


# Chapter 2

## Keyworders' Experiences of Leader Recognition During the COVID- 19 Pandemic: A Dilemma of Moral Values

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores keyworders' perceptions of managerial recognition during the COVID-19 crisis and examines how the quality of leader-member relationships shaped their motivation and well-being. Ten keyworders were interviewed at the height of the pandemic, and thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo. Findings reveal substantial variation in how recognition was experienced across sectors, with perceptions closely tied to relational quality, fairness, and the presence or absence of bias. These results highlight that recognition functions not only as a relational*

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*exchange central to LMX theory but also as a morally meaningful practice that affirms dignity and fosters resilience during crisis. To minimise favouritism and strengthen equitable recognition, HR practitioners should implement standardised recognition systems and leader development initiatives. This study provides novel qualitative insight into manager–keyworker recognition and extends LMX scholarship by illustrating how recognition practices shaped employee outcomes in an extreme work context.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In contemporary management discourse, moral capital—defined as the reservoir of virtues, ethical credibility, and trust that individuals and leaders accumulate through morally guided actions—has emerged as a vital micro-foundation of value creation (Deng *et al.*, 2023; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2023). Virtues such as justice, fairness, integrity, compassion, wisdom, and courage are not merely abstract ideals; they are actionable qualities that shape human behaviour, especially in moments of crisis (Wang & Hackett, 2016; Crossan *et al.*, 2023; Din & Zhang, 2023; Habaza *et al.*, 2025). When leaders practise these virtues, they generate moral capital that enhances organisational resilience, strengthens relationships, and elevates collective performance (Lemoine *et al.*, 2019; Kouchaki & Smith, 2025). Conversely, the absence of virtue-based behaviours erodes trust, diminishes motivation, and constrains value creation (Porto *et al.*, 2024; Hassan *et al.*, 2023).

Employee recognition in research and practice has gained greater interest since the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and the significant changes it has caused in workplaces across the globe (Mayer, 2020). Although critique of employee recognition programmes is abundant (Hancock, 2022), some recent publications have concluded that recognising employees' efforts must be standard management practice (Ayling *et al.*, 2020). In the early phases of the COVID-19 crisis, essential professionals were expected to continue as usual, yet in an uncertain, unknown and volatile environment (Ayling *et al.*, 2020). Indeed, the deterioration of working conditions during the pandemic for essential workers, potentially including a greater risk of contracting the virus and pressures to meet job demands, exacerbated key workers' need for praise, acknowledgement, and support.

In such circumstances, recognition is not merely a managerial tool but a morally charged act communicating dignity, respect, and fairness—core components of moral virtue (Meyer & Li, 2025; Crossan *et al.*, 2023). When leaders recognise keyworkers equitably and compassionately, they enact virtues that contribute to moral capital; when recognition is absent or unfair, the erosion of these virtues undermines trust and relational quality (Porto *et al.*, 2024; Kouchaki & Smith, 2025). By analysing

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