

Leader-Member Exchange and Advice Network Relationships in Organizational Teams

by

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To

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Preface

Organizations have fascinated me for reasons that extend well beyond their conventional understanding as formal institutions created to achieve specific goals. I have long been intrigued by the broader idea of organization itself-the process through which relationships, actions, and seemingly disparate elements come together to create order and purpose. Seen from this perspective, organizations are not merely administrative structures or places of employment; they are dynamic social systems whose formal arrangements coexist with equally important informal patterns of interaction. It is this broader conception of organization that inspired the research presented in this book.

My academic journey began in sociology and psychology, disciplines that taught me to look beyond individual behaviour and examine the social structures within which behaviour unfolds. As my interests gradually expanded into communication and organizational studies, I found that these disciplines converged around a common question: how do people actually work together? The more organizations I studied and interacted with, the more apparent it became that many of the most important organizational processes were not adequately explained by formal hierarchy alone.

Leadership was one such process. Although traditional organizational models often portray leadership as a function of formal authority, organizational life rarely conforms to such neat representations. Decisions are influenced by trust as much as by position, advice is sought from individuals irrespective of rank, and influence frequently emerges through relationships rather than designation. Leadership, therefore, appeared less as a characteristic residing within individuals

and more as a phenomenon embedded in interactions, exchanges, and social contexts.

This realization naturally led me to the study of social networks. Networks offered a way of visualizing organizations that conventional organizational charts could not. Every conversation, request for advice, exchange of information, or act of collaboration creates connections that collectively reveal how organizations truly function. These patterns are neither random nor incidental. They represent the pathways through which knowledge travels, trust develops, influence emerges, and decisions are shaped. Viewing organizations through this relational lens transformed the questions I wished to ask and the methods through which I sought answers.

Among the many forms of organizational interaction, employee voice became the phenomenon that most captured my attention. Speaking up in organizations is often described as a dialogue between employees and their leaders. Yet everyday organizational experience suggests a more complex reality. Before expressing a concern, sharing an idea, or raising a problem, employees frequently seek advice, reassurance, or validation from others within their network. They weigh potential risks, consider who can be trusted, and decide carefully whom to approach. These seemingly ordinary decisions reflect an underlying relational structure that remains largely invisible when organizations are viewed solely through the lens of hierarchy.

The questions that emerged from these observations became the foundation of this work. To whom do employees turn before they speak up? Is the formal leader invariably the preferred recipient of voice, or do influential peers occupy equally significant positions within organizational advice networks? What characteristics make certain individuals central to these networks? More importantly, how do leader–member relationships and informal advice networks

interact to shape who speaks, to whom, and with what consequences? These questions gradually evolved into the central research agenda of this book.

Answering them required a methodological perspective capable of capturing relationships rather than merely individual attributes. Social Network Analysis provided that perspective. Although its intellectual roots lie firmly within the social sciences, its application within organizational communication and leadership research-particularly in the Indian context-remains comparatively limited. Rather than treating Social Network Analysis as a theory in itself, I employ it here as a rigorous analytical framework for examining the relational architecture of organizations. It allows organizational behaviour to be understood not only through individuals and their characteristics but also through the patterns of relationships that connect them.

This work is therefore necessarily interdisciplinary. It draws from sociology, psychology, communication studies, organizational behaviour, leadership research, and network science. Each discipline contributes a distinct perspective, while together they provide a richer understanding of organizations than any single discipline could offer independently. Such an approach inevitably presents conceptual and methodological challenges, yet it also offers opportunities to build connections across bodies of knowledge that have too often developed in isolation.

This book reflects that intellectual journey. It is an attempt to understand organizations not simply as hierarchies of authority but as networks of relationships through which leadership emerges, information flows, advice is exchanged, and employee voice finds expression. If it encourages readers to look beyond formal structures and consider the relational realities that shape organizational life, it will have achieved its purpose.

Chapter 1

Organizations as Networks of Relations

1.1 The Relational Nature of Organizations

Consider two organizations that look identical on paper. Both employ two hundred people arranged across the same functional departments. Both share a chief executive, a management layer, and a workforce. Both display the same organizational chart on their intranet. Yet one is more agile, solves problems fluidly, and generates ideas that outlast any single employee. The other is chronically slow, siloed, and brittle in the face of change. The difference cannot be found in the chart. It lives in the invisible fabric of relationships—who actually talks to whom, whose advice is sought when a decision gets difficult, who bridges the gap between groups that would otherwise never communicate. Organizations, at their core, are not structures. They are *networks of relations*.

This is the central proposition of this chapter and the theoretical foundation of this book. Organizations are not things to be designed and then left to run. They are ongoing relational achievements—patterns of connection, communication, and interdependence that are continuously enacted, negotiated, and sometimes transformed by the people who inhabit them. The formal chart, the job title, the reporting line: these form the framework. The building is made of something else—of the conversations that actually happen, the trust that actually exists, the advice that actually flows. To understand organizations is to understand these relational dynamics.

This does not mean that formal structures are unimportant. They are the conditions from which relational patterns emerge—shaping who

encounters whom, whose collaboration is required, whose approval is needed. But the formal structure and the lived organization are never identical. The gap between them is not noise; it is signal. It is where informal leadership emerges, where knowledge brokers gain influence beyond their rank, where communication networks reveal the true pulse of collective life. Understanding that gap-and working with it rather than against it-is the task of anyone who seeks to lead, design, or meaningfully participate in organizational life.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 1.2 surveys the foundational definitions of organization, tracing the movement from classical structural accounts toward interpretivist, critical, and communicative perspectives. Section 1.3 examines the patterned dimensions of organizational life-activities, relationships, and meanings-and the interplay between formal and informal structures, drawing on structuration theory and relational sociology. Section 1.4 brings power into the analysis, asking how structural position shapes influence and how informal network position can amplify or override formal authority. Section 1.5 situates these dynamics within contemporary organizational forms-networks, teams, virtual and platform organizations-and examines how the classical model has given way to more fluid, relational configurations. Section 1.6 synthesizes these threads through the lens of the networked organization, setting up the book's central argument about leadership, advice networks, and organizational voice.

1.2 Foundations: What Is an Organization?

The scholarly literature offers no single definition of organization-a fact that is itself instructive. Organizations are complex enough that multiple perspectives are needed to illuminate different facets of the same phenomenon. These perspectives can be mapped along a spectrum: from static to dynamic, from structural to processual, from

material to symbolic. Rather than selecting one as definitive, this book holds them in productive tension, treating each as a partial lens whose limitations are as important as its insights.

1.2.1 Classical and Structural Definitions

The classical management tradition, represented by theorists such as Henri Fayol and Max Weber, defined organizations in terms of formal roles, hierarchical authority, and rational-legal principles. For Weber (1922/1978), the ideal-typical bureaucracy was characterized by a fixed division of labor, a hierarchy of offices, a system of rules governing conduct, and selection based on technical qualifications. In this tradition, organizations are understood as instrumentally rational systems designed to achieve specific ends with maximum efficiency. Certain structural features—centralized authority, labor specialization, formal incentives—were held to make such systems reliably productive. The human being, in this frame, is a component of the machine: important but largely interchangeable.

Chester Barnard (1938), writing from the vantage point of a working executive rather than an abstract theorist, introduced a subtler and ultimately more generative definition. For Barnard, an organization is *“a system of consciously coordinated activities or forces of two or more persons.”* Two features of this definition deserve attention. First, the emphasis on *conscious coordination*: organizations are not mere aggregations of individuals but systems in which individual activities are deliberately aligned toward common purpose. Second, the reference to *activities or forces* rather than to persons—an acknowledgment that organizations are constituted by what people *do* rather than simply by who they *are*. Barnard also argued that formal authority depends on its acceptance by those over whom it is exercised—a recognition of the limits of positional power that would prove prescient for later network and relational perspectives.

Richard Scott (2003), surveying more than a century of organizational scholarship, identified three broad conceptions: *rational systems* models, which treat organizations as instruments deliberately designed to achieve specific goals through formal structure and coordinated action; *natural systems* models, which emphasize that organizations are social groups whose informal, emergent structures matter at least as much as formal ones-and whose members are often as motivated by group survival and social belonging as by official objectives; and *open systems* models, which treat organizations as coalitions of shifting interest groups embedded in complex environments with which they continuously exchange resources, information, and legitimacy. Taken together, Scott's taxonomy captures a progressive opening of the organizational concept: from a closed, designed artifact to a living system embedded in a world it cannot fully control. This trajectory-from the closed machine type to the open, relational network-is the conceptual arc this chapter traces.

1.2.2 Interpretivist and Social Constructionist Definitions

A fundamentally different family of definitions emerged from the interpretivist turn in social science. Where classical definitions treated the organization as an objective structure existing independently of its members' understandings, interpretivists argued that organizations are constituted by the meanings that members attribute to their collective life. Organizations, on this view, are not things to be described but processes to be interpreted.

Karl Weick (1979), whose work represents the most influential interpretivist contribution to organization theory, proposed that *organizing*-the process-is more fundamental than the *organization*-the structure. For Weick, organizing consists of interlocked behavioral cycles through which members enact, select, and retain plausible interpretations of their collective experience. Organizations are

“enacted environments”: the environment to which an organization responds is not simply “out there,” waiting to be perceived objectively, but is constituted through the interpretive activity of its members. Organizations are, in a significant sense, what their members make them. They exist in and through the ongoing processes of sense-making, communication, and collective interpretation (Glynn & Watkiss, 2020).

Social constructionist perspectives push this further. Leeds-Hurwitz (2016) articulates the core constructionist premise: people create, make, and invent their worldviews, the meanings they assign to their interactions, and the social entities they collectively build-and they do this together, in ongoing communicative interaction. Organizations, from this standpoint, are social constructions: real in their consequences, but brought into being and sustained through the communicative practices of their members rather than existing as objective structures independent of human meaning-making.

1.2.3 Critical and Post-Structural Definitions

A third family of definitions, rooted in critical theory and post-modern social thought, foregrounds power as the central organizational dynamic. Where classical perspectives treated organizational structure as functionally rational and interpretivist perspectives emphasized meaning-making, critical perspectives insist that organizations are *sites of power*-places where the interests of some groups are systematically advanced at the expense of others, and where ideological processes naturalize these arrangements, making them appear inevitable, neutral, or legitimate.

Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of power-knowledge, Clegg (1989) argued that organizations are not neutral arenas for the pursuit of shared goals but fields of power in which social distinctions-of class,

gender, expertise, and organizational rank-are continuously produced and reproduced. Power, in this framework, is not simply a resource held by some and denied to others; it is a relational and discursive phenomenon, embedded in the very categories, languages, and practices through which organizational life is conducted.

Post-structural perspectives extend this critique to challenge any fixed or essential definition of organization itself. Organizations, from a post-structural standpoint, are not stable entities with determinate properties but provisional, unstable, and contested configurations of meaning-held together by ongoing discursive work, and always vulnerable to disruption, reinterpretation, and transformation. As Mease (2017) notes, post-structural approaches expand to include diverse forms of inquiry that challenge and reconstruct systems of power, identity, and representation-a formulation that captures the breadth and critical ambition of this tradition. This fluidity of meaning and power has direct implications for how leadership and advice networks are understood.

1.2.4 The Communicative Constitution of Organizations

A fourth definitional perspective-and the one most generative for this book's purposes-holds that organizations are not merely *contexts* within which communication occurs but are themselves *constituted* through communication. This is the Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) perspective.

Taylor and Van Every (1999) argued that an organization comes into existence and takes its form through the ways its constituent members and leaders speak about and account for its actions and activities. Communication and organization, on this view, are not separate phenomena: to communicate organizationally is to organize communicatively. An organization does not first exist and then

communicate about itself; rather, it exists *in and through* its communication. McPhee and Poole (2016) developed this perspective into a four-flows model identifying the fundamental communicative processes through which organizations are constituted: *membership negotiation* (who is inside and who is outside, and what membership means); *activity coordination* (how tasks are divided and integrated); *self-structuring* (how formal structure is established and maintained); and *institutional positioning* (how the organization relates to its environment). Each of these flows is a communicative accomplishment, and together they produce the organization as a recognizable social formation.

The CCO perspective has important implications for how we understand both leadership and networks-the two central concerns of this book. If organizations are communicatively constituted, then leadership is not a property of designated persons but a communicative accomplishment: it emerges, is sustained, and is contested through ongoing patterns of interaction. And if organizations are constituted through communication, then the patterns of communicative relationship-the networks through which information, advice, and influence actually flow-are not incidental to the organization but *constitutive* of it.

Taken together, these four perspectives suggest that any adequate account of organizations must hold in tension multiple dimensions: the formal and the informal, the stable and the emergent, the instrumental and the symbolic, the consensual and the conflictual. This dual character lies at the heart of organizational theory and provides the analytical framework for what follows.

1.3 Patterns, Relations, and Structures

If organizations are patterns, what is being patterned? At the most fundamental level, organizations pattern three interrelated dimensions of collective life: activities, relationships, and meanings.

Activities refer to the tasks, routines, and workflows through which organizational work gets done—who does what, when, and with whom, and how materials, information, and decisions move through the organization. These patterns of activity constitute the organization's technical core. But activities never occur in a vacuum; they are always embedded in social relationships.

Relationships refer to the connections—formal and informal, prescribed and emergent, vertical and horizontal—that link organizational members to one another. These are the channels through which information flows, decisions are made, trust is built or eroded, and influence is exercised. Drawing on relational sociology, Emirbayer (1997, p. 287) argues that the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the functional roles they play within that transaction. Organizations, from this perspective, are not collections of individuals but networks of relationships—and it is the structure of these networks, not simply the attributes of the individuals within them, that explains organizational behavior and outcomes.

Meanings refer to the symbolic frameworks—the stories, values, ideologies, and taken-for-granted assumptions—through which organizational members make sense of their experience. These meaning systems actively constitute what counts as reality within the organization. What is a problem? What counts as a solution? Who is credible? What matters? These are not questions answered by

objective facts but by shared interpretive frameworks that are themselves products of organizational history, culture, and power.

These three dimensions are not separate but deeply intertwined. Activities presuppose relationships; relationships are always interpreted through meaning systems; meaning systems are enacted and reproduced through activities. The organization is this dynamic, multi-layered pattern—a configuration that repeats similar structures at multiple scales, from the dyad to the department to the entire enterprise.

1.3.1 Formal and Informal Structures

The formal structure of an organization represents the intended or prescribed pattern—the organizational chart, the job descriptions, the reporting relationships, the standard operating procedures. This is the organization as designed, the blueprint for desired behavior. But actual organizational life never perfectly conforms to the blueprint. Alongside formal structure exists what organizational scholars call the *informal structure*—the emergent patterns of interaction, influence, and affiliation that arise spontaneously as people work together (Selznick, 1948).

Selznick observed that informal structures arise precisely because formal structures, however carefully designed, inevitably fail to specify all aspects of organizational behavior. Formal structures address the logic of formal administration while leaving untouched the non-rational dimensions of organizational behavior. People bring to organizations their whole selves—their personal histories, their social identities, their needs for affiliation and recognition, their trust relationships, and their political interests—and these inevitably generate patterns of interaction that the formal structure neither prescribes nor fully captures.

Informal structures are not merely deviations from formal design; they are essential to organizational functioning. They provide flexibility, speed, and social integration that formal systems alone cannot deliver. Information travels through informal networks far more rapidly than through official channels. Problems get solved not by following procedure but by knowing whom to ask. Trust gets built not through contracts but through shared experience and mutual accommodation. As Krackhardt and Hanson (1993) observed, informal networks function as the organization's central nervous system-invisible but indispensable, carrying signals that keep the organism alive and responsive.

Brass et al. (2004) argue that formal structure should be understood as an *antecedent* of informal networks: the formal organization creates the conditions-the proximity, the interdependence, the role obligations-from which informal relationships emerge. But informal networks, once formed, exert their own influence on the formal structure, shaping how authority is exercised, which decisions are actually implemented, and how formal roles are interpreted in practice. This recursive relationship between the designed and the emergent is central to understanding organizational dynamics.

1.3.2 Structure, Agency, and Giddens's Theory of Structuration

The relationship between organizational structure and individual action-between the patterns that constrain and enable behavior and the choices that individuals make within those patterns-is among the most fundamental questions in social theory. It is the *structure-agency problem*, and it runs through virtually every debate in organizational theory.

Anthony Giddens's (1984) structuration theory offers the most influential contemporary framework for understanding this relationship. For Giddens, structure and agency are not opposing forces but mutually constitutive elements of social practice. Structure-the rules and resources that organizations deploy-exists not as a fixed external constraint but as something that agents draw on in the course of social action and that is reproduced or transformed through that action. Giddens describes this as the "*duality of structure*": structure is simultaneously the medium through which social action takes place and the outcome of that action.

This means that organizational structures do not simply constrain individual behavior; they also enable it. The reporting relationships, the formal channels, the procedural rules of an organization give its members the cognitive and social resources they need to orient themselves, to coordinate with others, and to accomplish organizational tasks. But members do not simply receive these structures passively: they interpret them, adapt them, sometimes comply with them, sometimes circumvent them, and through these ongoing practices, reproduce or gradually transform the structural configurations within which they work.

Giddens's framework has important implications for the study of organizational networks. If structures are reproduced through practices, then the communication patterns through which organizational members interact-including the advice-seeking behaviors and network relationships that are the empirical focus of this book-are not simply reflections of a pre-existing structure but are themselves structural practices. The advice network in an organization is not a shadow cast by the formal hierarchy; it is a communicative practice through which organizational structure is continuously enacted and renegotiated.

1.3.3 Relational Sociology and the Primacy of Relations

The relational turn in sociology, gathering momentum from the early 1990s onward, offered a distinctive alternative to both structural-functional emphasis on fixed positions and the individualist emphases of much organizational psychology. Emirbayer's (1997) manifesto for a relational sociology identified the foundational theoretical choice as that between *substantialism*-which treats social reality as composed of fixed, pre-given entities (individuals, organizations, social structures)-and *relationism*-which treats social reality as constituted through ongoing relations and transactions.

For relational sociologists, the individual, the role, and the organization are not pre-given substances that then enter into relations; they are relational effects-identities and positions that are constituted through patterns of relationship. To understand an organizational actor-including a leader, a follower, or an advice-seeker-is to understand the relational configuration in which they are embedded, not merely the attributes they individually possess.

Donati (2011, 2018), one of the most systematic theorists of the relational approach, argues that society "*is relation*" rather than merely "*having relations*"-that the social fabric is constituted by the tissue of relations rather than being a container within which relations occur. This commitment has concrete methodological implications: the unit of analysis, for relational sociologists, is not the individual actor or the abstract structure but the relation itself-the actual pattern of interaction, exchange, and communication through which social life is produced and reproduced.

Jan Fuhse (2009, 2022), bringing relational sociology into productive engagement with social network analysis, argues that social networks are not merely formal structures of ties and nodes but meaning-laden

social realities. The ties that constitute a network carry expectations, identities, and cultural meanings; network structure both reflects and shapes the symbolic frameworks through which organizational members interpret their situation and relationships. Understanding the advice networks at the heart of this book therefore requires attending not only to the formal properties of network structure—who is connected to whom—but to the meanings those connections carry for the actors involved.

1.4 Structure and Power: A Pathway to Leadership

No analysis of organizational structure can avoid the question of power. Structures do not emerge from neutral processes of rational design; they reflect, embed, and reproduce particular distributions of power, interest, and advantage. To understand why an organization is structured as it is—who reports to whom, whose knowledge counts, who has access to whom, whose voice is heard—is, in significant measure, to understand the political history of the organization and the interests that its structural arrangements serve.

1.4.1 Power in Classical and Critical Organizational Theory

In the classical tradition, organizational power was largely identified with formal authority: the legitimate right, derived from hierarchical position, to direct the actions of others and command compliance. Weber's (1922/1978) analysis of authority—distinguishing traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal forms—treated formal authority as the primary mechanism of organizational coordination. Within the bureaucratic structure that Weber regarded as the defining institutional form of modernity, power was principally a property of position: those in higher positions had more authority over those below, and this authority was legitimate by virtue of the formal rules that defined the positions.

Critical organizational theorists fundamentally challenged this formulation. For theorists working within Marxist, feminist, and Foucauldian frameworks, organizational power was not a neutral resource that formal authority merely distributed; it was a mechanism of social reproduction—a means by which particular interests (those of capital, of management, of dominant social groups) were advanced at the expense of others. The apparently neutral, technical, and procedural character of formal organizational authority—its claim to rationality and impartiality—was itself an ideological achievement: a way of making arrangements that served particular interests appear natural, inevitable, and fair.

Foucault's (1977, 1980) analysis of power-knowledge offered particularly influential resources for critical organizational theory. For Foucault, power operates not only through formal structures of domination but through the discourses, practices, and knowledge systems that define what counts as legitimate, rational, and normal within a given institutional context. Organizational power, on this analysis, is everywhere and nowhere in particular: it operates through the performance appraisal system that defines what counts as good performance, through the communication protocols that determine whose contributions are audible in meetings, through the informal norms that govern who has the right to speak, to how much space, and with what authority.

1.4.2 Informal Power and Network Centrality

If formal power derives from hierarchical position, informal power derives from network position. This insight—foundational to the social network analysis perspective that anchors this book—suggests that influence in organizations is not coextensive with formal authority. An individual who sits at a structurally advantageous position in the informal network—who serves as a broker connecting otherwise