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The multiple faces of front line managers

A preliminary examination of FLM styles and reciprocated employee outcomes

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present exploratory research on the potential variation of front line manager (FLM) types and attendant causal links between FLM style and employee outcomes. It challenges the value of a homogenous FLM construct and tests for variation in FLM styles which may affect behaviours and employee outcomes.

Design/methodology/approach – A set of discreet FLM types is defined from extant theory and literature (named here as Policy Enactor; Organizational Leader; and Employee Coach). Each type and its relationship to employee outcomes is explored empirically using survey data and qualitative interviews with a small sample of employees ($n = 46$ employees across eight FLM groups) within a multi-national manufacturing plant.

Findings – The findings provide preliminary support for an FLM "type" construct. Employees reported a significant dominance of the "Organizational Leader" type for one FLM, while across a broader set of FLM's the proportions showed measurable variation. The qualitative data provides context examples that help explain FLM typologies and link to employee outcomes.

Originality/value – Much of current literature explores the FLM construct as a singular construct, relying on its contextual relevance for definition within a certain discipline. This paper focuses on combining these contextual experiences to present a multi-faceted construct for the role of FLMs within the employment relations literatures. By moving from the implicit to the explicit, the paper offers a conceptual lens for quantitative and qualitative exploration of the role of FLM types. As a result, attendant and subsequent FLM and employee behaviours may be better examined and possibly better specified. To add value to this contribution longitudinal and more extensive data sets could be examined and tested in the future.

Keywords Supervision, Reciprocity, Employee outcomes, Front line managers

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The role of front line management activity is now regarded as a critical yet neglected aspect in employment and human resource management theory (Teague and Roche, 2012; Townsend, 2013). Notwithstanding oversimplification, the literature is divided between several strands: those seeking to find more convincing evidence of a link to performance from people management roles (Guthrie, 2001; Wright and Nishii, 2007); those who critique the theoretical and/or empirical validity of such gains for workers (Godard, 2004, 2014; Kaufman, 2010); or scholars who argue for better explanation of the relationship between management functions and employment outcomes (Guest, 2011; Hesselgreaves and Scholarios, 2014; Knies and Leisink, 2014). This paper contributes to

such an understanding by examining the specific roles of FLMs. In the next section the idea of variation in FLM roles is examined and three discrete typologies are advanced. The extent to which these FLM types may impact employment relations outcomes is then considered, followed by the presentation of several hypothesis that are subsequently tested.

The theoretical contribution from the data indicates validity in variable FLM types, which can lead to greater specificity in the causal relationships of management and employment. It is subsequently argued that FLM and employee outcomes may be better understood. The implications for employee relations, HRM and future research are considered in the discussion section.

Front line management types

According to Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 6), FLMs have been "largely ignored" in research in this area. An important gap in this regard is the role of the FLM as a potential agent who can play a pivotal role in "bringing policies to life" (Purcell *et al.*, 2003). This is echoed by Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010) who also claim there is little systematic research on how individual line managers influence the relationship between HR and employee outcomes. The research presented here begins to address this gap by recognizing the FLM as a possible key agent in shaping employee relations and the enactment of HR practices.

Townsend (2014, p. 164) points out that the notion of homogeneity in the FLM construct is often implied, but rarely explored. Extant literature can portray the FLM as fundamentally generic, whereby respective branding (supervisor, manager, leader, boss, management) are minor iterations that in broader theory building become irrelevant. Hales (2005), for example, discusses the limitations of literature in the area because many treat "first line manager", "shop floor manager", "team leader" and "supervisor" as alternative job titles. The implication is that generic application of what may be different roles is interpreted in a similar and interchangeable manner, with subsequent ill-defined occupational roles and FLM groups resulting in construct ambiguity or, as Kaufman (2010) argues, outright misspecification. Acknowledging the inherent intelligence in the evolution of literature, perhaps the finding here is that research has learned FLM job titles are not a reliable source of differentiation in management population. In this case, a problem emerges of a new criteria to provide such differentiation. The point of consideration here is not whether the FLM construct is suitably generic, rather the issue is if specification and precision can better contribute to theory building and data generation.

Studies in the area of the FLM may be traced back to investigation of the industrial foreman or supervisor in the 1940s and 1970s (Hales, 2005; Townsend, 2014). This chronological perspective would place the FLM as an emergent title that originated in supervision, and developed over the years as a result of changing organizational contexts, including union presence, functional expertise and the introduction of the "personnel function" (Kerr *et al.*, 1986). In this context, it may be relevant to review the core activities of the "supervisor", usefully summarized by Kerr *et al.* (1986, p. 103) as: planning and scheduling; documentation of records and reports; carrying out "human relations" counselling; coordination and control; organizing work; maintaining external relations; managing performance – reward contingencies; maintaining quality and efficiency; maintaining safety and cleanliness; maintaining machinery and equipment; selecting employees; training employees; stimulating suggestions; and, maintaining union-management relations. Dawson (1991, p. 39) contests the idea that supervision

can be generically described as a set of tasks, claiming that "the actual tasks which supervisors perform are neither 'universal' nor 'static' rather they vary across organizations and over time". Instead Dawson (1991, p. 39) proposes an alternative approach, by providing five broad control elements within which multiple tasks may appear, namely control of: labour; product; technical maintenance; material resources; and, information control.

Recent literature does not typically contest the FLM construct in terms of the tasks or activities (Townsend, 2014). Dawson (1991, p. 40) too argues "that the supervisory function is in fact dispersed across several organizational levels, and therefore that it is misleading to simply focus on either the job tasks or job titles of supervisors". It appears that what defines the FLM construct needs to be much more than a set of tasks and an organizational hierarchy chart. Hales (2005) summarizes the key debates regarding variable FLM roles in the literature. He portrays two competing arguments. On one hand, "from studies of industrial supervisors comes the proposition that, whilst there may be aspirations or limited attempts to shift the FLM role into something more discernibly "managerial", such attempts have been so piecemeal and compromised that, in practice, the role retains the responsibilities, limited authority and low involvement in decision making usually associated with the supervisor. On the other hand, from the popular management literature, comes the proposition that there has been a decisive shift in the FLM role away from supervision towards either a facilitating and developing "team leader/co-ordinator" role or a resource deploying "unit manager" role" (Hales, 2005, p. 479).

From this three discrete *a priori* FLM types or styles can be discerned based two core dimensions: employee experiences of FLM policy and practice; and FLM enactment of policy, which may or may not differ according to specific employee, department or functional needs. In this way the dimensions capture a number of related key features, such as FLM role within an organization, hierarchical position, functional responsibilities and, importantly, their agency capacity to enact or disrupt policy. The resultant three typologies are elaborated and summarized in Table I. The first FLM type operates an unfiltered policy approach to HR enactment indiscriminately, translating policy to practice with their employees. This FLM style is named "Policy Enactor". A second type emerges whereby the FLM continues to operate policy in a vanilla style (e.g. taking a common approach with all direct report staff) regarding HR enactment, but filters selectively which HR policies are enacted and how they are implemented which affects the employees experience. This second FLM style is called "Organizational Leader". Finally, an FLM style can be patterned that displays certain chameleon-like operational method, showing more specific enactment variability. This we call the "Employee Coach" FLM style, in which HR policies are enacted at an individual level with precise tailoring or tweaking to the needs and requirements of a given situation or in response to employee experiences or views. These three FLM style types provide a lens through which the FLM construct can be measured, better specified and therefore understood.

FLM as a "Policy Enactor"
The first type is labelled FLM Policy Enactor. The literature reports the devolution of HRM activities to the FLM (Renwick, 2003). The rational for this change is summarized by Brewster and Larsen (2000) as the ability to reduce costs, to provide a more comprehensive approach to HRM, to place responsibility for HRM with managers most responsible for it, to speed up decision-making, and to use the FLM as an alternative to

	Policy Enactor	Organizational Leader	Employee Coach
FLM style dimension			
Employee experiences of FLM enactment	The employee experiences FLM style primarily through the formal mechanisms provided for in the HR system. The employee perceives the FLM behaviour as mostly dominated by their execution of HR practices and organizational responsibilities, while interaction of other kinds (e.g. one to one support) takes a lesser position in the employee's perception of the FLM	The employee experiences FLM style primarily through general leadership behaviour. The employee perceives their FLM as a good leader based on their overall interaction with their department/team	The employee experiences FLM style primarily in their individual interactions. They perceive the FLM as having an interest in their individual confidence, development and success. The interaction with HR policies is individually tailored and therefore experienced as a coaching discussion more than a formal intervention/policy
FLM operational enactment	This FLM operates in a way that is clear about what HR practice is being applied, how it applies and why. The FLM relies on hierarchy and HR policies to manage, and often reference an organizational dictate* as the reason for a particular course of events	This FLM operates in a way that they think is best for their overall group relationship. This may extend to taking initiative to go above and beyond current HR policies and/or around HR policies. The FLM relies primarily on their employee relationships to manage, and utilizes HR policies that support such. If a HR policy threatens the employee relationships, they may exhibit agency behaviour in positioning responsibility with the broader organization	The FLM operates in a way that is tailored to the needs of each employee. They utilize HR policies to advance the development of employee competence. They rely on their coaching skills to manage, and will perceive the need for disciplinary action as a failure of their management

Table I.
The FLM typology:
by employee
experience and FLM
operational
enactment

outsourcing the HRM function. In this context the FLM becomes part of the HRM construct, as they become a "deliverer" of the practices and policies. Purcell and Hutchinson explain "we know that the gap between intended and actual is commonly experienced, and is explained in the main by the problems FLMs have in applying HR practices […]. The employees experience is inexorably linked with their relationship with their FLM because the FLM is seen as an agent of the organization" (2007, p. 16). It is this argument that places the FLM "Policy Enactor" style at the core of the employment relationship dynamic.

FLM as an "Organizational Leader"
The second style we call FLM Organizational Leader. Its relevance is in relation to both the enactment of HR policy and employee experiences of work and management activity. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007) contend that "employees perception of people management are not restricted to those written in the employment manual but cover

wider aspects such as organizational climate and leadership behaviour" and, that "the way FLMs undertake their HR duties of selecting, appraising, developing, communicating, involving, etc., is inextricably linked to a wider set of what are increasingly called leadership behaviours, which aim to influence employee attitudes and behaviours in a given direction". Other evidence also supports the leadership role of FLM. Guest and Conway's (1999) 1,000 worker study showed that supervisory leadership was the strongest factor associated to organizational commitment. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 16) found that "the employees' judgement of their FLM leadership behaviour was directly related, where positive, to higher levels of affective commitment and to better aspects of job experience". Purcell *et al.* (2003, p. 39) describe the leading part of the FLM role as a "whole series of small actions which managers undertake on a daily basis that have a major impact on the employees" experience of working life.

FLM as an "Employee Coach"
The final variable line manger type we label FLM Employee Coach, derived from operational policy and employee experience noted in leadership literatures. For example, Rank *et al.* (2009) note the importance of both Active-Corrective Transactional Leadership (e.g. Management by Exception) and transformational leader styles (e.g. coaching and motivating). The former "is exhibited by supervisors who spend much of their time closely monitoring subordinates to detect errors and deviations from standards and to take corrective action" (Rank *et al.*, 2009, p. 467). In contrast, a transformational coach engenders an inspirational employee attitude and work motivation (e.g. articulating vision and displaying enthusiasm). Transformational leaders are those FLM that develop a degree of intellectual stimulation (encouraging followers to question old assumptions and adopt new approaches); individualize the employees' experience (considering individual needs and providing personalized coaching) that enhances trust and confidence (Rank *et al.*, 2009, p. 467). These authors also show evidence to validate the relationship between a transformational type of leadership style and individual employee outcomes, similar to those above defined as discretionary effort. This places the style of FLM and how it motivates employees as a central variable in understanding any casual chain between discretionary effort and performance outcomes.

Leadership studies concerned with the relationship domain are typically considered to be part of the leader-member exchange (LMX) research. This research differs from Rank *et al.* (2009) in their distinction between transactional and transformational leadership. According to Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995, p. 238), "it (LMX) begins as a transactional social exchange and evolves into a transformational social exchange". When considering the leadership behaviour of the FLM, these domains call on empirical researchers to investigate those domains together, and not in isolation (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Traditionally leadership categorizations have focused "primarily on the supervisor (e.g. traits, behaviours, styles, etc.) and how these characteristics make him/her either effective or ineffective in different situations" (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995, p. 220). However, this new perspective views the follower and the relationship as key mediators in the dynamic of employment relationship interaction. Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010, p. 150) call for further research "to investigate the moderating role of other measures of leadership behaviour such as LMX or transformational leadership on the relationship between perceptions of HR practices and employee outcomes".

How FLM types impact employee outcomes

Several specific hypotheses are developed and later tested form the foregoing theoretical review. Importantly, social exchange theory (SET) comes to the fore in providing explanatory value to the variation of FLM types. A particular FLM style can impact discretionary behaviour to the extent that it creates a sense of obligation in the employee to the organization, and/or anticipation of future benefits or, alternatively, resistant or oppositional actions by workers. If Gouldner's (1960) assumptions underpinning the importance of social reciprocity are acknowledged, the operational application of policy has a legacy to the previous interactions that the employee and the FLM have had (e.g. the employees' perceived history with the FLM). In this way, it is proposed that the FLM style may have a direct impact on employee outcomes:

H1. The FLM style types offer predictive value for employee outcomes.

Within the social exchange paradigm two frameworks seem to be followed most, namely the psychological contact and related (perceived) organizational support mechanisms (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2005, p. 774). The first of these frameworks, the psychological contract, relates to an individuals' belief regarding the terms and conditions of the reward-effort employment exchange (Rousseau, 1989). Much of the psychological literature assumes a link from perceived agreement between the idea of mutual obligations resulting in reciprocal outcomes, including discretionary behaviour displayed by employees. It has been argued, however, that the structural conditions of a capitalist employment exchange make a pure psychological exchange problematic in key respects. Cullinane and Dundon (2006) argue that mangers, including supervisors, may not be the agents with absolute authority or power to alter what are perceived obligations and expectations underpinning the psychological aspects of the exchange. Nonetheless, recognizing the FLM as an agent of the organization implies some potential impact on employee behavoiurs, expectations and/or perceptions depending on type of FLM approach.

The second framework relates to an individual's perception concerning the degree to which an organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986), namely perceived organizational support (POS). This theory contends that favourable POS will be positively related to employee discretionary behaviour. Underlying this framework is the "norm of reciprocity" as a potential explanatory mechanism relating to employee experiences, attitudes and behaviours arising from FLM operational approaches (Gouldner, 1960; Coyle-Shapiro and Conway, 2005; Conway and Coyle-Shapiro, 2012). The key distinction between POS and the psychological contract framework lies in the "expectation" or "promised" nature of the support. POS captures an employee's evaluation of the quality of organizational treatment, regardless of whether it was expected or not. Eisenberger *et al.* (2002, p. 565) go further and relate this specially to FLM, arguing that "just as employees form global perceptions concerning their valuation by the organization, they develop general views concerning the degree to which supervisors value their contribution and care about their well-being". They describe this phenomenon as perceived supervisor support (PSS). Studies have since found support for the contention that PSS leads to POS both generally (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002), and more specifically in relation to employee development (Kuvaas and Dysvik, 2010). Eisenberger *et al.* (2002, p. 572) contend that in order to foster personal loyalty, "many supervisors may exaggerate their positive valuation of their subordinates and their role in obtaining benefits for subordinates, resulting in greater PSS than POS". Both PSS and POS open up avenues to explore

already established social exchange frameworks as a method of further understanding the impact of the FLM styles on employee outcomes. To that end, this study incorporates two further hypotheses for empirical investigation:

H2a. PSS is positively related to employee outcomes.

H2b. POS is positively related to employee outcomes.

An additional element in the debate is that of agency theory and the possibility that differing FLM styles alter employee relations outcomes. For example, and from the perspective of workers, it has been shown that "employees view their supervisor's orientation towards them as indicative of the organization's support because the supervisor acts as an agent of the organization" (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). It is in this context that the variable role of FLM may add explanatory value to the management of people at work. The FLM role as an agent of the organization is relevant in the causal chain to the extent that it affects both the employee's perception of, and corresponding attitudes towards, the organization. Placing the FLM as an agent mediating the complexities of the organizational-employee relationships renders them at a critical control point in the causal chain. Recent empirical evidence contextualizes the local employee perceptions of the immediate line manager to the global perceptions of the organization (Sterling and Boxall, 2013). For example, Kuvaas and Dysvik (2010, p. 146) reveal "the perceptions of the immediate line manager seem to influence employee attitudes both directly and indirectly through more positive perceptions of an organization's HR practices". It is therefore proposed that:

H3. The relationship between FLM style and employee outcomes is mediated by PSS.

Having outlined the theory linking the FLM style to increased perceived support, attention is now turned to the operationalization of the FLM style typology. "It is often observed that there is a gap between what is formally required in HR policy and what is actually delivered by FLMs" (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007, p. 3). The question raised here is whether this gap is common across all FLM's, randomly occurs in FLM population, or is there a pattern. We provide a potential typology capturing the different faces of FLMs, and propose a connection to employee outcomes. Perhaps the story does not end there. Just as there are antecedents of employee outcomes, there are predictors of FLM behaviour also. Purcell and Hutchinson (2007, p. 5) remind us that "the fulfillment of FLM's people management roles often rely on the managers own sense of motivation and commitment". If this is true, it is plausible to imagine that each FLM may have a commonly worn face, or a dominant FLM style. Such a dominant style may be defined as that which is most strongly acknowledged by employees as a discernable perception or feeling of managerial actions affecting work experiences. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H4. One FLM style is significantly different (more dominant) than the other FLM styles as reported by employees.

Of course, this proposition opens up possibilities for the identification of a macro level variable for measuring the FLM construct, i.e. FLM dominant style. Such a construct could enable stratification of employee groups by FLM type to deepen understanding. If the dominant type detected in *H4* were the true for all FLMs, the explanatory value of such a construct versus the variation in employee group outcomes would be limited.

Hence, it is necessary for us to confirm that any "dominant type" is not a microcosm of a full population effect. Therefore, the study includes the following proposition for investigation:

H5. The variation in individual perceptions of FLM dominant style for one single FLM is significantly less than the variation in styles observed in the aggregate FLM group.

Employee outcomes and performance
The literature, for major part, omits a definition of performance in the context of FLM roles. Some reasons for this issue have been advanced. For example, Truss (2001, p. 1146) suggests "we need to compare and contrast performance measures at a variety of organizational levels if we are to gain a real insight into what 'performance' means". Guest (2001, p. 1100) argues that with a lack of theory on the outcomes of HRM, there is consequential uncertainty as to what can be reliably measured. However, there is a growing body of validated work to suggest further progress, typically drawing on financial measures, published company accounts, case specific operational metrics, and in some instances employee outcomes and the specific roles of line managers (Townsend and Russell, 2013; Harney and Cafferkey, 2014).

Methodology
Research context
Intending to control for the impact of HR System (Bowen and Ostroff, 2004), a single factory plant within a multi-national medical device company provides a case-study through which these concepts are explored. The data reported here is a pilot exploratory study conducted on the manufacturing shop-floor of a multi-shift operation. The case study operation is a manufacturing plant of a US-owned multi-national medical device organization. The plant is located in Ireland. The research context sought to expose FLM variation and differences in employee perceptions, by sampling 46 matched workers from operational occupations on the line who report to eight people who perform FLM in a first line supervision capacity. For the purpose of this exploratory study, a FLM is defined as the person whom an employee would consider their "immediate boss" in the workplace. Focus group discussion confirmed this was typically the person who held "supervisor" title for their department on the shop floor.

Research instrument and sample
The survey sought to capture employee perceptions of their FLM style, the perception of support received from the FLM, and broader organization and individual variables. These included turnover intention, organizational citizenship behaviour, discretionary effort, and perceived performance indicators in a 64-question instrument. In addition nine control variables were included.

The data is collected from 46 survey responses with some follow-up qualitative interview data. As this research instrument is at a pilot stage, focus group feedback was also used to check interpretation and phraseology of survey questions and statements. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a follow-up visit with one FLM and three employees on a single shift. The statistical and qualitative data analysis is cognisant of such a small sample size. We acknowledge the sample size has its limitations and the study is purposely a pilot study to explore potential FLM style variation.

Measures and approach

"Policy Enactor" style is measured by the extent to which employees have experienced their FLM enacting the HRM policies, as well as the perceived extent of agency behaviour. In total, 11 HR practices are included in the survey, and four-items used to measure agency behaviour were adapted from Eisenberger *et al.* (2002). "Organizational Leader" style is measured using a five-item measure from Purcell and Hutchinson (2007), using a Likert scale to capture employees' perception of their FLM leadership behaviour. "Employee Coach" style is measured using a nine-item scale adapted from Heskin *et al.* PSS is measured by a six-item scale established by Eisenberger *et al.* (2002). It has a slight adaptation to replace "supervisor" wording with "FLM". POS uses the same items, replacing FLM with the word "organization". Employee Outcomes are measured using a three-item organization citizenship behaviour scale; turnover intention using a five-item scale; and a six-item scale to measure discretionary effort. Control variables included nationality; age; gender; union membership; tenure reporting to current FLM; organizational tenure; education; working hours (full-time vs part-time) and contract type.

The survey was administration in two phases. "Phase 1" seeks to explore the extent of detectable differences in employee perception of FLM style and potential relationships to perceived support and employee outcomes. A sample of 31 shop-floor employees completed a survey regarding their perception of a single FLM. "Phase 2" seeks to explore the extent to which different FLM styles may be detected across a group of diverse FLMs. A sample of 15 employees, reporting to seven different FLM's, completed the same survey instrument.

Internal reliability and principal component analysis

Cronbach α's and Eigen value is satisfactory on all scales for the style typology, except the agency dimension of the "Policy Enactor" style. On review, the research had reduced the original agency scale in attempt to reduce survey length. However, the reduced items did not have satisfactory internal reliability (i.e. the Cronbach α statistic was < 0.7). For the purposes of the pilot data analysis, the agency dimension is omitted from the "Policy Enactor" Style, with only the HR practice enactment remaining. The other scales (including PSS, POS and employee outcomes) met criteria for analysis, albeit with reduced power in some cases (see Table II for Cronbach α coefficients for the FLM style types).

Findings

Phase 1

The sample consisted of 31 employees working in direct operator positions within a semi-automated manufacturing environment. The respondents worked a weekend shift pattern of three shifts Friday-Sunday each week. The employees reported to one FLM, a female weekend-shift supervisor. Despite small size and atypical part-time work pattern, the sample included satisfactory variation in gender, age, tenure, and work contract and union membership. Of the sample respondents, 14 (45 per cent) were female, 17 (55 per cent) were male. The age of the respondents was as follows 6 (19 per cent) employees aged below 25 years, 10 (32 per cent) employees aged 26-35 years, and 15 (49 per cent) were between ages of 35and 50. The nationality dimension revealed just 20 per cent of respondents reporting a nationality other than Irish. In addition, 21 employees (68 per cent) were union members (a compulsory requirement for all permanent

Factor	Policy Enactor:	Org. Leader	Employee Coach	PSS	POS	Org. commitment	Turnover intention	OCB
Policy Enactor	(0.89)	0.220	0.386	0.263	−0.194	0.53	0.019	0.107
Organizational Leader		(0.85)	0.624***	0.596***	0.152	0.357[a]	−0.021	0.087
Employee Coach			(0.87)	0.670***	0.552**	0.638***	−0.360[a]	0.477**
PSS				(0.85)	0.311	0.562***	−0.147	0.505**
POS					(0.86)	0.635***	−0.372[a]	0.455*
Organizational commitment						(0.84)	−0.475**	0.573***
Turnover intention							(0.87)	−0.249
OCB								(0.72)

Notes: [a]Indicative support for further study in larger sample size (significant at < 0.07). *,**,***Significant at < 0.05, < 0.01 and < 0.001, respectively (Cronbach α displayed in parenthesis on diagonal)

Table II.
Phase 1 correlations matrix – Pearson correlation and p-value significance

staff in the company, which has a single union agreement for all shop-floor workers). The remainder were temporary agency staff. The educational level of the group was high with 20 (65 per cent) reporting a third level education.

Correlations among key variables
Table II also shows the Pearson correlation and significance level for all variables at Phase 1. The Policy Enactor FLM type is not significantly correlated with any factor or outcome (Cronbach α: 0.89). On review, there was little variation in this type, with mean responses between "never" and "once" for HR policy enactment. The weekend-shift isolation of this pilot group may explain this finding; therefore absence of correlation here is not evidence of zero correlation in the population as a whole and additional larger sampling would be necessary. Organizational Leader has a significant Cronbach α of 0.85 and is correlated with PSS ($r = 0.596$, $p \leqslant 0.001$), and also with Employee Coach ($r = 0.624$, $p \leqslant 0.001$). Correlation between styles is expected, but indicates that the regression analysis should check variance inflation factor (VIF) for signs of collinearity. Employee Coach has a Cronbach α of 0.87 and is significantly correlated with PSS ($r = 0.67$, $p \leqslant 0.001$), POS ($r = 0.655$, $p \leqslant 0.01$), Organizational Commitment ($r = 0.638$, $p \leqslant 0.001$), and OCB ($r = 0.477$, $p \leqslant 0.001$). Of all three FLM styles, Employee Coach has greatest correlation with both perceived support and outcome variables. PSS is correlated with Organizational Commitment ($r = 0.562$, $p \leqslant 0.001$) and OCB ($r = 0.505$, $p \leqslant 0.01$). POS revealed a moderate correlation with Organizational Commitment ($r = 0.635$, $p \leqslant 0.001$) and OCB ($r = 0.455$, $p \leqslant 0.05$).

Hypotheses testing
"Phase 1" included data collection in relation to one single FLM to test hypotheses *H1-H4*. Standard hierarchical regression analysis (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2002) was used. Step 1 included control variables only, of which significant terms were retained and added to by the FLM types. Similarly, the significant FLM types were retained and add to by the perceived support and employee attitudinal outcomes, as relevant. This enabled the researcher to control for variation expected per the causal logic in the

hypothesis formation. The significance level for hypotheses in the regression model was $p \leqslant 0.05$:

H1. The FLM style constructs offer predictive value for employee outcomes.

Three employee outcomes are included in this analysis; two attitudinal constructs Organizational Commitment and Turnover Intention, and one behavioural construct, OCB. Items from the control variables had an effect on all three outcomes. Of the various control variables included, gender was significant for Organizational Commitment, with females predicting moderately higher outcomes ($\beta = 0.18, p \leqslant 0.05$) and, to a greater extent on Turnover Intention ($\beta = -1.09, p \leqslant 0.05$) with males indicating they are more likely to leave. Nationality revealed a significant effect on Turnover Intention ($\beta = 0.86, p \leqslant 0.05$) with "non-Irish" respondents predicting higher intention to leave. After controlling for these variables, the pilot study found none of the three FLM styles offered a direct predictive relationship to OCB or Turnover Intention. However, Employee Coach revealed a significant positive effect on Organizational Commitment ($\beta = 0.33, p \leqslant 0.05$), which itself in turn was a predictor of OCB ($\beta = 0.79, p \leqslant 0.05$). "Organizational Leader" also had significant effect on Organizational Commitment, however the model was stronger (going from a 27 per cent predictive R^2 value to 37 per cent) when it was removed. This is possibly related to the correlation between Organizational Leader and Employee Coach. As discussed in the previous section, pilot study sampling concerns combined with insufficient variability in the "Policy Enactor" responses render the conclusions on this hypothesis inconclusive at this time. However, the pilot reveals a predictive value of the "Employee Coach" style indicating a validity of the model that warrants further investigation. *H1* is supported for the "Employee Coach" FLM style only:

H2a. PSS is positively related to employee outcomes.

Controlling for the relevant gender and nationality variables, and FLM style constructs in the model, PSS was tested for a positive effect on employee outcomes. PSS significantly predicted OCB ($\beta = 0.52, p \leqslant 0.05$) and Organizational Commitment ($\beta = 0.32, p \leqslant 0.05$). There was no signification predictive relationship found with Turnover Intention. *H2a* is supported in the case of two employee outcomes, Organizational Commitment and OCB. Qualitative data from employees revealed some explanatory insight into this effect. One employee remarked of the relational interaction with her FLM: "because she (the FLM) goes the extra ten miles for you, you're more likely to go the extra for her":

H2b. POS is positively related to employee outcomes.

Controlling for the significant gender and nationality variables, and FLM style constructs, and PSS in the model, POS was tested for a positive effect on employee outcomes. The model indicates that POS is a significant predictor of Organizational Commitment ($\beta = 0.41, p \leqslant 0.05$). There is no evidence of a POS effect on OCB or Turnover Intention when other significant variables are controlled for. However, as mentioned earlier in *H1* analysis, Organizational Commitment positively predicted OCB, hence an indirect relationship may exist. *H2b* is supported in the case of Organizational Commitment. The qualitative data added a degree of explanatory power for *H2*. For example, a worker explained Employee feedback provided an example of POS, whereby the organization was providing a development opportunity to employees in the form of an elective training course. The employee described how one FLM failed (or forgot) to support a request for training: "they say sure I'll put your name down. Later you would hear from others that the course has come and gone and the supervisor hadn't even put your name forward".

Evidently, the employee differentiated between the organizational-level opportunity for training from the FLM's "un-supportive" behaviour (Table III):

H3. The relationship between FLM style and employee outcomes is mediated by PSS.

To test for mediation, the applied four-step approach by Baron and Kenny (1986) was utilized. The first requirement for mediation is confirmed in *H1* analysis. The second requirement is the relationship between the "Employee Coach" and PSS (the mediating variable). "Employee Coach" is found to significantly predict PSS ($\beta = 0.56$, $p \leqslant 0.05$). The third requirement for mediation is evidence of PSS relationship to Organizational Commitment while controlling for "Employee Coach". PSS reports a co-efficient value of $\beta = 0.21$, although it is not significant at $p \leqslant 0.05$. Mediation is not determined on statistical significance (Baron and Kenny, 1986), but rather co-efficient values. The requirement for the final stage, Step 4, is met. The "Employee Coach" relationship to Organizational Commitment reduces when PSS included. The reduction (from $\beta = 0.560.36$) would not indicate full mediation, however it indicates partial mediation. Practically, the finding means that any positive effect of an "Employee Coach" FLM style is partially mediated by PSS. Of relevance is when one worker explained differing degrees of support and (non)cooperation dependent on the type of FLM:

> I wouldn't refuse her (my FLM) anything unless it was totally impossible to do. Even though there are parts of the job that you may not like, if she (my FLM) asks me to do those parts of the job I wouldn't refuse […]. But if it is a "bad supervisor" (un-supportive FLM) then I would not help them out. I'd kick up a fuss. I'd make up any excuse or make it difficult for them […] People don't co-operate with their FLM if they don't co-operate with them (the employees).

H4. One FLM style is significantly different (more dominant) than the other FLM styles as reported by employees for a single FLM.

H4 proposes that one "dominant" FLM style is detectable in employee responses – where a dominant style is defined as the style that the employee confirms as most prominent. In order to test this hypothesis, three steps were performed. First, the score for each FLM style as reported by employees was ranked in order of highest to lowest. Descriptive analysis revealed 90 per cent of respondents had given the strongest agreement (highest score) to the same FLM style, namely Organizational Leader. Once it is established that one style is descriptively "dominant" among employees experience, the next question is of statistical significance. A paired *t*-test was conducted to confirm that the difference in the employee mean scores for each FLM style is statistically difference. The paired *t*-test reported a statistically significant difference between responses for "Organizational Leader" style and other styles, indicating the mean difference is > 0.5 (with 95 per cent confidence intervals around mean of 0.7-0.4), significant with *p*-value of 0. The final test is to confirm that the difference is not only zero, but in fact that one style is statistically "greater than" (more dominant than others). The paired *t*-test is repeated with the "greater than" hypothesis. Findings revealed that "Organizational Leader" score is statistically greater in the pilot study than the other styles at *p*-value of 0. These results provided statistical confidence to a descriptive pattern observed. The FLM on weekend shift has a dominant style of "Organizational Leader" with 90 per cent agreement among direct report employees.

The qualitative interview data revealed some support for this hypothesis and what the Organizational Leader type might look like in actual practice, from both employee

Hierarchical regression	Control variable	Reciprocity variables	FLM style	Org commitment Co-efficient	Org commitment R^2 (predictive)	Turnover intention Co-efficient	Turnover intention R^2 (Predictive)	OCB Co-efficient	OCB R^2 (predictive)
Step 1	Gender			0.18*	0.07**	−1.09*	–	–	–
	Nationality			–	–	−0.86*	0.27***	–	–
Step 2		PSS		0.32***	–	–	–	–	–
		POS		0.41***	0.42***	–	–	0.52*	–
Step 3			Employee Coach	0.33*	0.38**	–	–	–	0.25***
			Organizational Leader	–	–	–	–	–	–

Notes: *, **, ***Significant at < 0.05, < 0.01 and < 0.001, respectively

Table III.
Regression data for
H1, *H2a* and *H2b*:
FLM style, POS and
PSS are predictors of
employee outcome

and FLM data on the same weekend shift. The line manager respondent indicated the existence of a dominant approach: "I have a style and I make them (employees) aware of what it is. If they want to go with that, that is great. It will be so much easier if we can work together". Likewise, three of the employee interviewees from the same weekend shift reflected a common style as they used similar adjectives to describe their FLM experience as "professional", "fair", and "approachable" (Tables IV and V).

"Phase 2" includes a broader group of FLM's to support testing of $H5$. The hypothesis proposes that the dominant FLM style in the study, namely Organizational Leader, is unique to that individual FLM. This study contends that different FLM's will have different dominant styles as reported by employees. This question is operationalized by reviewing the FLM style scores of representative group of 15 employees, who report to seven different FLMs:

H5. The variation in individual perceptions of FLM dominant style for one single FLM is significantly less than the variation in styles observed in a broader FLM group.

For the quantitative data, Steps 1, 2 and 3 were repeated for the employee surveys to identify the dominant style reported for each respondent. The results found that 41 per cent of employees identified "Employee Coach" as dominant, 41 per cent 'Organizational Leader, and 18 per cent "Policy Enactor". The descriptive statistics indicate that there is a different proportion of FLM's who will have dominance in each style. To confirm that the variation between FLM's is greater than within a single FLM respondent group, the proportions are compared using χ^2 analysis (see Table IV).

FLM style	% of employees reporting dominance of the style	Mean score for FLM style	Mean difference from "Organizational Leader" score	Paired t-test (Org Leader > than other styles). Test p-value
Organizational Leader	90	4.19 (agree – strongly agree)	–	–
Policy Enactor	0	1.98 (never – once)	2.12	0.00
Employee Coach	10	3.60 (neutral – agree)	0.53	0.00

Table IV.
$H4$ – paired t-test on differences in FLM styles

FLM style	Single FLM sample study ($n = 31$)	Multiple FLM sample study ($n = 15$)	χ^2 expected proportion if NO difference between results	χ^2 p-value to indicate significance (significant if p-value < 0.05)
Organizational Leader	27	6	23/31 and 9/12	0.01
Employee Coach	4	6	7/31 and 3/12	0.01
Policy Enactor	0	3	Omitted from analysis due to $n < 5$, does not meet χ^2 sample requirement	–

Table V.
$H5$ – χ^2 analysis to establish dominant style difference for one FLM vs between multiple FLMs

This test reveals that the proportion of FLM styles reported for the weekend-shift FLM is statistically different than the broader group. Therefore, *H5* is statistically supported.

In addition, qualitative data lends weight to the idea of multiple FLM types according to worker experiences. One employee from the weekend shift compared a previous FLM to their present-incumbent:

> There is a huge difference (between FLMs). (Previous FLM) would have a different approach. It wouldn't be a collective thing, it would be more like the secret service. You wouldn't have the open meetings (like current FLM) where it would be communicated and if people are interested "come to me". The other (previous) supervisor would be […] going to people that they would "get on with" or have better relationships with.

Discussion and conclusion

The evidence in this paper provides exploratory support for the conceptualization of variable FLM types to advance understanding of employment relations and a series of potential organizational outcomes. The findings indicate that each FLM may have a dominant style, as perceived by employees.

As an exploratory study this offers potential. The "Employee Coach" style was shown to have a significant relationship to Organizational Commitment, which was further shown to be mediated by PSS. From this it can be argued that further study would benefit from development of such concepts using larger data sets to test for FLM style dominance and its connection to employee outcomes. Importantly, albeit from a small exploratory sample, the research contributes in a number of ways. First, a typology of FLM styles has been developed to add greater specificity to understand the roles of FLM in employment relationships. The contribution demonstrates that the FLM role has multiple faces and this can have much wider relevance concerning the devolution of people management functions to certain types of supervisors. This issue challenges the notion of a single homogeneous line manager across different spaces and contexts. Moreover, the evidence reveals support for the detection of a dominant FLM style, indicating that each FLM has a "face" that subordinates can identify or associate with within their work context.

Second, the research succeeded in demonstrating a link between FLM style and employee outcomes. The potential to predict employee outcomes based on FLM style is potentially a potent ingredient in advancing further HRM and FLM theory. Finally, the research develops new avenues of inquiry for the "how" and "why" of casual impact. For example, the inclusion of FLM style as a factor in future "big data" surveys could increase the predictive value of future model testing. A further potential avenue would be to test the research model across various occupational groups, including professional-type workers and/or a-typical occupational groups and working environments.

As with most studies of this nature, however, there are limitations. The most significant is the small and exploratory nature of the sample in a single organizational setting. While the findings add to theoretical opportunity, further empirical evidence is required to exploit the potential of the FLM typology. Other limitations can be attributed to the quantitative approach to empirical investigation. A case-study design that also includes both FLM and wider and more inclusive employee interviews could add deeper insight and contextual richness to the findings.

A further debatable issue, if not empirical limitation, may lie in the assumptions that higher or enhanced employee discretionary effort is somehow a "good" outcome. The contrasting perspective that improved performance and discretionary effort are no

more than euphemisms for the exploitative dynamic of employment relations is not without merit and validity. Improved outcomes may ultimately "come to employees at the expense of stress, work intensification and job strain, the latter being a key explanatory factor in improved organizational performance" (Ramsay *et al.*, 2000, p. 505). This raises ethical and theoretical issues as to what is meant by performance and effort, and for whom is the improved outcome intended or designed. These remain contestable spaces and debates within a model of capitalist work regimes. It is necessary, we argue, these debates are acknowledged and incorporated where possible. To this end, future research could investigate the relationship between the FLM styles and less favourable employee outcomes. This might include assessing the workload, stress factors and job dis-satisfaction of employees reporting to the various FLM styles.

A final consideration arising from the data is policy and practice implications. At a practitioner level, the FLM typology may provide an opportunity for organizations to assess managerial and/or supervisory approaches which may support new developmental opportunities or improved workplace relations.

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