

The art of staying in touch – exploring daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate in remote work

The art of
staying in
touch

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to widen the understanding of how remote work shapes the feedback environment by examining the perceptions of leaders and subordinates of daily, dyadic feedback interactions. The emphasis is on understanding how reciprocity within leader-member exchange (LMX) relationships manifests and how it influences the feedback dynamics.

Design/methodology/approach – Template analysis of a qualitative data set consisting of 81 semi-structured interviews with leaders ($n = 29$) and remote working subordinates ($n = 52$) was performed.

Findings – Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of the feedback environment and the leader-member exchange, the findings demonstrate the imbalance between the efforts of leaders and subordinates in building and maintaining a favourable feedback environment in the remote work context. The results of this study highlight the importance of the dyadic nature of feedback interactions, calling for a more proactive role from subordinates.

Practical implications – Given the estimation that the COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed the way organizations work, leaders, subordinates and HR practitioners will benefit from advancing their understanding of the characteristics of dyadic, daily feedback interaction in remote work.

Originality/value – Qualitative research on feedback and leader-member exchange interactions in remote work that combines the perceptions of leaders and subordinates is sparse.

Keywords Feedback, Remote work, Feedback environment, Leader-member exchange (LMX), Reciprocity, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Feedback is a dyadic interaction process (Anseel and Brutus, 2019) and a crucial performance management tool in organizations (Li *et al.*, 2022; London, 2015) containing information on a

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person's performance and behaviour at work (Eva *et al.*, 2019). Most feedback interactions occur within the daily interactions and communication that takes place between a leader and a subordinate, since the leader is considered as one of the most important sources of feedback (DeNisi and Murphy, 2017; Fletcher, 2001). Over past decades, feedback was considered as a formal annual performance management procedure, and an event separate from daily work (Fletcher, 2001; Levy *et al.*, 2017). However, feedback is currently perceived more often as taking place within informal day-to-day interactions (Kuvaas *et al.*, 2017; Mertens *et al.*, 2021), making it an inseparable part of everyday life in organizations.

As the feedback process has developed from isolated annual events to a part of day-to-day organizational life, feedback cannot be explored in a vacuum: the organizational environment where feedback emerges is dynamic and changes over time (Anseel and Brutus, 2019). The context of feedback changed substantially in the spring of 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic plunged workplaces into turmoil by irrevocably changing the way we work through the rapid growth of remote working (Wang *et al.*, 2021). Remote work (also called telework or telecommuting) refers to work performed outside of office premises, regardless of time and place, and communicating through telecommunications or computer-based technology (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022). Feedback has been recognized as vital within a remote context for team management (Hertel *et al.*, 2005; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002) and team effectiveness (Handke *et al.*, 2022). However, the field lacks research examining remote feedback interactions between leaders and subordinates. Thus, there is a need for studies investigating feedback in remote settings, particularly with a qualitative approach, to facilitate an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon (Brown *et al.*, 2019).

Additionally, although feedback is a phenomenon involving two parties, previous feedback studies have typically adopted a one-sided perspective on feedback, using mainly survey-based research data collected from subordinates (e.g. Anseel and Lievens, 2007; Gabriel *et al.*, 2014; Mertens *et al.*, 2021). Even studies that incorporate multisource data from leaders and subordinates (e.g. Gallo and Steelman, 2019; Jiang and Qu, 2023; Peng and Lin, 2016) fail to capture the perspectives of both parties on feedback interaction. Consequently, the significance of the dyadic nature in understanding feedback interaction has recently been acknowledged (Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Katz *et al.*, 2023), prompting a call for studies that enable the exploration of the dyadic aspects of feedback processes (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; Katz *et al.*, 2021).

These dyadic interactions can be examined through the theory of leader-member exchange (hereon LMX), which is a theory of social exchange (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Exchanges that enable both providing and seeking feedback have been suggested as vital elements in building the parties' work roles and their work relationship (Lam *et al.*, 2007), and also as creating the social context of the workplace. This dyadic-level construct can be referred to as a feedback environment (Katz *et al.*, 2021; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). The LMX theory strongly emphasises the reciprocal nature of leader-subordinate relationships, where both leaders and subordinates actively engage in resource exchanges, thus contributing to the overall quality of their interactions (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Martin *et al.*, 2023). However, the existing body of literature lacks empirical evidence of such actual exchanges underpinning reciprocity (Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015). Moreover, recent research underscores that the remote work environment challenges interaction (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022), which forms the foundation for exchange and reciprocity within LMX relationships. However, examining LMX in the remote work context remains an area of limited study (Varma *et al.*, 2022).

In sum, this study examines how remote work shapes the feedback environment by examining the perceptions of leaders and subordinates of daily, dyadic feedback interactions. The emphasis is on understanding how reciprocity within LMX relationships manifests, and how it influences the feedback dynamics. Using a qualitative approach, we explore the

research question (RQ): *How does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?*

The contribution of the study is twofold. First, it provides a missing qualitative examination of dyadic, daily feedback interactions in remote work. Second, the study widens the understanding of the dynamics of remote LMX relationships by investigating the actual reciprocal exchanges which shape the social context of feedback. Overall, the study offers practical implications for leaders, subordinates and HR professionals to develop remote work (leadership) practices. Next, we offer a review of the pertinent literature and propose three subsequent research questions (SRQs) to bridge the research gaps that are identified.

Literature review

Feedback – from annual appraisal to daily interaction

Feedback belongs among organizations' vital HR and leadership practices (Eva *et al.*, 2019; Tseng and Levy, 2019) and is said to be the most challenging activity (Pulakos, 2009). Besides including relevant performance-related information, feedback is a way to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships, handle expectations and develop one's organizational role (London, 2015). During the past decades, organizations have been replacing the formal annual evaluation processes with daily informal feedback exchange procedures (Dahling *et al.*, 2017; Mertens *et al.*, 2021), as formal performance reviews are regarded as costly, ineffective and unpleasant (Levy *et al.*, 2017). Systematically scheduled in nature, formal feedback can be, for example, provided in performance appraisal discussions (DeNisi and Murphy, 2017) or through digital performance appraisal systems (Payne *et al.*, 2009). In contrast, informal feedback is spontaneous, and frequently occurring in day-to-day interactions outside formal organizational procedures (Levy *et al.*, 2017; London, 2015).

Steelman *et al.* (2004) conceptualize informal feedback interactions as a feedback environment, representing the social context of feedback (Levy and Williams, 2004). Indeed, giving and seeking feedback can be considered as part of the interpersonal exchanges that take place in daily interactions in leader-subordinate relationships and also between coworkers. For leaders in particular, delivering feedback should be a crucial, strategic task (Baker *et al.*, 2013) accompanied by empathy, tactfulness (Gallo and Steelman, 2019), care and support (Peng and Lin, 2016). Following the feedback environment scale, subordinates evaluate their perception of feedback source credibility, feedback quality, feedback delivery, frequency of favourable and unfavourable feedback, source availability and the promotion of feedback seeking (Steelman *et al.*, 2004). High levels of these seven facets indicate a favourable feedback environment where people feel comfortable providing, seeking and receiving timely and relevant feedback (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; London, 2015). In such an environment, interpersonal exchanges contain high-quality feedback as a part of the daily dialogue (Levy *et al.*, 2017).

But notably, extant research predominantly offers a one-sided perspective by focusing on the viewpoints of subordinates on the feedback process (Anseel and Brutus, 2019). This approach leaves a gap in understanding the dyadic nature of feedback interactions, necessitating an integration of the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates. Consequently, we propose the following subsequent research question:

SRQ1. How do combining viewpoints from leaders and subordinates contribute to understanding feedback interactions that shape the feedback environment?

Leader-member exchange relationship as a social context for feedback

As noted earlier, the dyadic relationship between leaders and subordinates constitutes a context in which giving, seeking, and the perception of the received feedback materializes

(Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Lonsdale, 2016). These LMX relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995; Liden and Graen, 1980) are perceived to develop between the leader and each of their subordinates within their day-to-day interactions and communicative exchanges at work (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Kangas, 2021). These exchanges include essential information on work tasks, roles, performance, expectations and informal social exchanges between individuals (Liao *et al.*, 2016; Varma *et al.*, 2022). Through these exchanges, the leader is able to provide, e.g. frequent praise and constructive criticism when needed, as well as guide the subordinate in the right direction, creating a constructive feedback environment (Lonsdale, 2016; Steelman *et al.*, 2004).

Each of the LMX relationships within a work team is unique and varies in quality; high-quality LMX relationships often constitute extensive interactions, support and trust, whereas low-quality LMX relationships often lack these elements (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012; Gerstner and Day, 1997). The quality of the LMX relationship also has a role in how the feedback is perceived; high-quality LMX relationships and opinions of the favourability of the feedback environment are often positively correlated (Katz *et al.*, 2021; Jiang and Qu, 2023; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, the quality of the LMX relationship moderates the perceptions of perceived feedback: in high-quality LMX relationships, frequent feedback interactions are seen as supporting, whereas in lower-quality LMX relationships, they are often considered as a controlling tool (Audenaert *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, the notion of the effort exerted by the parties to a relationship is crucial to understanding the quality of LMX relationships. The theory emphasizes the dyadic and reciprocal nature of LMX relationships; it is not the leader's or subordinate's effort alone that drives the relationship, but rather the effort of both partners in the dyad (Terpstra-Tong *et al.*, 2020). Such behaviour represents the reciprocation effort as seen by the dyad partner, consistent with social exchange theory, in which interdependence and reciprocity develop through a series of exchanges over time (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Maslyn and Uhl-Bien, 2001).

Although the premise of LMX is the reciprocal nature of leader-member relationships (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995), the field lacks empirical evidence on actual exchanges between the parties, which are the basis of reciprocity (Martin *et al.*, 2023; Omilion-Hodges and Baker, 2017; Sheer, 2015). Moreover, the feedback environment literature often emphasises the role and actions of the feedback source as constructing a favourable or unfavourable feedback environment (Anseel and Brutus, 2019; Steelman *et al.*, 2004). However, feedback should also be seen as a mutual interaction (Anseel *et al.*, 2018; Katz *et al.*, 2023). In the same way that the leader, as a source of feedback, puts effort into giving feedback, the subordinate should proactively seek feedback, which can be done by directly asking (inquiry) or indirectly observing others' reactions to their performance (monitoring) (Ashford *et al.*, 2016; London, 2015). Prior studies have also shown that high-quality LMX relationships and subordinates' willingness to solicit feedback are interrelated (Anseel *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2014), and that a supportive feedback environment promotes feedback-seeking (Steeleman *et al.*, 2004).

While the significance of reciprocity is recognized in the theory of LMX and the feedback literature, there is a research gap related to empirical evidence on the reciprocity of LMX relationships and its specific role in feedback interactions. Thus, we propose the following subsequent research question:

SRQ2. How does the presence of reciprocity manifest within LMX relationships, specifically in feedback interactions?

Dyadic feedback interactions in remote work

The importance of the LMX relationship (Varma *et al.*, 2022) and high-quality feedback (Liu *et al.*, 2022) is emphasized in a remote work context, where the organization, in the absence of

office premises, is founded merely on interpersonal relationships. However, remote work reduces face-to-face encounters, requiring the increased use of information communication technologies (ICT) (Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2022; Wang *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, remote work is a contextual factor impacting the development and quality of LMX relationships as well as the feedback environment, by changing ways of interaction. For example, developing newly established leader-member relationships might be complicated remotely since frequent and spontaneous communication with the subordinates is reduced (Schreier *et al.*, 2022), including feedback exchange (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012; Schreier *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, the social context created in physical presence is missing in ICT-mediated communication, since nonverbal cues such as facial expressions and body language are not there to assist in interpreting expectations and reactions and creating mutual understanding (London, 2015). As a result, hampered feedback interaction may lead to role ambiguity (Liu *et al.*, 2022; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012) and a sense of uncertainty (Varma *et al.*, 2022).

Besides spatial distance, remote work may also add temporal distance to feedback interactions. Communication tools used in dyadic interaction can be categorized as synchronous or asynchronous, depending on their capability to enable simultaneous communication. For example, phone and videoconferencing are regarded as synchronous tools, allowing real-time interaction (Dennis *et al.*, 2008; Raghuram *et al.*, 2019). Text-based communication tools like email, chat and instant messaging are regarded as asynchronous, since the interaction is sequential (Raghuram *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, the richer the communication tool is (such as a face-to-face meeting), the better it transmits social cues and shared meaning, leaving less room for misinterpretation (Daft and Lengel, 1986).

These aspects arising from a remote work context influence feedback exchanges. From the leader's perspective, giving feedback is challenging at a distance, requiring a careful formulation of the message, a choice of the appropriate communication tool, and the collection of more extensive background information to ensure that all the relevant facts are included (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). From the subordinate's perspective, seeking feedback requires extra effort in remote work, where people cannot sense each other's perceptions of their behaviour in continuous interaction (London, 2015). Also notable is that remote workers often enjoy a high level of discretion in how and when to carry out their tasks (Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). Such a high level of autonomy may reduce the subordinate's willingness to seek feedback in fear of losing face, as autonomy implies an expectation to operate independently (Krasman, 2013). However, Huang (2012) found that subordinates who felt empowered to make decisions related to their tasks were more likely to seek feedback if they simultaneously experienced trust from their leader. Thus, the trust subordinates have in their leaders increases the motivation for feedback-seeking.

To conclude, feedback is a critical leadership tool, and also a dyadic process between the leader and their subordinates, which, to a great extent, takes place through daily interaction. The reciprocal interaction creates a foundation for a feedback environment. At the same time, while the remote work context emphasizes the importance of high-quality leader-member relationships, it complicates building and maintaining a favourable feedback environment, engendering tensions in interaction. As indicated above, the existing literature extensively outlines the challenges of remote interaction, which are progressively becoming a permanent part of the work environment because of employees' desire to continue working remotely (see Eurofound-ETF, 2022). Consequently, there is a need to extend remote feedback research from the team level (Handke *et al.*, 2022; Hertel *et al.*, 2005; Kirkman *et al.*, 2002) to the dyadic level, while also exploring LMX relationships within remote contexts (Varma *et al.*, 2022). Hence, our final subsequent research question is:

SRQ3. How do the challenges identified in remote interactions affect the dyadic feedback environment?

Method

Data sample and collection

The research data was collected from six corporations operating in Finland, which is considered as one of the world's leading remote working countries (Gschwind and Vargas, 2019). The participating corporations operated in the industries of information technology, engineering and metalwork, insurance, accounting and management consultancy, telecommunications, and energy equipment manufacture. The corporations were large-sized when measured by the number of employees, and they were selected based on their remote working guidelines to ensure remote working respondents' availability. At the time of the study, the interviewees were working remotely mainly (94%) or partly (6%), due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Before the pandemic, only a small proportion of the interviewees (6%) had primarily been in remote work, while over a third (38%) had worked remotely part-time. Most respondents (56%) had little or no remote work experience before the pandemic.

The overall data set consists of 81 semi-structured interviews with leaders ($n = 29$) and remote working subordinates ($n = 52$) working in sales, marketing, product development, customer service, production and service management. The interviews were conducted individually in Finnish ($n = 79$) or Swedish ($n = 2$). The sampling method was as follows: a leader announced their team's participation, or our contact person in the organization (HR professional) proposed a team. Employees were selected by random sampling in alphabetical order from the teams. Participation was voluntary. Altogether, the study comprised of 47 leader-subordinate dyads. Additionally, six subordinates without their leader and five leaders without any of their subordinates participated in the study.

The research data is part of a larger study where the experiences of remote working and leadership were explored. An interview guide was used to prompt discussion (Myers, 2013), including the following themes: remote work environment and culture, leadership in remote work, work-life balance, and self-leadership. Although feedback was not in the original research focus, related questions were included. Eventually, feedback interactions emerged as a significant theme in the interviews. The data collection was carried out in October–December 2020, seven to nine months after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to remote work. Qualitative interviews, ranging from 45 to 75 min, were conducted through Microsoft Teams or Zoom as audio or video. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymized with the permission of the interviewees.

Data analysis

To answer the research questions, we used template analysis (King, 2004), which is a form of thematic analysis used in organizational and management studies (see, e.g. Cassell and Bishop, 2019; Lecours *et al.*, 2021; Krehl and Büttgen, 2022). Template analysis provides a structured but flexible approach, allowing researchers to adapt their qualitative analysis to meet the needs of a particular study. The focus is on identifying, organizing, and interpreting qualitative data, in order to highlight the key findings. Researchers create an initial coding template based on a subset of data, iteratively develop the template further, and finally use it broadly for the complete data set (King, 2004; King *et al.*, 2018).

In the first step, the second author read through all of the interviews to become familiar with the data. The initial *a posteriori* coding template emerging from the data (see Lecours *et al.*, 2021) was created on a subset of data comprising of 50 interviews. The coding was supported by Nvivo software. To ensure a diverse as possible initial coding (King *et al.*, 2018), the second author chose leaders and subordinates from every organization by way of a random sample. The initial coding template resulted in six themes: characteristics of feedback interaction, forms of feedback, a high-quality relationship, information flow, feedback-seeking and team feedback.

In the second step, the first author read through the initial coding, after which the authors discussed the themes. As a result, the initial themes were revised and merged into groups, forming three themes on the intermediate template relevant to the research questions: procedures for remote feedback interactions, a dyadic leader-subordinate relationship and organizational feedback culture in remote work. The first author applied the intermediate coding template to the remaining subset of 31 interviews, followed by a discussion between the authors and a revision of the codes.

In the third step, the authors compared perceptions of leaders and subordinates within the three themes formed in the prior step. This comparison revealed aspects that the authors saw caused tensions in feedback interaction in remote work. Interestingly, what initially appeared as positive aspects of remote feedback interactions (including the availability of feedback, close leader-member relationships and ease of feedback-seeking) were discovered to have their downsides or related challenges. These three tensions emerging from the data were incorporated as higher-order codes in the final coding template. The tensions were examined through four facets of the feedback environment created by Steelman *et al.* (2004). The first tension (availability of feedback) is related to source availability, the second tension (a close LMX-relationship) pertains to source credibility and feedback quality and the third tension (ease of feedback-seeking) concerns the promotion of feedback-seeking (Steelman *et al.*, 2004). A final version of the coding template is depicted in Table 1 below:

A hierarchical coding was applied in the final phase. The authors collaborated to create 13 sub-level codes, which, when explored collectively under a higher-order code, constitute contradictory aspects (tensions) related to a particular facet of the feedback environment (see Steelman *et al.*, 2004). After the final coding template was confirmed, the first author re-coded the whole data set with the final codes to ensure that it was representative of the whole data (King *et al.*, 2018).

Tension 1: Leader's online accessibility resulting in an intensified workload

- 1.1. Systemized communication frequency
- 1.2. Availability of the leader online
- 1.3. Leaders' experiences of being available online
- 1.4. Need for face-to-face encounters

Tension 2: A close leader-member relationship does not eliminate quality challenges related to remote feedback

- 2.1. Source credibility
 - 2.1.1. Confidentiality and intimacy in LMX relationship
 - 2.1.2. Old vs new LMX relationships
- 2.2. Feedback quality challenges
 - 2.2.1. Lack of informality and spontaneity
 - 2.2.2. Information value of feedback
 - 2.2.3. (Mis)interpretation

Tension 3: Feedback-seeking – promoted but still complicated in remote work

- 3.1. Leaders promoting feedback-seeking
 - 3.2. Technology facilitating feedback-seeking
 - 3.3. Risk of loneliness, threshold for contacting
 - 3.4. Trust and autonomy
-

Table 1.
Final coding template
depicting tensions in
feedback exchanges in
remote work

Findings

As described above, the remote work context undeniably influences the organizational social context, one part of which is daily feedback in dyadic leader-member relationships. The interview data shows that the remote work context shaped the interviewees' interaction and communication routines, influencing the availability and credibility of the feedback source, feedback quality and the promotion of feedback-seeking. Although the overall perception of the remote work context was positive, some challenges might influence the feedback environment's favourability. We discuss the findings in more detail below.

Tension 1: Leader's online accessibility resulting in an intensified workload

Within the first theme, we found a tension related to feedback source availability (Steelman *et al.*, 2004), describing the contact frequency between the leader and the subordinate. Although the interviews revealed a positive shift to more organized interaction structures, this also created a more intensified workload for leaders. In many teams, remote working had resulted in more organized daily, weekly, and monthly communication. Interviewees experienced that one-to-one communication between a leader and a subordinate was more regular than in the office, since people had created communication routines to maintain the connection. Although the physical distance had increased, the communication frequency had surprisingly improved in many leader-subordinate relationships.

Now we are [in contact] every week. Once a week, about half an hour. We regularly review what's going on at work and whether there are any worries. Before, they [the conversations] were handled sporadically at the office alongside the work and were just shouted out in passing. The conversations were handled then, too, but now there are more of these one-to-ones. I know I have an appointment. It's important. (Subordinate_2)

In addition, many subordinates felt that it was easy to contact the leader when support and feedback were needed, and they felt that the leaders were more accessible online than in the office:

Well, maybe at the office, they [leaders] ran into a lot of meetings and stuff like that. You didn't see them that often. Now, when you send messages through Teams, in my opinion, you get a quick response. I feel like they're more present somehow. (Subordinate_38)

The leaders felt that creating an environment where the communication frequency and perception of accessibility were high was their most important task in the remote work context. Further, they emphasized that frequent communication should signal empathy and caring, instead of being considered as a monitoring tool. More structured interaction patterns were considered to increase team-level equality, as leaders had systematized communication with their subordinates, and many kept track of the number of interactions. It seems that the leaders also felt that keeping in regular contact conveyed accessibility. The leaders wanted to signal that they were accessible whenever the subordinates needed them:

I want them [subordinates] to feel that they kind of have support present when they need support. I then interrupt my own work rather than leave them wondering about what needs to be done. (Leader_2)

However, being accessible intensified the leaders' workload. Many leaders felt that the need to be present and accessible was burdensome, although they identified it as an essential element of their work and their role as a leader. Several interviewed leaders made an extra effort to be accessible and actively interact with their team members alongside their other work tasks. Two leaders commented:

You must make yourself somehow visible, that you are available and present and accessible every day, you ask how people are doing, and you are actively interested in those people, [...] You must remind yourself of that. (Leader_18)

Now when we're all at home, I've had to get used to how can I be accessible. But on the other hand, I'm not exhausting myself with being reachable in every direction all the time. I have meetings and my own work too; a bit of balance in when I respond to the team members' messages. (Leader_11)

A crucial element of frequent contact and feedback interactions in remote work was the leaders' keeping up with the state and mood of their subordinates. In addition to having regular contact with the subordinates and giving feedback through those interactions, the leaders had to be more observant about the subordinates' well-being, performance and workload. One leader described the need to be able to sense the needs of subordinates:

Caring for team members has been highlighted maybe more, and in a way, observing whether there is a need for help in other ways than just work-related matters. (Leader_13)

In addition to being available online, the leaders also experienced the requirement to be available face-to-face. Many leaders pondered the sufficiency of a virtual environment in delivering feedback. Although both leaders and subordinates described the frequency of the virtual interactions as systemized and frequent, many of the interviewed leaders described that giving feedback or going through personal matters had to be done face-to-face due to the sensitive nature of the issues. One leader reflected on the matter as follows:

Development discussions, for example, I'd like to handle such things face-to-face. And when you give feedback, be it good or bad, it should be done more face-to-face. Yeah, that's nicer if you can get to [the person] physically, and give a hug and thank you for a job well done. Or especially, if there's anything negative, then it's really nasty to handle via Skype. (Leader_26)

The perception of the face-to-face requirement was especially pronounced with leaders, and few subordinates came up with matters that required personal meetings at the office:

Well, I don't see anything that wouldn't work by a remote connection. It doesn't really matter to me whether we're in live contact or through Teams. I don't see that kind of need to meet [face-to-face]. (Subordinate_43)

I can't really say, because I think this [appointments with the leader online] has worked really well. [...] Of course, it's a fact that when you're sitting face-to-face with another person and talking, maybe it's a bit different, the contact of course, but... No, I can't say it makes a huge difference, because I think it works really well. (Subordinate_50)

To summarize, the interview data indicated that routinized communication frequency created a perception of a feedback environment in which the leader (as a source of feedback) was easily accessible. Nevertheless, the interviews also revealed a less positive effect of remote interaction, where despite the subordinates' positive experiences of their leader's availability in remote work, the leaders felt that the process of remote interaction and keeping up with their team increased the intensity of their work.

Tension 2: A close leader-member relationship does not eliminate quality challenges related to remote feedback

The second theme revealed a tension related to the interaction quality, affected by the dyadic relationship quality and duration. The interviews indicate that the feedback source credibility (i.e. the leader's trustworthiness: [Steelman et al., 2004](#)) in many leader-member dyads is high, as people feel emotionally close in remote work. However, the lack of spontaneity and timeliness influence the interaction quality. This hampers the informal, day-to-day feedback instances between the parties.

Many interviewees perceived that their relationship quality with their leader/team member had improved in remote work, contrary to expectations. Communication was perceived as more confidential, as there are no distractions in remote interactions as experienced in the office environment, and the parties do not need to look for a vacant meeting room to hold private conversations. Subordinates described dyadic conversations in remote work as unhurried, whereas in the office context, the interaction often occurred “on the fly”. As one subordinate explained:

It's easier to deal with each other. [. . .] Surprisingly, even if the distance has increased, so the intimacy has replaced it [physical proximity]. (Subordinate_3)

Indeed, the interviewees perceived their interactions in remote work as being more intimate due to scheduled one-to-one conversations and the private settings of online meetings. Interviewees described the interactions as having more depth than the office small talk. The following excerpt from a leader illustrates how people are encountered as a whole, having non-work factors in their life:

I've noticed through my own experience that people are somehow . . . In their own home, they are more relaxed, and maybe the home comes [through] somehow. . . You know, some kid comes in and sees who is on the video, and stuff like that. Somehow, that relationship becomes more personal. (Leader_8)

It seems, however, that the maturity of the LMX relationship influences the perception of closeness and the need for physical presence in remote work interactions. If the parties were already familiar, being in contact and further developing the relationship was less complicated remotely, which was different to the situation seen in newly established leader-member dyads. When, for example, the patterns for communication and giving feedback and instructions are known, the need for follow-up is reduced, and ensuring the correct reception of the message is easier. Correspondingly, the interviewees from teams with new leaders or team members hired during the remote work period described the need for face-to-face interaction as being greater. The following excerpts illustrate the contrast between relationships with longer temporal spans to those that are newly established:

I don't have such a strong need for it [face-to-face communication] because we've known each other for so long that we do so well with a Teams call or phone call or whatever. But if I had a newer leader, then I'm sure I'd like to take care of development discussions and things like that face-to-face. We had an interim development discussion, and we had it through Teams. I think it was okay. (Leader_9, talking as a subordinate about the relationship with their own leader)

Some of those who have remained in customer support due to this organizational reform are, of course, familiar to me as well, and I've been their leader for a long time. However, some are new team members, and with them, I'll have the process of getting to know them and find out how I can reach everyone, and how to make sure that information has reached them in a necessary way. I know that it hasn't gone very well for everyone in the last couple of weeks, and it still needs a bit of work. (Leader_11)

Despite the interviewees' positive perceptions of the quality of the interactions in remote work, some challenges were identified. The interviewees felt that informal and spontaneous interaction had decreased, and that interactions were often planned, and depending on the channel used, asynchronous. The chances for spontaneous synchronous feedback interactions were diminished, as informal day-to-day interactions and encounters do not materialize as easily online as in the office context. As a consequence, positive feedback that would have been meaningful for the recipient remained unexpressed. The following examples illustrate how informal, spontaneous moments during the day-to-day interactions in the office were assessed as crucial in feedback delivery:

Well, yeah, I mean, in the office, you can give immediate feedback right away. When we were in an open office, you could stop by and say, “great job, well managed”, and things like that. [...] But then [in remote work], sparring, encouragement or feedback is not that common. (Subordinate_27)

In the office you say thanks, and giving feedback for good performance should be remembered [...] It's very important when they [team members] are alone at home and don't hear that normal daily, 'hey, it's good, you took care of it nicely, thank you for doing this'. For us Finns it's maybe a bit more challenging to write 'well done'. You must sometimes really remind yourself of recognizing your team members, as they do an insanely great job. (Leader_14)

However, the interviewees described some equivalents for spontaneous day-to-day feedback interactions within remote work. For example, reactions distributed in chats and other instant messaging applications are perceived as ways of giving spontaneous feedback from a distance. Nevertheless, the quality of such feedback (e.g. the richness of information) was perceived as low. The reactions in the messaging applications are rather easy to convey, and the flow of such feedback can also be annoying to receive, as illustrated by the following excerpts:

So, of course, it has naturally reduced [spontaneous feedback]. If Teams and Skype beep all the time, it might become negative if thumbs-ups occur every fifteen minutes. After all, it doesn't work the same as in office work. (Subordinate_27)

I think, when I do my everyday work as well as I can, I don't need someone telling me weekly that I've done well. [...] When there is a reason to say something, it feels meaningful, compared to when it is daily. [...] It is not genuine. (Subordinate_29)

In addition to the challenges related to the spontaneity and information value of remote feedback mentioned above, interpreting feedback at a distance was described as challenging. Nonverbal communication is absent in written and oral feedback provided in a video call without a camera connection, increasing the risk of misinterpretation. Two interviewees described the challenges as follows:

The communication is so often written, and you're unable to see another person's gestures and facial expressions and so on. So, it [feedback] can more easily be interpreted as even more negative than the feedback provided was intended, or how the person who gave it wanted it to come out. (Subordinate_45)

If you're trying to present something, you can see from the expressions and reactions of the audience, whether they agree with you. Or is this a good thing. But in Teams, sometimes you feel like you're shouting into a well when you don't necessarily get any feedback from people. What are their vibes and what do they think about out there? (Leader_23)

Overall, the remote work context has created an opportunity to deepen long-term LMX relationships through regular, confidential one-to-one discussions. Nevertheless, the remote work context prevents leader-member dyads from taking advantage of the trustworthy relationship and delivering high-quality feedback. Especially, maintaining informal and spontaneous interaction which forms the foundation of daily feedback procedures and promotes feedback quality (see [Steelman et al., 2004](#); [Dahling et al., 2017](#)) is challenging.

Tension 3: feedback-seeking – promoted but still complicated in remote work

The final theme revealed a tension related to feedback-seeking, implying the extent to which employees are encouraged to seek feedback, and how comfortable they feel seeking it ([Steelman et al., 2004](#)). Although the interviews indicate that feedback-seeking is encouraged by leaders and facilitated by technology in the remote work context, it does not materialize easily. Earlier in this section, we reported how leaders voiced the low threshold for

communication, and how they encouraged subordinates to seek support when needed in remote work. A leader's actions can be interpreted as also promoting feedback-seeking through inquiry. However, at the same time, many leaders expressed concern about subordinates being left alone with challenges. They recognized the extra effort needed to keep communication lines open for feedback, and emphasized the active role of subordinates' in feedback-seeking, especially in remote work:

To find them [the subordinates] and encourage people to talk, so that they just don't stay there wondering and moaning about the situation, and sort of like not taking action and not bringing them [issues] up. (Leader_3)

Creating a safe working community, despite not seeing each other all the time, that's what I think is really important. [...] A person doesn't feel like being left alone, or that they dare not approach. Or they think they may interrupt. But I'm not saying it's completely uncomplicated, but it is something I constantly seek to pay attention to. (Leader_17)

The research data also showed how technology facilitated feedback-seeking in remote work. The subordinates thought they were not bothering the leader in the remote context in the same way they did on-site. The leader can choose when to answer, whereas walking up to the leader's desk interrupts their work. Moreover, the possibility to assess the availability of the other party through status messages made it easier to be in contact, and "traffic lights" on virtual platforms indicate whether a person is available, busy, or away. The following examples illustrate how technology promotes feedback-seeking:

I've agreed with everyone close to me with whom I have a lot of message exchange, you can send me a short message anytime, and I'll answer when it's right for me. I usually try to answer in an hour. (Leader_8)

In a way, I don't feel like I'm bothering anyone so much if I send a message, and they can answer right away or later if they are busy. On the other hand, if I go next to them in the office, I immediately feel that I'm disturbing them, even if they don't have anything going on, so maybe it [work in a virtual environment] has been more like positive. (Subordinate_1)

But despite the leaders' efforts and supporting technology, feedback-seeking actions did not always transfer easily to reality. As noted earlier, the contact was not always spontaneous, and the interaction was not instant, which was primarily due to the use of asynchronous communication tools. Also, the initiation to communicate was higher in remote work than in the office, leaving many things disregarded in daily interaction. Notably, this was evident when the subordinate encountered a challenge or a failure:

Well, yeah, I think the discussions in the corridors have been a good thing in that respect, too. You can ask people involved in a project what it looks like and how it feels. But if you want to do that now, you have to call and ask. And there's always a small threshold for calling. And I have to admit, often there will be no call. (Subordinate_11)

Well, maybe it's the fact that you may not broach a minor setback with anyone. Maybe there is, however, a little trouble with contacting. (Subordinate_6)

Moreover, it seems that the nature of remote work (as also raised in previous literature) supports autonomy, and in ideal situations, the development of trust. Many leaders described that remote work had led to higher job autonomy, which leaders did not perceive as a bad thing. The independent way of working was also verbalized to subordinates, and as one leader put it:

Basically, we must be reachable between 9 and 15. But I've told my people that I don't care, you may work in the middle of the night if you want to, as long as things get done. Certain team meetings and things like that are such, where you have to be present. (Leader_27)

Similarly, several subordinates felt that their leader trusted them. Some leaders had been forced to reduce their supervisory actions due to the pandemic-induced remote work, while for other leaders, the trust towards subordinates was self-evident. The data indicated that there seems to be a fine line between whether a leader's interactive behaviour is regarded as monitoring or support in remote work. Many subordinates connected the leader's absence as a signal of trust and desired performance.

That is, he [the leader] does not explicitly in any case spy or monitor, which is absolutely excellent; confidence is certainly a hundred per cent. (Subordinate_52)

In conclusion, leaders emphasize the extra effort needed for remote feedback interaction and strive to promote feedback-seeking by maintaining frequent communication. Further, communication technologies seem to promote feedback-seeking. However, soliciting support and feedback appears difficult in remote work, especially when subordinates have encountered challenges. Remaining without feedback might increase the risk of loneliness and reinforce the sense of failure at work.

Discussion and conclusions

This study aimed to examine how remote work affects the feedback environment by exploring the daily feedback interactions as perceived by leaders and subordinates. Specifically, the emphasis was on understanding how reciprocity within remote LMX relationships manifests and how it influences the feedback dynamics. To this end, the research question "*how does remote work shape daily feedback interactions between a leader and a subordinate?*" served as a basis for an in-depth qualitative analysis of how feedback interaction emerges when dyad parties work distantly from each other. Combining leaders' and subordinates' perceptions revealed contradictory aspects of dyadic feedback interactions, which we refer to as tensions. We explored three identified tensions using the feedback environment scale (Steelman *et al.*, 2004) as a framework for analysing the dyadic interactions. The contribution of our study to literature is twofold.

Theoretical implications

First, we bridge the gaps in the feedback literature regarding the lack of two-way perceptions of feedback interaction (SRQ1) and examining dyadic feedback in remote settings (SRQ3). The findings show that importantly, interactions between a leader and a subordinate that create the foundation for a feedback environment seemed not to diminish, despite this concern having been raised in earlier studies (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Sardeshmukh *et al.*, 2012). The interviewed subordinates appeared to be satisfied with the leader's accessibility online and the trustworthy relationship, which was improved on thanks to the communication routines maintained by the leader. Indeed, the burden of creating and maintaining communication routines falls on leaders, intensifying their work and increasing their cognitive workload, which is a concern brought to light in a prior study on frequent feedback (Tseng *et al.*, 2019).

Furthermore, remote working subordinates enjoying high levels of autonomy and trust did not actively seek support, even when it might have been needed. Meanwhile, leaders seemed to be searching for a turning point where subordinates might perceive the interaction as monitoring or intrusive, instead of support. Thus, in line with Anseel and Brutus (2019), our findings indicate that a feedback environment should be regarded as a dyadic construct, not solely concentrating on leaders' feedback-supportive behaviour and its perceptions by subordinates, but rather as an encompassing dynamic interplay between the parties involved.

The results also provoke a question of whether the remote work context emphasizes positive feedback interactions: Pleasant and positive issues are more easily brought up, while

matters related to more serious topics such as challenges or failures are postponed, as they are considered to need face-to-face contact (see Kirkman *et al.*, 2002; Krehl and Büttgen, 2022).

Second, this study provides missing empirical evidence regarding the reciprocal exchanges in LMX relationships (SRQ2) and widens the understanding of LMX relationships in remote work by examining remote, dyadic feedback interactions (SRQ3). Consistent with Jiang and Qu (2023), this study reinforces the importance of social exchange in LMX feedback interactions. However, our findings show that the remote work context influences LMX relationships, particularly from the perspective of reciprocity. The findings reveal that the balance of contribution in exchanges, which has been considered a fundamental aspect of LMX (Liden *et al.*, 1997; Lee *et al.*, 2019), might be misaligned in remote work relationships. It seems that leaders hold a greater responsibility within the context of remote work. Thus, subordinates could build their LMX relationship more actively through feedback interactions (see Lam *et al.*, 2007).

In line with Schreier *et al.* (2022), this study emphasizes the importance of a solid and high-quality LMX relationship between leaders and their team members in facilitating feedback exchange. In addition, our research extends the understanding of how context influences subordinates' engagement in feedback interaction in the LMX relationship, highlighting the misaligned reciprocity. Where prior studies report that high-quality LMX relationships promote subordinates' willingness to solicit feedback (Anseel *et al.*, 2015; Chun *et al.*, 2014), our findings from the context of remote work do not support these notions. Moreover, although the study of Huang (2012) shows that subordinates' sense of empowerment via trust in their leader increases the willingness to seek feedback, this does not seem to materialize in high-quality LMX relationships in remote work. The issue of technology can be speculated as creating a barrier to feedback.

To conclude, although both the feedback environment and LMX relationships are dyadic constructs, the results of this study highlight the imbalance between leaders and subordinates in their efforts to maintain exchange and interaction in the remote work context. Particularly, it seems that subordinates should be more proactive in these processes to make them effective and functional.

Practical implications

This study provides useful information for leaders, subordinates, and HR practitioners. First, our findings showed that systemized communication between leaders and subordinates created the perception of improved communication and deepened existing leader-member relations, despite the physical distance. Thus, leader-member dyads could create a communication plan together, including the frequency of communication and the channels to be used. When tracking communication frequency on an individual level, leaders avoid situations where some subordinates could receive fewer opportunities for feedback interaction, even if they might need support in remote work. Such a "communication gap" does not emerge as easily in the office environment where parties are physically present, so the difference is worth noting.

The need for systemized communication leads to further implications for HR practitioners, who could increase the organizational support for leadership and re-evaluate the number of subordinates per leader in remote working teams. This change implies an increase in the number of leaders in organizations. Indeed, keeping communication lines open for feedback individually for each subordinate requires resources. This study showed that leaders felt that informal daily communication (that forms the foundation for frequent feedback) in remote work was vital but burdening. Correspondingly, Tseng *et al.* (2019) are concerned about the cognitive overload of leaders in delivering frequent feedback. The findings of Mertens *et al.* (2021) lead us to the same concern, as they found that the average feedback frequency is 3.8 feedback

interactions in three weeks, and that there is no upper limit for appropriate feedback frequency when the LMX relationship quality is perceived as high. With this said, it must be asked which feedback procedures (formal or informal) are more stressful and costly? This study challenges the ongoing trend where organizations are replacing formal appraisal processes with informal feedback procedures, as the formal processes are considered to be expensive and burdening (Levy *et al.*, 2017). We do not deny the positive aspects of frequent feedback shown in previous studies (e.g. Kuvaas *et al.*, 2017; Liu *et al.*, 2022). However, we feel that HR practitioners should abandon the yearly performance evaluations with caution, and strive for a balance between frequent and annual appraisal systems (see Gorbатов and Lane, 2018).

Second, the study demonstrates that leaders and subordinates should choose communication channels for feedback carefully, so as to avoid misinterpretation and quality impairment of feedback, even if they (contrary to expectations) experience closeness in their remote relationship. Therefore, face-to-face meetings should not be forgotten in remote work, especially when delivering constructive feedback (Krehl and Büttgen, 2022). While leader-member relationships are essential for creating a favourable feedback environment (Anseel and Brutus, 2019) and their relevance is emphasized in the context of remote work (Liu *et al.*, 2022), HR practitioners should provide training for leaders and subordinates in maintaining high-quality relationships. Additionally, leaders can be trained to give feedback (London, 2015) and promote a favourable feedback environment (Dahling *et al.*, 2017; Gallo and Steelman, 2019). All such training should be focused on virtual environments, improving remote communication skills, the use of ICT communication tools and building and maintaining trust and social networks at a distance, among other things (see Roman *et al.*, 2019).

Finally, the findings indicate that leaders' promotion and technological support in lowering the threshold for feedback-seeking does not activate subordinates to solicit feedback in remote work. Subordinates should therefore recognize their active role in building a favourable feedback environment and actively seek remote feedback (London, 2015). In the same vein, HR practitioners should clarify subordinates' responsibilities in feedback interactions, and provide training to help subordinates seek and receive feedback in remote settings.

Limitations and future research

Despite its strengths in utilizing extensive qualitative interview data that combines the perspectives of both leaders and subordinates in feedback interaction, this study has some limitations that offer fruitful avenues for future research. First, the feedback environment (Anseel and Lievens, 2007), LMX relationships (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2012) and remote work (Peters *et al.*, 2016; Raghuram *et al.*, 2001) are known to appear differently in different cultures, due to the variation in cultural dimensions such as individualism and power distance. Therefore, our research results from a Finnish context should be generalized with caution, and further research is needed to expand the understanding of daily remote feedback procedures in leader-member relationships within different cultural contexts.

Second, the data used in this study was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic-induced remote work has been intensive, and the shift towards remote work was rapid and stressful. Additionally, the crisis period burdened many people with other non-work stressors related to health, childcare demands, and financial insecurity. These facts may have affected feedback interactions, as communication with a leader is a form of organizational support that may have helped subordinates cope with the exceptional circumstances (Mihalache and Mihalache, 2021). Thus, a longitudinal study is needed to examine remote feedback interactions beyond the crisis context in the post-COVID-19 environment.

Third, this study provided reciprocal insights from leaders and subordinates into four of seven facets of the feedback environment in the remote work context: source availability,

source credibility, feedback quality and the promotion of feedback-seeking (Steelman *et al.*, 2004). We therefore encourage scholars to broaden the understanding of the remaining feedback environment facets (feedback delivery and frequency of favourable and unfavourable feedback) in a remote context.

Fourth, the current research did not focus on how spontaneous feedback interactions affect the development of LMX relationships in remote work. Thus, future studies could address this aspect in more detail, as developing LMX relationships is vital for feedback interaction and vice versa. The remote work context should be emphasized in these studies, as the organizational context is related to developing the LMX relationship (see Gerstner and Day, 1997).

Finally, this study adopted a qualitative approach, enabling an in-depth interpretation of how feedback interaction in LMX relationships is constructed in remote work. The qualitative approach promotes a holistic understanding of the phenomenon but does not provide causality inference (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2015). Thus, we welcome longitudinal quantitative studies on the effects of the remote work context on dyadic feedback interaction and the feedback environment.

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