

HOW AND WHEN: THE DEVELOPMENT AND STRATEGIC MAINTENANCE OF  
SUPERVISOR-SUBORDINATE BLENDED RELATIONSHIPS IN THE WORKPLACE

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi and is hereby approved.

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the development and maintenance strategies of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace, or those friendships that develop in and outside of work. The motives that drove organizational members to develop blended relationships and the outcomes of each blended relationship were also discussed. This study used Leader-Member Exchange Theory as a framework to understand the development and maintenance of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace. Thirty-one individuals were given an open-ended online questionnaire to explore their blended relationship experiences. Individuals consisted of adults who worked full-time and currently or previously had a blended relationship with their supervisor or subordinate. Results indicated that organizational members desire blended supervisor-subordinate relationships for professional and personal benefits and develop these relationships through factors consistent with LMX development models, with a few key distinctions unique to this study. Communicating openly and consistently, sharing time, and respecting boundaries helped organizational members maintain their blended relationship at a satisfactory level. Personal and professional development as well as dialectical tensions were reported as outcomes of participant's blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. This study contributes to the organizational communication discipline by filling a gap in existing literature and further strengthening LMX theory. It also assists organizational practitioners by providing tools to navigate through the complexities of blended relationships.

*Keywords:* blended relationships; development; Leader-Member Exchange Theory; maintenance; supervisor-subordinate communication

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## CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

Lisa has just hired Mary to become part of her organization, where Mary will work directly under Lisa to manage different tasks and responsibilities suited to her specific position. The interview process was formal, but pleasant, and the conversations between them were consistent to the same pattern. After beginning her new job, Lisa finds herself impressed with Mary's job performance and work ethic and delegates more tasks and decision making to Mary. Mary and Lisa begin to interact more as the tasks begin to intertwine with their positions. Conversations become more relaxed as they get to know each other, and Lisa starts to trust that Mary will complete her tasks with the competence she has previously shown. Mary is appreciative of the trust Lisa has in her and makes an effort to keep that trust by continuing to put in good effort in her tasks, as well as the relationship.

As time continues to progress, Lisa and Mary start to look forward to seeing each other at work and begin to talk about their personal lives as the trust and respect build between the two. Eventually, they find themselves on an outing or two outside of work, and soon realize they consider each other friends, as well as supervisor and subordinate. Though they still work together very closely, their relationship has blended into a friendship as well.

Lisa and Mary's scenario represents a relationship that many people in the workplace face: a relationship developed over time that is both professional and personal. There are several reasons the relationship and friendship developed, as well as why it is maintained. Lisa and Mary have to ensure their relationship is satisfactory not only to their professional needs, but to the personal needs, as well as the organization's overall needs. As one can see, Lisa and Mary's supervisor-subordinate relationship is complex and multifaceted.

Supervisors spend two-thirds of their time at work communicating, and most of that communication is with their subordinates (Kramer, 2017). Supervisor-subordinate relationships are defined by Sias (2009) as “workplace relationships in which one partner (the supervisor) holds direct formal authority over the other (the subordinate) employee” (p. 20). For several decades, scholars have explored numerous supervisor behaviors, characteristics, and traits associated with subordinate and organizational effectiveness (Sias, 2014). Organizational communication research has generated many knowledge claims about how supervisor-subordinate relationships are formed and maintained, communication patterns between supervisors and subordinates, and the organizational outcomes of these relationships (Sias, 2009). Consequently, scholars have found that the perceptions both supervisors and subordinates have of their relationship has important implications for that relationship, organizational functioning, and their own personal and professional lives (Sias, 2009). Given how central supervisor-subordinate relationships are to personal and organizational success, it is no wonder supervisor-subordinate relationships have consistently been among the most explored phenomena in the organizational communication literature (Allen, Gotcher, & Seibert, 1993; Krone, Kramer, & Sias, 2010; Putnam & Cheney, 1985; Wert-Gray, Center, Brashers, & Meyers, 1991). Despite all this knowledge, researchers have yet to concentrate attention on blended supervisor-subordinate relationships, or those workplace relationships that are simultaneously professional and personal in nature or simply put, friendships in and out of work (Bridge & Baxter, 1992).

Workplace relationships begin nonvoluntarily as organizational members are assimilated into the workplace and among other employees. They evolve into more functional relationships through choice, intimacy, and status (Sias, Jablin, & Krone, 2002). Choice means organizational

members consciously decide who they develop closer interactions with in their workplace, based on likeability and social attractiveness, for example (Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003). Intimacy means that organizational members connect with their coworkers in more personal disclosure and interactions (Myers & Johnson, 2004). For example, organizational members may express a higher level of closeness to coworkers whom they trust (Kram & Isabella, 1985). Status means that relationships occur within different levels of hierarchy in the organization. Organizational members develop mixed-status relationships with their supervisors and equal-status relationships with their peers (Sias, et al., 2002). These three areas blur within blended relationships as organizational members choose to develop emotionally close relationships with people in different hierarchical positions in the organization (Bridge & Baxter, 1992; Zorn, 1995).

Although blended relationships can be successful and satisfactory, they have interpersonal challenges between blended supervisor-subordinate dyads and between the blended supervisor-subordinate dyads and the other members of the organization (Sias & Jablin, 1995; Zorn, 1995). Given the complexities of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships in the workplace, it is surprising that empirical literature is so scant on this phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

The research about workplace relationships in general and, supervisor-subordinate relationships specifically, reveals a wide range of personal and professional outcomes for organizational members. Previous researchers have found that personal relationships in the workplace substantially affect the quality of life at work (Nienaber, Romeike, Searle, & Schewe, 2015). Those supervisors who create a supportive organization help employees develop and maintain a sense of personal work and importance (Likert & Seashore, 1963). Additionally, when organizational members perceive their organizational environments as supportive, they

report higher levels of trust in their organization (DeConink, 2010). Likewise, when employees develop positive and trusting relationships with their supervisors, employees are likely to communicate their ideas more openly and constructively (Kassing, 2009). These communication strategies foster trust and communication, which contributes to a more personal relationship between supervisors and subordinates. Subordinates' perceptions of open and trustworthy communication exchanges with their supervisors is often the result of communication competence (Steele & Plenty, 2015), the use of positive upward influence tactics (Waldron, 2003) and favorable employee treatment from supervisors due to effective performance (Sias & Jablin, 1995).

As supervisor-subordinate relationships mature and become high-quality, personal relationships, researchers have found that they utilize a variety of tactics to keep their relationships at a desired and comfortable level (Waldron, 1991). The literature about relational maintenance behaviors suggests that organizational members use them to achieve their professional goals and their personal goals (Waldron, 2003). However, what has been missing from the literature about relational maintenance behaviors in the supervisor-subordinate relationship is how both members of the relationship manage their relationship when that relationship is blended.

In the early 1990s, Bridge and Baxter (1992) discovered that blended relationships are comprised of tensions that complicate the relationship. Building from Bridge and Baxter's seminal investigation, Zorn (1995) also studied the dialectical tensions that exist between close friends who are unequal in power status in organizations. His findings indicated that organizational members must manage the complex dialectical tensions inherent in blended relationships. However, despite the illuminating results regarding blended relationships, Bridge

and Baxter's and Zorn's investigations are relevant only to blended relationships that are already established. That is, they explored relationships that were already personal and close. The organizational communication literature on the actual development and communication process of supervisor-subordinate blended relationships is surprisingly scant.

Filling the gap in this literature will benefit organizational communication scholars in several ways. First, organizational communication scholarship will benefit by identifying exactly how supervisors and subordinates initiate a personal relationship when their professional roles are already established. Doing so will create insight into why a blended relationship ultimately develops, and what organizational factors and personal characteristics contribute to the development of a successful supervisor-subordinate blended relationship. Second, this study will help scholars make connections between various communication behaviors and the specific areas of an organizational climate conducive to supervisor-subordinate blended relationship development.

In addition to the academic benefits of this study, organizational members and practitioners can readily use the results of this research. The practical outcomes will become apparent as organizations can apply the knowledge gleaned from the study into supervisor training, employee workshops, and/or rules and procedures designed to improve the overall supervisor-subordinate communication in the organization. By understanding how and when supervisor-subordinate blended relationships develop, organizations will be able to avoid those blurred lines from being crossed with research-based explanations and expectations of employee behavior.

This study, then, will explore the developmental communication process of supervisor-subordinate blended relationships. A qualitative methodological study will be administered to

gain thorough understanding of both supervisors and subordinates perceptions of their blended relationships development. How supervisor-subordinate blended relationships develop and when they develop will be the focus for understanding this communicative relationship. Using Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) as a theoretical framework, the results from this study will create further knowledge into the supervisor-subordinate relationship through an avenue that has yet to be explored in the organizational communication discipline.

## CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Average Supervisor Communication Style**

Scholars in the organizational communication discipline have long studied supervisor-subordinate communication to understand how the relationship between an employee and their immediate supervisor affects workplace climate and production and the communication therein. Average supervisor communication style refers to the notion that supervisors treat their employees much the same way across the organizational board. Jablin (1979) summarized the main areas of research related to supervisor-subordinate communication, and scholars followed Jablin's lead in developing considerable knowledge claims about how supervisors and subordinates communicate. These areas include interaction patterns, communication competence, upward distortion, effective versus ineffective supervisors, and upward influence.

**Interaction patterns.** Task-related conversations are the most dominant type of conversation between individuals at different power levels, without too much discourse into the personal areas of each organizational member (Kramer, 2017). Generally, subordinates communicate with their supervisors instead of their peers when task-related questions arise because they expect their supervisors to be more informative and knowledgeable (Kramer, 2017). When subordinates are newcomers in the organization, direct questions are asked to the supervisor; however, once the initial newcomer period ends, questions tend to become more indirect as impression management becomes more important than the need for information (Sias, 2009). Subordinates become concerned with appearing competent and confident as they fit into their positions. Although subordinates perceive supervisors as communicating with them less than supervisors perceive they do, subordinates still seek information from their supervisors more so than their peers (Kramer, 2011). Furthermore, less social distance exists between the

supervisor and subordinate when subordinate autonomy is recognized by the supervisor and supervisors do not directly impose their authority over their subordinates (Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989).

Fairhurst (1993) explored the interaction patterns between supervisors and subordinates in the workplace. She found three communication pattern categories: aligning, accommodating, and polarizing moves. When organizational members use aligning interaction patterns in their relationship, the communication tends to be same-minded, cooperative, and supportive interactions where the supervisor “stands by” the subordinate or “shields” the subordinate from damaging career factors (p. 344). When aligning communication patterns are used, the power distance between supervisors and subordinates is minimized. When accommodating communication patterns are utilized, rules and procedures are made by the leader, but objections may be raised with polite disagreement by the subordinate. Supervisors and subordinate adjust to each other when adjustments can be made. When adjustments cannot be made, the supervisor’s authority overrules any subordinate objections. Polarizing moves consist of performance monitoring, power games, and competitive conflict. The power distance between supervisors and subordinates is clearly established.

It stands to reason that when supervisors create an open and supportive channel for communication with their subordinates and allow autonomy and constructive objections to arise from their interactions, supervisor-subordinate relationships reach the most satisfactory level for both organizational members.

**Communication competence.** Communication competence occurs when communication practices are appropriate to the situation and/or adapted to the surroundings (Steele & Plenty, 2015). Monge, Bachman, Dillard, and Eisenberg (1982) created a scale to assess communication

competence in the organizational context. Their seminal study discovered the encoding and decoding dimensions of communication competence and found the two factors to be highly correlated. Monge et al. (1982) created a reliable scale measuring the encoding and decoding ability of supervisors and subordinates in an organizational setting, thus validating the concept that encoding and decoding messages are essential to communication competence.

Communication competence involves supervisor's ability to listen and negotiate competently and effectively (Cushman & Craig, 1976). Supervisors are perceived as communicatively competent when they timely respond to information, actively listen to their employees, communicate clearly, and use different types of communication channels to communicate (Shaw, 2005).

Steele and Plenty (2015), for example, conducted a survey to examine the relationship between supervisor-subordinate communication competence and job satisfaction, and learned that employees (both supervisor and subordinate) believe their communication competence affects their level of communication satisfaction and job satisfaction. Cahn (1986) learned that perceived understanding between supervisors and subordinates created a quality communication environment and helped improve job production.

Additionally, Mikkelsen, York, and Arritola (2015) found that effective and appropriate supervisor communication both positively relate to subordinate job satisfaction, motivation, and organization commitment, with effective communication being the most significant predictor of subordinate motivation. Myers and Kassing (1998) explored the relationship between supervisor communication competence and subordinate organizational identification and found that subordinates have high levels of organizational identification when they perceive their supervisors as communicatively competent saying, "subordinates think and act more favorably towards their organizations" (p. 77). Payne (2005) explored communication competence as it

relates to knowledge of communication and the ability or skill to achieve communication competence. She found that high-performing employees (both supervisor and subordinate) were more motivated to adapt their communication based on the context and were more skilled at communicating empathy and managing workplace interactions. Supervisors were also more motivated to verbally communicate and empathize.

Communication competence is an important component of supervisor-subordinate relationships (Monge et al., 1982). Though scholars have operationalized competence in various ways, they have discovered that perceptions of competence often result in favorable organizational and personal outcomes. Generally, effective workplace communication competence occurs when subordinates feel heard and understood by their supervisors. Subordinates are happier, more motivated, and more effective in their work when supervisors are communicatively competent.

**Upward distortion.** In contrast to communication competence, upward distortion is the omission of negative information from subordinate to supervisor (Kramer, 2017). When a subordinate does not trust a supervisor, or the subordinate perceives high power distance between themselves and their supervisor, upward distortion occurs. If, however, a subordinate feels secure in his/her relationship with his/her supervisor, accurate information will be given to their supervisors. Despite this knowledge, Read (1962) conducted a study to explore upward distortion tendencies and found when subordinates had aspirations for advancement in the organization, upward distortion occurred, regardless of the trust in the supervisor. Interestingly, subordinates who have high-quality relationships with their supervisors still use behaviors to manage the supervisor's impressions of them (Wayne & Green, 1993).

Rao, Schmidt, and Murray (1995) found that subordinates have multiple reasons for utilizing upward distortion: job assistance, acceptance of new ideas, benefits, and better evaluations. They found that subordinates use ingratiation, bargaining, and assertiveness strategies to manage the information their supervisor receives. Subordinates used ingratiation to be perceived as more likable and to receive better job evaluations, however assertiveness and bargaining were used when seeking better evaluations.

In addition, researchers explored correlations between upward distortion and organizational climate and found a positive correlation between upward distortion and a heteronomous organizational climate and a negative correlation between upward distortion and an autonomous climate (Athanasziades, 1973). In other words, when there is strict authority, procedures, and laws in an organizational climate, upward distortion more often occurs. When there is freedom for employees, upward distortion is reduced. Based on these knowledge claims, one can conclude that organizational members feel less of a need for upward distortion when there is trust and autonomy within their supervisor-subordinate relationships and utilize upward distortion when managing impressions.

**Effective versus ineffective supervisors.** A multitude of studies have explored the effects effective supervisor-subordinate communication has on employee orientation and production orientation (Kramer, 2017). In general, effective supervisors tend to enjoy talking, speaking up in meetings, are empathetic listeners, would rather ask and persuade, rather than tell or demand, and are sensitive to the feelings and needs of their subordinates. Ineffective supervisors, by contrast, are apprehensive about speaking to subordinates, demand various task performances, and are apathetic to their subordinate's feelings and needs (Jablin, 1979; Kramer, 2017).

Ladany, Mori, and Mehr (2012) conducted a mixed method study to identify effective and ineffective supervisory skills. They found effective supervisors encouraged autonomy, facilitated open discussion, and continuously strengthened the supervisory relationship. Ineffective supervisors devalued supervision and weakened the supervisory relationship. A study of hospital employees found that those subordinates who perceived their supervisors as effective held more favorable attitudes about their coworkers, were more cooperative, sought higher standards, and were more accurate in reporting performance (White, 1971). Infante and Gordon (1985) found when supervisors have higher argumentativeness traits and an affirming communication style, subordinates reported greater satisfaction with them as supervisors. Verbal aggressiveness, however was found to be negatively related to subordinate satisfaction with their supervisors.

Effective supervisors are shown to be more beneficial to organizational members and the organization by being open and supportive and building relationships with their subordinates. Trust, however, between the supervisor and subordinate depends on the positive or negative upward influence a supervisor has with his/her supervisor and subordinates.

**Upward influence.** Upward influence is the subordinate's attempt to influence his/her supervisor in order to obtain a desired response or behavior (Deluga & Perry, 1991). Downward influence is a supervisor's attempt to influence their subordinate in order to obtain a certain response or behavior (Chaturvedi & Srivastava, 2014). Upward influence can be both positive and negative, as well as soft and hard, as shown in Edge and Williams' (1994) study of supervisor and subordinate upward influence tactics.

Soft tactics are described as acting nice, flattering, and less aggressive. Hard tactics, on the other hand, are demanding, pressuring, making assertions, and aggressive or direct

confrontation (Edge & Williams, 1994; Epitropaki & Martin, 2013). When subordinates perceive that their supervisors are friendly, attentive, and relaxed, they use soft upward influence tactics, however when subordinates feel their supervisors are unfriendly and non-affirming, they resort to hard upward influence tactics (Edge & Williams, 1994). Kramer (2017) also found that when supervisors use their upward influence over their own supervisors to assist their subordinates, said subordinates develop trust in their supervisor and communicate more frequently.

Waldron, Hunt, and Dsilva (1993) conducted a study exploring the different upward influence tactics subordinates used based on their high- or low- quality relationships with their supervisors. They found that subordinates with high-quality relationships with their supervisors used direct and enlistment tactics, or those tactics that invite their supervisor's assistance. Low-quality organizational members were found more likely to use avoidance tactics with their supervisors, such as deception. In addition, Kassing (2000) found when employees perceived their supervisor-subordinate relationship to be high-quality, they expressed their dissent through more articulate and proactive means. In contrast, low-quality organizational members expressed more latent dissent, and communicated more aggressively with coworkers.

One can infer from these studies that positive upward influence from both supervisors to their own supervisors and subordinates to their supervisors creates trust and communication between each. When supervisor-subordinate relationships reach a point where they are mature and built on trust and mutual understanding, a differential supervisor-subordinate communication can occur, which may create a more personal relationship.

### **Leader-Member Exchange Theory**

When trust and communication develop from positive upward influence, employees and employers create a relationship open to differential treatment. Leader-member exchange (LMX)

theory serves as a foundation for such communication. Leader-member exchange theory, developed first as vertical dyad linkage, seeks to understand how leaders create certain relationships with certain subordinates (Krone et al., 2010).

LMX theory proposes that because supervisors have limited amounts of time, resources, and energy, supervisors consciously communicate and share responsibilities with organizational members that they perceive as competent and trustworthy, resulting in higher or lower quality relationships (Graen & Cashman, 1975; Waldron, 1999). Liden and Graen (1980) explored this differential relationship further and found that not only are there indeed differentiated exchanges with supervisors and their subordinates, but both supervisors and subordinates are aware of the kind of relationship they have with their counterpart, and the leeway they may or may not have in their jobs.

LMX theory originated in the mid-1970s as Vertical Dyad Linkage (VDL) theory. This theory suggested that supervisors developed different exchange relationships with organizational members (Day & Mischenko, 2016). In the early 1980s, however, VDL theory evolved into LMX theory by exploring the relational exchange supervisors have with different sets of organizational members, rather than the task-related exchange VDL theory focused on previously. VDL theory had assessed the characteristics of the different in-group and out-group members, while LMX sought to explore the types of relational behaviors associated with the in- and out- supervisory groups that formed within the organization. The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century studies further examined the quality of LMX supervisor-subordinate relationships and the effects those relationships had on organizational outcomes (Northouse, 2019).

This theory posits that leaders and members, or supervisors and subordinates for this research paper's purposes, develop two different types of groups: in-groups, and out-groups. In-

group subordinates are more involved in organizational activities and appreciate the support and feedback from their supervisors. Oppositely, out-group subordinates perform routine tasks and have a more formal relationship with their supervisors (Graen, 1976). As a result, in-group subordinates and supervisors have high levels of support and influence each other, while out-group subordinate and supervisor relationships are less supportive (Krone et al., 2010). The high levels of support and influence gained in the in-group relationship creates trust between supervisors and subordinates, as task-related duties and decision-making is given more to the in-group than out-group.

In-group subordinates believe there is value in developing a relationship with their supervisors and as such, develop mutual trust, respect, and obligation with their supervisors (Kramer, 2017). That trust and respect in the in-group subordinate and supervisor relationship creates more two-way conversations and personal chats, which, in time, can create a more personal relationship within an in-group supervisor-subordinate relationship.

Among the most influential and heuristic theories of leadership (Day & Mischenko, 2016), LMX Theory suggests that the quality of the relationship between supervisor and subordinate predicts the outcomes of a partnership, group, or organization (Gerstner & Day, 1997). The theory has been used to explore work outcomes such as organization commitment, turnover intention, and job satisfaction (Major, Kozlowski, Cho, & Gardner, 1995), trust building (Brower, Schoorman, & Tan, 2000), employee voice (Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008), and organizational justice (Erdogan, Kraimer, & Liden, 2004).

High-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships have higher levels of mutual trust, respect, loyalty, and understanding (Dienesch & Liden, 1986). Subordinates in high-quality relationships with their supervisors benefit from increased levels of information exchange,

greater negotiation space, and more input in decisions (Mueller & Lee, 2002). Low-quality supervisor-subordinate relationships consist of low interaction and trust, and are managed more formally (Waldron, 1999). Through these different level quality relationships, two main groups are formed: the in-group, or high-quality relationships, and the out-group, or low-quality relationships (Sias, 2009).

Fix and Sias (2006) found that when supervisors use person-centeredness communication (PCC), or the extent to which an individual's communication considers the perspective of others, a higher-quality LMX relationship develops. Those subordinates who perceived their supervisor-subordinate relationships as high-quality reported better quality communication and an increased ability to participate (Yrle, Hartman, & Galle, Jr., 2003). Adversely, subordinates who perceive their relationships as low-quality reported a two-way communication, but without true participation ability.

Previous researchers have explored the effects a LMX relationship has on employee's perceptions of negative work conditions on performance (Day & Mischenko, 2016). They found that high quality LMX relationships can positively influence the way employees perceive work conditions. Furthermore, high quality LMX relationships create the highest employee performance in a workplace (Cogliser, Schriesheim, Scandura, & Gardner, 2009). Mueller and Lee (2002) found that high-quality LMX relationships positively affected not only the communication satisfaction a subordinate has with their supervisor, but also the communication satisfaction a subordinate has in large groups and the overall organization. These studies offer glimpses into using LMX theory to understand supervisor and subordinate behavioral outcomes.

## **LMX Theory and Relationship Development**

Throughout the past few decades, scholars have developed several models based in LMX Theory to explain how supervisor-subordinate relationships develop. The three most prominent modes are the Role-Making Model (Graen & Scandura, 1987), the Leadership-Making Model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991), and the Developmental Model (Boyd & Taylor, 1995).

**Role-making model.** Graen and Scandura (1987) developed a dyadic model explaining the process by which a partnership develops for accomplishing tasks. The Descriptive Model of Role-Making has an initial phase, role taking, in which the supervisor evaluates the talents and skills of the new subordinate. Using different tasks, a supervisor can gauge the appropriate limits and roles and assign tasks to the subordinate. This phase helps the supervisor assess the abilities of the new subordinate and the future potential he/she has in similar and/or unstructured tasks. This initial role-taking phase can take place within a few hours or a few months.

The second phase, role making, occurs when the supervisor and subordinate agree on the tasks assigned and work to complete that task. This is a reoccurring exchange based on different tasks needing to be completed. Although the exchange is rarely explicit, the subordinate agrees to complete the task, the supervisor accepts the agreement, and the process develops. Both supervisors and subordinates have evolved enough at this phase to be able to understand the behaviors each organizational member will have in various situations and adapt accordingly to complete the task.

The third phase, role routinization, is the understanding of each other's roles and behaviors. Both parties have experienced repeated success of various tasks and understand the most effective processes to reach that success. Both parties feel comfortable initiating task exchanges and both parties understand each other's behaviors and expectations for completing

various tasks. The relationship, in short, becomes routine. The relationship that develops through this model involves trust, respect, loyalty, liking, intimacy, support, openness, and honesty (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Based on these communication characteristics present in these studies, it is safe to assume there are communication characteristics present in the development of supervisor-subordinate blended relationships.

Another study explored new hires and the relationships they developed with their supervisors during a four-month period (Graen, Orris, & Johnson, 1973). They found that supervisors held predispositions about the newcomers and developed a relationship with them accordingly. For those whom they predicted would leave in a short amount of time, they invested little time and effort to develop a relationship. In contrast, for those whom they predicted would stay, they invested a large amount of time and care into their relationship development.

**Leadership-making model.** LMX evolved into a leadership communication context in Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1991) Leadership-Making Model, based on the previous studies that cast a light on how relationships evolved between supervisors and subordinates. In their leadership-making model, Graen and Uhl-Bien explore the potential life cycles of a supervisor-subordinate relationship. They identified three stages of leadership relationships: strangers, acquaintance, and maturity (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991).

In the initial stranger phase, interactions between supervisors and subordinates are formal and purely contractual. The supervisor provides the subordinate only what they need to perform or complete the task, and the subordinate does only what is required. Once an offer is made to improve the dyadic relationship, the supervisor-subordinate relationship moves to the acquaintance stage. This stage is said to have a greater discourse for sharing both personal and

professional information and resources, however the reciprocal influence is still limited (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Both parties understand the power distance that still exists and although the relationship has evolved, it is still somewhat contractual.

Once both parties approve of and are successful in this stage, the supervisor-subordinate relationship is able to move to the last stage: mature partnership. Both supervisor and subordinate can count on each other for both professional and emotional support and are confident in the reciprocity of their relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). This relationship involved trust and respect and loyalty and once a supervisor-subordinate relationship is in the mature partnership phase, the relationship is said to have the potential to move from the professional, formal roles to a more informal, personal relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bein, 1995).

**Developmental model.** Boyd and Taylor (1998) built on Graen and Scandura's role-making model and Graen and Uhl-Bein's leadership making model to further explore leader and follower relationships through the development of friendship between the two positions. They developed a model to illustrate the stages of friendship development between a leader and a follower by integrating the social penetration model and the LMX models explained above. Boyd and Taylor (1998) suggest a parallel unfolding of the four various stages attributed to social penetration model and the leadership making models. The first stage of the social penetration model is the *potential for friendship* in workplace relationships. The organizational member's initial orientation and interaction into the workplace provides the opening for this first stage of development through similarities with the follower and leader, and physical proximity to each other (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). Demographic characteristics and traits, as well as general in- and out-of-work attitudes may increase the likelihood of attraction to each other through the similarities the leader and follower share (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). This extends to the Leader

Member Exchange relationship in regard to the initial interaction with the employer/employee. Attitudinal similarities contributed to the introductory relationship between the two.

The second stage of the developmental model is the *exploration stage*, or orientation stage in the social penetration model (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). This stage between leader and follower is superficial in nature and cautious and tentative. Similar to social exchange theory, this model suggests that at this exploration stage, members of the leader-follower relationship are developing perceptions of the other and considering the benefits and costs of a further development in their relationship, as well as the outcomes of those decisions. This stage aligns with the initial stranger phase of the Leader-Member Exchange model. The relationship and communication therein are primarily contractual exchanges in which the leader assesses the skills and strengths of their new follower (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). Likewise, the follower assesses the leader and his or her task assignments. The exchange creates a role-taking relationship in which a role is given and accepted by the leader and follower, respectively (Graen & Scandura, 1987).

The third stage of the developmental model is the *casual friend stage*, or the testing stage in the social penetration model in which leader-follower relationships become more relaxed, open, and friendly (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). Verbal and nonverbal cues are interpreted more accurately, and the evaluation of the other is more accepted. This stage corresponds to the acquaintance stage of the Leader-Member Exchange model. The leader and follower make or are made an offer for an improved working relationship, and the other has to be willing to accept the offer. Individuals in this relationship begin to share information and resources on a professional and personal level (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). The roles are offered and made, as with Graen and Scandura's role-making model.

The fourth stage of the developmental model is the *close friend stage*. This stage, similar to the affective stage of the social penetration model, is represented by the richness of communication and closeness of the individuals in the leader-follower relationship. This is characterized by the inside understanding of specific nonverbal nuances and exchanges, as well as expanding the boundaries of trust through continued success in task completions and exchanges (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). This stage aligns with the maturity stage of the LMX model in that the relationship is considered highly developed through reciprocity and support of each member. A high degree of trust, support and respect is evident in this stage of the LMX model (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991).

Boyd and Taylor further discussed the risks of development of relationships as overly close or exploitive. They suggest three drawbacks in forming an overly close relationship in the workplace. *Leader favoritism* supposes unfair treatment or risks of favoritism when friendship is involved in the organizational relationship. *Manipulation* is also a risk on the part of the leader or the follower and *emotional disruptions*, such as hurt feelings or jealousy, have the potential to occur when professional relationships get too close in a personal nature (Boyd & Taylor, 1998).

The development of a supervisor-subordinate blended relationship may show a progression through the LMX models addressed above. Focusing on this development through a LMX lens may help understand and predict developmental behaviors of a supervisor-subordinate blended relationship. Using LMX theory as a foundational framework will help guide the research and methods of this study to better understand the developmental behaviors of supervisor-subordinate blended relationships.

**Peer coworker relationship development.** Kram and Isabella (1985) identified three types of peer relationships: information peers, collegial peers, and special peers. Information

peers are classified as those relationships that only regarded work tasks and discussions. This type of relationship does not have high levels of self-disclosure or trust. Collegial peers are described as moderate amounts of trust, emotional support and friendship, where both work and personal discussion developed. Special peers are established as the rarest of coworker relationships, in that they were similar to best friends (Sias, 2014). These relationships are comprised of high levels of emotional support and trust and discussed a wide variety of professional and personal topics.

Sias and Cahill (1998) found that physical proximity was the largest factor in developing friendships with peer coworkers in a workplace. Pogrebin (1986) also suggests that proximity is an antecedent for friendship. Another factor in friendship development in the workplace was shared tasks (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Participants found that they developed friendships sometimes simply because they were around that coworker for extended periods of time and worked closely on shared projects. Half of the participants reported their friendship development was also caused by extraorganizational socializing, or spending time with their coworkers outside of the workplace. Based on this study, factors such as physical distance, task and projects, and organizational climate provide factors for relationship development.

**Friendship development.** Friendship in the workplace is defined by Sias and Cahill (1998) as based upon two dimensions: voluntariness and personalism. The first dimension considers friendship as voluntary, in which individuals choose whether or not they befriend a coworker. The second dimension considers friendship as personalistic, in which individuals get to know each other on a personal level, rather than simply a professional level. In other words, when friendships occur in the workplace, individuals choose with whom they want to develop a closer relationship and then treat each other as whole beings, rather than simply coworkers (Sias,

Krone, & Jablin, 2002). Scholars have found evidence for various types of friendships in the workplace. For example, Reisman (1981) identified three types of friendships: reciprocal, associative, and receptive. In the *reciprocal* friendship, individuals regard one another as equals, with the same loyalty and commitment to each other. In the *associative* friendship, individuals interact and create a bond mostly due to convenience or proximity. In the *receptive* friendship, individuals are unequal in their status due to large differences in class, achievement, or power.

In another study, Rawlins, Leibowitz, and Bochner (1986) explored the different levels of workplace friendships, and found four types of friendship: best, equal, one-up, and one-down. The best and equal friendships were considered more useful and supportive than the one-up and one-down friendships, where an unequal power status was displayed in one level of power up, or one level of power down relationship. The unequal friendships were considered to have more potential for exploitation and social intimacy was harder to achieve under inequality. Kingsley and Park (2004) found that overall, individuals are uncomfortable in unequal friendships and many will distance themselves from the relationship if they feel they are in an inequitable situation.

In short, unequal friendships in the workplace create tension and lack of social intimacy for friendships to progress to a best or equal status, however it is the high-quality partnership relationships that have the most potential to become blended. The blended relationships that develop in a workplace have limited research in the exploration of such a phenomenon. Bridge and Baxter (1992) are the most notable study on blended relationships in the workplace, proposing the relational dialectics perspective as a framework for their study.

**Blended relationships.** Blended relationships are the kinds of relationships that blur the line between a professional relationship and a more personal relationship (Bridge & Baxter,

1992). Researchers have established that the stronger communication and trust is between supervisors and subordinates, the more likely they will develop a high-quality exchange (Day & Mischenko, 2016). These high-quality exchanges often emerge from perceived similarity and close proximity to one another, among other attributes (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). Subsequently, the trust developed through positive upward influence (Kramer, 2017) gives way to differential supervisor-subordinate communication as in-group relationships progress. In turn, the in-group relationships between supervisor and subordinate give the foundation for a more personal relationship to flourish, which creates tensions in which maintenance is required (Waldron & Hunt, 1992).

Personal characteristics determine the likelihood of development in workplace relationships (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Those who are dependable, competent, and optimistic are generally more likely to develop a relationship with their coworkers. Similarities in demographic and personal factors also contribute to the likelihood of relationship development in an organization. Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995) also suggest time as a factor in workplace relationship development. Initially, distance and formality will exist in a relationship, and over time, the relationship will become more personal in nature.

However, what scholars have missed in their investigations of high-quality relationships, is how they become blended relationships. That is, how personal characteristics, communication patterns, and organizational factors contribute to the blurring of the professional and personal boundaries. It is apparent that relationship boundaries blur when there is communication competence, positive upward influence, and high in-group relationship maintenance. Trust, respect, and closeness are formed through these tactics, and friendships may become another part of the workplace. To gain greater understanding, the following research question is posed as:

RQ1: How do supervisor-subordinate blended relationships develop?

**Motives for relationship development.** Sias (2014) suggested three reasons for workplace relationships: mentoring, information exchange, and social support. Peers rely on each other for honest job feedback and career advice. Additionally, peers depend on other peers for information regarding supervisors, role expectations, and work boundaries. Finally, peers create social support for each other in lending an ear for venting frustrations, managing conflicts, etc. They help to validate and confirm and support each other in ways others cannot because they understand the workplace environment and dynamics (Sias, 2014). In light of these motives, it is still unclear why a person would want to develop a blended relationship in the workplace. Organizational members would seemingly appreciate the personal comfort and professional guidance provided by a blended relationship. However, questions still remain about why organizational members desire blended relationships. Therefore, to gain greater understanding, the second research question is posed as:

RQ2: What motives do individuals have for developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships?

### **LMX Theory and Relationship Maintenance**

Maintenance communication is defined as communication that “includes messages and behaviors used to preserve an acceptable and lasting relational state” (Waldron, 1991, p. 289). Workplace relationships, both supervisor-subordinate and peer coworker relationships, are important to not only the employee, but the organization, as well. Waldron and Kassing (2010) suggest four reasons for maintaining workplace relationships. First, because there is little choice in choosing coworkers in an organization, it is necessary to maintain relationships with those with whom individuals work. Second, maintaining a relationship network assists with career

success. Third, maintaining a healthy workplace relationship keeps employees with a positive outlook and morale. Fourth, workplace relationships often rely on teamwork, committees, and information-sharing, so maintaining those relationships reduces individual vulnerability when faced with team-related tasks.

**Supervisor-subordinate relationship maintenance.** Once a relationship exists between supervisor and subordinate, subordinates use a variety of tactics to keep their relationship at a comfortable level. Waldron (1991) conducted a study exploring the upward maintenance tactics used by subordinates and found that subordinates used four strategies: personal, contractual, regulative, and direct. Those strategies that emphasized personal content rather than task-related content were labelled *personal*. Those strategies utilizing conformity to role requirements, deference to the supervisor, and respect for the organizational conventions were labelled *contractual*. The factors that included impression management and censoring or distorting messages were labeled *regulative*, and those strategies that used direct negotiation and explicit discussion between subordinate and supervisor were labelled *direct*. Specifically, when personal, informal tactics are used in a supervisor-subordinate relationship, personal content and sharing of jokes, stories, common interests, and compliments are given to maintain the relationship (Waldron, 1991).

Using LMX Theory as a guide, Waldron found a positive association between subordinates' perception of their supervisory relationship and the use of personal and contractual tactics. He discovered that in-group members use personal, contractual, and direct tactics more frequently than out-group members and that out-group members use regulative tactics more frequently than in-group members. Additionally, he found a negative association between subordinates' perceptions of their supervisory relationship and the use of regulative tactics,

reasoning that subordinates with low-quality exchanges likely engage in impression management to portray themselves in as favorable a light as possible with their supervisors. Overall, Waldron's study laid the foundation for new research investigations about a previously underexplored aspect of the supervisor-subordinate relationship: maintenance.

Additionally, those relationships perceived to be high-quality relationships are more apt to be maintained by supervisors and subordinates (Waldron & Hunt, 1992). Those organizations that rely on smaller teams and complex tasks have a more informal atmosphere as well, and relationship maintenance is more prominent (Waldron, 2003). Tepper's (1995) study explored the relationship tactics subordinates used in their mentoring relationships with their supervisors. He found that informal relationships between subordinate and supervisor were more likely to use direct and extracontractual tactics, implying that informal relationships provide a nonthreatening environment where subordinates feel comfortable directly questioning their superior.

In 1995, Lee and Jablin examined subordinates' relational maintenance behaviors with their supervisors in situations where supervisors found themselves maintaining their relationships with their employees. They identified three main types of relationship maintenance situations: escalating, deteriorating, and stable. Escalating situations are those in which the relationship is moving to a higher or closer level that one partner is uncomfortable with or not ready for such a relationship. Deteriorating situations are those in which one partner feels the other is distancing him- or herself from the relationship. Routine situations are those in which the relationship is stable on both sides (Lee & Jablin, 1995).

Lee and Jablin discovered that subordinates use a different set of relational maintenance behaviors depending on the situation. In the escalating situation, out-group subordinates were more likely to use avoidant communication behaviors to maintain their relationship. In the

deteriorating situation subordinates use direct, open, and deception approaches to maintain their supervisor-subordinate relationship. In the stable situations, subordinates use avoidance and restrained expression in their maintenance behaviors with their supervisors. They also found that supervisors felt the need to keep their relationships at a comfortable level when there was a deteriorating, task-related situation. In contrast to Waldron's (1991) study of the four strategies used to maintain the relationships of subordinates and their supervisors, the results of Lee and Jablin's study exploring maintenance tactics used by supervisors and subordinates showed that "supervisors and subordinates may have more extensive repertoires of maintenance communication behaviors...than previously reported" (p. 246), and the strategies vary depending on each situation individuals face. Interestingly, Lee and Jablin found that when out-group subordinates found themselves in deteriorating situations with their supervisors, they used direct and open tactics to maintain their relationship. Lee and Jablin (1995) surmised that because an out-group relationship has formal authority and clear rules and expectations, it was easier to address the deteriorating factors by correcting the deviating rules and/or expectations.

Lee (1998) developed another study analyzing the way work groups in organizations affect communication maintenance behaviors between subordinates and supervisors. He found when individuals were in a more cooperative group social context, they tended to support each other, used communication tactics that create closeness, and used less deception and avoidance. Furthermore, when individuals felt their supervisors had a high-quality LMX relationship with their bosses, they tended to be more supportive and used less avoidance, as well.

**Peer coworker relationship maintenance.** Ayers (1983) found that individuals use three tactics to maintain their workplace relationships: avoidance, balance, and direct. Avoidance tactics are used to avoid things or individuals who may alter the state of the relationship, such as

ignoring someone's actions. Balance tactics are used to keep the emotional support levels the same, such as understanding another's moods and compensating for them if needed. Direct tactics are used to explicitly discuss relationship expectations, such as an individual directly telling the other person in the relationship that the relationship is at a comfortable level. Ayers also explored the three maintenance tactics employed based on an individual's intent to keep, develop or dissolve their relationship. Those who want to maintain a stable relationship tend to use the balance tactics. When the other party wanted to further develop the stable relationship, direct and avoidance tactics were used by the participant to keep their relationship at their comfortable level. When the other party wanted to dissolve the relationship, the participants tended to use the balance tactics to keep the relationship stable.

Sias and Cahill (1998) conducted a study that examined communication changes over time within coworker friendships. They found that when trust developed between the coworkers, there was decreased caution to discuss personal and professional frustrations. Peers turned to other peers for support and assistance with supervisor frustration. Their discussions became more and more detailed, personal, and intimate.

Sias, Gallagher, Kopaneva, and Pederson (2012) explored the maintenance tactics peer coworkers used to maintain their friendships at work, and how polite those tactics were perceived. They found four primary tactics used to maintain peer friendships in escalating situations: avoidance, indirect conversational refocus, direct conversational refocus, and openness, and four primary maintenance tactics used in deteriorating situations: creating closeness, circumspectiveness, deception, and openness (Sias et al., 2012). All of the tactics used were an attempt of the communicator to manage the boundary between personal and work lines. Regarding perceived politeness in using the maintenance tactics, in escalating situations, indirect

and direct conversational refocus were perceived as more polite than avoidance tactics. In deteriorating situations, creating closeness and circumspectiveness were perceived as the most polite maintenance tactics.

**Relational dialectics in supervisor-subordinate relationships.** Given how close and trustworthy workplace relationships can be, the possibility exists that they experience dialectal tensions throughout their relationship. Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) described dialectical tensions as the simultaneous competing discourses, or tensions, that occur in every relationship, and the competing discourses that are managed by each individual in the relationship as they try to satisfy each opposing need. Baxter (1998) concluded that every relationship consists of three primary tensions: autonomy-connection, predictability-novelty, and openness-closedness.

Autonomy-connection refers to the competing needs an individual feel between wanting to maintain a sense of independence and wanting to feel connected to their partner (Dainton & Zelley, 2015). Predictability-novelty is attributed to the need for stability in a relationship while also wanting spontaneity. Openness-closedness is the tension between desiring to be open and honest with a partner, while also wanting to maintain one's privacy.

According to Zorn (1995), supervisor-subordinate relationships consist of the three primary tensions of autonomy-connection, predictability-novelty, and openness-closedness, as well as two new tensions he developed through his research specifically unique to the blended supervisor-subordinate relationship: equality-superiority and privilege-uniformity. Autonomy-connection resides in the personal relationships supervisors and subordinates create in that working in proximity to each other created a closeness for their relationship (Baxter, 1988). Many of Zorn's participants reported physical closeness as a reason for their relationship development and emotional closeness. One of his participants explained her closeness with her

coworker was only separated by five feet of space and resulted in an instant relationship (Zorn, 1995). His results showed, however, that participants reported their relationships becoming more distant once hierarchy was involved (Zorn, 1995). Several interviewees suggested that once a promotion was given to one of the members in the relationship, distance emerged between the two organizational members.

Predictability-novelty did not play an obvious role in his study of personal and hierarchical relationships, but openness-closedness was prominent in the informational confidentiality present in the majority of supervisor-subordinate relationships. A need to be open and honest with each other was apparent, but the tensions contradicted the openness when some types of information were not considered open for conversation (Zorn, 1995). When one participant explained she received the promotion both friends applied for, they discussed the promotion openly and they reported she disclosed more than she probably should have in that role. Another participant, however, felt the need to be cautious to avoid disclosing confidential information to her friend.

One of the two new tensions Zorn (1995) developed, equality-superiority tensions, was present in his study as participants struggled to manage the personal, equal status they wanted in their supervisor-subordinate relationships, while attempting to perform those supervisory roles of rule-making, decision making, and evaluating. Participants wanted to feel equal in their friendships, while still maintaining their respective and unequal roles. One participant expressed her use of external justification. She attributed any requests to upper level supervisors, allowing her to maintain her supervisory role while honoring her equal friendship status (Zorn, 1995). Another participant, however, reported leaving the company as soon as her best friend received a

promotion, explaining that she could not accept the new power distance in their relationship when they had been equal for so long.

Lastly, privilege-uniformity existed between supervisor and subordinates in trying to maintain a fair amount of treatment towards their relationship as well as the rest of the employees, without showing favoritism to their personal relationships. Many participants in Zorn's study were very aware of other's perceptions of their supervisor-subordinate friendship and attempted to stay fair in their treatment of each other. Others reported feeling picked on solely because of their existing friendship, more than other organizational members in their workplace.

***Blended co-worker tensions.*** In 1992, Bridge and Baxter conducted a study exploring the blended relationships between workplace peers. Openness-closedness and autonomy-connection were applied to their framework, as well as two new tensions: impartiality-favoritism and judgment-acceptance.

Impartiality-favoritism closely resembles the privilege-uniformity tensions discovered in Zorn's (1995) study, however Bridge and Baxter's impartiality-favoritism dialectic is based on peer-to-peer fairness treatment for everyone versus individual support for their particular blended relationship (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Other organizational member's perceptions who were outside of the blended relationship were reported more so than the feelings of the members of the blended relationship. The perceptions of others about their blended relationships played a larger role in this tension than their own individual feelings.

Judgment-acceptance creates a contradiction of motives in that individuals in blended relationships expect acceptance and mutual affirmation, since both employees are in the same organization and understand the ups and downs of the particular workplace (Bridge & Baxter,

1992). Contrastly, those expectations are conflicted with often competing interests and/or job promotions and evaluations that build the tensions between those blended relationships (Bridge & Baxter, 1992). Additionally, participants in Bridge and Baxter's study reported that any negative criticism, feedback or argument negated the friendship norms of acceptance previously established.

Given the maintenance strategies used by supervisors and subordinates in their work relationship, the tactics used by peer coworkers to manage their friendships, and the dialectical tensions that exist between them, it is logical to assume that maintenance strategies exist for supervisors and subordinates in blended relationships to create a desirable relationship. However, it is unclear what communication behaviors these organizational members actually use.

Therefore, to gain greater understanding, the following research question is posed as:

RQ3: What communication strategies do individuals use to maintain their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships?

### **LMX Theory and Relational Outcomes**

In Graen et al's (1973) study, the supervisors invested time and effort into those relationships with new subordinates they predicted would stay. In contrast, they neglected the new subordinates they predicted would not stay. Those relationships that were neglected resulted in those employees leaving very shortly after entering the organization. Those relationships that the supervisors invested time and care in resulted in those employees remaining in the organization.

In Sias and Cahill's (1998) study, they found that when peer coworkers were in a close friendship, their work-related discussion increased, usually because of needed advice or support from their coworker. This is of consequence because the closeness of the friendship suggests an

influence (negative if the discussion focus on the negative aspects of their work environment) of one another's attitudes about the job, the supervisor, and/or the organization itself. They also found that the closeness that developed in a peer coworker friendship made it impossible to keep the personal aspects of their life away from their work environment. Lastly, they found that some individuals stay in an unhealthy work environment because of the friendships they had with their coworkers and became unhappy in their career (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Waldron (2003) discussed outcomes of relationship maintenance in the workplace. Career advancement, general well-being, and positive/negative organizational effects contribute to the consequences of maintaining a close relationship with coworkers. Employees may experience promotions or recognition as a result of their relationship, work satisfaction, work buffers when faced with stress or frustrations, meaningful and innovative productivity in their position, and reduced turnover in their organizations due to maintaining a more personal relationship (Waldron, 2003).

Bridge and Baxter's study suggested that the blended relationship between peers benefited the work relationship in four ways: information access, work-related assistance, psychological support, and improved work relationship. Information access refers to each member providing another view on each member's work to give a new perspective on the information. Work-related assistance occurred when one member of the blended relationship helped the other on accomplishing various tasks in the workplace. When members of the blended relationship felt the need to vent, or the need for empathy, the other member gave the understanding, support, and comfort needed for psychological support. Lastly, members of the blended relationship reported having more trust and respect for each other as work associates because of their friendship. Based on these outcomes of relational maintenance between peer

coworkers, it is possible that organizational members report a variety of personal and organizational outcomes. Therefore, to gain greater understanding, the following research question is posed as:

RQ4: What personal and professional effects do blended supervisor-subordinate relationships have on individuals in the blended relationship?

## CHAPTER III - METHOD

This study utilized Boyatzis' (1998) thematic analysis process in order to encode qualitative information. His thematic analysis involved three stages: deciding on how the data will be collected, developing codes or themes based on the data, and validating and interpreting results (Boyatzis, 1998).

### **Data Collection**

A Facebook post was shared to inform Facebook friends of the thesis study. The post urged Facebook friends to participate and included a link to the online questionnaire. Once participants clicked on the link, they were directed to Qualtrics, where an open-ended questionnaire was presented. Participants were also collected through a medium-sized southern university's email address book. Upon department supervisor approval, emails were sent to the department-approved employees asking for participation. If an employee decided to participate, he or she would email the principle investigator stating their desire to participate, and the principle investigator would then send him or her an online link to the Qualtrics survey. Participants were required to be at least 18 years old and work full time (i.e., 35 or more hours a week). Participants needed to interact with their supervisor or subordinate on a daily or weekly basis, in order to have the opportunity to develop a personal relationship. Additionally, perspectives of both supervisors and subordinates were gathered for this study.

Participants for this study consisted of 31 adults (20 women, 6 men, and 5 unreported) with an average age of 39 ( $SD = 12.11$ ) The participants identified as Caucasian/White ( $n = 15$ ), Hispanic/Latino ( $n = 12$ ), and other ( $n = 1$ ), with three participants who declined to identify their ethnicity. Participants ranged from managerial ( $n = 8$ ), nonmanagerial ( $n = 12$ ), other ( $n = 7$ ), with four participants who declined to identify their position. Participants' organizational tenure

ranged from 1 to 25 years ( $M = 8.18$ ,  $SD = 7.879$ ), and positional tenure ranged from 1 to 24 years ( $M = 5.78$ ,  $SD = 5.85$ ). The length of participant's relationship with their supervisor/subordinate ranged from 1 to 10 years ( $M = 4.27$ ,  $SD = 3.1$ ).

Open-ended pre-determined questions were administered to participants, via online, with questions that pertained to both supervisor and subordinate roles in the workplace. Participants were given a definition of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships and asked to consider their communication behaviors as they pertained to their blended relationship. Participants were asked to expound upon their answers as much as possible. Participants responded to the following open-ended questions: (1) Describe the activities and/or events that led you to developing a blended relationship with your supervisor (subordinate). (2) Explain why you wanted to develop a blended relationship with your supervisor (subordinate). (3) How do you maintain your blended relationship with your supervisor/subordinate? (4) How does your supervisor/subordinate maintain your blended relationship with you? (5) What particular challenges have you faced in this blended relationship? (6) Describe the ways that your blended supervisor-subordinate relationship affects your personal life and your professional life. (7) Is there anything else you want to share about your supervisor/subordinate blended relationship?

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis allows researchers to identify, analyze, and report patterns in their data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once the surveys were completed, a thematic analysis was conducted to observe and assign meaning to patterns and themes found from the results. First, survey responses were read to develop an understanding and familiarity with the data and to identify units of analysis. Units of analysis included any areas of words, phrases, or sentences that reflected supervisor-subordinate blended relationships (as explained in the research questions).

Then, through the identified areas of data relating to the research questions, assessment and comparison of said data were conducted to compare and contrast emerging themes and patterns.

Second, after reading the initial data, individual units were written on a white board to assess similarities between units and compare them across and within other units to identify any emerging themes about the development (RQ1), motives (RQ2), maintenance (RQ3), and outcomes (RQ4) of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. As themes emerged and became more apparent from the data, definitions and exemplary indicators of each them were developed to best reflect participant's blended relationships.

To verify the analysis, a code book was created and utilized for intercoder reliability. Two coders, provided with definitions and descriptions of the themes and 10% of the data, helped ensure the consistency of the thematic analysis. Alpha reliability figures above .80 are considered appropriate (Krippendorff, 2004; Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007), the results showed a satisfactory alpha reliability of .83.

## CHAPTER IV - RESULTS

### **Development of Blended Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships**

Participants expressed four factors that contributed to the development of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships: social activities, supervisor affirmation, commonality, and context. *Social activities* are described as opportunities to socialize and interact outside of the workplace. Participants mentioned meeting for happy hour, grabbing lunch during work hours, game nights, hunting, birthday parties, and going to the movies together. For example, one participant stated, “Social functions like employee birthday parties and farewell dinners were hosted by my organization and attended by coworkers and supervisors alike. This was the start of the personal relationship between my supervisors and I.” Another said, “Our school does things as a staff outside of school. Once a month we have Fun Friday, where everyone gets together for happy hour somewhere.” It is clear that interactions outside of the workplace where members were able to interact in a social and equal setting functioned as a convenient way for blended relationships to form.

Organizational members discussed *supervisor affirmation* as communication that is supportive and respectful between supervisors and subordinates and creates positive feelings of connection and usefulness. This is exemplified by supervisors empowering subordinates, trusting them, being aware of their needs, understanding of outside factors that affected a subordinate’s work, and attentiveness to their team. One participant said, “In the process of beginning my new job, from the start my supervisor has been very uplifting and signed me up for a women’s empowerment club within the different bureaus.” Another shared, “She is very understanding and aware of her employees needs and requirements in their lives. She is also extremely willing to help and listen when trouble happen in her employees lives.” When supervisors expressed

their understanding and were open to supportive gestures and communicative behaviors, blended supervisor-subordinate relationship development occurred for these participants.

Another area that contributed to a blended supervisor-subordinate relationship is *commonality*, or those areas in which the supervisor and subordinate share similar characteristics and lifestyles such as age, interests, and life situations. Commonality is also described in this study as those areas in participant's lives that they connected with and bonded over. One participant stated, "My supervisor also lived in my same neighborhood and we attended the same church and would see each other there. My supervisor and I were both mothers and bonded over talking about our children." Another expressed, "We had common tastes and interests in the local cuisine, and that helped bring us closer together personally." Supervisors and subordinates were able to develop blended relationships when common interests and characteristics created instances of interaction and conversation outside of work-related issues.

*Context* are those situations that put supervisors and subordinates in close proximity over a period of time. Situations such as long work projects, or conferences, or being in the same physical space exemplify the context that aids in the development of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. One contributor says, "I did have a prior subordinate and after years of working together and attending conferences, we developed a strong blended relationship. So I think I can say that time and joint conferences led to the blended relationship." Another says, "My supervisor trained me, so we had a relationship from the start. She is my ally, and the person I am closest to in the office as a result of having her train me my first couple weeks." Proximity, time, and shared tasks were prominent factors in participant's blended relationship development. As expressed, participants reported the biggest factors that influenced the

development of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships were social activities, supervisor affirmation, commonality and context.

### **Motives for Developing a Blended Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship**

Participants articulated that they had three distinct reasons for developing a blended relationship with their supervisor/subordinate: to improve team/organizational cohesion, to improve professionally, and to feel like a human being. Participants developed a blended supervisor-subordinate relationship in order *to improve team/organizational cohesion*. Overall work and team quality was attributed to improving the organization. This was exemplified by organizational member's desire for the organization to be a generally positive place to work. Participants expressed, "It leads to a more cohesive team when employees know their employer is there to lead by example." Also, "It makes communicating in the workplace easier when you know your supervisor personally." The need for team cohesion and a positive work environment contributed to member's motives for developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

Participants also wanted *to improve professionally*, which is another motive for developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. They wanted to find professional significance in their workplace and aid in their own professional development in the workplace. Career growth and positive working relationships also contribute to this motive. One participant stated, "I believe it is good to build a professional relationship with your supervisor because it can open many career growth opportunities." Another said, "I really respect my boss, and we were alike and I wanted a mentor that was older and further along in their career." Mentoring and career advancement were significant factors in motivations among participants for developing their blended relationships.

A last motive for developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships was *to feel like a human being*. Participants wanted the personalism a supervisor or subordinate gives to the other. They articulated that they are able to find the validation and affirmation necessary for getting through life in their blended relationships, as well as feeling happier and satisfied as a person. For example, one participant asserted, “It helps to have a blended relationship with my supervisor because it relieves some workplace tensions; also, because it helps them have empathy when, on the rare occasion, my home life affects my workplace.” Another participant said, “I think it is important to have a blended relationship with my supervisor so my supervisor gets to know me and vice versa outside of the workplace.” The ability to create a friendship that helped with their life outside of work was a last motive for participants developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships in their workplace. As stated, improving team/organizational cohesion, improved professionally, and feeling like a human being were all motives participants expressed for developing a blended relationship with their supervisor/subordinate.

### **Maintenance Strategies**

Organizational members reported using four strategies to maintain their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships: communicating openly, communicating consistently, sharing time, and respecting boundaries. *Communicating openly* referred to those ways of interacting that are attentive, honest, and maintain confidentiality. Direct conversation and constructive problem-solving is exemplified in this category. One participant noted, “maintaining confidentiality with work projects and when they talk about their personal life” is a way they keep their blended relationship. Another said, “Communication among all issues and matters should openly be discussed with your supervisor so we can maintain a steady work environment

as well as stay on the same page, take advice and figure out how to constructively resolve any issues.” Open and direct communication is an obvious and important maintenance strategy used by participants in blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

*Communicating consistently* refers to those brief interactions that focus on the personal and professional issues of the other. This is exemplified by supervisors regularly checking on their subordinates and following up on previous concerns. Participants also suggested those who are dependable, patient, and flexible help maintain their blended supervisor-subordinate relationship. One participant reported, “My supervisor is good about making personal contact, ‘checking in’ on a regular basis.” Another expressed, “She answers my questions, has patience, and remains neutral in situations.” Yet another participant stated, “She checks in with all of us. She greets us at the door each morning, check in when we return in the afternoon and also if she sees us out of sorts, she will speak with us privately.” Regular interactions with each other seem to keep the blended relationships at a comfortable and satisfactory level.

Another strategy participants use to maintain their blended relationships is *sharing time*. Supervisors and subordinates engage in activities together, both in and outside of work, such as lunches and social activities. One organizational member stated, “We also maintain a blended relationship by regularly seeing each other outside of work, traveling, movies, or dinner.” A last maintenance strategy is *respecting boundaries*. Supervisors and subordinates understand their roles in a way that acknowledges the professional and personal separation. Expectations are clear in applicable contexts in which a supervisor has to assert his/her role and a subordinate has to adhere to those norms established. One participant said they maintain a blended relationship by, “setting up personal boundaries about certain discussion during the working hour and by focusing on responsibilities at work.” Another reported they are able to maintain their blended

relationship by, “going to work every day and knowing when to be able to conversation as friends, but being able to put that aside in an instant depending on the situation we are in.” Roles are clear and respected in this maintenance strategy.

Participants use four strategies in maintaining their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships, as discussed above. Communicating openly, communicating consistently, sharing time, and respecting boundaries all contribute to maintaining a blended relationship at a satisfactory level.

### **Outcomes of Blended Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships**

Participants reported five specific outcomes from their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships: improved organizational environment, improved professional experience, improved personal experience, dialectical tensions, and increased stress. An *improved organizational environment* refers to a more enjoyable and positive place to work, due to a blended relationship in the workplace. Organizational members experienced productivity and overall happiness as a result of their relationship. The team and quality of work is also improved, according to the participants. One participant said, “It’s much easier to pull together if you know a little bit more about the strengths of the people on your team and what motivates them.” Understanding the team and strengths associated with each organizational member is a beneficial outcome from blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

Another outcome of blended relationships is *improved professional experience*. Participants reported that their work skills and career grew as a result of their blended relationship with their supervisor or subordinate. Mentors and professional relationships were appreciated and welcomed in this outcome. Participants stated they have developed a more positive professional relationship, as well as mentors in their profession. One participant stated,

“Because my supervisor has more knowledge than I do, I learn a lot from her. I tend to ask many questions when I do not know the answer and she is always willing to answer them. So my work skills have improved.” A similar outcome of blended relationship that participants reported was *improved personal experience*. Organizational members felt happier overall and reported new friendships as a result of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. One organizational member expressed, “I have a new friendship I enjoy as part of my personal life. Our blended relationship makes work more enjoyable.” Another said, “It makes me happier overall. Enjoying your job and the people you work with is something that has great positive impact on me as a person.” A happier environment outside of work helped participants develop new friendships and contributed to their person overall.

Participants experienced dialectical tensions in their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. Dialectical tensions were those simultaneous and competing pulls that coworkers experience with one another as outcomes of blended relationships, such as blurred boundaries, preferential treatment, maintaining their individualism, and appropriate amounts of disclosure. For example, one participant said, “Sometimes when I need her to be my friend she has to be my supervisor instead. I understand it, and I respect that her role has to come first, especially while we’re at work, but sometimes this creates friction.” Another participant stated, “Sometimes, when a colleague doesn’t share the same sort of blended relationship you do with a supervisor, the colleague can interpret the blended relationship as ‘playing favorites.’” Another participant expressed, “Because I would consider my supervisor a friend, I feel that I can get away with things other employees can’t.” Dialectical tensions were apparent in the outcomes participants reported from their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

A final outcome of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships is *increased stress*. Participants report greater levels of work, mistreatment from their supervisor, and uncertainty about their supervisor which created stress, anxiety, and negativity from their blended relationship. One participant stated, “it brings stress and anxiety. I begin to question myself when I go home at the end of the day if I’m doing a good job or not.” Another said, “the downside to a positive blended relationship is probably that 2 to 4 hours of work at home are typical.” Increased stress, brought on by anxiety and uncertainty, created a negative outcome for participants in their blended relationships.

In short, participants reported an improved professional, organizational, and personal experience, as well as dialectical tensions and increased stress as outcomes of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

## CHAPTER V - DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to understand how and why blended supervisor-subordinate relationships develop in the workplace, and the maintenance strategies used to keep the relationship at a desirable level. This thesis found that both supervisors and subordinates do, in fact, desire blended relationships because they seek professional development and want to be treated well. They also develop and maintain blended relationships through various communication activities, and achieve both professional and personal success, albeit with some challenges.

### **Model of Blended Supervisor-Subordinate Relationships**

The results of this study create a model for blended supervisor-subordinate relationships by describing the motives, development, maintenance, and effects of this organizational phenomenon. This model aligns with LMX Theory and the LMX models previously discussed. Specifically, findings that contribute to the model of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships are also consistent with the Leadership-Making model Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1991), the Role-Making Model Graen and Scandura's (1987), and the Developmental Model (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). Many participants did not know their supervisor beforehand, therefore their roles initiated in the stranger phase. Organizational members reported that their supervisors spent time training them, or in the Leadership-Making model lens, making an offer to improve the dyadic relationship (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). This is also consistent with Graen and Scandura's (1987) Role-Making Model and the initial role-taking phase. A task was assigned, and the supervisor assessed and evaluated the skills and ability of their new subordinate to understand the level he/she was at in the organizational process (Graen & Scandura, 1987).

Once a somewhat contractual relationship was formed, supervisors and subordinates started sharing time together, working on various organizational-related projects, meeting for lunch, and outside social activities which allow organizational members to begin sharing more than professional information. Indeed, personal stories, lifestyles and resources were introduced, reminiscent of Graen and Uhl-Bien's acquaintance stage and Graen and Scandura's role-making phase. Both members of the relationship began to understand each other.

Many participants stated a relationship developed out of these factors, evolving into Graen and Uhl-Bien's mature Leadership-Making stage and/or Graen and Scandura's role-routinization phase. They felt trusted and respected in their relationship, and many reported feeling happier in their organization because of the understanding in their blended relationship.

Likewise, the results support Boyd and Taylor's (1998) Developmental Model. Many of the participants reported that their relationships developed based on shared characteristics and lifestyles. Further, organizational members reported physical closeness as a determining factor in the initial development of their blended relationship. This aligns with Boyd and Taylor's first stage of development as the *potential for friendship* stage. Participants also suggested the affirmation from supervisors in regard to trust and empowerment contributed to their blended relationship development. Organizational members stated their supervisors started to trust them to do their jobs and do their jobs well. This follows the *exploration* stage, when perceptions of each other are developed and assessed (Boyd & Taylor, 1998). The third stage of Boyd and Taylor's developmental model, *casual friend* stage, is exemplified in the blended relationship model through participants reports of social interactions outside of work. Members shared lunches, happy hour, and other social activities that helped develop the openness and relaxed behaviors associated with this stage. Once participants felt comfortable in this part of their

blended relationship, they reported that work tasks and issues were easier dealt with since an open and honest dialogue was able to occur. This creates a parallel with the last stage of Boyd and Taylor's model, the *close friend* stage. Members of the blended relationships felt clear understanding in their roles and reported a knowledge of emotional and professional support from the other person. Although there are parts of this blended relationship model that align with previous LMX models, it could also be distinguished from the previous models in a variety of ways based upon motives, development, maintenance, and outcomes of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships.

**Motives.** Participants in this study reported professional improvement as a motive for developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. Organizational members sought career growth and mentoring in their relationship, as well as a desire for more meaningful and enjoyable work. This finding is consistent with Sias's assessment of peer relationship development factors. She stated that coworkers seek mentors to further their knowledge in the company, as well as hone their skills and abilities to progress further in their organization (Sias, 2014). Participants in this study created a blended relationship with their supervisors because of some aspect of mentoring ability their supervisors could give them.

Two distinctions emerge between this study and previous supervisor-subordinate relationship investigations, however, as participants stated they developed their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships to improve organizational cohesion and to feel like a human being. Organizational members reported that they developed their blended relationships in order to feel like their supervisor viewed them as a person and to have a more relaxed and unified work environment. Participants seem to want to be part of an organization that is harmonious and gets along. Indeed, research suggests that supportive climates keep people committed to their

workplace (Patterson et al., 2005). Similarly, they want to be treated well because they want to be valued, recognized, and be seen as contributing members. Perhaps organizational members are increasing their desire to have an overall sense of balance between work and home that creates happiness and satisfaction in both areas. The empathy and understanding gained from this development created a more satisfied work and home environment. Developing a blended relationship with their supervisors and subordinates has proven to be one way to achieve these goals.

**Development.** Context was reported by participants to be a factor in developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. Physical closeness and the time spent together completing work tasks align with Sias and Cahill's (1998) study of peer friendship development. They found proximity to be the leading factor of friendship development in the workplace, with shared tasks accounting for almost half of their participants. It is accurate to state that being physically close with coworkers, including supervisors and subordinates, creates an environment where blended relationships have the potential to develop.

Another factor in developing blended supervisor-subordinate relationships was commonality. Participants gravitated toward coworkers who shared the same interests and lifestyles as themselves. This is consistent with Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) findings that discuss personal characteristics as a prominent component in relationship development. Those who are alike are inclined to develop relationships together. Likewise, Sias (2009) discussed similarities between supervisors and subordinates that contribute to a relationship development. When supervisors and subordinates share similar attitudes and demographic factors, the quality of their relationship development proves positive.

One distinction developed between this current study and existing supervisor-subordinate literature as participants expressed supervisor affirmation as a factor in their blended relationship development. Subordinates felt they had a more personal relationship when they believed their supervisors were supportive, empowering, attentive and helpful to their needs. Perhaps this personal development was created to balance the power distance between each role. Rawlins, et al. (1986) suggested that equal-status friendships were the most useful and supportive. Kingsley and Park (2004) found that organizational members are uncomfortable in unequal friendships. When supervisors affirm their employees through support and attentiveness, perhaps subordinates perceive the power distance to equalize enough to feel comfortable within the equal status of friendship.

**Maintenance.** Participants reported open communication as one strategy used in maintaining their blended supervisor-subordinate relationship. They stated open, friendly, and direct communication to address issues and tasks helped an overall level of satisfaction in their relationship. Organizational members also noted that respecting boundaries also helped in maintaining their blended relationship in and out of work. These findings are consistent with the existing literature regarding direct and contractual tactics. In-group LMX relationships use direct and open channels of communication to discuss any work-related tasks, while utilizing contractual tactics to maintain roles and role expectations. What is interesting to note is some participants stated they confronted an issue or concern directly with their supervisor, and their blended relationship allowed them to do so without any reports of threat or risk to their job or position in the relationship. This aligns with Lee and Jablin's (1995) findings in which in-group LMX organizational members used direct and open maintenance tactics to deal with deteriorating situations. Their reasoning behind this finding is that in-group LMX organizational

members have a relationship built on trust and respect, and therefore have little fear of consequences when approaching a problem with their supervisor in a direct manner (Lee & Jablin, 1995). The findings in this study seem to parallel with theirs.

Although interpersonal communication scholars have discovered five relational maintenance strategies: positivity, assurances, openness, sharing tasks, and social networks (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Stafford & Canary, 1991), two key distinctions evolved in this study compared to pre-existing organizational communication literature. Participants reported that consistently communicating and sharing time contributed to the maintenance of their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. Checking in, having lunches together, and continuing their social activities outside of work suggests that regular and steady interaction is required to maintain a blended relationship at a satisfactory level. This could be due, in part, to the possible in-group LMX relationship participants had with their supervisor or subordinate. Organizational members may feel more comfortable with personal conversation and activities, so the progression and continuation of these events may seem to be the natural course for their blended relationship. Another reason these maintenance strategies were reported could be that people merely want to feel important and remembered in their relationships, regardless of the context. Consistently communicating and sharing time may be the important factors in organizational members feeling like they have a meaningful role in their blended relationship.

**Effects.** Two outcomes of this study were reported that parallel existing literature concerning this research question. When asked about the effects or outcomes participants gained from their blended supervisor-subordinate relationships, our findings indicated dialectical tensions and improved professional experience as their perceived outcomes. This aligns with the studies conducted by Bridge and Baxter (1992) and Zorn (1995). The dialectical tensions

present in these findings, equality vs. inequality, impartiality vs. favoritism, judgement vs. acceptance, and openness-closedness, suggest a parallel that strengthens and validates previous studies. Dialectical tensions are inherently a part of every relationship, including blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. Professional improvement reported in this study is consistent with Waldron's (2003) assessment that career advancement plays a role in outcomes associated with relationship maintenance. A good quality relationship with a supervisor leads to workplace satisfaction (Waldron, 2003).

A notable distinction that unfolded in this study compared to existing literature are the reports of increased stress. Although additional work and responsibilities is consistent with in-group LMX high-quality relationship characteristics, it is surprising to find negative outcomes associated with the high-quality relationship, such as stress, anxiety, and uncertainty. These findings suggest a more delicate high-quality LMX relationship than previous research has exposed.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

There are several limitations to this study. The first is the sample size used. A larger sample size, with participants varying in gender and industry, would give greater detail to the findings of this study. Another limitation is the nature of the data collection. Although suitable for this study's needs, the qualitative method chosen provided limited substance and depth that could be acquired using a different methodological approach.

This study does pave the way for future scholars to expand and expound upon these findings. This study explored the perceptions and experiences of only the members in the blended supervisor-subordinate relationship. Future research could include perceptions of other organizational members, as some of the findings suggested perceptions of others impacted the

decisions of the blended relationship members. Perceptions of other organizational members regarding the development and/or maintenance of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships may shed new light on this model developed in this study. Additionally, gathering more detail and information from particular supervisor-subordinate dyads may create an area for future scholars to explore. Industry-specific dyads, or gender-specific dyads may develop new findings for the organizational communication discipline.

Another avenue for future research pertains to the organization would be to explore the effect that blended supervisor-subordinate relationships have on traditional organizational outcomes, such as organizational effectiveness, climate, and productivity. A positive or negative effect on organizations would be beneficial to understand from a scholarly and practical standpoint. Furthermore, the dissolution of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships would invariably affect organizations, and research exploring this phenomenon would assist organizational members and scholars alike.

### **Contributions**

There are several contributions this study makes to the organizational communication discipline. First, this study about blended supervisor-subordinate relationships focuses needed attention on an overlooked relationship within the supervisor-subordinate communication literature. Supervisor-subordinate communication is one of the most researched areas of organizational communication, yet literature on the friendships that develop and are maintained between different power-distance levels is sparse. This study bridges the gap in this literature. Second, this study further strengthens LMX Theory by using it to explore blended relationships. New insights and findings into this area help build the theoretical grounds upon which LMX stands by considering a new dyad in which LMX can be applied. Lastly, this study presents a

model of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships to the organizational communication discipline where none existed previously. This study is the seminal research into blended supervisor-subordinate relationships and can only be strengthened in time and further research.

Practical contributions exist from this study, as well. Organizational supervisors can use this study to understand how their blended relationships assist their subordinates in their positions in the organization. Doing so will give supervisors the tools needed to nurture and foster a blended relationship that benefits themselves, their subordinates, and the organization. Likewise, this study can help subordinates find personal and professional success in understanding why and how their friendships with their supervisors developed. Understanding the potential for improvement on their job skills as well as their overall happiness comes from the practical applications of this study. Lastly, supervisors and subordinates can use this study to build off one another. They will be able to learn of one another's strengths and weaknesses and learn to work together in the most successful way possible to achieve their goals. This study can also be used to identify the challenges of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships so that organizational members can be aware of the and navigate past them.

## **Conclusion**

This study delves into an area of organizational communication that has not been explored and found many insights and information that creates more depth to the discipline, as well as benefits to any organization. Similar to Fletcher's (2007) assertions, leadership style seems to be a huge factor in the success or failure of blended supervisor-subordinate relationships. The relationship in which supervisors affirm and support their subordinate leads to a satisfactory relationship for both parties. An unintended consequence, however, of blended

relationships is increases stress, which could interfere with work productivity and overall organizational climate.

Supervisors and subordinates spend a great deal of time together. Consequently, they both seek a relationship that creates personal development as well as professional development. Blended supervisor-subordinate relationships help bridge the balance organizational members are looking for in their professional and personal lives and create happier and more trusting organizational members.

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