 0.001$). However, when ethical leadership is included in the model, the direct effect of political skill on leader-member exchange drops from $\beta = 0.77$ ($P < 0.001$) to zero, indicating a non-significant relationship. This suggests that ethical leadership acts as a mediator. The results from Sobel, Aroian, and Goodman tests confirmed that the mediation effect is statistically significant ($z = 7.598, 7.5850, 7.601$; $P < 0.001$), supporting H8.

The leader's political skill plays a crucial role in shaping how employees evaluate the organization and exhibit positive behaviors. With a high-quality exchange, employees feel supported by their leaders in all situations, encouraging them to demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviors toward the organization. Politically skilled leaders can establish strong relationships not only with their direct reports but also with a wide network of individuals. This allows them to adapt their leadership style based on individual and situational needs, ranging from high-quality to low-quality interactions [49].

This study not only explored how the leader's political skill influences the quality of exchanges but also examined the impact of these exchanges on employees' life satisfaction, career success, psychological well-being, and creativity. Additionally, the role of ethical leadership within this framework was investigated.

The findings revealed that a leader's political skill significantly influences the quality of interactions with employees. These results align with previous research [8, 49]. It was determined that political skill helps maintain high-quality relationships, even under challenging circumstances, and positively affects the leader-member exchange. The study also found that political skill enhances ethical leadership, consistent with previous studies by Rice and Shields-Dutton [13] and Harvey *et al.* [14]. Politically skilled leaders understand the importance of building strong networks and relationships, leading to better self-awareness and higher internal control, which contributes to their effectiveness.

The structural equation analysis revealed that the ethical behavior of leaders plays a critical role in fostering strong relationships with their team members. Leaders who demonstrate ethical conduct enhance the quality of exchanges they have with employees, which in turn leads to employees feeling a stronger sense of connection to both their leader and the organization. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the importance of ethical leadership in employee relationships [20, 21, 23].

Additionally, the data showed that when employees engage in high-quality exchanges with their leaders, their life satisfaction improves. This occurs because employees feel assured of support and assistance in resolving challenges, which boosts their overall satisfaction. These results echo the findings of prior research on the positive impact of leader-member exchanges on life satisfaction [25-27].

Further analysis indicated that employees who experience strong exchanges with their leaders feel more valued, which contributes positively to their psychological well-being. This supports earlier research highlighting the relationship between positive leader-member exchanges and reduced stress [29-31].

Moreover, the study confirmed that strong leader-member exchanges are positively linked to career success. Employees who establish high-quality relationships with their leaders are more likely to experience career advancement, in line with past findings [33, 34].

Finally, the research demonstrated that leader-member exchange quality significantly influences employees' creativity. When employees feel supported and appreciated through their interactions with leaders, their creativity tends to flourish. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have explored the connection between leadership and individual creativity [39, 40]. The trust and collaboration fostered by high-quality exchanges provide a foundation for greater self-confidence and creative output.

Conclusion

Political skills are crucial for leaders, allowing them to understand and respond to the needs of those around them, facilitating effective communication, and fostering mutual understanding. In today's competitive business environment, however, negative behaviors such as corruption, discrimination, unfair practices, and nepotism are prevalent in many organizations. Ethical leadership plays a key role in combating these issues by creating an ethical climate within the organization, ensuring that these harmful behaviors are minimized or avoided.

The findings of this study indicate that, while political skills can help a leader navigate complex situations, when an ethical climate is established within an organization, the need for political skills diminishes. This study showed that leaders who are perceived as ethical have a significant positive impact on employee behavior, with ethical leadership acting as a mediating factor between a leader's political skill and the quality of the leader-member exchange.

The contribution of this study to the literature is significant, as it is one of the first to explore the interplay between political skill, ethical leadership, and leader-member exchange. It extends previous research by including key work outcomes such as life satisfaction, psychological well-being, career success, and creativity, and demonstrates that ethical leadership is a full mediator in the relationship between political skill and leader-member exchange.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although the study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. The research was conducted in a single city and within a single private sector organization, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future studies could enhance the validity of these results by collecting data from diverse sources, such as public sector organizations or firms in different geographic locations. Additionally, including a broader range of sectors in future research could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics explored in this study.

Another limitation is the exclusion of national and organizational culture variables, which could potentially influence the relationships among the variables studied. Future research could expand the model by incorporating cultural variables to explore how cultural differences might shape leader-member exchanges and the role of ethical leadership.

Furthermore, this study focused on employees' perceptions of their leaders. Future research could be enriched by examining both leaders' self-assessments of their political skills and the quality of their exchanges with employees. This approach could provide a more holistic view of the relationships between these variables and further contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Acknowledgments: None

Conflict of interest: None

Financial support: None

Ethics statement: None

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