

Wilson, K. S., Sin, H.-P., & Conlon, D. E. (2010). What about the leader in leader–member exchange? The impact of resource exchanges and substitutability on the leader. *Academy of Management Review*, 35, 358–372. doi: [10.5465/AMR.2010.51141654](https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.2010.51141654)

Positive Interventions: Alternate Routes to Quality Workplace Relationships

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Social exchange theory (SET) is an important foundation of social sciences from which many workplace theories have emerged. Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) contend that social exchange is at the heart of workplace relationships. Although SET is a complex framework, in essence, it views workplace interactions as exchanges of resources broadly construed, ranging from tangible resources such as money, goods, and services to intangible ones such as information, support, and trust (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Foa & Foa, 1980). Governed by the rule of reciprocity, parties involved in social exchanges use rational deliberation to gauge how much they need to repay for others' actions. Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu posit that workplace theories rooted in SET should be modified to accommodate the new realities in modern organizations. Although we concur with their observations about new characteristics of work, we are not as optimistic as Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu about SET's capacity to guide our understanding and actions to improve workplace relationships. We argue that positive interventions are important complements to the social exchange process, thereby promoting the quality of work relationships.

Why Do We Need More Than SET?

Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu (2018) describe the modern workplace as replete with volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (i.e., VUCA). The catch-all term of VUCA has been viewed as a synonym for a “crazy” workplace (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014), in which social exchanges become increasingly vulnerable. For example, employees can be too overwhelmed

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by an ocean of complex and conflicting information to collaborate well with colleagues, and supervisors can be drawn to the fast-paced and overloaded workday, and fail to provide needed support for employees. The rational, utilitarian mindset of SET does little to help except fueling finger pointing and elevating stress, which could potentially trigger or exacerbate negative exchanges. Importantly, Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu's extension of SET fails to recognize important facets of human nature; individuals (a) are disproportionately more sensitive to the negative aspects of social exchanges than to the positive and (b) inherently seek to make a prosocial difference beyond maximizing self-interest in the social exchange process. Our commentary aims to highlight a set of validated interventions that can be applied in work settings to foster employees' positive focus and prosocial behaviors in social exchange, thereby promoting high-quality work relationships in modern organizations.

Workplace Interventions Promote Positive Perspectives

It has been established that bad events have stronger power over good events across life domains (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In social exchanges at work, negative events occur less frequently than positive events but are much more potent in their ability to adversely impact employees (Miner, Glomb, & Hulin, 2005). As Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) noted, "Human beings are naturally biased toward remembering the negative, attending to the negative, and expecting the worst" (p. 783). Individuals adopting the lens of cost-benefit evaluation in the social exchange process are more likely to be overwhelmed by what went wrong or could go wrong at work. For example, individuals tend to quickly notice and continuously ruminate about heavy workloads, demanding bosses, and organizational red tape, while overlooking the positive aspects of caring coworkers, acquired skills, and earned income that supports their families.

We contend that individuals would enjoy and benefit more from work should they focus more on the bright side. Rooted in the positive psychology tradition (Seligman et al., 2005), positive reflection interventions explicitly attune individuals to positive events and direct attention away from the negative. The common paradigm of such interventions involves keeping a journal of three things that went well each day and explaining why they went well. Research has shown that individuals keeping a "three good things" journal daily for a week report greater happiness and fewer health complaints (Bono, Glomb, Shen, Kim, & Koch, 2013; Seligman et al., 2005). These interventions can be adapted with the added element of social sharing; individuals not only reflect on and savor the positive events by themselves but also talk about them with their colleagues, friends, and family. Research shows

that individuals who share positive work events with their spouses at home enjoy higher job satisfaction (Ilies, Keeney, & Scott, 2011); the benefits of positive events are amplified through social interactions. The active ingredient of positive reflection interventions centers on the attentional shift from the bad to the good in the social exchange process, which elicits positive emotions, shapes positive self-evaluation, and builds positive social connections over time (Fredrickson, 2001). Put differently, such interventions help individuals to more fully notice, savor, and capitalize on the positive aspects of workplace relationships.

Practical Implications

Positive reflection interventions are practically beneficial for employees in modern organizations. These interventions foster a positive focus and attune employees to reflect and capitalize more on the positive side of their experiences in various social exchange settings rather than become bogged down in what goes wrong. Thus, these interventions help to foster positive exchanges and alleviate or circumvent negative exchanges. For example, upon receiving performance feedback, employees practicing positive reflection interventions may do less to suspect supervisors' hostility behind their critical comments or blame the unfairness of the assessment system (Adler et al., 2016) and instead reflect more on their strengths and opportunities for professional development. By focusing on the bright side through interventions, employees undergoing organizational transformation may look ahead for positive prospects instead of dwelling on the fear of failure (i.e., positive forecast), employees helping a frustrated customer may think she is simply in a hurry rather than being a grumpy person (i.e., positive attribution), and employees driving their children to school may view it as fun and invigorating instead of stressful and time consuming (i.e., positive appraisal). Further, positive reflection interventions have the potential to create a positive team climate and organizational culture that guide employees to collectively savor and capitalize on the positive, thereby enhancing the quality of workplace relationships.

Workplace Interventions Enhance Prosocial Behaviors

An abundance of research points to the fact that individuals do not solely care about self-interest in the social exchange process; they also care about the welfare of others and strive to make a prosocial difference—an important but neglected point in Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu's (2018) SET lens. Many individuals have altruistic dispositions (e.g., agreeableness) and desires (e.g., prosocial motivation) and take prosocial actions to care for others (e.g., citizenship behaviors), without rewards and often at their own expense (Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016). Indeed, research shows that indi-

viduals feel happier when spending their money on others than on themselves (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). We focus on workplace interventions that promote prosocial behaviors (e.g., helping) by enhancing individuals' (a) kindness toward others and (b) perceived prosocial impact.

Interventions That Cultivate Kindness Toward Others

We focus on mindfulness and loving-kindness meditations as two contemplative interventions that empower employees to make a positive difference for others. Mindfulness interventions have taken various forms, ranging from the traditional Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) to adapted paradigms at work (Eby, Allen, Conley, Williamson, Henderson, & Mancini, in press), but their shared aim is to cultivate mindfulness, or receptive awareness of and attention to present moment experience without judgment (Brown & Ryan, 2003). A mindful state can be achieved by paying attention to breaths and gradually expanding attention to bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions as well as environmental stimuli as they arise, without judging or controlling them.

Mindfulness interventions promote prosocial behaviors by enhancing kindness toward others because mindfulness helps individuals to think less about themselves and take more notice of what others need. Through mindfulness interventions, individuals learn to decouple the self from experiences; they simply notice what they think and feel as fleeting mental events rather than judge whether they are good or bad or ponder what they mean to oneself (Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang, 2011; Good et al., 2016). This allows mental space to fully observe whatever arises in one's social surroundings, including the needs and difficulties of others at work. Thus, individuals tend to notice, empathize, and help others who have certain challenges. Indeed, mindfulness has been linked to positive social exchanges such as organizational citizenship behaviors (Reb, Narayanan, & Ho, 2015).

Unlike mindfulness interventions that foster nonjudgmental awareness, loving-kindness meditation squarely targets cultivating care and kindness toward others (Salzberg, 1995). This practice directs individuals to focus on the heart region as they think about a person (e.g., a loved one) toward whom they have warm feelings and then extend the feelings to others (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). Research reveals that individuals practicing loving-kindness meditation show activation in the brain regions associated with compassion toward others (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, Johnstone, & Davidson, 2008). Thus, workplace interventions based on loving-kindness meditation are promising candidates in fostering prosocial behaviors and quality work relationships.

Interventions That Enhance Perceived Prosocial Impact

We focus on two types of interventions—job crafting and gratitude expression—that foster quality bonds in social exchange by enhancing the salience of one's prosocial impact. Job crafting interventions empower employees to proactively redefine the task and relational boundaries of their jobs (Wrzesniewski, LoBuglio, Dutton, & Berg, 2013). By reflecting on how one's work benefits others (e.g., coworkers, supervisors, and clients), employees envision a vivid picture of how they make a prosocial impact (Grant, 2007). For example, an office assistant in charge of scheduling may view herself as helping colleagues use time efficiently. As one's prosocial impact becomes salient through job crafting, employees are motivated to do more for their intended beneficiaries in social exchanges at work.

Gratitude expression is another way to enhance one's perception of his or her prosocial impact. Thanking the helpers (e.g., gratitude visit) signals to them that they have made a positive difference to the beneficiaries and their kind acts are socially valued (Grant & Gino, 2010). Gratitude expression interventions in which individuals, for example, write a thank you note to their colleagues can greatly promote quality social connections at work. By reinforcing the social worth of others, gratitude expression has shown to enhance helpers' prosocial behavior toward the focal beneficiaries as well as a broad social audience (e.g., Grant & Gino, 2010).

Practical Implications

Workplace interventions that cultivate prosocial behaviors such as care, helping, and support fundamentally shift the mindset from what I would gain or lose, the core premise of SET, to what I can do for others, which is a crucial driver of positive social exchanges and healthy workplace relationships. For example, managers who benefit from mindfulness or loving-kindness interventions may become more sensitive to employees' needs and be more thoughtful of what they can do to support them. In team settings, mindfulness interventions may promote a nonjudgmental, mindful team process, which has been shown to prevent task conflict from escalating into relationship conflict (Yu & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2018). Further, managers may learn from gratitude expression interventions to write thank you notes or adopt other forms of recognitions to foster citizenship behaviors among employees. Job crafting interventions are promising for employees and managers as they can think more about what they can do to help and support each other, thereby increasing the quality of leader–member exchange and workplace relationships in general.

Conclusion

The modern workplace is ever changing. New features such as diverse workforce and leadership styles have challenged the ways individuals used to

interact with each other at work. We argue that social exchange theory, despite its venerable tradition, paints an incomplete landscape of how modern workplace relationships unfold. We highlight a set of positive interventions that foster high-quality social exchange relationships by empowering employees to attend to and capitalize on the positive side and by enhancing employees' potential to make a prosocial difference for others. Nonetheless, practical challenges remain. Although most of our interventions can be practiced daily during a short period of time (e.g., 10 minutes), they need to be properly embedded in a workday without disturbing employees' work flow. Further, the efficacy of interventions may depend on the situation. For example, mindfulness interventions may deescalate the conflict between coworkers, whereas positive reflection interventions may help employees build quality ties with colleagues and clients. Organizational culture may prescribe certain interventions as more suitable, and individuals may be more receptive to some kinds of interventions than others. Nonetheless, we believe that modern workplace relationships will greatly benefit from positive interventions that go beyond the cost–benefit assumption of social-exchange-based theories.

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Workplace Relationships and Social Networks

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As described in Chernyak-Hai and Rabenu's (2018) focal article, the workplace has changed tremendously over the past few decades. These changes, undoubtedly, have affected how individuals interact and build relationships

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