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Strengthening Leader-Member Exchange Through Everyday Coaching

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Abstract: Customer-facing sales teams operate under constant performance scrutiny. However, coaching conversations often frame disengagement and turnover intentions as personal failings rather than as signs of strain in the leader-employee relationship. This integrative literature review draws on leader-member exchange theory to explore how everyday coaching behaviors shape the quality of those relationships in frontline roles. A systematic search and multistage screening across business and education databases informs a structured synthesis of the evidence, focusing on trust cues, reciprocity, and perceived equity. These findings also carry implications for educational leadership contexts in which principals and instructional leaders coach teachers and academic staff through frequent observation, feedback, and professional learning conversations. The findings indicate that relationship

quality improves when leaders maintain a consistent cadence, clarify expectations, invite employee voice, and follow through on commitments. Conversely, irregular feedback, selective access to development, and overly corrective tones are more likely to be perceived as favoritism or control, thereby weakening team trust. This review translates the theory of leader-member exchange into observable coaching micro-behaviors that organizations can standardize and assess, shifting the focus from compliance to meaningful relationship-building. Departing from research that treats leader-member exchange as an outcome, this review emphasizes that coaching interactions are the mechanism through which strong exchanges are built. The practical implications highlight the importance of access to coaching for all employees, clear criteria for differentiated support, and brief, frequent check-ins that balance accountability with relationship maintenance.

Keywords: employee engagement, leader-member exchange, performance coaching, trust, turnover intentions.

Introduction

Customer-facing sales roles put performance as a daily top priority. In these environments, the relationship quality between the leader and the employee can either sustain motivation and engagement or prompt quiet withdrawal (Deng & Turner, 2023; Martin et al., 2023). Recognizing this pattern shifts the focus away from assumptions about employee traits and toward how leaders interact with employees during routine, high-pressure interactions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). While this review centers on customer-facing sales, the conditions closely resemble those in other high-accountability frontline environments, where performance is monitored, time pressure is constant, and leader credibility shapes persistence and commitment (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). In such contexts, high-quality daily exchanges help employees interpret expectations as legitimate and support as genuine rather than as surveillance or favoritism (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). Consequently, this study applies leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as the organizing lens to explain why performance coaching may sustain or undermine employee engagement in demanding frontline work (Dansereau et al., 1975; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015).

Rooted in vertical dyad linkage research, LMX theory challenges the notion that leaders treat all subordinates equally. Instead, it emphasizes that leaders build different dyadic relationships with various team members (Dansereau et al., 1975; Uhl-Bien, 2022). Over time, the theory evolved into a modern view, which posits that ongoing interactions that signal trust, loyalty, and mutual respect shape relationship quality (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). According to this framing, performance coaching is a relational event that may strengthen or weaken the exchange, depending on its delivery and reception (Hart, 2025a; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023; Savić et al., 2022), rather than simply

serving as a technical transfer of feedback. In other words, the same performance message may land differently when embedded in a relationship marked by credibility and care versus one marked by distance or inconsistency (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Martin et al., 2023). This perspective underscores the importance of examining coaching behaviors because coaching is one of the most frequent and visible touchpoints at which exchange quality is strengthened or eroded (Hart, 2025a; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023; Savić et al., 2022).

Empirical findings from recent LMX research reinforce the notion that relationship quality has important organizational consequences. Higher-quality LMX correlates with improved satisfaction and retention outcomes, suggesting that trust mechanisms help explain the influence of these relationships on commitment and persistence over time (Deng & Turner, 2023; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hirvi et al., 2020). Moreover, related work shows that LMX shapes employees' responses to leader communication, influencing whether leader actions are interpreted as supportive or controlling, which, in turn, affects engagement in performance-oriented environments (Hart, 2025b; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). However, LMX has also drawn criticism for its potential to foster perceptions of favoritism or inequality when leaders provide unequal access to and support for team members (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022). These critiques underline the need for more precise identification of day-to-day leader behaviors that foster high-quality relationships without creating exclusion or distrust (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Martin et al., 2023).

Research Problem

Across 247 studies and 290 samples, Dulebohn et al. (2012) found that higher-quality leader-member exchange is associated with stronger work attitudes and lower turnover intentions, suggesting that relationship quality carries measurable consequences for organizations. Turnover is not just a staffing glitch. In customer-facing sales, leaders and employees exchange frequent, public performance signals, so coaching conversations often serve as the primary channel through which employees decide whether accountability feels fair or controlling (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022). The general problem is that many sales organizations rely on metrics, scripts, and corrective feedback routines that may push results in the short run but do not reliably build the trust cues that sustain high-quality exchanges over time (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). The specific problem is that leaders often lack a clear set of real-time coaching micro-behaviors, especially consistency, transparency, and follow-through, that strengthen exchange quality while limiting team-level perceptions of favoritism when support varies across employees (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). Although LMX research links exchange quality to outcomes, it remains less precise about which observable coaching actions repeatedly build strong exchanges in performance-intensive frontline roles without triggering exclusion or distrust through unmanaged differentiation (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

This review fills that gap by synthesizing the evidence into an applied coaching framework that translates exchange quality into behaviors that leaders can practice, standardize, and assess in daily coaching conversations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Savic et al., 2022).

Research Focus

This paper presents an integrative literature review informed by a systematic search and multistage screening, synthesizing research on how performance coaching shapes the quality of LMX in customer-facing sales roles. The inquiry centers on leader-employee dyads and examines how relationship quality is associated with engagement and turnover intentions in high-performance settings (Deng & Turner, 2023; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hart, 2025a).

Evidence linking stronger exchanges with lower turnover intentions suggests that coaching behaviors that build trust may improve retention and provide interpersonal benefits (Deng & Turner, 2023; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hirvi et al., 2020). Building on LMX's differentiated relationship premise, this review analyses how coaching routines and communication cues can signal reliability, respect, and fairness, or, conversely, be perceived as selective support (Dansereau et al., 1975; Martin et al., 2023). These patterns are integrated into a practice-facing framework, translating exchange quality into observable coaching micro-behaviors that leaders can standardize and evaluate within organizational contexts (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Rizky et al., 2023).

Research Aim and Research Questions

This integrative review aims to synthesize evidence on leader-member exchange and performance coaching into a framework of coaching micro-behaviors for real-time application by leaders. It pays particular attention to consistency, transparency, and follow-through as trust cues shaping exchange quality over time (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hirvi et al., 2020). The research questions focus on translating exchange quality into observable coaching actions that can be empirically assessed in customer-facing, performance-intensive roles (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

Guided by the evidence base, the review asks three linked questions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). First, how do employees in customer-facing sales roles interpret leader coaching behaviors as signals of exchange quality, trust, and fairness (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023)? Second, how is perceived LMX quality associated with cohesion and turnover intentions in high-accountability work contexts (Deng & Turner, 2023; Jufrizen et al., 2024)? Third, which coaching behaviors are most consistently linked with higher-quality exchange while minimizing perceptions of favoritism or exclusion within teams (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022)? These questions set the stage for the theoretical overview that follows and inform the structure of the synthesis.

Literature Review

Leader-Member Exchange As the Unit of Analysis

LMX theory posits that leadership is experienced through dyadic relationships rather than as a uniform style applied equally to all employees (Dansereau et al., 1975; Erawati, 2024; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). This perspective emerges from vertical dyad linkage research, which highlights that leaders develop differentiated relationships that shape access, influence, and the day-to-day interpretation of leader intent (Dansereau et al., 1975).

Modern LMX scholarship retains that core insight while emphasizing that exchange quality develops through repeated interactions that signal trust, respect, and reliability (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). That framing matters here because performance coaching is among the most frequent relational moments in customer-facing roles, meaning coaching interactions can function as the mechanism through which exchange quality is strengthened or eroded (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In practice, this suggests that the same coaching message can be perceived as either developmental or controlling, depending on the existing exchange context and the cues embedded in the leader's communication (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

What Builds Exchange Quality and Why Trust and Fairness Are Central

LMX quality is commonly treated as a continuum ranging from more transactional exchanges to high-quality relationships characterized by mutual obligation and professional regard (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Trust is especially central because it serves as both an outcome of consistent leader behavior and a condition that enables employees to interpret feedback as legitimate rather than self-serving (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Hirvi et al., 2020). Evidence on LMX processes suggests that employees use everyday leader cues to ascertain whether they are respected, listened to, and treated fairly, which shapes the meaning they assign to accountability and coaching (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). This is also where an internal critique becomes relevant, because LMX differentiation can trigger perceptions of favoritism or exclusion when leaders distribute attention, opportunities, or latitude unevenly and without clear justification (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

From a coaching standpoint, this critique implies that relationship building cannot be reduced to "being supportive," because support must be communicated in ways that preserve perceived fairness across the team while still allowing individual development (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Martin et al., 2023). The practical implication is that coaching behaviors should be assessed not only for their effectiveness in improving outcomes but also for whether they signal reliability, transparency, and equitable treatment in repeated exchanges (Hirvi et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

What LMX Predicts in High-Pressure Work and Why Coaching Is A Plausible Lever

LMX research has consistently linked higher-quality exchange to stronger employee attitudes and performance-relevant outcomes, positioning exchange quality as a consequential organizational variable rather than a background relationship feature (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graves & Luciano, 2010). Recent evidence linking LMX to retention-relevant outcomes indicates that teams with higher-quality leader-member relationships report lower turnover intentions (Deng & Turner, 2023). Related findings suggest that the effective application of LMX principles, such as stronger exchange quality, can translate into improved team functioning, including higher levels of cohesion (Jufrizen et al., 2024).

These outcome patterns are theoretically meaningful because they suggest that exchange quality shapes how employees interpret performance pressure, leader demands, and organizational expectations over time (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). They are also practically meaningful in customer-facing roles because leaders often interact with employees through short, frequent coaching touchpoints that compound into stable relational judgments (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023).

Consistent and credible coaching can serve as a trust-building routine that reinforces the quality of exchanges and increases the likelihood that employees will stay engaged even through performance challenges (Deng & Turner, 2023; Hirvi et al., 2020). When coaching is inconsistent or selectively applied, it can be perceived as unfair, weakening the quality of the exchange and increasing the likelihood of disengagement, even in environments with clear performance metrics (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023).

Positioning Early-Career Employees Without Overclaiming “Generational Difference”

Organizations often interpret engagement challenges among early-career employees using broad cohort narratives rather than examining the relational dynamics that leaders can influence (Harter, 2024; Savić et al., 2022; Uhl-Bien, 2022). A more evidence-based interpretation is that the key mechanism is exchange quality, specifically, how leaders consistently convey respect, inclusion, and reliability in everyday performance interactions (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020).

Research on leadership expectations among Generation Z employees highlights their preference for clear communication and leader credibility cues that align with LMX concepts, without suggesting that the underlying relational mechanisms themselves are unique to one cohort (Erawati, 2024; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hart, 2025b; Savić et al., 2022). This framing anchors the paper in dyadic exchange while maintaining an actionable focus on coaching behaviors that shape perceptions of trust and fairness in high-visibility performance settings (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). It also supports a more careful contribution to the literature by emphasizing what leaders do in the exchange, rather

than positioning “Generation Z” as a stand-in causal account for observed dynamics (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

Integrated Framework

Synthesizing the LMX literature suggests an integrated framework in which performance coaching operates as a repeated-interaction channel through which leaders signal trust, fairness, and reliability, thereby building or weakening exchange quality over time (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hirvi et al., 2020). In this framework, higher-quality LMX shapes how employees interpret accountability and feedback, which, in turn, relates to cohesion, job attitudes, and turnover intentions in performance-driven, customer-facing roles (Deng & Turner, 2023; Jufrizen et al., 2024). The framework also foregrounds a key boundary condition: because LMX differentiation can be interpreted as favoritism, coaching that strengthens one dyad at the expense of perceived team fairness may unintentionally erode trust and commitment elsewhere (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

Research Methodology

An integrative literature review was conducted using systematic search and multistage screening procedures, along with a structured evidence synthesis, to identify and summarize patterns across the included studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). This approach was selected because the LMX literature includes foundational theory and applied empirical studies, which must be interpreted together to clarify the underlying mechanisms and translate them into observable leader behaviors (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2022). This design aligns with the paper’s goal of producing an actionable, coaching-oriented framework that emphasizes relationship quality rather than using LMX solely as an outcome label (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023).

A comprehensive search strategy was used to identify peer-reviewed sources addressing LMX theory, exchange quality, trust and fairness mechanisms, and outcomes relevant to engagement, cohesion, performance, and turnover intentions (Deng & Turner, 2023; Harter, 2024; Jufrizen et al., 2024). Searches were conducted using ABI/INFORM (ProQuest), ERIC (EBSCO), and Google Scholar, applying filters for peer-reviewed status and recent publication where appropriate to ensure contemporary relevance (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). Keyword and Boolean combinations were used to refine results and capture both foundational and applied work, including searches centered on LMX and workplace engagement, coaching and job satisfaction, and turnover intentions in high-accountability contexts (Deng & Turner, 2023; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Citation mining, ancestry searching, and chain searching were also used to identify influential works and to locate studies that were repeatedly cited across the LMX and coaching literature (Dansereau et al., 1975; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015).

Screening followed a structured multistage process. First, titles and abstracts were reviewed to confirm alignment with leader-subordinate exchange processes and to remove studies that did not treat LMX constructs as central (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). Next, full-text screening led to an assessment of theoretical alignment, methodological clarity, and relevance to relationship quality in performance conversations, with particular attention to trust and fairness cues and to mechanisms that shape how employees interpret leader intent and differentiated treatment (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023).

For included studies, data extraction focused on how LMX quality was conceptualized or measured, which leader behaviors or communication patterns were associated with exchange quality, and which outcomes were associated with higher-quality exchanges (Deng & Turner, 2023; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hart, 2025b). The synthesis compared patterns across studies and organized the results into the coaching-oriented framework and the research questions presented in the previous section (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Data Analysis

A thematic synthesis approach was used to code and compare evidence across the included studies and to organize recurring patterns into four thematic categories, as reported in the Results section (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The author first extracted study design, sample context, focal leader behaviors, and reported LMX-related outcomes into a structured evidence table, then applied line-by-line coding to the reported findings and interpretive claims most directly tied to coaching interactions and relationship quality. Next, codes were clustered into descriptive themes and iteratively refined into four higher-order categories that aligned with the coaching micro-behaviors emphasized in this review, while preserving contradictory or boundary cases rather than forcing agreement. This step mattered. Throughout the process, analytic memos and versioned code notes were maintained so decisions about merging, splitting, or renaming themes remained traceable from raw excerpts to the final category labels. These procedures were used to maintain transparency and support the interpretation presented in the Results section.

Table 1

Characteristics of included studies included in the thematic synthesis

Study	Design	Sample or context	Focal construct(s)	Key takeaway for this review
Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al. (2023)	Scale development and validation (three studies)	French- and English-speaking employee samples (multiple samples)	Supervisor need-supportive, need-thwarting, and need-indifferent behaviors (TMIB-S)	Supervisor interpersonal style provides observable cues that can support or undermine relational safety in coaching exchanges.

Hirvi et al. (2020)	Qualitative thematic analysis	Ten health care professionals (5 LMX leaders, 5 members) interviewed	Trust construction in LMX	Trust in LMX is built through emotional and collective elements, suggesting that coaching follow-through and interaction quality operate as trust inputs, not just "nice to have."
Martin et al. (2023)	Daily diary study	158 employees; morning/evening diaries over 5 workdays (603 observations)	Daily LMX quality and follower well-being	LMX quality fluctuates day-to-day and predicts daily well-being, reinforcing the idea that repeated coaching interactions can accumulate into meaningful outcomes.
Rizky et al. (2023)	Cross-sectional survey; SEM-PLS	116 industrial employees (questionnaire)	LMX, communication satisfaction, engagement, performance	Communication and exchange quality move together; coaching clarity and satisfaction may help explain why LMX relates to engagement and performance.
Khair et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional survey	67 port logistics employees (saturated sampling)	LMX, perceived organizational support, engagement, job satisfaction	LMX appears linked to satisfaction through engagement, aligning with the view that relational quality mediates between leader behaviors and downstream attitudes.
Jufrizen et al. (2024)	Cross-sectional survey; mediation testing	Public sector employees (reported sample approx. 140)	LMX, work engagement, job satisfaction, performance	LMX relates to performance indirectly via engagement and satisfaction, supporting the argument that coaching affects outcomes through relationship quality rather than feedback content alone.

Results

Coaching interactions function as exchange-building episodes

Performance coaching functions as a repeated exchange-building episode because employees interpret these interactions as evidence of leader intent, credibility, and investment over time (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). In customer-facing roles characterized by frequent coaching, even small variations in a leader's attention, tone, and follow-through can compound into lasting perceptions of relationship quality (Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2023).

This pattern suggests that coaching is not simply the delivery of performance information, but a relational event that can either strengthen or weaken the dyad, depending on consistency and perceived legitimacy (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). When coaching is inconsistent or unscheduled, the same performance routines may be perceived as favoritism or control, thereby undermining the quality of the exchange, even when targets remain unchanged (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023).

Taken together, this theme positions coaching as a practical mechanism that leaders use to shape LMX quality in real time, rather than a neutral management practice layered on top of the relationship (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020).

Trust cues mediate how employees interpret feedback and accountability

Trust cues appear to mediate whether employees interpret feedback as developmental guidance or self-serving correction, especially in roles with constant accountability (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). Employees use observable leader behaviors, such as communication clarity, follow-through, and interaction consistency, as cues to judge whether coaching is legitimate and safe to engage with (Hart, 2025b; Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023).

In high-visibility environments, these cues may matter as much as the technical content of feedback because employees compare leaders' behavior across people and situations in near real time (Steelman et al., 2004; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). When leaders communicate expectations clearly and demonstrate consistent support, accountability is more likely to be perceived as fair rather than personally targeted (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). This implies that "trust-building" is best understood as a recurring pattern embedded in the delivery of coaching that links the micro-level of interaction to the macro-level of exchange quality (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hirvi et al., 2020).

Differentiation is unavoidable, but perceived fairness determines whether it helps or harms

LMX theory posits that leaders form differentiated relationships, which can create advantages for some employees while increasing the risk of perceived inequity across the unit (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Differentiation becomes harmful when unequal access, latitude, or leader attention is interpreted as favoritism rather than as justified individualization (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022).

Coaching provides a visible context for these perceptions to take shape, as employees can readily observe differences in timing, tone, and developmental investment (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). Findings suggest that leaders who individualize development while maintaining consistent fairness cues are more likely to protect relationship quality across the team (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). The implication is that the practical problem is rarely differentiation itself, but rather

unmanaged differentiation that erodes perceived justice and undermines exchange quality across the wider team (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin et al., 2023).

Higher-quality exchange is associated with retention-relevant outcomes and team functioning

Higher-quality LMX is associated with retention-relevant outcomes and team functioning, indicating that relationship quality has measurable organizational consequences (Deng & Turner, 2023; Jufrizen et al., 2024). Deng and Turner (2023) reported lower turnover intentions among teams characterized by higher-quality leader-member relationships, linking exchange quality to attitudes related to withdrawal. Jufrizen et al. (2024) reported improved team cohesion when LMX principles were effectively applied, indicating that exchange quality can shape collective coordination and shared functioning. Related evidence links LMX to performance-relevant outcomes and cooperative behaviors, supporting the view that the impact of exchange quality reverberates beyond satisfaction alone (Graves & Luciano, 2010; Khair et al., 2024).

Taken together, these findings suggest that coaching practices that signal trust and fairness influence team cohesion and turnover intentions through the quality of the leader-employee relationship, rather than through the content of feedback alone (Deng & Turner, 2023; Hirvi et al., 2020). This sets the stage for this literature review to integrate these insights into a practical coaching framework that strengthens exchange quality while minimizing perceived favoritism (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023).

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings in Relation to Existing Literature

The central significance of these findings is that performance coaching appears to function as a recurring relationship event that builds or weakens LMX quality over time (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). LMX theory emphasises that leaders develop differentiated dyadic relationships, and those differences shape how employees interpret expectations, support, and access to developmental resources (Dansereau et al., 1975; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). It then sets up the practical implications.

Evidence from workplace developmental relationships indicates that relationship quality is associated with turnover intentions, reinforcing the notion that relational dynamics play a key role in retention in performance-intensive settings (Deng & Turner, 2023; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). Trust also appears to serve as a meaningful pathway in LMX relationships, helping explain why the same coaching message can be interpreted as support in one dyad and control in another (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). That is where coaching becomes leverage.

At the same time, the literature notes that LMX can foster perceptions of favoritism when leader attention and support appear inconsistent; this can undermine team dynamics even when particular dyads are strong (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). So, the discussion turns to what leaders can standardize.

Practical Implications in Organizational Settings

These findings suggest that organizations should treat LMX quality as an operational leadership capability that can be shaped through consistent coaching routines rather than left to informal relationship-building (Erawati, 2024; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Because fairness perceptions and trust are repeatedly identified as antecedents and mechanisms in LMX, organizations may benefit from coaching systems that emphasize reliable follow-through and transparent expectations (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020).

The favoritism critique also implies that leaders should maintain a visible baseline of communication and support for all team members while continuing to tailor development conversations to individual needs (Hart, 2025b; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). In metric-driven environments, unequal access to feedback can undermine relationship quality by creating uncertainty about whether coaching is developmental or selective, thereby increasing the risk of disengagement and turnover (Deng & Turner, 2023; Dulebohn et al., 2012; Rizky et al., 2023).

From a practical perspective, the synthesis supports standardizing core coaching touchpoints, such as cadence, documentation, and escalation rules, while still allowing for personalization within those boundaries (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Coaching Applications

At the coaching level, the evidence suggests that leaders should use each interaction to communicate trust, loyalty, and respect by employing a consistent tone, delivering predictable follow-ups, and providing clarity about what success requires (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). Leaders may reduce perceptions of favoritism by making coaching criteria explicit, for example, by linking additional coaching time to transparent performance thresholds or agreed-upon development goals rather than informal preference (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023).

Coaching approaches that emphasize continuous, constructive coaching and positive feedback have been linked to the development of trust between leaders and employees, aligning with LMX's emphasis on relational quality as the basis for engagement and retention (Bakhshandeh, 2022; Harter, 2024; Hirvi et al., 2020). Other key aspects of performance coaching, including immediate feedback and continual coaching, support shorter, more frequent check-ins rather than depending entirely on episodic correction after performance declines (Bakhshandeh, 2022; Jayathilake et al., 2021).

Finally, because LMX outcomes are shaped by how employees interpret leaders' behavior, coaching is more likely to strengthen exchange quality if it invites employee voice and maintains respectful accountability, rather than relying solely on compliance-driven messaging (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Implications for Educational Leadership and Teacher Development

The coaching micro-behaviors synthesized in this review translate to educational leadership, as leader-member exchange develops through repeated, visible interactions that signal trust and reliability (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Hirvi et al., 2020). Small routines matter. Research syntheses suggest principals shape schools partly through everyday instructional interactions that influence learning conditions, so it is reasonable to treat observation debriefs and feedback conferences as exchange-building episodes rather than isolated evaluation events (Grissom et al., 2021; Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020). When a principal names one growth target, invites the teacher's view, and follows through on agreed support, trust cues can accumulate across cycles in ways that mirror LMX logic (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). A randomized trial of web-based coaching in mathematics instruction found that structured feedback routines can shift teaching practice, supporting the claim that micro-interactions can matter at scale (Kraft & Hill, 2020). Under COVID-era strain, leadership and working conditions were tied to teacher stress, so follow-through and tone may shape whether coaching is experienced as development or as pressure (Collie, 2021; Kraft et al., 2021; Toropova et al., 2021). That translation also raises a fairness question that shows up in the next theme.

Educational settings also make differentiation highly visible, which can trigger concerns about favoritism even when leaders believe they are being helpful (Martin et al., 2023; Uhl-Bien, 2022). Visibility changes the meaning of support. Because schools operate through dense relationships, additional mentoring or selective access to professional learning can be read as an indicator of insider status, and those interpretations travel through staff networks (Liou & Daly, 2020; Martin et al., 2023). LMX differentiation is built into leader behavior, so uneven feedback cycles, inconsistent classroom observation notes, or quiet invitations to special projects can appear to be preferential treatment, even when leaders think they are simply triaging needs (Dansereau et al., 1975; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Rizky et al., 2023). The framework in this review suggests a practical guardrail: establish a baseline coaching cadence for all educators, then allocate additional development time to explicit, documented goals rather than to informal preferences (Hirvi et al., 2020; Uhl-Bien, 2022). Done well, that approach protects team-level trust while still allowing tailored growth conversations to spread (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020; Liou & Daly, 2020). Those perceptions matter because they can push people toward exit, which in turn affects retention.

Retention implications follow from the broader LMX evidence. Turnover is the real test. Updated meta-analytic work and COVID-era pipeline studies suggest working conditions and perceived support

relate to mobility and exit, so improving everyday exchange quality may matter most in high-turnover settings, including under-resourced schools and early-career roles (Bastian & Fuller, 2021; Kraft et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2020; Toropova et al., 2021). Policy arguments about shortages emphasize strengthening conditions that make teaching sustainable rather than relying on constant replenishment (García & Weiss, 2020). Leadership preparation programs and district workshops can integrate this framework through practice cycles that rehearse observation debriefs, track follow-through on promised supports, and use coaching logs to make consistency and transparency visible (Grissom et al., 2021; Hirvi et al., 2020). Taken together, these implications set up the conclusion's educational relevance without repeating the Results.

This review is limited by variations in how studies operationalize LMX mechanisms and outcomes, which can complicate direct comparison across contexts (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Martin et al., 2023). Several studies in this domain rely on survey-based evidence, which can limit causal inference about whether exchange quality drives outcomes or whether outcomes shape perceptions of exchange quality (Hirvi et al., 2020; Rizky et al., 2023). Causality is still uncertain in this set. These constraints suggest that the discussion and conclusions should be read as a framework-building synthesis rather than as causal proof (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

These findings should be interpreted with caution because much of the evidence base relies on survey designs, and LMX mechanisms are operationalized in varied ways across studies (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Hirvi et al., 2020). That matters for how the claims travel. Nevertheless, the synthesis supports a clear practical takeaway: leaders can improve both performance and retention outcomes by treating coaching as a deliberate relationship-building process while safeguarding perceptions of fairness across the wider team (Deng & Turner, 2023; Martin et al., 2023).

Conclusions and Implications

Across the included studies, coaching appears to operate less as information transfer and more as a set of relational signals that employees use to judge leader intent and reliability, which aligns with LMX claims that exchange quality develops through ongoing interaction (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Uhl-Bien, 2022). Trust cues and fairness perceptions emerge as the interpretive bridge between everyday feedback and downstream outcomes, including cohesion and willingness to stay, suggesting that the same performance message can land differently depending on how it is delivered and followed up (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). This synthesis, then, positions coaching as a visible lever for shaping relationship quality in frontline contexts where contact is frequent, and reputations are made quickly (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Huyghebaert-Zouaghi et al., 2023).

Practically, the review supports treating coaching as a routine with a clear rhythm, explicit standards, and closed-loop follow-through, because predictability and clarity make leader behavior easier to read and harder to misinterpret as favoritism or control (Hirvi et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). Rather than trying to eliminate LMX differentiation, leaders may need to make developmental access more transparent by using shared baselines for feedback while documenting why additional support is allocated, thereby protecting team trust while still allowing individualized growth (Dansereau et al., 1975; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Uhl-Bien, 2022). This framing also adds conceptual value by translating LMX into observable coaching actions that can be measured and tested, rather than merely discussed as an after-the-fact label (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Within educational organizations, these same coaching signals matter because instructional leadership is exercised through repeated observation and feedback, which shape teacher working conditions and well-being (Collie, 2021; Grissom et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021; Toropova et al., 2021). In high-turnover environments, including under-resourced schools and early-career roles, stable coaching routines may complement retention strategies that focus on improving conditions rather than continual replacement (Bastian & Fuller, 2021; García & Weiss, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). Future research should empirically test this framework in principal-teacher or mentor-mentee dyads, and the next section outlines concrete directions for doing so (Hallinger & Kulophas, 2020; Kraft & Hill, 2020).

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should test coaching behaviors as antecedents of LMX quality, rather than treating coaching as a broad perception measured after the fact (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Researchers should also distinguish dyad-level exchange quality from team-level perceptions of fairness, understanding that differentiation can strengthen some dyads while weakening climate-level trust if support is experienced as inequitable (Martin et al., 2023; Rizky et al., 2023). Longitudinal designs that track trust development across repeated coaching interactions would be especially useful for clarifying when coaching stabilizes exchange quality rather than contributing to withdrawal and turnover intentions over time (Deng & Turner, 2023; Hirvi et al., 2020).

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Conflict of Interest

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