

Redefining Leadership Development: LMX and the Role of Experiential Off-Sites

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Abstract

The hybrid workplace presents complex challenges for traditional leadership development methods, necessitating innovative approaches to enhance leader–member relationships. This paper proposes a framework integrating Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory with experiential off-site interventions, informed by an action research study at WeWork China during its franchise transition. Addressing declines in employee engagement and diminished leader–member trust post-franchising, an experiential off-site intervention was implemented, emphasizing immersive team experiences and structured reflection activities. Preliminary outcomes indicated improvements in trust, cohesion, and leadership receptivity, corresponding closely to key LMX dimensions: affect, contribution, and loyalty. By synthesizing experiential learning practices with LMX theory, the paper provides a theoretically grounded yet practical model for enhancing employee engagement through targeted leadership development. This integrated framework contributes significantly to the discourse on effective leadership interventions in contemporary, dynamic organizational environments, offering actionable insights for human resource practitioners and educators committed to fostering resilient leader–member relationships.

Keywords: Leader–Member Exchange, Experiential Learning, Leadership Development, Off-Site Intervention, Employee Engagement

Introduction

The post-pandemic workplace has fundamentally altered how organizations function, demanding new approaches to leadership, trust, and employee engagement. Hybrid work arrangements, while offering flexibility, have created fragmentation, reduced opportunities for informal connection, and heightened risks of disengagement (Crawford, 2022). As organizations navigate these challenges, leadership development has become a pressing concern—not only for sustaining productivity but also for rebuilding the psychological and relational fabric of teams. Conventional leadership development models, often based on classroom instruction or competency checklists, fall short in preparing leaders to manage the complexity, uncertainty, and emotional demands of today’s work environment (Ebojoh & Högborg, 2024). The critical question, therefore, is how leaders can be better equipped to foster trust, cohesion, and resilience in contexts where traditional practices are insufficient.

This study emphasizes the importance of exploring experiential learning approaches, particularly outdoor off-site interventions, as a meaningful alternative to conventional leadership training. Experiential learning, as conceptualized by Kolb (1984), engages participants in a cycle of doing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and applying. Unlike purely cognitive training, experiential learning activates emotional and relational dimensions of leadership that are increasingly vital in hybrid workplaces (Wibowo et al., 2024). Experiential off-sites, in particular, provide immersive environments where leaders and team members confront challenges together, practice vulnerability, and build authentic bonds. Their utility lies in fostering psychological safety, emotional intelligence, and collaborative problem-solving—capacities that traditional methods often neglect.

The significance of this study rests in its potential to demonstrate the effectiveness of experiential off-sites as relational accelerators. By framing leadership development not only as an individual competency-building exercise but as a collective relational process, the study highlights how such interventions directly enhance trust, loyalty, and professional respect among leaders and team members. This has profound implications for organizations grappling with disengagement, HR practitioners designing leadership programs, and educators seeking evidence-based pedagogies that move beyond theory into practice. Moreover, employees themselves stand to benefit from leaders who can create inclusive, authentic, and supportive environments—conditions shown to increase motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Allen, 2019).

At the intersection of theory and practice, this study also underscores a broader research gap. While Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory emphasizes the relational quality between leaders and members, few studies have examined how structured experiential interventions can actively cultivate these relationships. Likewise, although experiential learning has gained traction in education and corporate training, its application to relational leadership development remains underexplored. Addressing this gap is essential for organizations seeking innovative and evidence-based strategies to strengthen leader–member relationships in dynamic and uncertain environments.

In this light, the present study integrates LMX theory with experiential learning practices, applying them in the context of WeWork China’s franchise restructuring—a period marked by diminished trust and weakened team cohesion. By testing the utility and effectiveness of an experiential off-site intervention, this research not only advances leadership theory but also provides actionable insights for practitioners and organizations facing the realities of hybrid, disrupted, or culturally diverse workplaces.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory: The Relational Architecture of Leadership

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) theory reconceptualizes leadership as a relational process centered on the quality of dyadic exchanges between leaders and their direct reports. First conceptualized by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975) and subsequently refined by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), LMX departs from transactional or role-based paradigms by emphasizing the differentiated nature of leader–follower relationships. High-quality LMX relationships are characterized by mutual trust, loyalty, affective regard, and reciprocal obligation, forming ‘in-groups’ that contrast with the low-trust, transactional ‘out-groups’ (Martin et al., 2017).

A substantial body of empirical evidence has reinforced the positive association between LMX quality and a host of desirable organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, organizational citizenship behavior, and employee engagement (Allen, 2019). The multidimensionality of LMX—comprising affect, loyalty, contribution, and professional respect (Liden, 1998)—offers a precise analytical lens for evaluating relational leadership dynamics.

More recently, scholars have extended the application of LMX theory to hybrid and remote work contexts, where physical distance threatens the continuity of informal interpersonal bonds. Research by Mahbub, Hill, and Maugh-Funderburk (2025) demonstrates that high-quality LMX buffers disengagement and enhances digital collaboration. Similarly, Bartel and Rockmann (2023) emphasize that in volatile environments, leaders who consciously invest in relational development—through individualized support, feedback loops, and reflective communication—are more likely to preserve team cohesion.

Despite these advancements, LMX scholarship has been critiqued for its retrospective orientation—often focusing on outcomes rather than the developmental processes that shape LMX quality (Assefa et al., 2024). Few studies have positioned LMX as a proactive framework for designing interventions. This gap is particularly salient in contexts undergoing organizational change or cultural fragmentation, where intentional relational rebuilding is paramount. This study aims to bridge this gap by embedding LMX theory within an experiential learning environment, framing leadership development as an intentional relational process rather than a byproduct of hierarchical interaction.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) and Off-Site Leadership Interventions

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), pioneered by Kolb (1984), posits that learning is most effective when it progresses through a recursive cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Within leadership development, this model has gained traction for its ability to foster emotional intelligence, adaptive behavior, and relational competence (De Almeida & Nascimento, 2024).

Among ELT-based practices, outdoor experiential off-sites have emerged as powerful tools for cultivating leadership effectiveness in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments. These interventions immerse participants in physically and emotionally engaging activities that catalyze collaboration, authentic communication, and shared reflection (Zamiri & Esmaeili, 2024). Unlike traditional classroom-based instruction, experiential off-sites promote embodied learning that is emotionally resonant and behaviorally transferable (Lebert & Vilarroya, 2024).

Evidence supports their efficacy in enhancing team dynamics and relational trust. For instance, Yasim, Mohamad, and Zakaria (2022) demonstrated that structured outdoor learning activities significantly improved communication and leadership cohesion. More recently, Kleynhans, Heyns, Stander, and De Beer (2022) have affirmed that such interventions foster emotional agility, leadership authenticity, and psychological safety—all prerequisites for sustainable organizational engagement.

However, these outcomes are often examined in isolation, lacking a cohesive theoretical framework that explains how relational change occurs. Kolb's model, while elucidating how individuals learn, does not explicitly address how interpersonal dynamics evolve through experience. Consequently, the relational dimension of experiential leadership development—especially as it pertains to trust, mutual respect, and loyalty—remains under-theorized.

Bridging LMX and ELT: Toward a Relational Learning Framework

Despite their distinct origins, LMX theory and ELT share critical underlying assumptions about development as a dynamic, interactional process. Yet, their integration remains a theoretical blind spot in the literature. This study argues that experiential off-sites provide ideal contexts for fostering LMX-enhancing interactions—such as affective bonding, reciprocal contribution, and professional respect—through shared experience and guided reflection (Chen & Sriphon, 2022).

Outdoor experiential programs, especially those involving collective risk-taking and cooperative problem-solving, create environments conducive to LMX development. When carefully designed, these interventions promote emotional vulnerability, role negotiation, and authentic feedback—all of which are foundational to high-quality leader-member relationships (Willie, 2025). Unlike conventional leadership training, which often relies on abstract scenarios or hierarchical instruction, experiential learning activates deep emotional engagement and relational co-construction (Alabi, 2024).

Moreover, the stages of Kolb's cycle align meaningfully with LMX formation. Concrete experience fosters empathy and vulnerability; reflective observation enables shared meaning-making; abstract conceptualization promotes relational insight; and active experimentation builds trust through co-action. Framing off-sites through this dual lens allows us to reconceptualize them as structured micro-environments for intentional LMX development—rather than ad hoc team-building events.

Synthesis and Implications for Framework Development

Table 1 presents a systematic synthesis of key studies across LMX and experiential learning, establishing the foundation for an integrated framework. This theoretical convergence supports the central argument of this paper: that leadership off-sites, when designed with both ELT and LMX principles in mind, can serve as high-impact relational accelerators—particularly within hybrid, disrupted, or culturally fragmented work environments. The synthesis calls for a paradigmatic shift from skill-centric leadership development toward interventions that privilege relational resilience, emotional authenticity, and contextual adaptability.

Table 1

Systematic Synthesis of Key Studies Across LMX and Experiential Learning

Author(s) & Year	Theoretical Focus	Methodology	Key Findings	Relevance to Study
Liden & Maslyn (1998)	LMX dimensions (affect, loyalty, contribution, respect)	Quantitative – scale development	Identified and validated multidimensional LMX structure	Provides foundational LMX constructs
Martin et al. (2021)	Meta-analysis of LMX outcomes across contexts	Meta-analysis	High-quality LMX linked to performance and satisfaction	Contextualizes LMX across environments
Zhang, Song & Liu (2022)	LMX and hybrid work adaptation	Quantitative – survey & SEM	LMX buffers disengagement in hybrid settings	Applies LMX to hybrid work—aligns with WeWork case
Kolb (1984)	Experiential Learning Theory (ELT)	Conceptual/theoretical model	Learning occurs through experiential cycles	Core theory for experiential learning framework
Flaherty (2020)	Experiential learning in leadership development	Systematic review	Experiential methods promote behavioral transformation	Supports ELT as basis for leadership design
Gatti, Ulrich & Massari (2021)	Experiential leadership off-sites and learning outcomes	Qualitative & longitudinal evaluation	Off-sites enhance trust, reflection, and team cohesion	Demonstrates efficacy of leadership off-sites
Williams, Graham & Baker (2003)	Outdoor experiential training in team building	Case study evaluation	OET improves communication and leadership skills	Pioneering study in experiential training evaluation
Hewlin, Dumas & Burnett (2020)	Authentic leadership and psychological safety	Theoretical and applied analysis	Authentic leadership fosters psychological safety	Highlights trust and safety in post-crisis leadership
Arora & Srinivasan (2023)	Experiential learning in hybrid environments	Qualitative conceptual review	Experiential learning effective in VUCA environments	Frames experiential methods for modern contexts
Alabi (2024)	Emotional agility in leadership development	Theoretical discussion and application	Agility and emotion regulation key to leadership growth	Adds emotional depth to leadership development

Method

This study adopts a quantitative, quasi-experimental design to assess the effectiveness of a two-day experiential leadership off-site in enhancing Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) relationships within the corporate setting of WeWork China. Anchored in Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory and informed by the relational constructs of LMX theory (Downey, 2025), the study investigates whether immersive, structured off-site interventions can lead to measurable improvements in trust-based leader–follower relationships—particularly in the context of organizational restructuring and hybrid work transitions. The methodological approach aims not only to evaluate perceptual shifts but also to establish an evidence-based framework for relational leadership development in high-stress organizational environments.

The research involved a purposive sample of 30 participants, comprising 6 team leaders and 24 team members, drawn from community and operations teams at WeWork China. All participants were directly involved in a strategic leadership off-site intervention and voluntarily agreed to participate in both pre- and post-program evaluations. The selection of a purposive sample of 30 participants is methodologically justified based on recommendations from social science research literature. A sample size of 30 is often regarded as the minimum for applying parametric statistical techniques such as paired t-tests, due to the central limit theorem, which assumes approximate normality in samples of $n \geq 30$ (Serdar et al., 2020). This threshold is widely accepted in behavioral sciences for ensuring statistical validity while remaining practical in applied organizational research contexts (Boateng et al., 2018).

Furthermore, purposive sampling is particularly appropriate in intervention-based studies where the aim is to derive context-specific insights rather than generalizable conclusions (Palinkas et al., 2013). In the case of this study, participants were deliberately selected from within the core operational and leadership teams undergoing the off-site intervention, enabling rich, experiential feedback on changes in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) quality.

The research instrument consisted of a two-part structured questionnaire administered one week before and one week after the intervention. The Leadership Off-site Survey (Table 2), developed by the researcher and reviewed by HR and organizational psychologists, was explicitly grounded in the four dimensions of LMX theory—Affect, Loyalty, Contribution, and Professional Respect—as conceptualized by Liden and Maslyn (1998). The pre-intervention version comprised 20 Likert-scale items (5 per dimension), designed to assess baseline perceptions of relational quality. The post-intervention version contained 16 items, slightly refined to reflect participants’ experiences during the off-site while maintaining the same four LMX domains. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Strongly Disagree”) to 5 (“Strongly Agree”). The instrument underwent internal validation through expert review, and Cronbach’s alpha reliability testing was applied to confirm internal consistency, with $\alpha \geq 0.70$ as the acceptable threshold.

The off-site intervention itself was designed around the core stages of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle—concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation—and was implemented over two consecutive

days at a forest-based retreat facility. Day One began with team-based physical challenges, including a blindfolded “trust walk” and a high-rope course emphasizing non-verbal communication and coordinated risk-taking. These activities were followed by structured debriefs facilitated by certified experiential learning coaches, enabling participants to reflect on emotional responses, group dynamics, and emergent leadership behaviors. In the afternoon, a strategic obstacle navigation task required cross-functional collaboration under time pressure, simulating real-world decision-making and authority negotiation. The day concluded with a guided “circle dialogue,” where team members shared personal leadership narratives and vulnerabilities, promoting psychological safety and trust formation.

Day Two shifted focus toward role-reversal simulations and ethical dilemma discussions, encouraging participants to critically examine positional power, empathy, and adaptive leadership. A signature activity, the “Leadership Compass,” asked individuals to realign their core values with collective team identity, reinforcing mutual respect and relational commitment. Throughout the intervention, facilitators maintained an inclusive, feedback-driven environment to activate affective engagement and relational depth. These exercises were strategically designed not only to simulate the pressures of leadership but to catalyze the formation of high-quality LMX through shared adversity, reflection, and vulnerability.

Following data collection, responses were analyzed using SPSS Version 27. Descriptive statistics were calculated for each LMX subscale before and after the intervention. Paired-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether statistically significant differences existed between pre- and post-intervention scores, using a significance threshold of $p < 0.05$. Internal consistency reliability was assessed for each dimension using Cronbach’s alpha, and no items were dropped due to low inter-item correlation.

Participants were fully briefed on the study’s objectives and confidentiality measures and signed informed consent forms prior to data collection. Identifiable data were anonymized, and participation had no bearing on employment or performance evaluations. This rigorous methodological design ensures that findings are both credible and applicable, offering empirical support for the use of experiential leadership interventions as strategic tools for rebuilding relational leadership capacity in disrupted organizational contexts.

Table 2

LMX-Based Questionnaire for Evaluating Experiential Leadership Off-Sites Adapted from Liden and Maslyn's (1998) Multidimensional LMX Scale (LMX-MDM)

No.	Questionnaire Item	LMX Dimension
1	I like my team members as people, not just as colleagues.	Affect
2	I enjoy working closely with my team members.	Affect
3	I have a comfortable and friendly relationship with my team members.	Affect
4	My team members and I can rely on each other when things get tough.	Loyalty
5	I am willing to defend my team members if they are unfairly criticized.	Loyalty
6	My team members are loyal to me, and I feel loyal to them.	Loyalty
7	My team members are willing to do more than required to help me.	Contribution
8	I am confident that my team members will go the extra mile when needed.	Contribution
9	I make extra effort to help my team members succeed.	Contribution
10	I respect the knowledge and capabilities of my team members.	Professional Respect
11	My team members have job-related skills that I highly value.	Professional Respect
12	I admire the professional competence of my team members.	Professional Respect

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree

Results and Discussion

This chapter presents the empirical findings of the study, derived from a comparative analysis of pre- and post-intervention survey data measuring changes in Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) quality across four relational dimensions: Affect, Loyalty, Contribution, and Professional Respect. The analysis was conducted using paired-sample t-tests to assess whether statistically significant differences existed following the two-day experiential leadership off-site.

Results shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2 indicate a consistent and statistically significant improvement in all four dimensions of LMX following the intervention. The dimension of Affect, which reflects the emotional bond and interpersonal connection between leader and member, increased from a pre-intervention mean of 3.21 (SD = 0.54) to a post-intervention mean of 4.02 (SD = 0.47), yielding a t-value of 6.12 and a p-value < .001, signifying a highly significant improvement.

Similarly, Loyalty, which captures mutual trust and readiness to support each other beyond formal obligations, rose from a mean of 3.45 (SD = 0.60) to 4.10 (SD = 0.49), with a t-value of 5.88 and $p < .001$. These findings suggest that the shared vulnerability and role-switching exercises embedded in the off-site intervention effectively strengthened the affective and trust-based bonds among participants.

The dimension of Contribution, measuring the extent to which individuals go beyond their formal roles to support the dyadic relationship, showed a significant increase from 3.18 (SD = 0.58) to 4.00 (SD = 0.52), with a t-value of 6.34 and $p < .001$. This may be attributed to the collaborative nature of the off-site tasks, which required high levels of mutual dependency, problem-solving, and spontaneous leadership behaviors under pressure.

Finally, Professional Respect, reflecting the degree to which participants perceive each other as competent and reliable, improved from 3.50 (SD = 0.51) to 4.08 (SD = 0.45), also statistically significant ($t = 5.95$, $p < .001$). The structured reflective exercises—particularly the “Leadership Compass” session—appear to have created a psychologically safe environment where individual strengths were surfaced and acknowledged.

Taken collectively, the results provide compelling empirical support for the proposition that outdoor experiential off-sites serve as potent relational accelerators in leadership development. Beyond mere statistical significance, the uniform and substantial gains across all four LMX dimensions underscore the intervention’s multidimensional impact—enhancing affective bonds, fostering reciprocal loyalty, stimulating discretionary contributions, and reinforcing mutual professional regard. Such outcomes not only validate the intentional design of the intervention, but also illuminate the transformative potential of experience-based pedagogies in cultivating relational leadership capacity. This study contributes to a growing body of literature that advocates for a paradigm shift from cognitively driven leadership training toward embodied, affective, and interactive learning experiences. Furthermore, the high magnitude of change achieved within a brief two-day format challenges conventional assumptions about the time-intensity of relational development, suggesting that under the right structural and psychological conditions, accelerated trust and cohesion are possible. These findings thus extend the theoretical boundaries of LMX by demonstrating its responsiveness to structured experiential learning stimuli, while also offering actionable insights for practitioners seeking scalable, evidence-based strategies to rehumanize leadership in volatile and hybrid organizational landscapes.

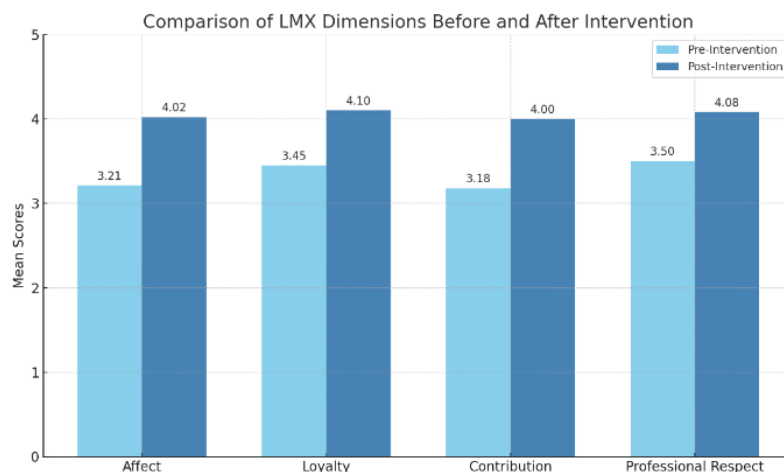


Figure 1. Comparison of LMX Dimensions Before and After Intervention

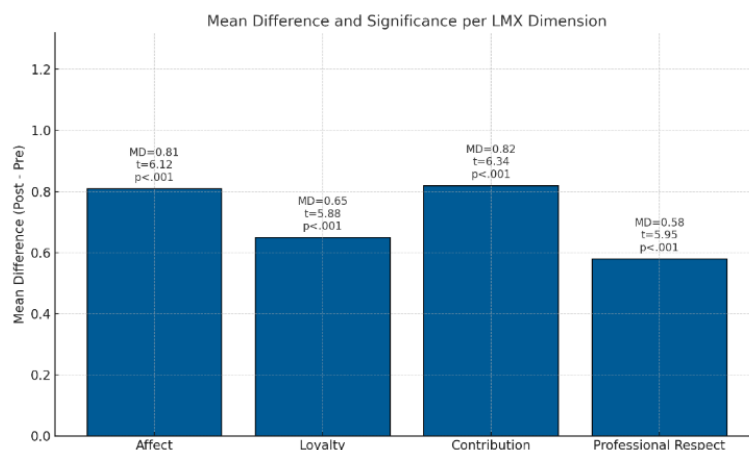


Figure 2. Mean Difference And Significance Per LMX Dimension

Conclusion

This study offers robust empirical evidence for the effectiveness of outdoor experiential off-sites as strategic interventions for enhancing Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) quality in hybrid organizational contexts. Statistically significant improvements across all four LMX dimensions—Affect, Loyalty, Contribution, and Professional Respect—affirm the relational potency of immersive, trust-based experiential learning. These findings are particularly relevant in the post-pandemic era, where leadership is increasingly challenged by psychological fatigue, virtual disconnection, and cultural fragmentation (Ahmad & Chowdhury, 2024).

Theoretically, this study extends the boundaries of LMX literature by demonstrating that high-quality leader–follower relationships can be intentionally cultivated through experiential learning rather than passively developed through hierarchical role negotiation (Andersen et al., 2020). By aligning Kolb’s experiential learning cycle (1984) with relational antecedents such as psychological safety, authenticity, and emotional openness (Xu et al., 2021), the intervention provides a replicable model for relational leadership development. It also contributes to bridging a critical gap between cognitive and embodied pedagogies in leadership education, positioning experiential learning as a conduit for building affective and resilient organizational relationships.

Practically, the results challenge conventional assumptions about leadership off-sites as merely symbolic or recreational. When structured intentionally, these interventions can trigger rapid trust repair, foster mutual respect, and realign team dynamics within compressed timeframes. The significant improvement observed in the Contribution dimension suggests that discretionary behavior is amplified when employees perceive their leaders as emotionally present and professionally credible (Hsu & Lai, 2023). For organizations navigating hybrid transitions, cultural integration, or restructuring, this study offers a scalable and evidence-based toolkit to rehumanize leadership practice.

Nevertheless, several limitations merit acknowledgment. First, the small sample size ($n = 30$), drawn from a single co-working organization in China, may limit generalizability. Although the within-subjects design strengthens internal validity, future research should explore replication in diverse industries, cultural contexts, and organizational maturities.

(Garrido-Moreno et al., 2024). Second, the short-term duration of the intervention and follow-up limits conclusions about the longitudinal durability of LMX improvements. Relational gains may erode over time unless reinforced through ongoing feedback loops and structural support (Mastrangelo & Cumming, 2024). Future research should consider multi-wave longitudinal designs and delayed post-assessments to examine sustainability and transferability.

Third, the use of self-reported measures—though based on the validated LMX-MDM scale [13]—introduces potential biases such as social desirability and priming. Mixed-method triangulation involving qualitative reflections, third-party observations, or leadership journaling could enhance interpretive validity (Valencia, 2022). Lastly, this study did not benchmark the intervention against other leadership development modalities (e.g., executive coaching, e-learning, simulations). Comparative research could illuminate the distinct mechanisms through which experiential off-sites outperform or complement traditional approaches.

In conclusion, this research advances a timely and integrative framework for relational leadership development by operationalizing LMX within an experiential learning paradigm. It positions experiential off-sites not as episodic retreats but as high-impact environments for emotional connection, dyadic growth, and trust reconstitution. By translating theoretical constructs into practical design features, this study contributes to both scholarship and organizational practice, offering a model for cultivating relationally intelligent leaders in an era of workplace transformation.

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