



The Influence of Older Subordinates on Young Managers' Leadership Style: A

Literature Review

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Abstract

This study explores how older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers. Using a structured literature review of 19 studies published between 1995 and 2025, this study examines under what conditions and through which mechanisms such informal upward influence can occur. The study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange Theory, which together can provide a relational lens to understand this informal upward influence. The findings identify four recurring mechanisms: informal mentorship, high-quality relationships, perceived credibility, and organizational context. Influence was strongest when older subordinates were seen as competent and trustworthy, when the relationship was based on mutual respect and when the work environment allowed for open communication and psychological safety. Influence appeared more likely when older subordinates were perceived as competent, when trust-based relationships existed and when the organizational climate encouraged open communication. While the findings do not confirm a general pattern, they suggest that leadership in age-inverse teams can be shaped by relational dynamics rather than formal authority alone. This perspective can offer a useful extension to current leadership theories and provide direction for leadership development and HR practices in multigenerational teams.

Keywords: *informal influence, leadership style, older subordinates, young managers, social exchange theory, leader-member exchange theory*

Introduction

Demographic shifts in the workforce have led to increasingly multigenerational organizations, where young managers can be responsible for supervising older subordinates (Kooij et al., 2011). As young professionals move into management roles earlier in their careers, they can find themselves managing older subordinates with considerably more institutional knowledge (Kunze & Menges, 2016). This switch in career progress challenges traditional leadership models that emphasize top-down influence. Leadership processes, however, have long been understood as reciprocal and relational, shaped by both managers and subordinates (DeRue & Ashford, 2017). Influence can flow upward, particularly when high-quality relationships allow older subordinates to informally shape the behavior and decisions of their young managers (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Leadership models such as transformational and transactional leadership have traditionally emphasized how leaders shape the behavior and motivation of their subordinates through direction and reinforcement (Bass, 1985). These models are primarily concerned with the actions of leaders and how they influence subordinates from the top down. In contrast, more recent approaches, such as authentic leadership, shift attention toward mutual influence, relational transparency and the development of trust between leader and follower (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). This growing recognition of bidirectional influence opens space for examining how older subordinates actively shape the leadership behavior of young managers.

Older subordinates can possess extensive institutional knowledge, professional credibility and familiarity with organizational dynamics, which positions them to influence their young managers in meaningful ways (Kunze et al., 2010). One key form of this influence is through informal mentorship (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). By offering guidance, contextual insight and support, older subordinates can help young managers

navigate unfamiliar challenges and avoid early mistakes (Cohen & Bradford, 2005). In other cases, their influence may take the form of critical input or resistance when proposed changes challenge established practices. This kind of engagement, whether supportive or oppositional, stems from the informal authority older subordinates often carry based on their experience, tenure and perceived reliability (Oedzes et al., 2018). This can result in a shift in how young managers lead, such as adapting their leadership style, involving older subordinates in decision-making (Kunze & Menges, 2016). When these dynamics are positive, they can strengthen the working relationship between the manager and the older subordinate, which can support more thoughtful leadership behavior and improved decision-making (Randel et al., 2016). When negative or unbalanced, these dynamics may result in resistance from older subordinates, leading to reduced communication or uncertainty experienced by young managers in their leadership role (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

This study focuses on how older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers, “Leadership style may be defined as a pattern of emphases, indexed by the frequency or intensity of specific leadership behaviors or attitudes, which a leader places on the different leadership functions” (Casimir, 2001, p. 246). In other words, patterns of behavior managers use in interacting with subordinates. Such as how they make decisions, communicate and involve others. The goal of this study is to synthesize findings from existing empirical literature to understand under what conditions and through which mechanisms this informal influence takes place.

In this study, older subordinates refers to employees who are significantly older than their manager, often by 10 years or more, and who typically possess greater work experience or organizational tenure (Kooij et al., 2011; Kunze & Menges, 2016; Kunze et al., 2010; Ng & Feldman, 2012) . Young managers are defined as individuals under the age of 35 who are in the early stages of their careers and hold formal authority over older subordinates (DeRue

& Ashford, 2017; Kooij et al., 2011). While age and experience are distinct, age difference serves as the primary indicator of this relational dynamic. This phenomenon raises the key question: *How do older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers?*

To investigate this question, this study conducts a structured literature review, combining empirical and theoretical insights from peer-reviewed studies in leadership and organizational behavior. The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding how leadership is shaped not only from the top down but also from the bottom up, particularly in age-diverse teams where young managers lead older subordinates.

Theoretical Framework

Informal Influence

Across the literature, leadership style can be defined as the consistent patterns of behavior that leaders display when interacting with subordinates, including how they make decisions, communicate, provide feedback and involve subordinates (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Bass, 1985). Leadership styles are commonly classified into categories such as transformational, transactional and authentic leadership. These styles influence not only managerial effectiveness but also how subordinates respond and contribute to leadership processes.

Across the literature, young managers can be defined as individuals who hold formal leadership roles within the early stages of their careers, typically within the first ten years of professional experience (Kunze & Menges, 2016; Ng & Feldman, 2012). These managers can be tasked with leading teams that include older and more experienced subordinates. This reversed age dynamic can introduce challenges related to authority, legitimacy and leadership confidence, particularly when young managers must assert control in the presence of subordinates with greater tenure and institutional knowledge (Kunze & Menges, 2016).

While formal leadership roles grant authority, they do not automatically generate influence. Influence can stem from relational dynamics and informal interactions rather than just formal position (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Formal roles are those explicitly granted by organizational structure and carry defined authority, whereas informal roles can stem from personal attributes such as credibility, tenure and perceived expertise (Bauer & Green, 1996; Blau, 1964). Consequently, older subordinates can hold greater informal influence than young managers due to their longer tenure and accumulated knowledge, which can shape workplace interactions and decision-making beyond formal hierarchies (Kunze & Menges, 2016). Studies suggest that older subordinates can be seen as informal leaders by peers and even by supervisors, particularly when their expertise is relevant to key decisions (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2012). This phenomenon can be especially pronounced in knowledge-intensive or change-oriented environments, where organizational memory and historical context carry weight (Thompson & Vecchio, 2009).

Older subordinates can influence young managers in at least three key ways. First, they may act as informal mentors, helping young managers navigate organizational norms, offering advice and even protecting them from early mistakes (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). Second, older subordinates can resist or question leadership decisions, particularly when proposed changes challenge longstanding practices or violate perceived norms (Ng & Feldman, 2012). Third, older subordinates can influence how other subordinates respond to a young manager's decisions, either reinforcing or challenging those decisions (Topa et al., 2022). This influence can be shaped by the quality of the relationship between the older subordinate and the manager, as well as the perceived fairness of the manager's behavior (Topa et al., 2022). These subtle forms of informal influence can significantly impact leadership effectiveness by shaping decision-making quality and team performance (Oedzes et al., 2018). They can also affect how managers are perceived by subordinates and peers,

influencing their credibility, acceptance and authority within the organization (Oedzes et al., 2018).

Research on employee voice shows that older subordinates can be more likely to speak up when they perceive psychological safety and feel that their input is valued (Morrison, 2011). This voice is important because it can enable older subordinates to share their expertise, influence decision-making and contribute to improved organizational outcomes, thereby supporting more effective leadership (Detert & Burris, 2007). In the context of young managers, such upward communication can influence leadership behavior by encouraging reconsideration of decisions or a change toward more participative styles (Detert & Burris, 2007). Conversely, when these conditions are absent, older subordinates may withhold information or disengage, which can restrict the manager's access to valuable insights and can encourage a more directive and less participative leadership style focused on task completion rather than collaboration (Morrison, 2011). When managers respond constructively to input, it can foster stronger working relationships, increase trust and can lead to greater reliance on the subordinate's expertise (Detert & Burris, 2007), ultimately shaping how leadership is enacted.

To analyze this relationship, the theoretical framework draws on two well-established approaches: Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These theories were selected because they are widely used to explain interpersonal influence within hierarchical relationships. Social Exchange Theory provides insight into why older subordinates may expect informal influence in return for their knowledge, loyalty or support. Leader-Member Exchange Theory complements this by explaining how relationship quality can affect the degree of influence subordinates can exert. Both theories have been extensively applied in leadership research, particularly in contexts where formal authority is imbalanced but relational dynamics are central (Bauer & Green,

1996; DeRue & Ashford, 2017). Their combined explanatory power can make them suitable for understanding how influence from older subordinates can shape the leadership behavior of young managers.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a framework for understanding how influence flows in relationships marked by interactions and mutual expectations. Blau (1964) argued that workplace relationships are based on a system of reciprocation. When one party provides value, such as advice, support or loyalty, they typically expect to receive something in return. This may come in the form of recognition for their contributions, interpersonal respect or material rewards such as pay (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In the context of young managers and older subordinates, SET can help explain why older subordinates may expect influence in return for their continued engagement and knowledge sharing (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

When these expectations are met, trust can grow and cooperation can improve. When these expectations are violated, disengagement or resistance can follow (Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). Subordinates who feel they are treated fairly by their supervisors may show higher commitment, job satisfaction and citizenship behavior (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Conversely, older subordinates who feel that their contributions are overlooked despite years of service can react negatively (Kunze & Menges, 2016). This perceived fairness can undermine leadership legitimacy, particularly in cases where the manager is younger and less experienced (Ng & Feldman, 2012).

SET shows that influence is not purely hierarchical. Instead, it is created from the ongoing balance or as previously mentioned, reciprocity. Within the framework of SET, older subordinates who provide sustained support or knowledge may develop expectations of

informal reciprocity, such as being consulted or included in leadership decisions (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). These exchanges can influence how leadership styles develop, particularly when the manager is still forming their leadership identity (DeRue & Ashford, 2017).

Leader-Member Exchange Theory

Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) focuses on the quality of the relationship between a manager and subordinates. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995), not all leader-member relationships are equal. High-quality relationships are built on trust, mutual respect and open communication. In contrast, low-quality relationships tend to be transactional, meaning that interactions are based on formal obligations and exchanges rather than trust or mutual investment and are limited to formal role expectations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995).

Older subordinates, due to their greater experience and institutional knowledge, may form high-quality relationships with managers more easily than less experienced colleagues (Bauer & Green, 1996). Their familiarity with workplace norms and expectations may help them navigate interactions with young managers more effectively, fostering trust and communication. This can give them greater access to the manager's time, resources and the decision-making process (Willie, 2025). Erdogan and Bauer (2015) further note that subordinates in high-quality relationships are more likely to influence organizational strategy, especially when the manager views them as valuable advisors.

In the case of young managers, high-quality relationships with older subordinates may lead to increased reliance on their input (Bauer & Green, 1996). This can shape leadership style in several ways, it can encourage a more collaborative approach, it can delay decision-making due to increased consultation or alter strategic direction based on older subordinates' preferences (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). While this can benefit cohesion among

subordinates, it may also object innovation or necessary change if the older subordinates' views are overly conservative (Schipper et al., 2007).

LMX theory accounts for differences in how older subordinates influence young managers by focusing on relationship quality. Older subordinates in strong leader–member relationships tend to exert more informal influence than those in weaker relationships (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Not all older subordinates can influence their young managers equally. The extent of influence depends on the quality of the relationship and the manager's openness to input. High-quality LMX relationships are associated with more favorable leadership outcomes and can get greater responsiveness to subordinate behavior (Bauer & Green, 1996; Watson et al, 1998).

Integrating SET and LMX

SET and LMX together can help in understanding the informal influence that older subordinates can exert on young managers. SET can explain that older subordinates who offer valuable contributions may come to expect reciprocity (Bauer & Green, 1996). These contributions can include guidance, support or organizational knowledge. In return, subordinates may anticipate respect, involvement in decisions or a stronger voice in the workplace (Blau, 1964, Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). LMX complements this by explaining how such expectations may be realized through high-quality relationships built on trust, mutual respect and open communication (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). These interpersonal dynamics do not grant formal power, but they can create meaningful access to a manager's discretion and influence leadership behavior (Randel et al, 2016). Taken together, SET and LMX can clarify how informal influence can emerge in age-reversed hierarchies, where older subordinates contribute significantly despite lacking formal authority (Oedzes et al., 2018).

Methods

To answer the research question, a literature review was conducted. The study focuses on incorporating empirical findings that are relevant to a specific organizational issue, in this case, the influence of older subordinates' on the leadership style of young managers.

The literature was collected using Google Scholar and WorldCat, Tilburg University's academic search engine. These platforms were chosen because they provide access to a wide range of peer-reviewed scientific articles in the domain of management, organizational behavior and human resource studies.

Because this study is guided by SET and LMX, the scope of the literature was restricted to studies published from 1995 onward. This boundary was chosen for two main reasons. First, although the conceptual roots of SET lie in Blau (1964), its empirical application in organizational context gained momentum in the mid-1990s. This period marked the emergence of structured research into reciprocity and perceived fairness in hierarchical relationships. The widely cited review by Cropanzano and Mitchell (2005) later consolidated this trend, confirming the relevance of SET in leadership and HR research. Second, LMX was formalized into its current relational model by Graen and Uhl-Bien in 1995. Earlier LMX research focused on role-making without a consistent theoretical framework. Starting from 1995 ensures that the study includes modern, empirically grounded applications of both theories and maintains relevance to current leadership dynamics.

The search process was guided by three core constructs derived from the research question: older subordinates, young managers and leadership style. These constructs were complemented by two theoretical concepts: SET and LMX. Each construct was translated into relevant keywords, refined through preliminary literature exploration. Various combinations of these keywords were used to maximize the coverage of relevant academic sources. The final list of constructs and their corresponding keywords is presented in Table 1.

Table 1*Keywords and Constructs*

Construct	Keywords
Older subordinates	Older workers, older employee, older follower,
Young managers	Young leader, young manager, young supervisor
Leadership style	Management style, decision-making behaviour, delegation style, adaptation, authority style, informal
Social exchange theory	SET, bottom-up influence, reciprocity
Leader-member exchange theory	LMX, relationship quality

The literature search was conducted using Google Scholar and WorldCat, two widely used academic databases offering extensive coverage in the fields of management, organizational behavior and human resource studies. To maintain consistency and feasibility, each keyword combination was limited to the first 50 search results per database, which were screened based on title and abstract. This method ensured a manageable selection scope while maintaining relevance, as results in Google Scholar are generally ranked by keyword match and citation frequency, increasing the likelihood of identifying influential and thematically appropriate studies.

After removing duplicates and excluding irrelevant sources, 45 articles were selected for full-text screening. These articles were then assessed against the following inclusion criteria: (1) the article was written in English or Dutch, (2) it was published in 1995 or later, (3) it addressed the influence of older subordinates on young managers, age-related

leadership dynamics or upward influence in organizations, (4) the article was peer-reviewed and published in a scientific journal, (5) the study was situated in an organizational or business context and (6) the article was empirical or offered a theoretical framework relevant to informal influence, leadership or intergenerational dynamics. Although preference was given to studies using LMX, SET or both, other empirical studies contributing to the understanding of informal influence, leadership behavior or intergenerational dynamics were included when they added theoretical or practical value.

Following the application of these criteria, 19 articles were included for the final analysis. For each included study, relevant information was extracted, including author(s), year of publication, sector/population, design/sample size and key findings.

Sample

The final sample consisted of 19 studies that met all predefined inclusion criteria. Of these, seven were conceptual or theoretical contributions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cohen & Bradford, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Morrison, 2011), offering foundational insights into leadership dynamics, influence processes, and the subordinates' role. Three additional sources were meta-analyses (Kooij et al., 2011; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Schippers et al., 2003), which synthesized empirical findings related to age, motivation and team behavior. The remaining nine studies were empirical, including five longitudinal designs (Bauer & Green, 1996; Detert & Burris, 2007; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Watson et al., 1998) and four cross-sectional or experimental studies (Kunze et al., 2010; Kunze & Menges, 2016; Oedzes et al., 2018; Randel et al., 2016).

Across these studies, four explicitly used SET as a guiding framework (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Ng & Feldman, 2012) and five were

grounded in LMX (Bauer & Green, 1996; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Randel et al., 2016; Deluga, 1998), reflecting its relevance to leader–subordinate relationships. While not all studies were explicitly framed by SET or LMX, their findings contributed to the interpretation of informal influence processes within age-diverse leadership structures.

Results

Core Constructs

To understand how older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers, the reviewed literature consistently uses three core concepts: older subordinates, young managers and leadership style. This section outlines how these terms are defined across the included studies.

In five of the 19 reviewed studies, older subordinates are defined based on a combination of chronological age and greater professional experience or tenure compared to their manager (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Kooij et al., 2011; Kunze & Menges, 2016; Kunze et al., 2010). These studies typically operationalize the age gap as 10 years or more. In some cases, older subordinates are also described as possessing more institutional knowledge or historical familiarity with organizational practices, contributing to their informal status within the organization (Kooij et al., 2011; Kunze et al., 2010).

Young managers are defined in four studies as individuals in early stages of their career, usually under the age of 35 or within their first ten years of full-time employment (DeRue & Ashford, 2017; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Kunze & Menges, 2016; Kunze et al., 2010). These studies focus on the dynamic that can arise when young managers lead older subordinates, often using terms such as reversed age dynamics or age-inverse leadership to describe this organizational configuration (Kunze & Menges, 2016; schippers et al., 2007).

Definitions emphasize the mismatch between formal authority and informal status, with older subordinates sometimes perceived as more experienced or credible than the young manager.

In six studies, leadership style is defined as the consistent behavioral patterns leaders use when interacting with subordinates, including how they communicate, make decisions, delegate tasks and involve others in shaping direction (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2017; Detert & Burris, 2007; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Kunze & Menges, 2016). Some of these studies use broader models, such as participative or transformational leadership, while others focus on behavioral traits linked to openness, consultation or inclusiveness. Leadership style can be treated as fluid and responsive to contextual factors, such as the age or perceived competence of subordinates.

Forms of influence

Older subordinates can influence young managers through several behaviors, including informal mentorship and onboarding support (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013), guidance based on organizational knowledge (Cohen & Bradford, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013), resistance to leadership decisions (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Topa et al., 2022) and shaping communication tone and team dynamics (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Watson et al., 1998).

Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2013) and Erdogan and Bauer (2015) describe how older subordinates can provide onboarding support and informal mentoring. Helping young managers navigate team dynamics, social expectations and informal routines. These contributions can be more impactful within high-quality LMX relationships, where trust and mutual respect foster openness to upward input (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). From a SET perspective, such mentoring reflects a form of social investment, whereby older subordinates expect recognition, respect or involvement in return for their support (Cohen & Bradford, 2005; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Additional influence can occur when older subordinates share institutional memory or organizational insight, helping managers avoid pitfalls and align with unspoken expectations (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Cohen & Bradford, 2005). Morrison (2011) adds that voice behavior is often shaped by psychological safety and perceived receptiveness of managers, indicating that older subordinates speak up selectively, depending on relational cues and context.

Resistance can be another form of influence. Ng and Feldman (2012) and Topa et al. (2022) report that older subordinates who feel overlooked may withdraw, challenge decisions or subtly resist leadership authority. These reactions are framed within SET as responses to imbalanced or violated exchange relationships. DeRue and Ashford (2010) further emphasize that leadership is not just assigned but also earned, meaning that failure to gain informal influence from older subordinates may constrain a manager's ability to lead effectively.

Communication tone and mutual engagement may reflect influence. Epitropaki and Martin (2005) and Watson et al. (1998) show that strong LMX relationships can foster open communication and shared understanding. Schippers et al. (2003) add that team reflexivity, the extent to which subordinates discuss and adapt processes, can be key to constructive leadership development, particularly in age-diverse teams.

Finally, indirect influence can occur through the social standing of older subordinates. Cohen and Bradford (2005) and Kunze and Menges (2016) show that well-respected older subordinates affect how others respond to young managers, either strengthening or undermining their authority. These relational dynamics may prompt young managers to adjust their leadership approach over time.

Conditions for influence

While older subordinates may engage in mentoring, providing guidance or offering input, these behaviors can only translate into actual influence under certain conditions. Across the 19 reviewed studies, four recurring conditions shape whether informal influence emerges and is accepted: organizational context, relationship quality, perceived credibility and the presence of mentoring opportunities.

Organizational context was discussed in seven studies. It can play a substantial role in enabling or limiting influence. Organizational context can shape whether older subordinates exert influence on young managers. In psychologically safe environments, subordinates are more willing to voice concerns, increasing the likelihood that their input is heard and acted upon (Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison, 2011). When organizations promote inclusion and respect for tenure, older subordinates can be viewed as credible contributors (Kunze et al., 2010; Ng & Feldman, 2012). These structural features may help reduce the impact of age-based barriers. Oedzes et al. (2018) show that in unstructured environments or under weak formal leadership, older subordinates may temporarily step into leadership roles. In such settings, organizational slack creates space for informal authority. Similarly, DeRue and Ashford (2010) emphasize that leadership can be shaped by social negotiation within the organizational structure, not just formal roles (Topa et al., 2022). Together, these studies indicate that organizational climates that promote psychological safety, respect for experience and tolerance for informal role shifts can be more likely to enable older subordinates to influence leadership behavior.

Relationship quality was emphasized in six studies. High-quality LMX relationships, built on trust, mutual respect and reciprocity, can increase the likelihood that young managers accept input from older subordinates (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). Strong relational bonds can foster consultation and behavioral adjustment (Bauer & Green, 1996; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015). Watson et al. (1998) find that older subordinates in

such relationships may be consulted on decision-making more frequently. Kooij et al. (2011) and Kunze and Menges (2016) support the idea that respectful engagement can enable influence in age-diverse teams.

Credibility was named as a condition in six studies. While age and tenure can contribute to perceptions of credibility, they are not sufficient on their own (Ng & Feldman, 2012). What can matter is how competence and reliability are perceived by young managers. Randel et al. (2016) found that credible subordinates may be more likely to be involved in decision-making processes. Ng and Feldman (2012) show that stereotypes can diminish credibility, even among highly experienced subordinates. Kunze and Menges (2016) add that emotional expressions, such as frustration or empathy, can influence whether a young manager sees an older subordinate as a legitimate and trustworthy contributor. Cohen and Bradford (2005) underline that informal influence can depend more on perceived value than on formal position. Epitropaki and Martin (2005) and Watson et al. (1998) show that perceived trustworthiness and reliability can be central in determining whether older subordinates are consulted and granted influence in leadership settings.

Mentoring opportunities were highlighted in four studies. These opportunities often arise when young managers are new to the organization or role. In such cases, older subordinates can fill knowledge gaps by offering onboarding support, cultural guidance or informal feedback (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cohen & Bradford, 2005; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). These forms of mentoring were found to be most impactful when trust-based relationships allowed for reciprocal learning and informal exchange (Erdogan & Bauer, 2015).

Discussion

This study set out to answer the question: *How do older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers?* The findings show that older subordinates can shape leadership style through informal behaviors such as mentoring, offering guidance, resisting decisions and influencing communication patterns. These behaviors are most effective when certain conditions are present, including high-quality relationships, perceived credibility and an organizational context that supports open communication. Rather than applying a fixed leadership style, young managers adapted their behavior in response to ongoing interactions with older subordinates. This underscores the relational nature of leadership development in age-inverse hierarchies, where traditional authority structures are reversed.

Informal mentoring emerged as a possible influence behavior, particularly in the early months of a young manager's tenure when uncertainty and adjustment are high. In these moments, guidance from experienced subordinates can help build confidence and shape initial leadership behavior (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Rather than relying solely on formal mentoring structures, informal support from older subordinates can play a key role in shaping how young leaders grow into their role (Allen et al., 2004; Ely et al., 2012). This suggests that leadership development processes could be more attentive to the informal dynamics that occur in age-diverse teams.

Relationship quality also played a central role. Consistent with LMX theory, strong trust-based relationships can enable older subordinates to shape leadership behavior through consultation and feedback (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Older subordinates can actively influence the quality of the relationship, for example by initiating supportive behaviors or voicing constructive input (Randel et al., 2016). This challenges the traditional directionality assumed in LMX research and calls for more attention to upward dynamics. In addition,

boundary conditions such as psychological safety and voice climate may moderate the extent to which relational trust leads to actual influence (Edmondson & Lei, 2014)

Credibility can also enable influence. Young managers can be more receptive to input from older subordinates perceived as competent and dependable (Posthuma & Campion, 2009). However, this credibility is not determined by age or tenure alone, but shaped by how subordinates can be perceived in daily interactions and relational exchanges (Randel et al., 2016; Cohen & Bradford, 2005). Negative age-based stereotypes can undermine this perception, reducing the likelihood that older subordinates are seen as capable contributors (Ng & Feldman, 2012). This aligns with the stereotype content model, which suggests that older workers can be viewed as warm but less competent (Fiske et al., 2002), limiting their influence even when trust is present.

Organizational context further moderated influence. Supportive climates that value voice and inclusion can enhance the ability of older subordinates to contribute (Morrison, 2011; Nishii, 2012). Conversely, in settings with age bias or hierarchical rigidity, older workers were less likely to speak up. This supports Oc's (2018) argument that leadership can be understood as embedded in structural and cultural systems, not just individual traits. Although these mechanisms of influence were visible across studies, influence was not uniform. Some studies (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012) described stabilizing effects of mentoring, while others (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Topa et al., 2022) reported resistance or tension when subordinates felt undervalued. These inconsistencies align with broader research showing that older workers are viewed stereotypically as loyal but less innovative (North & Fiske, 2015).

This study applied SET and LMX theory to interpret the findings. SET highlights how older subordinates may expect reciprocity for their support and knowledge (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When this is not met, trust can vanish and influence may decline

(Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007). LMX theory provided insight into how trust and mutual respect shape influence, but it may need refinement to account for upward dynamics, especially in reversed age hierarchies.

Limitations

Several limitations were present across the 19 reviewed studies. First, seven studies were conceptual contributions, offering important frameworks on leadership, voice and influence (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Cohen & Bradford, 2005; Coyle-Shapiro, 2002; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Morrison, 2011). While these offered valuable theoretical frameworks and conceptual understandings on leadership, voice and influence, they did not present original empirical data.

Three studies were meta-analyses or literature reviews (Kooij et al., 2011; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Schippers et al., 2003). While these summarize broad patterns and offer conceptual clarity, they do not contribute new empirical observations specific to the research question.

Of the remaining nine empirical studies, five used longitudinal designs (Bauer & Green, 1996; Detert & Burris, 2007; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Watson et al., 1998), which allows for stronger inference regarding the development of leadership style over time. However, most of these timeframes were still limited to a few months, leaving open questions about long-term evolution of leadership style.

The remaining four studies used cross-sectional designs (Kunze & Menges, 2016; Kunze et al., 2010; Oedzes et al., 2018; Randel et al., 2016). The latter was based on a series of experimental lab studies, which offer control and precision but limit ecological validity. Overall, the reliance on survey-based and short-term research restricts understanding of how informal influence can develop, persist or change over time.

Moreover, no qualitative studies were included in the final sample. This limits insight into how influence is subjectively perceived, interpreted and negotiated by young managers and older subordinates.

Finally, although five of the reviewed studies used longitudinal designs (Bauer & Green, 1996; Detert & Burris, 2007; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Watson et al., 1998), most were limited to short or medium timeframes. As a result, it remains unclear whether influence mechanisms observed early in a manager's tenure persist, evolve or diminish over time.

Future research

building on the limitations and findings of this study, several directions for future research can be identified. First, more longitudinal research is needed to trace how influence from older subordinates develops over time. Of the empirical studies included, only five adopted a longitudinal approach (Bauer & Green, 1996; Detert & Burris, 2007; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Watson et al., 1998), and even these were limited in duration. Future research could examine how leadership styles evolve across the first year of a manager's tenure, particularly in response to repeated interactions with older subordinates. This could illuminate whether early dynamics persist or change as trust, expectations and organizational pressures shift. Such research would be especially valuable, as early tenure is often when leadership identity is most shapeable and young managers are most susceptible to influence (McCarron et al., 2023). Understanding how these early interactions shape long-term leadership behavior can help organizations better time and tailor their leadership development efforts (Cotrim & Gomes, 2024).

Second, qualitative methods remain absent from the literature. None of the included sources used qualitative data to directly explore influence processes. Future research could

use interviews or observational techniques to offer deeper insights into how credibility, voice and leadership style are experienced and interpreted in real-world settings. Such methods are particularly useful for exploring how older subordinates and young managers make sense of their roles, how informal authority is negotiated and how subtle social cues shape leadership behavior over time (Bryman et al., 1996).

Finally, gender remains an overlooked aspect in the reviewed literature, even though it might play a critical role in how credibility and influence are assigned. Research shows that women in leadership roles often face stereotypes that can affect how their input is received, especially in situations where authority is already contested due to age differences (Eagly & Karau, 2002). These biases may influence how older female subordinates are perceived by young (fe)male managers, potentially limiting the acceptance of their contributions. Moreover, studies suggest that women are more often expected to show supportive behavior, which may alter how their influence is interpreted (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Exploring how gender affects the interaction between older subordinates and young managers could help clarify how leadership influence is shaped by broader social expectations.

Implications

The findings of this study have several practical implications for young managers, HR professionals and leadership development practitioners. While older subordinates are often evaluated in terms of performance or tenure (Posthuma & Campion, 2009), this study shows that they can also play a key role in shaping the leadership behavior of young managers. Recognizing and supporting this dynamic could enhance leadership development by encouraging young managers to engage in more reflective and adaptive leadership practices (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). It may also reduce generational tension by fostering mutual respect and open dialogue between age-diverse subordinates. Additionally, team functioning

could improve when older subordinates are actively involved in decision-making or mentorship roles, as their experience and institutional knowledge contribute to more informed and cohesive leadership processes (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

First, young managers can be made aware of the informal influence that older subordinates may exert through credibility, experience and trust-based relationships. Several studies emphasized that this influence can be most effective when young managers were open to feedback and when older subordinates were perceived as credible (Ng & Feldman, 2012; Randel et al., 2016). Both interviews supported this: the first interviewee emphasized how early informal mentoring from an older subordinate helped him gain leadership confidence and navigate team dynamics. The second interviewee noted how involving older subordinates in decisions and explaining the rationale behind changes improved cooperation. These examples show that trust, open communication and early engagement can strengthen collaboration across age lines. Leadership development programs could therefore include guidance on navigating age-diverse teams and interpreting feedback.

HR professionals can actively support informal mentoring between older subordinates and young managers. Informal mentoring, particularly in the early months of a young manager's tenure, can support leadership adjustment and reduce imposter feelings (Ely et al., 2012). The interview with the team lead revealed that informal advice from an older subordinate provided emotional reassurance and technical guidance, which were crucial in shaping his leadership style. These insights align with research by Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2012) and Janssen et al. (2015), who highlight the unique value of informal mentoring in everyday work situations. HR departments could recognize and support such relationships without formalizing them too heavily, to keep their natural and trust-based character.

Third, the broader organizational context influences whether older subordinates feel empowered to speak up. Morrison (2011) found that environments characterized by

psychological safety were more likely to enable voice behavior among older subordinates, which in turn shaped how managers adapt their leadership. HR departments can focus on building climates that support voice, constructive feedback and mutual respect across subordinates. Without these conditions, even experienced subordinates may withdraw or remain silent (Nishii, 2012). In the interviews, both managers observed that resistance from older subordinates was reduced when changes were explained clearly and input was invited early. These findings support Oc's (2018) call for organizations to treat context not just as background, but as an active part of the leadership process. HR can support this by promoting inclusive team norms, ensuring age-diverse teams have equal voice and training managers in constructive dialogue across generational lines.

Lastly, this study highlights that age by itself, does not determine the degree of influence older subordinates exert. Instead, multiple studies emphasized the importance of relationship quality, mutual trust and demonstrated competence as more predictive factors in shaping leadership dynamics (Bauer & Green, 1996; Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Randel et al., 2016; Ng & Feldman, 2012; Erdogan & Bauer, 2015; Watson et al., 1998). Rather than relying on generalized perceptions linked to age, HR practices can benefit from evaluating informal leadership potential based on observed behavior and contribution. For example, the junior team lead described how only one of his older subordinates emerged as an informal mentor, offering consistent feedback and guidance, while others were less involved or resistant. This was not related to age or tenure alone, but to interpersonal dynamics and mutual respect. Similarly, leadership development programs may be more effective when they consider differences in how young managers engage with older subordinates (Day et al., 2014).

Conclusion

This study examined how older subordinates influence the leadership style of young managers. The findings from 19 peer-reviewed studies demonstrate that such influence is real and multi-layered. Four recurring mechanisms were identified: informal mentorship, high-quality relationships, perceived credibility and supportive organizational contexts. Influence was not based on age alone. Instead, it depended on how older subordinates were perceived, the relational quality between subordinate and manager, and whether the work environment supported open communication. Studies using SET and LMX showed that trust and reciprocity are key to understanding how leadership styles are shaped through these dynamics. Overall, the study underscores that leadership is a socially constructed process. Rather than emerging in isolation, young managers' leadership behaviors evolve through daily interactions with older subordinates. Understanding this process is crucial for improving leadership development and fostering effective multigenerational collaboration.

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Appendix A

Main aspects of reviewed literature

Author(s) & year published	Sector/population	Design/sample size	Key findings
Avolio & Gardner, 2005	Organizational context (focus on authentic leadership)	Conceptual paper	Proposes authentic leadership as a driver of sustainable performance through self-awareness, follower development and positive psychological traits. Emphasizes the role of organizational context.
Bauer & Green, 1996	New subordinates and managers in business organizations	Longitudinal study, subordinates n=205, supervisors n=112	Shows that subordinate performance and relational similarity influence LMX development, with high performers encouraging greater leader delegation.
Cohen & Bradford, 2005	Organizations without formal hierarchies	Practical conceptual model	Proposes influence strategies without authority through reciprocity.
Coyle-Shapiro & Shore, 2007	Organizational context	Conceptual paper	Identifies theoretical gaps in how reciprocity and agency are defined and offers recommendations for advancing EOR (employee-organisation relationships) theory.

Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005	Various organisational contexts.	Literature review	Clarifies foundational principles of Social Exchange Theory, addresses conceptual inconsistencies in its use and proposes future directions for applying SET in organizational contexts.
DeRue & Ashford, 2017	Various organizations	Conceptual article	Defines leadership as a socially constructed identity claimed and granted.
Detert & Burris, 2007	Large US restaurant chain	two-phase field study, subordinates n=3149, managers n=223	Managerial openness has a stronger and more consistent effect on employee voice than transformational leadership, largely by increasing psychological safety. Leadership influence is strongest among high-performing subordinates.
Epitropaki & Martin, 2005	Various organizations	Longitudinal study, n=439 subordinates surveyed in 2 time periods	subordinates who perceived alignment between their manager's traits and their own implicit leadership theories reported higher LMX quality, which indirectly improved commitment, satisfaction and well-being. Effects were consistent across most subgroups and supported a causal direction over time.
Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995	Various organisations	Theoretical review	Traces the development of LMX theory over 25 years, focusing on the centrality of

			leader–member relationship quality.
Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013	Organizational newcomers	14 wave longitudinal study, n=264 organizational newcomers	Shows that early support or undermining by supervisors predicts long-term outcomes for newcomers. Proactive behavior by subordinates mediates this relationship, highlighting the role of follower agency in shaping workplace integration and turnovers.
Kooij et al., 2011	Various organizational settings	Meta-analysis	Shows that older subordinates are more motivated by intrinsic and relational goals than by extrinsic rewards. These age-related shifts in work motives can influence how older subordinates engage with young managers, shaping relational dynamics and leadership expectations.
Kunze et al., 2010	128 companies across industries, organizational-level study on age diversity	Cross-sectional study, n=128 companies, n=8651 subordinates	Finds that higher age diversity within organizations is linked to perceived age discrimination, which undermines employee commitment and performance. Suggests that negative age-based climates may indirectly affect intergenerational leadership dynamics.

Kunze & Menges, 2016	German companies across industries, focus on inverse age dynamics between younger supervisors and older subordinates	Cross-sectional, n=7802 subordinates, n=175 top managers, n=61 HR directors	Finds that larger age gaps where young managers lead older subordinates increase negative emotions among subordinates, which relate to lower firm performance. This effect is mediated by emotional expression toward supervisors and neutralized when emotions are suppressed, suggesting that older subordinates can influence organizational outcomes through affective dynamics.
Morrison, 2011	Organizational behavior literature, focus on employee voice in workplace settings	Conceptual literature review, integrates findings from recent empirical and theoretical studies	Integrates literature on employee voice, emphasizing how subordinate decisions to speak up are shaped by leader openness, relational dynamics and perceived risk. Highlights how voice can function as a form of upward influence.
Ng & Feldman, 2012	Various organizational contexts across 418 empirical studies	Meta-analysis, N=208204 (208204 participants among 418 studies)	Finds that most negative stereotypes about older workers lack empirical support, except lower participation in training. Challenges assumptions about older subordinates and provides evidence supporting their potential to contribute meaningfully to workplace interactions and leadership dynamics.

Oedzes et al., 2018	Experimental and field settings in organizational teams	Three studies (lab experiment, longitudinal field study, and cross-sectional field survey)	Demonstrates that informal hierarchies emerge most strongly in complex tasks when formal leadership is weak. Suggests that in the absence of strong top-down leadership, subordinates can informally shape structure and influence team direction
Randel et al., 2016	subordinates from multiple organizations	Cross-sectional survey, n=377 subordinates (from 534 respondents)	Leader inclusiveness strengthens helping behaviors toward leaders and subordinates, especially in inclusive climates. Effects are strongest among women and minorities, suggesting potential for upward support from underrepresented subordinates.
Schippers et al., 2007	Teams from organizations and school management teams	Two-sample empirical study, n=59 teams (from 14 different organisations), n=59 school management teams	Develops and validates a scale to measure team reflexivity, identifying two key factors: evaluation/learning and discussing processes. Suggests that team-level reflection can support adaptation and performance, creating space for influence from experienced subordinates
Watson et al., 1998	Student task groups in a university setting	Two-sample longitudinal study; Sample 1: n=54 student teams, Sample 2: n=86	Diverse teams showed more self-oriented behaviors but initially outperformed non-diverse teams. Over time, non-diverse teams improved.

culturally diverse and non-diverse teams. Observed over three project phases	Findings suggest that shifting interpersonal behavior patterns in diverse teams may shape informal influence and the emergence of leadership roles
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Appendix B

First Interview

The first interview was conducted with a junior team lead at a major Dutch construction company. He has been working in this role for approximately one year and leads a team of data analysts that includes several older and more experienced professionals. During the interview, the challenges and adjustments involved in managing people who are both older and have more technical knowledge at the company were discussed.

Early in his role, he felt a clear gap in expertise. Older colleagues often had detailed insights into the company's computer systems and could quickly identify technical constraints or routine solutions. Rather than imposing authority, he chose to take a collaborative approach. He frequently initiated discussions and encouraged his older subordinates to offer input on both day-to-day tasks and broader decisions. According to him, this participative approach helped to build trust and improve team cohesion.

One older subordinate became an informal mentor. Though this mentoring was never officially established, the colleague regularly offered feedback and advice. This included technical guidance, suggestions for improving team communication and personal insights on how to deal with the latest problems. He saw this relationship as crucial in shaping his leadership confidence.

Despite the generally supportive environment, he also experienced resistance. Some

older subordinates pushed back against the adoption of new tools. In some cases, they expressed concerns directly, in others, they showed reluctance through passive behaviors such as slow adaptation or minimal engagement. He responded to this resistance by carefully explaining his decisions, offering space for feedback and piloting changes in small, reversible steps.

He highlighted the importance of respecting the experience of his older subordinates without losing sight of his leadership responsibilities and authority. Over time, he learned to balance listening with decision-making and found that consistency and transparency played key roles in building credibility. When older subordinates members understood the rationale behind a decision and felt involved in the process, they were more likely to support it, even if they initially had reservations.

He spoke about the learning curve he experienced when transitioning from university into his first full-time role as a team lead. Beyond the technical aspects of the job, he had to quickly adapt to the unwritten rules of workplace behavior and team dynamics, especially in a group with older, more experienced colleagues. He realized that textbook knowledge wasn't enough, credibility had to be built over time through consistent actions and openness to learning. This pushed him to stay reflective, seek informal feedback and gradually find his own way of leading within the professional culture of the organization.

Second Interview

The second interview was conducted with a 22-year-old store manager working at a large discount supermarket chain. He started at the company at age 16 and worked in several roles over the years, including as a shelf stocker, cashier and team leader, before being promoted to store manager last year. In his current role, he leads a team made up of both

younger and older subordinates.

He noted that being promoted into a leadership position changed his relationship with many colleagues, particularly the older ones. Some had previously supervised or trained him and now had to accept him as their manager. He explained that this transition was not always smooth. While many older subordinates respected his work ethic and progression, some found it difficult to adjust to his new role.

The manager observed that older subordinates often had well-formed ideas about how tasks should be done, based on their years of experience. This sometimes led to tension when he tried to streamline operations. Older workers occasionally questioned these changes openly or hesitated in implementation. He learned that communication was key. By explaining why changes were happening and involving older subordinates in planning, he reduced the amount of pushback and gained more cooperation.

One older colleague, who was responsible for training new staff, had an especially strong informal influence. His role in onboarding new subordinates meant that he shaped how norms and routines were passed on. The interviewee recognized this and actively engaged his subordinates in discussions about store policy and subordinate expectations. He found that this kind of collaboration made his leadership more effective.

Another challenge he faced was finding a balance between maintaining authority and staying approachable. Having worked in the company for such a long time, he was used to being part of the team. Now, he needed to set clear boundaries while still remaining 'friends'. He worked on being assertive without being rigid and took care to treat all subordinates with fairness and consistency.

Over time, he noticed improvements in how the older subordinates responded. Older subordinates became more supportive when they saw that their input was taken seriously. He emphasized the importance of giving clear instructions, providing regular feedback and

following through on promises. These practices helped him earn respect from subordinates across all age groups. In summary, the interview demonstrated that older subordinates influenced his leadership through their experience, feedback and informal authority. Their role was not only operational but cultural. As a result, the store manager adjusted his leadership to emphasize clear communication, early involvement and strategic relationship-building.