

# E-Mail and Face-to-Face Organizational Dissent as a Function of Leader-Member Exchange Status

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine whether leader-member exchange status (in-group vs. out-group) of employees explains differences in organizational dissent (i.e., articulated, latent, displaced) via e-mail as opposed to face-to-face. Participants were 166 full-time employees working in a variety of organizations. Results indicated that out-group employees were more likely to express articulated dissent through e-mail, whereas in-group employees were more likely to express articulated dissent in person. The results of this study suggest that the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship is important in determining how contradictory opinions are communicated in an upward manner via e-mail. Communicating these subordinate opinions in person to a supervisor, instead of sending an e-mail, may be indicative of a better working relationship. Furthermore, e-mail may be a positive venue for out-group employees, previously unwilling to question management, to dissent.

## Keywords

organizational dissent, leader-member exchange, LMX, e-mail

In their historical look at organizational communication studies, Taylor, Flanagin, Cheney, and Seibold (2001) explicitly called for more research on the various impacts of new technologies, adding that, “because it is interwoven so thoroughly into organizational practice, it cannot be meaningfully separated from the organizational contexts in which it is used” (p. 121). Van den Hooff, Groot and de Jonge (2005) concurred:

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“Given that communication technologies are an integral part of our organizational communication landscape, explaining the extent to which they are used and with what effect is important” (p. 5). Indeed, many scholars have studied, and continue to study, the broad-based effects of communication technologies in organizations. This study focuses on the ubiquitous use of e-mail in organizations and its effect on employees’ willingness to dissent.

While the number of communication technologies used in organizations continues to grow (D’Urso & Pierce, 2009), e-mail remains the dominant form of communication in the workplace (Dawley & Anthony, 2003; D’Urso & Pierce, 2009; Katz & Rice, 2002; Minsky & Marin, 1999; Stephens, Cowan, & Houser, 2011; Van den Hooff et al., 2005). The way people use the technology is important to study, given the way it influences people’s behavior. Sociotechnical systems theorists, in fact, argue that the presence and use of e-mail cannot be ignored as social and technical systems interact with each other and influence each other (Bostrom, Gupta, & Thomas, 2009). Technologies such as e-mail therefore influence the way people act (Law, 1992), and the technology itself and how employees use it have become crucial ways that organizational social systems are created, maintained, and changed (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). E-mail becomes a critical part of the social context in an organization and “is a key factor in organizational change” (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). E-mail therefore has the potential to empower the powerless to enact change in an organization (Poole, Siebold, & McPhee, 1996). Given that premise, the current study examines how e-mail is used to communicate organizational dissent between in-group and out-group organizational members. To address this, we invoke theories of computer-mediated communication, organizational dissent, and leader-member exchange theory.

### *E-Mail Versus Other Forms of Communication*

Even with newer technologies such as text messaging and cell phones, e-mail remains the dominant form of communication in organizations today. In a study on the use of communication technologies in organizations, D’Urso and Pierce (2009) found that “e-mail still appears to be the primary CT (communication technology) of today’s organization. In fact, e-mail and the Internet (World Wide Web) appeared as not only the most frequently used CTs, but as the most needed” (p. 80, parentheses added). In a survey of 430 people who use technology in the workplace, 88.5% reported using e-mail, the highest percentage of the 25 types of technologies they reported using. The Internet and the telephone followed e-mail as the most commonly used communication technologies.

Scholars note that the prevalent use of e-mail in organizations has changed how members communicate with each other in numerous ways, including those involving power struggles. “In many organizational contexts, e-mail is increasingly being used for strategic and political reasons, which can affect the power and control functions found in organizational structure” (Stephens et al., 2011, p. 230). Baron (1998) notes: “The preponderance of studies of computer mediated communication indicates that interlocutors are more forthcoming with ideas and information when they cannot see

or hear one another than when they can” (p. 157). Baron also noted that e-mail encourages more personal discourse, and that communication via e-mail can become overly emotional as opposed to other communicative contexts. “Even when one’s identity is revealed, the level of ‘comfort’ in initiating communication, suggesting new ideas, and even critiquing proposals made by those perceived as higher on the status chain is not necessarily reduced” (Baron, 1998, p. 147).

That “level of comfort,” however, often stems from the fact that using e-mail to communicate to higher-ups provides a potential shield from the consequences of doing so in a face-to-face setting. Riordan and Kreuz (2010), in fact, found that the main reason people use e-mail over face-to-face or even IM (instant messaging) to discuss negative issues is because of the “shielding effects” of the computer.

While for both types of CMC, the computer acts as a physical barrier to any violence or any other physical consequences of expressing negative emotion, e-mail also prevents immediate feedback from the reader. This lack of immediate feedback may buffer the message writer from having to deal with the consequences entirely. (p. 1671)

Joinson (2004) found similar results studying communication preferences for those with high and low self-esteem. Not surprisingly, those with low self-esteem prefer e-mail over face-to-face interactions because, as Joinson argues, media choice is directly tied to self-protection needs. He adds that e-mail “affords the recipient of negative feedback more control over their self-presentation, the pace of the interaction, and the transmission of clues like nervousness” (p. 477).

Given the previous observations and findings on the effects of e-mail on communication behavior, and using leader-member exchange (LMX) theory and Kassing’s (1997, 1998, 2000a, 2000b, , 2005, 2007) research on organizational dissent, the purpose of this study was to examine leader-member exchange status (in-group vs. out-group) as a predictor of organizational dissent communicated using e-mail and face-to-face mediums.

## Organizational Dissent

Organizational dissent refers to the expression of disagreement or contradictory opinions concerning organizational policies and practices (Kassing, 1997). Employees dissent in one of three ways (Kassing, 1997, 1998) by engaging in articulated, latent, or displaced dissent. *Articulated* dissent refers to open and direct communication to influential organizational members (i.e., a supervisor). *Latent* dissent refers to communicating opinions to ineffective audiences (i.e., coworkers) rather than employees with organizational power. *Displaced* dissent refers to expressing criticism to external audiences (i.e., friends, family, significant others).

Although there are many factors that lead to organizational dissent, research suggests that dissent stems from a triggering agent, which may include factors such as the availability of resources, performance evaluations, organizational inefficiency, organizational change, ethical considerations, and worker treatment (Kassing & Armstrong,

2002). There are also many organizational factors that influence dissent, such as employee burnout (Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, & Patterson, 2005), employee perceptions of organizational justice (Goodboy, Chory, & Dunleavy, 2008; Kassing & McDowell, 2008), workplace freedom of speech (Kassing, 2000b; 2006), tenure (Kassing, 2006; Kassing & Dicioccio, 2004), and adversarial perceptions and organizational climate (Kassing, 2008). Organizational dissent is also influenced by employees' personality traits, including locus of control (Kassing & Avtgis, 2001) and aggressive communication traits (Kassing & Avtgis, 1999). In addition, it is influenced by a member's status in the organization with supervisors. LMX theory, explained below, addresses status issues that could affect dissent practices.

### *Leader-Member Exchange (LMX)*

Leader-member exchange theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen, 1976; Graen & Cashman, 1975; Graen, Novak, & Sommerkamp, 1982; Graen, Orris, & Johnson, 1973) holds that supervisors will communicate with subordinates differently depending on the quality of their relationships. "Managers use either a supervisory style that relies exclusively on authority, formal employment contracts, and role expectations, or a leadership style that relies on interpersonal relationships as well as contractual norms and role expectations" (Kassing, 2000a, p. 59). As a result, subordinates will become a member of the in-group or out-group. In-group subordinates enjoy "mutual trust, respect and support. In-group members can communicate informally about work and nonwork matters with superiors; they can disagree with and challenge each other without damaging the relationship" (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn, & Ganesh, 2011, p. 154). Out-group subordinates have the opposite relationship with supervisors, involving low trust and support, conflict, face threats, and communication avoidance (Cheney et al., 2011). Graen and Schiemann (1978) also identified a middle-group, containing subordinates who fall somewhere in between in-group and out-group.

In terms of communication, LMX researchers have found differences between the ways in-group members will engage with supervisors as opposed to members of the out-group. Krone (1991), for example, found that members of the in-group engage in more open, upward communication with supervisors. Out-group members, according to Lee and Jablin (1995), resort more to deception and communication distortion than in-group members. Fairhurst (1993) identified several differences between in-group and out-group communication practices. Some of these included supervisors' inclusion of subordinates in problem-solving, common values between supervisor and subordinate, role negotiation, and career advice/support from supervisors. By contrast, out-group relationships were characterized by constant monitoring, nonsupportive statements, and power games.

These findings indicate a potential difference in employee dissent practices in relation to a subordinate's place on the LMX scale, since there is such a stark contrast in the way subordinates are communicated with and treated by supervisors depending on where they fall on the scale. Kassing (2000a), in fact, investigated the relationship

between LMX and employee dissent. One study in particular has important implications for the current study. In a study on organizational dissent among subordinates, Kassing (2000a) found that leader-member exchange status was related to organizational dissent in that out-group members use less articulated but more latent dissent.

However, Kassing did not examine how this dissent was communicated in e-mail messages in comparison to face-to-face dissent. In fact, until recently, no studies existed that addressed dissent and e-mail. Hastings and Payne (2013) conducted an exploratory qualitative survey of employee use of e-mail to dissent. In their study they specifically discuss the lack of research in this area and a particular void in quantitative research. This current study helps to fill this gap in the research. "As organizations use a growing variety of CMC channels, communication scholarship needs to question and examine how these technologies shape and transform communicative processes within the organization" (Hastings & Payne, 2013, p. 328). They argue that e-mail could have democratic properties for those in the organization who may not want to express dissent face to face. And, as Gossett and Kilker (2006) argued, "The personal costs associated with articulated dissent suggest that weaker members might seek out alternative methods for voicing their frustrations" (p. 66). This study examines whether weaker members may be voicing frustration via e-mail as an alternative to face-to-face communication.

Communicating dissent over e-mail may be the preference for some employees who desire to avoid in-person negative reactions from coworkers or supervisors. In other words, some employees may hide behind their e-mail as a protective barrier when engaging in dissent. On the other hand, the risk of e-mailing contradictory opinions to organizational members may put the same employees at risk by providing a permanent record of dissent, which can be saved, revisited, and forwarded to other parties. Organizations are known, in fact, to actively monitor employee use of technology, including e-mail, according to Sanders, Ross and Pattison (2013). Their discussion of workplace surveillance points to a 2007 survey conducted by the American Management Association and the ePolicy Institute which found that 43% of the more than 4,000 companies surveyed monitor employee e-mail messages. However, Kassing et al. (2012) argued, "Despite the clear risks associated with dissent, employees readily express it" (p. 49). Nevertheless, it is important to consider factors that may influence an employee's decision to communicate dissent using e-mail or in-person channels. LMX appears to be an important factor, as in-group members have better working relationships with their supervisors and prefer to directly communicate their upward dissent (Kassing, 2000a). What is unknown, however, is whether out-group members, who do not have a solid working relationship with their supervisor, prefer using e-mail as an alternative to face-to-face dissent.

There is at least one study indicating that dissent does indeed take place more often via e-mail. Garner, Leahy, Rubenstein, and Templeton (2008) examined e-mails in a database from the now defunct Enron Corporation. The study found that over time, as employees began to sense the organization was in trouble, networks began to form in which employees expressed dissent toward management and company policies; this was despite the fact that dissent at Enron was strongly discouraged. Employees did so at the risk of being fired (Fusaro & Miller, 2002). However, the findings from the

Garner et al. (2008) study also indicated that employees did not express dissent to many people, which suggests that employees were well aware of the company's unwritten rule regarding dissent and therefore did not feel that there were many options for expressing dissent. This suggests that perhaps there may have been a difference in dissent practices between in-group and out-group members based on LMX. Specifically, since in-group members tend to be committed workers who perform well at their job (Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, & Shore, 2012) and directly communicate their concerns to supervisors (Baker, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2008; Kassing, 2000a), out-group members may resort to using e-mail to communicate their dissent as they feel uncomfortable with their supervisor and prefer to complain to coworkers (Kassing, 2000a). This study seeks to explore this possibility, working from the following research question:

RQ: Does leader-member exchange status (i.e., in-group vs. out-group) explain employees' communication mode choices (i.e., e-mail, face-to-face) in organizational dissent?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 166 employees (46 men, 120 women) who worked at various organizations for at least 30 hours a week for pay. These participants were recruited by undergraduate students at a midsized mid-Atlantic university in 2012. These participants' ages ranged from 18 to 66 years ( $M = 41.02$ ,  $SD = 12.29$ ). On average, participants had worked in the current organization for 9.90 years ( $SD = 8.81$ ). Salaries reflected a wide range of pay, with 9.6% of employees making under \$20,000, 22.9% earning \$20,000 to \$30,000, 10.2% earning \$30,001 to \$40,000, 9.0% earning \$40,001 to \$50,000, 10.8% earning \$50,001 to \$60,000, 5.4% earning \$60,001 to \$70,000, 6.6% earning \$70,001 to \$80,000, 4.8% earning \$80,001 to \$90,000, 7.2% earning \$90,000 to \$100,000, and 6.6% (with 6.6% unreported) earning over \$100,000. On average, participants worked a full work week at 42.27 hours per week ( $SD = 8.43$ ). Approximately 43% had managerial and professional jobs; 34% worked in technical, sales, and administrative support; 14% had service occupations; 1% worked in precision production, craft, and repair; while 2% were considered operators, fabricators, and laborers. All participants were recruited only if they expressed their concerns about work through e-mail and in person.

### Procedures and Measurement

Participants completed a survey containing measures of leader-member exchange and organizational dissent (both e-mail and face-to-face items), along with items assessing demographic and occupational/job characteristics.

Leader-member exchange was measured using Scandura and Graen's (1984) LMX scale, which consists of seven items that operationalize the quality of exchange between supervisors and subordinates. Responses were solicited using a 4-point

Likert-type response format, although the anchors vary depending on the item (e.g., from 4 = *usually know where I stand* to 1 = *never know where I stand*). Scores range between 7 and 28. Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .84 to .86 (Scandura & Graen, 1984). In this study, the obtained Cronbach alpha was .85 ( $M = 19.02$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ ) for the summed scale. To trichotomize in-group versus out-group members of LMX status (Scandura & Graen, 1984), a standard deviation split was used to classify in-group status ( $M = 25$  or higher), middle group status ( $M = 17$ -24), and out-group status ( $M = 16$  or lower).

Organizational dissent was measured using Kassing's (1998) 20-item Organizational Dissent Scale, which consists of three subscales that operationalize articulated (9 items), latent (5 items), and displaced (6 items) employee dissent. The scale was modified by adding the words "via e-mail" and "in person" to each item, to distinguish between e-mail and face-to-face dissent responses. Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating more reported dissent. Previous reliability coefficients have ranged from .70 to .80 (Olison & Roloff, 2012). In this study, obtained Cronbach alphas for e-mail generated dissent were as follows: articulated ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 26.25$ ,  $SD = 7.63$ ), latent ( $\alpha = .72$ ,  $M = 10.84$ ,  $SD = 3.81$ ), and displaced ( $\alpha = .76$ ,  $M = 14.66$ ,  $SD = 5.06$ ). Obtained Cronbach alphas for face-to-face dissent were articulated ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $M = 30.35$ ,  $SD = 5.73$ ), latent ( $\alpha = .63$ ,  $M = 11.18$ ,  $SD = 3.34$ ), and displaced ( $\alpha = .69$ ,  $M = 19.02$ ,  $SD = 4.32$ ).

## Results

A correlation matrix is reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Correlation Matrix.

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
<i>Face-to-face dissent</i>							
1. Articulated (FtF)	—						
2. Latent (FtF)	.24**	—					
3. Displaced (FtF)	-.17*	.07	—				
<i>E-mailed dissent</i>							
4. Articulated (e-mail)	.34†	.13	.04	—			
5. Latent (e-mail)	-.03	.44†	.21**	.56†	—		
6. Displaced (E-mail)	-.17*	.02	.55†	.40†	.53†	—	
7. LMX	.12	-.10	-.04	-.10	-.13	-.01	—

Note. FtF = face to face; LMX = leader-member exchange.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . † $p < .001$ .

The research question addressed whether leader-member exchange status explained differences in organizational members' e-mail generated and face-to-face dissent. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed to answer this question with the LMX groupings (i.e., in-group, middle group, out-group) serving as the independent

variable and summed scores on the organizational dissent subscales for both e-mail and face-to-face channels serving simultaneously as the dependent variables.

The MANOVA yielded a statistically significant model, Wilks'  $\lambda = .80$ ,  $F(12, 288) = 2.77$ ,  $p < .01$ . Univariate effects were significant for articulated e-mail dissent,  $F(2, 149) = 4.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ , and articulated face-to-face to dissent,  $F(2, 149) = 7.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ . No significant effects were observed for latent or displaced dissent. An examination of the mean score differences using Tukey-Kramer post hoc tests revealed significant differences for both channels of articulated dissent.

Specifically, out-group employees reported significantly greater levels of articulated dissent using e-mail ( $M = 29.48$ ,  $SD = 7.46$ ) compared to the middle-group delineated employees ( $M = 25.17$ ,  $SD = 7.25$ ). In-group employees ( $M = 27.92$ ,  $SD = 7.46$ ) did not significantly differ from either the out-group or middle group employees (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Comparisons of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Groups' Articulated Dissent Via E-Mail.

LMX Status	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	23	27.92	7.46
Middle group	103	25.17 <sup>a</sup>	7.25
Out-group	26	29.48 <sup>a</sup>	7.46

Note.  $F(2, 149) = 4.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ ; Tukey-Kramer post hoc comparisons.

<sup>a</sup>Means sharing superscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

In-group employees reported significantly greater levels of articulated dissent using face-to-face conversations ( $M = 34.04$ ,  $SD = 4.70$ ) compared to middle-group employees ( $M = 29.28$ ,  $SD = 5.25$ ). Out-group employees ( $M = 31.17$ ,  $SD = 7.42$ ) did not significantly differ from either the in-group or middle group employees (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparisons of Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Groups' Articulated Dissent In Person.

LMX Status	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
In-group	23	34.04 <sup>a</sup>	4.70
Middle group	103	29.28 <sup>a</sup>	5.25
Out-group	26	31.17	7.42

Note.  $F(2, 149) = 7.92$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ ; Tukey-Kramer post hoc comparisons.

<sup>a</sup>Means sharing superscripts are significantly different ( $p < .05$ ).

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine if leader-member exchange status (i.e., in-group vs. out-group) explained employees' communication mode choices (i.e., e-mail,



face-to-face) in organizational dissent. Similar to the findings of the only other study exploring e-mail and dissent (Hastings and Payne, 2013), this study “challenges the idea that dissent is primarily a F2F [face-to-face] phenomenon and is more complex than one person simply sending an electronic message to another” (p. 328). However, this study further explores the idea of dissent via e-mail by exploring which members of an organization might be more willing to use e-mail as a medium to dissent. The results suggest that articulated dissent, which is directed toward a supervisor, is influenced by the quality of leader-member exchange. Although all groups reported using face-to-face articulated dissent, compared to the middle-group, out-group members reported significantly greater use of e-mail for articulated dissent and the in-group reported significantly greater use of face-to-face articulated dissent. Given the fact that people tend to be less inhibited via e-mail (Joinson, 2004; Kato, Kato, & Akahori, 2007), even with superiors (Baron, 1998), it makes sense that those in the out-group would be more willing to dissent via this medium. As suggested in earlier studies, the computer acts as a “shield” against the potential negative consequences of dissenting against management. This finding is significant, though, given Kassing’s (2000a) finding that out-group members use less articulated dissent otherwise, as they “perceive there is no room to voice their contradictory opinions with their supervisor” (p. 66). According to this study, e-mail is a medium by which out-group members may feel more comfortable dissenting. Kassing (2000a) argues that “organizations stand to benefit from receiving employees’ opinions about workplace issues, practices and policies” (p. 65), further suggesting “the importance of the superior-subordinate relationship in fostering channels for hearing employee dissent” (p. 66). Perhaps e-mail is a positive step in that direction.

The second conclusion is that in-group employees report using more articulated dissent in person compared to the middle-group. This is not particularly surprising given Kassing’s (2000a) previous findings, as the results in this study replicate his work. Although the results of this study indicate that in-group members use both e-mail and face-to-face channels to express articulated dissent, face-to-face is used more often. Kassing (2005) found that articulated dissent can be perceived as competent when employees present solutions to organizational problems and communicate direct-factual appeals. It may be that in-group members feel comfortable enough to communicate their dissent in person to their supervisors, because their working relationship is of high quality and because competent strategies may help rectify perceived problems that only management can address.

Perhaps one of the more interesting findings in relation to dissent and the threat of retaliation can be found in the results for the middle-group members. Out-group members may be using e-mail as a “shield” from retribution, or they may feel they have nothing to lose since they are already on the outs with management. The in-group members, by contrast, may not feel any fear of retribution because of their position, so using e-mail to express articulated dissent would not concern them any more than face-to-face dissent would. Middle group members, however, because they are neither “in” nor “out,” may feel more apprehensive about using e-mail because of the possible retributions from management. Their main concern may be that articulated dissent in

any form would place them in the out-group. Our findings indicate that this group is less likely to use dissent in either form as compared to the in- and out-groups. Garner (2011) argued, "For fear of sanctions, fear of being labeled a *troublemaker*, and/or feelings that dissent is futile, employees may remain silent rather than voice their dissent" (p. 225, emphasis in original).

Differences in latent and displaced dissent via e-mail versus face-to-face were not revealed as a function of leader-member exchange status. Since LMX is based on the quality of the relationship between a supervisor and subordinate, it seems that articulated dissent is the only type influenced by LMX status. Dissent directed toward coworkers, family members, significant others, and so on may be influenced by other organizational variables, but LMX status does not appear to be of significance for these types of dissent.

Nevertheless, this study advances the research on both dissent and LMX by including a communication tool that is now used even more than face-to-face communication. The results here show that out-group members are more likely to use e-mail compared to middle-group members. And in-group members are more likely to use face-to-face dissent compared to middle-group members. Because e-mail use is so prevalent in organizations today, it is important to determine how power, dissent, and employee relations with management are affected by this medium. This study makes that contribution to the scant literature on this topic. "Understanding the role of e-mail in dissent expression can provide employees and managers with information critical to using the channel to promote constructive dissent, leading to greater levels of input into decision making and more collaborative work processes" (Hastings & Payne, 2013, p. 310). The results of this study suggest that the quality of the supervisor-subordinate relationship is important in determining how contradictory opinions are communicated in an upward manner via e-mail. Communicating these subordinate opinions in person to a supervisor, instead of sending an e-mail, may be indicative of a better working relationship. Furthermore, e-mail may be a positive venue for out-group employees, previously unwilling to question management, to dissent. In addition, this study has many practical implications that may be useful to organizations that should value employee input rather than squash it. As Garner (2011) pointed out, employees' ability to express dissent has been associated with job satisfaction, less turnover, and better decision making. "Organizational members need a safe space to share their ideas, find solutions to problems, and have their opinions acknowledged. If organizations fail to provide these resources, workers may create their own" (Gossett & Kilker, 2006, p. 82). This study demonstrates that at least some employees in organizations are willing, and in fact prefer, to use e-mail to dissent. Organizations would have to ensure, however, that e-mails expressing dissent would not be met with retribution (within reason, of course). Kassing and Kava (2013) argue that organizations need to create space for, and welcome, dissent from employees. Based on our results, there are some practical implications for organizations. Managers should consider e-mail to be a valuable and useful tool in getting important and useful feedback from employees who may not be as willing to express their concerns face to face. Fear of retribution will likely quash any efforts by employees to use e-mail as a means

of dissent. As this study found, out-group members are more likely to use e-mail to dissent than are those in the middle group. As we noted before, out-group members may feel they have little to lose in dissenting via e-mail, whereas middle-group members would be more reticent to avoid becoming a member of the out-group. Those in the middle-group could have important contributions to make to the organization, and so management should encourage rather than discourage the use of e-mail to dissent. In addition, there should be more room for face-to-face dissent once an e-mail has been sent. That is, management should encourage further discussion of plausible complaints or suggestions from employees in a face-to-face environment. E-mail could serve as a catalyst, but face-to-face communication should follow if possible.

The limitations in this study include the borderline internal reliability estimates for the latent and displaced subscales for in-person dissent. Another limitation is the small cross-section of employees who work in precision production, craft, and repair, and operators, fabricators, and laborers. The low representation of these jobs is likely due to the instructions given for participant recruitment; employees must have expressed a contradictory opinion using e-mail. Since these jobs are hands-on jobs that require skills sets used in factories, garages, and so on, it is likely that e-mail use is not required for these jobs. Consequently, a majority of the participants worked in managerial and professional jobs, technical, sales, and administrative support, and service occupations, where e-mail may be more important for fulfilling job duties.

Future research should further explore triggering agents for dissent via e-mail. If people are more willing to directly dissent to superiors via e-mail, what issues spur the dissent? Hastings and Payne (2013) found in their qualitative study a number of triggers for dissent. "Participants reported conflict over procedures, new policies, existing policies, hiring decisions, role confusion and role conflict, poor work performance, compensation, and generally annoying boss and coworker behaviors and dissent triggers" (p. 326). In addition, research should examine any consequences that may occur as a result of out-group dissent via e-mail. Even though dissent is sometimes welcome, oftentimes it is not (Kassing, 2000). As Kassing (2011a) argued, it is nonetheless important for organizational members to have an outlet for dissent. Allowing outlets for dissent could help prevent the need for whistleblowing, he argues, but also "receptiveness to dissent represents a powerful form of corrective feedback that organizations can use to monitor: (a) unethical and immoral behavior, (b) impractical and ineffectual organizational practices and policies, (c) poor and unfavorable decision making and (d) insensitivity to employees' workplace needs and desires (Redding, 1985 as cited in Kassing, 2000a, p. 66). Since technology "is a key factor in organizational change" (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), the use of e-mail for more articulated dissent among those who are reticent to express themselves could help bring about positive change in organizations. The finding that employees are more willing to directly dissent via e-mail also has implications for other emerging communication technologies that are currently being used in the workplace, although not as frequently as e-mail. Text messaging, social networking sites, blogs, and other Internet-based communication technologies may also prove to be outlets for dissent. Future research should explore these possibilities as well.

In conclusion, this study explored the relationship between leader-member exchange and dissent via e-mail and face-to-face interactions. The results indicate that outgroup members prefer expressing articulated dissent to superiors via email. The implications are that e-mail may be a positive outlet for employees who are likely afraid to challenge management because of their position as outsiders compared to members of the in-group. Organizations should consider e-mail as a worthy outlet for dissent—one in which useful feedback can help improve decision making, monitor questionable behavior, and improve relationships in the organization.

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