

Inclusive Relational Leadership in University Public Relations: A Systematic Integrative Review

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Abstract: This systematic integrative review examined how leader-member exchange (LMX) explained relational leadership in university public relations. University communication units relied on rapid coordination, accurate information, employee voice, psychological safety, and continuous innovation, yet most LMX research had developed outside public relations. A bounded protocol was applied to eleven peer-reviewed LMX studies published from 2022 to 2024 and identified during an earlier phase of the research project. Each study was re-audited for bibliographic validity, relevance, methodological clarity, and conceptual contribution, and the corpus was synthesized thematically. Six themes emerged: relational competence and candor; communication resources and engagement; employee voice and psychological safety; support for innovation; justice and LMX differentiation; and resilience, exhaustion, and retention. The review generated an Inclusive LMX-Based Public Relations Leadership Model in which equitable high-quality exchanges provided communication resources, voice, safety, and innovation, while organizational justice and relationship differentiation functioned as boundary conditions. The findings advanced a communication-centered interpretation of LMX and produced five propositions for future qualitative, multilevel, and longitudinal research in university public relations teams.

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INTRODUCTION

University public relations (PR) has moved beyond ceremonial publicity and media handling. Contemporary communication units manage institutional reputation, public information services, digital content, media relations, stakeholder engagement, crisis response, and internal coordination. These responsibilities are interdependent: the quality of external communication is partly determined by whether internal actors can exchange accurate information, challenge weak assumptions, and respond under time pressure. The leadership problem is therefore not only how a PR leader communicates outward, but also how the leader builds working relationships that enable the team to communicate responsibly.

The internal dimension is particularly important in universities because PR work is performed through mixed teams. Permanent staff, lecturers, administrative officers, student media crews, interns, designers, videographers, and technology personnel may collaborate across formal hierarchy and project-based assignments. They differ in status, expertise, access to senior decision makers, and confidence in speaking upward. Digital public communication further intensifies these demands. Social media functions as a strategic channel for communication and public-opinion monitoring while also creating risks of disinformation, polarization, and manipulation. University PR teams therefore require rapid interpretation of digital signals, accurate verification, and psychologically safe internal correction before messages reach institutional publics.

Leader-member exchange (LMX) theory provides a relational explanation for these conditions. Instead of treating leadership as a uniform style directed toward an undifferentiated group, LMX examines the quality of the dyadic exchange between a leader and each member. High-quality exchanges are generally characterized by trust, respect, support, information sharing, and reciprocal obligation, whereas low-quality exchanges remain formal and restricted to contractual role requirements (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden & Maslyn, 1998). This perspective is useful for PR because members who receive context, autonomy, and credible feedback may be more willing to report risks, offer ideas, and act responsibly. The theory also raises an ethical problem: differentiated relationships can produce an in-group and out-group when access and opportunity are distributed without transparent justification.

Recent LMX studies have expanded this logic. Manager-centered research shows that leaders value competence, candor, and shared goals in exchange relationships (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). Other studies connect LMX with communication satisfaction and engagement (Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado, 2022), job resources (Wagner & Koob, 2022), employee voice and organizational justice (Arain et al., 2022; Assefa et al., 2024), psychological safety (Wang, Ponnappalli, et al., 2024), innovation (Modliba et al., 2024), adaptation and retention (Petrilli et al., 2024), and lower counterproductive behavior (Premru et al., 2022). These constructs closely match the operational requirements of strategic communication teams, yet they are rarely synthesized through a public relations leadership lens.

Three gaps remain. First, most contemporary LMX evidence is located in organizational behavior, human-resource management, psychology, or general management rather than public relations. Second, studies often treat communication as a mediator or outcome without examining communication as the constitutive practice through which exchange quality is built. Third, positive dyadic outcomes can conceal team-level inequality when leaders concentrate information, trust, and strategic assignments among a few members. University PR requires a framework that explains both the benefits of high-quality exchange and the conditions under which differentiation suppresses voice, innovation, and resilience.

This review therefore asks three questions: (1) What relational and communication mechanisms connect LMX with outcomes relevant to university PR leadership? (2) What boundary conditions determine whether differentiated leader-member relationships promote inclusion or exclusion? and (3) What conceptual model and testable propositions can be derived for future public relations research? The article contributes by reorganizing current LMX evidence around the communication requirements of university PR and by proposing an Inclusive LMX-Based Public Relations Leadership Model. The contribution is not a claim that LMX outcomes are unknown; it is a communication-centered synthesis that integrates dyadic quality, team justice, internal communication, and PR-specific outcomes within one analytical structure.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article used a bounded systematic integrative review. Systematic review procedures are appropriate when a study assembles a defined evidence base through explicit criteria, while integrative synthesis permits the combination of empirical, conceptual, and methodological contributions (Snyder, 2019). The analytical corpus consisted of the eleven peer-reviewed journal articles that formed the

final evidence set of the preceding SLR phase. The present article did not represent that corpus as a new exhaustive database search; it re-audited and synthesized the established evidence set through transparent eligibility, extraction, appraisal, and thematic procedures.

The core studies were published from 2022 to 2024 and covered bibliometric development, manager-valued exchange qualities, communication satisfaction, engagement, employee voice, psychological safety, innovation, organizational justice, LMX differentiation, work-mode adjustment, exhaustion, turnover intention, and counterproductive behavior. Contextual public relations and internal communication studies were used to interpret the evidence but were not counted as part of the eleven-study core corpus. This separation prevented contextual literature from being confused with the primary analytical evidence.

Eligibility required that a study (a) was published in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) appeared from 2022 through 2024; (c) treated LMX, manager-LMX, or LMX differentiation as a central construct; (d) examined a relational mechanism or outcome relevant to communication leadership; and (e) provided sufficient methodological or conceptual detail for appraisal. Studies were excluded when LMX appeared only as a peripheral control variable, the publication status could not be verified, or the findings did not inform communication, voice, engagement, innovation, justice, adaptation, or team functioning. Bibliographic details and DOI links were rechecked before synthesis.

A structured extraction matrix recorded the research focus, design, organizational context, principal finding, limitation, and potential relevance to university PR leadership. Quality appraisal asked four questions: Was the purpose clear? Was the design appropriate to the claim? Were conclusions supported by the analysis? Was the study relevant to the review questions? The synthesis then proceeded through three coding cycles: identification of recurring constructs; grouping of constructs into mechanisms, outcomes, and boundary conditions; and interpretation through public relations leadership. The procedure followed the transparency principles of PRISMA 2020 without claiming a de novo PRISMA database flow that was not conducted in the present phase (Page et al., 2021).

Table 1. Bounded Systematic Integrative Review Protocol

Protocol element	Operational decision
Review type	Bounded systematic integrative review using a pre-screened research corpus.
Core evidence period	Peer-reviewed LMX studies published from 2022 to 2024.
Analytical corpus	Eleven DOI-verified articles; contextual PR literature was used only for interpretation.
Inclusion focus	LMX as a central construct and outcomes relevant to communication leadership.
Extraction fields	Focus, design, context, principal finding, limitation, and university PR relevance.
Quality appraisal	Clarity of purpose, design-claim fit, evidentiary support, and relevance to the review questions.
Synthesis	Three-cycle thematic coding: constructs, mechanisms/outcomes, and public relations interpretation.
Integrity boundary	No de novo exhaustive database count was claimed; the pre-screened corpus was re-audited before synthesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Review profile and overall pattern

The corpus was methodologically plural but contextually concentrated. Most studies used quantitative survey designs with mediation or moderation analysis, while the evidence set also included bibliometric, scale-development, experimental, and conceptual contributions. Higher education appeared directly in one study, but no core article focused specifically on university PR. This pattern supports transfer of the findings to communication leadership while requiring careful contextual interpretation rather than automatic generalization.

Across the eleven studies, favorable outcomes did not arise from interpersonal closeness alone. High-quality exchange operated by giving members communicative and psychological resources: context, feedback, discretion, recognition, support, and permission to speak. The evidence also showed that relational differentiation could become harmful when status, justice, and access were not managed transparently. Six themes organized the synthesis: relational competence and candor; communication resources and engagement; employee voice and psychological safety; innovation support; justice and differentiation; and resilience, exhaustion, and retention.

Table 2. Core LMX Evidence Corpus and Public Relations Relevance

Study	Design / context	Core contribution	University PR leadership relevance
Premru et al. (2022)	Multi-technique bibliometric review of LMX research	Maps social exchange, justice, innovation, and work-outcome clusters.	Establishes the field structure but confirms limited PR-specific development.
Uhl-Bien et al. (2022)	Multi-study development and validation of Manager-LMX	Managers value competence, candor, and shared goals in exchange relationships.	Clarifies member qualities needed for accurate upward communication and strategic alignment.
Santalla-Banderali & Alvarado (2022)	Quantitative mediation study	Communication satisfaction and work engagement connect LMX with self-rated performance.	Positions communication quality as an operational mechanism of PR team effectiveness.
Arain et al. (2022)	Quantitative study of LMX social comparison and employee voice	LMX does not produce equal voice effects across status groups.	Warns that relational closeness cannot substitute for inclusion and equal permission to speak.
Wagner & Koob (2022)	Survey and mediation analysis in social work	Job resources explain the LMX-engagement relationship.	Information, autonomy, support, and recognition are resources for deadline-intensive PR work.
Premru et al. (2022)	Field study and experiment	Higher-quality exchange is associated with lower	Relational leadership may reduce delayed

Assefa et al. (2024)	SEM study in higher education	counterproductive work behavior. Organizational justice and LMX contribute to employee voice behavior.	response, withholding, and coordination failures. Provides the closest institutional evidence for university PR teams.
Wang, Yao, & Gao (2024)	Multilevel/team survey	LMX strengthens the link between leader positive emotion and psychological safety.	Shows how relational climate permits error reporting, correction, and idea sharing.
Modliba et al. (2024)	Matched field survey and mediation analysis	Team support for innovation translates LMX into innovative work behavior.	Explains experimentation in content, platforms, formats, and workflows.
Wang, Ponnappalli, & Sin (2024)	Conceptual framework on purposeful LMX differentiation	Strong ties with key members can be functional but create team-level risks.	Highlights succession, information concentration, and perceived favoritism.
Petrilli et al. (2024)	Chain mediation survey	LMX and work-mode adjustment protect against exhaustion and turnover intention.	Connects leadership support with resilience in hybrid, digital, and crisis work.

Relational competence, candor, and shared goals

The manager-centered work shifts attention from what members receive to what leaders value (Uhl-Bien et al., 2022). Competence, candor, and shared goals are especially relevant to PR because leaders depend on members who can interpret issues, identify errors, and communicate disagreement without abandoning institutional objectives. Candor matters because silence may allow inaccurate claims, reputational risk, or operational confusion to move through the communication chain. Shared goals matter because autonomy without strategic alignment can fragment institutional voice.

This theme also corrects a possible misreading of LMX. High-quality exchange should not be equated with personal closeness or informal favoritism. A professionally robust exchange is grounded in credible performance, mutual respect, and truthful communication. For university PR, relationship quality should be assessed through observable practices such as access to context, response to difficult feedback, recognition of expertise, and consistency between stated and enacted decision rules.

Communication resources, satisfaction, and engagement

Santalla-Banderali and Alvarado (2022) and Wagner and Koob (2022) identify two related pathways through which LMX may contribute to employee outcomes: communication satisfaction and job resources. These pathways explain why LMX can influence performance and engagement. A relationship becomes useful when it changes the member's access to information, feedback, autonomy, support, and recognition. This mechanism is consistent with internal communication research showing that symmetrical communication and employee-organization relationships contribute to engagement and positive communication behavior (Kang & Sung, 2017; Tkalac Verčič & Pološki Vokić, 2017).

For university PR, resources are material and communicative. They include content approval, issue context, access to institutional leaders, platform permissions, production equipment, feedback, and clarity about risk tolerance. Communication satisfaction is therefore not merely liking the leader's style. It concerns whether information is timely, sufficiently complete, credible, and actionable. When these resources are distributed reliably, members can coordinate under deadline without excessive upward dependence.

Employee voice and psychological safety

Voice is a core PR leadership outcome because communication teams are expected to identify weak signals before they reach external publics. Organizational justice and LMX are connected with employee voice in higher education (Assefa et al., 2024). Psychological safety: a leader's positive emotional signals are more consequential when exchange quality is high (Wang, Yao, et al., 2024). Members speak when they expect their contribution to be respected and when interpersonal risk is manageable.

Demonstrate that LMX does not produce voice equally. Status and social comparison can interrupt the relationship (Arain et al., 2022). This is crucial in university communication teams, where students, junior staff, outsourced personnel, and permanent employees may not perceive equal standing. An open-door policy may exist formally while lower-status members still anticipate reputational or academic consequences for disagreement. Public relations scholarship treats voice as an antecedent to engagement and constructive communication behavior (Ruck et al., 2017). LMX must therefore be accompanied by inclusive routines such as structured debriefs, correction protocols, confidential escalation options, and visible leader responses to dissent.

Innovation and creative support

Innovation in PR is not limited to aesthetic novelty. It includes new content formats, platform strategies, workflow improvements, audience research, data use, crisis simulations, and cross-unit collaboration. Team support for innovation is a key mechanism translating LMX into innovative work behavior (Modliba et al., 2024). This finding prevents an overly individual explanation: a leader may trust a creative member, but innovation still depends on whether the team tolerates experimentation, shares knowledge, and treats unsuccessful trials as learning.

The bibliometric mapping also identifies innovation as a growing LMX cluster (Premru et al., 2022). Within university PR, high-quality exchange can create a safe authorization zone in which members test ideas without waiting for exhaustive control. Yet discretion must remain connected to shared goals and ethical standards. The appropriate leadership task is calibrated autonomy: enough freedom for speed and creativity, combined with clear boundaries for institutional identity, accuracy, privacy, and public accountability.

Justice, differentiation, and relational exclusion

LMX theory contains a normative tension: leaders cannot invest identical time and responsibility in every dyad, but visible differences can be interpreted as favoritism. Purposeful differentiation around key members may be functional (Wang, Ponnappalli, et al., 2024). Strategic communication teams often require such concentration because a crisis spokesperson, senior editor, or platform

administrator holds specialized responsibilities. The problem is not differentiation itself; it is differentiation that lacks transparent role logic, mobility, and procedural fairness.

Why justice matters explained (Arain et al., 2022; Assefa et al., 2024). Unequal status or access can suppress voice even when some dyads are strong. In PR teams, information concentration around an inner circle can produce bottlenecks, succession risk, burnout among trusted members, and alienation among others. Inclusive LMX means expanding high-quality exchanges while explaining role-based differences. Leaders should distribute developmental opportunities, rotate visible assignments where feasible, document decision rights, and make the route into higher-responsibility roles observable.

Resilience, exhaustion, retention, and counterproductive behavior

LMX connected with adjustment to work mode, exhaustion, and turnover intention (Petrilli et al., 2024). This theme is relevant to communication work that is hybrid, digitally mediated, and exposed to sudden peaks of demand. Relational support helps members interpret changing expectations and obtain assistance before strain becomes chronic. Work adjustment is communicative as well as logistical: members need clarity about availability, response times, authority, and priorities when work moves across platforms and locations.

The resilience pathway complemented by showing a relationship between LMX and lower counterproductive work behavior (Premru et al., 2022). In PR, counterproductive behavior may include withholding information, ignoring coordination channels, delaying corrections, careless publication, or disengaging during critical periods. The evidence does not justify labeling every error as counterproductive. It indicates that relational neglect can reduce felt obligation, while high-quality exchange can strengthen accountability. Leaders should not demand extraordinary commitment without providing information, recognition, and protection from avoidable overload.

Integrated model and theoretical contributions

Taken together, the six themes support a communication-centered reinterpretation of LMX. The dyadic relationship is not merely an antecedent to employee attitudes; it is a channel through which information, discretion, emotional cues, and permission to speak are distributed. In university PR, leadership quality becomes visible in who receives context, who can challenge a decision, whose expertise is recognized, and how mistakes are handled. This interpretation bridges LMX with strategic internal communication by locating the exchange relationship inside everyday message production and sense-making.

The proposed Inclusive LMX-Based Public Relations Leadership Model contains three levels. Relational conditions form the first level: trust, professional respect, competence, candor, shared goals, leader support, and equitable access. Relational-communication mechanisms form the second level: communication resources and satisfaction, psychological safety and voice, support for innovation, and adaptive reciprocal obligation. PR team outcomes form the third level: engagement and performance, innovation and responsiveness, resilience and retention, and reduced counterproductive behavior. Organizational justice, status and power distance, workload, crisis intensity, and LMX differentiation operate as boundary conditions.

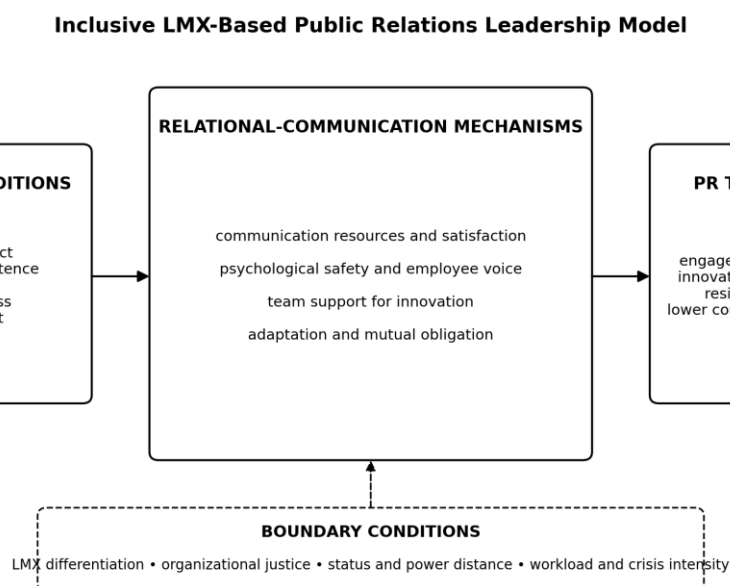


Figure 1. Inclusive LMX-Based Public Relations Leadership Model

The model's first theoretical contribution is to make communication constitutive rather than incidental. Much LMX research measures communication-related constructs as mediators, but PR scholarship requires attention to how communication creates the relationship itself. Dialogue, feedback, information access, listening, and response to dissent are not simply consequences of a good exchange; they are practices through which exchange quality is continually produced. Lemon's account of employee engagement emphasizes dialogue and active listening (Lemon, 2019), while Shen and Jiang locate internal communication strategy within an engagement-behavior model (Shen & Jiang, 2019). Future LMX research should measure perceived relationship quality together with observable communication routines.

The second contribution is normative. The most useful PR application of LMX is not to strengthen a small in-group, but to build as many high-quality professional exchanges as possible while making necessary role differentiation transparent and contestable. This principle is important in higher education because hierarchical position does not always correspond to communication expertise. A student media producer may detect a platform trend before a senior manager, and a junior staff member may identify a factual error in an executive draft. Inclusive relational leadership preserves their right and safety to contribute without erasing legitimate accountability structures.

The third contribution is a set of propositions for empirical testing. Proposition 1: High-quality LMX will be positively associated with PR team engagement through communication resources and communication satisfaction. Proposition 2: The relationship between LMX and employee voice will be mediated by psychological safety and strengthened by perceived organizational justice. Proposition 3: Team support for innovation will mediate the relationship between LMX and innovative communication behavior. Proposition 4: Unexplained LMX differentiation will weaken team-level voice and trust, whereas transparent role-based differentiation will reduce these negative effects. Proposition 5: LMX will reduce exhaustion, turnover intention, and counterproductive behavior through work adjustment, support, and reciprocal obligation.

For practice, the model can be operationalized through a relational communication audit. University PR leaders can map access to strategic information, frequency and quality of one-to-one dialogue, participation in decision-making, opportunities to lead projects, response to error reporting, and distribution of recognition. The audit should not seek identical treatment in every dyad; it should test whether differences have a defensible role basis and whether all members have a realistic path to trust, development, and voice. Team debriefs should record not only what content succeeded but also whose information was absent and whether dissent was addressed.

The model also has implications for crisis readiness. During a reputational issue, high-quality exchanges can accelerate upward reporting and decentralized response, but overreliance on a few trusted members can create a single point of failure. Transparent decision rights, backup roles, shared documentation, and cross-training are therefore relational as well as technical controls. Transparent communication and leadership can build trust during change (Yue et al., 2019); the present synthesis explains how leader-member relationships determine whether transparency is experienced consistently across a PR team.

Finally, the review distinguishes relational leadership from interpersonal warmth. Positive emotion can support psychological safety (Wang, Yao, et al., 2024), but warmth without candor may suppress critical information. Demanding candor without protection may transfer risk to the member. Effective PR leadership combines relational care with professional challenge: the leader invites disagreement, evaluates it fairly, communicates the decision, and protects the contributor from retaliation. This cycle is particularly important because the cost of silence may be borne by the institution and its publics.

Table 3. Review-Derived Propositions and Illustrative Indicators

Proposition	Mechanism	Illustrative indicators
P1	LMX -> communication resources/satisfaction -> engagement	leader accessibility, information timeliness, feedback quality, role clarity, work engagement
P2	LMX -> psychological safety -> employee voice; justice strengthens pathway	error reporting, upward suggestions, dissent safety, procedural justice
P3	LMX -> team support for innovation -> innovative communication behavior	experimentation, knowledge sharing, autonomy, adoption of new formats
P4	Transparent role-based differentiation reduces negative team effects	perceived favoritism, access gaps, role explanation, developmental mobility
P5	LMX -> adjustment/support -> lower strain and withdrawal	work-mode clarity, exhaustion, turnover intention, counterproductive behavior

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrated that Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) explained university public relations leadership most effectively when exchange quality was understood as a communication process rather than merely as interpersonal closeness. High-quality exchanges facilitated information sharing, feedback, discretion, recognition, psychological safety, and opportunities to speak, thereby supporting team engagement, innovation, responsiveness, adaptation, and retention. However, LMX could also reproduce exclusion when information, trust, and strategic assignments were concentrated among selected members without transparent role justification, procedural justice, and opportunities for developmental mobility. To address this issue, the proposed Inclusive LMX-Based Public Relations Leadership Model integrates relational conditions, communication mechanisms, public relations team

outcomes, and boundary conditions and generates five propositions for future empirical testing. In practice, the model encourages relational communication audits that assess information access, dialogue quality, error-reporting safety, project opportunities, decision rights, and recognition across team members.

This study was limited by its bounded corpus of eleven articles inherited from the preceding systematic literature review phase rather than from a de novo exhaustive database search, while the available evidence was dominated by cross-sectional studies conducted outside the public relations context. Future research should therefore employ registered database-based systematic reviews, qualitative case studies of university public relations units, multilevel surveys examining dyadic and team perceptions, and longitudinal studies during leadership transitions, organizational crises, and digital transformation. Despite these limitations, the findings indicate that effective university public relations leadership depends not only on strategic capabilities and technological resources but also on fair and inclusive relationships that provide members with equitable access to information, psychological safety, recognition, and decision-making authority. Such relational conditions are essential for enabling public relations teams to communicate effectively, adapt to organizational demands, and contribute sustainably to institutional goals.

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